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Signature:

John W. Steen, IV

Rhymes Unbearable: Crises of Feeling in 20th-Century U.S. Lyric

By

John W. Steen, IV
Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

Walter Kalaidjian, Ph.D.
Advisor

Elissa Marder, Ph.D.
Advisor

Claire Nouvet, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

April 13, 2012

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By

John W. Steen, IV
B.A., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005

Advisors: Walter Kalaidjian, Ph.D.
Elissa Marder, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature
2012

Abstract

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“Rhymes Unbearable” argues that three significant moments of poetic innovation linking Modernism to contemporary literature derive from responses to the emergent need for poetry to rearticulate its relationship to feeling. No longer conceived as a secure container in which the emotions of lyric speakers find purgative release, the poems of Wallace Stevens, Robert Creeley, and Aaron Kunin call on unfamiliar strategies to engage uncontrollable affects poetically. Stevens’ anxiety about what poems can hold leads to an oeuvre that admits of “chaos” more often than confidence. Specifically, I read the consequences of Stevens’ vexed ‘poetic holding’ alongside the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s concept of the maternal “holding environment.” In my second chapter, Stevens’ elaborate apologies for interiority find a parallel in Winnicott’s concept of “not communicating,” and open a route for acknowledging the threats of affects that arise from within. Later chapters turn to the afterlife of Modernist feeling in the trans-Atlantic influences of postwar U.S. verse and in the theoretical orientations of contemporary poetry. Jean Daive’s translations of Paul Celan and Robert Creeley bring to the fore the physical and affective components of stuttering as a response to personal and historical destructions. By incorporating the technology of the photograph and its peculiar relationship to time into a work of poetic mourning carried out over several decades, Creeley’s elegies for his mother work through problems of poetic speech and its origins that his early poems struggled to overcome. My final chapter demonstrates how Aaron Kunin’s poetics of verbal constraint mimic what Silvan Tompkins calls the “reduce[d] facial communication” characteristic of shame. Such an intentionally flat poetics refashions Kunin’s verse as the zero degree of affective production. In my conclusion, I suggest that affective constellations signifying on autism spectrum disorder allow contemporary verse to comment upon otherwise inaccessible feelings. As such, twentieth-century poetry’s handling of its crises of feeling prefigures continuing poetic interventions by affective means into the broader political, ecological, and humanitarian crises borne by persons in our unsustainable, if not unbearable, present moment.

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Acknowledgments

It is unbearable to imagine having had to write “Rhymes Unbearable” without the unwavering support of a great cloud of witnesses, and while it may be possible to acknowledge the debt I owe them, it certainly cannot be acquitted. My advisors at Emory provided an invaluable and inviolable intellectual holding environment that would have made Winnicott proud. Elissa Marder’s discernment and attention are the natural prayer of a dissertation writer’s soul; Walter Kalaidjian’s dexterity and humility turned my eyes, again, to lyric; Claire Nouvet’s passionate intensity never lacked conviction, and breathed new life into my writing. I first read poetry in Allen Grossman’s classes at Johns Hopkins University, and Gregory Flaxman introduced me to psychoanalysis at the University of North Carolina: the experience, as Frank O’Hara puts it, ‘will not go wasted on me which is why I am telling you about it.’ Friends, professors, students, and colleagues in the Departments of Comparative Literature and English at Emory University ushered me into a hemisphere of light, and the true way has, as a result, never been lost. Within it, the conversation and consolation of the following deserve special recognition: Deborah Elise White, Andrew Mitchell, Ofra Yeglin, Amin Erfani, Ariel Ross, Seth Wood, Lisa Schneider, Colleen Dunne, Matthew Roberts, Maya Kesrouany, Scott Branson, Armando Mastrogiovanni, Rob Vork, Jacqueline Abrams, Mark Stoholski, Andy Ryder, Ania Kowalik, Christina Leon, Ronald Mendoza de Jesus, Alex Robins, and Madhava Martin. Alian Teach and Virginia Shadron made academic life livable, again and again. Dave Ritchie promises me that one day it will be a pleasure to remember even this, and if his wisdom and humor have been Virgil in this Commedia, Adam Rosenthal and Tim Meneely have played its epic heroes, carrying me on their backs when the world behind lay in smoke and ruin (or in Brooklyn). Dinah Hannaford, Kate Juergens, Lisa Knisely, Amanda Morelli, Anna Loroach, Claire-Marie Hefner, Margaret Boyle, Andrew Lardie, Lilly Lampe, Jim Vickers, Lolly Pancer-Beck, and Lola Rodden sponsored these pages with their smiles and hugs when I looked up from them. My family celebrated my progress in late-night phone calls across state lines: Bart, Matthew, and Sarah deserve honorary doctorates for medical, technical, and artistic support, respectively; Mom and Dad could defend their approach to parenting a graduate student before the toughest committee and pass with highest honors. Roy Blumenfeld gave the phrase “glad company” new meaning during six unforgettable months of writing in New York. Kara Moskowitz deserves praise and thanks for patience and undeserved kindness. Many of these words were written under the influence of espresso at Steady Hand Pour House in Atlanta. “Rhymes Unbearable” is a postcard from the volcano in memory of John David Oddo, and a dream song, “beyond all dream of enduring,” for Stephen Ross.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Feeling of Crisis: Negative Affects and Poetic Reading.....1

Chapter I

‘One reads poetry with one’s nerves’: Wallace Stevens and Anxiety’s Holding.....28

Chapter 2

Solitude’s Comedy: Wallace Stevens and D.W. Winnicott’s ‘Not-Communicating’85

Chapter 3

Stuttered Orientations: Jean Daive Between Robert Creeley and Paul Celan.....124

Chapter 4

Words Returning: The Mourning of Robert Creeley.....150

Chapter 5

The Line of Shame: Poetic Form, Conceptual Aesthetics, and Aaron Kunin’s

Folding Ruler Star.....191

Conclusion.....253

Introduction

The Feeling of Crisis: Negative Affects and Poetic Reading

I refer directly to my
own need, since to advance in the now fresh &
sprouting world must take on some musical
sense. Literally, the grace & hesitation of
modal descent, the rhyme unbearable, the
coming down through the prepared delay and
once again we are there, beholding the
complete elation of our end.

How can we sustain such constant loss?
I ask myself this, knowing that the world
is my pretext for this return through it, and
that we go more slowly as we come back
more often to the feeling that rejoins the whole.

--J.H. Prynne, from "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform"

This study traces the status of the difficult feelings that attend poetry in the wake of Modernism. It tells the story of poetic structures overwhelmed and undone by intensities they cannot contain, and suggests that the consequences of this undoing for the literary history of one of the most prolific periods of U.S. verse to date are still unfolding, and remain to be appraised. Among the determinants of an ongoing "crisis of verse," the genre-challenging moment by which Mallarmé defined the modernity of lyric in 1897,

feeling resonates, even when its effect on the sound of the poem is to mute it. Bound by anxiety, mourning, and shame, three negative affects with a particular ability to upset communication, Wallace Stevens, Robert Creeley, and Aaron Kunin reassert the significance of feeling in the poems of a century whose poetic history is most often indexed by its philosophical, rather than its affective, coordinates.

Affect, emotion, and feeling have long been associated with lyric poetry, but in many ways their roles have been either idealized or devalued. On the one hand, feeling has at times marked the sole evaluative criterion for the effect of the poem on the reader as well as the single metric for the speaker's achievement of success within its parameters.¹ On the other, the range of possibilities for affect to 'affect' poetry at its very core, to change it or index its changing, has been underestimated by a reluctance to regard feeling as anything more than an after-effect of more important formal, intellectual, political, or linguistic poles.² In contrast to both of these extremes, this study claims that the presence of intractable feeling spurs poetic innovation in a century that

¹ Reading that relies too heavily on the emotions bears a close relationship to the pathetic fallacy, the figure applied, most often pejoratively, to writing that attributes emotions and feelings to unfeeling objects. In John Ruskin's identification of the trope, he notes, however, that "the temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy...is a more or less noble state, according to the force of the emotion which has induced it." He goes on to note that even poets of the "first" order are susceptible to the unbalanced response characteristic of the pathetic fallacy because "there are always some subjects which ought to throw him off his balance; some, by which his poor human capacity of thought should be conquered, and brought into the inaccurate and vague state of perception" (151).

² An extreme version of this latter pole would invoke Ruth Leys, who suggests that any affective turn is mistaken in thinking that literature or other works of art provoke meaningful feelings and not simply interpretable meanings. "The fact that a novel or painting makes me feel or think a certain way may be a significant aspect of my response to the work, but, simply as my response, it has no standing as an interpretation of it" (451n31).

redefined not only affect, but also the role of intellection in lyric's poles of addressor, addressee, and audience.

I suggest that these feelings upset models of reading and writing in which poets first feel, then express, and finally provoke feelings in their readers. I argue instead that, in their very confrontation of the difficulties associated with handling feeling poetically in the wake of modernism's challenges to lyric form, feeling rises to the level of a crisis for Wallace Stevens, Robert Creeley, and Aaron Kunin, and for the readers of their poems. Caught between demands of Modernist form that changed the potential for poems to contain and process feelings and the continuing desire for poems to bear a relationship to this aspect of experience, feeling seems never to be 'caught' or captured in these works, but rather to persist in uncomfortable proximity to them. I will claim that poems that no longer mirror a successfully purgative processing or releasing of emotion for their speakers reflect it back as anxiety, grief, and shame, negative affects that point toward the new shape of the poem and the changed parameters of its intimacy with feeling. While a reactionary response to the dyspeptic and disruptive poetry of negative affect would call for a return to traditional modes of lyric expression and its confidence in the ability of the poem to hold and purge all affects, another might read such a newly born lyric as an experiment within new constraints; I suggest that an atypical triad of U.S. poets spanning the 20th and early 21st centuries integrate cacophonous sound, contemporary technology, and mathematical constraint into the lyric in order to ensure the survival of the genre's affective resonance alongside its radically changing forms. Discovering the obstacles that changing aesthetic paradigms make for articulating

feeling, these poems mark what is unbearable about affect as well as what structures of feeling U.S. verse may yet be able to bear.

The term affect is as controversial as it is unavoidable for recent literary criticism and theory. The first question that attaches itself to any discussion of affect demands that the word be distinguished from or defined with reference to emotion and feeling.³ In this study, I use the term in two distinct ways. First, I follow theorists (Lyotard, in particular) for whom affect, as against emotion, describes the situations of feeling in which a failure to experience that feeling is most salient. That is, if “experience” demands a subject able to reflect consciously on the nature of his or her bodily and mental existence, affects, which consistently overwhelm the structures of perception and expression, cannot properly be said to be experienced by anyone. They exist, but cannot, in the “now” of their emergence, be named.⁴ In this sense, affect refers to a sort of ‘felt unknown.’ In this

³ In recent literary studies, both Jonathan Flatley and Charles Altieri have provided extensive glosses of the concepts and their use, and each adds that the multiplicity of definitions makes their attention to detail both necessary and complex. Flatley, who relies mostly on Tomkins and holds Freud accountable as a theorist who “never really developed a coherent account of the affects,” distinguishes between emotion and affect by emphasizing the “relational” quality of the latter and the “expressive” quality of the former: “Where emotion suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, affect indicates something relational and transformative. One has emotions; one is affected *by* people or things” (12).

Altieri’s account, which depends mostly on a critique of cognitivism that derives from philosophical psychology and takes its cues from William James, uses “affect” as its “umbrella term” to describe “the entire range of states that are bounded on one side by pure sensation and on the other by thoughts that have no visible or tangible impact on our bodies. Affects are immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension” (Particulars 2). While Flatley lists four terms, adding mood and structure of feeling to affect and emotion, Altieri calls on feelings, moods, emotions, and passions to describe variations of affects.

⁴ According to this definition, in which affects refer to the overwhelming of self that we often accord to the sublime, it is impossible to simply list “the affects,” though some

vein, I use the term “feeling” to refer to the conceptual and experiential space that felt and consciously accountable emotions share with the felt unnamed and unknown affects. As its use in my title indicates, I take feeling as a fertile ground for exploring the constitutive and formative tensions of 20th-century poetry. I use it as an umbrella term for which affect and emotion mark subtler distinctions.⁵ One of the chief arguments that links my chapters is that poets respond to the role unfeeling feelings play and begin to turn toward them during the course of the 20th century. Thus, while I tend mostly to the unacknowledged anxiety of Wallace Stevens’ poems (granting, of course, that significant emotions also have their ground there), Creeley’s non-traditional elegies evoke a middle ground where the emotions of bereavement meet the affects constitutive of mourning. Finally, Aaron Kunin’s constraints direct his poetry to perform a shame that cannot easily be handled by more traditional models of poetic production. Alongside my argument’s chronology, from the early 20th-century to our contemporary moment, I track a movement from an inexplicit to an explicit engagement with the negative affects, and in so doing suggest that contemporary poetic interest in affect owes a certain debt to Modernist and mid-century practitioners.

theorists working in a slightly different tradition (notably Tomkins) aim to do so. Nevertheless, anxiety is, for my study, the affect par excellence inasmuch as Winnicott defines it as experience of which its sufferer is unaware “It seems to me that the word ‘anxious’ is applicable when an individual is in the grips of physical experience (be it excitement, anger, fear, or anything else) which he can neither avoid nor understand; that is to say, he is unaware of the greater proportion of the reason for what is happening” (“Birth” 181).

⁵ In contrast to Altieri, who uses “affect” as an umbrella term to collect the denotations of feeling, mood, emotion, and passion (*Particulars* 2).

Anxiety, grief, and shame give names to affects that we can recognize. In trembling, tears, and blushing, the body shows the mind's cards and reveals what, at times, the sufferer would rather hide. But what does the interruption or intervention of writing do to these affects? Is there, for example, an anxiety proper to writing that differs from the anxiety that is written on the body? Might this anxiety be the same as what Blanchot identifies as an effect essential to all reading, an "anguish" that follows from the fact that "any text, however important, amusing, or interesting it may be...is empty—at bottom it doesn't exist" (10)? This study begins with anxiety because Freud notes that it is a common denominator of the affects, inasmuch as "all 'repressed' affects are exchanged" for it ("Unconscious" 179). Anxiety is a particularly significant affect for this period's poetry because it reveals a reversal from what Oren Izenberg calls, quoting Valéry, poets' "confiance au monde" ("Confiance") to a troubled mode more appropriate for what Auden christened 'The Age of Anxiety.'

I proceed to mourning, perhaps the affect most commonly associated with—and controversial for—the history of recent poetry and poetics. The elegiac potential of poems has been almost as securely identified with lyric as its erotic goals, but the poetry of mourning after Modernism takes aim at the possibility of elegiac consolation, as Jahan Ramazani has argued.⁶ Even more significantly for my argument, elegiac writing struggles with a problem of containment that cuts deeper into the promise of elegy than even that of consolation. For if the poem cannot contain or express the intensity of its grief, how can it sustain the illusion that this grief played any role in sponsoring the

⁶ Tracing a trajectory of British poetry that is true in *The Poetry of Mourning* for U.S. poets as well, Ramazani remarks that, "For [Geoffrey] Hill as already for Hardy, every elegy is an elegy for elegy—a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning" (8).

fantasied resurrection of what Ezra Pound calls its ‘lost dead’?⁷ Channeling Emerson, such a poem “grieve[s] that grief can teach [it] nothing” (*Essays* 473). It finds itself, instead, among unwanted revenants, having become, in Wallace Stevens’ apt phrase, “the haunt of unimportant ghosts” (*Letters* 507).

Finally, I take up the affect of shame, which has played a significant role in recent discussions of the ongoing intervention of queer theory into contemporary intellectual pursuit.⁸ Shame is nearly as difficult to define as anxiety, as significant differences among theorists concerning its relationship to guilt, to subjective experience, and to personal history place its role in obstructing communication in different registers. Shame also bears a close relationship to poetry because it makes salient the very questions about subjects relating to objects to which poems, and particularly those upset by intense affects, demand new answers.

“Rhymes Unbearable” will be less concerned with a model of feeling and writing in which affects are experienced and then expressed by the poet to a reader who feels them or their byproducts than by a reading of the silence (or muteness) of affects that bind writer, reader, and text precisely by their stubborn immutability, their failure to be transformed, processed, and transmitted by aesthetic means. In order to show how poems of this period handle affect—notably by failing to contain it—I will speak of two ways in which affects are *addressed*. That is, the poems attend and call attention to affect even as

⁷ Pound’s “Coda” calls into question the positive affects—what Silvan Tomkins might call their “excitement/interest”—that attach to poems confident of their own effectiveness in achieving traditional elegiac results: “O My songs, / Why do you look so eagerly and so curiously into / people's faces, / Will you find your lost dead among them?” (103).

⁸ See, most notably, *Gay Shame*, which brings together papers first presented at the landmark 2003 conference of the same name at the University of Michigan.

these uncontainable affects are their undoing. Secondly, they do so because, despite upsetting the apostrophic tropes to which readers of poetry are accustomed, they situate themselves along an axis of address to the reader or listener. If apostrophe is an address whose vocative articulation is marked by the poem, often with “O” or with a proper name, affect (as Lyotard will come to understand it) makes an unmarked and inarticulate address that nevertheless also takes the poem as its emphatic site. Apostrophe has been named the constitutive trope of the lyric,⁹ but for the purposes of this study the poem shall be the constitutive site of affect.

As often as it has been associated with feeling, poetry has been identified with the single speaking subject. Critiques of amorous verse in particular trouble claims that an addressing subject’s construction and seduction of a “beloved” other constitute an ethical model of interaction, much less evidence of lyric’s openness to alterity.¹⁰ As I read them here, however, poetic affects suggest a different mode of reading. Rather than narrow the focus of poetic reading to the myopic sight of the speaking (and feeling) subject with which lyric has always (and, according to many readers, only) been preoccupied, the negative affects that feature in each of these chapters identify how profoundly affect depends on someone outside the speaker to sponsor, provoke, or witness their unsettling of poetic space. Inasmuch as Stevens, Creeley, and Kunin discover and explore the negative affects that emanate from their chosen or unchosen attachments, their poems show that the sphere of the emotive function, which Jakobson identifies with interjections

⁹ Cf. Culler. “Indeed, one might justified in taking apostrophe as the figure of all that is most radical, embarrassing, pretentious, and mystificatory in the lyric, even seeking to identify apostrophe with lyric itself” (60).

¹⁰ Cf. Grossman. “It is also the case that the Beloved in lyric is an image of the perceiver as perceived. What we celebrate in the beloved is the self as known” (*Sighted* 227).

and with their singular speakers, may swell beyond this addressor and touch others who are not addressed directly.¹¹

Tracking the history of 20th-century U.S. poetry involves taking the measure of Modernism's legacy; thus far, this legacy has been couched in terms of its consequences for the relationship of poems to intellectual history, politics, and aesthetic form. Without ignoring these registers, this study explores the possibilities that Modernist verse inscribes its most dramatic effects affectively, and seeks to include and prioritize the changing face of poems in this period as they are overcome by affects that poetry has struggled to admit into its ken. What did Modernist lyric—often conceived of as a rejection of sentimental emotion for multiple, fragmentary, and impersonal sources of feeling—bequeath to poets who continued to struggle with poetic feeling from the middle of the last century to the present? Reading the particular affects—and in this case negative affects, or what Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings”—that afflict and affect this era's poetry demonstrates the role that the 20th-century lyric plays with regard to matters of feeling in a literary history that and speaks to the role that affect plays in rethinking poetic production in our moment.

Why the focus on negative affects? Pleasurable affects play a substantial role in this era's poetry. Another study might have structured its argument about significant formal and theoretical innovations in poetics with reference to William Carlos Williams' startled surprise, Frank O'Hara's spontaneous exuberance, and, say, Laura Kasischke's

¹¹ Cf. Jakobson. "The so-called emotive or "expressive" function, focused on the addresser, aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion whether true or feigned...the purely emotive stratum in language is presented by the interjections" (354).

ecstatic reverie. Focusing instead on affects of unpleasure, however—those constituted, in the Freudian account, by a rising of tension rather than its lessening or discharge¹²—attends both to the analogous sense of crisis that accompanies the last century’s struggle with affect as an increasingly urgent problem for poetics and to the controversial flowering of affective approaches to literature in our contemporary moment.¹³

This study stakes a claim to the significance of negative affects in particular for motivating the innovative approaches to communication that 20th-century U.S. poetry modeled. These negative affects continue to resonate in the present, and not only in poetry. The legacies of anxiety, melancholy, and shame in contemporary discourse and contemporary feeling permeate the social as well as the literary field, as a spate of recent books and articles on each of the three makes clear.¹⁴ To some extent, they continue to withstand any and all discursive attempts to contain them. Attending to poems’ affective

¹² “Unpleasure is always the expression of a higher degree of tension” (“Narcissism” 85) and “unpleasurable feelings are connected with an increase and pleasurable feelings with a decrease of stimulus” (“Instincts” 120-21). Freud would, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, substantially revise the theory of drives that obtains in both of these essays. It is important to note, however, that he had already recognized that some component instincts of sexual instinct involve a heightening of tension in the service of pleasure, as best exemplified by the heightening of tension that allows for the pleasure of sexual climax. If, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues that heightening of tension serves the life instincts, it is still the case that this heightening is most often experienced in its immediacy as unpleasurable.

¹³ My conclusion signals a movement in the direction of neutral affects, the lack of affect and, finally, the positive affects in contemporary poetry. Despite the different registers of our chosen affects, this project shares a methodological inheritance with Michael Snediker’s *Queer Optimism*. Snediker turns to a Winnicottian conceptual vocabulary as part of a re-evaluation of what he characterizes as the prevailing melancholy of queer theory, and privileges poems as “striking...experiments in the very forms of affect and personhood I seek to rescue from short shrift” (31).

¹⁴ Cf., for example, *Time* magazine’s December 5, 2011 cover story, “Why anxiety is good for you,” the *New York Times* “Opinionator” series on the topic, Kevin Young’s recent anthology, *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing*, and Steve McQueen’s 2011 film, *Shame*.

strategies and effects opens us to new understandings of their role in contemporary life, and perhaps to additional possibilities for coping with what Emerson called, in reference to lost objects, their “lubricity,” that “most unhandsome part of our condition” (*Essays* 473).

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s work has not often been a source for work associated with the “affective turn,” so my reliance on a Lyotardian concept of affect deserves some explanation. Stemming from his 1983 volume, *The Differend*, which articulated a philosophy centered on the “universe” established by the unit of language he called “the phrase,” Lyotard came to identify affect, too, as a phrase, but one deserving of special attention because it cannot be subsumed into any articulated phrase regime. I turn to Lyotard’s account of the “affect-phrase” as a way of speaking about the peculiar status of negative affects in relation to the 20th-century poems in which their prominence is often indicated precisely by their muteness. As Claire Nouvet writes, “To testify to the muteness of the affect, claims Lyotard, is the task of literature, which labors to say a “secret affection” that a writer worthy of the name knows to be unsayable, irreducible to articulation” (245). Because Lyotard also identifies this phrase’s address as a process into which psychoanalysis provides special insight, my reading of Lyotard’s concept of affect, and its relationship to the speechlessness of infancy, calls on D.W. Winnicott’s presentation of the early infantile holding environment as a model for understanding the significant role of the negative affects in the development of poetic modernity.

“Innocence and culpability arrive together, under the name of anxiety” (110).

This final sentence of Lyotard’s short lecture, “The Affect-Phrase,” refers to the moment

when affect, which is usually silent, unaddressed, bodiless, and not in need of discourse nevertheless “rise[s] in the course of articulated phrases” and disrupts the decorum of rhetoric as we usually conceive of it. Lyotard argues in the essay that “feeling is a phrase” heterogeneous to all other phrases and the genres that link them: unlike articulated phrases, with their gradations and variations of meaning, their more or less marked instances of addressing and receiving, the affect-phrase “signals the meaning...only of one kind, pleasure and/or pain.” While it is possible to think of poems, so often conceived of as highly ordered and condensed sites of articulated meaningful address, the affected poem would be measured, instead, by this single axis. The affect-phrase “has no need of...is perhaps indifferent to articulation” (109), and to impose articulation on it, or to transcribe it into a “pragmatic scheme” in which it would have meaning, referent, addressee, and addressor, “*wrongs* it” (109). It is not that the two orders of phrase—articulate and inarticulate—can never meet, but that by meeting they “miss...each other” in a “wrong that can said to be radical.” The ethical dimension of Lyotard’s philosophy of phrases is most prominently marked with relation to affect, of which both an ignorance and a misguided attempt to translate wrong its fragile, if stubborn, openness. What is left to say about feeling, if speaking it, about it, or to it, does irreparable harm?

Lyotard turns to Freud’s conception of the psychoanalytic dyad to offer a provisional answer: “The affect-phrase is said to be non-destined. What would it be to respect its mutism with regard to its address? At the very least it would be to lend it one’s ear. This is, notably, the Freudian rule of ‘free-floating attention’, sometimes spoken of as that of ‘the third ear’” (108). Lyotard goes on to note any address to the affect that

follows this listening as an instance of psychoanalytic “transference,” in which one seeks out “a reputedly *initial* phrase universe, where the affect is supposed to arise along with its genuine address. Hence Freud searched for the ‘primal scene’” (109). Nevertheless, the transference method turns up false here because “the affect-phrase is not originally sent to somebody.” Freud’s method, though it suggests an analogy, comes up short of providing a solution, and Lyotard closes his essay with two exhortations.

These exhortations bring Lyotard to the *infantia*, a conceptualization and personification of the situation of language in which, in Bill Readings’ gloss, “communicational discourse is haunted and deconstructed by another, wordless, voice to which it owes a debt that cannot be spoken and yet which must be witnessed to.” First, noting that “this time before the *logos* is called *infantia*,” Lyotard argues that “One would have to elaborate the transcendental status of *infantia*.” Although Lyotard relies on a Freudian conception of “a narcissism prior to all ego” to characterize the objectlessness of “pleasure and pain,” I suggest that Winnicott’s conception of the mother-infant dyad as a holding environment for the unintegrated ego of an infant not yet distinguishable as an individual object allows us to better track the relationship of articulated discourse to inarticulate affects. Winnicott notably distinguishes his concept of the infant from Freud’s by limiting it to the “very young child” instead of “the child up to the passing of the Oedipus complex,” and like Lyotard, Winnicott points to the root of infancy in the Latin *infans*. In turn, Winnicott argues that it is specifically owing to this speechlessness that “the infant depends on maternal care that is based on maternal empathy rather than on understanding of what is or could be verbally expressed” (“Theory” 40). That is, Winnicott, by understanding infancy as a state dependent on maternal care, rewrites

(albeit *avant la lettre*) Lyotard's conception of the infantile affect (as strikingly heterogeneous to and somehow strangely proximal to articulated discourse) in terms of an inevitable, if not inevitably "good enough" bond between beings who are inseparable because they have only affects between them. To Lyotard's *infantia*, then, I appose the aphorism Winnicott employed to remind readers of the presence of a mothering figure: "there is no such thing as a baby" ("Theory" 39n1).

Secondly, in the closing lines of "The Affect-Phrase," Lyotard turns to the fact that, due to the very "shameless innocence" of infantile affect that knows nothing of "what is just and unjust," sometimes "the impudent affect" upsets speech, "in an impromptu manner" (110). That is, despite its heterogeneity, sometimes the inarticulate affect-phrase appears in the midst of articulated discourse, (perhaps in the same way that, in Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," a jar appears in Tennessee¹⁵). I argue that the eruption of certain negative affects in 20th-century poetry can best be understood by adopting this model of inarticulate affect lurking near poems, those most ordered and most condensed sites of meaning. By using the negative affects to articulate this world, these poets and poems also speak to the world of the affects in a tone that engages the uncommon attentiveness of Freud's "third ear."

Commenting on this text, Claire Nouvet suggests that instead of talking about communication, since the affect negates the four poles that constitute it, we should substitute the word "communicability." Instead of a direct or straightforward communication, that is, "[t]here is an affective communicability, a strange

¹⁵ As Barbara Johnson notes, "I placed," the first words of "Anecdote of a Jar," which indicate that the speaker of the poem is responsible for the jar's appearing in Tennessee, are quickly forgotten by a poem in which the jar seems to be the author of its own actions, "*seems to do the rest by itself*" ("Urn" 67).

transmissibility of affect, outside the model of articulated communication” (242). For poetry to be concerned with affect is not, once again, to speak of how poems make us feel, but of how poems’ failure to contain affects in their linguistic grids may nevertheless allow them to account for (or in a more Lyotardian idiom, acquit a debt to) these affects by other means. An anxious poem may not make us feel anxious, but it signals that anxiety hems the poem in, so that what it cannot bind or treat binds it instead.

The “impromptu” appearance of affect marks the poems of Wallace Stevens, Robert Creeley, and Aaron Kunin as sites of significant interest for a century of poetry highly attuned to the fragment, the rupture, and the appearance of the incommensurable. For Stevens, a “chaos” or “turbulence” marks poems that lose track of themselves, that cannot obey prescriptive ideas of order, and that turn into broken containers of the affects they tried to defend against; for Creeley, “love is dead in us / if we forget // the virtues of an amulet / and quick surprise” (Selected 60) and the progress of his poems is often open to the interruptions of feeling as “tensions” that turn the utterances upside down (Ibid. 73); Aaron Kunin acknowledges that it is impossible to confront shame, the affect of lowered eyes, head on: his poems, which struggle to continue despite a shame that makes communication nearly impossible, reflects Lyotard’s observation that affect’s “impudent” appearance quickly becomes its being “ashamed of its nakedness” (110). The final exhortation of Lyotard’s lecture calls us to link these instances of affective interruption into a provisional intelligibility at the place where this possibility is most beset by obstacles: “It is necessary to elaborate the status of the world or of the incorporeal chaos associated with the affect” (110). This uncommon trajectory of 20th-century U.S. poets offers, I hope, one such elaboration.

D.W. Winnicott's "psycho-analytic explorations" move more easily into the realm of cultural analysis than many other post-Freudian psychoanalytic approaches, in part because Winnicott found in poetry a prime extension of his core concepts. "Transitional space" or "intermediate experience," in which neither subjective nor objective phenomena dominate, become a characteristic of adult creativity after having played a chief role in the development of the child's capacity to distinguish self from other, to manage separation, and to relate to his or her own body.¹⁶ Instead of calling on poetic examples merely to provide evidence for a pre-established conceptual framework, Winnicott, like Freud, seeks to account for creative activity as an outgrowth of psychic development. For Winnicott, not every person becomes a poet, but poetry is a model of "creative living," a result of healthy development and the consistent maternal holding environment that psychoanalytic treatment aims, when it has not been experienced, to restore ("Location" 135).

In prescient fashion that calls to mind Lyotard's mention of the affect-phrase's appearing alongside articulated phrases, Winnicott recognized that words in the analytic situation do not stand alone, but are accompanied by effects that can only be called poetic:

Although psychoanalysis of suitable subjects is based on verbalization, nevertheless every analyst knows that along with the content of interpretations the attitude behind the verbalization has its own

¹⁶ The phrase "psycho-analytic explorations" is the title of the volume containing Winnicott's posthumously published papers. For Winnicott's remarks on the metaphysical poets as a particular example of a regard for intermediate space, see the "Introduction" to *Playing and Reality*.

importance, and that this attitude is reflected in the nuances and in the timing and in a thousand ways that compare with the infinite variety of poetry. (“Communication” 96)¹⁷

The significance of the writing of D.W. Winnicott to this study, then, is threefold. First, I take Winnicott’s engagement with Freud, which was oblique, at times disingenuous, but always an implicit motivator of his original thought, as a model for this project’s relationship to psychoanalytic literary criticism. While the excesses and reductive schemas of that tradition have been sufficiently criticized, psychoanalytically-oriented readers have not yet responded with clear methodological aims that would differentiate a new project from the blind spots and symptomatic readings of the old. Because Winnicott identified himself as a Freudian, even though he also noted that reading Freud could hamper his individuality,¹⁸ I suggest that Winnicott’s modifications of Freudian theory, which were often not stated as such, provide a helpful way of continuing to read psychoanalytically without becoming suckled in a creed outworn. In particular, Winnicott’s conviction that his own observation of infants and the material his patients “taught” him in the course of their analytic work would be the inviolable source of his knowledge,¹⁹ while his reading of the psychoanalytic tradition would remain in the

¹⁷ Winnicott’s biographer emphasizes his lifelong affinity for poetry. Although he was first trained as a pediatrician, and later as a child psychoanalyst, Winnicott wrote poetry throughout his life and found solace in reading it. Rodman notes his particular love for Stevens’ near-contemporary, Rainer Maria Rilke (96).

¹⁸ Cf. Rodman 165. Winnicott spoke similarly about not reading Ferenczi so as to “protect his original thinking” (109).

¹⁹ The most famous example of this commitment to patients as teachers in their own right comes in the humorous dedication page of the posthumously-published volume, *Playing and Reality*. The inscription reads, “To my patients who have paid to teach me.”

background, may be translated in this study to a focus on the poems themselves over any particular theoretical lens.

Second, I employ Winnicottian concepts to interrogate and animate the poems of Stevens (and, to a lesser extent, those of Creeley and Kunin). The maternal holding environment that precedes speech and is fundamental for later development helps us to account for Stevens' conceptions of poetic space and of the poem as a container of uncontainable feelings. Within this environment, and following from its effects, the role of communication as an act just as often directed to the self as to others—and justifiable in this regard despite its unintelligibility to others—suggests a renewal of the terms by which Stevens' poetic "solipsism" has been evaluated. Perhaps it allows us to speak of the "good enough" poem, just as Winnicott emphasized the importance of a mother whose ability to fail her infant, and to avoid both depriving it and spoiling it, gave her a sufficiency more vital than perfection. Notably, Winnicott's version of psychoanalysis depends on an attention to and a validation of the patient that de-emphasizes one of Freud's cornerstone concepts, resistance.²⁰ As a result, Winnicott's analytic technique speaks to what is useful and unique about the peculiarities of Stevens' oeuvre, rather than, as some critics have emphasized, its deficits.²¹

²⁰ While Freud claims that any therapy claiming to be psychoanalytic must recognize the concepts of transference and resistance (cf., in particular "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement," 60, 66), Winnicott argues that resistance derives just as much from the analyst as from the patient. Because "Interpretation outside the ripeness of the material is indoctrination and produces compliance...A corollary is that resistance arises out of interpretations given outside the area of the overlap of the patient's and the analyst's playing together" ("Playing: A Theoretical Statement" 51)

²¹ As I will discuss at more length in chapter 2, Winnicott, like Freud, uses an understanding of pathological phenomena to describe psychological and metapsychological experience. In contrast, however, Winnicott employs the concept of "health" quite liberally. Masud Khan explains that Winnicott identified "representatives

Finally, aspects of Winnicottian style recommend a posture toward texts that is attentive to the “transitional space” that the poetic instantiates and is.²² While the concept, has been noted by numerous critics, to some extent its most radical gestures have been overlooked. Every act of reading enters a space in which subjective and objective are productively—if not without risk—blurred, and in which a certain play between dependence and independence that involves all actors on the psychic stage allows for movement and insight at a pace that is as dynamic as the interaction. It is precisely this ‘space between’ that Winnicott’s psychoanalytic writing on the development of the child allows us to posit for the adult (if sometimes childlike) reader and writer of poems; and this dissertation teases out the implications of a kind of reading that takes place in this liminal zone—implications for reading and for writing, for texts and their readers that are borne out in the difficult language that aims to account for affective experience.

An image of this sort of reading appears in Wallace Stevens’ “The House was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” a poem that seems at first to sponsor a merger between

of...dissociation in healthy persons and in healthy living (private self reserved for intimacies, and public self adapted for socialization)” (9).

²² Geoffrey Hartman, in a brief dismissal of the relevance of Winnicott’s theory of play and of “transitional space” to literary studies, turns to Schiller’s “aesthetic state,” Victor Turner’s concept of “marginality,” and Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* to argue that Winnicott’s theory, by positing a phase of development that follows transitional phenomena, misses the fact that the “mystery of aesthetic education is in the understanding it gives of liminal or transitional states as such” (262-63). Had Hartman read Winnicott’s, “The Location of Cultural Experience,” he would have recognized that his views and Winnicott’s are closer than he claims. For Winnicott, the transitional space of play is the precursor of “cultural experience,” a place of “infinite variability” tied both to the cultural tradition of the past and the possibility of original contributions to a “cultural pool.” He defines the space in which this occurs “potential space” because it exists neither in inner psychic reality nor externally objective reality but between the two, and as such it has to do with the space between “separateness” and “union” (130). As Schwartz has it, the account of aesthetics given in “Location” represents “Winnicott’s most eloquent statement of his revision of the Freudian worldview” (172).

book and reader before showing that their difference is constitutive of a space that includes the action of reading as well as the environment in which it takes place:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,

Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much to be

The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.

(CP 358)

The reassertion of the material existence of “the book” in the antepenultimate stanza reminds us that the act of reading must be mediated, that it must cross a distance and take place in a space. The poem’s last line gives us the corollary: the world can be read like a book, and summer night can be like a book in being an organized “perfection of thought,” but the reader cannot, even in fantasy, “become” the book. Even in the beginning of the poem, “summer night” is only “like” it. This resemblance, while it lessens the distance between subject and object in the same way that a Winnicottian

potential space does, nevertheless, and as a matter of necessity, preserves a minimal distance that we may speak of as the poem's environment.

Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* stands as a significant exception to the rule of poetry's absence in studies that incline toward affect. However, some of her most pointed comments on U.S. poetry, which reference Bruce Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up*, identify a poetics of disgust that challenges the "flatness or ongoingness" of most of the "ugly feelings" taken up in the rest of the book, and signals that a genealogy of the unspeakably intense affects still needs to be formulated. In Ngai's reading, Andrews' interjections, which resemble the "socially stigmatized content" of a Tourette's sufferer (349), serve to "insist" in a way that calls to Ngai's mind Lyotard's concept of the "tensor," a sign, often a proper name, that does not move along an axis of "vertical fixation and horizontal displacement" so easily as other signifiers (350). Like the proper name, Andrews' utterances "cross... a line from being disgusted to being *disgusting*" — that is, an object that we ourselves as readers can no longer easily consume" (353). I bring these closing words of Ngai's text to mind here in order to suggest that the texts of Stevens and Creeley, chronologically prior to Andrews', demonstrate a similar challenge to "flatness or ongoingness" in their dominating affects, and do so in a way that also calls on a Lyotardian conceptual formation. Rather than disgust, the anxiety and melancholy, respectively, of Stevens and Creeley, call to mind the "inarticulate affect" to which Lyotard turns as a way of explaining something that, although it cannot reach the level of words, is nevertheless communicated or transmitted according to the axes of communication, which Lyotard names as addressee, addressor, meaning and referent.

Quoting Adorno, Ngai writes that “an overemphasis on feelings in terms of purely subjective or personal experience turns artworks into ‘containers for the psychology of the spectator’” (275; qtd. in Ngai 29). In opposition, and precisely because the poems of Stevens, Creeley, and Kunin confront emotions produced by the very impossibility of their easy containment within poems, I follow Ngai by attending to tone not in order to track “the emotional effects of texts on...readers” but rather as a benchmark of the text’s “global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world” (28).

Recent work by Charles Altieri and Christopher Nealon also turns to affect in assessing Modernist verse. Interestingly, each takes a strong position on the association of the political with the affective in Modernist aesthetics. Where Ngai sees literature’s “powerful powerlessness” exemplified in Bartleby-like characters whose affects are neither simply productive nor simply resistant to capitalist modes of production (2), Altieri’s work explicitly cordons off political concerns in search of an aesthetic space that would be “capable,” as an overly sociological or political emphasis is not, “of dealing adequately with the kinds of experiences and values made sharply articulate in how specific works of art structure reflexive consciousness” (*Particulars* 5-6). Nealon takes aim at Altieri, however, for perpetuating a binary between the psychological and the political that Emerson had pointed out early on (7). Furthermore, he calls a host of critics, including those who would turn merely to affect, to account for failing to attend to the actual poems of this period, in which anti-capitalist political concerns are strikingly manifest (7). If, in his gloss of Marjorie Perloff’s *The Dance of the Intellect*, 20th-century

U.S. poetry is “idea-driven,” Nealon asks how these ideas combine with feelings, and how these feelings manifest in political action.²³ My project translates Nealon’s political attention into a concern for the ethical implications of negative affects in a corpus of poetry that conceives anew the relationship of poems to persons.

Although Ngai does not discuss Lyotard’s conception of tone as “phoné,” the voiced but unarticulated, animal-like utterance that is characteristic of “the inarticulate affect,” I bring Ngai’s focus on tone and Lyotard’s “phoné” together as concepts for describing a kind of attention to poetic sounds and soundings of emotive configurations that stand somewhat apart from the words themselves. For Stevens, reading tone calls on “reading with one’s nerves,” a model that Stevens laconically proposes in his collection of poetic aphorisms, *Adagia (Opus Posthumous* (hereafter OP) 189). For Creeley, a kind of stuttering that disrupts the continuity of the voice and a reliance on the non-textual space of the photographic image place his poems in a relationship to affect that is not alone linguistic. Finally, Aaron Kunin’s machine-like obedience to constraint figures the words of the poetic text as additional distortions of a human cry already distorted by its subjection to punishments it can hardly bear. In all of these texts, and despite significant differences, U.S. poets hashed out a relationship to the word and to what could not be vocalized that bears the imprint of uncontainable affects.

The philosophical and rhetorical bravado of Wallace Stevens’ poems seems to be at odds with the disruptive contagion of anxiety. And yet, the “fluent mundo” Stevens

²³ Perloff concludes, climactically, that, “In the poetry of the late twentieth century, the cry of the heart, as Yeats called it, is increasingly subjected to the play of the mind” (*Dance* 197).

idealizes does not always align with a “chaos in motion” that upsets so many of his poems. My first chapter extends Winnicott’s concept of a “holding environment” to the space of the poem tasked with safely containing the emotions of a speaker. In Winnicott’s explanation, the failure of the holding environment, often due to anxiety itself, gives rise to early childhood experiences of anxiety. I demonstrate in my first chapter that Stevens’ poems betray just such an ongoing anxiety about the emotions poems can contain that belies his reputation as a confident and calmly masterful poet. Reading Stevens “with one’s nerves” brings to light poems that contain nothing, or only anxiety, rather than the wisdom or “supreme fictions” even his prose statements and more ebullient poems lead us to expect. Rather than staging this failure as an implicit critique of Stevens’ poetry, I suggest that this anxiety imagines a new kind of poetic holding inseparable from its failure. In this light, Stevens’ poems create and maintain a space where anxiety that arises from being insecurely held can itself be held, held onto, tolerated, and revisited.

The intense, subject-centered focus of Wallace Stevens’ poems has often split commentators into those who deride Stevens’ solipsism as self-indulgent and those who glorify his singular focus on the self. In my second chapter, I open more nuanced routes for reconsidering insight, interiority, and self-knowledge in Stevens’ meditative poetics by drawing upon D.W. Winnicott’s concept of ‘not-communicating,’ which recognizes a purposive interaction with “subjective phenomena” within nonsense communiqués. By focusing on ambient sound, birdsong, and nonsense in readings of four poems, I establish Stevens’ reliance on “not-communicating” for negotiating the fraught boundary between self and other, thus resituating his poems at the unstable threshold between internal and external engagements.

My third chapter claims that if there is any ground of comparison between Paul Celan and Robert Creeley, we are likely to find it on the basis of stuttering, an aspect of their verse that threatens difference itself. Stuttering entails a distortion of the voiced or written word that obscures its relation to other words, and both Celan and Creeley resort to it as a form of writing the disaster. Reading their work through the writing of Jean Daive, the contemporary French poet who translated both Celan and Creeley into French, I suggest that stuttering constructs a provisional bridge between oeuvres that insist on incomparability as the only proper site for a poetry that would relate itself to destruction.

My fourth chapter refigures the time of mourning in the elegies Robert Creeley wrote for his mother. Maternal mourning returns Creeley to the site of the seemingly unrelated emotional crises that drove his early poems of erotic ambivalence and aggression. Poems in the elegiac tradition have long depended on manipulations of time to address the dead as though they were living; I suggest that mid-century technologies of mourning, including a particular reliance on photography, may also return poets to periods in their work that still need to be, in Freud's phrase, "worked through." Roland Barthes discovers an absolute and unmovable past in maternal photography that refuses to transform grief into a non-melancholic mourning. Creeley's vexed attempts to reanimate himself through the reading and handling of his mother's image suggest that recent poetry mourns the loss of elegiac consolation even as it claims more recent modes of technological intervention as building blocks in a proprioceptive poetics.

By means of a constrained poetics that aims to show the potential of shame to produce new means of poetic communication, Aaron Kunin's groundbreaking volume, *Folding Ruler Star* (2005), brings an argument about affect's importance to twentieth-

century verse into the contemporary moment. My final chapter investigates the role of Kunin's governing constraint, the five-syllable line, as a manipulation of iambic pentameter and a representation of the obstacles to communication imposed by shame. Because Kunin draws explicitly on affect theorist Silvan Tomkins and engages with the history of poetry within his poems, I argue that contemporary poetry concerns itself with affect directly, in some contrast to the anxiety that overcomes Stevens' poems and the way that mourning inhabits Creeley's elegiac writing. Although Kunin takes up problems of shame in *Folding Ruler Star*, he does so fully aware that shame overtakes the space of even his tightly controlled pieces. A certain timelessness of affect manifests itself in the poets whose work I take up here, so that despite any historical argument, affects remain a challenge to the fallacy of progress or development in aesthetic production, even in a period of change as stark as the last century.

While I have chosen to speak of anxiety, mourning, and shame in these texts, and the specific determinants of each in psychic life are distinct, they are all characterized by calling to what poems carry along in their margins or in their wakes. It is as though Stevens, Creeley, and Kunin, writing in and responding to a century whose violence manifested itself in exiles, forced migrations, and unrecoverable losses, were all concerned with the *baggage* of poetry, both with what it can and cannot carry, and with the penumbral impressions these extra-poetic aspects seek to project, develop, and program in the space of their reception. In some cases, these rhythms are tolerable to readers only because they cannot bring along the legacies or violences that brought them into being. In others, the absences themselves make the poems nearly illegible and burdensome in their affective resonance. Rhyme is not masculine or feminine here, not a

technique these poets can be said to master, but rather the insistent troping of what is, in barely registered echoes, unbearable.

Chapter 1

Anxiety's Holding: Wallace Stevens' Poetry of the Nerves

“One reads poetry with one’s nerves” (Stevens, OP 189). This aphorism from the posthumously-published collection of refrains Wallace Stevens called *Adagia* not only hints at Stevens’ reading habits, but suggests how contemporary readers might proceed in glossing the texts of a poet whose reputed difficulty and diverse critical legacies prompt, already, a nervous response. “One reads poetry with one’s nerves.” The phrase relocates poetic legibility to a zone between mind and body, for reading “with one’s nerves” would aim to sidestep both the anemic misreading characteristic of an overly cerebral analysis of Stevens’ poetry and the overwrought sentimentality Stevens’ verse itself continually disparages. After all, “It is not the reason that makes us happy or unhappy” (*Collected Poetry and Prose* (hereafter CPP) 476), and the poetic mind described in “Man and Bottle” “destroys / Romantic tenements of rose and ice” (*Collected Poems* (hereafter CP) 239).

On the one hand, the directness of the adage, which reorients practical criticism of Stevens’ poems in one clause, bespeaks masculine certainty; the appeal to nerves calls on incontrovertible physical and biological proof, a certainty so profoundly embedded in the individual, as if in his or her blood and bones, that it trumps both casuistry and predilection. On the other hand, however, nerves are the seat of uncertainty, ambivalence, and untraceable impulses; as the pathways of the tensions that may not be containable by the mind *or* the body, nerves transmit the threat of the approach of what overwhelms the structures of experience. By recommending them as agents or catalysts of reading, Stevens indicates that it is, paradoxically, in the realm of the indirect, the subtle, and the

risk-prone that his poetry sounds its longest-lasting chord. Or, beyond this, that poetry is not always the stable, legible and intelligible expression of “emotions recollected in tranquility,” but that it occurs also when nerves cannot collect or contain their stimuli, and when nervousness, anxiety, and panic disrupt the poem’s progress and its style. To read with one’s nerves, then, would mean to be attuned to what “Credences of Summer” calls “the secondary senses of the ear” and the “pure rhetoric of a language without words,” that is, to what cannot simply be spoken in Stevens’ verse, and to what has not yet been heard there (CP 374). A significant aspect of Stevens’ oeuvre, I suggest, concerns what cannot be parsed with one’s mind, cannot be heard with one’s ears, but only, instead, read with one’s nerves. Long revered or criticized as the most calm, confident and invulnerable of poets, what has not often been heard or read in the poetry, and what can only be parsed with the aid of “one’s nerves,” I maintain, is precisely the presence of nerves, of nervousness and of anxiety.²⁴

I turn to the British object relations psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott to not only read Stevens with the nerves, but to read the role of nerves in this poetry. Winnicott’s writings on anxiety, which argue that the experience of being insecurely held fosters a contagious experience of anxiety related to holding and containing—helps to gloss the affective material to which Stevens’ anxious poems signal. His development of the concept of holding to describe the earliest, most intimate interactions between an infant

²⁴ Stevens’ confidence was a matter of importance to even his earliest reviewers. Harriet Monroe’s sympathetic review of *Harmonium* praises it, exclaiming, “The black despairs of lesser men visit him not at all,” while Marianne Moore’s counterpoint places such confidence on the side of “a deliberate bearishness—a shadow of acrimonious, unprovoked contumely” (qtd. in Axelrod and Deese 4).

and its mother also models, as I will show, the onset of the affect of anxiety in poetic technique.

What I call poetic holding is one locus of Stevens' anxiety. I take the concept to refer both to the explicit concern with containment, management, or treatment of affective content in poems and to the poetic strategies that Stevens uses to try hold or contain what often resists it.²⁵ Poetic holding, then, constellates a series of questions about the relationship between what Stevens called "material poetica" and the poems made out of it, between poems and an oeuvre, and between the oeuvre and Poetry more broadly and abstractly conceived.²⁶ How does a poem adapt to and manage, or find itself disrupted and upset by, its contents as a result of the affective intensities that threaten to destroy it? What can the space of a poem successfully contain, and how? What is the result for a poetics on the anxiety-producing discovery that poems cannot contain everything, or that they cannot contain everything without registering, perhaps on the reader's nerves, the strain to which they have been subjected?

This chapter works to read the varieties of anxiety that register in just such a situation of problematic holding. I will show that reading Stevens' anxiety poems reveals

²⁵ By way of introduction, see, for example, "Of Modern Poetry," in which the poem is figured as "an instrument...wholly / Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend, / Beyond which it has no will to rise" (CP 240). Other poems that explicitly concern the poem's ability to hold or contain include "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "Stars at Tallapoosa," "So and so reclining on her couch," and "Les Plus Belles Pages."

²⁶ Stevens used the phrase "material poetica" as the title for another collection of aphorisms on poetry, and speaks there of prose as the "well" from which poetry draws its inventions and interventions into reality. While I use the phrase to refer to a more abstract "materia," that of affective quantities, that make up a significant part of Stevens' poetic making ("Poetry is great only as it exploits great ideas or what is often the same thing great feelings" (OP 200)), Graham Foust notes that the term applies equally well to money, in that Stevens considered the physical embodiments of his poems in books and manuscripts (what Foust calls, punning, "the materials of his trades") as objects of value and exchange in their own right.

a preoccupation with holding that bears on and is descriptive of Stevens' other mainstay, poetics. Holding and anxiety are singular markers of affect and poetics in Stevens, and giving them their due may exchange the terms we have used to see and evaluate Stevens for a lexicon more in line with reading with one's nerves. Anxiety challenges the rigid critical binaries that have divided Stevens' poems into emotional or philosophical, short or long, and early or late. Stevens' criticism is overdue for a renewal of its terms, and if the poetic oeuvre itself is indeed, in the words of the late poem "Local Objects," one of "the few things / For which a fresh name always occurred," anxiety is a particularly timely descriptor of its under-recognized affects (OP 137), and holding is the best fit for schematizing the effect of this affect on Stevens' meticulous poetics.

In one sense, what I am calling a concern with holding in Stevens' poetry is a new way of troping a well-known aspect of Stevens' verse, his practice of writing poems about poetry. That Stevens' poems themselves offer his fullest attempt to articulate a poetics is at once a point of general critical agreement and the most difficult aspect of Stevens' verse.²⁷ "Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues and // To this returns," the speaker claims in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" (CP 176). This statement of the situation of Stevens' poems emphasizes the circularity of his poetic work: it both springs from and returns to an abstracted idea of Poetry to which individual poems contribute. It also helps explain why Stevens' poems about poetry account not only for the critical praise lavished on him, but also for a good deal of the scorn. Paul Lauter claims that Stevens' lack of subject matter outside of poetry confines him to readers inside the academy, and goes so far as to call his popularity symptomatic of a

²⁷ Cf., for only one example, Bart Eeckhout. "[N]o other major American modernist was as much given to writing poetry about poetry" (17).

distortion of “aesthetic discourse.” Only such a critical discourse, one that is “distinct, removed, even self-enclosed—a singular place where initiates speak mainly to one another in special languages” could have vaulted Stevens into the most written-upon Modernist poet in the U.S. (135-36).²⁸

Fredric Jameson gives a less extreme, but still negative account of the implications of Stevens’ style. Jameson writes of the tension between “an astonishing linguistic richness on the one hand and an impoverishment or hollowness of content on the other” (11). The description Jameson provides is precise, but, caught up in its negative evaluation (“impoverishment”), he overlooks what I take to be the notable significance of “hollowness” in its own right. I take “hollowness” not as an indication of emptiness or deception, but as an index of Stevens’ anxiety about what poems can hold. That is, anxiety hollows his poetry of content so that questions of poetics—addressed to what and how poems hold—can take center stage. The supposed lack of content of Stevens’ verse is actually content motivated by anxiety to question poetic content itself, what it means that poems contain or that they should.

Frank Lentricchia introduces a paradigm for understanding Stevens’ aesthetics that accounts for discrepancies between Stevens’ prose statements and his poetry and helps distinguish between a model of poetry often associated with Stevens and the one that is operative in his verse. Lentricchia divides what he calls Stevens’ “explicit poetics”—that is, what his prose pieces say about poetry, from the “implicit poetics” the poems demonstrate in their own unfolding (119). Lentricchia’s framework, though he

²⁸ Eeckhout takes up Lauter’s argument in a discussion of Stevens’ consignment to academic, as opposed to broader public discourse. Notably, he cites “reading with one’s nerves” is “one Stevensian aphorism that has at times boomeranged” such that Stevens gets on critics’ nerves (125).

uses it to distinguish between the naturalism of Stevens' poems and the aestheticism which his prose statements align, is helpful for introducing Stevens' concern with holding, a topic that emerges in both his confident explanation of the task of poetry as well as his more implicit difficulties with this aspect in his poems. Using Lentricchia's terms, my aim is to isolate a small part of Stevens' concern with poetics, and to merge the explicit and implicit poetics by showing, from the poems, that one of Stevens' major, explicit concerns in poetics—the role or capacity of poetry to hold—betrays one of the major, implicit ways in which his poems work. That is, so often concerned with matters of holding, Stevens' anxiety poems are aware that they demonstrate and articulate failures of holding.

I. The Orbit of the Planet on the Table

The late poem, "A Planet on the Table" is a significant example of a poem concerned with holding, though I argue that it is especially concerned with an anxiety about holding. (As we shall see, theorizing what happens when holding is "insecure" forms a central part of Winnicott's theory of infant development and of adult pathology.) Written near the end of the poet's life, "The Planet on the Table," stands, quite literally, apart from its predecessors. Its speaker stands outside the book (rendered here as a "planet") of which it is a part—Stevens' *Collected Poems*, published in 1954—in order to offer an evaluation of its contents. Because its explicit subject is a book of poems, "Planet" is one Stevensian *ars poetica* among many, but it is also, from its first line, an example of a rare species, a poem about an affective state that results from writing poetry: "Ariel was glad that he had made his poems" (CP 532).

In this line, Shakespeare's sprite parallels the God of Genesis who, after his creation of the world, regards his works from outside and expresses approval. But Ariel stands in, too, for Wallace Stevens, who, at the end of his own life and work, thus claims to author a work that leaves nothing out. Even as a planet (and a book *on* a table) is something contained by (and defined as such in relation to) a larger organizing system, a planet is also self-contained, a container complete in itself. To speak thus of his *Collected Poems*, to claim them as a "planet," is to schematize individual poems not as part of an infinite series, but as singular examples of phenomena and styles (or notes, ephemera, letters, songs, postcards, invective, cadences, reveries, etc., to name a few of the putative genres or sub-genres Stevens names in the titles of his poems) that serve to fill out and complete the planet as a whole.

The affect at the start of this poem—gladness—is rare for Wallace Stevens, who is a downcast sort of comic poet, pensively meditative in his belief in a benignly godless universe. In fact, critics began crediting Stevens with confidence very early in his poetic career, though they glossed it variously as beneficial or detrimental to the quality of his writing and as boding well or ill for his character. His confidence is an outpouring consistent with the certainty of an "exuberant prophet" (as Axelrod and Deese gloss Adelaide Morris' description), the easy pleasure of a "leisured man of taste" whose "tolerance and serenity are a little too blandly appropriated" (Robert Lowell), the "sense of security" proper to a poet who believes that "the world is a gay and bright phenomenon" (Gerhom Munson), and the natural state of a man who did not experience "the black despairs of lesser men" (Harriet Monroe). (qtd. in Axelrod and Deese 18, 9, 5, 4).

The seeming purity or innocence of Ariel's "gladness" does not endure in "The Planet on the Table;" it quickly gives way to a comparison between his oeuvre and the rest of creation: "Other makings of the sun / Were waste and welter / And the ripe shrub writhed." If there is something new in this confidence—its object is not just the poem at hand, but his oeuvre as a whole, and it is evidenced explicitly rather than only in an aspect of voice or tone or the poetry's directness—it is its grandiosity. Stevens had previously written poems that were critical in their retrospective stance, but "Planet" not only makes his poetic project a world, but claims it as a world equal to *the* world.

Or so it would seem. Reading "The Planet on the Table" against itself, however, and along with Winnicott's comments on holding, the canonical confidence of this speaker falls prey to a lurking anxiety. "Planet" is a short, one-note poem: unlike Stevens' longer poems, there is no time for his famous qualifications or evasions, no time to say "as if" or "and yet." Nevertheless, the spatial coordinates of the poem mitigate the gladness its opening notes establish.

"The Planet on the Table" is Stevens' first positive evaluation of his oeuvre, but it comes only after substantial acrobatics: suggesting that there can be no such evaluation in the midst of the oeuvre, the speaker of "Planet" has to step impractically or impossibly out of the book in which he is contained in order to proclaim his gladness at its achievement. To be confident about one's writing is, in some sense, to be dislocated from it, or worse, to recognize that it has already ended.

But even beyond this strange standing apart, the creator behind the curtains is anything but glad. The speaker's physical orientation to the planet of which he speaks deserves attention. The planet of the poem rests on the table. The maker does not hold the

whole world of his poems in his hands, but instead leaves it lying apart from him. On the one hand, as we have seen, this distance is necessary for evaluation. On the other, the distance is indicative of an anxiety that parallels the anxiety D.W. Winnicott attributes to the mothers of infants. Anxious about dropping the infant, rather than holding it, such a mother “uses the cot as much as possible, or even hands the baby over to the care of a nurse” (“Knowing” 18). The distance she puts between herself and the infant has, in this case, a reason: the mother claims that the baby will be more comfortable in the cot. Winnicott sees such an excuse as the articulation of an anxiety that derives, perhaps, from the mother’s own experience of “being insecurely held.”

For Stevens, the distance between his planet and himself is one, presumably, that allows him to evaluate it and proclaim his “gladness.” Upon closer analysis, however, the evaluation of the planet is vague.

It was not important that they survive.
 What mattered was that they should bear
 Some lineament or character,

 Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
 In the poverty of their words,
 Of the planet of which they were part.

(CP 532-533)

Rather than actually describe any characteristics of the planet, these two final stanzas emphasize the fact (or the hope) that the “planet” of the poems resembles the planet where they were written.

The name Ariel signals not only, with reference to Shakespeare, a late comedy, which “The Planet on the Table” surely is in Stevens’ corpus, but also a “tempest” that this Ariel, in his gladness and from his Archimedean standpoint, seems too quick to dismiss. Once we discover it behind the screens of confidence and calm, what consequences for reading Wallace Stevens entail from naming this tempest anxiety?

First, “The Planet on the Table” shows that Stevens’ confidence is more complex and less univocal than it is sometimes portrayed. It demands a new way of reading Stevens’ poems. In “Planet,” an anxiety lurks behind a confident posture, and Stevens’ poetry includes more open descriptions and enactments of anxiety that, owing to a history of criticism that gloss Stevens’ project otherwise, have not received much attention.

An openness to such a new reading of Stevens recommends a psychoanalytic approach to which Stevens’ writing is not usually exposed. One of the most-contested questions in the history of Stevens criticism concerns how to categorize his poetry. In response, much criticism resigns his verse to either a philosophical or an emotional reading, making of Stevens either a poet of ideas or a poet of feelings, and claiming that in only one of these two ‘planets’ does it find its true source and character. I argue instead, as befits a Winnicottian approach, that Stevens’ poems manage to inhabit a transitional space in which neither the purely subjective nor the purely objective nor, in another lexicon, the purely cerebral or purely affective, can account for his work’s unique role in 20th-century poetry. Anxiety is not a term that replaces “feeling” or “thinking” them, but anxiety’s role as an affect that involves the body and the mind helps to expose the gaps in any debate that would place Stevens firmly on one side or the other of this binary.

Several critics have made headway in articulating the complex relationship between feeling and thought in Stevens' verse, and in ways that gesture at poetic holding and the anxieties that effloresce there. Helen Vendler has been the reader of Stevens most adamant to claim that he is not primarily a philosophical poet but an emotional one. He is, she claims, "our great American poet of the exhausting and inexhaustible cycle of desire and despair" (*Voices*), one who is "too little read as a poet of human misery" (*Words* 12). Acknowledging that many of Stevens' poems include a "metaphysical or epistemological prolegomena," she argues that a "candor of desire" is the central element, despite its delayed appearance or seeming disguise (*Voices*).

For Frank Lentricchia as for Vendler, the philosophical content of the poems is secondary. Lentricchia holds that it serves merely as "the discursive matter he uses as the vehicle for the expression of his lyric impulses." More specifically, it is the philosophical that serves the emotional in Stevens' poems. Lentricchia continues: "For Stevens was not the kind of poet who could directly pour out his emotions; he needed doctrinal counters to which he could anchor the fundamental anguish and hopes of the self that could not be satisfied by its own theory of poetry" (149).

The example of Stevens' poem, "Asides on the Oboe" serves well to highlight the complexity of deciding this question. At first glance, this is not Vendler's or Lentricchia's Wallace Stevens. Since the everyday or regular "man is not enough," we are instructed to take refuge in an "impossible possible philosopher's man, / The man who has had time to think enough," and who redeems mankind and "sums us up." Philosophy would be, in these lines, not only what gives a complete account of "us," but also what brings human belief and poetic thought to an end. Nevertheless, in this poem

philosophy seems only to respond to emotional needs, of which the need for a “fiction” is preeminent. It seems that philosophy—or Stevens’ *fiction* of philosophy, inasmuch as it is emergence depends on *a priori* claims that determine its purpose in the poetic universe—grounds the *feeling* of oneness the speaker so desires: “It was as we came / To see him, that we were wholly one” (CP 251, emphasis added). Philosophy and emotion form a knot for Stevens, who can only be the poet of one or the other at the cost of the integrity of his own poetics.

Stevens’ prose only complicates the matter of whether philosophy or emotion, mind or body deserves preeminence in poetry. At times, Stevens seemed comfortable preferring emotion to the intellect. Several of the aphorisms in “Adagia” point to Stevens’ acceptance of an emotional motivation for writing, giving credence to the hypothesis that he viewed poetry as a struggle with, and, notably, an eventual conquering of, negative emotional states.²⁹ “Poetry is an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words, occasionally of the dissatisfied thinker to find satisfaction through his emotions” (CPP 905).³⁰ If the trajectory of Stevens’ poems is from a state of “dissatisfaction” to one of “satisfaction,” Stevens says nothing about the final, satisfaction-granting poem bearing any traces of the dissatisfaction that motivated it. This is one of the reasons that commentators focus on Stevens’ confidence, and even on a sense of triumph: the dissatisfaction is often erased from the final product of the poem on the page. [an

²⁹ For an early account of the role of aphorisms and epigrams in Stevens’ writing and thinking, see Litz.

³⁰ In this aspect, it is interesting to compare Freud, who argued that words alone were the instruments of therapeutic change in psychoanalysis. The basis for this claim is, as in Stevens, a belief in the capacity of words to handle emotions: “incidentally do not let us despise the word: After all it is a powerful instrument; it is the means by which we convey our feelings to one another, our method of influencing other people” (*Lay Analysis* 187-188).

example?] Unlike a poet like Frank O'Hara, that is, Stevens doesn't use the space of the poem to accomplish this transition. Rather, the poem is the record of the satisfaction granted by an act of mind that precedes it.

Bart Eeckhout demonstrates the difficulty of pegging Stevens to one stance on the question of philosophy and emotion. He first culls an adage in which Stevens suggests that emotion is more amenable to the aims of the poem than the intellect: "We never arrive intellectually. But emotionally, we arrive constantly (as in poetry, happiness, high mountains, vistas)" (OP 198; Eeckhout 31). Later in the same book, however, Eeckhout sides with the more explicit thrust of a passage that seems to show just the opposite, Stevens' belief that poetry has more to do with insight than with affect: "Emotion is thought to be at the center of aesthetic experience. That, however, is not how the matter appears to me. If I am right, the essence of art is insight of a special kind into reality" (OP 238; Eeckhout 127). Between these passages lies the observation—missed by many of his critics and overlooked or willfully obscured by Stevens himself—that "insight...into reality" comes about in Stevens' poems by the description and working through of such continually varying (and thus, for Stevens, ever interesting) emotional way stations. Even if "Asides" argues for the centrality of philosophy, it owes this centrality to its potentially consoling effect on those who come into contact with it. To believe in a "philosophers' man," especially in a poem that begins with the command, "say that final belief / Must be in a fiction," is to subordinate philosophical truth to the effect of believing in philosophical truth.³¹

³¹ Cf. also, "The Lack of Repose." The intellectual problem of the poem is the relationship between reader and text (a common theme in Stevens' poems), but the driving image of the poem, a young reader delving into a book whose words thereby

Rather than suggest that Stevens is either a poet of feeling or a poet of ideas (and none of the critics quoted here go to such an extreme), a reading of anxiety in Stevens' poetry bridges the emotional and philosophical aspects of Stevens verse. Part of the problem of anxiety—what makes it difficult to theorize—lies in its inhabiting both physical and psychological domains.³² Although Stevens does not theorize anxiety, his poems do: anxiety's presence in the oeuvre has roots in both the emotional and the philosophical. At times, anxiety upsets emotion and makes it illegible even to its supposed possessor. A confused speaker asks, in "The American Sublime," "But how does one feel?" (CP 130). But anxiety also works productively in the poems to call up questions that were important to Stevens as a thinker and a poet, or, we might say, as a poet invested in the ways emotional experience, when it does not smother thought, sometimes leads to thinking.³³ In Stevens, such thinking raises questions of the

"reveal themselves," serves primarily to relieve the speaker's "lack of repose" at not having written the book. As Stevens famously remarked to William Carlos Williams, "a book of poems is a damned serious affair" (Williams, "Preface," 13). "The Lack of Repose" transforms the criticism into a self-consoling poem. The insight is still there, but an emotional moment is its occasion (CP 303).

³² Samuel Weber links Freud's two theories of anxiety by claiming that the problem in each is "the relation of the psychic to the nonpsychic, or in other words, the delimitation of the psychic as such" (87). Anxiety always raises the question of what is part of the mind and what is not. For Stevens, an anxiety about what poetry "of the act of the mind" (CP 239) can hold links the space of the mind to that of the poem in a way that questions the transmissibility of both thought and feelings.

³³ Claiming that anxiety is productive is problematic. In *Ugly Feelings*, which includes a chapter on anxiety, Sianne Ngai criticizes simple claims for recuperating "negative affects" as explanatory tools, noting how easily even these resistant responses can be co-opted by a capitalist schema (3-4). At the same time, she argues that the risk should not dissuade us from seeing the potential of "ugly feelings" to have a certain "critical productivity." Ngai claims that feelings like envy and anxiety can be even more useful for analyzing situations of "restricted agency" than their stronger and more direct counterparts of anger, rage, and melancholy. The former are "marked by an ambivalence that will enable them to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class *ressentiment*, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic 'solutions'

relationship between selves and others, and of the significance to individuals of objects, time, and nothingness. We see these questions manifesting in Stevens not only explicitly, when he writes of “Local Objects” or “Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors,” but also implicitly, in the way the poems, and particularly poems that manifest anxieties, work them out.

Reading Wallace Stevens is not usually an experience that brings to mind the characterization of “anxious.” As the least confessional and most rhetorically ebullient of the high modernists, anxiety would seem to have neither a reason nor a means for finding its way into Stevens’ work. Much has been made of Stevens’ characteristic “evasions” by means of “as if” constructions and a proliferation of possible alternatives to what would otherwise be grand assertions, but it is not anxiety about their validity but a desire to draw attention to the process of their construction that drives this tactic.³⁴ Uncertainty, agitation, irritation, and fear seem more appropriate terms for glossing the work of so-called Confessional poets like John Berryman and Sylvia Plath, whose psychological vulnerabilities appear closer to the surface of their finished work. (For all the charges of Stevens’ solipsism, which I’ll deal with more directly in chapter 2, it’s surprising what little place the pronoun “I” plays in his poems, especially when compared with the aforementioned poets.) The flow of Stevens’ poems, unlike that of the Confessionals,

to the problems they highlight and condense” (3). Anxiety’s ambivalence, or its uncontrollability, allows us to see its role in an individual’s thought or writing as something that both stymies and propels it.

³⁴ Cf. Brazeal and Vendler 1965.

covers over the distraction, disruption, and hesitation that characterize poems noticeably defined by, or upset by, anxiety.³⁵

By “flow,” I mean to suggest that Stevens often couches passages that describe states of agitation, panic, and anxiety in his typically stylized and mannered language such that we infer a distance between the situations described and their articulation by an unfazed or unaffected poetic speaker. In this vein, Stevens describes the anxiety of his addressee, a young poet whom his most famous long poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” seeks to instruct in the art:

You lie

In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner

Of the pillow in your hand. You write and press

A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,

Yet voluble dumb violence. You look

Across the roofs as sigil and as ward

And in your centre mark them and are cowed...

(CP 384)

³⁵ The question, in terms of Stevens’ poetics, would concern what is permitted to appear in lyric poems. Contemporary poems seem to have a much wider space for revealing and even reveling in their own “failures”—their revisions and erasures. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” is a famous example of a disrupted poem, but it’s rare to see anything so indecorous or, as Stevens might have thought it, ignoble, in his own poems. The ideal poem, like the idealized oeuvre of “The Planet on the Table,” is complete and does not reveal the messy process of its making. Researchers in the Stevens archives point to the paucity of manuscript versions Stevens left of his poems. One draft of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” housed in Harvard’s Houghton Library, is exemplary in this regard. Handwritten in tight cursive with a pencil, the revisions Stevens made as he transcribed from an earlier draft are barely visible beneath the rewritten lines: as soon as the final word had been chosen, Stevens erased its inferior precursor (Stevens, “Notes”).

In the context of the poem, the anxiety described here results from living among people who work against the poet, and unnaturally try to tame the strongest natural voices—lions, elephants, and bears--whose strength dwarfs even the poet's. The anxiety is not an anxiety of influence, for it is not predecessor poets who threaten the ephebe, but philistine progeny—"heroic children time breeds / Against the first idea," who would silence him. In this sense, it is anxiety proper, rather than fear or fright, for it, in Freud's words, "describes a particular state of expecting danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one" (*Beyond* 12).

Nevertheless, the style of the passage betokens tranquility. Rhetorical feints—the adjectives "writhing" and "voluble," the archaic noun "sigil," and the anaphoric "you" beginning each of the three sentences in the passage—distance the speaker of the poem from the suffering the speaker describes to the sufferer. The carefully crafted, worked-over passage is evocative of, but not affected by, the mental pain it describes. In a taxonomy of the emotions present there, it could be listed, but hardly emphasized as predominant. So far, anxiety seems to be at worst absent and at best thoroughly distanced from the reader, and without looking more closely at other poems—minor poems, as we will see—this proximal or marginal engagement with anxiety as someone else's affect would be its only appearance, the only reason to suspect anxiety plays any role at all in Stevens' poetry.

Nevertheless, I am positing two types of anxiety poems in Stevens' verse. On the one hand, in poems that feature a confident and triumphant tone, as in the above passage, calm can be the most convincing evidence of anxiety overwritten or obscured by Stevens' poetic process. In these poems, an anxiety about this anxiety appearing and upsetting

writing drives Stevens' arch style, his polished and noticeably 'poetic' diction and syntax, and the performance of certainty even about the subjects or experiences—such as that of anxiety—that belie it.

On the other hand, there are poems in Stevens oeuvre that call attention to anxiety because their engagement with the affect is continuous, explicit, and not so easily contained. The same anxieties about the capacities of poems to hold their contents, which were defended against by rhetoric in the confident poems, stand out in these. It is a significant adjustment to grant that Stevens is a poet of anxiety, but such an adjustment not only presents a fuller picture of Stevens as a poet, it also allows us to reread Stevens' confident poems with their motivating anxieties in mind.

To read anxiety in Stevens is also to endorse the project, named by Seth Perlow but practiced by other critics as well, of elevating “the minor Stevens” to a place of importance alongside the canonical Stevens, whose place in American letters has been secure since the publication of the *Collected Poems* in 1954. Characteristic of a canonized Stevens is an oeuvre categorized biographically into early, middle, and late poetry, but also formally between his long and short poems. Following Stevens' own preference for his long poems, critics have shown a strong bias toward the former, considering the extended meditations and ambitious projects of such poems as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and “The Auroras of Autumn” more worthy of attention than the elliptical or comic pieces “The Dove in the Belly” and “Debris of Life and Mind.” Against this tendency, Perlow favors the short poems because they are less likely to “yield propositional meanings and metaphysical truth-claims,” giving us a look at a Stevens who was resistant to such extractions as an end for his poetry (191). While

Perlow draws upon Michael Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* to suggest that it is in economic terms that Stevens' resistance articulates itself, I challenge the critical consensus that privileges Stevens' long poems over his short poems because doing so opens Stevens to a new set of claims about poetics in the realm of the uncontainable affect of anxiety.

Attending to anxiety changes the very terms by which we read Stevens. In her groundbreaking book, *On Extended Wings*, which takes as its own structuring principle that "[Stevens'] greatest poems, by almost any judgment, are the longer ones (2)," Helen Vendler implicitly claims that we can have the whole Stevens by reading the long poems he made a centerpiece of each volume. The measure of this claim in her readings, however, is an evaluative criterion that may not be sufficient for understanding Stevens' poetic output. Leaving aside the possibility that some of Stevens' short poems are "greater" than the long ones, it may be true that some of Stevens' short works are more illuminating of Stevens' poetics and of the anxiety that is their under-recognized hallmark.

The same is true of Stevens' less-recognized and less frequently anthologized poems, which are often, with some exceptions, the shorter ones. Many of Stevens' best-known poems are calm, and even magisterial in their commanding use of language to interrogate the problems of religious belief, traditional romance, or simplistic understandings of such philosophical problems as the relationship between perceiver and perceived, or the individual and the objects that are his or her environment. The questions Stevens raises in these pieces—"The Idea of Order at Key West," "Sunday Morning," and "The Snow Man" are three famous examples—are rhetorical tours de force rather

than indicators of self-doubt or second-guessing. One of Stevens' most powerful and rhythmic stanzas first commands (rather than asks) its addressee for information, and then goes on, in its request, to supply all we need to know, in effect, to put the answer in the mouth of the questioner:³⁶

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
 Why, when the singing ended and we turned
 Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
 As the night descended, tilting in the air,
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

(CP 130)

But these are not the only questions Stevens asks in his poems. Within the oeuvre of a poet most remembered and noted for his bravura, élan, and dazzling rhetoric, several poems bespeak a different Stevens. The rarely cited poem that follows “The Idea of Order at Key West” in the *Collected Poems* features a speaker who can barely phrase his questions, which are unanswerable for their simplicity and lack of referent. Instead of grand assertions numbing the interrogative, the questions of “The American Sublime” regress from an initial, complex maneuver (“How does one stand / To behold the sublime...?”) to cries of confusion about basic matters (“But how does one feel? // What

³⁶ Charles Altieri notes this manipulation of question and answer in a passage of Stevens’ “at his most confidently rhetorical” as a positive development since its refusal of an answer from Ramon Fernandez is a sign that “poetry makes nothing happen in the domain of marketable ideas” (*Art* 135).

wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" (CP 130)). In these moments, Stevens' poetics is one of anxiety, as if to say that, unlike the sublime of Kant and Burke, the American sublime provokes a more pedestrian response, a basic level of confusion about posture and nutrition.³⁷

This is not to say that Stevens' canonical poems are immune to the anxieties that the shorter poems place on display. In fact, in matters of holding, some canonical poems are particularly illuminating. The concept comes into play as a result of Stevens' repeated mention and evaluation of his ability to create containers for the metaphors, ideas, and (rarely) persons that he tasks his poems with developing. Given that Stevens uses poems to comment on the role of poetry, the objects of his poems often stand in as material representatives of the poem in the world, as is the case in the famous early poem, "The Anecdote of the Jar."

"Anecdote" betrays a concern with the property of holding or containing by avoiding it when we expect it to claim the spotlight.³⁸ After the narration of the peculiar main event of the anecdote, "I placed a jar in Tennessee," there is no focus on what the jar holds until the "anecdote" is nearly at an end. The final lines of the poem read, "It did not give of bird of bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee" (CP 76). Critics usually take these lines to emphasize the jar's artifice—it is the only non-organic object around—and

³⁷ Focusing more on the concept of the sublime than, as I do, the effect that its treatment has on the form of his poem, Jonathan Flatley also speaks of a movement of regression in the poem. In his reading, the poem's middle sections undertake a critique of "a commodity-glutted American landscape" and argue, by way of the stripped-down closing questions I cite, that "the spirit of the sublime—American or otherwise—can only exist...through countermovements of the spirit which negate...false or prior notions of the sublime, even if they are images from his own earlier poems (174, 177).

³⁸ For another reading of "Anecdote" that emphasizes what is hidden by the poem over what it "airs," see Emig, who calls the poem a "modernist reminder of the destruction that underlies history" (73).

to affirm the improbable and felicitous success of its placement by emphasizing precisely what it lacks in comparison to its surroundings. But there is also an ambiguity apropos of the jar's contents. Does it, in a simple contrast, "give of" nothing, or does it, in its peculiar way, "not give of bird or bush," and as such give somehow otherwise than reproductively? Instead of assuming that the jar is bereft of content, or that its contents are simply unknowable, we might think of "Anecdote" as a poem that emphasizes what such uncertainty about contents entails. That is, being unaware of what exactly a jar—or a poem—can contain forces us to attend to its relationship to the environment. Because we are also unaware of how the jar "took dominion," both questions—what does it hold and how has it taken hold—remain active and unanswerable. The enigma of the jar's contents and its dominion stands to the side of the poem's narrative, as though it were only a distraction. But both the "jar" and "Tennessee," the container and the environment, are peculiar. Why does the poem specify a jar, rather than another domestic object, if not for its ability to contain? Or for its ability to hide whether or not it contains? Why place it in a named place, Tennessee, if the particular way that environment responded to the jar were not of some import? Might these be the questions that would help us understand how a small jar "took dominion" over an entire environment? On the other hand, might concrete answers to these questions distract us from Stevens' concern with holding and the holding environment, from a kind of "reading with one's nerves" that shows Stevens shifting back and forth between the jar and its surroundings, unable to focus on one or the other and unable or unwilling to offer a "closed" reading of what seems to be a poem left, as it were, ajar? The problems of what is inside and what outside, of what it means for the "outside environment" to be *inside* a poem, and of what basis objects have for relating to

their environment make “Anecdote of the Jar” an exemplary poem concerned with holding.

One of the consequences of a critical apparatus that has focused on Stevens’ confidence and his calm is a suppression of some of the more radical views about poetry expressed in his work. One of the main reasons for this is that Stevens’ own statements about poetry belie anything but the most positive claims for the practice of poetry.

As we have already seen, Stevens’ *Adagia* makes the argument (before contradicting it) that emotional experience has a role in poetry: “Poetry is an effort of a dissatisfied man to find satisfaction through words, occasionally of the dissatisfied thinker to find satisfaction through his emotions” (CPP 905). More specifically, in his “explicit poetics,” most noticeably in *Adagia* and in the 1942 essay, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Wallace Stevens considers poetry as a consolation, a way to obtain relief from suffering and to prevent the “pressure” and “violence” of the external world from intruding (or, to use a Winnicottian term, “impinging”) on the sanctuary crafted by an imagination that provides all necessary resistance. Coining a phrase in German, Stevens writes, “Seelenfriede durch Dichtung” (OP 190), which translates as “peace of mind through poetry.” He goes on, “A poem is a café. (Restoration)” (OP 170), suggesting that Stevens thought of his poems as a ‘third space’ away from the stresses of both work and home. His practice of writing poems on the walk to work suggests that poems exist in this nearly-universal transitional space between the familiar and the social, the domestic and the industrial, the intimate and the economic.

In “The Noble Rider,” the poet’s “role is to help people live their lives,” and the mind, home to the imagination, engages, by writing, in “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” (*Necessary* 29, 36). Stevens’ more popular contemporary and fellow Key West vacationer, Robert Frost, expresses a similar sentiment when he describes poetry as “a momentary stay of confusion” (vi).³⁹

In these statements, poetry is firmly advantageous for life. It, and the imagination that Stevens sees as its reason for existing, sanctions “the pleasures of merely circulating” (CP 149), as one poem’s title has it, and creates the space for positive, if defamiliarizing, self-knowledge, the place in which a speaker can say, as in “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” “I found myself more truly and more strange” (CP 65). If it is at all present, anxiety would be on the side of the “pressure of reality” that poetry counters, the antithesis of the art even though it is its immediate environment.

But especially in the shorter poems, Stevens is not always the champion of poetry as the practice that gives relief, helps people live their lives, and interrupts the monotony of reality with the infinite variations of imagination. Instead, Stevens often doubts the ability and mission of art to cover up a more brutal reality. That is, some of Stevens’ poems—those that are left ‘ajar’—trouble the idea that a poem is a good container for a person, for a life, or for experience. “Poetry is a Destructive Force,” for example, begins familiarly.

That’s what misery is,

Nothing to have at heart.

³⁹ Stevens’ embeds his own version of Frost’s epithet in “The Lack of Repose,” where a book of poems is “a momentary end / To the complication,” but, unexpectedly, “*not yet* to have written” that book “is a good” (CP 303).

It is to have or nothing.

Poetry comes on the scene against misery and its living presence successfully opposes the emptiness of misery:

It is a thing to have,

A lion, an ox in his breast,

To feel it breathing there.

This short poem concludes quickly but with a knife-twist. The lion, symbol of poetry, reveals the destructive force foreshadowed in the title but forgotten by the poem's second stanza:

The lion sleeps in the sun.

Its nose is on its paws.

It can kill a man.

(CP 192-193)

The risk accompanying poetry's role as "a thing to have" and "to have at heart" in place of misery is its "destructive force," a potential power unpredictable and alien to human concerns. To forget or deny this aspect of poetry, Stevens suggests, is to be naïve about the demands placed upon it to resolve or relieve misery. "Poetry is a Destructive Force" goes beyond the question, "What can poetry hold?" by reversing it and asking whether the human can hold poetry. I've been claiming and will show that Stevens is an insecure holder—but here Stevens claims that failures of holding may be imputed to the contents they try to contain. Winnicott's theory claims the origin of insecure holding is in the past, but "Poetry is a Destructive Force" suggests that the threat that the object (infant or

poem) poses to the holder, of annihilating him or her, accounts for much of the holder's anxiety about holding.⁴⁰

Stevens' cautious handling of poetry, which in "Poetry is a Destructive Force" approaches a warning to steer clear of it, is not just a phenomenon of minor poems. "The Emperor of Ice Cream," one of Stevens' most famous, builds up an elaborate edifice for describing (and embellishing) a funeral, only to close each stanza with the pronouncement that if any portrayal can overcome the gaudiness and unsuitability of aesthetic representation, it would have to be more spare and artless than the one he has just provided: "Let the lamp affix its beam. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." As such, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," published in *Harmonium*, may be the earliest poem in the Collected Poems to struggle with the problem of holding, that is, with the concern that poetry may not be the proper container for the situation it attempts to put into language.

It is here that Winnicott's concept of holding and the holding environment, though it derives from a particular context in clinical psychoanalysis, will be helpful for exploring the implications of Stevens' concerns.

⁴⁰ Though I have chosen to bring out the implications of anxiety related to holding, "destruction" and "hate" are also significant, and related concepts in Winnicott's oeuvre. While anxiety about holding is one response of the holder to a threatening object, Winnicott writes that this is one major reason that "mothers hate their babies," a fact he urges skeptical readers to accept in "Hate in the Countertransference." On the other side of this equation, that the held object *must* be threatening becomes a major aspect of Winnicott's late theory of "object use," a stage beyond simply relating that requires the "destruction" (in fantasy) and survival (in reality) of the loved (and holding) object in order for the child to develop a capacity for creativity, object constancy, and love (Cf. "The Use of an Object").

II. Holding, Failing, Reading (Winnicott)

Unlike Freud, whose *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* delivered a revised and comprehensive (if admittedly incomplete) theory of anxiety, Winnicott speaks of anxiety mostly in the context of other developmental phenomena;⁴¹ unlike Klein, Winnicott does not posit anxiety as one of the chief forces stimulating early infantile development. In many ways, then, it would be easy to pass over anxiety's role in Winnicott's work in order to focus on the more popularly recognized "Winnicottian" concepts of transitional objects and potential space and what seems, in many brief accounts, to be their calmer and more palatable account of the psychic life of infants than the ones associated with either Freud or Klein.⁴² While emphasizing and exploring the concept of holding for a study of Stevens's poetics, I maintain that the significance of anxiety in Winnicott's account of this phase of infant development has been overlooked, and that reinserting it may help us read both the holding and the turbulent anxieties about holding that punctuate Stevens' oeuvre. Because anxiety for Winnicott is not only a consequence of the worst failures in the holding environment, but also the affect that adult analysis hopes the defensively-structured analysand can return to and tolerate, to recognize anxiety in Stevens' poetry is not to defame or dismiss it. Rather, it is to approach the work from an angle that allows us to see what forces threaten the poem and how those threats shape it.

⁴¹ Though I do not dwell here on Winnicott's allegiance to and divergence from Freudian metapsychology, it is worth noting one similarity with regard to anxiety. Both realized that the phenomenon of anxiety could not be isolated from larger problems, but that if it was to be understood, it would only be as an integral part of the functioning of other psychic structures in what Freud calls the "mental apparatus" ("Inhibitions" 129).

⁴² For one example of why the former method would be mistaken, note that Winnicott formulates his most famous concept, that of the "transitional object,"—the plaything or blanket that soothes a child and is his or her first creation and possession—with reference to anxiety. He notes that the child first turns to such an object as a "defense against anxiety" ("Transitional" 5).

More “defended” poems gives less evidence of these influential aspects, and so prove less helpful for articulating how anxiety, by holding poems, holds the key to understanding Modernism’s relationship to poetic forms.

For D.W. Winnicott, psychoanalysis is an encounter in which the history, consequences, and experience of holding and being held come to light. Both in the literal sense of early infantile dependence on a holding mother and in the figural senses of an adult’s capacity for concern and for love, holding signifies the royal road to a way of living whose hallmarks are creativity, spontaneity, and authenticity.⁴³ The numerous resonances of the term “holding” apart from any psychoanalytic connotations suggest why Winnicott found the word amenable to his purposes of naming a naturally-occurring phenomenon and the analogous psychical phenomenon that springs from it. While the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first definition is familiar, glossing holding as “[t]he action of [the verb] hold in various senses,” the second is less obvious: holding is defined as “[t]hat which holds or lays hold; an attachment; a means of laying hold or influencing.”⁴⁴ This second definition mingles agent and recipient: holding, then, might just as well describe the holder as the person who, having been held, develops an attachment for the holder: he or she can be said to “have a holding” on the holder and to “lay hold” of him

⁴³ The difference between Freud and Winnicott in terms of theory and technique begin to become clear here. While for Freud the “royal road” of dreams leads to a knowledge of unconscious conflicts and the conflictual remnants of infantile, usually Oedipal sexuality, for Winnicott an understanding of the pre-Oedipal “holding environment” supplies the most significant knowledge for psychoanalytic treatment. In terms of cure, Freud’s oft-quoted aim of restoring patients to an ability to experience “ordinary unhappiness” bears at least a degree of stylistic difference from Winnicott’s less jaundiced rhetoric of health and “creative living” (“Location” 135).

⁴⁴ For this definition, the *OED* gives as one example a line from the memoirs of R. Cumberland: “I had a holding on Lord Halifax, founded on my father’s merits.”

or her. This transitivity of holding, the sense in which both parties are holding and being held suggests that there is no holding unaffected by the experience of having been held, and no being held without the (often anxiety-provoking) possibility and responsibility of having to hold lurking on the horizon. In this respect, holding names one of the fundamental ways in which humans attach to each other, or form the bonds and binds by which families, communities, and societies form.⁴⁵

Significantly, Winnicott links the physical act of holding to the affective qualities that emerge from it. The concept of holding and of the holding environment merges the mother's physical holding of the infant and her creation of the psychological environment in which, through a gradual transition from complete unity to independence, the child approaches maturity. The duality of the referent is particularly appropriate because, as Winnicott states, holding takes place at a time in development when "physiology and psychology have not yet become distinct, or are only in the process of doing so" (Theory 48). Physical holding is not only like, but owing to the early state of the child's development, actually *is* psychological holding. When, as I will discuss below, Winnicott emphasizes a mother's technique of holding—adapting to the infant's body and not holding too tightly⁴⁶—the significance of the double resonance of the word becomes clear: the technique of physically holding an infant influences emotional development

⁴⁵ My last chapter examines shame, which, in Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's assessment of Silvan Tomkins' research, exhibits the same features of bonding and binding as holding. Shame is only operative (and thus damaging) for persons who are already attached to each other by desire.

⁴⁶ Holding, Winnicott writes, "Takes account of the infant's skin sensitivity—touch, temperature, auditory sensitivity, visual sensitivity, sensitivity to falling (action of gravity) and of the infant's lack of knowledge of the existence of anything other than the self. It includes the whole routine of care throughout the day and night, and it is not the same with any two infants because it is part of the infant, and no two infants are alike." ("Theory" 48-49).

inasmuch as it gives birth to the infant's psychological apparatus, which is at this stage indistinguishable from its physical environment, and is integral for the child's transition from complete dependence to independence.

In this way, the concept of holding presents Winnicottian psychoanalysis in a nutshell: unlike Freud, Winnicott's comments on adult analysis are never far from his thoughts about children and infants; and unlike Klein, Winnicott emphasizes the role of the mother as the infant's "holding environment" over the infant's inner fantasy world; and finally, unlike the American ego psychologists with whom he found some posthumous favor late in his career, (and perhaps unlike his earlier, pediatric self), Winnicott's conceptual vocabulary inhabits a realm far from technical jargon and scientific systematization.^{47, 48}

In his major statement on the role of holding in infantile development and in the adult analysis, "Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," Winnicott posits four stages of childhood development, each pegged to the infant's progress in separating from the mother. Starting at birth in a phase of "absolute dependence," the child moves through "dependence-independence," in which the first category is dominant, to "independence-dependence," before finally achieving relative independence (cf. "Theory"). Winnicott's major claim is that Freud failed to account for the first stage, in which holding is most important. "The infant exists only because of maternal care" in this stage, which precedes

⁴⁷ To note how the concept of holding distinguishes Winnicott is not to ignore the many ways in which it links him to his predecessors and contemporaries. Not only did Winnicott credit his wife, Clare, for the term "holding," as we will see below, his most detailed statement on holding comes with a rare, extended discussion of Freud.

⁴⁸ Critical attention to Winnicott's idiosyncratic use of language manifests in guidebooks like Jan Abram's *The Language of Winnicott*. Perhaps no other analyst outside of Freud and Lacan has received as much attention for this aspect of his psychoanalytic writing.

that of “living together” with the mother and, significantly, of alerting the mother to its needs by means of the “signals” of crying and kicking (“Theory” 42). During absolute dependence, however, the interaction between mother and infant is not only such that the infant cannot yet produce signals in order to indicate its needs, the good-enough mother should not need to receive such signals. A mother’s ability to adapt to her infant’s needs, (a major part of holding), derives from her “devotion” to the child, and as such is part of what Winnicott calls her “knowledge,” something she brings to the interaction with her infant that has little to do with the “learning” she must undertake to master from external sources such as doctors (“Knowing” 18).⁴⁹ While Winnicott emphasizes the role of the psychological environment, he also believes that the physical must not be forgotten, inasmuch as it is a means of communication: “Holding includes especially the physical holding of the infant, which is a form of loving. It is perhaps the only way in which a mother can show the infant her love” (“Theory” 49). Just as Freud was attuned to the minimally verbal communicative potential of the Fort/Da game, Winnicott stresses that communication during the holding stage is different from that of other stages. The child does not send signals to the mother because it does not yet need to, but the mother, in her knowledge of what the infant needs, is able to communicate via holding. Holding thus figures a different sort of relationship between language and emotion, and it is at this intersection that Stevens focuses his poetry.

⁴⁹ For a critique of Winnicott’s image of the mother, see Susan Rubin Suleiman’s “Writing and Motherhood,” which references Nancy Chodorow’s remarks on the clinician’s general blindness to the difficulty of what they nevertheless describe as normal mothering (Suleiman 355, Chodorow 84-85). Claire Kahane also criticizes the reductive gender schema at work in Winnicott’s concept of the transitional object.

Before we start to think that Winnicott's analysis of mothers and infants is too rosy, a critique that many Kleinians have leveled against him, it is important to cite the continuation of the above quotation: "There are those who can and those who cannot hold an infant"(Ibid. 49). While Winnicott allows for—and even seems to accept the other qualities of—such mothers, he does not omit the sometimes catastrophic circumstances that can befall an individual as a result of having had such a mother. The key to failed holding is not a lack of devotion to the infant or ambivalence about it; for Winnicott, the mother's anxiety leads to insecure holding, to an environment in which the baby's own anxieties and insecurities cannot be contained or consoled.

Most of Winnicott's theory of anxiety, and the majority of the discussions of the term in his work, come by means of, and through a link with, this concept of holding, which refers to the chief characteristic of the mother's care of the newborn infant, and to the adaptive process by which the mother's care changes in order to allow the infant to achieve independence. For Stevens as well as Winnicott, then, anxiety and holding are inseparable; its grip on those it affects, and on the writing produced under its disturbing effect, is tantamount to an insecure, anxious holding of the topics or concerns it treats. Anxiety's hold, as we shall see, makes for anxious holding.

Outside of explicit reference to holding, anxiety was of central importance to Winnicott's understanding of the aims of psychoanalytic treatment, not only (as with Freud) in the theoretical underpinnings of neurosis but as a generative factor in the workings of a psychoanalytic therapy that could provide relief from it. Without disregarding the lasting damage that anxiety could set in motion, Winnicott also saw

anxiety as necessary, normal and at times productive. As such, Winnicott provides one avenue for seeing anxiety as more than a problematic concept to be theorized. Inasmuch as the affect can be located and taken note of, it can be significant, and even illuminating, as an indicator that something otherwise undetectable is happening.

Winnicott's theory of anxiety focuses on the infant's relationship with the mother and with the transitional object or objects that stand in for her, as well as with the consequences of this early relationship on the analytic situation that takes place, if necessary, later in life. Like Freud, Winnicott claims that anxiety has its determining causes in the earliest infancy of the child. For Winnicott, the child's ability or inability to tolerate anxiety based on environmental and temperamental factors is an important gauge of his or her healthy development. What he calls "intolerable anxiety" is a sign of disintegration and nascent psychosis, whereas an ability to tolerate a high level of anxiety indicates a certain strength of personality in its progress toward independence. And finally, in some adult analyses, by means of regression, the analyst aims to help the analysand become able to experience anxiety again and to unravel the layers of defenses that mask an inability to tolerate it that had its beginnings in early childhood.

In his characteristically simple style, Winnicott announces in "Anxiety as Insecurity" that, "we are near the well-known observation that the earliest anxiety is related to being insecurely held" ("Anxiety" 98). He explains that insecure holding forces the child to prematurely, and without the necessary resources, respond to the "impingements" of the external environment. Notably, Winnicott adds that this contingency, rather than the infant's "inherited potential," can structure the infant's entire

personality: “if maternal care is not good enough...the personality becomes built on the basis of reactions to impingement” (Ibid. 54), by which Winnicott indicates both the ways that unmet physical needs threaten the baby from outside and the ways that a mother’s own emotional deficits or demands can upset the baby’s development.

Winnicott argues that “[a]nxiety in these early stages of the parent-infant relationship relates to the threat of annihilation” (Ibid. 47). This is because the ego goes “from an unintegrated state to a structured integration,” at which point “the infant becomes able to experience anxiety associated with disintegration” where it previously had not been possible (Ibid. 44). Thus, the importance of the “holding environment,” which Winnicott says “has as its main function the reduction to a minimum of impingements to which the infant must react with resultant annihilation of personal being” (Ibid. 47). Holding is so powerful and consequential for later life that failures in this environment result in extreme anxieties. And so powerful is anxiety at this stage in an infant’s life that the characteristic defenses of an entire personality structure can be traced back to this stage.

Winnicott notices something peculiar about anxiety in relation to the mother. That is, the mother’s own anxiety is determinative of her child’s. Anxiety might lead a mother or a sibling to hold the infant too tightly for fear of dropping it, or not to hold it at all, believing mistakenly that it is happier in the crib (“Knowing” 18). In this situation, anxiety interrupts knowledge and prevents one of the basic functions of childcare from taking place, often with the effect of passing on an anxiety to the infant him or herself.

One of the most important facets of the concept of holding is Winnicott’s application of it to adult psychoanalysis. Jan Abram notes that, often in his published

work, the concept of holding appears as a rough synonym for “management” as it applies to the care of those who are so severely mentally ill as to be unable to function (198). So important is holding in these situations, Winnicott insists, that instead of “interpretations that might be made on the material presented” in a schizophrenic’s analysis the focus should be on the patient’s “main need,” which is “for an unclever ego-support, or a holding. This ‘holding,’ like the task of the mother in infant-care, acknowledges tacitly the tendency of the patient to disintegrate, to cease to exist, to fall forever” (qtd in Ibid. 198). In the analysis of a more neurotically-organized patient, holding allows for the creation of a potential space through the transference that would otherwise have been impossible: instead of interpretations, which would be received as impingements, this analytic holding environment often functions in silence as the analyst conveys a sense of empathic understanding. As with infantile development, the very notion of health and psychological growth in the analytic setting depends on the successful creation of a holding environment against impingement, even when the most likely culprits are words themselves.

Winnicott draws a number of parallels from his psychology of infants to the technique of adult analysis and it is, in part, this work of relating holding in one case to holding in another that allows us to use the concept in reading Stevens. When Winnicott discusses the role of holding in adult psychoanalysis, he will speak often of the technique of regression. The analyst offers a holding environment not in order for the patient to progress, at least not immediately. Instead, the analyst hopes to allow for regression back to the time of insecure holding, where the defenses were organized and the neurotic or

psychotic personality determined. Winnicott claims that feeling anxiety might even be a part of recovery, or progress in the analysis:

[D]efences are formed in relation to anxiety...the infant experiences intolerable anxiety with recovery through the organization of defences.

From this it follows that the successful outcome of an analysis depends, not on the patient's understanding of the meaning of the defences, but on the patient's ability, through the analysis, and in the transference, *to re-experience this intolerable anxiety* on account of which defences were organized. ("Theory" 74)

Stevens' poems demonstrate an exemplary ability to display intolerable anxiety at the moment that defenses against it—almost always those of his rhetorical evasion—are being formed but have not yet obscured their inciting causes.

Winnicott's most clear statement of the relationship of holding to the adult analysis comes from a later paper, the 1963, "Psychiatric Disorder in Terms of Infant Maturation Processes":

You will see that the analyst is *holding* the patient, and this often takes the form of conveying in words at the appropriate moment something that shows that the analyst knows and understands the deepest anxiety that is being experienced, or that is waiting to be experienced. (240)

If Winnicott previously defined anxiety in terms of holding ("being insecurely held"), we can now do the converse. Holding happens when the analyst's words make clear that he or she grasps the threat—"the deepest anxiety"—facing the patient. If infantile holding

happens just on the threshold of the use of signals, and is itself the indicator and determiner of future anxiety, so it is that holding and failures of holding take place in analysis at the zero-degree of language, where words become intelligible out of their silence. This is the constraint of poetry and our reading and analysis of it. Reading Stevens with one's nerves will be a kind of holding of the poetry in which Stevens' own concern with holding can be viewed, and along with it perhaps the deepest anxiety that his body of work confronts.

Winnicott's theory of holding, and of the anxiety that often accompanies it, does not simply map onto the reading and writing of poems. That is, rather than suggest that Stevens is the anxious, motherly holder of the poem-infant that reflects and in turn transmits the same anxieties to which it has been exposed, I take Winnicott's theory as a sign of the ways that holding and anxiety are inseparable, of the ways that anxiety escapes containment and betrays a certain contagion through everything it touches, of the ways that the words in poems bear witness to both a concern for holding and an exposure to anxiety, and of the possibilities for innovation that this anxiety makes available to poetry in its moments of crisis.

Like Winnicottian analysis, Stevens' poems seek to create and maintain a space where anxiety that arises from being "insecurely held," that is, from suffering the "impingements" of the external world (Winnicott uses the word often in *Babies and Mothers*), can itself be held, that is, held onto, tolerated, and revisited—with the final goal of providing relief. For Winnicott, such relief would involve a reorganization of the defenses that an early inability to tolerate anxiety set in place; for Stevens, I suggest, it

would mean a continually developing poetic technique with the aim of better understanding “what will suffice.” My next section constitutes a case study in the reading and holding of anxiety in Stevens’ (minor) poetry. I take the short poem, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” as the central text. “Chaos” makes the case that holding—and particularly failures of holding that result from, and manifest in, anxiety—is at stake in Stevens’ poetry, and that to explore this concern is to be led to the heart of an anxiety that finds its counterpart in Winnicott’s apothegm, “anxiety is related to being insecurely held.”⁵⁰

III. Stevens’ “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion”

Dating from the middle period of Stevens’ career, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” like “The Snow Man,” sustains repeated encounters, paradoxically because it is the poetic account of an encounter that cannot be withstood. On the surface, “Chaos” is a poem with a narrative at its center. The story is that of Ludwig Richter, a 19th-century German illustrator who appears in the poem as a “spirit” and, to use the title of another

⁵⁰ As an illustration of his argument that a number of different methods can, by being self-reflexive about their aims and limits, work together to illuminate Stevens’ rich text, Bart Eeckhout uses Stevens’ most famous poem, “The Snow Man,” as a “case study” (56). The plethora of critical perspectives on the poem does not mangle it; rather, it shows the multiplicity of levels upon which Stevens worked: “The Snow Man” is a poem that gathers meaning from the poems alongside it in *Harmonium*, but also a poem that links this early collection to Stevens’ later work on the basis of the word, “nothing,” which Stevens used more frequently as he aged. It is a text to be read in light of its philosophical claims (or evasions of claims) about objective knowledge of reality, and yet also a text whose images evoke loneliness and despair. Eeckhout’s case study would seem to bolster the evaluative claims that “The Snow Man” is Stevens’ greatest poem, but the case study also suggests a much more democratic conclusion. “The Snow Man” stands as one example of a phenomenon common in the oeuvre, a poem that, like the river described in “This Solitude of Cataracts,” benefits from repeated encounters. “He never felt twice the same about the flecked river, / Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing / Through many places, as if it stood still in one” (CP 424).

Stevens poem, as a “connoisseur of chaos.” The poem’s account of Richter is interesting because it is rare for Stevens’ poems to feature characters, much less historical figures. I suggest, however, that Richter’s story is not the only event of the poem. In fact, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” a poem full of the language of the stage, performs a catastrophic drama in its own speech behind the masque of its master narrative. The chaos of the poem exceeds the character for whom the leading part was written, and reveals the problem of anxiety in the oeuvre as a problem of holding.

Several problems beset “Chaos” as a poem tasked with containing or holding emotions. The poem, which speaks to the problem of movement in its reference to “motion and not in motion,” moves from its beginning to its end in view of an insolvable problem it nevertheless continues to confront. Furthermore, the poem’s ellipses and unquestionably short stanzas of two lines leave the poem more open than most of Stevens’ poems, as though the place itself were at the same time phantom-like and stubbornly insistent.

Nevertheless, “Chaos” is not an outlier in the Stevensian oeuvre. If its historical context accounts for some of the turbulence, I suggest that a poetic problem that subtends Stevens’ entire oeuvre finds salient expression in “Chaos” but is not peculiar to it. The anxiety that besets some Stevens poems is representative of a current underwriting (and sometimes upsetting) Stevens’ more well-known themes of order, the power of imagination to reorient us in an “unhappy world” (CP 420), and the ability of poems to be at the center of such an enterprise.

Referencing the poem “Man Carrying Thing,” Helen Vendler suggests that Stevens’ reader must often work through the same problem as the poet, and at the same

pace (“Hunting” 82n3). One of the characteristic difficulties of Stevens’ poems is contained in this simultaneity: Stevens’ poems do not bestow a retrospective clarity on their development that would make it easier for the reader to grasp, in advance, their trajectory. “Chaos” shares this difficulty and heightens it: the speaker never solves a problem that motivates him to speech, and the language of the poem struggles even to identify that problem, to make it intelligible before its abrupt ending.

Timothy Bahti points out the peculiar, and perhaps even experimental, nature of the endings of Stevens’ poems. Instead of adhering to lyric convention, in which a poem’s end is coincident with reaching its “goal,” Stevens’ poems end “with their lingering...upon words.” “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” is certainly an example of what Bahti calls Stevens’ way of ending poems “without ending reading” (1061), but the way in which the ending of “Chaos” returns us to its beginning is slightly different. It catches the reader in a loop from which there is no easy exit. “Chaos” is a poem to which the reader returns again and again, but the repetition of the promise of its opening lines—that the speaker’s plight will come into better view—is always broken by the poem’s end.

Oh, that this lashing wind was something more

Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter...

The rain is pouring down. It is July.

There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,

In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

The air is full of children, statues, roofs
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.
The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.

And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl,
Has lost the whole in which he was contained,

Knows desire without an object of desire,
All mind and violence and nothing felt.

He knows he has nothing more to think about,
Like the wind that lashes everything at once.

(CP 357-58)

Read from start to finish, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” introduces a character (lines 1-2), describes a tumultuous environment as a projection or dramatization of his turmoil (3-12), and returns to a more direct explanation of the character’s chaos (13-18). But how much does “Chaos” lend itself to such an ordered reading?

Although the poem opens in the voice of a speaker bemoaning Richter's presence on the wind and wishing for "something more," "Chaos in Motion" never again addresses the problems of its speaker. The poem will never be more concerned with the subjectivity of its speech and the possibility for the speaker's relating to Richter than in the non-fluent sigh of its first word. From here, the poem slips into the third-person and never returns to the speaker's situation. On the one hand, Richter's drama overwhelms the speaker's desires for "something more," an excess or supplement he never receives or has time to describe. Perhaps the reason he bemoans Richter's appearing is nothing more than this: the speaker will never return to himself because he is, against his will, caught up in Richter's chaos. The character impinges on the environment of holding and containing, and all the subject can do is comply. (As we shall see in chapter 2, Stevens does not like anything to keep him from interiority). On the other, however, the poem's shift from first-person wish to third-person narration after its first stanza suggests something less readily apparent. If the speaker wants "something more," how does something so insubstantial manage to pull him under? How might the appeal to Richter's drama, which takes the form of the speaker's wish to be rid of Richter, be an excuse to avoid its own utterances and to stifle any explanation for its opening "oh"?

Jakobson had written that the "emotive function" of language is "focused on the addresser [and] aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about... [t]he purely emotive stratum in language is presented by the interjections" (354). According to Barbara Johnson, who calls on Jakobson to make the argument, the word "oh" has a special role when it appears in poems. As a signifier of pure subjectivity, it opposes the "O" of apostrophe, which is perhaps the fundamental

trope of the lyric and the sign of the pure conative function in its trajectory toward an addressee (“Apostrophe” 31). In “Chaos,” Stevens’ speaker’s “oh” places the poem under the sign of a plaintive subjectivity before it turns aside, focusing most of the poem’s energies on a middle ground between “oh” and “O” that is the narrative of Ludwig Richter’s theatrical turbulence. That is, what is odd about this poem is how completely subjectivity is erased following the strength of its presence in the first two lines, and how no other apostrophe ever takes its place. Although the first stanza ends in ellipses, it closes off the speaker’s explicit involvement in the drama of the poem. “In an attempt to contain “Chaos,” I argue, the speaker quarantines himself from the storm and spectacle in a strategy that seems destined to fail.

Chaos is not only the subject of the poem, but is at work in it. In the figure of Ludwig Richter, whose own chaos is the putative subject of the poem, chaos becomes an anxiety that runs against the poem’s story. That is, instead of either a narrative about the speaker’s resolution of the Ludwig Richter problem, or a narrative of that problem alone, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” displays the particularly lyric anxiety that besets a poem that cannot articulate what it urgently needs to signal.

Based on its context in history and in Stevens’ career, it makes sense to hear anxiety in “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion.” Stevens’ letters suggest July of 1945—weeks before the United States would drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—as the most probable date of composition for the poem (*Letters* 507). Stevens was attuned to the situation, and described the summer in a letter as “most defective” because “the numbing effect of the war seems to grow constantly worse” (*Ibid*). We get a sense of the workings of Stevens’ imagination in his disjunctive equation of thunderstorms and

atomic bombs, as his letter to Henry Church continues, “And if the war doesn’t quite put an end to us, the weather will, if it stays as is” (Ibid). In the summer of 1945, annihilation could come from any direction, even, it seems in the poem, from a long-dead German illustrator named Ludwig Richter. Even the letter’s mention of a desire for a small road trip to Pennsylvania finds him dwelling strangely on confused tongues, dead ends, and spectres. Deciding against the trip, Stevens wrote, “It doesn’t sound worth while merely to see...the haunts of unimportant ghosts whom I could not understand, since they would be certain to talk to us in Pennsylvania Dutch” (Ibid.).

Moreover, “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” was included in the 1947 collection, *Transport to Summer*, which contains some of Stevens’ darkest poems and his most extensive treatment of pain and suffering. “Esthétique du Mal” finds Stevens reckoning with the philosophical problem of pain and determining that “Life is a bitter aspic” (CP 322). The speaker of “Jouga” proclaims that “the physical world is meaningless tonight / And there is no other” (CP 337). Death prompts a more violent vision in *Transport to Summer* than it had previously: if, in *Harmonium*’s “Sunday Morning” death had figured as “the mother of beauty” (CP 68), in “Burghers of Petty Death” Stevens sinks into a vision of

a total death,

A devastation, a death of great height

And depth, covering all surfaces,

Filling the mind.

(CP 362)

For all of the discord, misery, and unease at work in most of *Transport to Summer*, the collection ends with “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” an elegant apology for poetry itself as “a war that never ends” (CP 407). The inclusion of Stevens’ longest *ars poetica* at the end of *Transport to Summer* suggests, on the one hand, that Stevens could finally subsume what he previously called “Fears of life and fears of death” under the sign of writing about poetry (CP 138). The structure of the volume hints at the possibility of a successful countering of “the violence without,” by reflecting on the nature of poetry (*Necessary* 36), but I argue that to read “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” is to cast doubt on the success of such a structure. Not only is its violence not successfully countered or contained, the poem’s abrupt ending suggests that Stevens needed to marshal “Notes” as just such a strategic and somewhat defensive ending to *Transport to Summer*, an otherwise open-ended volume. What questions did the volume raise that were too difficult to leave open-ended or unanswered? What does the poem struggle to hold properly?

In comparison with “Notes” and with some of the other famous and more frequently anthologized lyrics in *Transport to Summer*, “Chaos” may seem to be a minor work. It is certainly a poem in a minor key. Stevens is very rarely thought of as the poet of chaos. Despite the variety of tones and moods that his early volumes touch, the titles *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order* lend themselves to the thesis of a comic vision in Stevens. If harmony resolves apparently disparate sounds into an aesthetic whole, the

idea(l) of order claims poetry against chaos as a vehicle for discovering the unfailing ordering principle that could recover logic from the inchoate contours of ‘reality.’⁵¹

Helen Vendler also looks to “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” to prove just this point, that “Stevens has been too little read as a poet of human misery” (*Words* 11). Despite the “tonelessness” and lack of “lyric emotions” characteristic of Stevens’ late poems, “Chaos” is, to her, an example of a poem that has an identifiable basis in an emotional situation:

The reader who can penetrate irony, brutality, rapidity, and tonelessness to see behind them a catastrophic loss of feeling, a fear of unleashed libido with no conceivable object, and the despair of a mind of genius that has nothing more to think about, will read *Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion* as a poem reflecting one of the fundamental miseries of the old. (Ibid. 15)

In some ways, Vendler’s reading is prescient, as it senses the affect in “Chaos” that commentators are reluctant to point out in Stevens. First, Vendler hovers over the term anxiety without landing on it. By mentioning “a fear of unleashed libido,” Vendler comes unexpectedly close to Jean Laplanche’s metapsychological definition of anxiety. Positing that a theory of anxiety is the best way to test Freud’s structural theory, Laplanche defines anxiety in terms of its relationship to drives that emanate from the Id and processes of survival organized by the Ego: It is a “boundary phenomenon” linking the two agencies: “Anxiety is the impact of destructuretion produced on the ego and its

⁵¹ This is not to claim that a wrestling with chaos is absent from Stevens’ early and middle work. The poem “Connoisseur of Chaos,” from *Parts of a World*, first states an equivalence between “order” and “disorder,” works to disavow it as the residue of a time when “bishops’ books / Resolved the world,” and then recovers a substitutive “relation” that recuperates the poem from the grip of chaos. Such a recovery is absent from the later “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” however, as we shall see.

objects by the drive-attack. Or, to put this in another way, it is the irreconcilable (*unverträglich*) ego-dystonic residue of sexual desire” (81). Fear is certainly among the outcomes of the “destruction produced on the ego.” (Vendler uses the Freudian “libido,” and Laplanche the more literary “drive-attack.”) But while fear has an object and a known cause, Laplanche makes a point of rewriting anxiety in a middle voice. Something, perhaps unknown, “makes itself anxious within myself” (84). If anxiety is really what is at stake in “Chaos,” it is more complex than fearing libido. Rather, as a result of libido (Laplanche’s “drive-attack”), destruction leaves Richter out of control of his own reactions and uncertain as to what is causing them. Vendler, on the other hand, does not point out that this fear is attributed in the poem to Ludwig Richter because she leaps to name Richter as a stand-in for Stevens. As a result, and by an uncharacteristic appeal to Stevens’ biography, she can thus name this “fear of unleashed libido” as “one of the fundamental miseries of the old” (15). This final designation rounds out her reading, and by converting the diagnostic, psychoanalytic phrase into a humanistic common denominator, she places it in parallel with her claim that Stevens’ poems have an emotional basis.

While I want to accept Vendler’s depiction of fear in the poem as an astute sounding of the “human misery” at work there, I read “Chaos” differently. In fact, Richter’s anxiety, his “desire without an object of desire,” is only half of the anxiety that makes “Chaos” such an important poem for our understanding of anxiety in Stevens. We have to account for the anxiety of the speaker, the voice that tries and fails to contain Richter within the whole of the poem. This leads us to see the poem as an interpersonal drama, something rare enough in Stevens, though the affect attached to it here makes the

poem representative and illuminating of a dynamic that runs through the oeuvre. Is Richter's anxiety, the anxiety the speaker attributes to him, separate from his own? In order to understand the speaker's anxiety, we have first to see how he describes Richter's.

The conjunction in the title "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" suggests that the juxtaposition of two opposing states of chaos will, we expect, either be explained or justified in the course of the work. Instead of an explicit statement on this relation, the only such explanation or justification the poem gives is by means of the fraught (that is, mostly avoided) relationship between its speaker and its main character, Ludwig Richter.⁵² What can we make of this failed encounter? The French psychoanalyst André Green defines anxiety in such a way as to bring the concept, which is often considered a private or individual phenomenon, in to the realm of the relational. Green focuses on the difficulty of giving voice to anxiety, noting that "anxiety is often said to be incommunicable." Despite this difficulty, one that is fully on display in the speaker's inability to speak of himself in "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," anxiety is deeply involved with others. Green defines anxiety as "the noise which interrupts the silent continuum of the sense of existing through the exchange of information with oneself or with others" (107). Green emphasizes that an individual subject cannot own (or contain)

⁵² We should note that "Chaos" stands apart among Stevens poem for featuring a named character or personage. Among the chief complaints of his detractors is that Stevens' poem do not engage a social world. Famously, Stevens claimed that "[l]ife is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (CPP 901). When Stevens does use proper names, they are most often, in George Lensing's phrase, "witty names of an assigned symbolic status who rarely survive a few lines" (3). Ludwig Richter, however, really lived. He was a 19th-century German illustrator with ties to Goethe and Grimm. I am less concerned here with Richter as an historical figure than with the poem's anxiety about Richter's role therein, but the fact that Richter seems to present a threat to the speaker who names him suggests that his historic status is part of what's so troubling. For a reading of "Chaos" that links Ludwig Richter to John Ruskin in an argument for the latter's importance to Stevens, see Beyer.

anxiety; rather, anxiety is “noise” that exists between one person and another, or in the space it disruptively opens up within a person. “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion” demonstrates such an anxiety in the person of the speaker, whom anxiety has so disrupted that he disappears from the space of the poem and exists only through the “noise” he utters, that is, Richter’s story. “Chaos” manages to be both the space in which the speaker’s anxiety is impossible—the speaker cannot speak of it—and the space in which the noise of anxiety is most present.

As a noisy, distracting character, Richter is a good choice because he differs from the relatively few named personages in Stevens’ oeuvre. As an actual historical figure, Richter is more solid and less dispensable than noted characters like Mrs. Pappadopoulos, Peter Quince, and Professor Eucalyptus . Unlike them, Ludwig Richter cannot be erased from the record by disappearing from the poem. “Chaos” takes note of this in its description of Richter’s presence as irritatingly persistent. As a spirit, he is one who continually returns. And if the speaker has tried to forget or erase him, he is as unavoidable as a gust of wind. But Richter is not only a figure whose return is undesired; he is a figure whose return is from a time long past, which raises the issue of the poem’s untimeliness, its asynchronous relationship to the present. If André Green proposes that the spatial and aural dimensions of anxiety come between persons, Stevens’ speaker reminds us of anxiety’s temporal dimensions; it returns from the past and returns those who suffer it to a time out-of-joint with the present, which may, as in “Chaos,” have its own disasters to worry about.

Why does Richter come forward in a “lashing wind”? Before the catalog of its destruction (stanzas 4 and 5), we perceive the “lashing wind” as a threat. And, in fact,

“wind” is a term Stevens often uses to depict crisis, confusion, and uncertainty.⁵³ The speaker’s tone in “Chaos” hardly befits a “lashing” wind, however, and it is the discrepancy between the adjective “lashing” and the style of these sentences that is our clue that something is awry. The speaker’s opening apostrophe sounds like weariness with a tired subject: “something more” would be something more interesting or more contemporary than a “turbulent Schlemihl.” As the poem continues, and the lashing wind gives way to a destructive storm, Stevens’ unaffected tone is even more at odds with the content to which it, like Odysseus to the mast in the Sirens episode, is lashed: the short sentences (each with its “to be” verb) and concrete words (modified by adjectives speaking only to the physical characteristics of the storm) suggest a continuation of the speaker’s opening attitude of weariness and boredom. The only thing missing is the speaker himself, who remains, during the storm he describes, closed off within himself. Another Stevens speaker had claimed, in “The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad,” “I am too dumbly in my being pent,” but the voice who speaks “Chaos” is so imprisoned that he is unable to give words to his condition.

The third stanza offers one solution to this problem, introducing a theatrical metaphor. Perhaps this is no strong storm at all, and only “a spectacle” where “Scene 10 becomes 11, / In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.” This storm would warrant the speaker’s detached style because it is staged, and the turbulence of the poem, if it is contained in

⁵³ As the last lines of “Man and Bottle” have it, “The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind, / As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys / Romantic tenements of rose and ice” (CP 100). In “Repetitions of a Young Captain,” another poem that depicts a storm destroying a theatre, “The wind beat in the roof and half the walls.” Stevens’ attention to the vicissitudes of weather was so precise that there are, of course, many qualities of wind described in the poems from breezes to hurricanes. One is struck, however, by a disproportionate number of powerful and/or violent winds.

the disaffected tone of the poem, is resolved thereby. But, as it turns out, this is a false calm, only the eye of the hurricane: the storm grows stronger in the following stanzas, and reading the weary “et cetera” of line 6 more closely leaves us no doubt. While we could assume that the throwaway Latin phrase indicates the speaker’s alliance with a reader who would no doubt also be bored to be further oriented in this drama, I suggest that the speaker of “Chaos” only hopes we will be content with such an inference. Instead, this “et cetera” masks the speaker’s unwillingness to orient himself in a “spectacle” that is much more threatening than he is ready to admit.⁵⁴

On the one hand, this seems to be an apocalyptic poem, with the “massive sopranos” and the drama progressed to the late and perhaps final “Series X.” But both of these references indicate, not weariness at a *long* play but an anxiety about infinitude, about something that doesn’t end, or whose ending cannot be certain. In the idiomatic expression, “it’s not over til the fat lady sings,” but here multiple sopranos do their worst in a present continuing sense, they “are singing,” and their “songs of scales” warm up to some final song of whose beginning, (not to mention an ending) we are uncertain. If this is “Series X,” when does it all end? And the disorientation that accompanies it? If this is a spectacle, it makes the speaker more, rather than less anxious. Perhaps less able to keep

⁵⁴ Marjorie Perloff notes that Georges Perec’s motto, “Never use the word ‘etcetera’” stands as “an injunction that might be the epigraph for a manual on the poetics of constraint” (*Radical* 141). Only by showing everything, and then showing how such a complete showing actually reveals very little, serves the constrained writer’s purpose—revealing how language itself shows everything, its resources and originality, only when it seems constrained to the point of producing nothing. While Stevens was by no means writing under the sorts of constraints adopted by members of OULIPO, Perec’s positing of the concealing function of “etcetera” bolsters our sense that by allowing the “et cetera,” and thus not coming to the end of the description of the “spectacle,” Stevens’ speaker only further enmeshes himself in its chaos. If constrained writing proceeds through order to a positive chaos, Stevens’ “Chaos,” in its attempt to forestall chaos, opens the floodgates.

his distance than ever before, this speaker's defense crumbles alongside the world he describes. The theatrical metaphor and the spectacle it introduces does not solve the tonal problem, but rather brings it into full view).

Despite the chaotic movement caused by the storm as described in the fourth and fifth stanzas ("People fall out of windows, trees tumble down..."), the first half of the poem describes chaos as unmoving. That is, the disorder does not, in these stanzas, move the speaker, who resists its disorganizing effects by treating even the most threatening movement—even the theater from which he watches this "spectacle" is "spinning round"—as a matter not worthy of additional explanation or concern. But, revealingly, neither does the unmoving chaos of these lines move or progress the poem, which stays with a single, descriptive tone for its single matter of concern and cannot reach any conclusion except "et cetera." It is only the speaker's return from the remove of the atmospheric disturbance to the individual who seems to have conjured it that sets the threat of chaos in motion. The speaker's anxiety comes full circle even though the narrative of their relationship never receives explicit attention.

But haven't we seen the change coming? Helen Vendler calls line 13 the "human beginning" (*Words* 16) of the poem (she explains that it is often the case that Stevens delays the personal and emotional until late in his poems), but the shift has already taken place when we learn that "The theatre is spinning round." The drama Stevens' speaker narrates is not the only spectacle about to give way. The one he performs and participates also draws to its climax. The crisis is not only Ludwig Richter's, but also that of the poem.

First, what is the nature of Richter's turbulence here? We are told, in the final lines of the poem, that Ludwig Richter's chaos has something to do with desire. Richter "Knows desire without an object of desire." Written just before "Chaos," the poem "Men Made out of Words" tropes desire quite differently:

What would we be without the sexual myth,
The human revery or poem of death?

Castratos of moon-mash—Life consists
Of propositions about life.¹

(CP 355)

"Men Made out of Words" valorizes sex (or at least "the sexual myth") as the minimal condition for life and the writing in which life consists: without it we would be "Castratos of moon-mash." In "Chaos" this presence is more problematic: it turns Richter into a lashing wind without which he would not be so turbulent. Rather than the absence of sexual desire, its presence (as an "ego-dystonic residue") leaves Richter chaotic.

Chris Beyer reads the last lines of "Chaos" as "elegiac" and sees their "simplicity" as an indication that "the speaker's thoughts have moved out of the forced and jumbled world of Richter's spirit...to a more natural relation to reality" (204). And the last lines do certainly demonstrate a movement or change. But it is in fact Richter's sense of himself as insubstantial that is at issue here, and the only move that has been made on the speaker's part is to identify and confront the source of the threat, not to come to terms with it through any "more natural relation to reality." The poem does change stylistically, but not in the way Beyer would have it. "Has lost" is the first verb of

“Chaos” not to be in the present tense, and this longest sentence of the poem is also the first one not to contain a “to be” verb, signaling that the poem’s heightened language tries to meet the heightened threat level, since the threat that the speaker will lose his way asserts itself here with the most disorienting force. Abstract nouns replace concrete, and the polysyndeton of “mind and violence and nothing felt” replaces the asyndeton of stanzas four and five in a first indication that chaos is now in motion, not only for Richter but for the speaker who must account for his state of mind. The poem reaches its stylistic as well as thematic climax in a missed encounter, a confrontation between the speaker and the irritating figure of the lashing wind he has bemoaned, avoided, and finally pronounced “lost.” The non-confrontation seems motivated just as much by the speaker, who runs away from it. Despite a sustained interest in Richter—he devotes three stanzas to him—the pace becomes faster as the poem draws to a close. The ‘motion’ of “Chaos in motion” is that of the speaker’s attempt to escape from a danger he has avoided admitting by any means possible. What is the nature of this threat, however?

I propose that we take seriously the speaker’s opening claim that he wants “something more” than Richter’s spirit. It is because such a spirit is not substantial enough for the speaker that he continually slips through his fingers upon any attempt to grasp him, that the threat he represents to the speaker is that he cannot be held within the bounds of the poem. On the one hand, this is an anxiety about writing poetry: the speaker of this poem identifies a subject who must be given proper lyric treatment but whose insubstantiality and turbulence resists this, whether this is, as Vendler suggests, because of the speaker’s similarity to Richter or precisely because of a difference that nevertheless cannot prevent the anxiety from being held in common. If Richter eludes the

poem, anxiety scripts Richter's absence precisely because his affective turbulence risks becoming the speaker's, too. The threat that Richter is or could become the speaker of, or the voice intoning, "Chaos" is what explains the distance this speaker tries to keep from him. Richter's anxiety is contagious, and it is the speaker's unspoken understanding of this, rather than any identification between poet and character, that leaves Richter lost in a wind and still lashing as the poem ends.

It is the contagion of anxiety that Winnicott describes as one particularly debilitating consequence to being insecurely held: one risks becoming an insecure holder. In a lecture to mothers called "Knowing and Learning," he writes that having "a mother who was not very good" at holding makes the anxious mother "afraid of passing on to her own baby some uncertainty belonging to the past" (18), and that this fear causes her either to hold the baby too tightly or not at all. These remarks on infant care concern the mature Stevens poem, one that Vendler claims identifies "one of the fundamental miseries of the old" (*Words* 15), because the speaker relinquishes control of Ludwig Richter, just as the anxious mother seems to be controlled by her child even as she holds it. While he attempts a defense against Richter's lashing wind, his indifference and compliance cannot withstand it. Instead, Richter, turbulent and anxious about the absence of his own "object of desire," retroactively creates or instantiates the speaker of "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" as a speaker anxious about what he cannot securely hold. To press upon the poem's final stanza, it indicates something more complex than Vendler's claim that Richter is simply a double for Stevens himself. Instead, it is an anxiety that this should be the case that organizes the defense apparatus that is "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion." The speaker's fear that his voice is not his own, and further

that his fate is determined by that of his historical subject, long dead but somehow unvanquished, produces a poem that brings Richter into view only to obscure and eventually escape him. The time of the poem is the brief window of time in which the speaker can tolerate or endure “being used” by his subject. Like an anxiety attack itself, the poem is a spilling over of what can no longer be contained by one person, but whose duration is also almost unendurable.

Finally, Richter is anxious, but his anxiety also presents a threat to the speaker of the poem. As we know, “the earliest anxiety is related to being insecurely held” (“Anxiety” 98), and this failure may actually begin a cycle of failed—because anxious—holding. This is to say that anxiety cannot be successfully contained, because it has its origin in unsuccessful containing, Winnicott’s “being insecurely held.” Being insecurely held, Winnicott notes, incurs struggling at some later point with the problem of being an insecure holder, with passing along anxiety, demonstrating and inevitably, involuntarily performing its uncontainability. Among the reasons a mother might be anxious, Winnicott offers that holding a child when she was a little girl or having “a mother who was not very good” at holding makes her “afraid of passing on to her own baby some uncertainty belonging to the past” (“Knowing” 18). The poem demonstrates anxiety’s holding by bearing witness to an impingement to which it cannot adequately respond, an affect it cannot contain.

The anxious have no worse anxiety, and no worse experience, perhaps, than watching anxiously as their anxiety repeats itself, and spreads to their “local objects,” to use the title of one of Wallace Stevens’ last poems. For Stevens, the question to pursue is how the anxiety that cannot be held or contained within “Chaos in Motion and Not in

Motion” spreads to his other poems, permeating—or uniquely motivating—an oeuvre that seeks “intenser calm” with an affect that, by returning again and again, “lashes everything at once.”

I have suggested that Stevens’ poems are concerned with holding and that they demonstrate the consequences of insecure holding. Winnicott’s holding environment extends to speak not only of infant development but of the surround of poems threatened by characters, topics, and affects that are uncontainable, and in so doing he suggests a vocabulary for reading some of Stevens’ least read and most powerful documentations of affective experience as it is simultaneously registered and escaped. In the next chapter, I speak to another aspect of Winnicott’s work that helps us to read Wallace Stevens’ poems, namely a “non-communicating” interiority that is inseparable from the problematic experience that, for both Winnicott and Stevens, ground the possibility of aesthetic experience, that of holding and being held.

Chapter 2

Solitude's Comedy: Wallace Stevens and D.W. Winnicott's 'Not-Communicating'

By turns hidebound and exuberant, recondite and sententious, Wallace Stevens' poems task their readers with tracking the orientation of an ever-changing self. "What counted was mythology of self," he writes in "The Comedian as the Letter C," but especially in that poem, whose main character stands apart from and then, suddenly, among human and inhuman others, the self is rarely still enough to locate, much less lend a mythos (CP 28). Two epigrams in the posthumously published collection of Stevens' aphorisms, *Adagia*, suggest the tension at work in constituting the poetics of the self in transition. The first urges the poet to advance from the individual imagination to a fictive poetics that would address a community outside the poet: "The transition from make believe for one's self to make believe for others is the beginning, or the end, of poetry in the individual" (CPP 908). Such a mandate is consistent with Stevens' bold claims about the ends of poetry in society, that it may "help people live their lives" even if some critics doubt that Stevens ever makes the transition he recommends (CPP 661). But Stevens checks his own boldness in a second adage, one that suggests the difficult labor of poetry is in making the opposite movement, from external concerns to a resolutely inward tenor: "We have to step boldly into man's interior world or not at all" (CPP 901). Noticeably, however, neither adage speaks to being in an external or internal location. Rather, both speak from the threshold of "man's interior" and exterior worlds of a necessary "transition" or "step" toward the proper, if recently unsettled, location of poetic experience. These prose fragments suggest that the self imaged and articulated in Wallace Stevens' poems dwells fitfully between solitude and society. In the analysis that follows,

I suggest that the poetic strategies of this space, which marshal sounds and speech at the limits of audibility and intelligibility, are consonant with its transient and transitional temperament.

Wallace Stevens has only recently been regarded as a poet whose investments in the exterior world—history, politics, and news—deserve an important place in his poetic reputation; since the 1950s, most assessments of Stevens have granted pride of place to a world-avoiding interiority that some critics have scorned as solipsism and others have praised, hyperbolically, as American poetry’s closest approximation to the quintessence of lyric. Only in the last two decades, led by Alan Filreis, James Longenbach, and Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, did a new perspective, one that recognized Stevens’ engagement in the events of his day, emerge as a corrective.⁵⁵ Of course, none of these scholars claim that contemporary history was the “absolute foyer” of Stevens’ work, but it is still a necessary reminder that his poetry, from “The Comedian as the Letter C” to “The Motive for Metaphor” to “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” privileges change, variation, and modulation, the desire for a foyer than the sense of already inhabiting it. The endless, restless movement that his poems observe and demand describes, too, the lability characteristic of Stevens’ inhabiting of both internal and external sites of concern. What psychoanalytic paradigm, it is pertinent to ask here, aids in limning Stevens’ hoverings, approaches and withdrawals from the threats of the interpersonal world and the comforts of the mind? Or, to trouble this dualism, from the promises of contact and the threats of self-knowledge?

⁵⁵ Cf., Longenbach, Brogan, *Violence* and Filreis. For a fuller list of critics who placed Stevens firmly in the camp of dandyism, sparking a counter-response in the criticism of defenses of Stevens, see Brogan, *Stevens and Simile*, 7n13.

By focusing on what is gradual, precarious, and transitional, D.W. Winnicott's account of the self offers a rich conceptual vocabulary for describing the changes—rather than the fixity—of Stevens's psychic negotiations of the real world. Adhering neither to Freud's developmental stages nor to Klein's more suggestive "positions," Winnicott "tends...to write of capacities" (Phillips, *Winnicott* 58). Describing the sequence of development of the child, which he believed to be of supreme importance in establishing adult health, he wrote of the child's growth from dependence toward an independence characterized by the capacity for creative and spontaneous living. In order to do achieve this, the child alternately relies on and tests its environment. Shuttling back and forth in this way allows the child to differentiate between inner and outer reality, and to negotiate the demands of his or her needs with respect to both. This demand, of course, is never completely resolved, and as such characterizes the struggles of adults, too: "It is assumed that the task of reality acceptance is never completed, that no human being is ever free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality" ("Transitional" 240).

By a foray into Winnicott, readers of Stevens can better approach the complexity of a poetic language made to grapple with the movements of a self torn by allegiances to itself and its others, or "inner" and "outer reality." In the adages above, Stevens speaks from what D.W. Winnicott calls a "transitional space" between self and others, or on the way from self to others or the converse, such that the desire to be in the world or in one's mind is always mediated by the change it would take to arrive there. D.W. Winnicott's concept of "not-communicating" suggests an openly paradoxical—productive and engaged—withdrawal from positive communication that helps us to account for the aims

of such movements between the self and its others and the strategies by which these aims are realized poetically.

Later in his life, Winnicott spoke to the role of communication in development, and it is in this light that his work can be especially helpful for reassessing Wallace Stevens' interiority and the constant movement of the self in his poems. "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading To a Study of Certain Opposites," published in 1963, establishes the developmental significance of silence and self-directed practices of speech, and as such allows us to speak of Stevens' singularly difficult way of fashioning "materia poetica"⁵⁶ to describe the voyage of the self between what Winnicott called "subjective and objective phenomena" ("Communicating" 180). As an example of the vocabulary he derived from clinical experience and the vernacular, "not communicating" is Winnicott's phrase for a complex form of interpersonal interaction indicative of an individual's communication with "subjective phenomena" instead of persons or objects perceived of outside the self. This interaction is, crucially, still interpersonal because the dynamic is perceived by, and sometimes even directed toward, potential interlocutors. Winnicott recognizes that this "active or reactive" relationship to typical communication has its role to play in the development of the healthy subject.

Despite its negative formulation, and its derivation from a pathological split between "False Self" and "True Self" Winnicott posits in individuals who experienced failures in the early holding environment, "not communicating" is Winnicott's term for a

⁵⁶ Stevens used the phrase as a title for the section of his journals he published in *View* in 1940, but when Harold Bloom commented that "*materia poetica* and poetry [are] the same thing for Stevens," he licensed it for broader use among critics, who have employed the phrase to hint at the diverse topics Stevens' drew together for his poems, as well as to discuss the Stevens' concept of a kind of workmanship between reality and imagination.

phenomenon of health; it describes the way that individuals actively engage with ‘subjective phenomena’ and ignore or disengage from objective events and others. The term is valuable for allowing us a more complex view of such disengagement as not simply withdrawal, but as a shift of focus highly motivated by the ongoing process of development. “Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that *each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound*” (“Communicating” 187).

Instead of needing to see Wallace Stevens as the epitome of health or of illness, as the “great poet of inward glory” or the withdrawn antisocial character, “not communicating” allows us to situate Stevens in a middle ground. To critics who understand Stevens’ social disengagements as evidence of a disturbed vision of reality, the phenomenon of “not communicating” counters that what appears to be pathological may actually serve the healthy person’s desire to protect a center.

Underlining the developmental necessity of participation with “subjective phenomena” at the expense of the objective phenomena which communication is expected to engage, Winnicott reveals that what appears to be withdrawal is actually active and even outwardly-engaged, a communication both to the self and to others, albeit by other means. Stevens’ manipulations of tone and apostrophe, often accompanied by non-fluent sounds and ambient noise, construct a repertoire of non-communicative strategies integral to an apology for meditative interiority haunted by its others, and it is in the hard-won stability that this conflicted poetics affords Stevens that the originality of his poetics consists.

Although it would be reductive to claim that critics fall into only two camps—one of praise and one of blame—nevertheless critical appraisals follow a few predictable paths in dealing with Stevens’ interiority. Mark Halliday faults Stevens’ “omissions and distortions” of social practices and devotes his book, *Stevens and the Interpersonal* to a critique (and eventual qualified defense) of Stevens’ social disengagement (174n1). Gerald Bruns claims that we can locate a disruption of Stevens’ poetry in what it knows it neglects: “[Stevens] is a poet troubled by the sort of poetry he is not writing and perhaps can’t bring himself to think of as poetic...the poetry of the other” (35). He goes on more forcefully: “It is not, as Hugh Kenner once put it, that there are no people in Stevens’ poetry...it is that people in Stevens’ poetry never answer back” (26). Coming to Stevens’ defense, Harold Bloom praises the “selfhood-communings” that set him apart as “the twentieth century poet of that solitary and inward glory we can none of us share with others” (*Modern 5*). Helen Vendler claims that it is in Stevens’ difficult, self-reflexive poetic process that we discover their originality. Although “baffling to the ordinary reader when they enact the thinking of thoughts, or the sensing of sensations, or the supposing of suppositions,” these techniques comprise the “second-order” processes for which Stevens is renowned (“Hunting” 74-75).⁵⁷

Set against this handling of interiority, a trend in the recent criticism positions Stevens’ poetry in relationship to the historical and political issues of his day. Examining

⁵⁷ Bart Eeckhout reminds us that some of the charges accruing to Stevens on account of his interiority might be better attributed to the nature of the lyric (20). Although I do not have time to speak in great depth to Stevens’ peculiar relationship to the interiority constitutive of the lyric—an interiority made infamous in Adorno’s critique of it in “The Lyric Poet and Society”—my reading of Stevens’ revisions of Keats in his “Autumn Refrain” and “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” will in some way keep this relationship in mind.

his World War II-era output, Jacqueline Vaught Brogan situates her claim that Stevens matured to become “one of the most compelling and ethical poets” within an argument about the progress of his poetics throughout his career. She also notes that a critical predisposition for seeing Stevens “as an aesthete, removed either by inclination or economic position from any involvement with the political realities of his time,” led to the dismissal of earlier critical appraisals of Stevens’ political involvement, such as Joseph Riddel’s 1958 article, “Poet’s Politics.” The work that has come out of this recent trend is not always in conflict with an understanding of Stevens as a poet of inner issues in relation to outside ones. At times, even scholars most invested in the project of exposing Stevens to the light of historical and social issues admit that he was insular. Alan Filreis’ archival research in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* shows that Stevens does approach and engage with what the poet termed ‘the actual world,’ but Filreis concedes that the phrase ‘actual world’ is not always an indicator of devoted involvement. Stevens used it “at times to denigrate his interest in such externalities as the last resort of a man whose already famous interiority made him feel desperately irrelevant” (xviii).⁵⁸ As Winnicott’s theory of development has prepared us to accept, the world of actual objects is often the horizon of multiple approaches and retreats in a transitional space characteristic of subjective and objective phenomena intermingling. Stevens could, out of a (subjective) feeling of desperate irrelevance, malign the same (objective) world he would approach later as the locus of pleasure and affiliation. (In a

⁵⁸In a similar vein, Longenbach writes, “I have tried to answer those readers who see Stevens’s aesthetic as one of retreat or mere aestheticism. There are moments when Stevens was such a poet...but the times when he was not were as much a result of the contradictions of his sensibility as of the complexities of the world in which he lived” (279).

poem like “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” the maligning has to precede the affirmation: “It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good” (CP 293-94)).

That is, if the ‘actual world’ came to mean both a repudiated or repudiating place and a site of subtle investigation in the poems, it is time to investigate anew how interiority is at work in a poet whose relationship to the external world has been shown to be continuous and complex. Interiority would not be the simple opposite of an ‘actual world’ in Stevens. Rather, it would be an aspect of the ‘actual world,’ a response to it, and a buffer between it and the self never completely free from its predicates. I read Stevens’ interiority differently from both Halliday and Bloom by demonstrating that the poetry’s resistance to social convention is a more complex phenomenon, neither an oversight nor the overarching thematic keystone. Rather than simply reject or accept it, Stevens directs our attention to the separating off of an individual self, to the process of its becoming isolated and maintaining this posture against external pressures. As such, the poems constitute an anatomy of the struggle to achieve solitude as well as an apology for its eventual, always deferred achievement. In my readings of four poems, I show that the individual relates to the outside world and to the self simultaneously, and does this by means of a modification of positive communication that Winnicott calls “not-communicating.”

I begin with “The Comedian as the Letter C” because that early long poem’s deliberation—over dozens of lines in its first canto—of how its main character becomes “an introspective voyager” is the first and fullest poetic treatment of what is, after all, a deliberate turn inward, rather than an already-established interiority. By tracking the

progress of this turn, I show that shifts of tone and ambient sounds in the poem threaten the main character's introspection. Such self-beholding grounds the poem's defense of interiority as a perilous voyage of uncertain destination, rather than an indulgent escape from reality and the obligations of social presence. I turn to readings of "Autumn Refrain," "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," and "Long and Sluggish Lines," to trace Stevens' tentative engagements with (and disengagements from) the self and the external world in poems that move progressively later through his career, emphasizing a dislocation from the outside that nevertheless remains consistently provisional, hesitant, and incomplete. In all of these poems, dissonant echoes of non-fluent, inhuman sounds are the vehicles of non-communication; these departures or "divagations" from communicative speech propel the inward turn and its movement away from a social order that is always nearby. It may be in his treatment of this other as a threatening possibility for impingement that we can best account for Stevens' relationship to the social world; it is certainly the strongest evidence that critics (like Bruns) who argue that it is absent from the oeuvre are mistaken.

Crispin's loss of a "mythology of self" and his becoming "an introspective voyager" happen amidst peculiar tonal variations and a menagerie of unarticulated sounds that complicate our sense of interiority in the poem. Always conflicted, and most often parallel to or intercalated with an external world, inwardness is never simply inwardness in Stevens. The problem of self-knowledge, or more basically, of obtaining a space in which such knowledge could be gained, serves to complicate what is already an involved drama of the individual's location in the world.

In *Harmonium*, a volume of poems that advertises its many genres or sub-genres in its title—invective, explanation, anecdote, theory, hymn, sonatina—“The Comedian as the Letter C” sets itself up as a comedy delivered as both treatise and travelogue. The relationship between these genres is that of commentary and original text, in the sense that the poem turns to the exegetical and synthetic mode precisely when the narrative needs, as one critic puts it, “punctuation” (*Extended* 39).

The scholarly treatise of “Comedian” follows the humbling of its protagonist. The story of his own transition from complete control of his surroundings to the recognition that his surroundings control him does not conclude so much as find itself “benignly clipped” in its own final lines so the story of the world around him can continue. The poem’s movement progressively strips Crispin of his sovereignty, his aspirations, and his role in the poem whose title bears only a truncated version of his name, “the Letter C.” To read this progressive stripping or, as the poem has it, “dissolv[ing],” is to recognize the travails—rather than the indulgent triumphs—that follow from a decisive “introspective” turn in its first canto. Instead of “inward glory,” as Bloom has it, Crispin’s reflections first increase his “apprehensions” and then are powerless to stop his disappointment and eventual demise.

As for the other genre of “Comedian,” the poem’s travelogue is only briefly that of a geographical voyage. Although the opening contrasts the sovereignty of humans on the earth with their alienation at sea, the speaker narrates the way that mental travel turns up on the itinerary. “Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next, / And then to Carolina” is the geographical trip, but somewhere along the way “Crispin /Became an introspective voyager” (CP 29). How does introspection become the poem’s greatest concern? That is,

how does “Comedian” bring us to this point?⁵⁹ In other words, what are the coordinates by which this bold step into man’s interior world is taken, considering that we start from the external world of actual voyages?

The first canto of “Comedian” continues a trend, already established by this point of *Harmonium* through such poems as “Another Weeping Woman,” of questioning the unmitigated good of the imagination. It makes the case that Crispin might just need “a world without imagination” in order to be cured of self-absorption and led toward self-reflection. The voyage of the poem (rather than the voyage described *in* the poem) is one that begins with an “insatiable egotist” and leads to the “introspective voyager.”

Crispin’s role when we first hear his name is to add “a touch of doubt” to the claim that man’s status as “the intelligence of his soil...principium / And lex” is applicable once he is at sea, surrounded by “porpoises, instead of apricots.” Crispin’s “verbooseness,” a habit, when on land, of acting as “general lexicographer of mute / And maidenly greenhorns,” is the first casualty. The speaker, verbose in his own right, distinguishes between his own voluble tongue and Crispin’s by claiming that the latter errs by giving language, or worse, a non-fluent “haw of hum,” to things that do not need it. Crispin oversteps his bounds, becoming not just the “intelligence” of his soil, but also its spokesman. The only sounds of “Comedian” at this point are those made by Crispin, but we are soon to hear the retaliation of his environment.

This move to countermand a certain kind of address to nature has a companion in Stevens’ poem, “Nuances on a Theme by Williams,” which dates from the same time

⁵⁹ I leave aside the rest of “Comedian” because my interest is in the way Stevens turns from the outside world to the inside world, and how he proposed to manage the two in tandem. This process takes place in the first canto of “Comedian,” and the rest of the poem builds on the foundation of interiority thereby established.

period as “Comedian.” There, Stevens uses an indictment of false relationships between humans and objects to distinguish his poetry from Williams’. “Nuances” reiterates an injunction against prosopopeia even as it personifies and addresses the “ancient star” Williams had commanded to “Shine alone in the sunrise / Toward which you lend no part” (CP 18). Stevens’ speaker, in ironic contrast, demands that the star not recognize any gesture that grants it such power: “Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses you in its own light” (Ibid. 18). Of course, even for the star to obey such a command would betray a tacit compliance with this new speaker’s injunction, suggesting that Stevens’ “nuancing” of Williams is less a reproof of the latter’s anthropocentrism than a call for its inevitability to be recognized.⁶⁰ One of the emerging tropes of *Harmonium* is a call for attention to be placed where it is due, at the moment when objects from the outer world and the inner world come into contact.⁶¹ The criticism of Williams, and of Crispin at this point in his voyage, seems to be that each takes too much for granted about possible relationships to the inhuman external world. These poems stop us in our tracks with assumptions about the outside world. Stevens makes the case for a different kind of

⁶⁰ Thus, while I agree with Dawid De Villier’s assertion that Stevens would have the star “remain aloof from the personal relationship established by the speaker of ‘El Hombre,’” I depart from his in suggesting that the valence of “Nuances” is, in relation to Williams’ anthropocentrism, more than simply oppositional. (Cf. De Villiers 102).

⁶¹ “Contact” is, of course, no alien concept to Williams, as it figured as the title of the little magazine he edited from December 1920 to July 1923, and again for three issues in 1932. But if for Williams contact denoted the result of an external object’s becoming knowable as (according to the “Manifesto” of *Contact*) “personal realization” came to bear upon it, Stevens suggests that the unknowability of both self and object drive the energy of the encounter they nevertheless sustain. To cultivate respect for individual difference in the realm of contact forms the central tenet of “Re-statement of Romance,” in which the two lovers experience, rather than the self-erasing merger characteristic of the Shakespearean dyad (cf. “The Phoenix and Turtle,” where “number...in love was slain”) an experience of solitude “far beyond the casual solitudes” (CP 146).

communication, one that would aim to exhaust communication with the local (though not always more knowable) inside before it addresses the outside and thus risks devaluing it with its own suffusing light.

Indeed, the way Crispin's environment comes to define him becomes the speaker's focal point in the next part of canto I. (This is another motif of *Harmonium*, one that Stevens sometimes expresses in a more neutral tone. The short poem, "Theory" elaborates two "instances" to support the theorem, "I am what is around me" (CP 86-87)). Once the voyage begins, it is not the unfamiliarity of "porpoises" or even their "inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world" that bothers him: "the lost terrestrial" upsets his sovereignty, but his concomitant, and now inaccessible "mythology of self, / Blotched out beyond unblotching" motivates a new vision.

Crispin...now beheld himself,
 A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass.
 What word split up in clattering syllables
 And storming under multitudinous tones
 Was name for this short-shanks in all that brunt?
 Crispin was washed away by magnitude.

(CP 28)

The first indication that the point of Crispin's voyage will be to turn him into an "introspective voyager" occurs when (after many lines in this poem, and at the end of a long sentence), a sea-glass grants Crispin his first sight of himself. Certainly, such a self-revisioning comes at the cost of viewing the external world with any real accuracy: in order to use the "sea-glass" to see himself, Crispin must of course invert it and use it as

an ersatz mirror. The telescoping effect allows Crispin to watch himself watching himself as from a distance, though we should note that Stevens uses the word “beheld,” to indicate a reverent encounter for a man who nevertheless lacks a mythology. The speaker goes on to describe the kind of word that *would* describe Crispin at this moment, if only he could find it. In the same moment, then, Crispin is “washed away” from himself by magnitude and from the reader by the unavailability of language to the speaker, who admits the impossibility of articulating his experience. (The speaker also judiciously avoids verboseness here.) When the speaker picks up, after his aphasic inability to describe Crispin, it is to describe another inarticulate sound to add to the “multitudinous tones” just witnessed:

The whole of life that still remained in him
Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,
Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,
Polyphony beyond his baton’s thrust.

(CP 28)

The “multitudinous tones” of “The Comedian as the Letter C” never resolve into “one sound.” As soon as we are told that they do, the one sound becomes several, a “concussion, slap and sigh,” a whole “polyphony.” The sounds of the poem are almost always related to the sounds associated with the letter “C”: they indicate that the self in the outside world is multiplicitous, irresolvable, and inarticulate as a single voice. How to even isolate a singular self for observation if “I am what surrounds me?” Crispin’s self-beholding may come at the expense of seeing the external world, but it also comes as the result of significant labor, artifice, and, given his inverted telescope, even innovation. If

the failure of the sounds to ever “dwindle to one” is not a recognition of the failure of Crispin’s introspective voyage, it is at least an admission of the difficulty of inward turning.

In the passage above, as Crispin is being “washed away,” overwhelmed and estranged from all he knows, the speaker indicates both the seriousness of the occasion for Crispin and his own nonchalance in describing it. The nickname “short-shanks” and the playful alliteration, “skinny sailor” do nothing to heighten the intensity, but at the same time they do not succeed in deflating it entirely. Being “washed away by magnitude” still has its necessary solemnity.

These tonal shifts are not a sign of unevenness or, as some critics have it, the relatively poor quality of this early poem, but rather a signal of something that cannot be articulated otherwise. They mark an ambivalence on the part of the poet about the attitude he should take toward the speaker and the character Crispin. As though the poet, too, saw himself as in a “sea-glass,” and there saw not only his speaker, but also the character his speaker sees, “Comedian” portrays audibly—in shifting tones—what cannot be spoken because it is incongruous, namely the vertiginous *visibility* of self-seeing. Looking at the rest of the poem, we note the strange sounds that accompany the voyage: pipping, clickering, sneering boisterously, etc. These sounds often occur alongside moments of tonal shifts, in precisely the places where Crispin’s voyage takes an important inward turn. As such, strange sounds index visions of self otherwise too challenging to account for, visions that can be indicated audibly, but not verbally.

In a starker, barer world, in which the sun
Was not the sun because it never shone

With bland complaisance on pale parasols,
 Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets.
 Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried
 Celestial sneering boisterously. Crispin
 Became an introspective voyager.

(CP 29)

In these lines, the noise from outside turns Crispin inward. The archaic adjective “pipping” describes, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the action of a chick in cracking or puncturing its shell prior to hatching.” Instead of hatching, however, or heading into the external world, Crispin, in the tradition of Ben Johnson’s “brave infant of Saguntum,” returns to the womb. If this return is brave, however, it is because it must confront even stranger phenomena introspectively than it had in the “starker, barer world”:

Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last,
 Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,
 But with a speech belched out of hoary darks
 Noway resembling his, a visible thing....

(CP 29)

The unfamiliar speech Crispin finds when he looks within, a speech “Noway resembling his,” demonstrates Stevens’ belief in the difficult work of self-knowing. Rather than a harmonious sphere of self-identification, Crispin’s continuing voyage of introspection requires a continuous voyaging into the unknown.

Harold Bloom has it that “The Comedian as the Letter C” marked, at the time he wrote it, Stevens’ farewell to poetry as he set out to build his career at the Hartford Insurance group and devote himself to family life (*Climate* 70). When he began writing again, in the socially and politically turbulent 1930s, the demands of the outside world had begun to exert a pressure he could no longer resist. Or so one side of the story goes. I suggest, in contrast, that Stevens realized that he could only undertake such public and social aims alongside the project of “introspective voyaging” his comedic character had left behind to his own peril. I take up the poems of this period below, and suggest that “not communicating” is precisely Stevens’ strategy for engaging the inner and outer worlds simultaneously while negotiating their demands separately.

II.

Although this article is not the place for a comprehensive review of the rich pairing of Winnicott and poetry (and Wallace Stevens in particular), I take it as significant that, in the aftermath of skepticism about psychoanalytic concepts in both literary criticism and the broader culture, readers of canonical Romantic and modernist poetry have turned to Winnicottian concepts to renew a dialogue about such fundamental concepts to the study of lyric as address and mourning. Emily Sun’s recent study of Winnicott and Keats, the poet to whom the former felt most allegiance, and Toshiaki Komura’s work on Stevens and elegy have been exemplary in this regard, providing essential updates to the pioneering interventions of some of the first works to take Winnicott’s work seriously as an interlocutor with literary texts (I refer in particular to the 1993 publication of *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W.*

Winnicott).⁶² As of yet, however, no study has attended specifically to Winnicott's writing on language or, as he more often calls it, communication. Where to date Lacan has provided the account of language in psychoanalysis most provocative for literary studies, I suggest that Winnicott provides a compelling alternate route. Like language for Lacan, communication for Winnicott is a key element of the subject's development, but for Winnicott it is both a tool for making use of the provision of the maternal holding environment as well as for establishing a separate, interior sphere safe from the intrusions or impingements of all others. Unlike the Lacanian signifier, which is by definition an impingement of the "nom du père" on the mother-infant dyad, for Winnicott the acquisition of verbal language capabilities does not significantly differ from the capacity for non-verbal communication with the mother.⁶³ As a result of this continuity of communicative capacity, the child may use communication, and even the kind of intentional self-communication Winnicott calls "not communicating," in the service of the development of a self not overly compliant with the environment. A concept mostly alien to a Lacanian vocabulary, communication, Winnicott claims, may work in the service of spontaneity and creativity, perhaps the two qualities Winnicott privileged most as the achievement of a healthy self.

In contrast to the more openly 'non-communicative' aspects of Lacan's work, Winnicott derives his technical vocabulary from a plain style; his theoretical insights take pediatrics and the observation of children as their precursors; and his adherence to and revision of Freudian texts and traditions is understated, often unacknowledged (Cf.

⁶² Cf. Sun, Komura, and Rudnytsky.

⁶³ Adam Phillips writes, "[Winnicott] makes nothing in his work, for example, of the connection between the child's acquisition of language and his shift from a two-person to a three-person relationship" (*Winnicott*, 139).

Rodman 165). While the readiness of critics to adopt Winnicottian concepts may suggest a tentative rapport with a particularly British tradition of philosophical empiricism than has recently been brought to bear on the objects of literary critical interest, it may also be true that the surprising distance between Winnicott's concepts and this foundation—a distance characterized by Winnicott's playfulness and insistence on paradox, his willingness to accord not only subjective data but literary texts a role in reaching conclusions—points the way toward an anti-essentialist critique as powerful as, although quite different from, Lacan's. The subject is not split in Winnicott's account, but neither is it wholly self-contained. Carrying the traces of a 'psychotic core' that only the consistent provision of the maternal environment can sufficiently efface to allow for what Winnicott calls health, the non self-identity of the individual is as developmentally primary for Winnicott's holding environment as it is for Lacan's mirror stage. To suggest that Lacan and Winnicott have more in common than might first be expected, and not only for psychoanalytic theory but for literature, has also been the subject of recent work, in particular that of Mari Ruti, who reads a space for creativity in response to the signifier in early Lacan that aligns with Winnicott's notions of language as something the creative person comes to "use" for his or her own purposes. Although Ruti's analysis does not take up literature explicitly, her contribution reminds us that Winnicott's concepts most often take health, rather than pathology, as their reference. We may thus read Stevens' "not-communicating" as a creative "use" of language, rather than a rejection of poetic commonplaces or social obligations.

Stevens frustrates communication and engages in "not communicating" by including sounds in his poems; at the expense of intelligible speech, these songs or noises

resemble human speech enough to mimic its failures but depart from it enough to sound alien.⁶⁴ As Rachel Cole suggests, referring to the Stevensian *ars poetica*, “Of Modern Poetry,” this style of writing chooses aural abstraction over verifiable meaning: “instead of truth, he communicates aural arousal, sonic intensity, an asemantic condition of emphasis, of heightened degree” (394). Moreover, Cole claims, this form of not communicating refuses to presume knowledge about the desires of those it addresses. As such, what seems at first like deliberate withdrawal from the milieu of others may in fact indicate the groundwork for an even more radical commitment to ethical engagement.

A large portion of the ambient noise of the oeuvre consists of birdsong. In “Depression Before Spring,” Stevens turns away from lexical speech and to translations of birdsong when the subject at hand (and the cause of the speaker’s “depression”) is a failed address.

The cock crows
But no queen rises.

The hair of my blonde
Is dazzling.
As the spittle of cows
Threading the wind.

⁶⁴ Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s interesting work on sound in Stevens proceeds from her claims about language acquisition as a blind spot in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Blasing suggests that Stevens’ sounds signal, though they cannot by their very nature as non-fluencies narrate, a history of the speaker’s language acquisition. I differ from Blasing’s approach by seeing the non-fluent sounds in Stevens’ poems not pointing backwards to an individual history of the self but to a poetic strategy that would sustain that self’s ongoing development.

Ho! Ho!

But ki-ki-ri-ki

Brings no rou-cou,

No rou-cou-cou.

But no queen comes

In slipper green.

(CP 63)

The short poem contains repeated attempts at describing a call that brings no response, with birdsong emerging as one strategy for uttering the narrative otherwise. The first stanza contains the only narrative the poem advances, and the final stanza repeats it. But between these utterances, the speaker lapses into non-signifying sounds, re-enacting the call first with an expression whose sound contains the quintessential “O” of apostrophe. This unanswered cry contains, at the lowest limit of signifying speech, the same lament as the relatively protracted version of the first and last stanzas. But the speaker pushes past this limit and turns to the more evocative (because even less linguistic) “ki-ki-ri-ki” and “rou-cou-cou,” using sound to counter human speech at the moment such speech fails to signify the absence that unexpectedly attends it. If positive speech expects a response, expects the queen to come “in slipper green,” non-communicating sound comes between call and failed response to reveal what is unbearable and other to speech, namely its own failure. At the same time, and unlike the

descriptions that bookend it, this non-human, non-communicating speech accomplishes what human speech cannot, bringing the sound “rou-cou-cou” to the surface of the poem, allowing the speaker to “hear” the sound whose absence he had thus far failed to evoke.

In “Depression Before Spring,” we could say that Stevens uses “not communicating” only when it serves him. Stevens communicates with positive speech and then turns to “not communicating.” The strategy picks up where human speech leaves off and even allows for a return to human speech in the closing stanza. In the later “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” the opposite will be the case: there, Stevens relies on “not communicating” as the minimal necessary condition for positive communication to occur. Before I turn to “Waving Adieu, Adieu,” however, I examine another poem in which birdsong bears a close relationship to a bizarre signifying practice.

“Autumn Refrain,” a modified sonnet, begins with a movement of stripping away characteristic of “The Snow Man” and “The Comedian as the Letter C.” However, instead of the personality, it is the layers of the environment’s sights and sounds that “Autumn Refrain” strips away to allow an encounter with the interior world. The speaker of “Autumn Refrain” recounts the sounds that are “gone” once night has fallen: “The skreak and skritter of evening gone / And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun” (CP 160). After he narrates the silencing of these sounds, he speaks of an absence of a different quality. Also gone is

...the moon and moon,

The yellow moon of words about the nightingale

In measureless measures, not a bird for me

But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air

I have never—shall never hear.

(CP 160)

The nightingale is evoked in the poem by means of its current absence as well as its future inaccessibility. Mimicking the structure of elegy, the speaker conjures up sounds and sorrows both to say they are gone and to prove that they are not.⁶⁵ Hardly any word or sound occurs in this passage without being immediately repeated. The sounds and sound-makers of twilight are both gone and, in the temporality of the poem, present. Unlike in an elegy, however, the “skreaking and skittering” will come back later in the poem as the speaker reveals that what had seemed “gone” is recoverable, or remains to be rediscovered “beneath / The stillness of everything gone.” This line marks the ‘turn’ of the sonnet, as what has been stripped away can now be discovered as something that “resides” as a “residuum,” something left over from the stripping away.

And yet beneath
 The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
 Being and sitting still, something resides,
 Some skreaking and skittering residuum,
 And grates these evasions of the nightingale

(CP 160)

The residual “skreaking and skittering,” by its grating or shredding, overcomes the nightingale’s evasions and brings it—and its song—near. This is an important moment, because it shows that an inarticulate and unorganized sound, here contrasted even to

⁶⁵ “The clearest example of this structure is of course the elegy which replaces an irreversible temporal disjunction, the move from life to death, with a dialectical alternation between attitudes of mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence” (Culler 67).

birdsong, has a power to evoke what only a moment ago the speaker had asserted he would “never hear.” In doing so, the poem accomplishes the reverse of Keats’ “Ode,” which begins in the presence of a nightingale’s song and ends by exclaiming, “fled is that music” (238).

But what is a skreaking or skrittering, and how could it manage to evoke the traditional song of the nightingale? “Skreaking and skrittering” constitute, at the beginning of “Autumn Refrain,” ambient noises that, having no definable origin or addressor, disappear quickly. Their “residuum,” however, is quite different. Once all of the ambient sounds have been removed, internal sounds remain, making this new “skreaking and skrittering” a no more peaceful, but nevertheless different phenomenon because it is personal and internal. These screeching or scattering sounds can only be heard when one is “Being and sitting still.” By communication with subjective objects, that is, by listening to what remains “beneath / The stillness,” the song of the nightingale can be brought closer. It gives one’s stillness the same key as a nightingale’s song. Subjective communication becomes the ‘key’ to productive solitude.

“Autumn Refrain” comments on the access that “not communicating” provides to what would otherwise be inaccessible sources of knowledge and memory. The song of the nightingale, associated with the imagination, is traditionally a song motivated by violence from the incessant memory of which the song provides relief.⁶⁶ By means of sounds that have both their origin and their destination in the self, the speaker can gain some access to the nightingale. If nothing can recover the exact song, at the very least the

⁶⁶ “[I]n many medieval and Renaissance texts, Philomela must remind herself (so memory-less is she) of the cause of her pain by leaning upon a thorn as she sings beautifully in the night” (Grossman, “Orpheus/Philomela” 32).

speaker can experience “stillness...in the key of that desolate sound.” Stevens seems to be claiming that he can access an outside by means of subjective communication, that is, that he has access to the key of the nightingale’s sound, a sound that evokes “hungry generations,” but that he does not need to go through the social order to access it. If “Depression Before Spring” is a poem about the inaccessibility of the social, “Autumn Refrain” is a poem accessing the gains of the social while avoiding its dangers.

III.

As we have seen with “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens’ long poems incorporate the strategies used by shorter lyrics to limn the particular themes of each collection. In “Comedian,” a continuity between the criticism of imagination in the shorter and longer lyrics gave a helpful context to the difficult rhetoric of the cantos of the longer poem.

In the later collection, *Ideas of Order*, and its titular poem, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” there is instead a contrast between the language and perspectives of the central poem and the short poems that surround it. The confident speech of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” for example, contrasts strikingly with the short, nearly stuttered questions of the poem that follows it, “The American Sublime.” The poem that precedes “The Idea of Order at Key West” is also a poem in which anxiety manifests, hinting, perhaps, that Stevens was uncomfortable with the flourishes of what was to become one of his best-known and most anthologized poems. If the major poem outlines the accomplishment of an idea of order and aims to speak “words...of ourselves and of our *origins*,” the preceding poem, “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” also speaks of the self, but does so in view of its demise rather than its origins. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer,

Stevens wrote that the poem dealt with death under what he called “the new regime,” a world without an obstructing religious viewpoint (*Letters* 273). The task proposed by “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” is not unique—numerous early poems have a similar anti-religious bent, with “Sunday Morning” as their capstone. Unlike the others, however, “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” tests the limits of language as a mode for “not communicating” as a means to its end.⁶⁷

The poem makes an odd preface to the title poem of *Ideas of Order*, not only because its preoccupation with death stands in such stark contrast to the youth and liveliness of the singing girl of “Key West,” but because it foregrounds saying goodbye to the material world that the second poem “rages” to classify and understand. Like “Autumn Refrain,” the poem has Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” as its chief precursor. An echo of that poem’s famous closing stanza, where “adieu” is also repeated three times, introduces the concern of “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” as a return to the reality of the self from the illusions that threaten its integrity. In Keat’s ode, “adieu” serves both as a command for the nightingale to leave and a benediction after it has gone. Stevens’

⁶⁷ Although Fredric Jameson has rightly remarked that the “familiar and banal motifs” of “existentialism” that appear in such poems make them “surely for us today the least interesting parts of the Stevens canon,” another sort of motif is present in them that should give us pause. When he gives an example of such an uninteresting poem, Jameson quotes an excerpt from “The Man with the Blue Guitar” that equates “the chattering of your guitar” with poetry itself, which Stevens here calls upon to replace “empty heaven and its hymns.” The significance with which Stevens endows this “chattering,” which calls to mind the “skreaking and skittering” of “Autumn Refrain” in its oblique, non-communicative paralleling of human speech, suggests that the poetic techniques by which Stevens accomplishes what indeed may be less urgent ideological aims are the same ones he uses in the later work, which is more interesting to Jameson as the site of a “newly emergent discourse called theory” (18,19).

poem, too, must first push the old regime away before it can come to a place from which to look back on it with new eyes.⁶⁸

“Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” takes departure, rather than encounter, as its point of departure, though it will lead up to an encounter in its closing lines. It, too, dramatizes a “toll[ing] back” to the “sole self,” taking Keats’ ending (and the theme of ending in general) as its beginning so as to showcase the poet’s need to disengage from what would otherwise be a smothering, ever-present contact with a world of which he disapproves. Stevens’ attention to the act of separating, to that which allows a personal world to develop, makes possible a reading of the poem’s “not communicating,” which takes place through difficult syntactical maneuvers, delays, and repetitions or echoes. The poem works through the possibilities for a zero degree of communication, trying to understand how, without “crying and shouting,” or even moving, the speaker could still communicate a “farewell” to life and to the old order of religious understanding.

The first non-communicative strategy, which appears in the poem’s first stanza, is grammatical. Hyperbaton, a radical disjunction of syntactical elements from their expected order, leaves the grammar of each stanza-length sentence unclear until the final line.

That would be waving and that would be crying,
 Crying and shouting and meaning farewell,
 Farewell in the eyes and farewell at the centre,

⁶⁸ The final stanza of the ode begins:
 Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
 As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades....

Just to stand still without moving a hand.

(CP 127)

The poem begins unconventionally: a demonstrative pronoun absent its antecedent leaves the grammar in question almost before the poem begins. If the rhythmic cadence of the lines, the polysyndeton, and the repetition of “that,” “crying,” and “farewell” seemed to cushion the opening’s difficulty, the eventual predication of the sentence in the last line of the stanza interrupts our ease by reversing the understood meaning of the opening lines. “[T]o stand still without moving a hand” must be parsed as the suppressed antecedent of the opening stanza’s “that,” indicating that the static tableau on which the stanza ends, its standing still, is somehow equivalent to “waving” and “crying” and “shouting and meaning farewell.” The last line stills the dramatic movement of farewells as we have seen them, subsuming them under an odd, motionless and speechless kind of “bidding farewell” that it will take the rest of the poem to explain. In what world could such inaction constitute the communication of farewell?

It is not until the third stanza of “Waving,” that the speaker turns away from the performative gesture of arresting dramatic farewells by grammatical means to a more direct statement of the reason that such stillness is desirable. The delay in itself is an additional obstruction to the communicative potential of the poem, although not an unfamiliar one in Stevens’ poems. One often gets the sense that the beginnings of Stevens’ poems are tangential to their eventual poetic concerns. This tangential quality derives sometimes, as here, from grammatical obstructions, and sometimes from a

calculated triviality that gives way to the poem's strongest lines.⁶⁹ Helen Vendler points out a similar phenomenon, and makes it an axiom for reading Stevens that one should look not at the beginning of the poem but toward its end for the "human narrative" ("Hunting" 74). She also suggests that such a strategy is characteristic of Keats's odes, where discovering a "secret beginning" of the poem allows us to return to the actual beginning with a better understanding of the poem's chief concerns (Experiential 593). Instead of focusing on a "secret" place in the text, as in Keats, or in the hidden "human narrative" in a Stevens poem, the motivation to obscure and secret away clear narratives is itself a matter of great importance. That is, apart from the eventual narrative of Stevens' poems—whether these are philosophical or personal and emotional poems—we can account for the obscuring of the poem's eventual clarifying narrative in Winnicottian terms, where what motivates "not communicating" is a "dilemma" that strikes every artist:

In the artist of all kinds, I think one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found. This might account for the fact that we cannot conceive of an artist's coming to the end of the task that occupies his whole nature. ("Communicating" 185).

Such a dilemma manifests itself in "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," by a certain kind of endlessness—by means of repetition—that appears at the very moment that individuality

⁶⁹ Cf., for example, "The Pastor Caballero," which begins, "The importance of a hat to its form becomes / More definite" (CP 379).

becomes an important term. Oscillating between the need to be found and the need to “not be found,” the speaker “not communicates” and communicates at once, winding his long sentence through clauses that repeat not only the “to” that precedes the infinitive form of verbs but also the words “little,” “be” and “just.” In the repetition of these words a diminutive, barely visible subject or “existent” emerges against the language that obscures it:

To be one’s singular self, to despise
 The being that yielded so little, acquired
 So little, too little to care, to turn
 To the ever-jubilant weather, to sip

 One’s cup and never to say a word,
 Or to sleep or just to lie there still,
 Just to be there, just to be beheld,
 That would be bidding farewell, be bidding farewell.

(CP 128)

This stanza does, as I have suggested, communicate. For the third time in this short poem, the third stanza makes a claim about bidding farewell. Not just to be still, not participating in the overdramatic performances of farewell undertaken by those who expect “heaven to follow;” rather, or more succinctly, it would be “to be one’s singular self,” which, unlike the kind of living that “yielded so little,” entails a whole series of actions that, for the first time, give a coherent identity to the individual who bids farewell. These two stanzas, too, consist of a long periodic sentence, the same grammatical

structure of the first two. By now, however, we recognize the pattern, and the accord between the opening dependent clauses and the predication that will follow them. Furthermore, the infinitive constructions are less jarring than the pronomial constructions of the first stanzas. And while the periodic sentence requires a grammar driven by its final clause, its opening phrase is the point around which the poem turns. “[T]o be one’s singular self” drives the meaning of the sentence by grouping the actions that follow it under its name. Despising, turning, sipping, and saying all fall into the category of actions necessary for constructing a “singular self” in the midst of a world where “bidding farewell” has been radically redefined. These actions oppose the deliberate farewells of the first two stanzas.

To be one’s singular self, though, comes at a certain cost—not just of the way of “being that yielded so little,” but also of the trappings of a language that communicates to an external world by means of words, gestures, and even tears. Only not communicating promises the speaker a way of accommodating himself to death—and, as it turns out, to life—in a post-religious world. The movement of the poem has been a familiar stripping of the unnecessary qualities of communication (compare the stripping of the self in “The Snow Man” and of Crispin’s sovereignty in “The Comedian as the Letter C”), but in the final lines the speaker regains some of his lost “spirit,” notably from a different source than those who believe in heaven. The kind of life that not communicating allows begins when, in a provocative enjambment, he notes that “to be one’s singular self” requires a “turn / To the ever-jubilant weather.” The enjambment on the key word “turn” puns on the poem’s own decisive shift. In the final stanza, the adjectival phrase “ever-jubilant” becomes a vocative, and “ever-jubilant” sounds the poem’s first apostrophic address:

“Ever-jubilant, / What is there here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?”

Instead of a God, the speaker’s question posits (as only Stevens’ questions can do) the invisible force and will of weather. Mimicking the grammatical conceit of the entire poem, the last line reverses a general pattern of movement. Most of the poem had obeyed a movement outward from the speaker, in a concern about how to communicate differently. Once he has learned to do so, he can communicate, even if a personifying apostrophe to the weather is an odd form of communication. More importantly, perhaps, the speaker can also begin to receive communication in the form of a sun-borne “spirit.” Part of the purpose of not communicating is that it clears a way for the reception of communication from others. “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” a poem that never specifies the addressee of its farewells, only issues a specific address once it has justified not addressing, having “never to say a word.” The assertion of a “right not to communicate,” and the elaboration of how not communicating might be achieved, alone makes positive communication possible in Stevens (“Communicating” 179). That it does make this possible reveals how often Stevens’ poems end at the moment of such contact between inner and outer worlds, as though the work of the poem itself were in arriving at this point, where a social self no longer mediated by poetry could begin to interact.

The “turn” to weather is significant in a broader context. In two very different registers, critics have shown that Stevens’ focus on the weather, while it may at first seem like a paltry attempt at engaging with the external world, instead reveals Stevens at his most social. Alan Filreis documents the way that, in the buildup to World War II, Stevens came to appreciate the similarity between news events and weather events. Writing to Hi

Simons, and responding to questions about his poems, Stevens declared of the last stanza of “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” that “the ‘ever jubilant weather’ is not a symbol...the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities. The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind” (*Letters* 348-349). Filreis interprets Stevens’ explanation as evidence that Stevens was discovering “that the invention of a fiction originated in an acute sense of reality as event” (25). Stevens wrote in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” that “out of nothing to have come on major weather” makes a belief in a supreme fiction “possible, possible, possible” (CP 403). In “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” what a not-communicating gesture at the beginning of the poem makes possible is the perception of the “ever-jubilant weather,” the possibility, then, of an encounter with events in the actual world.

In a different vein, George Lensing also traces an argument about Stevens’ oeuvre through “The Comedian as the Letter C,” reading the poem as a voyage not only to the new world or to a new understanding of the self, but through the four seasons. According to Lensing, this stratagem becomes, in the rest of Stevens’ poetry, a paradigm for his “engagements with and retreats from the world” (15). Lensing uses Stevens’ reliance on the cycling of seasons to rebut critics who would see the poet as narrowly focused on only a small sliver of experience. Within an attachment to the vicissitudes of weather that Lensing traces back to Emerson, Stevens can still be read as a poet of great emotional breadth and depth. Emerson had written, “I lead the life of a blade of grass in mere wind & sun & have no other events than the weather” (*Letters* 122), a line that closely parallels Stevens’ closing lines, “Ever-jubilant, / What is there here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?” In this literary historical context, too, we might read

Stevens' line not as a solipsistic closure of outside happenings, but rather as a recognition that at the moment when it becomes possible for "the state of weather [to] become a state of mind," events that happen at this threshold of outside and inside, self and environment, leave no room for those that are wholly one or the other.

IV.

Mark Halliday reads the late poem, "The World as Meditation" as an exception within Stevens' oeuvre, a rare example of a "believable woman" as well as "yearning human lovers" in the midst of a poetic career that, for the most part, focuses its energies elsewhere (65). And indeed, Stevens' poignant rewriting of Penelope's waiting for the return of Ulysses reminds us that, at the very least, Stevens is capable of evocatively staging the more typically abstract Stevensian thesis delivered in the poem's title. Penelope's waiting takes center stage in "The World as Meditation" not in order to emphasize the strength of her love for Ulysses, or the strength of love in general, but rather to give an example of the sanguine effects of meditative approach to the contingency of events. Nevertheless, the affecting closing lines remind us that even a tangential relationship to love is rare in Stevens poems: "Repeating his name with its patient syllables, / Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near." The stress falls on the word "patient" in these lines. It is a transferred epithet from 'repeating' — Penelope, of course, is the patient one here, not the sound of the name Ulysses; even more, however, the device convinces the reader, who wonders if the syllables are really, somehow, 'patient,' to echo the name "Ulysses" as he or she reads the lines, thus mimicking Penelope's own repetition. The world of the poem becomes a world of

meditation once the reader, too, joins the effort of remembering Ulysses, an effort that is partially responsible for his “coming constantly so near.”

The poem that follows “The World as Meditation” in the *Collected Poems* decidedly abjures its echo and opens with a fatalistic vision of ennui to contrast the hopefulness of “Meditation’s” closing lines. In stark contrast to the epigraph from Georges Enesco that Stevens affixes to “Meditation,” in which the “*rêve permanent*” of meditation compensates the writer for his sacrifices (CP 520), “Long and Sluggish Lines” is, at least at first, a poem of disillusioning: “It makes so little difference, at so much more / Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before” (CP 522). And again, where Penelope allows the passage of time to strengthen her resolve, drawing upon the “planet’s encouragement” so that “The barbarous strength within her would never fail” (521), the speaker of “Long and Sluggish Lines” finds his vision of planetary phenomena discouraging: the “trees are mended” in the beginning of spring in “Meditation,” but in “Lines” “the trees have a look as if they bore sad names” (CP 522). Why, if the world is “meditation,” does the tranquility achieved by that poem dissolve so quickly into the miasma of “sluggish lines”? Even if the second poem did not immediately follow the first, it would be difficult to account for both states of affairs in Stevens without irresolvable contradiction. After all, as Eleanor Cook notes, the second poem’s lines are not even longer than those of “The World as Meditation,” so the problem does not seem to attach, as the title might suggest, to the form of the poem.

“Long and Sluggish Lines” breaks from a tired rhyme scheme (more/before and flow/so) in its third stanza only to transfer the dull sameness from form to content: the trees appear to be “saying over and over the same, same thing.” Unlike “Meditation,” the

pace of “Lines” is uneven, tracking the speaker’s mood. Trees that started out as sad become inexplicably angry, and as the speaker begins to contest his own designation of that anger, he impulsively jumps to another situation entirely. The speaker’s restless turmoil finds its proper form in the sixth and seventh stanzas: “Or these-essent-issant pre-personae: first fly, / A comic infanta among the tragic drappings, // Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief, / The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?” (The speaker asks whether these things account for the pathetic fallacy in the previous stanza, that “one think[s] the house is laughing”). That is, given this thought, is it possible, by describing the world, also to account for it? The answer seems to be no, as the final two stanzas deny that the poem has even begun or that the just-now-being-mentioned addressee of the poem, a “Wanderer,” is even born, “in this wakefulness inside a sleep.”

The problem of “Long and Sluggish Lines” seems to be similar to that of a persona or mask Stevens used long before, the “man whose pharynx was bad” (CP 96). The refrain of that poem, “I am too dumbly in my being pent” has a counterpart in the tired vision and negated birth of the addressee (“You were not born yet.../ Nor are you now”) in “Long and Sluggish Lines,” though in this poem it is not the speaker but the poem itself that is “pent up.” More than any other poem in Stevens’ oeuvre, “Long and Sluggish Lines” acknowledges its incompleteness and comes close to advertising its failure as a poem. But this failure is also a success. After all, Stevens included the poem in the *Collected Poems*, unlike a number of poems, especially from *Harmonium*, that he excluded from later editions and the 1954 volume. The poem declares itself a failure because it cannot find the proper addressee for its non-communicating associations. The speaker describes the time of the poem, the “now” in which the wanderer/addressee is not

yet born, as “this wakefulness inside a sleep.” The speaker is aware of being alive, awake, and perceptive in only a limited sense, locked inside “a sleep” that smothers the poem, figuratively in the sense that the poem’s drowsiness prevents it from reaching outside its circuit of associations, and literally because it is on the word “sleep” that this poem ends.

“The World as Meditation” is a poem about an almost telepathic communication, a sense that Penelope repeats the name “Ulysses” and it is useful, if not for bringing him back, then at least for sustaining her “barbarous strength. In contrast, the communiqués in “Long and Sluggish Lines” are diffuse, indirect, non-linguistic, amounting to what Winnicott calls a “cul-de-sac communication.”⁷⁰ The speaker nearly admits that they are projections on the environment of his mood by diluting his metaphors and questioning them. Instead of “The trees...bore sad names” and “the house is laughing,” he delays: “The trees have *a look as if they bore sad names,*” and “that yellow patch...*makes one think* the house is laughing” (CP 522; emphasis added). The speaker may desire communication in the poem, but the poem itself teaches that it is impossible. Instead of waiting patiently like Penelope, meditating, he falls into a “sluggish” middle ground of trying to animate trees, houses, and an unborn “Wanderer.” The poem’s success is just as present, however. It does animate a world, and evokes the ennui of old age (as “Meditation” evokes love) through performing, paradoxically enough, its inability to communicate. The poem succeeds, then, as an instance of not-communicating, and dwells productively on the advantages and disadvantages that inhere in such alternative

⁷⁰ “[T]he cul-de-sac communication (communication with subjective objects) carries all the sense of real. *Per contra*, such communication with the world as occurs from the false self does not feel real; it is not a true communication because it does not involve the core of the self, that which could be called a true self” (“Communicating” 184).

communication. Surpassing its counterpart in Winnicott, Stevensian not-communicating can depict the fragility of the interior world not only of the infant, but of the aged. Stevens' contribution, even in this moment of vulnerability, is to endow not-communicating with the aura of a trope.⁷¹ Consonant with Winnicott's claim that not-communicating allows the individual to preserve a space in which both privacy and the eventual possibility of being found can coexist,⁷² this difficult technique's proliferation in Stevens' oeuvre helps account for his originality and his difficulty; it protects his work from being known and marks it, continually, as a "colony in Carolina," the promised destination, as-of-yet unreached.

The ever-changing self to which Stevens' poems give voice, in an array of tones beset or harmonized by alien sounds, manifests itself by means of an undercutting, avoidance, or reconsideration of traditional means of communication. This experimental and creative retooling represents Stevens' poetry's attempt to temporarily separate an inward self from the external world in hopes of later engaging with that world under refigured, less compliant terms. The fact that this attempt always remains just that, provisional and ongoing, holds Stevens' poetry at the threshold of self and other, inner and outer phenomena, the private self and the 'actual world.' The Winnicottian conceptual universe, with its transitional spaces and allowance for "the right to not communicate," affords the reader of Stevens' poems a new lens for tracing the flickering

⁷¹ Because instances of it emerge in strong relation to Stevens' major concerns, not-communicating constitutes an aspect of what Simon Jarvis names, in a call for increased attention to this form of lyric reading, "repertoire... the quasi system of local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on in particular authorships" (934).

⁷² "It is a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which *it is joy to be hidden and disaster not to be found*" ("Communicating" 186; italics in the original).

sights and “clickering” sounds of the poetic self. Instead of fixing that self in order to analyze it coldly, Winnicott suggests a way of reading Stevens that moves alongside the poems in a spontaneous flux not unlike that of the “ever-jubilant” weather from which Stevens took his cues. In the epigrams from *Adagia*, the paradox concerned a “transition from make believe for oneself to make belief for others,” on the one hand, and a bold step “into man’s interior world” on the other. Attending to the phenomena of “not communicating” in Stevens suggests that the space of “transition” is precisely the site of his poetry’s boldest step.

Chapter 3

Stuttered Orientations: Jean Daive Between Robert Creeley and Paul Celan

“Au bord de l’espace/ j’ai erré” (*Décimale* 7).⁷³ These first words of Jean Daive’s first published poem speak from the margins of an undefined world; in the course of the poem, Daive’s speaker orients himself by seeking the “pivotal voice” that would mark the origin and boundaries of a drifting journey both physical and linguistic (Ibid. 12). Both a bibliographic and a figural meridian mark the significance of *Decimale Blanche* to transnational poetics in the second half of the last century: Paul Celan arranged for the first publication of the piece and translated it into German; Robert Creeley was instrumental in founding *Origin*, the small journal that first published it in English. Daive, in turn, would translate both poets’ work into French and suggest that an overlooked rapport binds the two men of such different dispositions, historical circumstances, and poetic allegiances. The figural trajectory of *Decimale Blanche*, with its search for orientation in the fixity of the voice, echoes in their poetics, which bring the vulnerability of the poetic voice to manifold destructions into high relief. Like the speaker of *Decimale Blanche*, both Celan and Creeley take the poetic voice as a pivot that responds to disorientation by articulating the continuing threat of its own displacement, the possibility that poetry after Auschwitz, on both sides of the Atlantic, must wander “at the edge of space.” As another phrase from that poem suggests, a rapport between Creeley and Celan remains something “proche possible,” though not readily asserted. In order to investigate this near possibility, it is necessary to wander at the edge of poetic

⁷³ In English, “At the edge of space/ I wandered” (Translation mine). Cid Corman’s idiosyncratic rendering leaves the enjambed word, “espace,” untranslated: “At the edge of / I drifted.” (3.)

space momentarily, where the names of Hart Crane and Allen Grossman bookend the literary history we consider, where a debate about the singularity of the event of the Holocaust and the literature that follows it divides literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic, and where the legibility of the poem finds itself threatened by the aesthetic consequences of destructions that impinge upon it. All this is necessary to consider both the obstacles to that possibility of rapport as well as the possibilities inherent in it, namely that poetic communication itself remains possible among unlikely interlocutors and after destruction's impingements.

I. Translation, Orientation, Destruction: Jean Daive

By means of his translation of Celan's work into French, Jean Daive played a significant, if indirect, role in making Paul Celan a familiar name to *American* readers. In the introduction to the first anthology of critical writings on Celan edited in the United States, Aris Fioretos notes that, "It was not until Celan had been received critically in France that his poetry began to make its way more solidly across the Atlantic" (xiii). As one of the first translators of Celan's work into French, Daive was part of a history of reception of Celan that has had major repercussions for U.S. poetry and literary criticism.

We might then speak of the U.S. as an added stop on the westward journey of Celan's life and work as Daive traces it in *Sous la coupole*, the memoir of their friendship that he himself recently made it to the U.S. in translation. An abbreviated geo-biography of Celan's life, of what he calls "Les étapes...ou les strophes...de Paul," begins in the east and travels insistently westward: "La Bukovine—le camp de travail—Bucarest—Vienne—Paris" (*Coupole* 134). The opening lines of the memoir highlight Celan's westward trajectory: "Comme si un homme venu de l'Est pouvait faire une lecture du

monde illisible avec un vocabulaire le plus radicalement étranger à soi” (Ibid. 10). Jean Daive is part of this westward orientation of Celan’s verse. As a result of Celan’s death, which haunts *Sous la coupole* from beginning to end, Daive is charged with witnessing for the witness, a debt he acquits by leading the poetry toward a figural horizon. That is, it is nearly impossible to think of evening, death, night, and the limits of poetic speech, without the name of Paul Celan, and we who read him in the U.S. now owe this debt, in part, to Jean Daive.

But this is not the only debt readers of poetry owe to Jean Daive, and the direction in which his translations move poetry is not only from East to West, but West to East; to the United States from France, but also from the United States to France. Recent events in both France and the United States have shown interest in U.S. poets affiliated with the Black Mountain and Objectivist schools of poetry to be at an all-time high, and Jean Daive’s translation of Robert Creeley’s selected poems as *La Fin*, was an early marker of this interest. It is important to remember that Creeley’s poetry traces its lineage back to William Carlos Williams, whose distinctly “American” project of a poetry rooted in images derived from the synchronic specifics of place, would seem least likely to find an audience in France, especially if we listen to Octavio Paz, who claims that when it comes to poetry, the English and French languages stand, in this respect, “at opposite poles to each other” (qtd. in Auster xxxi). That Williams’ dictum, “no ideas but in things” which emphasizes not only the materiality of poetic concerns but the “rootedness” of poetry in its native soil, has indeed found its transit across the Atlantic, adds its own felicitous riposte to Paz. The red wheelbarrow may be more portable than it would have imagined (or perhaps wanted) itself to be.

In the unsigned biography of Jean Daive provided by his publisher, we read one of the only published statements linking Celan and Creeley:

Découvre les poèmes de l'écrivain américain Robert Creeley que les éditions Gallimard lui demandent de traduire. En 1971, le Mercure de France publie ses traductions des poèmes de Paul Celan : *Strette* qui seront reprises et augmentées en 1990 sous le titre de *Strette et autres poèmes*. L'expérience de la traduction aux côtés de Paul Celan lui sert pour aborder la traduction des poèmes à la fois simples, elliptiques ou abstraits de Robert Creeley dont il voit très vite - dès 1970 - la proximité avec le monde de Paul Celan : les traductions d'un choix de poèmes paraissent 27 ans plus tard sous le titre de *La Fin* (Daive, "Biographie").

Note the lapse of time between the commissioning and the publication, despite the assertion that "it voit très vite...la proximité."

Freud writes in chapter VII of the *Interpretation of Dreams* that the wish fulfillment of a dream may work by transforming a dream-thought expressed in the optative to a hallucinated image that can be worded in the indicative. "If only Otto were responsible for Irma's illness" becomes "Yes, Otto is responsible for Irma's illness" (534). The "proximity" between the worlds of Creeley and Celan that Daive states in the indicative I want to return, briefly, to the optative: if there is a proximity, what would it be, how would it handle the various rejections, denials, and evasions of proximity that have preceded and followed it, and what might stand in the way of this *wish or dream of a proximity between Creeley and Celan* becoming an arguable assertion. That is, if the indicative of Daive's statement places it in the realm of the dream's wish-fulfillment,

why has that wish needed such distortion and censorship that it hasn't been recognized, explored, and contextualized? It's only mentioned once, and Daive doesn't sign the articulation of the assertion: it's only given as an aspect of his biography.

If we take this as a possibility, then of what? The possibility that, discovering Robert Creeley's work in 1970, the year of Celan's death, Jean Daive would orient us, in the midst of a prevailing poetic disorientation, toward an encounter between Creeley's American idiom and Celan's "vocabulaire...étranger à soi." Furthermore, he would signal that this encounter takes place at an intersection or even meridian of these two poets' trajectories. It is certainly impossible to cross the meridian as if it were invisible. But there we may trace an otherwise undetectable rapport between Celan and Creeley, and perhaps say that the latter picks up poetically as and where the former leaves off.

Despite preserving the optative, we can say that if there is a proximity, it would not only be Jean Daive's role to have signaled it, but his role to have suggested that this proximity depends on an act of—or an orientation toward—translation, of which the very least we can say is that these texts do not offer themselves to their translators without some resistance. *Sous la coupole* records the struggle Daive had with Celan's poems, and the twenty-seven years between the commissioning of his translation of Creeley and their eventual publication suggests the same difficulty for the American poet's work.

As a result of the complex relationship to the literary past, the gesture of bringing together Paul Celan and Robert Creeley—with Jean Daive as a sort of mediator—must not be confused with simply comparing the two poets. Aris Fioretos writes that "the way

in which [Celan's] writing insists on its incomparability" must be the hallmark of criticism, even that which reads Celan alongside other writers (9).⁷⁴

The twofold risk of placing Celan alongside another poet, or of asserting a "proximity" between his world and any other is, first, that it would claim too easily a reciprocity between Holocaust violence and the conditions of language and voice out of which other poets speak and second, that it would overshadow what is at the heart of Celan's thought on intimacy, namely, as Derrida puts it in a reading of "Aschenglorie," the ever-present risk or possibility of its annihilation.⁷⁵ The poem survives, but, as Derrida puts it in "Che cos'è la poesia?", does so by a simultaneous demonstration of the force with which it confronts threats it and its vulnerability to them.⁷⁶

In this vein, to question and even to doubt the grounds by which Celan's work could be linked to another's is to do a work suggested by Celan himself. Not only did Gerhart Baumann report Celan's frustration at being "compared" to Mallarmé, in the poems themselves, Celan only presents the linking or joining of one person to another in an intimate bond alongside what obstructs it. When the presence of such a "witness"—to name the relationship Celan values most—can be affirmed, temporal, spatial, and material obstacles beset that possibility:

⁷⁴ Gerhardt Baumann, who hosted Celan at a dinner party in Freiburg, recounts Celan's frustration at being paired with Mallarmé in a critical article. Baumann noted: "Celan opposed any attempt at comparison and insisted on the incomparable" (Baumann 84).

⁷⁵ Derrida's reading of this "untranslatable" poem figures its original German language as "present at everything that was capable of destroying by fire and reducing to 'ash'...existences of innumerable number...Ash, this is also the name of what annihilates or threatens to destroy even the possibility of bearing witness to annihilation" ("Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" 68).

⁷⁶ The poem, Derrida writes, remains "[r]olled up in a ball, prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill-adapted...it exposes itself to an accident" (297).

Deep
 in Time's crevasse
 by
 the alveolate ice
 waits, a crystal of breath,
 your irreversible
 witness.

(Hamburger 214-215)

For what we must insist are very different reasons, Creeley's poems nevertheless stage similar obstacles to valued relationships and, in contrast to a tradition of love poetry invested in overcoming those obstacles by poetic means, Creeley belabors the gulf separating speaker from addressee. To Celan's "crevasse," Creeley writes repeatedly of the "utter blackness" and "darkness" that shroud the individual who, in some desperation, cries out for some "glad company." Like Wallace Stevens, and in alliance with Celan, Creeley insists on recognizing the solitude of the individual before the possibility of communication or intimacy, going so far as to suggest, in the poem ironically titled, "For a Friend," that "*Himself* alone is dominant / in a world of no one else" (For Love 91). In "A Form of Women," Creeley's struggles with the singularity of the individual lead him to question the status of the "I" that would even approach another, much less attempt a seduction. The poems do not so much accomplish their seductive aims as set up a vexed prolegomena to any future intimacy:

My face is my own.

My hands are my own.

My mouth is my own

but I am not.

--

What to say

when you see me.

(Selected 62, 63)

Creeley's "A Form of Women" suggests that there is a rapport between Celan's blocked intimacy and his own. Is this, however, enough? Is there any way to speak of Creeley's poetry in relation to destruction, to do so in a way that does justice to the gravity of the experience to which Celan's poems respond, and, moreover, to which they respond by showing that poetry may never be adequate to respond, or may always risk not being able to overcome the annihilation of ash? Are these stakes Creeley's as well as Celan's? Answering this question requires that we understand how it is that Celan's poems speak.

In "Shibboleth," Derrida refers to Peter Szondi's *Studies on Celan* to remind readers what they must already know: that many of Celan's poems are inscrutable to the reader who does not know the biographical context, who cannot speak to the proper and singular "date" of the poem. Nevertheless, or in addition to taking up this singularity, Derrida claims that "*despite* the date, in spite of its memory rooted in the singularity of an event, the poem speaks: to all and in general, and first of all to the other" (7). He goes on:

Now the beyond of absolute singularity, the chance for the poem's exclamation, is not the simple effacement of the date in a generality, but *its effacement in front of* another date, the one *to which* it speaks, the date

of an other, masculine or feminine, which is strangely allied in the secret of an encounter...the encounter as random occurrence, as chance, as luck or coincidence.... (9)

Might Celan's poems speak in such a way that they speak to Creeley, and in such a way that, thanks in part to the chance encounter occasioned by Jean Daive's translation, they provoke his response? If Celan's poems speak to an other, with what techniques of language does such address that other?

At the end of *Sous la coupole*, Daive asks, "Que laisse écrire la fulgurance?" (202). This "fulgurance" is, of course, Celan himself, who figures as a flash after which Daive must change his relationship to writing;⁷⁷ but "lightning" is also the destruction that touched the life of Paul Celan, including, as is well known, his own internment in a labor camp and the murder of his mother.⁷⁸ From the effects of this shock, and the measureless destruction of its "thousand darknesses," Celan's poems and prose search out possibilities for reorientation.⁷⁹ *Sous la coupole* takes the measure of this search, and the consequences for poetic language of its findings. We learn, in Daive's apt phrase, that "Paul Celan mâche un mot comme une Pierre," a chewing that alters the very forms of words (*Coupole* 13). As Daive describes, it brings us "le mot composé," a word that gives the substance of a noun to the force of an adjective. This is the process that gives us Celan's "windgalle," and "fadensonnen." But the chewing of words also leaves them

⁷⁷ We might figure the fragmentary technique of *Sous la coupole* as an effect of the lightning that only becomes visible in a flash, in the last words of the text. This fragmentary method is also the effect of a kind of destruction, even though, in this case, it is an indirect destruction, something Daive first listens to and then transmits from his contact with Celan.

⁷⁸ Cf. Felstiner 15-17

⁷⁹ Cf. Grossman, "Poetry and Enlightenment."

broken, stammered, and stuttered, at the other limit of legibility.⁸⁰ This process gives us some of the most difficult and difficult to translate phrases of Celan's oeuvre, especially those in which composite words become stuttered fragments, bypassing legibility almost entirely. The poem "No sandart anymore" records a transfiguration of sand into snow that does not pass through glass, steam, or water. The opaque material of one type of aesthetics—sand—becomes an entrapment of the voice "deepinsnow." As the voice breaks under the pressure of its frozen isolation, only its echo is audible. "Eepinno" becomes "i-i-o" as the last remnants of the material voice, its consonants, fall prey to the snow. The word is not stuttered until *after* it has been uttered not fully, but more than fully. Language that passes through destruction finds itself in these two extremes of diction and at the extremes of legibility. When Jean Daive dedicates an entire fragment of *Sous la coupole* to a single word, the one he chooses is "Morphologie" (Ibid. 14). Celan's stuttering questions the formation of words, and to the question, "Your chant, what does it know?," the answer is a word too big and too small to chant, or to know, at all.

From another continent, a poet whose traumas—the loss of his father and his left eye in early childhood, and the loss of his mother in adulthood—bear little external resemblance to the world-historical proportions of Celan's destructions, Robert Creeley's poems also stammer and stutter, but they do so more often through another area of linguistic manipulation, that of syntax. Creeley's lines twist sentences into syntax

⁸⁰ For another poem in which these two limits come into contact, see "Hollow Homestead of Life," in which "A handful / of sleep grain / wafts from the mouth / stammered true, / out to the snow / conversations" (Hamburger 219).

fragments that derange the experience of consciousness, making of its stream a stone-choked rapids. Where Celan chews words like stone, stones dam up Creeley's clauses.

The preface to Daive's translation of Creeley's selected poems consists of an interview between the two poets that was completed over the course of twenty years. Creeley had written, "J'aime surtout entendre un homme parler, saisir son rapport au langage," and Daive returns these words to him, asking him if they remain true late in his career. Creeley affirms wholeheartedly: "La syncope des mots, la syntaxe me fascinent toujours" ("Mesure" 18). In the same way, introducing the interview that precedes *La Fin*, his selection and translation of Creeley's poems, Daive describes Creeley's way of reading: "Il est à peine assis et il lit en saisissant à peine les syllables" (Ibid. 7). Thanks to Daive's attention to the manner of each man's relation to the word, we can appose Celan's words, chewed like stone, to Creeley's, seized at every syllable.

Creeley's poems sometimes address directly the building up of composites or communities from their broken pieces, suggesting that the same extremes—from fragmentation to synergetic compound—animate Creeley's poetics. Take for instance the poem, "The Names," translated by Jean Daive as "Les Noms." Instead of names, persons are first figured as numerals, and their approach seems ominous until an encounter with brokenness:

When they came near,
 the one, two, three, four,
 all five of us sat
 in the broken seat.

(*Selected* 1991 62)

In the second and final stanza of the poem, after all of the numbers are seated, these individual parts become a “company,” though Creeley ends the poem noting that any such unification has been derived from parts, “sticks and stones / and bottles and bones” that subtly evoke violence, dismemberment, and dissipation:

The progress of the poem from an impersonal approach to a “glad...company” narrates a search for orientation in the face of brokenness. This progress plays itself out in many, many Creeley poems. Like Celan’s, his poems are figured as places that are products of wandering, even as they seek respite from its deprivations. In the “Preface” to *For Love*, Creeley writes that his poems are places, but that they are “always ones stumbled into” (*Quick* 5). The metaphorical depiction of language as place, and poetic technique as a manner of inhabiting space, will be significant in linking Celan and Creeley through stuttering, which each poet describes as nothing less than a way of being in the world.

What is poetic stuttering? In addition to the quite literal instance of stuttered speech, stuttering also figures afflictions of poetic voicing in which discontinuities, silences, non-fluencies, illegibility and inaudibility abound. Both Creeley and Celan stutter and reorient themselves to poetic practice in light of a poetic tradition whose fluency can no longer withstand the pressure Celan and Creeley need poetry to contain.

II. Orientation and Traumatic Enlightenment (Grossman, Celan, Crane)

The fragmented geography of *Sous la coupole* takes its form from Celan’s rapport with language with its compound words offset by stuttered utterances. Some of Celan’s best-known words underscore that his rapport with language was necessarily a conflict:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could surface, 'enriched' by it all. (*Collected* 34-35)

Any "words" that Celan uses in his poetry to account for "what was happening" do not come as a gift from language, since we learn here that language "gave...no words." Rather, like the "rapport" with which Jean Daive seizes the language of his interlocutors, words would have to be seized from language which, although miraculously present as a survivor, maintains its silence. Although language remains reachable, it does not give itself. Celan, too, seizes words, which "seize up" in composites and fragments as a result of the twofold process of going through, coming out enriched, and then being chosen for poems. Like the "alveolate ice" of "Weggebeizt," the words Celan wrings from darkness appear in strange concatenations, bergs of peculiar size and form.

In his interview with Creeley, Daive asks Creeley about the reception of his second volume of poems, *For Love* and elicits a response that is striking for its resemblance to Celan's words on language: "Le seul endroit qui me protégeait alors était la possibilité des mots..." Creeley hoped, in vain, that language could "protect" him from a lack of response, from the silence, in this case, of others: "j'espérais une réponse à ce que je faisais. Mais au fur et à mesure que j'avancais, je m'apercevais que je ne obtenais rien de ce que je voulais" (9). He would learn to seize words from silence, too,

and in his innovations with a short line and a personal voice, would create forms in which words could be newly stabilized against the terror of non-response. We might say that Creeley's orienting meridian is also jeopardized, if not by the same experience of destruction, then by the destruction of language in the wake of its own failures to provoke response.

Allen Grossman places Paul Celan alongside of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, and in philosophical proximity to Kant by means of a reading of the concepts of Enlightenment and orientation. In so doing, he provides an example of U.S. literary criticism that takes seriously the possibility of a proximity between European and U.S. poets. "Something has happened to us," Grossman writes, using the words with which Celan circumlocutes the indescribable, and gives the Holocaust its most accurate, because most basic and least evasive euphemism. "Something has happened to us bearing upon poetry or poetic practice: an enlightenment" (3). Tracing a literary history by which poetry is always, in some sense, a "seeing or enlightenment" that responds to loss and recognizes the incommensurability of its substitutive satisfactions with what is unrecoverable, Grossman argues that poetry today—in a today that is inseparable from, but not simply identifiable with a response to the Holocaust—faces a new enlightenment that can be called "traumatic." With traumatic enlightenment, the registration of new knowledge comes at the expense of "something that happens" by means of violent destruction. Lost in this destruction are not only of all ways of prior knowing, but the very means of orienting oneself in knowledge. The above quotation from the Bremen address continues, in words less often cited: "In this language I tried, during those years,

and the years after, to write poems: in order to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality” (*Collected* 34-35).

To Grossman, Kant’s definition of orientation is helpful here because it depends on the same ‘body’ of knowledge as poetry, that is, a knowledge of “our physical subject nature, our body as it is the bearer of recognition and intelligibility” (8). Note these lines from Kant’s essay, “What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?”:

In the proper meaning of the word, to *orient* oneself means to use a given direction (when we divide the horizon into four of them) in order to find the others—literally, to find the *sunrise*. Now if I see the sun in the sky and know it is now midday, then I know how to find south, west, north, and east. For this, however, I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely, the difference between my right and left hands. I call this a *feeling* because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition. (qtd. in Grossman, “Enlightenment” 7)

It was in conversation with Jean Daive that Celan affirmed that poetic orientation, too, depends on one’s physical hands. “Nous écrivons avec de blessures lumineuses, qui illuminent nos mains” (*Coupole* 140). Paul Celan reorients himself—distinguishes his left hand from his right—not by the light of Kant’s “own knowledge,” but by the light of wounds. Elsewhere, Celan’s word is “*Wirklichkeitswund*.” Or more specifically in his statement to Daive, wounded writing gives off an orienting light. When Daive asks, in the final lines of *Sous la coupole*, “Que laisse écrire la fulgurance?” he calls for an inquiry into the techniques that remain to writing when destruction both limits that practice by its wounding and lights the only path for its future.

In a conversation that enacts the power of stuttering to impede movement, Celan and Daive discuss the former's poem, "Einmal," which Daive translated as "Une fois." In the poem's second stanza, the German reads, "Eins und Unendlich, /vernichtet, / ichten." Celan suggests that Daive translate this pair, the word followed by its broken double, as "anéanti, néanti" (*Coupole* 45).⁸¹

Leaving aside the fascinating possibilities suggested by the stuttering of each poem as well as the stuttering that Celan's proposed translation suggests occurs in the space between languages, what is fascinating about this conversation concerning translation is that the stuttering has a strange effect on Jean Daive.⁸² Before they began speaking, Daive notes that he had been counting the trunks of the chestnut trees. Afterwards, however, he notes, "Ma comptabilité s'exaspère. Nous nous sommes arrêtés. Il s'est arrêté pour me parler. Nous nous faisons face. Ce moment d'arrêt m'exaspère. Car il coche." (*Coupole* 45). Engaging with Celan's stuttered poetics leave no one unscathed here. The wounded language of Celan's *wirklichkeitswund* inflicts wounds, too; it tends toward the destructions that led to its being spoken.

Stuttering "exasperates," but Daive notes that it also "marks" and that it bridges. In the Derridean vocabulary of "Shibboleth," we would say that this stuttering dates the poem, that it marks what is unrepeatable and yet barely legible, what still "speaks" despite its singularity; in Grossman's, we would say that the "anéantissement" or

⁸¹ In Pierre Joris' English translation, the lines read: "One and unending, / annihilated, I'ed. // Light was. Salvation" (*Breathturn* 249). In the original German, the passage reads: "Eins und Unendlich, / vernichtet, / ichten. // Licht war. Rettung."

⁸² "Einmal" plays a crucial role in Derrida's "Shibboleth," as the title's suggestion of the singularity of the date intimates. "A certain *ichten* remains so difficult to translate; it repeats, in some sort, the annihilated without negation in that which also resonates like the production or constitution of an I (*ich*), one and infinite, once and infinitely, the step between nothing (*Nichts*) and light (*Licht*)" (41).

annihilation of the word “anéanti,” which becomes “reborn” as “néanti” marks the poem’s destructive orientation, its simultaneous recognition and situating of destructive knowledge in a poetic idiom that is singular, nearly untranslatable, and communicative of the desire for response. This exasperation, marking, and bridging also calls out to Robert Creeley, and to Jean Daive’s eventual immersion in Creeley’s poetics of stuttering. This defect, weakness, or obstacle may be precisely the measure and the possibility of Creeley’s “proximité avec le monde de Paul Celan.”

It is in two poems that Jean Daive did not translate of Celan and Creeley that we will find the possibility of a belated encounter between these two poets, and furthermore an encounter that leaves us with the *énoncé* of stuttering.

Derrida writes of “Hinausgekrönt” that it is a poem in which the “multiplicity and migration of languages...and within language itself” come to the fore, especially in the name “Babel.” Derrida points out that this name is the poem’s “last word, both its address and its sending” (27). As such, the poem does not properly conclude, but ends at the moment when stuttering and stammering overwhelm its ordered articulation.

“Hinausgekrönt” had opened in a similar prevailing disorientation, and sought to impose order upon it, like both *Décimale Blanche* and Creeley’s “Hart Crane”: “Crowned out, / spewed out into night.” The poem describes, obliquely, in a series of clauses beginning with the word “with,” the manner of the speaker’s movement toward a beloved figure: “Bringing that too / wasted on whores and harlots, / I go and go. To you, beloved. // And with curses and prayer. And with each / of the cudgels whirring / over me....”

(Hamburger 187). The paradox of the poem’s final stanza, the one that draws Derrida’s attention, is that it seems at one and the same time to foreclose the “multiplicity of

languages” and to be pulled toward an admission that this confusion of tongues is inevitable.

And an earth rises up, ours,

this one.

And we’ll send

none of our people down

to you,

Babel.

(Hamburger 211)

The speaker’s object, his beloved, has, by the time of the last stanza, finally been reached and named; the poem addresses her, knowingly, as Petrarca, as though Petrarch, the author of the first poems to establish the constancy of a beloved should become female in order to be the addressee, rather than the addressor of this lover’s quarrel: in the final instance, the poem cannot consolidate its gains. Even to reject the supplications of Babel, it must name the place, which act closes off the possibility of further speech, as if the very word “Babel” were, in its onomatopoetic force, enough to scatter the unified syllables of the utterance of which it is part, and to return the speaker to the state of “hinausgekrönt” in which he began. What survives the poem, the language that might be “enriched” by this experience, is not the name of the beloved who has been gathered into the speaker’s arms but instead the name of the place whose law is scattering and whose language is stuttering.

In his conversations with Daive, the law of Babel governs even the way Celan speaks about stuttering: it is an enigmatic, figural movement that trades in each term for

another as soon as it speaks it. The conversation on stuttering is, strangely, one of the longest sustained dialogues between Daive and Celan in *Sous la coupole*, though it is also one of the most difficult. In a scene that recalls the setup of a Baudelaire prose poem, a street show provokes this talk of stuttering: he and Daive notice that the monkey who danced for coins in the streets near the Contrescarpe has been, much to Celan's dismay, replaced by a goat. He takes comfort, however, in noticing that, like the monkey, "the goat also stutters, that is, it gibbers because it bleats" (*Dome* 58). Its scarf "visually announce[s] the holes of the stutter," which denotes an aphasia that is the product of "knowledge" so "extreme" that it makes one "'stupid.'" Because the monkey is "aphasic," Celan says in closing, "he dances...he has seen the lightning. He is silent and dances" (*Dome* 59). A goat becomes the figure for traumatic enlightenment and luminous wounding. Its gibbering bleating, which alternates with silent dancing, is one of several animal voices that stand in for the voice of the poet, indicating its otherness from everyday conceptions of human speech.⁸³ Significantly, the distortions of sound and movement become linked here, as, at the end of this conversation, Celan associates stuttering with limping:

Avez-vous déjà observé la rampe parallèle à celle de l'escalier, je
veux parler de la main courante...le boitillement dérègle là
l'occasion de la main courante: elle s'arrête, marque un arrêt au
moment où la blessure pose son temps sur la marche...[...] et ma
main qui agrippe la main courante est la mémoire de la blessure
intermittente du monde, posée sur la rampe...la main du
bégaiement et du boitillement. (*Coupole* 143)

⁸³ Simon Jarvis notes Allen Grossman's words to him: "When language has had all this done to it, it is no longer only language" (934).

Have you ever noticed the ramp that runs parallel to an escalator, I mean the handrail...limping disturbs the occasion of the handrail: it stops, marks a stop at the moment the wounded foot limps, the wound imposes its timing on the stop...and my hand gripping the handrails is the memory of the intermittent wound of the world set down on the ramp...the hand of stutter and limp. (*Dome* 95)

To the hand of luminous wounds, we add here the image of a hand surprisingly capable—it can speak and walk—but disabled such that these capacities manifest only as stutter and limp. Here a hand not only writes, but also stabilizes the body as it moves up and between floors. The writing hand orients the displaced body.

A limp will also be the detoured vehicle of a discourse on the poetry of stuttering in “Hart Crane,” a significant poem by Robert Creeley. In the “Preface” to the volume of poetry in which that poem appears, Creeley writes

Wherever it is one stumbles (to get to wherever) at least some way will exist, so to speak, as and when a man takes this or that step—for which, god bless him. Insofar as these poems are such places, always they were ones stumbled into.... (*Quick* 5)

By linking the linguistic material of the poem to the action of walking aimlessly, or stumbling, he speaks to the orientative, or, more properly, disorientative, aspects of speech. In the poems, “stuttering” becomes the linguistic counterpart to “stumbling” to such an extent that Creeley even equates the two. And thus, even though stuttering, which in its brokenness bears an even more intimate relationship to the singularity of the individual voice even than tone, may suggest a link (or a limp) between Celan and Creeley. That is, we might add it to a list that Kalaidjian makes in *The Edge of*

Modernism of “grammatological techniques...[that] form a salutary medium for staging traumatic histories” (11).

Creeley’s stuttering works, it is true, by a different set of techniques than Celan’s: it is primarily syntactical rather than morphological. One poem that takes up the matter of syntax in its content demonstrates the twists and turns that allow us to speak of Creeley’s poems as stuttered.

The Sentence

There is that in love
 which, by the syntax of,
 men find women and join
 their bodies to their minds

--which wants so to acquire
 a continuity, a place,
 a demonstration that it must
 be one’s own sentence.

(Selected 50)

Something of the same singularity that Celan attaches to the date inheres in Creeley’s “love.” In order to speak to the other, one’s “own sentence” must mark a territory that deviates so radically from any conventional syntactic route it deserves to be called anacoluthon. Of the ten words in the first two lines, three are pronouns, three are prepositions, and the most basic verb and article, “is” and “the,” isolate or perhaps drown the nouns in a performance of just how fraught the articulation of love—or that sentence

within love that the poem only allows us to identify and parse as such in its closing words—might be. This is the stuttering characteristic of Creeley’s verse, a line impossible to read without a certain limp, and as such a reorientation of poetic practice that is charged with mediating demands—speaking to the other and crafting one’s own sentence—that threaten to destroy the poem’s legibility.

Like Daive, Creeley figures his poetic vocation in relationship to a poet of suicidal destruction, that is, to a poet whose thinking and writing in the face of disaster threatened his own capacity to live. The first line of “Hart Crane,” the first poem of Robert Creeley’s first major book, *For Love*, recalls the opening phrase of Daive’s *Décimale Blanche*. (In fact, Creeley’s friend Cid Corman, who rendered *Décimale Blanche* into English, uses the same word, “edge,” to translate its opening line (Corman 3).) Here is the first stanza of Creeley’s “Hart Crane:”

He had been stuttering by the edge
of the street, one foot still
on the sidewalk, and the other
in the gutter...

(*Selected* 51)

The poem ends with a quotation from Crane’s landmark poem, “The Broken Tower,” “Thus I entered the broken world,” and from its opening mention of stuttering the speaker, too, stutters toward this attributive closing. First, the verbatim quotation from Crane’s landmark poem, “The Broken Tower,” rearranges the earlier poem. There, this line comes near the beginning of the poem and is really an “entrance.” Here it is a telos, as though Crane’s “entering” the world were in fact a reference to his despairing exit, his

jumping ship to his death in the Carribean in 1932. But it is also as though Crane's way of leaving the world were Creeley's way of entering it. Later in the poem, Creeley writes, "While Crane sailed to Mexico I was writing;" with this, we can figure Creeley's poetry as a written reply to a sign from the disaster,⁸⁴ the voyage from which Crane would not return. If we are able to speak of this poem as Creeley's own "entrance" into poetry, taking Hart Crane as his precursor in stuttering is significant. Allen Grossman links Crane and Celan as poets concerned with "the inadequacy of our communicative *structures*...to bear the burden of our communicative traffic." Crane's broken tower, like Celan's tower of Babel, is a sign of the inadequacy of prior knowledge and the necessity of new structures and new methods for rebuilding poetic knowledge. For Grossman, Crane is a poet who asks if there is "another poetry" (6). That is, if Enlightenment puts prior knowledge into crisis, can poetry respond in a way that is adequate to the memory of the crisis and the new structures of experience that result from it? Orienting himself toward Crane at the beginning of his career, Robert Creeley asks this question, too, and begins to answer it, as Celan and Daive together do, with reference to stuttering. Although the explicit precursor to whom the poem orients itself is Hart Crane, the American poet, by its reference to stuttering and its coming into the sights of Jean Daive, "Hart Crane" also signals Paul Celan, the westward-oriented poet of stuttering.

⁸⁴ The phrase is Blanchot's: "I wish (for example) for a psychoanalyst to whom a sign would come, from the disaster" (9). *The Writing of the Disaster* is a book in which poetry may be defined as that which traffics in sending such signs. Blanchot turns back to Archilochus, citing the line, "Know what rhythm holds men" in an attempt to show the resemblance between rhythm—which, "while it appears regular...threatens the rule"—and a disaster that similarly conditions all writing proper to it without necessarily being visible or legible there (5, 112).

In the poem, stuttering is the condition of language that precedes the poem: “he *had been* stuttering.” And because “stuttering” refers here not only to Crane’s speech but also to his walk, “one foot still / on the sidewalk,” stuttering becomes not only a mode of voicing the world, but a way of moving through it, of orienting oneself to a two-fold disaster, one that precedes the poem and brings it into being (Creeley’s poetic vocation, perhaps), and one that remains on the horizon of the poem when its speech is shut down with the stuttering, doubled, echoed words, “Hart Crane / *Hart*.” The destruction that precedes the poem is figured as the historical fact of Crane’s suicide (his response to the “broken tower”) as well as the poetic fact that, instead of silence, a kind of confused stuttering or babel precedes and conditions poetic speech. This Babel is also what Derrida called both the “address and the sending” of Celan’s “Hinausgekrönt” (Shibboleth 27).

The destruction that threatens Creeley’s poem besets it on both ends, and the space of the poem is what can be held open long enough to be stumbled into before darkness ensconces it again. In contrast to a traditional understanding of the poet’s vocation, it would not be Creeley’s task to make this stuttering legible or fluent, but rather to leave the predication of stuttering open. A second poem, “Hart Crane 2,” continues the elegiac task of the first in a first demonstration of the seriality that characterizes Creeley’s mourning (most notably for his mother). Creeley struggles with his discovery that such tasks as were given him by poetic predecessors like Crane and, in a sense I have tried to outline, Celan, were interminable. If we can associate Creeley with continuity, it is not the continuity of full or realized presence, the fulfillment of desire or resolution of the paradox of poetry’s singularity and generality: it is instead the continuity of a stuttering that has preceded the poem and to which the poem must be faithful,

perhaps at the expense of its own legibility. The poem risks its own destruction in illegibility because it remains faithful to a kind of language given to it by the tradition of traumatic enlightenment and luminous wounds. There is certainly an American lineage to be traced behind Creeley's language, and attention to William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Louis Zukofsky shows what Creeley owes to some of the most interesting poetic friendships of the last century. But minding this "edge" of modernism, the one Creeley walks with Crane, suggests a poetic lineage that does not so easily exclude Paul Celan. From Crane, Creeley adopts a language in which proper names cannot be uttered, only stuttered, because to speak the name would improperly claim an unavailable closure. In the absence of any personal relationship to Creeley, Celan stands, or limps, as a precursor whose technical manipulations of poetic language intersect with those of Creeley at a meridian where the reorientation of the tasks of postwar poetry—to the body and to knowledge newly defined in relation to the wounds of reality—cannot be placed solely on one side of the Atlantic.

In his interview with Creeley, Daive, whose translations of Creeley draw largely from the early poetry (as does this paper), recognizes that the later work is very different, the work of a man, as Creeley puts it, "plus à l'aise, moins troublé" ("Mesure" 16). The poetry Creeley wrote after the age of forty-nine—Celan's age at his death—accounts for nearly half of his output. The facts of his life contrast strikingly with Celan's, most notably in the contrast between the growing isolation of Celan's final years, as Daive records them in *Sous la coupole*, and the increasing sense of Creeley's pivotal role in U.S. poetry and poetics community until his death in 2005. And yet, Creeleyan syntax responds to Celanian morphology. In the proliferation of schools and the confusion of

tongues of U.S. poetry in the wake of Modernism, Creeley too seeks out a different relation to poems as knowledge of the problematically oriented and orienting body, a relation that would allow the poetics of discontinuity to be handed over to its own predecessors without transmitting the traumatic wound that made it necessary.

Two different geometric figures have been at work in this attempt to place Celan and Creeley on the same plane. Daive triangulates Celan and Creeley by translating them into French; Grossman triangulates Celan and Crane as poets of orientation in the wounded light of traumatic enlightenment; and the techniques of morphological and syntactic stuttering, I have suggested, triangulate these two triangles, as Creeley, Crane and Celan position each other in a provisional, anachronistic, tri-lingual, trans-Atlantic, proximity. This figure, however, seems too neatly drawn, a comedy of the letter C in which it is too easy to forget that Celan's reality, Creeley's line, and Crane's tower are broken. It is indeed necessary to read the meridians that divide these poets as lines that may only be crossed with care. But I have also spoken of Daive's voice as a pivot, and would note that the pivotal voice, like the pivoting foot, inscribes a circle by the very act of encircling. That these voices stutter, and that their metered feet limp, may begin to demonstrate the critical idiom with which any reminder that a meridian traces not only a dividing line but also a globe-spanning circle must proceed. Any echo of these poetic orientations allows us to stand and speak only by stuttering and stumbling, "at the edge of" some possible reply.

Chapter 4

Words Returning: The Mourning of Robert Creeley

The title poem of Robert Creeley's 1986 collection, *Memory Gardens*, elegizes the poet's mother, who had been dead, by that time, for fourteen years. Within the poem, and given in fragments measured by Creeley's short line, the speaker relates a desire to encounter, speak to and then "hold to" his mother one last time before her death. Obsessed with arriving "in time" to actualize this fantasy, the poem's deliberate suspension of time ends, appropriately, with an image of statuesque stillness as the speaker fantasies inhabiting, with his dying mother, a work of art that preserves the human form outside of time:

could lift her
 in my arms so
 hold to her so
 take her in my arms

(Collected Poems 1975-2005, 266)

The artifice of this speaker's fantasied art world depends on a fastidiously recorded stepwise process. His "could" and "so" indicate heightened awareness of the fragile factitiousness that carves this reverse pietà—the son holding the mother—from the memory of death. If the speaker "could" lift his mother, then he could "hold to her;" only then might he "take her in" his arms and allow this strange statue to be actualized, if only as an image in the speaker's "memory garden." To "hold to" this image of the mother stamps the poem on several levels. It marks it as an elegy, since in that subgenre of lyric speakers draw on just such counterfactual constructions to console themselves for losses deemed irreversible outside of poetry's conventional manipulations of time. It also speaks

to the kind of gardens memory grows in Creeley's late poetry; that is to say, gardens of artifacts rather than of flowers. If this desire to hold calls back to the maternal "holding environment," it obeys a different logic entirely than that of Wallace Stevens.

In contrast to the material artifact that the mourning subject desires at the end of "Memory Gardens," the elegiac "Mother's Voice" struggles against the persistence of maternal sound in the surviving son's body.

I hear
 mother's voice say
 under my own, I won't
 want any more of that.
 My cheekbones resonate
 with her emphasis.

(Selected 204)

Against the movement toward the mother that "Memory Gardens" highlights, "Mother's Voice" articulates a desire to achieve distance from the mother precisely because her own "distance...from / common fact of others" threatens his desire to continue living.

I look out
 at all this demanding world
 and try to put it quietly back,
 from me, say, thank you,
 I've already had some
 though I haven't

and would like to
 but I've said no, she has,
 it's not my own voice anymore.

(Selected 204-205)

Both “Memory Gardens” and “Mother’s Voice” envision states of affairs different from the ones that grief allots, and pit desire—whether for the lost object or for detachment from it—against mourning. Both point to a heightened tension in mourning between the material body and the immaterial forces that act upon it. Neither short poem claims any triumph over the situation that brought it into being, and stops short of seeking consolation from the forms of eluding death that elegy has traditionally offered its suffering speakers. Finally, both poems link the figure of the mother to the status of poetic writing, and suggest that Creeley’s later poetry hinges on this relationship in both its material and virtual indices.

Because they differ from the image of Creeley’s poetry that many readers “hold to,” “Memory Gardens” and “Mother’s Voice,” along with several other elegies Creeley wrote for his mother in the 1970s and 1980s, can be disturbing to read. Usually associated with the ambivalence of erotic love, the careening movement of thought, and the exigencies of the present moment of perception, these poems concern friendship and family as they return to mind from an irrecoverable past. But the poems are not without precedent, as “Memory Gardens” is not the only elegy Creeley wrote for Genevieve Jules Creeley, who died in 1972 at the age of 85. Poems devoted to her memory are scattered throughout the second half of Creeley’s career, and the recurrence of this need to elegize

suggests, albeit in a preliminary fashion, that a significant part of Creeley's oeuvre undertakes a work of mourning too easily overlooked when critics christen Creeley the poet of erotic ambivalence, or of the mid-century U.S. heritage of imagism, minimalism, and Olsonian "projective verse." Creeley is all of these things, too, but the value and valence of Creeley's attachment to his erotic partners and poetic precursors must be reexamined in the light of his late preoccupation with death, and with the death of his mother specifically.

At first glance, Creeley's dedication to the genre of elegy suggests a radical separation from his earlier work. Creeley gained acclaim from critics—and was open in his prose about such an aim—as a poet whose attention to the happening of the present shaped his short line and the turns of his irregular syntax. In the "Preface" to the 1967 volume, *Words*, he writes, "So it is that what I feel, in the world, is the one thing I know myself to be, for that instant" (*Quick* 8). The poem titled "As real as thinking...", from *Pieces* (1969) claims that poetic forms are constructs for "saying / something / as it goes." Creeley's most widely-anthologized poem, "I know a man," takes such a focus on the present to be a corrective to the excesses and disordered behavior of an individual overwhelmed by the "darkness" that "surrounds us," as well as the fear-driven responses to such a predicament. To the speaker's "shall we and why not/ buy a goddamn big car," the voice of a passenger intervenes: "Drive, he sd. Look out where yr going." By the end of the poem, the speaker may still be headed for darkness, but he has been called to account for his role in this descent by the pressure of current conditions and the potentially, quite literally concrete destination of his car, if not also his words. Critics praised the poem for performing an intervention into its own excesses: the last line's

command translates, in Charles Altieri's paraphrase, to "keep your eye on experience" and recommends accurate vision as an antidote to a "drunken speech" that "stems not from perception, but from the need to fill voids" ("Unsure" 164).

Compared to this emphatic preference for the now, and the implication that allowing constructs from the past to shape projected futures is tantamount to inviting disaster, Creeley's later work, which turns to memory and to the temporal disjunctions of elegy,⁸⁵ can, as a result, seem incongruous. These poems, too, feel "the need to fill voids" as a strong motivation to poetic speech, but they adopt a different, sober mode of speech in which to do it.

The structure of mourning itself presents a particular difficulty to a poetry that drives to "get to" the unfolding of the present moment, to admit of no illusions that would distract from tracking what is happening.⁸⁶ In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud notes that the difficulty of mourning derives from the strength and persistence of the ego's attachment to its cathected objects, an attachment that persists even when those objects do not:

It is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. (244)

⁸⁵ Cf. Culler 67

⁸⁶ The phrase "get to" comes from Creeley's "Preface to *The Whip & For Love*:" "Wherever it is one stumbles (to get to wherever) at least some way will exist, so to speak, as and when a man takes this or that step—for which, god bless him" (*Quick* 5).

Instead of external obstacles obstructing Creeley's relationship to the present moment, in the case of mourning the obstruction derives from within, as one's own attachments prompt "a turning away from reality." To make this issue even more difficult, Creeley has relied upon the strength of his "libidinal positions" and their affective productions of love and hate to moor him to "common fact of others" against distractions and lapses of authenticity. As noted in the previous chapter, in "The Sentence," love gives its own "syntax" to the language by which the speaker would seek "continuity;" at the same time, the strength of the desire that love imparts makes that syntax so familiar that "it must / be one's own sentence." In Creeley's early work, only love has the ability to affect language, to give it structure, without distorting it in a way that threatens its authenticity. When a loved object is lost, however, love no longer moors the speaker to his "own sentence," but to something that is no longer real.

This process of inauthenticity had been introduced in the early work, though it is figured most often as the result of external interference. In a classic early poem, Creeley opposes poetic speech to the work of "dishonest mailmen":

They burn everything I have, or what little
I have. I don't care, etc.

The poem supreme, addressed to
emptiness—this is the courage

necessary. This is something
quite different. (35)

What is surprising about “The Dishonest Mailmen” is that, while it figures inauthenticity as an external hazard, it does not counter such false sending, as we might expect, by addressing a known loved object. Instead, the supreme poem must be “addressed to / emptiness.” Creeley’s demand that poetic speech be moored to reality does, often, invoke love; however, it works just as surely in the absence, or perhaps in the wake of the loss of, a loved figure. We might adjust our view of the early Creeley so as to regard “the nothing that is” as the most significant aspect of poetic authenticity. If Creeley links reality to emptiness (and perhaps to loss, which demands courage), mourning has played an important role in Creeley’s work all along.

Once again, mourning challenges Creeley’s early poetics because it pits, for the first time, reality against libido. Before, libido had held him to the present: with his mother’s death, it called him to the past or, as Freud’s passage suggests, to magical thinking. From a look at his early poems, we might imagine Creeley’s mourning as a vexed one. As it turns out, while he is committed to reality as a founding tenet of his poetry, he discovers and performs his attachment to his mother as a profound, if sometimes problematic, source of poetic speech in the decades following her death. The artifice that underlies poetic speech comes into question in this problem: is the mother a dishonest mailman from which he can and must distance himself, as a poem like “Mother’s Voice” intimates, or is she the place to which his words always return, not only because they are attached libidinally, but because they find there an authentic relation to source? Furthermore, what are the stakes of not discovering a maternal source of poetic speech until after the death of the mother? Is it possible to return through words

to a relationship to the maternal such that poetic vigor can be sustained, and not at the expense of “reality”?

II. Periodizing Creeley

In an interview with the French poet Jean Daive, who translated Creeley’s selected poems into French, Creeley noted that, as he aged, he felt “transformed” from the “aggressive” intensity that drove his character during the fifties and sixties into a man “more integrated” into the social fabric and its demands (“Mesure” 17).⁸⁷ A number of commentators have pointed out the marked differences between Creeley’s early and his later work. Reviewing the *Collected Poems*, Ben Lerner points out that the late poems’ “conversational” tone derives its power from a contrast with the earlier work. Those poems set us up to expect “awkwardness,” as unexpected line-breaks make the experience of reading a tortuous one. The uncommon syntax of the early work exerts an influence on the later poems mainly by its absence: “the power of the poems that develop without awkwardness is largely the consequence of our having been conditioned by forced reorientations to think of every line break as a potentially perilous fall” (258). From the “forced reorientations” compelled by the early poems’ syntax to the conversational rhythms of the later work, the reader undergoes yet another reorientation. The movement is not, however, unidirectional, as Lerner’s remarks intimate. To become oriented in the later work is not only to feel the effects of the early techniques; it is also to return to the dynamics and conflicts that set those techniques in motion.

⁸⁷“Je me suis transformé: le sens de la perspective, de l’engagement, qu’il soit sexual ou émotionnel, le sens de la relation avec les autres, meme dans la rue, a changé. D’un côté je me sens beaucoup plus intégré.” Translation mine.

Because continuity remains a major concern for Creeley in his later work, positing a simple discontinuity separating these poems from the early work would be reductive. Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies the increasing concern with death in the late poems as an issue that reframes the questions Creeley has been asking all along. Cast now as “meditations on death and its surround,” Creeley’s later poems still ask “how to use this time, how to be situated in time, how to register time in his particular offbeat way” (91). Considering death more prominently, however, leads Creeley to take a fuller account of how the present--“this time,” or time in which one “has time” to consider being situated in it or registering its passing—allows or disallows the past to enter its surround. On this issue, DuPlessis notes the changed role of the poetic tradition in Creeley’s very late poetry: “In his last books he wrote many poems to the dead and many poems using very familiar lines from great poems. He thus links himself via them to the stream of Anglophone poetries, and links us to them by underemphasizing any sense of rupture or break from the past” (91). Before these “last books”—*Life and Death, If I were writing this*, and *On Earth*—Creeley’s poetry of the 1970s and 1980s maintains a concern with time, death, and the past that must be read through personal and familiar, rather than primarily poetic “predecessors.” Surprisingly, however, Creeley positions his mother as a source of poetic speech even more primary than any of the poets whose names and memories fill both the earlier and the later poems.

III. The Mourning of Influence

Two kinds of poems stand out in Creeley’s early work. Poems concerned, on the one hand, with the erotic often demonstrate a problematic relationship to the “I” as the place from which poetic address can originate. On the other, poems dedicated to poetic

precursors evince a complementary deferral of the poet's own words to those of his dedicatees by the use of such phrases as "as you say." Each of these types of poems demonstrates a concern with poetic speech and its problematic origins that only a later affective posture will be able to resolve. That is, only a later mourning, for the mother, will speak to the grief that is at the heart of these poems. Maternal mourning plays such a major role in the late work, then, because it returns us to the confluence of loss and the erotic and the intersection of familial and aesthetic attachments—sites that have repeatedly marked the most productive and irresolvable conflicts in the course of Creeley's career.

"A Form of Women" struggles with the instability of the "I" as a source from which any address to the other would originate. The poem exemplifies this preoccupation with the lyric subject's distance from itself, as it constructs the poem around an attempt to regain some grasp over the "I" in order to mediate the relationship with the beloved:

I have come far enough

from where I was not before

But the course of the poem reveals that it is this erotic attachment, sought out to ameliorate the fragmentation of the "I," that exacerbates it:

my hands are my own

but I am not.

(Selected 62)

Early commentators focused on the extent to which Creeley turned to women as a source of relief in his poetry, and poems such as "For Love" and "Love Comes Quietly" confirm

that his speakers seek erotic love as consolation.⁸⁸ However, these same poems hint that the “places stumbled into” for relief from what he calls, quoting Ginsberg, “the pain of living,” are rarely the unviated sites of comfort he expects. The erotic is idealized in expectation and, in poems like “The Whip,” the site of great conflict upon arrival. Most obviously, this problem afflicts the sending of poetic address from the speaker whose difficulty constructing a stable “I” prevents him from effectively imagining a “you” or another able to receive his conflicted words. To this problem of sending, here figured not as the work of “dishonest mailmen” but of a disoriented addressee, the death of Creeley’s mother will appose a complementary problem of words returning to their conflicted sender.

Robert Creeley’s relationship to poetic precursors often manifests as a concern with poetic speech; in particular, Creeley goes to great pains to attribute the sources of turns of phrase to poets or to a more general “they.” “For W.C.W.,” for instance, constructs a poem around glosses and variations of words and phrases attributed to Williams:

There, you say, and
 there, and there,
 and *and* becomes

⁸⁸ Cf. Robert Duncan’s “After *For Love*“, in which Duncan argues that Creeley’s ideal female figure promises passage outside or beyond the troubled self: “He turns to the world of story as he turns to the world of dream or of daily life, to find a door leading to a self he is that is not his, to a revelation that is beyond him and must be given: its secret is in a woman’s keeping” (239).

just so. And
 what one wants is
 what one wants,

 yet complexly
 as you say.

(Selected 87)

Most notably, the attributions “you say” and “as you say” punctuate or interrupt the fluency of the poem, and he resorts to a sort of stuttering by the end of the poem to articulate a relationship between his own work and Williams’:

Let’s
 let it go.
 I want—

 Then there is—
 and,
 I want.

(Selected 87)

The poem’s last three lines reprise the phrases attributed to Williams, “there” and “want” and “and”—and arrange them disjunctively in order to characterize a relationship between the two poets, as indicated in the plural command “Let’s,” that would be characterized by the complexity of desire, the precision of observation, and the accurate mediation of conjunction.

As we have already seen in chapter three, by giving over the first poem of “For Love” to the figure of Hart Crane, Creeley embarked upon a poetic career in which the source of speech is always already lost. This source—so far traced to poetic mentors and to his mother—links up to a problematic relation in Creeley’s oeuvre to the speaking “I,” as if moving from these sources to his own speech were obstructed. While a trouble with the speaking “I” owing to a fixation on the sources of poetic speech seems to suggest a study of the anxiety of influence, Creeley’s preoccupations suggest rather that a painful yearning for influence leads to a profound mourning of its loss.

In an interview with Linda Wagner-Martin, Creeley speaks both to his abiding concern with attributing the sources of his ideas and to the subtle, continuous concern with the figure of the mother that is not unrelated to it. He and his interviewer are discussing a popular topic for early critics of Creeley’s work, namely Creeley’s peculiar idiom, seemingly derived from “common speech” rather than from any poetic precursor or style:

And so I think what really gained from that sense of source in common speech was the recognition that the intimate knowing of a way of speaking—such as is gained as Olson says with mother’s milk—what’s gained in that way offers the kind of intensity that poetry particularly admits. These words known from one’s childhood have the most intense possibility for the person writing (75).

The remark Creeley couches in em-dashes is the crux of this statement. If it is characteristic in the poetry and prose for Creeley to take pains to attribute his words and

ideas to sources outside himself, it is also important to note the maternal aspect of this persistent technique. Here, he credits his mentor, Charles Olson, with a unique usage of the colloquial phrase “gained...with mother’s milk.” It is hardly a brilliant insight on Olson’s part, and hardly seems to call for Creeley’s deference, but the way Creeley builds onto it explains why Creeley takes the technique so seriously. For Creeley (or, if we take his word for it, for Olson), poetry’s characteristic “intensity” has, even further back than one’s poetic precursors, a source in maternal care. Because knowledge of that source passes through poetic mentors—it is Olson who relates that speaking comes “with mother’s milk”—Creeley’s devotion to the poets he considers formative—William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Robert Duncan—bears a maternal imprint. But the figure of Creeley’s actual mother is not erased by these gestures of loyalty to (mostly male) poetic forebears; in fact, Creeley’s attributive compulsion asserts itself in relation to the mother with an equal insistence. To the poems titled “For W.C.W.” and the several bearing dedications for Duncan and Zukofsky among others, we may appose the poems that Creeley wrote after his mother’s death in 1972. In addition to “Memory Gardens” and “Mother’s Voice,” the earliest and most formal elegy, “For my Mother” deserves attention because it bears on the relationship between other poets and maternal mourning, as Allen Ginsberg plays a significant role in that poem’s attitude toward the mother’s death. Ginsberg’s poems also mention Creeley as a photographer, and this technology that promises faithful representation of the past adds to the problems of poetic speech and its mediation by others, most notably in the poem, “Mother’s Photograph.”

Ginsberg's "Memory Gardens," an elegy for Kerouac, works backward to a graveyard scene from an annotated list of stories and memories. It is at the final moment of the poem, when the poem depicts Kerouac lying in the grave, and the speaker throwing "a kissed handful of damp earth / down on the stone lid," that Kerouac actually dies and can no longer be part of the elegy's shared vision, that of "Jack thru whose eyes I / saw." And it is thus at this moment, in the speaker's need for a supplementary vision, that he turns to Creeley as a witness both to the life he has lived with the newly dead poet and to the finality of the latter's death.

As though he were aware of this intertwining of photographic vision, the end or ends of poetic speech, and Ginsberg's poem, Creeley takes the closing lines of "Memory Gardens" as an epigraph to his own volume.

Well, while I'm here I'll
do the work—
and what's the Work?
To ease the pain of living.
Everything else, drunken
dumbshow.

(534)

The lines recall Charles Altieri's characterization of Creeley's "I know a man" as "drunken speech," and suggest that Creeley takes from Ginsberg a different mandate for poems that would treat of the death of others as inseparable from the realization of one's own mortality.

Ginsberg is a significant antecedent for Creeley's elegies. Both Ginsberg's "Memory Gardens" and Creeley's "For My Mother" are elegies in which mourning is inseparable from reading. Ginsberg tells us that he has just read the closing lines of Shelley's elegy for Keats, "Adonais," before composing "Kaddish," and takes an epigraph from that poem to gesture at the "self-destructiveness" of his poetic task. In homage to Ginsberg's technique and in continuation of its genealogy, Creeley mimics the former's epigraphic conceit and uses lines from "Kaddish" to preface his own 1994 volume, *Echoes*. More specifically, he quotes from "Kaddish" in "For my Mother." Although the differences between the elegies and the women they commemorate are undeniable, it is telling that Creeley looks back to Ginsberg, especially when Robert Lowell (and Anne Sexton, too) had, by the time of "For my mother," already published well-known elegies for their mothers. Ramazani's reading of Ginsberg's elegies emphasizes their "bodily metaphors" as a means to connect, unlike Berryman and Lowell in their parental elegies, to "a literalized, maternal source" of both self and poetic art (249-50). And this is an important concern for Creeley, whose elegies, too, focus on the literal body of the mother, and, significantly, on this body as, in Ramazani's phrase, "the living body from which [Ginsberg] came" (250). Unlike Ginsberg, however, Creeley dwells on the absence of the physical body that bore him instead of the body's alternately seductive and repulsing physicality. In age and in death this body is no longer maternal, hardly the mother's at all. When Creeley does not figure it as absent entirely ("Mother's Photograph"), and present only in the traces of her voice ("Mother's Voice"), even in her age she has the body of a child or even a fetus ("For My Mother").

In a letter to Ginsberg dated January 28, 1973, Creeley describes the origin of the lines of Ginsberg's that show up in "For My Mother:"

I wanted to tell you and in that clutter at the church there was no chance to, that while my mother was dying in Marin General, just worn out at last physically, 85, I kept hearing in my head as I'd be there, watching the catch of her breathing, how the body was all going 'in'—anyhow those words of yours, "Relax and die"—also "Death's let you out." Obviously one wants to know if anything said can ever be of that measure, and what I'm trying now to say is that it, also obviously, can—and not just those specific phrases, but a whole experience of ways you have and do 'say things' that kept a measure of the reality clear and possible in myself. It's an incredibly dear human experience to realize others are with you in that place. Ok.⁸⁹

What's interesting about the appearance of these lines in the elegy is that they no longer bear the mark of attribution that they do in the letter. An earlier poem might have marked this quotation with the phrase, "as you say," but in the poem, except for quotation marks, they flow seamlessly into Creeley's own words:

"Death's

let you out—"

⁸⁹ My thanks to Kaplan Harris for alerting me to the existence of this letter.

comes true,

this, that,

endlessly circular

(Selected 165)

Not only do Ginsberg's words become Creeley's own here, a part of what he "The Sentence" named "one's own sentence," he also takes advantage of the deictic "you" so that the same word can indicate the object of Ginsberg's mourning and his own. In the recognition that life itself is "endlessly circular," Creeley circles back to his own reliance on the words of poetic predecessors, not now to mourn them, but to mourn his mother, whose own relationship to Creeley's words emerges later in yet another "endlessly circular" process of citation and return.

V. Creeley and Elegy

Recent work on elegy has contributed greatly to our understanding of the last century's poetry of mourning as it departs (with some reluctance and some exceptions) from its sources in classical and later English elegy. Nevertheless, Creeley has not often been considered among the last century's elegiac poets, in part because his early work does not bear that stamp, and his later work has drawn less attention.

Following a Freudian conception of "healthy mourning" as a process that regains for the mourner the ability to make libidinal investments, Peter Sacks argues that the conventions of elegy—from the "flower catalogue and procession of mourners" to strategies of "repetition and refrain"—create substitutes for the lost loved one by trope and distortion, using these strategies in the service of consolation. At the close of his study,

however, Sacks acknowledges the “originality and privacy” of the American elegy in contrast to its English antecedents, and argues that this recent trait threatens both to close itself off in narrowness and to reopen the genre with “constant renegotiation between...individual elegists and their inherited tradition” (328). His point that the American elegist reflects a peculiar “displacement,” often literally outside the cemetery in which the official acts of bereavement are taking place, resonates in the opening words of Creeley’s “Memory Gardens,” which uses a variant of the word to describe the approach to his dead mother as “dis- /placed eagerly / unwitting” (Sacks 313; Creeley *Collected 1975-2005* 266). On the other hand, Sacks does not consider the mourning of experimental poets, and limits his account of the “American elegy” to a mainstream canon. Although Jahan Ramazani also engages a limited cadre of examples of recent elegy, his corrective to Sacks’ thesis helpfully accounts for the twentieth-century elegy’s anti-elegiac bent. Going farther than Sacks in his exploration of the genre’s role in poetry more broadly, Ramazani claims that elegy “is central to the history and development of twentieth-century lyric” and “crucial to modern poets of various kinds” (x). Where Sacks claimed that elegy “install[s] a substitute for the lost person, thus recapitulating the oedipal resolution of the child,” Ramazani argues that the “melancholic emphasis” of the poems of the last century demonstrates a veer away from the “healthy” and “successful” mourning Sacks read into earlier elegiac work (xi). The work or twentieth century mourning, in his revision of Freud’s distinction, has more to do with melancholia than Sacks would like to believe.

While Ramazani does not mention Creeley (or other poets of the Black Mountain, Objectivist, or New York schools of poetry), his recognition of the significance of the

“American family elegy” establishes a touchstone for Creeley’s elegies for his mother. “More than all other elegiac subgenres...[it] best displays the postwar American poet’s especially intimate and immediate, impatient and hostile work in the genre” (221). Despite some more subtle revisions of earlier elegiac conventions (217-18) that demonstrate a continuity with the history of the U.S. elegy, many of these poems lash out at family members, upsetting the polity and reverence demonstrated by the earliest exemplars, such as Anne Bradstreet’s Puritan ministrations for her father. In this new vein, Robert Lowell “mocks his mother’s pretensions” and Allen Ginsberg “ruthlessly expos[es] his mother’s acts of self-exposure;” Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich “forc[e] us to rethink the terms in which the ‘female elegy’ has been defined” by attacking their dead. “Because they...have incurred a great debt from the parent, they vociferously repay it with comparable injuries” (223). That these violent or hostile attacks are some of the great mid-century American poems suggests, to Ramazani, not only that there aspects of the larger culture against which these poets felt the need to speak, but also a revision of the aims of the entire genre, which can no longer “afford to be simply compensatory,” and can no longer be measured by their ability to offer “consolation” (226).

I dwell at some length on Ramazani’s interpretation not only because it has become the reference point for any commentary on U.S. elegy, but because Creeley’s elegies maintain a relationship with this tradition, even if they fit only uneasily into this version of the “American family elegy.” Creeley’s elegiac poems are notable not for any ambivalence, hostility, or attempt at revenge. His harshest words to his mother may be the comparatively innocuous “Mother...was essentially mistaken,” and any ‘rejection’ of

elegiac ‘consolation’ derives less from a need for public vengeance or violent retribution than a preference for using these poems to accomplish other, subtler aims.

What, then, is the relationship of poems like “For my Mother” and “Mother’s Voice” to the genre of elegy? While maintaining a sense of their strangeness in the oeuvre, Creeley’s poems are not anti-elegies⁹⁰. Without adhering to conventional norms of the elegy, or even declaring themselves elegies by traditional means, we can begin to account for them by speaking to Creeley’s envisioning of what Timothy Bahti calls “the ends of lyric.” From the beginning of his career, poems serve as a means to give words complex states of mind and feeling evoked by contact with things and people as these interactions are constrained by time and mediated by subjective experience. Creeley’s originality in post-war American poetry hews to his being neither a poet of thought—he is rarely accorded the status of philosophical poet as are Ashbery, Olson, Zukofsky, and, in a different vein, Stevens—nor a poet of reckless feeling, as some critics have characterized Frank O’Hara or the Beats, with whom Creeley was closely associated. In fact, Creeley’s own detractors have been outspoken about a weakness owing to his minimalist leanings.)⁹¹ To be, like Wallace Stevens, neither one nor the other, I am

⁹⁰ Peter Gizzi’s recent collection, *Threshold Songs*, while its poems respond to the recent deaths of intimate loved ones, assiduously avoids the term elegy. As Stephen Ross notes, the poems read “more like abstracted forms of the elegy than elegies proper—poems that achieve their aims by reflecting on what it means to mourn and to be frustrated in the attempt.” Susan Stewart’s recent review of mourning poems by poets as diverse as Susan Howe and C.D. Wright is less abashed about the term.

⁹¹ In a brief commentary on Creeley’s *Selected Poems*, and using a quotation from “For My Mother,” Vendler writes that, despite “diminishment...[t]hings are wasted, faded, faint, trembling, wavering, blurred, darkening: the scale is miniature, the dimensions fragile, in this poet of ‘tender, semi- / articulate flickers’ of presence” (“Ten” 357). Apart from her labeling Creeley’s poetry “fatally pinched,” her choice to praise him using lines he used to describe his dead mother may point both to the power of this part of Creeley’s oeuvre and a troubling risk for the critic who allows an emphasis on Creeley’s mothers—

suggesting, may be Creeley's strongest claim to be both, and to be a significant example of mid-century U.S. poetry of the thought of feeling and the feelings attached to or derived from thinking.

VI. "Mother's Photograph"

By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photographer tells me death in the future...In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 96).

Robert Creeley's engagement with the photograph as a technology associated with mourning and the maternal is limited. In contrast to the book Barthes devotes to the subject, only one of Creeley's elegiac poems depends on a photograph. In contrast to Barthes' conscious alternation between "two languages, one expressive, the other critical" (6), Creeley's "Mother's Photograph" is "only" expressive: the poem does not explain the role of photography in his mourning or even meditate on it for long. And although the medium is not alien to his oeuvre, or to its late focus on familiar figures (for the volume, *En Famille*, for example, Creeley wrote poems to accompany photographs of families by Elsa Dorfman), in both works Creeley leaves photography literally in others' hands. The medium stands both close to and apart from the work Creeley sees as essential to the work of mourning, which, as we have seen, bears on the absence of the mother's body and a certain difficulty with the origins of speech. How, after all, could the silent, two-

whether his precursors or his biological mother—to overshadow the originality of his subjectivity as their mourner.

dimensional medium of the photograph have anything to do with his concern to figure the mother's body and reckon with the intractability of speech that her legacy announces? If the image Creeley's speaker produces in "Mother's Photograph" bears witness to what Barthes calls the "catastrophe" of "death in the future," can this new point of view shed light on the darkness in which speech and bodies remain shrouded in Creeley's persistent work of mourning?

According to Barthes, the photograph has a special relationship to the work of mourning. Barthes asserts this link in the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, lamenting a "rather terrible thing which there is in every photograph: the return of the dead" (9). If we are tempted to read this "return" in the light of elegiac consolation, Barthes reminds us that the return of the photographic dead is "rather terrible" because the photograph represents an obstacle rather than an aid to mourning. It gives "the absolute past" and nothing else that would catalyze either the process of articulating loss or of overcoming it. "[W]ithout culture," "undialectical," and "violent," the photograph "fill[s] the sight by force;" its bluntness mimics nothing so much as the raw, unredeemable fact of death itself. As a result, Barthes claims, "nothing in [the photograph] can transform grief into mourning" (90-91). Despite the movement intimated by photographic "return," the hallmarks of the photograph's relationship to loss are stillness and a stubborn resistance to any "transformation." They house death's absoluteness, its immaterial contents, such that no labor of mourning can work through it.

On the other hand, might the photograph and the kind of reading and writing it allows to Barthes give birth to something new, a potential outside of the certainty of the mother's death and the photographic viewer's own impending demise? Elissa Marder

suggests as much in her reading of *Camera Lucida*. In Barthes' text, the power of the photograph is its referential certainty: "the photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents," and, in the end, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (85,89). According to Marder, it is paradoxically in this excess of certainty that a less certain and less prescribed relationship to the future may be imagined: "'The Photograph' uses its power of certainty to disable the latent potentialities of language: it neither reads nor writes" (248). Nevertheless, Barthes writes photographically, both by using "word-images" and by describing certain photographs in words instead of reproducing them alongside his text. And it is precisely in this writing, which demands that Barthes "reproduce the photograph in his own psyche" (250), that otherwise inaccessible perceptions—and most notably perceptions of the mother—can be accessed.

Only by responding 'photographically' as it were, to this image—that is, by giving himself over to the unconscious photographic capacities within his own psyche, can these latent inscriptions of the lost life (and perhaps the life is neither strictly his nor hers) be awakened... This 'photographic writing' cannot show anything directly; it animates a potential field of associations through which the time 'before' is awakened otherwise and, when read, brings the 'déjà vu' of a possible, impossible future to life (251).

Essentially for Marder, "this mode of photographic reading is intimately connected with the figure of the mother both *in* photographic writing and *as* photographic writing" (252). Photographic reading and writing returns us to the psyche's "dark room" as to a womb,

and a sense of "capacity" for a different birth develops in this unrecognizable place. In this inner, uncanny space, the possibility remains "to create new temporalities that unfold from dormant histories that are embedded in its inscriptions" (240).

I dwell at length on this reading of Barthes' photographic reading and writing because the role of the photograph in Robert Creeley's poem, "Mother's Photograph," bears an uncanny relationship to *Camera Lucida*. Both Barthes and Creeley triangulate photography, maternal mourning, and a peculiar definition of "History." A photograph of his mother in her childhood authorizes Barthes to define "History" as "the time my mother was alive *before me*," a time to which one can gain access only by the photograph (65). Using an image of his mother as a schoolgirl as the object of his meditation, Creeley takes up this same "historical" time in "Mother's Photograph."⁹² Creeley does so, however, in a way that demands attention to one of the elegy's most interesting conventions.

The scene of "Mother's Photograph" couches its consideration of Barthes' "History" in the context of a fantasized present. In this moment, the dead mother has returned to life. Here, she will be apostrophized as a living mother and as the recipient of her own photograph, which the speaker hands to her in order for her to provide an interpretation the speaker cannot dare to make on his own. The use of time in Creeley's

⁹² Interestingly, as near contemporaries, Creeley and Barthes' texts concern not only the same figurally "Historical" time, but also the same chronologically historical time. Henriette Binger Barthes was born in 1893, and Barthes places her age in the "Winter Garden Photograph" at 5. Genevieve Jules Creeley was born in 1887, and "Mother's Photograph" presents her "aged / ten." Barthes' mother died in 1977, at the age of 84, while Creeley's mother died at 85 in 1972. The two photographs may have been taken only months apart in 1898 and 1897, respectively. Moreover, Creeley and Barthes contemplated the photographs when the images were themselves between eighty and ninety years old.

poem calls to mind Jonathan Culler's definition of one of the central conventions of the genre of elegy. Culler takes the elegy's temporal manipulations as exemplary of the power of the trope of apostrophe to establish a "now" that "is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, or writing" (68). In his definition, "elegy...replaces an irreversible temporal disjunction, the move from life to death, with a dialectical alternation between attitudes of mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence" (67). As per Culler's definition, Creeley returns, in "Mother's Photograph," to a time in the past as a means for erasing the present in which the loved one's death is a fact.

It is worth noting that Culler's choice of Keats' "This Living Hand" to demonstrate these dynamics bears upon Creeley's elegy, in which metonymy figures the dead body of the mother by evoking her grasping hand and what it holds. Like "This Living Hand," "Mother's Photograph" is, in my reading, a self-elegy, as it turns away from the death of the loved object and toward the speaker, whose own death the meditation has brought into sharper focus. In this way, it aligns with Barthes' reading of the Winter Garden photograph. Creeley also returns to the past in order to view with more—rather than less—clarity the inevitable death of the speaker who has employed temporal manipulations for the sake of his own consolation. As though obscuring or avoiding one's own death were more grave a wrong than obscuring or denying the death that the poem exists to record and to deny, Creeley's poem offers a justification for the turn to self-elegy in the midst of an elegy for another.

As the poem begins, "Mother's Photograph" proposes that a new technology, that of the photograph, may answer anew a problem associated with the mother's body.

Dwelling with, holding to, or being possessed by the body of the mother has preoccupied all of Creeley's elegies, as we have seen in the fantasy of "Memory Gardens" of holding to the mother to protect her from death, in "For My Mother" with its "Kaddish"-like descriptions of physical decrepitude that evacuate the mother of her maternal function, and with the way in which "Mother's Voice" depicts the possession of his speech by the mother's. In each of these poems, the body was evoked but never presented, spoken of but never given, as instead a fantasy, a skeleton, and a voice stood in for it metonymically. "Mother's Photograph" begins similarly, but suggests that a particular form of technology and its corollary mode of reading may present the mother's body in such a way that the mourner may accomplish an otherwise blocked task of mourning.

The opening of "Mother's Photograph" raises a significant question of syntax and holds it in abeyance until the poem's (and sentence's) end. Not only is the deferral itself significant, the particular question involved is one of verb tenses, which brings the poem's relationship to a particular time of mourning to the fore.

Could you see present
 sad investment of
 person, its clothes,
 gloves and hat,

 as against yourself....

(271)

What kind of sentence does the word "could" signal? The reader of "Mother's Photograph" must hold in mind the possibility that "could you see" is either a question

outright, something that would follow the form, “Could you see me when I was waving?” or that it is a conditional clause embedded in a speculative proposition: “if you could see me, would you have waved back?” That we don’t know this at the beginning of Creeley’s poem, and that we don’t know until its end structures our reading of the poem as one that sits between two decisive alternatives: has the independent, verb-bearing clause already appeared in the poem’s first sentence, or does it only set up the conditions for an independent clause to come?

To take the opening words as though they opened a question, that question would resemble the one asked by Yeats’ aging speaker in the fifth stanza of “Among School Children.” This speaker also anachronistically juxtaposes a young mother with her aging son, returning to a time in the past in order to posit the present as a hypothetical possibility, rather than a lived certainty. Return to this state of innocence or ignorance allows both speakers to ask whether the same course would have been followed had the future been known:

What youthful mother, a shape on her lap
 Honey of generation had betrayed,
 And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
 As recollection or the drug decide,
 Would think her son, did she but see that shape
 With sixty or more winters on its head,
 A compensation for the pang of his birth,
 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

(216-217)

Both Yeats and Creeley ask if the past contains the seed of the present by necessity, or if it is radically separated from the present by its necessary ignorance of it. Can the evocation of this (possible) state of innocence change the speaker's perspective on the present, now that it has come to pass? Alternately, would a different understanding of the (mother's) past have allowed the present to develop otherwise, in such a way that present pain could be avoided? In both cases, the speaker grants his mother the posthumous ability to judge the worth of his life, inasmuch as Yeats' "youthful mother" would surely *not* think her son's life a just "compensation for the pang of his birth," and Creeley's, could she see her present "sad investment" as its consequence, would certainly not again choose the burden of raising a family. In this sense, each poem invokes the threatening possibility that their respective mothers' posthumous examinations could, anachronistically, upset the actual courses of their speakers' lives: since each mother could have decided not to bear children, it is possible that neither of these speakers would have ever been born. This encounter with his own non-being foreshadows the sense that, for Creeley, these poems put his own death in question first and foremost. That is, the problem that the death of the mother brings to the fore is not the loss of the mother, *per se*, but the aging and eventual death of the speaker. More specifically, the problem is of one's own possible impossibility, and the sense that the mother's death makes this radical possibility more likely. If the mother is dead or dying (for Yeats, if she has decided she doesn't want to have given birth to the child), what proof exists that she ever lived and decided to bear children? The speakers in each of these poems become their own mothers here, a much more complex operation of mourning that exists for any other figure, including the father. When the mother dies, the space where one has certainly and

uncannily been no longer exists. These speakers turn back time not in order to find consolation, but in order to ask a question pertaining to their own lives, as if hearing from a mother's lips that life has value would make death's approach less fraught. That such an answer never comes is something the lyric's convention of a single speaker allows both Yeats and Creeley to elide, though not completely. In "Among School Children" this question leads to a famous proliferation of questions whose "answer-ability" is undecidable, as though the failure to receive an answer to this first rhetorical question were not taken for granted, but taken as an inflaming wound. The single sentence of Creeley's poem ends with a rather different technique that indicates the same problem: the number of clauses added to the initial question so obscures its interrogative valence that the absence of an answer seems, at first, to be unremarkable. Returning to the beginning of the poem in order to parse the sentence again, however, leaves the reader with an unresolved anticipation of, if not an answer, then at least the punctuation proper to the question. Bereft of even this marker, since the poem ends with a period, the question of "Mother's Photograph," like that of "Among School Children," commingles the present and the past and hesitates to trace out any resolving continuity between the two. This uncertainty about time is the hallmark of Creeley's poetry of mourning, which is significant because, as we recall, mooring himself in the present moment has always been Creeley's recourse against the violent impingements of the unintelligible world. How will elegiac conventions, which, as Culler asserts, allow the elegist to assert the triumph of poetry, come to Creeley's aid if his loyalty to the present has already been challenged by a poem that fully inhabits neither the reality of the present nor an hypothetical presents determined by the a posthumously-revised past? Does, perhaps, this

temporal confusion call Creeley to the photograph, whose absolute pastness (as Barthes puts it) poses less of a challenge to the regime of time than elegiac manipulations? Or does the photograph upset time just as much, and just as unacceptably?

Like most Creeley lyrics, “Mother’s Photograph” is slight: there are four stanzas of four lines each, and most of the lines contain just four or five syllables. As the title suggests, at issue here is a photograph of the speaker’s mother, though the situation of the poem, the reason of its utterance, is not primarily or explicitly an analysis of the photograph, a meditation on the discovery of the photograph by the speaker, or even the feeling it evokes for him. Instead, the poem makes its single sentence out of a scene of presenting the photograph *of* the mother *to* the mother, and, couched in the form of the question we have not yet parsed as direct or conditional, we understand the poem will use the photograph to get an answer.

The poem’s first stanza suggestively sets up the mother who receives the photograph of herself as “sad investment of person,” not a mother at all but the object (the pronoun “it” replaces “her”) of generic articles, each of which also lacks the personal pronoun: “clothes, gloves, and hat.” Surprisingly, in a poem about a photograph, and one which the poem will go on to describe, what the mother is actually asked if she “could see” is not the photograph at all but her “present” condition, a “sad investment” of her accessories and hardly a being at all. The question would seem to ask whether the mother can see herself as others--and in particular the speaker--see her.⁹³ Describing his mother

⁹³As I suggested in chapter 1, the journey of Crispin in Wallace Stevens’s “The Comedian as the Letter C” suggests that self-seeing is a dangerous enterprise and a difficult accomplishment. There, we recall, Crispin’s self-seeing required inverting a telescope, or symbolically leaving behind, at least momentarily, his aspirations to geographic discovery in order to become an “introspective voyager.” For the mother addressed here,

as a “sad investment” would seem to import some of the revenge-seeking resentment of Ginsberg’s “Kaddish,” in which the poet refers to his mother’s “sad condition.” But Creeley’s poem, unlike Ginsberg’s, depicts a scene that is unfolding in the present, at the moment of his mother’s final illness, and Creeley’s drive to depict this scene accurately accounts better for the grotesquerie. Thus, in the most formal elegy, the one written most nearly after her death, “For my Mother: Genevieve Jules Creeley, April 8, 1887- October 7, 1972,” we find these lines: “Curled up, in / on yourself, // position you take / in the bed, hair / wisped up / in your head, a /top knot, body / skeletal, eyes / closed....” Ramazani notes that Ginsberg more than most elegists “reveals the living body of the deceased—the living body from which he came” and he reads “Kaddish” as a poem that seeks its cathartic purging of the mother’s excesses by an exposure of her body (251). In their physical probing of the mother’s decrepitude, Creeley’s lines echo Ginsberg’s, but their tone is tender, rather than recklessly vengeful. As for “Mother’s Photograph,” it is not on account of any denuding of the mother that the elegy participates in the violence of Ginsberg’s, but on account of its “exposure” of her being photographic. Rather than depend on the gardens of compare to compare her present and past selves, the speaker forces his addressee to regard her current decrepitude “as against” a version of youth preserved in a photograph.

As “Mother’s Photograph” proceeds from its first to its second stanza, it introduces what we understand to be the photograph of the mother. A portrait of the mother as a ten-year-old child emerges that contrasts the sad outfitting of her old age. She is self-sufficient with “lunch box” and “homemade dress.” What stands out about

self-seeing would require taking a historical view of a situation--that of impending death--that threatens to overwhelm sight in the present.

both of these stanzas is that the mother herself is hardly to be found. Instead of a description of her body, as even “For my Mother” had it, only the garments and accessories that surround what should be her body find a place in the “now” of the discourse. In one possible reading, these stanzas have their counterpart in Roland Barthes’ mention of “a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed *differently*” (64). But for Creeley, the dress precludes any description of the “familiar being,” as though to bring her body into the poem were also to enter the fact of her death in the space of death’s elegiac denial. The presencing of the mother that the poem’s apostrophe enacts stands in tension with the ‘absencing’ that is the work of its metonymic substitutions.

It is possible to imagine a different metonymy that would bring the poem into the domain of the elegy, if, for instance, these parts of the mother stood in for her as a whole being in order to signify that her wholeness is no longer available. Creeley’s maternal metonymy, however, does not use her parts to retrieve a composite substitute image that could replace her whole being. Not even pictures of her from the past, from a time in which she was alive, can make her “present”: even then, her body was missing. By contrast, in Barthes’ experience of finding the Winter Garden photograph, he says, “I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother” (69). So complete is the loss of the mother that her presence in memory and as an object of poetic address is spectral, an absence outlined by the objects that typically define the limits of a body. To this point in the poem, the reason for asking the question, “could you see present” hinges on the predicate adjective “present,” and if the speaker’s progress through the second stanza is any indication, the provisional answer would have to be “no.” How could the mother see

herself present if the speaker, even while looking at her photograph, cannot envision her clearly? If he can, in fact, only “present” or represent her as absent? And yet this is another reason why the speaker asks such a question, as a way of calling down from the dead mother a vision or an aid to vision that he has lost. Unable to see her now or in her photograph, the demand for the mother to see herself imagines another means of accessing her body: only if she can see, and approve of his seeing, will the speaker be able to see her. A corollary to Creeley’s needs to attribute speech, here he needs permission for his sight. Neither can exist unsponsored. Like Yeats’s speaker, Creeley’s needs the knowledge that the mother sanctions his living, even when the purpose of this living is directed toward a successful mourning, or even burying, of the mother.

Before he found the “Winter Garden” photograph, Barthes despaired of finding an image of his mother that would contain her for him. In chapter 25 of *Camera Lucida*, he recognizes the absence of the mother from most images of the mother. It is “one of the most agonizing features of mourning...which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality)” (63). He adds, “If I were ever to show them to friends I could doubt that these photographs would *speak*” (64). Creeley rearranges these same actions and doubts. In “Mother’s Voice,” Creeley had worried that his mother’s words spoke beneath his own. Here, his attempt to let a photograph speak is beset, on one side, by photographic silence, and, on the other, by a voice whose words he is sometimes reluctant to repeat. That is, between the general structural limitations of all photographs and the particular verbal limitations of the specific object whose presence he hopes to “rediscover.” Can Creeley’s reading of the

technology of photography, which Ginsberg figures as “Creeley’s one eye,’ mediate between these limits?

As the poem moves into its second half, the last two stanzas contain at least two peculiar nuances to suggest that there is a different, positive answer to be had for the poem’s initial question. First, the word “body” appears for the first time:

to go to school
and learn to be somebody

(272)

As the photograph gives way to a narration that takes off from it, the mother’s body may once again begin to take shape. It would not be in the objects themselves, but in their movement or interaction that form could take shape. In Creeley’s poetics and in a statement from William Carlos Williams that speaks to the issue, a poem is constituted by how it makes objects “dance, giving them thus a full being” (14). That the objects of the photograph give way to their own dance, an interval in a system, suggests that the movement of animation from stanza 2 to stanza 3 is something the speaker hopes to replicate from stanza 1 to stanza 4. That is, if the picture can gain a maternal body, and the mother can find a way “out of the // small place of home,” perhaps the poem, too, can harness this photographic animation toward an animation of the “present /sad investment” that is the dead and absent “person” of the mother. In Creeley’s hands the photograph—or the act of handing over this photograph to the mother who is its subject—aims to turn what Barthes calls “the return of the dead” in every photograph from a “terrible thing” into a principle of consolation and possibility. The poem’s fourth and final stanza does not, of course, accomplish this aim and bring back an image of the

living mother—there is no room in Creeley’s elegies for such a resurrection of the dead. Instead, and by means of a prepositional pattern, it turns to what the elegy can “hold to” when it cannot hold the mother’s body.

“Mother’s Photograph” turns as much on its prepositions as upon its interrogative evasions. While the dominant preposition of the first two stanzas had been “in”—the mother’s lunchbox “in hand in / homemade dress” and the stanza’s push deeper into a representation of the absent mother—each of last two stanzas bring something “out.” The voyage out begins in the third stanza with the mother’s escape from her childhood and continues in sedimentary fashion in the fourth, as her education grants not only her escape but that of her family, including the speaker:

bring them with
you, out of it too,
sit them down in a new house.

(272)

On the one hand, this is a narrative that exalts in the mother’s story as it has come to effect the speaker’s own. If not for her getting out, the speaker would not be in the “new house;” “with” her, far from the absences of the lunchbox-carrying girl, who stood backed against a pine tree, the speaker can “sit...in a new house.” If this were the extent of it, the tribute would be tender, but almost saccharine. Instead, the “out, out” of the final two stanzas, if it does not call to the domestic horror of Frost’s eponymous poem, does certainly conjure the lines of Ginsberg in “Kaddish” that Creeley had quoted in “For my mother:” “Death’s let you out.” To be let out by death is the real escape that the mother has made, and that has made her absent from her described garments and from the

photograph at the beginning and at the end of the poem. To have been absent and then to have gotten out doubles her death, a movement quite different from that in which most elegies, by raising images from the dead in order to put them again to rest, participate. “Mother’s Photograph” first cannot find the mother, finds her, and then puts her “out” again. Notably, however, her being let out in the final stanza is not a death she experiences on her own. The fourth stanza haunts because the speaker writes, “bring them with you, out of it, too.” Unlike the “healthy mourning” of “Mother’s Voice,” in which the speaker desires more of life than his mother’s voice sanctions, in “Mother’s Photograph” the mourner cannot overcome the loss, lacking what Freud calls “the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive” (“Mourning” 255). That is, the speaker lacks a strong enough desire for his own life to continue, and wishes instead to die along with the dead. Even further, these lines imagine the mother’s death taking the whole family, which her effort has allowed to live comfortably, “in a new house,” along with her, “out” into death. The closing lines take on a new sense in this light, as if they were a command:

bring them with
you, out of it too,
sit them down in a new house.

Instead of asking for the mother’s vision to sponsor his own successful mourning, these last lines ask for the fact of her death to ensure his own. Roland Barthes describes this same conviction upon discovering the Winter Garden Photograph: “From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death” (72). Creeley arrives in the same place, but, significantly, only after the poem has sufficiently animated the mother so that

the speaker can ask her permission to arrive there. The opening lines of the poem ask if, by seeing her as a child and by giving an image of her childhood to her, he has also regressed to that age.

The elegy is a genre that slips away—just like the loved objects it attempts to revive long enough to address. That the only part of the body that figures in this poem of absent bodies is the mother's hand calls to mind Emerson's lines on the loss of his son Waldo in "Experience:" "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition." In an aside, Stanley Cavell notes that Emerson's pun on the failure of grasping as "unhandsome" speaks to "Emerson's recurring interest in the hand (as in speaking of what is at hand, by which whatever else he means, he means the writing taking shape under his hand and now in ours)" (146). Creeley is also party to this recurring interest, and to an insistence on the hand's—and perhaps thus the writer's—failure to grasp, to transmit, and to hold. Paradoxically, the photograph we imagine the speaker holding in his hand (and passing to the hand of his mother in order to ask "Could you see?") is actually the vehicle by which his mother, his own life, and his poem slips away, "out" of his control. To hand a photograph, with one's living hand, to the hand of the dead is also to consign the photograph itself to an inaccessible realm of memory. "Mother's Photograph" seeks to sign away possession of the photograph—the image that is the speaker's only claim to her continued life as well as, in Barthes logic, the irreducible fact of her absolute death—to the mother herself. Whether she is, at the end of the poem, the child of the photograph, the fantasied living mother of the poem's address, or the body whose wholeness and deadness escapes the realm of the poem remains as

uncertain—as potential—as the poem’s syntax. The poem’s end returns us to its beginning in an unending quest to settle its syntactic quandary. If for Creeley the work of mourning the mother is one that puts in question poetic speech and its origins in the maternal body, “Mother’s Photograph” re-enacts, endlessly, the problematic and “rather terrible” return of the dead in photographic writing. Rather than a resurrection of the dead mother, this “return” is that of the speaker’s own death. By removing him to a past he never could have experienced, and to the presence of death even in that childhood, photographic writing in the realm of elegy returns the unfamiliar, uncanny words of the immemorial past instead of the familiar, if uncanny, mother’s body. Within this past however, a new space becomes available for the poetic reworking of death-tinged language. The “new house” in whose space the poem ends compensates for the impossibility of joining his mother in the photograph by figuring an alternative dwelling that the mother will have made possible.

Roland Barthes writes of Charles Clifford’s photograph of the Alhambra, “it is there that I would like to live” (38-40). In a slightly different move, Creeley’s speaker writes of a “new house” that is not pictured; he turns to it only after his photographic reading and writing has failed to produce the mother’s body. “Mother’s Photograph” reverses the time of Barthes’ discovery of the mother in the Winter Garden photograph, and of his desire for her in the photograph of the Alhambra. By the time “Mother’s Photograph” concludes, it falls back on the space of the poem—rather than that of the photograph—as the only “new house” in which both the life and death of the mother and son could be, momentarily, shared. The time of this elegiac poem is the time that the speaker needs to test the photograph as a potential space and time of dwelling, to

recognize its failure, and to “get out of it” into another imagined space. Rather than the work of mourning as it is traditionally configured or an embrace of the photograph as a technology that could “transform grief into mourning,” “Mother’s Photograph” mourns the elegiac possibilities of the photograph. Its words return to an investment in the poetic construction of containers for grief, but with a lingering consciousness, befitting its “new house,” that those constructions hold on to, rather than hand off, the images whose absolute certification of death admits of no consoling vision. Although the poem’s title indicates the subject of the photograph, read otherwise it reminds us that “Mother’s Photograph,” like her voice, remains her possession, and leaves the grieving speaker, in the grip of her death, to his own “unhandsome” and “sad investment.”

Chapter 5

The Line of Shame: Poetic Form, Conceptual Aesthetics, and Aaron Kunin's

Folding Ruler Star

In its blending of conceptual aesthetics with concepts and references derived from affect theory, gender studies, and art and literary history, Aaron Kunin's 2005 collection, *Folding Ruler Star* has quickly established itself among the most interesting and difficult volumes of recent poetry. While the *Boston Review* praised its "dynamic reversals" and "carefully crafted verses," Stephen Burt, reviewing Kunin's second volume of poetry, *The Sore Throat* (2010), recorded his reaction to *Folding Ruler Star* as one of "complete bafflement." Taking its title from a set of photographs by the German photographer Sigmar Polke, its line-measure and mise-en-scène from a combination of Milton and Oulipo, and theoretical cues from affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, the work's scope is as vast as its vision is intricate. The poems depict miniature dramas of punishment and blocked communication that unfold between the fragile, limited, and rigidly zoned parts of the terrorized human body and a seemingly unlimited array of personified objects haunting domestic tableaux. The light that emanates from these constellations of human and inhuman pain in *Folding Ruler Star* is, to use Paul Celan's phrase, a luminous wound; Kunin calls the wound shame.

The scope of this chapter does not allow for the exhaustive treatment that the volume's individual poems deserve—each of which is doubled by a "mirror" poem with the same title—so I limit my focus to the volume's presentation of shame through an experimentation in poetic form and its consequences for reassessing contemporary poetry's relationship to the negative and positive affects to which shame is bound. Kunin

strategically halves the traditional English Blank Verse decasyllabic line; his five-syllable line serves as a vehicle for considering the possible poetic manifestations of an affect that is generally hostile to speech. As Kunin's epigraph from Silvan Tomkins' *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* notes, the "shame response is an act which reduces facial communication...By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head...the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person's face, and to the other person's looking at him, particularly at his face."

Kunin's line is inventive on several fronts. It takes aim at its literary historical antecedents, indicting what Kunin names, in a poem here and as well as in an article on the topic, the violence of a "preservation fantasy" by which lyric has presumed to confer immortality to its chosen subjects. It combines the aesthetic strategies of several branches of new poetry, and in so doing outlines an intersection at which conceptual aesthetics, too, must face up to shame. Finally, Kunin's poems suggest that the two major 20th-century discourses articulating theories of shame—the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins and the object relations theorists of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott—may have more significant lines of intersection than have previously been acknowledged. By means of an affect alien to communication, *Folding Ruler Star* manages to speak from literary history and theory as well as to a horizon where the possible futures of both practices can be reimagined in order to take one of the least communicable affects into their respective discourses.

In what follows, I dwell first and at some length on the volume's careful set-up—its "Preface," dedication, and epigraph. In addition to the orienting capacity these opening feints sustain (and especially in a book whose title recommends an artificial

alternative to traditional methods of stellar navigation), I take my cues for this focus from Kunin's admission⁹⁴ that Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" inspires his own practice of writing under pre-set constraints. LeWitt famously defines conceptual art as an aesthetic practice that removes the decisions involved in making the work of art to the time before the making. Moreover, the last lines of *Folding Ruler Star*, "some of the words are / underlined (only / they are important)" confounds the reader at first, since, in fact, no words are underlined in the found text that makes up all but this final stanza of "Preservation Fantasy/." The only underlined words in the volume are, in fact, the book's section headings, "Contents" and "Preface." Finally, as I examine Kunin's work to conclude a study of 20th-century poetry that has taken Wallace Stevens and Robert Creeley as representative figures, it is appropriate to consider the climate in which Kunin's poems begin speaking, and the conditions by which Kunin limits this speech in response to that climate's handling of affective concerns.

That is, it is not coincidental that Kunin takes up the affect of shame in *Folding Ruler Star*. The affect's prominence here makes the implicit argument that twenty-first century U.S. poetry must, before it can proceed, or as a way of proceeding, reckon with the shame of its past and the way that shame inflects all futures.

⁹⁴ As opposed to what Kunin glosses as "the normal, intuitive, organic way," LeWitt's "other, conceptual way" proposes an artistic process in which "you make all the decisions before you start working" (Kunin, "Conversation" 246-247). Kunin goes on to quote an excerpt from LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art: "the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (78). It's interesting to note that this second paragraph of LeWitt's essay also touches on the emotional, or usually emotionless, aspect of the conceptual artist's process. "It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to be emotionally dry" (78). Kunin's departure from this custom of the conceptual artist seems to me to be a sign of the productive tension between Modernist and conceptual aesthetics in *Folding Ruler Star*.

To the poetry of Stevens and Creeley, which spans the heyday of psychoanalysis in the U.S. but does so largely without reference to its concepts, Kunin's grafting of theoretical concepts for poetic use is representative of a motif in contemporary poetry, which both comments on and, in Winnicott's sense of the term, "uses" theory in order to move beyond identified obstacles to poetic communication.^{95, 96} While the opening chapter of this dissertation argued that a psychoanalytic perspective might still, in our day, illuminate aspects of Stevens' and Creeley's work that have gone unnoticed, Aaron Kunin's work wears its theoretical orientation on its sleeve.⁹⁷ This may be the best evidence yet that psychoanalysis and U.S. poetry have work to do together to respond to

⁹⁵ Among the contemporary U.S. poets for whom theory has been important in drafting individual volumes of verse, see especially Christian Hawkeye's *Ventrakl*, which relies on Heidegger and Agamben, among others, in its development of a "collaboration" between himself and Georg Trakl, and Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime*, which recounts and rewrites the last days of Walter Benjamin.

⁹⁶ Winnicott's late work moves beyond the term 'object relations,' which involves a modification of psychoanalytic orthodoxy that would emphasize the infant's earliest attachments to other beings over and above the effects of its drives. He introduces the term "object usage" to describe the important sense in which a child learns that objects are real and can withstand love by first destroying them. In a paper that expands on the concept as it was first introduced in "The Use of an Object," Winnicott notes that the good enough mother is the one who can "carry the baby over from relating to usage" ("On 'The Use of an Object'" 221).

⁹⁷ Kunin associates theory with possibility, and it may be in this definition that we may first see the ability of his work to "use" shame rather than be enmired in it. Kunin's analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* in his article "Characters Lounge" hinges on his discussion of the "overlooked" Graziano, a character accused of "speak[ing] an infinite deal of nothing." Crucially, Kunin suggests that, "the word for 'theory' in Venice is 'nothing,'" and argues that "*The Merchant of Venice* is a work of theory in that nothing happens. Events are possible, approached, threatened, but they never quite occur" (293-94). Despite what does not occur in *Merchant*, the play's theory provides one of the most salient descriptions of character as the "formal device" that, adapting Graziano's own words, "is the fixed point that allows one to 'hold the world...as the world' and to leverage it" (298-99). I return to Kunin's discussion of character in order to gloss the strange characters who hold the world of *Folding Ruler Star*.

the crises of feeling that, I have argued, constitute a significant thread in its 20th—and now 21st-century—practice.

I. Poetry, Affect, Tomkins

The American psychologist and founder of affect theory, Silvan Tomkins (1911-1991), published the two volumes of his master work, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* in 1962 and 1963. In these and in auxiliary articles, Tomkins proposed a theory of affect in response to both the reigning cognitive behavioral paradigms of U.S. academic psychology and to the drive theory of classical Freudian psychoanalysis. Tomkins draws on both Darwin and systems theory, making his theory an eclectic synthesis of historical and contemporary theory. According to Tomkins, there are a discrete number of intrinsically positive or negative innate affects, which, although “programmed” or structured sub-cortically by “internal working models” or “scripts,” are always and only conscious.⁹⁸ Two of the affects are positive (interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy), one is neutral (surprise-startle), and six are negative (distress-anguish, contempt-disgust, dissmell, fear-terror, anger, and shame). Although arguments ensued among psychologists and theorists about the number of innate affects and their names, only Tomkins and his close follows assert that shame is among them. And yet, shame is the most intricate and interesting of the affects for Tomkins because, while it is basic, it is also auxiliary. Tomkins defines shame as “an act of facial communication reduction in

⁹⁸ The reason that one individual experiences shame at one time, while another does not owes itself to the individual’s exposure to shame in early childhood and to the individual’s interests. Only what one desires can be the source of one’s shame. This complex and unique drama shows up in Kunin’s poems, where the objects that showcase shame are multifold: if in one poem it’s a knife and a mirror, in another a reptile and money stage the punishments that reveal the sources of shame for the characters of *Folding Ruler Star*.

which excitement or enjoyment is only incompletely reduced.” Notably, this basic negative affect can only be felt in the presence of a positive affect, either interest-excitement or enjoyment-joy, that is diminished but not extinguished. More broadly, as Elizabeth Wilson notes, “While shame is a negative affect, it is not therefore a dispensable one. Rather, shame provides the generative condition for socialization” (81).⁹⁹

For its complexity, its integration into social fabrics, and its relationship to childhood and sexuality, gender studies and queer theory have recognized shame as a significant affect, and their work has played a key role in bringing Tomkins’ work to light for researchers in the humanities. Most notably, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s work in the 1990s, which resulted in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, sparked an interest in Tomkins that has since been a significant aspect of the interdisciplinary research agenda of the “turn to affect.” While Aaron Kunin’s engagement with shame is not exhausted by reference to its source in this theoretical milieu—for *Folding Ruler Star* regards nearly all of its sources as sources of shame as well as desire—Sedgwick and Frank regard Tomkins’ work as particularly interesting for its openness to non-normative sexuality and to the theories of artificial intelligence associated with the moment of the late 1940s to the mid-1960s they call “the cybernetic fold” because science grew more certain that computers were essential for understanding the brain but did not yet have the programming or hardware to proceed (cf. Sedgwick 12). Notable in this context is the way that Sedgwick and Frank situate a concept that is

⁹⁹ I am indebted to Elizabeth Wilson for this point, and for my introduction to Silvan Tomkins’ and his recent resurgence in the humanities.

central not only to the moment when systems theory filled the gap between actual computers and their imagined counterparts but also to Kunin's poems:

The epithet 'fold' seems applicable to the cybernetic moment partly because systems theory, precisely through its tropism toward the image of an undifferentiated but differentiable ecology, had as one of its greatest representational strengths an ability to discuss *how things differentiate*: how quantitative differences turn into qualitative ones, how digital and analog representations leapfrog or interleave with one another, what makes the unexpected faultlines between regions of the calculable and the incalculable that are destined to evolve into chaos theory, and so forth.

(13)

For Kunin, the "folding ruler star" is first a figure for imagining how lines and units held apart by shame and by the non-negotiable constraints of conceptual aesthetics manage nevertheless to *come together* into an unexpected shape; Sedgwick and Frank remind readers that every fold of this star also marks the difference at the heart of anything co-implicated, contiguous, and overlapping. They argue that this is, in fact, what differentiates Tomkins' theory from the rigidity of his own sources. Rather than the idealized "behavioral 'outcome'" or the "single bar (repression) between a single continuous 'consciousness' and a single unconscious," they note that Tomkins' work "by contrast offers a wealth of sites of productive opacity" (13). Such "productive opacity" describes the dispersion at work within *Folding Ruler Star*. Rather than any singular story of *the Fall*, shame's unfolding occurs in a plurality of poems whose nameless characters (and their mutable pronouns) do not speak to each other or link up as in a sequence. If

they produce, nonetheless, a star, it is one whose dimensions are continually changing in the parallax views to which we as readers are permitted of it.

In its opening pages, *Folding Ruler Star* announces its adherence to a different paradigm of feeling than the ones that have guided my reading of Stevens and Creeley. Where a psychoanalytic conception of emotions as signifying—related to ideas and beliefs—has operated there, Kunin’s epigraph from Silvan Tomkins signals that this collection uses affect theory as its point of departure. While psychoanalytic theories of affect generally regard the connection between ideas and affects as very strong, if often misplaced, in Tomkins’ theory affect is completely separable from cognition; affects are biological responses to stimuli that, in their automation not only move faster in response to perception and in relation to objects than a conscious subject’s intentions or intellection, but do so without being attached to unconscious ideation.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank have played a key role in introducing, or recovering the work of Silvan Tomkins. Not only does Tomkins provide a model for thinking, or, in Sedgwick’s phrase, “touching feeling” that recovers some relationship to the biological sciences, he does so in such a way that a cultural history and questioning of poststructuralist-influenced “Theory” might be newly possible. For Sedgwick and Frank, Tomkins is not worth reading because they can claim each element of his affect theory is true, but because his work aligns with pressing question about theory: “how difficult to reconstruct and how exorbitantly specialized of use, are the tools that in any given case would allow one to ask, What was it possible to think or do at a certain moment of the past, that it no longer is?” (23).

Sedgwick and Frank also cast Tomkins as a helpful interlocutor in new conversations within queer theory. They note that among American psychologists of the Cold War period Tomkins is rare for “the plain absence not only of homophobia but of any hint of a heterosexist teleology”—and this unlike the assumptions of the main fields Tomkins draws on, “ethology, social psychology, psychoanalysis” (7). In theoretical and academic projects that question the validity of the “Gay Pride” movement, and pride as its basic emotional marker, as a basis for contextualizing queer identity, queer theorists have become very interested in the contrasting affect of shame. They argue that a recovery of, and recognition of shame, which often plays such a formative role in the development of queer identities in a heteronormative culture, may be productive for moving beyond the homogenizing imperatives of “Pride.” Tomkins’ ability to describe the multiform manifestations of shame in interpersonal interactions, as well as his ability to link shame to positive affect bolsters these theorists’ arguments that “queer shame” does not repeat the violence of a shaming culture, but rather recognizes its role and recovers the radical political potential at the heart of non-normative sexuality. Sedgwick and Frank gloss Tomkins’ reminder that shame is not only negative thusly: “the pulsations of cathexis around shame, of all things, are what either enable or disable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world” (5). Furthermore, because shame is linked for Tomkins to the biologically-based affects, and to the “precarious hyperreflexivity of the surface of the body,” Sedgwick and Frank read shame as productive of a kind of “bodily knowledge” that queer theory, among other recent theoretical discourses, has been eager to claim (22).

Folding Ruler Star orients itself toward these aspects of queer theory most generally by finding or founding a poetics of shame. But more specifically, Kunin's poems serve, in a line that will come back throughout this piece, to critique the social conventions that constrain individual sexuality:

these poems express my
dissatisfaction
with sexual life

(54)

Aaron Kunin borrows not only from Silvan Tomkins' theory, but from his peculiar style. Sedgwick and Frank describe how "a potentially terrifying and terrified idea or image is taken up and held for as many paragraphs as are necessary to 'burn out the fear response,' then for as many more until that idea or image can recur in the text without evoking terror" (3). Tomkins' "rich claustral writing," its repetition of whole phrases, and its "epistemically modal nonfactive utterances" (3) call to mind Kunin's "Petting Impersonal." The first four stanzas read:

they decided to
be nice to him as
an experiment

and the result was
that they got aroused
they decided to

torture him as an
 experiment and
 the result was that

they got aroused (the
 results they obtained
 were inconclusive)

(54)

Except for the substitution of “torture” for “be nice to,” the second five lines of the poem repeat the first five, and their doing so mimics the scientific method’s demand that the “results” of “experiments” be reproducible according to a standardized protocol. Kunin’s reversal of this scenario, so that different experiments yield the same result, puts even that self-same result in question. It leaves the supposed researchers “inconclusive”—unable to contribute to our understanding of arousal and more than willing to continue their testing on the poem’s “him,” the shamed subject of the experiment whose own arousal is deemed inconsequential. The poem’s final stanza, already quoted above, allows the subject of testing and object of grammar to speak in his own words:

these poems express my
 dissatisfaction
 with sexual life

(54)

With this statement, the poems of *Folding Ruler Star* posit their aims; they also perform one way in which the depiction of “the shame response” permits the shamed person some minimal articulation of the effects of that experience. Tomkins’ statement of the difficulty of shame’s speech appears as the epigraph to *Folding Ruler Star*, and while the poems themselves depict plenty of this blocked communication, they also attempt something that Tomkins’ work stops short of, namely to discover how to overcome shame’s hindrances in order to speak in the midst of shame.

Kunin’s appeal to Tomkins references a recent movement in cultural and literary scholarship that is consciously post-psychoanalytic, if not by any means anti-Freudian. The term “affective turn” consolidates (perhaps too quickly) a congeries of efforts in various disciplines to foreground what is variously understood as affect or emotion, and feeling, and aims to do so in light of recent research in neuroscience and neurobiology. Much of this work seeks to correct an undue emphasis placed on rationality, reason, and intellection as a metric for evaluating aesthetic and cultural production.¹⁰⁰ Even when researchers have considered emotion, they have often leaned toward the cognitive aspects of emotion, as Alison Jaggar argues, “at the expense of an attention to bodily sensations” (qtd. in Ahmed 5).

II. If Shame is god, then Poetry is its Prophet

Shame is a poetic crisis at the intersection of Modernist and conceptual poetics.

Where the first values intricacy, allusion, and detail at the level of the individual word in

¹⁰⁰ This brief overview of “the turn to affect” is indebted to Ruth Leys’ critique of various scholars affiliated with it. Despite Leys’ conclusion that much of this work relies heavily on disputed claims of recent scientific research and is opportunistic in using such research to support its own biases, her overview of the perspectives of such diverse theorists and scholars as Brian Massumi, Eve Sedgwick, and Silvan Tomkins is one of the most cogent available, and her bibliography one of the most complete.

its conscious revision or fragmentation of literary history, the second rejects these attributes as the accouterments of a passé lyric subjectivity that grants too much authority to an author figure. As a result, conceptual poetics favors chance operations, appropriation, and machine-authored artifice in the service of allegory rather than Modernism's irony. Tomkins' definition of shame as the "incomplete reduction of interest" helps us see the shame at this crux: the incomplete rupture that separates conceptual and Modernist practices, and the way that many writers who employ them are drawn syncretically to both, results in a shame over their impurity that articulates itself as the distance and the proximity between the two.¹⁰¹

III. 'Troublesom and modern bondage': Kunin's Milton

Folding Ruler Star is not alone in the experimental tradition's fascination with Milton. Most notably, Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os*, inspired by conceptual methods of appropriation and collaging shared with Jackson Mac Low, splices words from successive sections from *Paradise Lost* in the service of crafting his own poem within that poem's lexicon and progression. Johnson's text, for example, takes Milton's lines,

¹⁰¹ Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman define "'impure' conceptualism" as a middle form of conceptual writing that tends away from pure appropriation and toward the baroque. To the question posed by such impurities, "Do these broken promises [as in "reneging on the faithful execution of the initial concept"] point to a failure in a conceptual writing text?" Fitterman and Place quote Sol LeWitt's affirmation ("If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results.") and respond jointly, "I have failed miserably—over and over again" (22-23). A fascination with mistake, error, and wandering links Fitterman and Place's understanding of impure of post-conceptualism, Sedgwick and Frank's valuation of Tomkins' affect theory based on the latter's belief that artificial intelligence would need to account for the human infant's learning by error (13-14), and Kunin's association of shame with mistakes in "Access Denied:" "shame went walking (by / evening it was cool / enough) / to seed with // mistakes" (20).

selects individual words or short phrases from among them, and creates an “unoriginal” poem by leaving these words in their spatial arrangement on the page with the rest of the text deleted. Rather than an homage or a “strict reworking” of Milton’s text, Erik Anderson argues that Johnson’s poem favors a twentieth-century aesthetic and worldview at the expense of one faithful to Milton’s vision (or blindness, as Johnson and Kunin might have it)(4). Notably, for both Kunin and Johnson, it is Milton’s theology that needs to be replaced first. For Kunin, “these poems are conceived as a value-neutral *Paradise Lost*” in that “someone who is not god” makes up the rules that will be disobeyed and bear the fruit of shame (ix). Some of Milton’s least generous critics have accused him of repeating a Biblical story: Kunin opens *Folding Ruler Star* by noting that his poems will be, like Milton’s (and as conceptual art demands) unoriginal. And despite, like Johnson, placing constraints on his own work that bind him to Milton, Kunin’s opening feint point readers to the alternate moral universe in which his own characters will disobey, suffer, and fall. “The result is shame.”

Folding Ruler Star owes more to Milton, however, than just its Edenic source. Milton’s status as a metrical heretic also ground Kunin’s own formal innovations. As stated in the introduction to the 1674 “Revised and Augmented” edition of *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s argument to abandon rhyme rests on a description of the technique’s perils alongside a catalogue of other poets, classical as well as contemporary Italian and Spanish poets who had, and “not without cause,” already “rejected rhyme” without losing poetry’s “musical delight.” Rather than in rhyme, Milton insists, such delight consists

only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously
drawn out from one Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like

endings, a fault avoyded by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory. This neglect then of Rhime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover'd to heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing.

Samuel Johnson's lukewarm assessment of Milton's "original genius" in *Lives of the Poets* disputes the significance of blank verse by arguing that the English language is insufficient for a non-rhymed verse:

"Rhyme," he says, and says truly, "is no necessary adjunct of true poetry' ... [But] [t]he music of the English heroic lines strikes the ear so faintly, that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line co-operate together; this co-operation can only be obtained by the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds; and this distinctness is obtained and preserved by the artifice of rhyme.

Kunin takes the very word Milton associates with poorly-used rhyme, "constraint," and extends it to his truncated measure, a rule that further constrains his rhyme-rejecting line. If he moves out of rhyme's "modern bondage," he does so only to enter a new and improved syllabic and strophic "constraint." By this means, Kunin opposes Johnson and can claim that, even within constraints, language is sufficient to make its proper music. That neither Kunin nor Milton wishes to have nothing to do with "preservation" as Johnson puts is evidenced in the former's claim that it is "the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another," rather than the sound preserved, that really matters. Kunin

follows this definition of musical delight to the letter. “[T]he sense” of his poems is “variously drawn out” by means of the mirror poem that doubles it, literally leading each poem’s sense into the reflection of the next. For him, “apt Numbers” and “fit quantity of Syllables” will, of course, be embodied in the number five, whose significance we shall investigate below.

IV. Folding the Ruler Star

The “Preface” of *Folding Ruler Star* sets the book up as a series of poems connected by their relationship to an overarching scene. Like the two parallel creation stories of Genesis, the first two paragraphs of Kunin’s “Preface” give similar origin stories for the book of poems, and this is not coincidental because the poems find their inspiration in another story that derives from Genesis:

These poems are conceived as a value-neutral *Paradise Lost*. In other words, someone who is not god tells you to avoid a certain tree, and you disobey the instruction; the result is shame.

Two characters agree that one of them is supposed to worship and obey the other without actually believing that the other possesses any special qualities that would enforce obedience; the first one disobeys the second one and has to be punished (ix).

Kunin’s opening is remarkable because it presents the poems that will follow it as part of a verse drama. And while we could imagine a “value-neutral *Paradise Lost*” without too much upsetting Milton’s paradigms, the poems that follow in *Folding Ruler Star*, in their stylistic constraints and their experimentations with multiple genres of speech (advertising, slang, conversation), suggest that to emphasize the “result” of “shame”

rather than the moral universe that might produce such results require a poetic project drastically altered from Milton's own.

Kunin prepares us for some of these drastic changes in what remains of the "Preface." "Affect lives in the face and is measured with a ruler," he writes mysteriously, and clarifies with a prosodic explanation: "The measure is a five-syllable line arranged in three-line units. Each poem is mirrored by another poem with the same title" (ix).

Kunin's explanation—that his five-syllable line will measure affect sheds light on the volume's title. The title of the photo sequence reproduced in the volume's frontispiece, "Bamboo Pole loves Folding Ruler Star" gives the book not only its title but also its concept of giving affects to objects. The "ruler" that measures affect is pegged to the regular length of the poetic line Kunin will use. That ruler folds into stanzas, or "units," and perhaps these stanza units, formed into poems, create a shape that is the object of some other object's love. Although the last poems of the collection work with the notion of a "Folding Ruler Star," there is no mention of a "Bamboo Pole." This object, in the grammatical subject position, may be the place of the reader who "loves" *Folding Ruler Star* by reading it, and who is tasked with releasing it from its destiny of having, as "The Shame Word" puts it (quoting Tomkins), "every affect // totally bound by /shame" (14). The sequence of photographs also suggests that the "relationship" between the subject and object of the sentence is more than just a formal one. [How do the different photographs relate to one another?] As we discover in Kunin's poems, the scenes Kunin sets up in these poems, often with objects and humans interacting, are as intricate as those in the Polke photographs. In the manner of Sade, they form a sort of *tableau vivant*, in the sense that they, too, are concerned with forming a new kind of

libidinal economy or circulation of the energies of desire. Instead of a celebration of libertinage, however, the speaker of “Petting Impersonal” claims “dissatisfaction / with sexual life.” Many poems evince this dissatisfaction: scenes of torture, of sexual abuse, unwanted sex, failed masturbation, and the like are hinted at, if not described explicitly, throughout the volume.¹⁰²

¹⁰² These scenes also call to mind the “knots” of R.D. Laing, whom Kunin mentions in an interview in connection with the publication of “Awkward without w,” a selection of his journals. Not only does Kunin suggest that Laing’s genre-name, “knots” for a kind of poem about relationships, serve as a model for his own genre-twisting writing, he notes that, although he had not read Laing before writing *Folding Ruler Star*, “I still feel that his way of abstracting and elaborating is a retroactive influence” (Fleischman 82). Laing’s poetic semi-narratives, whose embedded layers and repeated or near-repeated phrases speak to the cascading effects of real or perceived cruelty, bear a strong stylistic resemblance to both Tomkins and Kunin. Note the following passage from *Knots*:

You are cruel
 to make me feel bad to think
 I am cruel to make you feel cruel
 by me feeling bad that you can be so cruel as to think
 I don’t love you, when you know I do.

It bears comparison with Kunin’s “Silence was Pleased (2),” in which the embedded clauses grow so dense that the poem’s speaker grows flustered or afraid of their complexity.

SILENCE WAS PLEASED

did I ever tell
 you (knowing I had
 not) did I ever

tell you (knowing that
 someone else had told
 you but not knowing

who had done it but
 suspecting) because
 either she told her

and we didn’t see
 or she told her in
 a way we couldn’t

see or one of them

V. Poetry's Shame

A major influence on Aaron Kunin's poetics, Allen Grossman's theory of poetry suggests, we might imagine, only one role for shame.¹⁰³ Grossman writes that poetic speech begins when communicative difficulties present obstacles to other forms of discourse or other forms of accomplishing the goals of collective life. Poems start, that is, when poetic speech alone is left as a recourse. Commenting on Milton's sonnet, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," Grossman notes that the poem "is driven into actuality, the speech of the person, by the collapse of a great civilizational machine which has suddenly ceased to provide the intelligibility of the world, the intactness of the human image" ("Avenge"). On one reading, the set-up of Kunin's poems is one that establishes shame as just such a condition of communicative difficulty. The poems will attempt, then, to overcome shame, to speak through it in order to ameliorate it, to re-establish a kind of communication that is not as embattled as the "shame response."

Another reading, however, might take shame not as the pre-poetic state of affairs that poetry would attempt to redeem or overcome, but as the state of affairs that poems constantly reproduce, even as it is only (or often) in a state of shame that poetic speech

knew without being
told or one of them

was lying or they
both were (I insist
we go no further)

(53)

¹⁰³ Kunin's article, "Shakespeare's Preservation Fantasy," relies explicitly, in its first few pages, on Grossman's explanation, through Horace's *Odes*, of poetry's claim that its chief cultural work is preserving the names of persons against death in a kind of immortality or available only through art. Kunin's disagreement with Grossman as to whether this aim or fantasy of preservation is ethically justifiable leaves its mark on *Folding Ruler Star*, as we shall see.

can begin. (In this case, Grossman may be correct in identifying obstacles to communication as the starting point of poems, but either too quick to define the re-establishment of collective life as their aim or too optimistic to believe this aim can be accomplished.) Grossman recognizes that poems cannot achieve what they set out to achieve, and Kunin draws the corollary that they may be complicit in the violence they seek to redress. Here, Kunin finds a starting point for the poems of *Folding Ruler Star*. To begin in a communicative crisis brought on by poetry, and not simply to be corrected by it, is to acknowledge a second-order problem for poetics. How can poems be written after such knowledge? What defense of poetry does *Folding Ruler Star* offer, if it offers any at all? In the most elemental way, Kunin's treatment of books and reading in *Folding Ruler Star* suggests one set of answers to this question. The role of the inhuman or machinic in creating "good enough affects" will suggest another.

VI. Lying in the Library: Books and Reading in *Folding Ruler Star*

The two poems titled "Hidden School Entrance" suggest that Kunin's poems, like the truck that "pulls up to the / library to fill / the Pepsi machines," come at knowledge by an alternate route. The second poem of the sequence understates that aim and upsets any vision we have of approaching truth indirectly or "otherwise." Instead, these poems replace one bad system with another and consist of "misguided moral// ...and aesthetic principles replaced / by misguided...// economic... principles" (9). That is, instead of the morality of *Paradise Lost* and the aesthetics of Wordsworth alluded to in the opening stanzas of "Hidden School Entrance" (1), the poems of *Folding Ruler Star* proceed by an economic system that is "misguided," perhaps, because it is guided not by that founding "principle" of modern economics, rational choice, but by what is opposed to rationality,

the vicissitudes of affect. Such principles produce a different kind of book entirely, and the speaker of “Hidden School Entrance” admits as much:

(for

the lies in the books

in our collection

we apologize) (9)

Kunin’s emphasis on the material book he has written is picked up in the final poems of *Folding Ruler Star*, where we learn that, in addition to the “five security zones” of the body, there are five zones mapped onto his planet on the table:

syllable is the

first zone boundary

must be crossed (again

please stop using the

word elliptical)

line is the second

zone (this word is re-

configurable)

parenthesis is

the third zone paper

is the fourth zone with-

(a security

blanket to sleep with)

drawing into your

book is the fifth zone

(47)

For Kunin, syllable, line, and parenthesis are continuous with paper and book; this cartography of the experience of reading takes into account not only the arrangement of words on the page and within sentences, but also their collection in book form. To the morphological and poetic axes of composition, (syllables make words, and words makes lines, and lines make poems), Kunin adds the diacritical (“parentheses” make these poems different from any other poem), the material, and, separate from this, the bibliographic. It is not enough that the poems be written on paper; the book in which the poems “withdraw” is “a security / blanket” for the poems that have made it to paper. The last line’s “your” hints again at the role of the reading in *Folding Ruler Star*. Just as the title of the photograph sequence suggests that only what “loves” *Folding Ruler Star* makes it actual, here the book is divided into zones that gather not only its own contents, but even the reader him or herself. As “/Preservation Fantasy/” and “Five Security Zones (4)” make clear, this “security blanket” for the reader is not an unambiguous protector. As the volume’s preface makes clear, the reason for security zones is less for security than for its inevitable breach: “Descriptions of the parts set off the alarms” (ix).

“Preservation Fantasy,” the final poem of *Folding Ruler Star* and the second found poem of the collection, presents a note about measures taken to preserve a damaged book.¹⁰⁴ After noting that the book’s damages have “RECEIVED THE / FOLLOWING CONSERVATION TREATMENT // DRY CLEANED / DISINFECTED / BOOK REPAIR (HINGE REPAIR),” the poem returns to lowercase letters to note, “some of the words are / underlined (only / they are important).” “Preservation Fantasy” not only speaks to the fantasy that poems themselves are preservationists, but also to the fantasy that some book outside the book could shed light on what is “important” about the “misguided” text we have just read. That the book goes to great lengths to disprove this misguided hypothesis is evidence that it is aware of the difficulty inherent in the writing of affect. Which words of the poems are, if not underlined, then emphasized, or even stressed? Even if we could find out, there would be no guarantee that these words are really the only important ones. By sending up both the New Critical and historicist reading strategies that would refer to such “underlined words,” (whether these underlinings are part of the text itself or an extra-textual system of reference, and whether underlined means metrically “stressed” or otherwise “symbolic”) as indices for interpretation, Kunin leaves the reader without what Allen Grossman calls a “hermeneutic friend.” Even worse, the last words of *Folding Ruler Star* are the lies of a potential friend. “For the lies in the books in our collection we apologize” becomes, by the end of the book, a more brazen admission that lies are the only way to proceed, the only way to make a collection as such, and to constitute a library that would stand apart

¹⁰⁴ (The “note” is signed and dated “6/10/96 // MSEL Preservation,” and refers to the Milton S. Eisenhower library at Johns Hopkins (Kunin also mentions Baltimore in “Five Security Zones” (9)).

from preservationist fantasies. Instead of such preservationist fantasies, which constitute perhaps the real “damages” to books, *Folding Ruler Star* would push for an economics of affective avoidances, a poetics in which syllables, lines, and parenthesis fold together to make a collection that happily avoids the “human face” and revels (and, at times, grows ashamed) in the faces that show themselves in its absence. The poems of *FRS* “express my / dissatisfaction/ with sexual life” (54).

Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank recognize an alignment between the shame response and reading as one key to the contemporary engagement with affect:

If, as Tomkins describes it, the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head is the attitude of shame, it may also be that of reading—reading maps, magazines, novels, comics, and heavy volumes of psychology, if not billboards and traffic signs. We...know the force field-creating power of this attitude, the kind of skin that sheer textual attention can weave around a reading body (20-21).

Just as the book was figured as a “security blanket” into which the reader “withdraws,” Sedgwick and Frank speak of “textual attention” as such a textile; but rather than a Winnicottian holding environment in which affective attunement promises healthy development, Sedgwick, Frank, and Kunin pick up on the way that reading allows for a withdrawal that may be induced as much by shame as by its necessary condition, desire. Kunin makes the connection explicit in “Five Security Zones” (4), a poem that notes the pain that ironically results from too strong an attempt to avoid pain: “the pain of self-exposure / until (avoidance becomes painful).” The poem’s ending connects this phenomenon to reading:

at
 which your shield becomes

a burden (your shield)
 reading a book is
 cutting off the head
 (33)

If the shamed person can turn, in his or her downward glance of “reduced facial communication,” to the book as to a source of consolation, Kunin shows that the shield of the book is also a sword. If shame makes communication difficult, reading makes it impossible. Tomkins suggests one reason that reading a book like *Folding Ruler Star* may be especially dangerous for the reader:

A second major source of shame, in addition to barriers of excitement or joy, is the shame response of the other. If another individual with whom I am identified or in whom I am interested or with whom I have experienced enjoyment lowers his eyes or head to me as an object of his interest or enjoyment, then my own positive affect can be sufficiently reduced to evoke my shame (154).

If *Folding Ruler Star* is a book that lowers its head in shame, whether this shame responds to my interest or expected enjoyment of the book, so may I, the reader, lower my head in shame, doubling (as does a mirror) the difficulty of reading.

Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman argue that conceptual writing “is dependent on its reader for completion” (13). *Folding Ruler Star* notes that such completion does not

enlighten or illumine the reader, as though he or she had accomplished an interpretation. Rather, the book's completion is predicated on the reader's violent incompleteness, a violation of the zones of his or her body. Rather than confer immortality, as the "preservation fantasy" would assert, these poems enact mortality. But because the "preservation fantasy" is already, for Kunin, "a violent intervention in the given world that would suspend two of the limiting conditions on human life, mortality and temporality," even decapitating the reader, if it challenges the technology of preservation, may be a more ethical end for poems. Decapitation has a metrical reference in *Folding Ruler Star*, and its intervention into the ethics of poetry closely tracks an inventive intervention into poetic form.

To this point, *Folding Ruler Star* has already been concerned with mutilations and amputations. "Food Syntax" describes a character who "often imagined stabbing / himself in the eye" or "otherwise / de-eyeing himself." If, following a pun established as a poetic statement by Louis Zukofsky, "eye" is "I," the syntactic change signaled by "de-eyeing himself," might be the five-syllable line. In "Under the Lampshade" a character "kisses both / her real foot and her / artificial foot" (6), and the artificial foot refers not only to the ironically prosthetic object of the shamed person's osculation but the metrical artifice of syllabic-accentual poetry. The metrical foot of anacrusis, in which the first foot of the line is cut short, is often called "decapitation." How have we imagined that Kunin's five syllable line is cut off from its decasyllabic precursor? On the one hand (or foot), I have argued that the line is truncated, cut short of its final five syllables in order to reflect the way that the shamed person's communication to the shaming object is cut short by a "shame response" that consists of the downward glance of "reduced facial

communication” and an incompletely reduced desire for the object of desire. On the other hand, however, Kunin’s five-syllable line is decapitated by anacrusis, its first five syllables shorn off and left in silence and absence as a response to the violence that a preservation fantasy has perpetrated in the history of poetry. For Kunin’s line to begin with the sixth syllable marks, instead of the graceful quickness of the traditional metrical line in which only a single anacrusis cuts the first foot short, the abyssal divide separating Kunin’s vision of poetry from its own shameful past.

VII. Shame and *Folding Ruler Star*

Against our expectations of an affect that stifles all communication, at its first appearance in the poems of *Folding Ruler Star* shame is prolific, even fertile. In the volume’s first poem, “The shame tree,” the tree (modeled on the tree of life) not only changes shapes and has faces, but contains multiples. The tree is identified as a “t.v.” which “has a / human face (the face / has two memories).” The next poem, “False Nativity,” picks up the thread and relates that the fact “that memory has / two faces is true.” The branches of the televisual “tree of shame” are not themselves stunted; they multiply and sprout subsidiaries. Here, a doubled “face” is itself doubled by “memory,” and the poems in which we learn of these doublings are themselves mirrored. Instead of a communicative expansion, however, these multiples further ensure the shame response. Tomkins notes the peculiar ability of shame to multiply and crowd out other affects by means of a “generalized shame bind,” a process by which repeatedly being shamed for displaying affect results in making any affective expression an occasion for shame (148-49). Kunin’s poems speak to Tomkins’ claim in the epigraph that “shame...reduces facial communication” by suggesting that this reduction is preceded, and perhaps even

catalyzed by, a proliferation of the mechanisms of shame. Once shame has created this multi-faceted cage, the poem's forms enact the reduction of communication. To the proliferation of the "t.v.," which shines a "facial nightlight" on the speaker in "The Shame Tree," the mirror poem responds with a single stanza, the minimum unit of communication. The speaker of that poem is shamed and can barely speak but to beg for a reprieve:

aspirin tonight
 no contempt please no
 contempt tonight please (3)

The "reduced...communication" stands in proportion to the proliferation of the television's non-human face and doubled memory as mechanisms of shame.

The effects of shame's proliferation show up in a later poem in which Kunin quotes directly from Tomkins: "(destined to / have every affect / totally bound by / shame)" (14). In this formulation, the "smothering tree" of shame (2) gets a more technical description. Shame operates by surrounding and binding to every other affect, smothering it and co-opting it. In the language of Tomkins' *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, the poems of *Folding Ruler Star* unfold in the realm of what Tomkins calls a strong shame theory. As Tomkins explains, in order to be effective or expedient for an individual, an affect theory must be weak. That is, it must not "kick in" very often; otherwise, the individual will find his or her affects bound by one constraining affect, like shame, and will be limited in life by this constraining. In a strong shame theory, due to childhood experiences, shame appears everywhere and swallows up or transforms every

other positive or negative affect, in much the way that anxiety does in Freud's theory.¹⁰⁵ The opening lines of *Folding Ruler Star*, in which shame begins to "branch out," present the threat that the book will be literally bound by shame, and will find it difficult to present any other affect.¹⁰⁶ And indeed, "shame" is a common word in *Folding Ruler Star*, and a common event in the lives of the unnamed characters whose scenarios and "object relations" it presents.

Shame plays several different roles in *Folding Ruler Star*. It is at times personified ("shame went walking" (20)) or attached to objects that outlive it and carry its nature through various scenes. Although the "tree" of "The Shame Tree" appears throughout the book without another mention of television, we still link the figure of to both the Tree of Knowledge and the pedestrian appliance with its "shining light." The machine carries out shame's work. Similarly, in "Access Denied," shame takes on a persona very much like that of God in the first chapter of Genesis at the moment shame comes into being. Before eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve "were both naked...and were not ashamed" (*Holy Bible*; Gen 2:25), but the first consequence of their eating is the recognition of nakedness. At this moment,

They heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

¹⁰⁵Cf. "The Unconscious." "In that case the affect always has the character of anxiety, for which all 'repressed' affects are exchanged" (179).

¹⁰⁶In my reading of the book's response to poetic theory, these opening poems would suggest that everything is too far gone to be recovered: there's no escape from shame for the history of poetry's complicity with the violence of preservation.

And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? (Gen. 3: 8-9)

As Kunin has it, “shame went walking (by / evening it was cool / enough) to seed with / mistakes” (20). One of the only times shame is personified in *Folding Ruler Star*, its character combines the serpent of the Garden of Eden with the devil of the book of Job, who answers the same question that the LORD God poses to Adam and Eve in Genesis. When the Lord asks, “Whence cometh thou?” this devil responds, “From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it” (Job 2:2). Kunin’s attaching shame to the devil gives it a character fitting for the affect Tomkins claims “strikes deepest into the heart of man” (133).

The example of shame (even though it is *the* example here) sheds light on Kunin’s poetics, which proceeds by a microscopic attention to domestic miniatures and a more consciously literary process of allusion, quotation, and reflection on poetics. Like shame itself, which is consigned by its rejected desires for outside communication to languor in self-communication, Kunin’s poems inhabit a space between a tortured self-consciousness that interacts mainly with objects (and even these interactions are strained by fear and dissatisfaction) and an engagement with an historical and literary milieu outside the individual (allusions to the Bible, Milton, Wordsworth, Tomkins, and Winnicott).

VIII. The Figure 5 in Red: Shame’s Number

The number five stands out in *Folding Ruler Star*. Shortly after the preface introduces the line of five syllables as the measure of the affect of shame, “Hidden School Entrance” intones, “(five syllables with // the length of five long / winters)” (8).

Kunin's words signal that the length, rather than the brevity of his line deserves attention: although shorter than the ten syllables that figure communication between persons, five syllables may still be too many for the shamed speaker. The allusion to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" is striking because the poem's actual title, of course, is simply "Lines." Kunin's line measures itself against a poem that revels in "that serene and blessed mood, / In which the affections gently lead us on," and that finds "life and food / for future years" where time's ravages threaten (lines 41-42, 64-65). *Folding Ruler Star*, on the other hand, speaks to a past that is only five syllables old, and yet that promises never to be "recollected in tranquility" because it was born not among "beauteous forms," but in the shade of "the shame tree."

Within these poems, the five-syllable line bears a relation to the method of writing through constraints pioneered by the members of *Ouvroir pour la littérature potentielle*, or Oulipo. Constraining his poems to lines of five syllables (with no hyphenated words) and stanzas of three lines, such that each poem's number of syllables is divisible by five, is not as constraining as many of the devices put into practice by Roubaud, Queneau, Perec, and others, including U.S. poets as diverse as Jackson Mac Low and Rae Armantrout. However, Kunin's concern with what lines of poems actually measure—and he claims that, as a "ruler," the five-syllable line measures affect, which "lives in the face"—owes a debt to Oulipo's emphasis on poetic work that brings a traditional intersection of poetry and number into newer, higher relief.

The Blank Verse line of Milton and Shakespeare, however, figures as an antecedent, too. Allen Grossman writes that, "line-forms, and verse forms in general, are fundamentally discussable as mediations of relationships, as rules and orders of polities"

(*Summa* 283). Given this, Grossman notes the characteristic relationships that Blank Verse, in all its forms, mediates:

The Blank Verse line-form was established between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries in English as the form speech takes when it depicts the speech of persons in social situations. Blank Verse is a regime the rules of which produce the picture of the speech of a person under those conditions of exteriority (seen from the outside) and scale (no larger or smaller than a human being as he or she is seen by other human beings) which characterize social situations (282).

Shakespeare and Milton are the significant examples of using Blank Verse explicitly to figure relationships, as with Shakespeare “only ‘gentle’ persons speak Blank Verse” and only these persons are considered “well-formed,” and as with Milton “to liberate verse from rhyme is...to liberate from bondage, to set up the human form divine” (282-83).

Even more importantly, perhaps, Blank Verse, whose rejection Pound saw as the “first heave” of Modernist innovation, itself arose as a critique of medieval Christian poetic procedure in which rhyme signified the infinity of the person in relation to divine infinity. Blank Verse took on a “connotation of antimystical severity” that made it unusable for Yeats, for instance (284). Kunin breaks Milton’s Blank Verse’s decasyllabic line precisely in half in the “value-neutral *Paradise Lost*” of *Folding Ruler Star*. To what end?

In relation to Grossman, Kunin’s line also “depicts the speech of persons in social situations,” but only such speech as shame disturbs it; the five-syllable line suggests the broken communication of the “shame response,” the way that shame cuts off the

individual's communication so that it cannot reach the other. This modified line length is not a negation of the pentameter in the sense that Milton's blank verse was a rejection of the shackles of rhyme); rather, by maintaining a relationship to the pentameter, it demonstrates a key aspect of Tomkins' definition of shame as an affect that depends on a continued desire to be in relationship with the one who shames. Tomkins notes that shame "is an act of facial communication reduction in which excitement or enjoyment is only incompletely reduced" (137). It is, according to Tomkins, "a paradoxical consequence of the linkage of positive affect and shame" that they are linked inextricably: "to the extent to which socialization involves a preponderance of positive affect the individual is made vulnerable to shame and unwilling to renounce either himself or others" (138-39). Much of the pain of shame derives from its requirement that the shamed person still be bound to the one who shames by his or her desire. This is what makes shame such a difficult affect to bear, because it is the result of a not fully diminished desire to communicate. Each time Kunin's lines cut short of ten syllables, they perform the diminished desire to be in relation with an absent other. But, as we shall see, Kunin does not neglect the link Tomkins asserts between shame and the "positive affect" on which it depends. The collection's title poem, which I examine in more detail below, ends with this stanza:

almost is a good
 enough iambic
 pentameter line (57)

Rather than a cut made unwillingly, or one that signals only the violence of the shameful poetic past and an present made incommunicable by the overwhelming affect, these lines

speak to a kind of formal sufficiency in shame's line. Whether that formal sufficiency marks the possibility of any other sufficiency shall be the project of the next part of this paper.

The fact that the dramas of these poems revolve not around humans making claims on or about others—as in Shakespeare's sonnets, for example—but on descriptions of interactions with objects and micro-explanations of behaviors fits the collection's short line, as well. Because persons do not speak to other persons in these poems, and do not bid them fall in love or be faithful or remain beautiful, the five-syllable line captures interactions that fall short of interpersonal communication but which interpersonal poems often ignore. The first stanza of "Under the Lampshade" (2) gives the genealogy of an unidentified character's repeated action:

he punishes them
 because he believes
 he should be punished

(7)

The five-syllable line separates the action ("he punishes") from the explanation of its motivation: in fact, no explanation will mitigate this violence (as against a decasyllabic line, in which the first two lines would share the same space and blunt the force of the first five syllables). Still, the syllabic distribution over the three-line stanza positions belief as a ball-stop valve that makes other-directed punishment actual and self-punishment potential or deferred. If the first line promises a drama of shame that would unfold like that of the Biblical garden, with clear commands and reciprocal punishments,

the second and third lines, which explore the motivational apparatus of the unnamed character, remind us of the reduced scope of communication and the expanded focus this reduction makes possible.

IX. Object Relations: Winnicott

Despite the collection's explicit affinity with Silvan Tomkins, whose affect theory is articulated as a radical revision to Freudian drive theory, Kunin draws on one of Winnicott's most popular concepts in deriving his own book's *felix culpa*. In order to get out of the shame bind, it would seem, Kunin needs to have recourse to a psychoanalytic way of thinking. Winnicott's "good enough mother" is adept at bringing her child from dependence to independence by a progressively less immediate attention to the child's needs. Without being perfect at any point, the "good enough mother" is, most importantly, able to allow her child to experience frustrations only when he or she is capable of integrating these frustrations into an experience of the world that includes the existence of "not-me" objects (Cf. Winnicott "Transitional" and "Theory"). The first two stanzas of "Folding Ruler Star" (1) bring Winnicott's term to yet another intricately designed scene characterized by a voice that commands and a parenthetical voice that, in this poem, annotates and elaborates.

draw a circle in
 the mirror (inside
 and outside are not
 places) half the size
 of your face a hinged

ruler is a good

enough mother (out
of sympathy) for
measuring the bridge

between parent and
child (56)

Just as the five-syllable line is half the length of the pentameter, the circle in the mirror, which is “half the size / of your face,” is the right size for a “folding ruler star” to circumscribe. Although a face cannot fit inside the circle on the mirror, the hinged ruler that is these poems, is “good enough” as an adaptive mother, good enough as in instrument for articulating what can be spoken about shame. The final poem of the collection emphasizes that the exclusion of the face has been necessary for the work that the folding ruler star can do with its non-communicative affect. It is not until the final lines of the book that we read this:

kindly no human
face shines out of a
folding ruler star (61)

What can poems do with things that exclude the human face? How can poems “express my / dissatisfaction / with sexual life” (54) and yet describe sexual life and measure the affect that “lives in the face” at the same time? *FRS* does both. Shame is the keyword for both of these endeavors, because it is, as Kunin shows, the affect that allows a

measurement of the object as it recedes, and because in the disappearing or removing that it causes, it shows both the strength of sexual desire and the inevitable knots in which its pursuit entangles us.

X. Shame (in parentheses)

Among the stylistic difficulties of Kunin's poems that his "Preface" signals but does not fully explain is the use of parentheses in the collection. Apart from the two found poems inserted at the book's middle and end, the only poem in which the technique of parenthesis does not figure greatly is the aforementioned mirror poem to "The Shame Tree." In every other poem, parenthetical remarks punctuate, link, and interrupt phrases, marking the texture of the poems on the page just as significantly as the five-syllable line and three-line unit.¹⁰⁷ Rather than a consistent or monotonous refrain, parentheses function in several ways. At times, they annotate or elaborate upon the non-parenthesized phrases, as though an interpreter or translator had returned to the poem after its initial composition. In "Five Security Zones (6)," for example, the first parenthetical remark interrupts the poem to explain the setup of the long sequence of poems, which is held together by the concept of "security zones" keyed to parts of the body:

mouth is a castle

for defending an

idea (at each

¹⁰⁷ In an interview with Tom Fleischman, Kunin speaks to his own use of parentheses as an experimental method of punctuation. "The uniqueness of the parenthesis allows it to do the work of the entire set of punctuation marks — it can act as comma, question mark, period, etc. In that book, it would be pointless to embed a parenthesis inside another parenthesis, because closing one parenthesis turns out to have the same effect as opening another" (83).

level the worst threat

to security

defines the next zone) (34)

Parentheses also respond to the non-parenthesized phrases, mimicking a dialogue by emphasizing a second voice whose words stand in a relationship of partial communication to the first.

exposed wrist (try to

hide that) you like it

between the sleeve (and

the glove) only the

glove did not have its

own sleeve (you'll see it

terminate almost successfully) (16)

Parentheses in this sense serve both to quarantine and to commingle, suggesting another parallel with the affect of shame, which is only possible when desire reaches out to another, and yet also has the effect of isolating the individual. In yet a third category, Kunin parenthesizes words that disrupt the sense or the movement of the non-parenthesized words with their own narrative, leaving the text a juxtaposition of two or more incompatible starts and stops, threads picked up and quickly abandoned. The poem "Silence Was Pleased" presents several possible scenes, but the parentheses, instead of linking them with several different possible readings (as in "The Bloody Revisions") give

the poem the feeling of montage, in that one text seems incorporated into the other from outside¹⁰⁸:

shame is also in
 sleep (clouds eat into
 buildings) cut through the

paint (thought cut further
 into speech) putting
 her foot on the stair

she makes a cut (stair
 closing cancelled) with
 a hand to expose

an interior
 through writing (teaching
 torment) messages

¹⁰⁸ For Kunin's own comments on the significance of collage and montage techniques to new poetics, see "New Poetics," 216-18. The difference between collage and montage depends on the externality of the incorporated fragment to the medium. Technically speaking, montage refers to texts that incorporate other texts. Kunin notes that Marianne Moore's use of quotations around her fragments makes what is technically a montage more like collage by signaling "the prior embeddedness of the fragments in another context" (218). Kunin's parentheses, at least in "The Bloody Revisions," perform a similar transmutation.

that have no future
 no rest interval
 (much remains to be
 written about clouds)
 no division no
 further assistance (52)

These disjunctions draw attention to the problematic communication characteristic of shame in a way that adds to the “reduced...communication” of “The Shame Word (2).” Where that poem’s single stanza simply stops communicating in the crisis of its shame, other poems stop and start communicating again and again, drawing attention to the fact that moments of shame not only mirror other scenarios, but that they become what Tomkins calls “scripts,” or habituated routines that familiar emotional situations re-activate. The consistency of the parenthetical technique in Kunin, like the consistency—even, at times, monotony—of his regular lines, reveals the troubling repetition of scripts once shame has taken hold of the individual.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ The only interruptions of such scripts are, as I have suggested, on one hand the complete stoppage of communication as in “The Shame Word (2)” and, on the other, the poeticizing of moments alien to the scripts in question that might interrupt and comment on their patterns. The two found poems in the collection, “/Local Machine Zone/” and “/Preservation Fantasy/” manage to do this. These poems do obey the syllable constraint, but not the parenthetical technique (except for the end of /Preservation Fantasy/” (which can be explained by reference to the fantasy that falls apart at the end and returns the poem to the parenthetical, in which it ends.) In some way, it’s like the first of these poems is one big parenthesis, a poem about what is not secure in case we were thinking that the poems treatment of shame were actually making us more secure. In Lerner’s reading, the first found poem is the place where “the reader realizes just how inhuman [Kunin’s] syllables are...[w]hat’s startling is that this found text is perfectly consistent

XI. Reading Shame's Line: "Lost Ambulances"

To what kind of reading do Kunin's poems lend themselves? As a sequence made up of doubled parts, no "individual" lyric stands out as a self-contained unit. In fact, the impossibility of self-containment in general manifests in the relational posture of these poems, in which even the shamed subject cannot *not* speak, look at, or otherwise be dependent on another. As "The Shame Word (2)" notes, "(not allowed / to be powerless // we can't even have / no response)." Even reading *Folding Ruler Star* as a sequence, however, presents some difficulties. Although the preface relates a minimal plot—"Two characters agree that one of them is supposed to worship and obey the other"—these characters are nowhere named in the book, in which feelings, behaviors and/or faces are distributed to televisions, trees, knives, phrases, light fixtures, and mirrors. The possible dyads of the poems are multiple, and the pronouns are unstable: sometimes an "I" commands a "you," at other times an "I" speaks of a "he;" other times, however, "Girl and Reptile" or "prisoner" and "glasses" seem to be the only "two characters" of the poems. Kunin's theory of character, articulated in "Characters' Lounge" and in interviews, sheds some light on this strategy. There, in an argument that takes on Alex Woloch's theory of character-system, Kunin claims that character is "a formal device that collects every example of a kind of person" (291). In fact, something "misanthropic" about this device shows that "person" may even include the non-human, since "character does not respect divisions between biological species, or between organic and inorganic matter" (314). Notably, "character is the fixed point that allows one to 'hold the

with the voice (or lack of voice) of all the other poems. The speaking subject of these poems is a machine. There may or may not be a human addressee" (245).

world...as the world' and to leverage it" (298-99) against the need to mention every single example separately. Since "character collects," one fool speaks for all fools, and, extending this point to *Folding Ruler Star*, one shamed person speaks for all, though with a speech that calls back to Wallace Stevens' "Comedian as the Letter C," in which Crispin discovers his own speech as "a speech belched out of hoary darks /Noway resembling his, a visible thing" (CP 29).

The found poem at the close of *Folding Ruler Star* reminds us of this: not only does it critique the fetish of preserving books (and what they claim to preserve, the human), it reminds that a book can hardly stand alone. Like, perhaps, Stevens' "The Planet on the Table," which envisions the book of poems of which the poem itself is a part, "Preservation Fantasy/" takes *Folding Ruler Star* as its referent:

THIS BOOK WAS DAMAGED
 BY AN UNKNOWN LIQUID
 AND MOLD

AND IT HAS RECEIVED THE
 FOLLOWING CONSERVATION
 TREATMENT

DRY CLEANED
 DISINFECTED
 BOOK REPAIR (HINGE REPAIR)

6/10/96

MSEL PRESERVATION

some of the words are
underlined (only
they are important)

XII. Repetition

Numerous commentators have noted that Wallace Stevens' poems resemble those of the symbolists in that recurrent images accrete meaning across the poems of his oeuvre. The experience of reading a Stevens poem is often one that calls upon memories of previous poems in which the wind, the ocean, or the word "euphony," for example, appeared. Helen Vendler, for example, depends on this kind of reading: it allows her to make statements like the following: "The dove, for Stevens, is always an amalgam of the dove of Venus and the dove of the Holy Spirit, symbolizing the poet's two sources of energy, the libido and the imagination" (*Last* 40). The poems do not usually form sequences that would link them to each other thematically; instead, a common vocabulary runs through the poem, and links them by means of familiar images and words. An investigation of any single one of these elements traces a unique pathway through Stevens' oeuvre and reveals some commonalities among poems that achieve a legendary heterogeneity of styles. Stevens' verse is unmistakable because it consistently finds "a fresh name" for a finite number of oft-repeated "local objects" (OP 137). More violently, the effect of a lashing wind that "returns" bearing spirits from the past cannot be made

more subtly than by its reappearance in other poems, absent any mention of its source or prior resonances.

Aaron Kunin's works play with the repetition of words within and across poems in a way that recalls this aspect of Stevens' poetry, though at times it also brings to mind Gertrude Stein's insistent repetition of words at very close intervals. In this respect, Kunin has commented that "Gertrude Stein's highly repetitive writing rejects the possibility of repetition. Each person, thing, and event is different, unique, unrepeatable...The same word is no longer the same when it occupies a different space" (220). Noting this similarity, Kunin's repetitions also speak to his own concern with measure. They mark the interval between repeated words, calling back to previous instances in other poems in order to indicate the possibility of repetition, but also, like the personal pronouns in the poems that bear no stable antecedent, to signal the Steinian argument that the difference in time and place of this seemingly repeated word challenges our means for verifying any instance as repeated.

Repetition has figured significantly in all of Kunin's poetry. In his 2010 chapbook, *Cold Genius*, Kunin marks repetition diacritically. Any word or phrase that has already been used thus far in the poem is enclosed in quotation marks. Thus, the first lines of "A dream under anaesthetic" read,

Make the second cut across or
 To undo make "the" same "cut" in
 "The" opposite direction.

(19)

The quotation marks indicate to what extent poems proceed inasmuch as they recycle the vocabulary of the private language worlds they have created, and mimic in miniature the citational aspect of all language use.¹¹⁰

Kunin's most recent book of poems, *The Sore Throat*, works within "a severely limited vocabulary of about 170 words" (ix). The most noticeable effect of the limited vocabulary on the poems, which constitute an homolinguistic translation of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and (an English translation of) Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, is the inevitability of repetition. The poems' sound patterns resemble those of the sestina:

Last to know, and out of the mind,
 You wish to begin the dance
 Of pleasure; to heal "the soul"
 And keep up the dance. (1)

Repetition in *Folding Ruler Star* is more subtle than in *Cold Genius* or *The Sore Throat* but no less significant. Poems feature words and phrases that debuted in previous poems, all of which fit into a small number of thematic categories, including domestic objects, economics, education, and animals. Each poem provides a new context for the vocabulary, and previous uses be examined in order to determine the present connotation. While the technique of building meaning is similar to Stevens', for Kunin we rely on the other poems almost exclusively, since the poems themselves do not contextualize them. That is, Stevens' "doves" fit into each of his poem and into a logic of the oeuvre, while Kunin's book alone gives the "apple" its meaning in a poem like "Lost Ambulances 2."

¹¹⁰ For more on this technique, see my review of *Cold Genius*.

The sense that words in the individual poems don't fit there, or are out of place, mimics the preference in *Folding Ruler Star* for parts over wholes.¹¹¹

Apples are an important object in *Folding Ruler Star*, and, in a book that notes its debt to *Paradise Lost* in its opening sentences, apples allude to the biblical temptation of Eve as well as to the connotations they pick up throughout the book. In the loose retelling of the biblical story in "Girl and Reptile," the passing of an apple from the girl to her "little brother" mimics Eve's handing of the apple to Adam. In Kunin's poem, however, the only thing apple-like about the apple is that it can be eaten, cored, and peeled. It is more like a knife than an apple, and its damaging influence shines through in "Girl and Reptile": "(her tongue / wiping the shredded / inside of her cheek)" (23). When it returns in "Zipdown Day," the apple is just the vehicle of a metaphor ("the /room seemed larger (like // an apple dully / shining)" (27), and seems intended mainly to allow the fruit to reassert its ubiquity. And indeed this reminder pays off, because the apple comes back in the penultimate stanza of *Folding Ruler Star*:

¹¹¹ "Five Security Zones," most prominently, defines the body in five parts. Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory of development emphasizes that the infant's early perception and introjection of part objects rather than the whole body or being of the mother accounts for the defining characteristics of the child's movement from aggression to reparation. Because the mother's breast is, for the infant, a part object—perceived as a whole but split into "good" and "bad" based on its presence and absence—the infant begins in the paranoid/schizoid position, where the splitting of part objects into "good" and "bad" leads to aggressive fantasies of killing or consuming bad objects. Only as the fear of destroying the good objects along with the bad allows the child to integrate "good" and "bad" does a "depressive position," with its focus on reparation for earlier violence, allow the infant to begin what may more properly be termed object relationships. Despite Kunin's preference for a "theme-and-variations" aesthetic that rejects the progression of developmental narratives, it is useful to imagine the objects with which Kunin's characters interact (or that some of his characters, in fact, *are*) as Kleinian part objects, possibly integratable at some future time, into more intelligible and communicable wholes. For a helpful summary of Klein's developmental positions, see her "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," particularly p. 99 and 101-105.

the machine (they can't
blush cry or love but
it's precisely in

blushing crying and
loving that they are
most machine-like) like

an apple that did
not ripen (astral
physiognomy)

kindly no human
face smiles out of a
folding ruler star

(61)

Unbeknownst to us, an “apple” was being prepared throughout the book to help describe, in its last lines, the enigmatic significance of the book’s title. The edible apple that causes shame at the book’s beginning progresses backward from being cored and peeled to shining dully to finally being unripe. It is in this final (although chronologically prior) state that the apple helps evoke the most important quality of a folding ruler star, that its face is “astral” and not human. The non-facial aspect shared by “the machine,” the unripe apple, and the folding ruler star links the biblical to the contemporary source of shame

and suggests a third faceless term as a possible solution. Part simple machine (folding ruler), part celestial body (star), part cultural artifact (the photograph bearing its name) and part loved object (bamboo pole loves folding ruler star), *Folding Ruler Star* becomes a book of poems by the experimental process of communicating across multiple zones of non-communication. Kunin affixes a voice to multiple sites or zones of pain, and by making them speak a regulated, if not regular or normal speech, demonstrates the possibility that an affect other than shame that might arise from an overwhelming situation of “total affect shame-bind.” That affect or action is embodied in the strange adverb that opens the last stanza. From the inhuman light of the t.v. that shone with two faces and two memories in the collection’s opening poem, Kunin’s poetic labors have brought us to a place where the face has finally been successfully masked and protected from the incessant mirroring that threatens it. If a folding ruler star is any kind of face, it is an astral one, and one that thus recalls Shakespeare’s lines in *Romeo and Juliet*, lines of mourning that re-enact the violence of death in a ritual of mourning that alone could be adequate to reorient the gaze to its proper object:

And when he shall die, cut him out in little stars, and he shall make the
face of heav’n so bright, that all the world will be in love with night, and
pay no worship to the garish sun. (III.ii.21-25)

Although a reading of “Lost Ambulances” demands knowledge of the rest of *Folding Ruler Star* and does not promise to stand alone, it may nevertheless stand in as a representative of the other poems in the volume for the way that it speaks to the issues of mirroring and shaming as they affect human and inhuman bodies and the voices “affixed” to them.

The first poem begins with a technique that will be common in *Folding Ruler Star*, a command: “to a pain affix / a voice.” The use of commands in later poems to mimic stage directions establishes each poem as a construct as intricate and imbued by artifice as the scenes of domestic objects photographed in the book’s frontispiece. The use of command also returns us to the moral setup of the poems indicated in the “Preface,” where “someone who is not god tells you to” do something, “and you disobey.” The disobedience that attaches to the original command subtly undermines each command that follows it, and any authority implied by the speaker’s voice in *Folding Ruler Star* seems undone not only by the need for parenthetical supplements but by the reminder that all commands will be disobeyed. The use of the imperative in *FRS* marks Kunin’s awareness of the problem of address in contemporary poetry. In these poems, the command is always a mark of punishment and debasement (as the preface explains the situation of the book), rather than an invitation, as canonical love poems like “Come live with me and be my love” might suggest. In his interview with Lerner, Kunin sympathizes with Elias Canetti’s remark that in order to recast a poetic language averse to doing violence to its others, a violence associated with the “preservation fantasy,” one would have to prohibit the use of the imperative (Kunin, “Conversaion” 241). Thus Kunin’s commands here are themselves a way of taking the imperative out of grammar, since they imply their own disobedience.

The slight hyperbaton of the opening phrase, “to a pain affix / a voice,” emphasizes pain as the object of “affixing” and signals that the “ambulances” of the title are perhaps “lost” with regard to their ability to transport pain, to make it articulable and, perhaps, bearable. Although the line seems like a command to make pain knowable, and

thus a command whose disobedience is all too easy to understand and to forgive, we might also read the opening phrase very differently. Instead of “giving voice” or “voicing” pain, affixing a voice to a pain, especially when pain itself takes the syntactical (if not the grammatical) spotlight, would suggest that Kunin’s poetic goal is to let wounds speak for themselves. The mechanical connotations of “affix,” over the charitable and anthropomorphizing connotations of “give,” suggest that it is not the precision or tone or profundity of the voice but rather the character of the pain making use of it that matters here. When the word “affix” appears later in the volume, it is used precisely to distinguish between the usual context of human movement and a more mechanical interaction between object and person: “never put on your / blindfold (unfold and / study but do not // put it on) affix / it to your eyes” (44). Against casual placement or even considered attachment, “affixing” connotes machine-like sterility and precision, as though the blindfold were to be medically grafted onto the eyes. To affix a voice to pain would also require an incongruous or violent transplant of a foreign body onto a vulnerable surface.

The voice of pain—which speaks over the course of the two “Lost Ambulances” poems and, by extension, the rest of *Folding Ruler Star*—is, like the voice of shame, beset by obstacles to communication even as communication is demanded of it.

LOST AMBULANCES (1)

to a pain affix

a voice (books stop

lying) remembered

by the phrase splashing
 through the unseen mud
 and (never the same

 color) as the road
 beyond unfolds like
 a truth (in human

 syllables) what was
 splashing in that child-
 like receptive soul

 (little forgotten
 bookmark) alive in
 painful memory

(10)

As the first stanza of the poem concerned the way that pain and voice, as incompatibles, could stand in relation to each other, “Lost Ambulances” turns to more difficult relationships in its next stanzas, each of which embeds a distinct grammatical or tropological element. If the poem itself is the “voice” affixed to pain in the first stanza, the articulations that make this voice (minimally) intelligible are not punctuation marks, and not (only) the spaces between words. Instead, the breaks between stanzas, or “units,” as Kunin calls them, section out the poem into discrete parts whose relationships must be

retroactively determined. The linking of phrases in “Lost Ambulances” is both an obstacle to communication and an added element of signification. Like the first stanza, the second begins with a prepositional phrase and includes yet another in an unwinding that seems to take us farther away from “pain:” “by the phrase splashing.” If a voice has been affixed, it is a voice that runs away from pain the way that a “lost ambulance” seems to be willfully avoiding the scene to which it has been called. That voice can not be presented or heard, but only “remembered / by the phrase splashing.” By the time the conjunction “and” gives way to a parenthesis at the end of the second stanza, the parsing of the poem’s sentence has become unwieldy. Nevertheless, it goes on. The third stanza opens a metaphor that references the title of the collection, since a folding ruler star, like “the road / beyond,” also unfolds in the service of a truth concerning human and inhuman syllables and faces that utter them. The fourth stanza, but returning to the past tense, reverses the movement of the third: instead of the road of truth “beyond,” we will be concerned with the road of “what was,” in the past, where it was not only a phrase splashing, but a splashing that took place in the soul. But if the voice has been remembered, it’s not the same for the soul, figured here as a “forgotten bookmark,” or for what was splashing in it, which, despite being “alive” and “remembered,” is not given in the space of the poem.

Kunin’s associative logic, repetition and recontextualization come into play in this poem. Of the words used in “Lost Ambulances” (1), no fewer than seven have already appeared in the eight poems preceding it in *Folding Ruler Star*. Here, a voice is “remembered / by the phrase,” while “Hidden School Entrance” “takes us back to the / scene remembered by / the phrase” (8). Even more salient is the role of memory in the

opening poems of the collection: before we learn, in “Lost Ambulances,” that the contents of “that child- /like receptive soul” are still “alive in painful memory,” we have been told that someone in “False Nativity” engages in “masking memory...with furniture placement,” that the face of a “t.v...has two memories” (2), and that the fact “that memory has / two faces is true” (4). For Kunin, memory is dangerously plural, to the extent that it must be avoided, hidden from, or “masked.” The contents of memory are not advantageous for life inasmuch as they keep “alive” what is inaccessible to articulation (the poem never inventories the contents of memory) but still somehow painful. Finally, memory is impersonal, machine-like, and unrelenting, belonging more to the face of the t.v. (which radiates its light whether or not the loved one’s hair is there to reflect it) than to the “suffering” watcher who cannot turn away. By closing on this word, even as it leaves an unformed metaphor and an unanswered question in its wake, “Lost Ambulances” defines memory as one cause of the pain to which his poems affix a voice. The inability to articulate the painful memory is perhaps the cause of the script of shame being so insistent. Until one recognizes and understands that script, it cannot be rewritten.

“Lost Ambulances (1)” problematizes the return to a “value-neutral” garden figured here as the “unseen mud” where something occurred to “that child-/ like receptive soul.” Although “the road /beyond unfolds like /a truth,” it is what lies in the past that remains “alive in /painful memory.”

The mirror poem, “Lost Ambulances (2),” animates the mirror itself, but this machine which “looks back” does not return us to the past so much as evoke a threat in the present; not only does the mirror threaten to consume its viewer, it sets a drama of

temptation and shame into motion. The mirror poem is two stanzas longer than its preceding double:

LOST AMBULANCES (2)

a kiss on the eye

and it's the knife that

bleeds (only because

your body's sharper

than any knife) and

the mirror itself

drools (one thread of drool

connects mirror to

you) at the promise

of human food and

whispers (inhuman

syllables) find out

what they eat and give

it to them (testing

is painless but

expensive (as the
 skull rejects the face
 tasted like apple

(triumph of money
 over pain) I have
 tasted like apple

(11)

Despite the “human syllables” of the first poem, no characters figured in it except in the “child-like receptive soul.” On the contrary, “the mirror itself” speaks “inhuman syllables” in (2), the poem is also the site for an “I” to speak to, or to be transformed into a “you.” The poem’s first five lines imagine a knife bleeding after kissing, in a sound game that scrambles the poem’s pronouns, the “eye” of the poem’s “you.” To this knife, the poem adds a mirror, possibly suggesting that the blade of the knife is the mirror, connecting now with the “you” by its own “drool” instead of “blood.” If the body was sharper than the knife, however, it is not more reflective than the mirror, which plots to tempt, or, in a double-entendre, “test” the poem’s “you.” The mirror addresses inhuman speech to an unknown addressee and the poem’s “you” suffers the cost of such testing, which the poem figures as the “triumph of money over pain.” Just as the shame response produces a face that appears to have been rejected by the skull (its grimace), the “you” to whom this has all happened speaks as an I: “I have / tasted like apple.” What is surprising about these lines is that an “I” manages to speak them after having paid the price for falling into temptation. If “the skull rejects the face,” how does that face manage to speak

in the about the experience? Certainly the speech is minimal, only an admission that it has “tested positive” for apple, the fruit of the shame tree. Despite the fact that the speech of the I has been limited to a recital of its guilt, and that we might say the “I” has been shamed into even this confession, the fact the “I” is no longer simply the object of temptation or of the kisses of a knife speaks to what is *felix* about this *culpa*. In both the Biblical and Miltonic gardens of Eden, a pained and guilty self-consciousness is the price of the fall from grace, whereas the redemption from this fall comes only later with the arrival of Christ. The “I” of “Lost Ambulances” becomes aware of his fault and of his coherence as an I (which coherence may still mean being split into five alarmed parts) at the same moment, and speaking of this convergence overcomes the “reduced facial communication” and silence characteristic of shame. It also returns us to the first poem, and suggests that what has been alive in painful memory, what couldn’t be spoken, is the fact of disobedience that produced the shame.

XIII. Shame and Artificial Intelligence

In a trenchant analysis of recent developments in Artificial Intelligence and their relationship to Silvan Tomkins’ affect theory, Elizabeth Wilson notes that, “At the end of the twentieth century, the pioneering computational question was no longer Can machines *think?* but Can they *feel?*” (viii). In fact, before the rise of a psychological theory dominated by cognitive approaches (which, for the most part, ignored biology and the role of affects as somatic influences on thought and behavior), Wilson refers to Kenneth Colby’s plan to use a computer to simulate neurotic processes and discover ways to reduce anxiety by varying the inputs and using the program to simulate responses

as evidence that already in 1962 “a synthesis of psychodynamics and cybernetics was a cogent part of psychological research.” (60).

Interestingly, the time period to which Wilson suggests thinkers of affect and artificial intelligence return to find its beginnings is also fertile ground for the development of conceptual, experimental, and post-avant poetics in the United States. For Wilson, the “moment in 1962 when the warmth of affectivity was still available to cognitive theory” must be accounted for in present investigations of the turn to affect. Analogously, the Vancouver Poetry Conference of July and August 1963 marks, for many LANGUAGE poets and other experimentally-oriented practitioners, a watershed moment in the history of U.S. poetry. I mention this possibility in order to suggest that Kunin’s sources in Tomkins’ affect theory, and his consideration of non-human characters is anything but ahistorical.

Wilson argues that shame may be directly linked to AI projects, whose “enthusiastic projects are predestined for disappointment, or more specifically for the incomplete reduction of interest, enjoyment, and surprise” (82). In her chosen example, the Kismet robot developed by MIT to model a human infant’s development by interaction and integration with its environment (as opposed to specific functions running from highly-specified programming inputs), Wilson argues that shame may have played an unrecognized role in the robot’s limitations, most likely because shame was excluded from the six major emotions its face could express. Rather than argue that an absence of shame simply made the robot less realistically human, Wilson considers how “the shaming elements of Tomkins’ theory would have brought more emotive life, more skilled sociality to this artificial agent” (75). She builds on Tomkins’ comment that

shame is linked as much to the positive affects as to the negative ones: “While shame is a negative affect, it is not therefore a dispensable one. Rather, shame provides the generative condition for socialization” (Ibid. 81). Tomkins’ explanation may shed light on Kunin’s decision to devote a book of poems to shame, a topic that not only seems unlikely to produce poems because of reduced facial communication, but unlikely to produce poems that would be able to lead to anything but additional shame. And what purpose could there be for such a poetry?

Tomkins acknowledges that the experience of shame is “an inner torment, a sickness of the soul.” Nevertheless, he admits that

shared shame [is] a prime instrument for strengthening the sense of mutuality and community whether it be between parent and child, friend and friend, or citizen and citizen. When one is ashamed of the other, that other is not only forced into shame but he is also reminded that the other is sufficiently concerned positively as well as negatively to feel ashamed of and for the other (216).

If the mirroring withdrawnness characteristic of the shame response is everywhere present in *Folding Ruler Star*, it may nevertheless be that these shared withdrawals carry their own reminders that positive concern is their necessary condition. Perhaps, given the constraints on meaning and feeling in our contemporary world, shame is the best or only way to communicate this reminder that such concern exists and may also make the removal of shame binds (affective as well as poetic) possible.

If, as Elizabeth Wilson reminds us, “shame itself can be one of the things that is most acutely shaming: ‘one is as ashamed of being ashamed as of anything else’”

(Tomkins 136, Wilson 81), it is evidence of a particular form of poetic courage that Aaron Kunin takes on the affect in *Folding Ruler Star*. Instead of being so ashamed by shame to silence it, as Wilson suggests the Kismet programmers did,¹¹² Kunin trots out the affect in the hope that its recognition and writing can reprogram our response to shame and make us more likely to recognize its intimate relationship with the positive affects. In this way, shame can be a sign not only of weakness, nor of its own multiplication, but of its dependence on the ability to experience desire, love, interest, and surprise.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the linkage of positive affect and shame is that the same positive affect which ties the self to the object also ties the self to shame. To the extent to which socialization involves a preponderance of positive affect, the individual is made to feel vulnerable to shame and unwilling to renounce either himself or others (Sedgwick138-39).

Poems by both Wallace Stevens and Robert Creeley bear on this peculiar relationship. Creeley's, "The Warning," casts a strikingly violent image in order to describe the interdependence of what, in Tomkins' vocabulary, we might call positive and negative affects.

For love—I would
split open your head and put

¹¹² "Perhaps, then, Kismet is best understood as a robot designed to regulate the production of shame and dampen down its transmission. Perhaps the potency of Kismet has been precisely that it can communicate neither its own shame nor that of its creators" (82).

a candle in
behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us
if we forget
the virtues of an amulet
and quick surprise.

(Selected 60)

Creeley's vision is frightening because it demands, at the risk of love's own survival, that we rewrite an act of violence as a "quick surprise." What's odd is that the ability to define violence as surprise both depends on the prior existence of love, because "love is dead in us" if we have forgotten how to do so, and claims to make love possible, inasmuch as the speaker would claim to "split open / your head" on behalf of love, or "for love." For Creeley, the ability to provoke or strengthen love by drastic measures depends on a reserve of love without which splitting the head is, after all, just that. In this reading, the speaker, and author of violence, deserves the recriminations and shame that follow from actions that presumed intimacy in its absence. The two scripts of the poem—one to be run if love is still alive, and the other if it is dead—produce divergent outputs, but the fact that both are inscribed in the poem's logic suggests that Creeley's poems, like Kunin's, depend on their reader for completion and accept this dependence at the risk of being shamed, humiliated, and excoriated if approached by a certain reader. To Creeley's violence of splitting open the head, Kunin's "quick surprise" is a volume of poems that risk shaming their readers in order to remind them that shame is ubiquitous, that it

expresses “dissatisfaction,” that we are always vulnerable to it, and, finally, that it can happen only in the presence of the very genuine interest and concern for others that can dissolve its binds.

Wallace Stevens quotes and rewrites the early William Carlos Williams poem, “El Hombre,” in a poem from *Harmonium* called “Nuances on a Theme by Williams”:

It is a strange courage
you give me, ancient star.

Shine alone in the sunrise
to which you lend no part!

I.

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II.

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.

Be not chimera of morning,

Half-man, half-star.

Be not an intelligence,

Like a widow’s bird

Or an old horse.

(CP 18)

Against what Stevens' takes as Williams' pathetic fallacy, the speaker of "Nuances" commands the star to "Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light," to "reflect neither my face nor any inner part / of my being," and to "shine like fire, that mirrors nothing." Kunin's own lines, "Kindly no human / face shines out of a / folding ruler star" births a heavenly body that would be inhuman, reflect no shape, and mirror nothing (except perhaps itself), but moreover, would manage to do this not as the result of the command of a chagrined speaker, but out of some unexplained kindness. In this way, Kunin's poems hold on to a strange courage, even as they nuance an ancient story—"man's first disobedience and the fruit thereof"—for our post-Miltonic poetic age.

Conclusion

Aaron Kunin's poetics has brought my argument about the 20th-century's crises of feelings to the present day. From an inexplicit anxiety about the ability of poems to contain affect in Wallace Stevens' poetry, I have suggested that twentieth-century verse began to turn its attention to the uncontainable affects, not in order to master them, but to explore the ironically productive or innovative avenues available to poetry as it is undone by mourning and by shame. In closing, I wish to point to one way that my focus on negative affects and their becoming an explicit focus of recent poetry might set the stage for an affective posture that acknowledges the uncontainability of negative affects but approaches them quite differently.

Namely, I show that a focus on negative affects may productively turn critical attention to affective disorders and affect's role in coming to define and constitute what we know of disability. While my argument thus far has claimed that intense, and intensely negative affects are characteristic of a trajectory of poetic innovation that stretches through the twentieth century, in some ways the uncontainability of these negative affects also points to affects that are uncontainable not because they are overwhelming but because they barely register as affects at all.

"Rhymes Unbearable" has spoken, then, of some of the affects that, with varying degrees of explicit attention by their authors, affect the poetry of our time. It has explored the implications that this familiar and consistently uncanny intersection of art and feeling have had for the practice and the discourse of each. The roads that lead on from this place invoke other discourses and other practices in contemporary life, showing that the intransigent unavailability of poetry and affect to immediate understanding make them

anything but irrelevant to the project of detailing a “history of the present.” Two poets, Tao Lin and Heather Christle, have used film and performance, respectively, to bring the affective dimension of their poetry into conversation with the affective currents of contemporary media.

“Mumblecore” names a genre of film—pioneered by Andrew Bujalski with his 2001 feature film, *Funny Ha Ha*—whose most noticeable conceit is dialogue that includes all of the non-fluencies constitutive of the everyday speech of (otherwise) articulate and intelligent, post-college, (mostly) white young adults. While the films feature a rotating cast of trained and untrained actors in simple plots involving love and work among the struggling-to-launch progeny of the upper middle class, they are striking for their stark portrayals of awkwardness as the dominant affect of interpersonal interaction. The genre raises the question of awkwardness’ relationship to other affects. Is it the consequence of an attempt to let sincerity outpace irony as the mediator of relationships? Or does it blunt and temper that very sincerity, which would otherwise be uncontainable in its raw vulnerability? Perhaps even more answerable than these questions, though, is the question of why such basic difficulties in communication should seem, themselves, so representative of not only a genre but also the generation whose métier it aims to represent. Without offering a broader analysis of mumblecore, I make this general claim about awkwardness in part because the genre has become an aspect of fiction, print journalism, internet culture, and even poetry. Specifically, I speak of a trend in contemporary poetry by which affects are disordered and down-regulated as a means for accessing a level of consciousness of the difficulties of social interaction that is

otherwise unavailable. I take up, briefly, the work of Tao Lin and Heather Christle to suggest the ways in which poetry might shed some light on this strand of contemporary culture.

Lin and Christle, in rather different valences, use poetry to speak about minimal affective experience. Whereas Aaron Kunin uses poems to make an affect that opposes communication somehow communicable, Lin and Christle turn to poems to trace affect that has been split off or displaced. Their poetries represent, I would suggest, a poetics “of the spectrum” in the sense that an intentional affectlessness signifies on autistic categories and afflicts the content of their poems, which struggle to make use of other poetic techniques in the absence of what has often been considered poetry’s mainstay.

Drawing on the pioneering work on disability and law of Martha Nussbaum, Lennard Davis, and Rosmarie Garland Thompson, Michael Davidson has been one of the first critics to draw attention to poetry and disability. Bringing a prolific and influential poet back into critical consideration, Davidson’s “Missing Larry Eigner,” from his 2008 book, *Concerto for the Left Hand*, speaks both to the disability—cerebral palsy—that goes almost unmentioned in Eigner’s own poetry and to the discriminations of a critical culture that has still managed largely to omit Eigner from its accounts of postwar verse culture. As though the disability manifested itself in Eigner’s poetry more saliently through his silence on the subject, critics seem to resist even more strenuously his work’s ability to attend to perceptions of the continuity of public and private spaces. By foregrounding disability and its uncontainability in poetry, Davidson calls for “returning the body to the aesthetic” and “the aesthetic to issues of bodily impairment” (xviii). Although he mentions “cognitive disability” (and Martha Nussbaum’s careful treatment

of it), Davidson focuses more on disabilities that affect the physical body, including HIV/Aids, hearing and vision impairment, amputation, and organ trafficking. Adding a discussion of autism and autism spectrum disorder may also realign our thinking of bodies and art, and in particular the ways that cognition's embodiment may serve to isolate individual bodies from their desired social communities.

Because Davidson's chapter on Larry Eigner focuses on "thinking about impairment when it is not represented" (xx), his work is a helpful reference for speaking about the contemporary trend of representing a kind of disability—autism—without naming it. While Lin's poetry often focuses on aspects of own impairment and the therapeutic means—both psychological and poetic—by which he might attain some kind of healing, it is precisely what Lin does not represent that distinguishes his writing (and, I would add, his filmmaking). Heather Christle's poetry considers, but does not name, any impairment from which her speakers might suffer; however, the unspoken sense that their ability to engage in reveries and fantasies is sanctioned by an aura of psychological detachment heightens the work's originality, as well as its sensitivity to revelation and epiphany. As such, contemporary poetry's affiliation with autism spectrum invites not only consideration of the poetic effects of these postures but, perhaps, a discussion of the ethicality of its appropriation of the disorder's symptoms.

Among young writers, none has drawn as much criticism (or as many Twitter followers) as Tao Lin. After publishing his first books while still an undergraduate at NYU, Lin quickly consolidated his reputation (and "reputation" is a significant aspect of Lin's work to his critics, who claim that his self-promotion through the internet and

public gimmicks overshadows his literary talent) by blogging, starting his own publishing house, and surrounding himself with like-minded young writers, many of whom he has published.

The film Tao Lin made with Megan Boyle, *Mumblecore* (2011), offers a commentary on the eponymous genre. Its minimally verbal, drug-addled staging of episodes in a relationship highlights the awkwardness or low-level anxiety that overshadows even the most intimate interpersonal relationships in mumblecore film. Its universe is markedly Aspergian: the “aleness” by which Kanner defined “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” (Murray 46-47) is markedly manifest, as is the preference for “sensory-oriented and visual thought process” noted by Temple Grandin as characteristic of autistic persons (“Navigating”). While Lin’s film was received as mostly as a branding ploy, many of the same devices are at work in his literary output, most notably *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy*.

Lin’s 2008 volume of poetry, *Cognitive-Behavioral Poetry*, refers to the school of psychological therapy that aids patients by making them aware of the ways that modifying their thoughts and actions can change not only their handling of affectively-charged situations, but may change the feelings themselves. Developing from the 1950s to the 1970s out of theories that had been pioneered earlier in the century, the methodology is, in many ways, starkly opposed to the psychoanalytic focus on understanding childhood development, sexuality, and the role of dreams as keys to insight that make transformative change possible. Noticeably, CBT’s emphasis on behavior undervalues the unconscious coordinates of pathology, preferring to focus on ego processes and on conscious interventions, rather than the slow work of interpreting

the transference. Despite these differences, I want to show that Lin's poems are an important, complex, and perhaps problematic trend in contemporary culture.

In "The Affect-Phrase," Jean-François Lyotard's argues that an understanding of uncontainable and "inarticulate" affects calls for an understanding of the 'transcendental status of the infantia.'" In a starkly different register, Tao Lin's poems often suggest, through the figures of children and animals, a similar need to access a different state of development than the supposedly mature and able-minded adult's. The poem, "I will learn how to love a person and then I will teach you and then we will know" aligns the phrase addressed by a feeling with the phrases addresses by "small children": both, in Lin's poem, use "declarative sentences" that have distinctive "messages" and are attached to particular effects. It is worth taking a closer look at Lin's idiosyncratic poems to understand the role that feeling plays there.

**i will learn how to love a person and then I will teach you and then we
will know**

seen from a great enough distance i cannot be seen

i feel this as an extremely distinct sensation

of feeling like shit; the effect of small children

is that they use declarative sentences and then look at your face

with an expression that says, 'you will never do enough

for the people you love'

.....

when i cried in your room

it was the effect of an extremely distinct sensation that ‘i am the only
 person
 alive,’ ‘i have not learned enough,’ and ‘i can feel the universe
 expanding and making things be further apart
 and it feels like a declarative sentence
 whose message is that we must try harder’

(14-15)

Whereas the first passage presents small children as having an effect, and it is part of this effect that they use sentences, “look at your face” and do so “with an expression that says” something, in the second passage it is the sensation of a feeling which is “like a declarative sentence” that has the effect of making the speaker cry. As part of this reversal, the speaker notes that a feeling “feels like a declarative sentence”: that is, that, like a child who uses this type of sentence, a feeling is a phrase, or feels like one. Lin’s effort in the poems of *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* is to find the “message” of these feeling-phrases.

In a poem that calls to mind both Wallace Stevens’ “The Planet on the Table” and Temple Grandin’s work on animal communication as enabled by her experience with autism, Lin looks back on his own poetic work from a certain ‘distance’ and notes that his social interactions lead him not to other persons so much as to animals:

when i leave this place

the distances i have described in my poems

will expand to find me

but they will never find me

when my head touches your head
your face hits my face at the speed of light

holding it a little

i want to cross an enormous distance with you
to learn the wisdom of lonely animals with low IQs

I want to remember you as a river
with a flower on it

i'll be right back

(67)

Imagined as a privileged access to animals, Lin's writing not only explicitly wishes for aspects of the autistic experience, it mimics them. The space of the poem, and the voyages across the distances between persons that its speaker constructs, allows for a conceptualization of autism somewhere on a 'spectrum' between what is imagined as normal development and the restricted social communication characteristic of autism.

Following the publication of her second collection of poetry, *The Trees The Trees*, Heather Christle announced a poetry performance project. Making her telephone number available on her blog, Christle scheduled times during which anyone could call and have

a poem of his or choice read from the new book.¹¹³ Commenting on the project, Christle noted.... The telephone and poetry have a famous antecedent in Frank O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto,” in which O’Hara noted that he and LeRoi Jones had invented a type of poetry whose communicative intentions would not differ from those of telephone conversations:

It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. (111)

Most interesting about Christle’s project, then, is the reversal it enacts. Instead of writing poems that could be read over the telephone and understood as personal communication, Christle actually read over the phone poems that eschew interpersonal communication in favor of private “not-communicating.” When I called Christle’s number and requested the poem, “Trying to Make a Difference,” I was struck, as I had been in a public reading, by the sensibly hyperbolic closing phrases, “let’s check in in eighteen hundred months” (44). A cheery way to distance oneself from the addressee, expressing the time period—it turns out to be 150 years—by an incalculable number of months both brings the addressee close, as to a secret, and also blunts what seems to be the lines’ underlying message: let’s never talk to each other again. Christle’s poems turn

¹¹³ For Christle’s coverage of the experiment, as well as links to reviews of it and *The Trees The Trees*, see <http://thetreesthetrees.tumblr.com/>

the addressee away by a number of means, even as they invite that addressee to be seduced by the words, rhythms, and inviting shape of the poems. As such, *The Trees The Trees* is a book where one cannot see the forest of community because *The Trees The Trees* doubles its already plural, multiple self: “let’s swim around until by chance we dance the same maneuvers,” the poem intones, even as it suggests, with its next lines, that to hold out hope in chance would be inadvisable.

Heather Christle’s recent work turns more often to hopeful, exuberant, spontaneously ecstatic feelings than Lin’s explorations of depression, loneliness, social isolation, and delinquency. The block-like poems of *The Trees The Trees* straddle a line between prose-poem and concrete verse, and their abutments of short phrases highlight the white spaces that separate fragments as well as the potential energy of phrases that may combine across these synapses. What I take as most significant about Christle’s poems is their return to a state of affective innocence. Rather than naiveté, the simple statement of the speaker’s relationship to an other betrays a strategy of radical doubt about the constructs and assumptions often added to feeling in order to explain it. The reduction that Christle’s arranged fragments undergo represents an attempt to articulate the most basic actions, thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, and from this place to gradually build up a basis for understanding a developing situation. In a manner that recalls the Frank O’Hara of such short epiphanic poems as “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday,” Christle’s poems are not allergic to the moments of revelation characteristic of more meditatively-aligned poets, but they aim to achieve revelations by a process that begins at an earlier point in cognitive experience and by so doing involves more self-

reflection and acknowledgement of the risks as well as the possibilities that accompany every leap from one phrase to the next.

More specifically, to me the question that Christle's poems raise is whether their return or even regression to a basic level of affective experience is motivated by a mimicry of Asperger's-like symptoms and would serve as an attempt to gain access to a mode of emotional understanding usually inaccessible to subjects whose affective economies are not organized in this way.

In "Aqualung," for example, a speaker begins, as is typical in Christle's poems, with an announcement in the first person singular; the poem then moves gradually toward a negotiation of the boundaries of the self with an other (often aided by, or alongside of fantasies and visionary excursions) and of that dyad with the world. The poem manages this traditionally lyric task (arguably the same one with which poems like Donne's "The Canonization" concern themselves) by their relatively elemental and elementary starting place. Here is the first half of "Aqualung":

what I like likes me back I like the sky and
 information I walk around everything bounces
 off the world and sticks to me and it is called a
 system the red light on my chest is a symptom
 of I am about to be shot or else I am going to
 be mentioned in a short presentation on love
 and deep misgivings like how today I was
 exploring the pink coral reef

By using the simile-signifying “like” to link “a short presentation” to “exploring the pink coral reef,” Christle maintains a belief in the continuity of the phrases: seemingly disparate elements do, in fact, relate to each other as part of what is here “called a / system.” The system that Christle’s poems create is, on the one hand, their risk of returning to an outdated concept of the lyric. (Marjorie Perloff’s preference for Ezra Pound over Wallace Stevens depends on the latter’s failure to go beyond the lyric convention of the purely self-referential and self-contained, stylistically continuous poem (Cf. *Dance*.) On the other hand, the container Christle creates retains a particular kind of permeability, not only in the gaps formed by the white spaces splitting each line, but also in the gap between affective states articulated in the poem—“I like” and “we don’t like”—and the layers of experiential history of which they are only one element. Signaling the minimal affective experience, then, allows the poem to observe its own mechanism, and thus to prevent any falsity or deception, but it also leaves a residue of the affects that “what I like” cannot contain, namely why I like what I like and how this liking makes me feel about myself in the world that “we don’t like back.” What goes unspoken here is, perhaps, just what another, more meditative poet would emphasize. In its resistance to a definition of romance or of solitude that would sentimentalize lyric’s capacities, “Aqualung” points back, perhaps surprisingly if we take Perloff’s word, to Wallace Stevens’ “Re-statement of Romance,” and “Auroras of Autumn.” Both poems are concerned with the difference between persons and the environment, and with the strength or relative domination of either party in a relationship recognized to be mutually determinative. The last canto of “Auroras of Autumn” argues that humans are “unhappy

people in a happy world,” and that the purpose of poetry is, to some extent, to reconcile, if not the people, then at least the poet, to his environment:

Turn back to where we were when we began:

An unhappy people in a happy world.

Now, solemnize the secretive syllables.

Read to the congregation, for to-day

And for to-morrow, this extremity,

This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,

Contriving balance to contrive a whole,

The vital, the never-failing genius,

Fulfilling his meditations, great and small.

In these unhappy he mediates a whole,

The full of fortune and the full of fate,

As if he lived all lives, that he might know,

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,

To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights,

Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.

(CP 420-421)

Christle's poem, ends with a less felicitous resolution between "people" and "world," though it seems to agree with him on the basic distinction:

my body slipped
 out and stood beside me we could not see each
 other and assembled our two visions into one
 the world was different because it looked
 different and it still likes us but we don't like it
 back

(32)

If the world is happy because "it still likes us," the way in which the speaker claims not to reciprocate the world's feeling suggests, ironically, that the separation between people and world is not so stark as Stevens would make it out to be. While Stevens needs the mediation of the auroras ("This contrivance of the specter of the spheres") to convince him of the happiness of the world, for Christle's speaker "everything bounces off the world" and, just like another person, the world is the site of simple preferences: it can like and not be liked. Just as Frank O'Hara distinguishes between his own project and Wallace Stevens' in "Personism," nothing that "Personism is to Wallace Stevens what *la poésie pure* was to Béranger," so Christle turns back Stevens' heightened rhetoric in order to make the world more available, as though it, too, could pick up the phone and be told "we don't like you back."

In closing, I would like to signal a continuous line—not without its gaps—between two poets as differently situated in their relationship to poetry and the poetic tradition as Wallace Stevens and Heather Christle. Namely, both suggest that poetic

reading benefits from a theory of reading that accounts for what Winnicott calls the “environment,” that is, for the social contexts that constitute lyric speakers or, in these cases, from which those speakers flee.

Winnicottian psychoanalysis outlines an environmental theory that establishes the poem as a problematic holding environment for uneasily borne affects, and his understanding of a space in which reader, writer, and poem *feel* together reinvigorates a model of poetic reading that can account for the poem’s material objecthood as well as the insubstantial energetics that invest poems with their compelling force. It may help us to understand or value even those poems in which that energy is so insubstantial as to upset some of the categories we assign to serious art. Lin and Christle may be suggesting a return to play in contemporary poetry, and play in Winnicott’s sense of a creative work that negotiates the boundaries between self and other without a strict policing of the distinction between what is real and what inhabits a shared ground of fantasy. By attending to the affects, such a mode of reading permits what remains outside the poem to influence what is inside, just as Lyotard suggests that articulated phrases owe a debt to the inarticulate affect. If affects are, as I have tried to show, uncontainable by the poetic structures poets used in the wake of Modernism, they are not by that measure extrinsic to “*materia poetica*,” and may indeed be the only measure, the unbearable *rhythm* by which the complex structures of this period’s poetry can be accounted for in their fragmentary wholeness.

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