SHADOWS NUMBERLESS: FOUR COLLECTIONS OF CRITICAL MATERIAL BY ADAM FIELED

COMPLETE NOTES AND BRIEF PIECES ON THE BRITISH ROMANTICS 2009-2012

WORDSWORTH AND DE MAN: SIMILITUDE IN DISSIMILITUDE

On the surface, there seems to be little common thread binding William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis*. The contextual circumstances that gave rise to each were radically divergent. Wordsworth was consciously, boldly inaugurating a new movement in British poetics, away from abstraction and impersonality and into the personal, candid, emotional realm that we are now familiar with as that of British Romanticism. His strategy was earnest and direct, his use of language purposeful and linear. Conversely, Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis* emerged right in the midst of a Deconstructionist and post-structuralist revolution. The terms of Deconstructionism, as applied to individual writers, necessitated that the "I," the constitutive subject, be subsumed. Rather than start his own counter-revolution, as Wordsworth might have done, de Man took on Deconstructionism on its own terms. There is no "I" in his piece, and the rules of the then *au currant* critical style were closely, carefully followed.

Nevertheless, a close reading of *Criticism and Crisis* reveals that de Man was, in fact, making a purpose-statement, in the manner of Wordsworth. Because convention precluded him from expressing himself in the first person, de Man resorted to a dizzyingly sophisticated use of irony and "mirroring" to make his points. That is, he used similar instances and "subjects" from the history of art and aesthetics to help make his aim clear. His central theme was the idea of the "crisis" as applied to literary criticism. De Man wanted to show that "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis"(8); in other words, that any new aesthetic reality forces a confrontation between a critic or audience and the innovative, "challenging" work. De Man's piece, as it was a reaction against the new aesthetic theories being touted by trend-hungry Continental critics, is itself also a crisis-statement. It is de Man's ironically rendered representation of a trend-created crisis. Likewise, Wordsworth's purpose-statement can also be seen as a crisis-statement. Wordsworth is not merely inaugurating British Romanticism; he is reacting against the "gaudiness and inane phraseologies"(77) of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The aesthetic conventions of his era forced this crisis, as the critical conventions of de Man's era forced his.

Purpose-statements are personal; they give an artist or critic a chance to set forth a personal agenda. Crisis-statements are social; they involve the activities of many others, as perceived by the constitutive subject, and of the Zeitgeist. Wordsworth and de Man stand united in the impulse to achieve a dual aim; to set forth a personal, purposive agenda, and to frame it in the larger context of a crisis existent around them. For de Man, this dual aim is doubled by a need not only to refute trends, but to question the entire endeavor of literary criticism; Wordsworth, conversely, states his fundamental faith in poetry-as-literary endeavor.

Wordsworth, not constrained by a need to subsume his subjectivity, is able to present his personal agenda mostly unimpeded. He makes a novel claim for his poems and the language found therein; he is using the "real language of men"(76) to describe a universal interiority, how the mind "associates ideas in a state of excitement."(78) Wordsworth never completely defines what "real" language might be, except to associate it with "low and rustic life"(78), which for him signifies purity, lack of social vanity, and freedom from the distractions of urban life. Wordsworth's vision, though it makes claims on universality, is self-created; Wordsworth recognizes this, and his own limitations. His approach to the public display of his vision is cautious and calculated; he states his aim,

which is quite ambitious, humbly; he will gauge the receptivity of the public to the real language of men, and in due course gauge how much pleasure "real language" can impart on receptive minds.

Implicit in Wordsworth's claims for "real language" is a critique of the then-current modes of poetic production. Wordsworth feels himself surrounded by "deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse."(80) His stance is one of resistance against fashion, rebellion against prevailing trends, and isolation from the mainstream. In other words, once his purpose is stated, and with it his personal agenda, it becomes clear that he is also in the midst of a crisis. His social position is uncertain, and his feeling about his contemporaries ambivalent at best. This ambivalence plays itself out in a shifting discomfort that appears when Wordsworth is forced to address them; he is sometimes willing to lash out, then retreats behind a more even-handed "I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own."(81) Always, the figure of an unseen, assumed reader looms large, and adds at least a modicum of self-consciousness to Wordsworth's expressed subjectivity. The purely subjective, placed into a social mode of expression, is part and parcel of Wordsworth's crisis. The purpose, easily stated and developed in solitude, becomes embattled and "crisis-like" when placed into the social context of a published preface.

De Man, unlike Wordsworth, chooses to begin with an explicit acknowledgement of crisis. The piece is titled *Criticism and Crisis*, which gives an indication that it will address salient contemporary issues in criticism. He quickly tells us that "well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism…have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse."(3) We are placed squarely within a social context; we do not yet know who is doing the tampering, but it is clearly (we assume) not the work of de Man himself. He presents himself to us, initially, in a reactive mode and stance. Yet it is not a stance, as with Wordsworth, of raw subjectivity; there is no "I" here. We know that a social nexus of critics is being addressed; we know that the situation is designated as "crisis-like"; but we do not get an immediate sense of how de Man posits himself in this scenario. Since use of "I", in the context of an attempted Deconstructionist or post-structuralist statement, would seem blasphemous, De Man opts to use a "sideways" or "ironic" method to pursue his agenda.

De Man begins with a quote from Mallarme, which he then echoes. Just as Mallarme claimed that his French contemporaries had tampered with the rules of verse, so de Man claims that his Continental contemporaries have tampered with the rules of criticism. As the piece progresses, de Man seems to use Mallarme as a sort of mirror or "double,"a predecessor in an analogous situation. As such, everything that de Man says about Mallarme could equally be applied to de Man. The substantive, purposive element of this comparison occurs when de Man informs us that Mallarme is not really perturbed by what his contemporaries are doing. He "is using them as a screen, a pretext to talk about something that concerns him much more; namely, his own experiments with poetic language."(7) Likewise, it would seem that de Man's purpose in *Criticism and Crisis* is not to jump on any bandwagons or even to take sides in a public battle. His purpose is to talk about his own experiments with criticism. He wants to get to the heart of the matter, to address what criticism really consists of and whether it "is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole."(8) What his contemporaries may or may not be doing is a detour, albeit a necessary and unavoidable one. Their battling and bickering

serves to demonstrate what may happen when self-scrutiny becomes lost, and this becomes useful to de Man as a means of representing his purpose.

For both Wordsworth and de Man, historical awareness is paramount. Both take a long view of their respective disciplines, believing that historical awareness adds depth and gravitas to vision. To situate their endeavors in time is part of their purpose, and a lack of historical awareness among their contemporaries is part of the perceived crises. However, each must adopt a different strategy in order to effectively present a historical case for themselves. The pre-Romantic milieu in which Wordsworth was working put an emphasis on the objective, the impersonal. For Wordsworth to break through this wall, he had to adopt what was then an unconventional strategy. He dared to be personal, thus inaugurating a new era. Conversely, de Man conformed to the anti-subjectivist standards that surrounded post-structuralist discourse. Only then was he able to make his points in such a way that they would be listened to, possibly heeded. De Man's submission to the trends of his day, however, were merely apparent. Through the use of irony, and through the indirect use of himself as constitutive subject, he was able to historicize himself, his purpose of self-scrutiny and the crises both within his own consciousness and without.

Within his piece, De Man, unlike Wordsworth, is willing to stoop to self-contradiction. First he tells us that the entire critical edifice may be collapsing, owing to conflicts on the Continent. Then he remarks that "we have some difficulty taking seriously the polemical violence with which methodological issues are being debated in Paris."(5) So, almost immediately there is a sense, within this contradiction, that de Man is being subversive, and that his seeming dismay at his contemporaries' flightiness is intended ironically. He is indulging in self-contradiction in order to achieve his purpose, part of which may be to put the Continental critics in their place. Indeed, he tells us that the authority of the best historians can be invoked to show that "what was considered a crisis in the past often turns out to be a mere ripple."(6) De Man's view of history, as seen in this piece, is cyclical. It is not that changes do not transpire; it is that they transpire slowly and almost invisibly. Thus, part of the crisis he is rebelling against is an attitude of shallow, ill-considered fickleness. It turns out that De Man's crisis-statement is two-pronged; he castigates literary poseurs for their lack of historical awareness, even as he notes that the utility of literary criticism has not been proven conclusively. The first crisis applies to him, as an outsider looking in; the second is generally operative, and it applies to him directly. Just as Wordsworth makes universal claims for the utility of poetry, de Man makes universal claims *against* the utility of criticism, or shows that its utility must be proven and scrutinized.

On this level, it is interesting to note that the analogues de Man chooses to act as his shadows or doubles are not critics; Mallarme is a poet, Husserl a philosopher, Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist. Further, it is remarkable to note that not once in *Criticism and Crisis* does de Man mention one of the Continental critics whom he is taking to task. He mentions Sartre, Poulet, Starabinski, stars of an earlier era; but those who have created the seeming crisis that de Man is addressing remain unnamed (just as de Man, himself, does.) This returns to the fact that de Man is naming a crisis that exists to him only ostensibly. The more profound crisis is whether criticism, once scrutinized, retains any meaning. Historicity becomes a method whereby de Man, rather than making claims for criticism, sees the cycle of crises and purposes that defines any kind of literary

creation. The final question as to the ultimate validity or non-validity of criticism is never addressed directly, but merely suggested. This suggestion constitutes a substantial part of de Man's purpose, just as his contemporaries neglect of the question forms part of the crisis.

Wordsworth's approach to historicity, like most angles of his approach, is more direct, less convoluted than de Man's. Wordsworth is a poet, concerned with poetry; when he looks for analogues, in the context of a discussion of metrical language, he thinks of "the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope."(77) What we have here is a variety of implicit assumptions, none of which can be found in de Man. Wordsworth seemingly believes that poetry is an art-form valid both through history and in his present; that there is a stable canon of great work that can be relied upon unquestioningly; that knowledge of this canon is essential; and that Wordsworth, himself, is going to attempt to join the ranks of canonized, historically important poets. Wordsworth's tremendous advantage over de Man, in making a purpose-statement, is that he does not have to resort to subversion, irony, and self-contradiction. On the other hand, his straightforward subjectivity leaves him open to accusations of pomposity and complacency.

There is, in fact, a note of complacency running through Wordsworth's preface. He idealizes the poet as a being "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind."(81) This attitude aids and abets Wordsworth in delivering the purposive element of his preface; he believes in the "poet", as an idealized figure, in the same manner that he believes in "poetry". Thus, he seems to suffer comparatively little cognitive dissonance regarding his agenda, and his ability to express himself and his purpose. His faith in the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind"(80) gives his address assurance, and his tone rarely wavers from this measured, assured calm. When "crisis" issues arise, i.e. when Wordsworth mentions his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, he does not slip into another register, but maintains a dignified, even keel. We are able to infer from this that if a "battle" of sorts should take place for domination of British poetics, Wordsworth is confident of victory. Wordsworth sees a crisis all around him, and is able to name the crisis, and talk of how it must be overcome, but it does not seem to concern him overmuch. His tone is that of an already privately established eminence waiting to be crowned with justly-earned laurel. He sees his isolation as a temporary condition and waits without haste for the world to come to him.

Circumstances, of course, proved Wordsworth to be correct. His eminence grew to be widely recognized, he was eventually made laureate, his avowed purpose was embraced by many poets, and the poetic crisis of "false refinement" and "arbitrary innovation"(79) resolved itself in the birth of British Romanticism. Consequently, a certain amount of complacency might have been justified. However, it could be argued that a lack of rigor makes many of Wordsworth's claims untenable. Coleridge, for example, was disturbed by Wordsworth's claim to the "real language of men", "real language" not being definable or discussable by any objective measure. Such claims formed an essential part of Wordsworth's purpose— to stake a claim for poetry as universal truth, "carried alive into the heart by passion."(82) The sort of rigorous and

unstinting self-scrutiny advocated by de Man is not part of Wordsworth's agenda. It may be that, as this preface was not his idea, but that of his friends who "advised me to prefix a systematic defense"(76), he did not feel the need to question himself, as he might have were it a poem.

De Man, unburdened (at least on the surface) with complacency or egotism, makes no claims for criticism, universal or personal. His purpose, discernible beneath the twists, turns, ironies and meta-ironies, is to stake a claim for self-scrutiny, on all levels. Following in the footsteps of Mallarme, who is seen to be "ironical"(16), de Man suggests that the act of writing must question itself at every turn; "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis."(8) Yet, de Man takes another detour, to an unlikely destination. He uses a lecture by Husserl to demonstrate that "the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error."(16) Though never explicitly stated, we can use these two statements to make an inductive leap; if all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis, and if the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error, then all true (and rhetorically based) criticism must be erroneous! It must be noted that this inductive leap is never made by de Man himself. It is left in wait for the attentive reader. The irony is that this passionate plea for self-scrutiny in criticism should suggest (albeit indirectly) that criticism, once scrutinized, may lose all meaning.

Had Wordsworth wanted to make this point, he would have spelled it out explicitly. However, the context that de Man is working in precludes him from doing this. For the Deconstructionists, Romanticism, of which Wordsworth is so salient a representative, was the enemy. Any hint of egotism or complacency would be pounced upon and used to discredit the subject. Yet, it was clearly de Man's intention to make this point, by whatever means available. He notes that "in the language of polemics the crooked path often travels faster than the straight one."(14) This must, of necessity, be the path he takes. Because it is not stated overtly, de Man must hope that his audience is subtle enough to catch the purpose behind his twists and turns. Likewise, de Man must hope that his enemies, those who have created the crisis we encounter at the beginning of the piece, and who are never openly named, will appreciate the self-scrutiny that has led de Man to his rigorous conclusion; that nothing in literature can be taken for granted, and that literature itself might be a kind of nothingness.

Here, we have two apparently simple designations: Wordsworth, the Romantic egotist, spelling out a personal purpose and reacting to crisis in a personal way; de Man, the objective Deconstructionist, subsuming subjectivity both in stating a purpose and reacting to a crisis. However, beneath the surface, things may not be so simple. Wordsworth, reacting as he is against objective modes of creation that (he feels) have grown stale, is using bare subjectivity to spell out a new vision. Subjectivity becomes the most attractive expedient, the shortest distance between what was and what may be. It is being purposefully used, and with self-consciousness. Complacency creeps in specifically because Wordsworth knows himself to be doing something original. Had Wordsworth's "I" been subsumed, his entire construct would collapse, and he would not be making an original statement. His crisis would remain untouched, his purpose unstated. In the contextual framework of early nineteenth century Britain, nothing could have been more revolutionary or revelatory than a lone, rebellious "I" taking a bold stand against trends that had prevailed for decades.

Likewise, De Man's lack of subjectivity, his apparent objectivity, is a carefully

crafted illusion. De Man speaks of using the language of polemics, because *Criticism and Crisis* is polemical. It is a personal statement based on a subjective experience, both of criticism as a personal, purposive endeavor, and of criticism as it exists in de Man's social milieu. This milieu is being dogged by crisis, and a crisis (of false refinement and arbitrary innovation) that closely resembles the one that Wordsworth is enumerating in his preface. Because de Man is not self-consciously inaugurating a new era but reacting against one, his strategy seems to be to outdo the Continental critics at their own game. His "I" is so cleverly concealed that, far from seeming like a "privileged consciousness"(9), it seems evanescent. Yet multiple re-readings of *Criticism and Crisis* reveal an "I" that is fluid, mercurial, and capable both of enumerating a two-pronged crisis (the fickleness of Continental critics and the uncertainty of criticism as a discipline) and stating a two-pronged purpose (to show that fickleness in criticism is fruitless and to show equally the need for continued self-scrutiny).

In a way, de Man's circuitous technique could be seen as even more egotistical than Wordsworth's. There is an element of "dazzle" to de Man's performance that is lacking in Wordsworth. De Man demonstrates that he can use irony, "mirroring,"and deliberate self-contradiction to craft a statement that is as essentially personal as Wordsworth's preface. He is beating the Continental critics at their own "unprivileged" game, demystifying them in such a way that at no point does he reveal himself as the dreaded, Romantic subject. Yet every point he makes moves forward the argument that it is not the Romantic subject to be guarded against, but a contradictory awareness of literature as a "something that is really nothing". De Man might choose to designate literature as a "nothing that may or may not be something".

There does remain one fundamental discrepancy between Wordsworth and de Man: their attitude towards language itself. This discrepancy was largely determined by the eras in which they lived; Wordsworth, right at the dawn of Romanticism, had no notion of words as arbitrary signs, nor that the connection between thing and word, signified and signifier, might be flawed or, worse, non-existent. When Wordsworth addresses language itself, he does so in such a way to reinforce the impression that he believes words are capable of "pure" signification. Wordsworth mentions "in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other"(76-77), in the context of a complaint as to the general taste of the British public. We do not see Wordsworth questioning the inherent value of linguistic signification; we see him questioning the uses to which linguistic signification can be put. If language is seen to be stable, reliable, and just to the expressive intent of the human subject, then an attitude of confident self-righteousness would seem to be, if not admirable, at least understandable. Wordsworth does not doubt that he can make clear his purposive agenda, nor that he can spell out the crisis in British taste as he sees it. His trust in language, and in his own expressive capacities, seems secure. For Wordsworth, language may be purified and simplified by a retreat into rural simplicity; the language of rural people "is adopted…because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived."(78) Rather than admit of fundamental duplicities or confusions, Wordsworth advocates reducing language to its barest essentials. Here, there is likely to be less static between sign and meaning, less needless ornamentation. This simplification of language forms part of Wordsworth's purpose, just as the ornate, "gaudy" language of his predecessors forms part of the perceived crisis he is

counteracting. Once simplified, language need not be scrutinized. This bedrock belief in the power and reliability of signification is part of what allows Wordsworth to be so straightforward. Purpose and crisis can be equally addressed, an even keel may be maintained, and faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and nature (both, in this context, assumed universals) are demonstrated. Wordsworth enacts the discourse of the privileged subject, making a singular claim for his finite notions of truth, in precisely the manner that de Man eschews.

For de Man, things *must* be more complicated. In the post-Saussurian era, faith in language, even simplified language, had been drastically reduced. The arbitrary quality of the linguistic sign had become a guiding precept for both Structuralism and Decontsructionism. De Man works with the knowledge that every discourse falls prey to "the duplicity, the confusion, and the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language."(9) The kind of self-scrutiny that de Man is advocating would seem to preclude the confident vigor of Wordsworth's tone and literary demeanor. De Man's complete awareness, both of his own situation as a contemporary critic and of the situation of his Continental colleagues, allows him room to maneuver, to use the trends and tenor of his times to make a personal claim on, if not universal truth, at least enduring value. Whether there is a direct correlation between universal truth (the legitimacy of which took a beating, alongside linguistic signage, as the Structuralist movement developed) and enduring value is not, for de Man, the point. What de Man is demonstrating, with just as much confidence and vigor as Wordsworth (though sans the "I", and the directness that it lends), is that certain situations and circumstances tend to repeat themselves, that trends pass, and that the self-scrutiny which "scrutinize(s) itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin"(7) has a value. De Man does not posit this value as universal; he does not need to. The very fact of Mallarme's speech to an English audience at Oxford in 1894, the nature of Mallarme's ironies, his twists, turns, and ability to turn trends and fickleness to his own ends in a sort of charade, show de Man (and, by implication, his readers) that Nietzsche's "eternal return" might apply to aesthetics as to all other things. The end of Mallarme's charade is adopted by de Man; to sneak "enduring value" (for want of a better, less authoritative sounding term) in through the back door, via irony. Through adopting Mallarme's stance, de Man gets to have his cake and eat it too; he makes a personal purpose-statement without ever using the first person, while revealing a seeming crisis to be a trifle (and one with many antecedents in the history of literature.) Mallarme becomes a Virgil figure (albeit a highly ironical one), leading de Man through the dark wood of conflict, into the open air of disciplined thought.

As this "air of disciplined thought" entails a fundamental ambivalence or uncertainty towards de Man's chosen discipline, this metaphor might be misleading. Better, perhaps, to say that de Man's "Mallarmean mask" allows him to tell the truth (or, at least, his version of the truth). Wordsworth does not feel compelled to wear a mask. His only artifice involves the use of rhetoric to make his perceived crisis clear and his purpose known. His famous "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"(79) seems more rhetorical than reality based. "All", in this context, universalizes a sentiment that, in its time, might have seemed shocking. It would be difficult to imagine *Paradise Lost* as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", or *The Rape of the Lock*. Wordsworth exaggerates the aspects of his argument that make

him seem singular, atomized, and extraordinary. The exaggerations are subtle, but they color the entire enterprise of the preface.

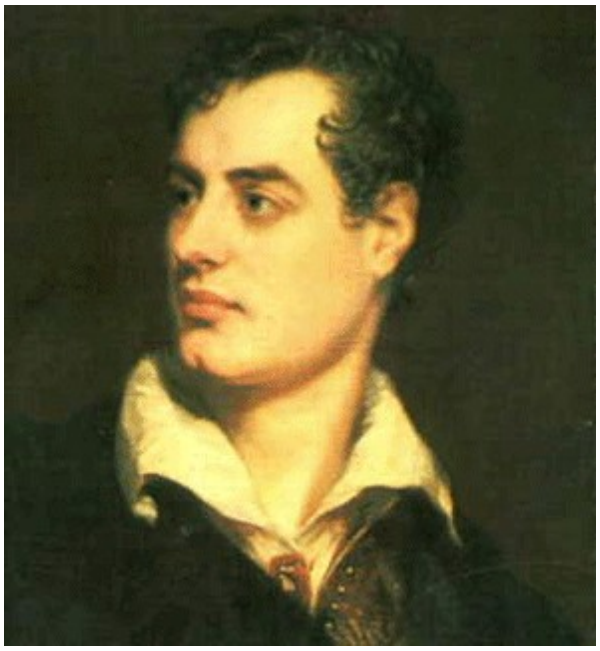
Perhaps this is the essential similarity between Wordsworth and de Man, as reflected in these two pieces: both feel the need to make calculated overstatements. De Man's "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis" is mirrored by Wordsworth's "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." These two pieces are joined, not only by the need to assert a purpose and a crisis, but by the ambition to be bold, to "think big." These are pieces written to be read. They demonstrate a keen awareness of an assumed audience, and both display a sense of intellectual showmanship, a certain "bravura" quality. These two figures, writing to such different ends and audiences in such radically dissimilar eras, are showing us (one through earnestness, one through irony) how a literary gauntlet might be laid down. Judging by the intense reaction these pieces received, De Man and Wordsworth both succeeded at meeting their divergent, contradictory, but not entirely dissimilar goals.

WORKS CITED

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983.

Wordsworth, William. *The Essential Wordsworth*. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1988.

NOTES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: WORDSWOTH'S "PRELUDE" AND LORD BYRON'S "DON JUAN"



Jerome McGann emphasizes the fact that *Don Juan* is more about "contexts" than *Prelude* is. He stresses the social aspect of Byron's mock-epic, set against Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime." However, I would argue that there is ample evidence within *The Prelude* that not only was Wordsworth aware of social context, it plays a role that is almost equally large to the role that it plays in *Don Juan*. The central difference between the two epics is fundamental, and obvious: *Don Juan* is partly about a character that (unlike Childe Harold) is definitively *not* Byron, while *The Prelude is* definitively, on most levels, about Wordsworth. We see, in *Don Juan*, Byron labors to make situations and contexts *around* Don Juan interesting, while Wordsworth must labor to make his interiority interesting (though Wordsworth presents some situations and contexts as well). Yet a look at social contexts (some included, some excluded) in *The Prelude* will demonstrate that even amidst all the earnestness, Wordsworth has a sense of himself as an actor upon a stage. While it would be hard going to see a "masquerade" element in *The Prelude* (and McGann emphasizes the "masquerade" aspect of *Don Juan*), there is a sense that the one aspect that resides behind Wordsworth's binds, Wordsworth-as-text-creator, enables Wordsworth to deliberately introduces stories, the contexts they create, and how they might change our opinion of the protagonist (him). Likewise, it is important to balance out McGann's equation by asserting the obtrusiveness of Byron's presence in *Don Juan*. The Byron that is a "ghost presence" (both in the poem and in his binding processes) is static: he is flippant, insouciant, irreverent, and digressive from start to finish. *The Prelude*, on the other hand, is a kind of Bildungsroman, and the point is to watch Wordsworth change, grow, develop, consummate his mind (and, I will argue, his body). So that the constant shifts McGann sees in *Don Juan* are equally present in *The Prelude*, but the poles are reversed: *Don Juan* features change up-front and stasis beneath (or as a "ghost presence"), while *The Prelude* exists with a static surface and a flux beneath.

From a critical perspective, it might be most interesting to apply this "reversal principle" to the story of Julia and Vaudracour (Book IX). Here is a story that reflects issues of the body, sexuality, and loss. Because Wordsworth elides his own affair with Annette Villon (and the child it produced) almost entirely from *The Prelude*, this story has a kind of "double resonance." It is also one of the few places in *The Prelude* where sexual intercourse (Byron's favored motif in *Don Juan*) is directly alluded to. Wordsworth goes out of his way to make the pair seem innocent; yet they are having unprotected sex, which is, in this context (a forbidden affair) risky indeed. This story demonstrates (as *Don Juan* does over and over again) that pleasures often lead to pain, that sexuality is the source of great sorrows, and that this is created by its eruption in contexts in which it is forbidden or discouraged. This is the story in *The Prelude* that relates most closely to *Don Juan*; and it is told tenderly, rather than archly. Looking back, we can see it as Wordsworth telling this part of his own story in indirect terms. It also demonstrates how carefully Wordsworth labored to create a textual self that was seldom directly culpable. Just as Levinson saw "Tintern Abbey" and "Ode" as displacements away from radical despair/disappointment, I see this episode as Wordsworth's displacement away from *sexual* disappointment. Vaudracour's nobility is Wordsworth's displaced; the history of Vaudracour and Julia does not mimic that of Wordsworth's and Annette Villon's, but is close enough (in its tragic context) to warrant the displacement tag. So, Wordsworth does get in a bit of masquerade, but (unlike in Byron), it does not advertise itself *as* masquerade. Wordsworth's essential earnestness is intact, and the form in which the tale is told (a kind of retrospective reverie) ensures that the audience's labor will not involve fingers being pointed back at Wordsworth. The Wordsworth protagonist must be painted in a certain way and from a certain angle; otherwise, the "bargain" element of the text will be taken away and the audience will have too much work to do. Mysteries must be presented;

but they must present a contrast to Keats and Negative Capability (though of course neither Keats nor Negative Capability could have been a direct influence on Wordsworth) by ample and instructive explanation. This central displacement (and others, like Wordsworth in Milton's room) needs to be explored.

……

Jonathon Shears notes in *Byron's Aposiopesis* that Byron uses the literary device aposiopesis (sudden breaks in a character or narrator's speech) to encourage reader participation. Shears writes, "Aposiopesis creates a role for the reader as actor central to the establishment of reading" (187) This positing brings to mind Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response theory, which Iser applied to prose fiction, but might just as easily be tied to epic poems. I believe this true because epic poems, like prose fiction, work on a large scale, with an extended architecture and narrative structure in mind (even, as in *Don Juan*, when this structure is deliberately ad hoc and digressive). Wordsworth rarely uses aposiopesis, and I believe that the lack of this device in *The Prelude* signals a key difference between Wordsworth and Byron's respective approaches, if one parses them like this: Wordsworth's systematic application of principles determines that his approach must be as unitary as possible. Aposiopesis is a breaking-of-unity; it signals a place in which the reader is induced to exert effort to understand. Because Byron is rebelling against Wordsworth's unitary pretensions (and the deliberate elisions this necessitates), it suits his purposes to use aposiopesis to create an ambience of candor and humanity. In fact, it is a central irony to the comparison of these two epics that both Wordsworth and Byron believe they are more candid and more humane than the other. Nevertheless, Byron's usage of aposiopesis (and Wordsworth's elision of same) gives a key to understanding how a reader is induced to respond and create meaning within the confines of these two poems. A sudden breakage represents an event that can be interpreted as artificial or organic— text is inherently artificial, but breakages are part of the texture of lived existence. When we come across aposiopesis in *Don Juan*, we are led to believe that Byron is reinforcing one of his central conceits— that this is an oral epic, which replicates Byron's actual voice. Byron is toying with (or, as John Lauber might say, destroying) epic conventions. The central question is: is aposiopesis part of Byron's labor (i.e. something calculated to induce an effect in the reader) or is it part of his improvisatory style? Since Byron was loathe to credit himself with any labor whatsoever where poetry (even epic poetry) was concerned, it seems safest to guess that Byron includes these interruptions as they occur to him. However, this can be taken as a sort of giving in to the immediacy that McGann sees in him; he labors not to check his impulses, but to give in to them, to deliberately not censor himself, to (as the modern colloquialism runs) go with the flow.

For the reader, this means a ride less monotonous, but significantly rougher, than one finds in *The Prelude*. Byron's episodic impulses, however, assure that the serious reader of *Don Juan* (and Byron might bridle at such a notion) has significantly less work to do (but also, possibly, less to attain) than the reader of *The Prelude*. We collaborate (using Iser's term) with Byron by following his voice, rather than learning his system; our labor is rewarded in the immediacy of authentic breaths. Wordsworth's lack of aposiopesis raises chances that immediate enjoyments (and illusions, however convincing, of immediacy) be sacrificed for an ultimately larger gain, which encompasses a broader, more ideal vision of humanity than is offered by Byron. The serious reader of *The Prelude* must submit to Wordsworth's monotonous (perhaps mountainous) surfaces, in order to gain the stunning epiphany of

Snowdon. The reader's labor seems to be one of wise passivity and restraint: trusting Wordsworth to lead us to a secure, worthwhile destination. The labor Byron imposes is less demanding; to listen closely to individual moments, to glean a sense of frothy enjoyment from each. Byron rejects the idea that either he or his audience should significantly labor; it is the labor *not* to labor, the manifestation of an aesthetic of irresponsibility. Byron uses aposiopesis to such an extent that it becomes a mannerism, a token of his roguish wit. Yet Byron's anti-labor is labor nonetheless; he forces himself to be as lively as possible, to create as many memorable moments as he can. Wordsworth's plan tends to defer the momentary.

……

J. Michael Robertson points out Byron's "aristocratic individualism" and how it "doubly-elevates" Byron: elevated (class-wise) by birth and experience, also elevated (by talent and insight) *above* his birth and experience. Robertson points out that Byron "frequently belittles the act of composition even as he composes" (643). Yet I want to complicate this by placing them in relation to Byron's methods of binding. I would argue that Byron is always in the process of "doubling himself"— it is one way of refuting Wordsworth's unitary presentation and Coleridge's theories of organic unity. He must, of necessity, present himself as both himself and not-himself— engaged in a work of great labor, and above labor (or maybe even, in a certain sense, beneath it.) Since, as Robertson points out, Byron's massive audience was massively enticed by his aristocratic disdain, Byron's "doubling" and disdain for labor cannot be taken at face value. Rather, passages that demonstrate this can be parsed as Byron recreating a textual image that has brought him fame and fortune (which, monetarily, he refused to accept), and this kind of "image maintenance" is a key to understanding *Don Juan*. But any kind of maintenance is a kind of labor, and Byron works to consolidate the image he has established in *Childe Harold* and his earlier works. He belittles partly because his audience *wants* him to belittle; he is saving them the work of dealing with a new Byron. Because Don Juan is the protagonist, it seems like Byron, in the context of this epic, has no need for self-recreation. The split between himself and his protagonist creates doubling enough; his labor is to entertain by an unpredictable textual juggling act. There is little in Byron's self-presentation here that is not stylized; belittling the act of composition is a characteristic gesture that enhances the stylistic flair of the representation. I buy Robertson's claim for Byron as an "aristocratic individualist": but I would opt to see this something already more or less perfected before *Don Juan* was even begun. Byron does not suddenly become what Robertson sees him as: it has been part of his repertoire for many years at this point. Because this image is (or can be taken as) a rebellion against the Lakers, it also involves Byron in a kind of class warfare: Wordsworth's elevation is etherealized, rather than material, and not meant to entice but to reform and give wholesome nourishment to middle-class readers. Yet, Byron reached a wider, more appreciative audience with his more spectacular form of self-image dissemination.

To expand Robertson's thesis, I would opine that Wordsworth presents himself as a spiritual aristocrat, and a spiritual individualist. All the material manifestations of wealth and importance are too low (to be crude) for Wordsworth even to spit on; the center of his investigation is the pursuit of a unitary self, unitary mind, and a similarly unitary text fit for middle-class consumption. The idea of "unitary realities" may be seen as a middle-class one; "doubling," multiplication of selves, involves a consciousness that destabilizes necessity; Byron has the time, leisure, freedom, and resources to be more than one person. Material exigencies (though they are elided from Wordsworth's self-presentation *The Prelude*) force the

middle-class consciousness into knowledge of limitations, boundaries, and the imperative of purpose. Middle-class ethos instills rigor, discipline, and single-minded determination for this reason. Wordsworth's individualism is the middle-class kind: disciplined, stringent, singular. Byron emphasizes leisure by refuting these notions. Yet it is worth looking into just how similar these two forms of individualism are: material and spiritual, aristocratic and bourgeois. Both are predicated on having, at the very least, enough material goods for subsistence. Both are predicated on leisure, with one central difference between Byron and Wordsworth: Wordsworth feels guilty, Byron is shameless. Wordsworth *needs* to demonstrate middle-class virtue in his labor; his textual self is made to be representative. However, unlike Robertson, I believe that Byron has a *compelling need* (rather than just an off-hand desire) to responsibly (thinking of his audience's pleasure) deliver aristocratic irresponsibility. They are flip sides of the same coin.

…….

It seems to me that Marjorie Levinson's reading of "Michael" makes Michael himself a precursor to Wordsworth, as he appears as text-creator (creator of binds) in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth, as text-creator, makes his flock the whole horde of experiences and sensory impressions that he uses to craft both himself-as-protagonist and a unitary vision of why this created self is important. The difference is that, in the course of "Michael," the protagonist loses, and goes from successful consummations of lived experience to unsuccessful ones, while Wordsworth-as-protagonist "gains" by consummating his mind and leading himself carefully to a place and a context in which he can express himself effectively. Wordsworth as text-creator is, in a sense, "subsistence farming," because he is not creating anything, is using only what has happened to him to create organic unity. Thus, the use value of what he has experienced gains an exchange value when attached to the other two links: textual production and the (eventual) public appearance of a "priceless" commodity. It is because Wordsworth identifies with Michael that the purity of Michael's interaction with natural elements mirrors (or, Wordsworth would want it to mirror) Wordsworth's textual approach in *The Prelude*. So Michael is both a prefiguring type and more material manifestation of the "middle Wordsworth" that stands between his represented self and a middle class public. If there is a loss, it is that, just as Michael "loses" Luke into an urban arena (which swallows him), Wordsworth "loses" his text to a realm of (urban) commodities. That *The Prelude* was not published until Wordsworth dies softens the blow, but also parallels Michael's advanced age. Levinson points out that Michael equates labor with pleasure: they are an undivided, unitary reality for him. In Wordsworth's conception of *The Prelude*, this also holds; Wordsworth never complains that writing *The Prelude* is not easy for him, though the work does show Wordsworth as protagonist in pain, dealing with cognitive dissonance. Yet, because the work promises and delivers consummation, we see a successful "marriage" between both the mind of Man and Nature, Man and Community, and Man and textual presentation thereof. Middle Wordsworth clearly takes pleasure in what he is creating, is convinced of its worthiness and use value for an audience that is willing to labor along with him. If the issue of "exchange value" in uncomfortable, it may be ameliorated by the fact that Wordsworth never lived to see this happen (at least on the level that followed from the dissemination of *The Prelude*). Levinson also points out the process by which, just as Michael does, Wordsworth works through raw materials, "processes" them, delivers them to a largely urban audience who can use it to purify and "compensate" themselves. For audience as for

Wordsworth, labor is seen to be an act of pleasure, fulfillment, and love. The work that Wordsworth asks us to do is work that should be labor, but should not necessarily, at all times, *feel* like labor.

Of course, much about Michael, and the middle Wordsworth that he prefigures, is antithetical to Byron's self-presentation, the middle Byron and *Don Juan* as protagonist. Rather than merely "subsistence farm" from what he has already known and experienced, Byron spins a wild weave of imagined experience (and imagined, not from Nature, but out of thin air), indirect recollections (which put his raw materials, which are plainly visible in *The Prelude*, out of the audience's sight), snarky digressions (which are "subsistence" material, but more like weeds and stubble then sheep), and anti-philosophical sophistries, all of which deflect attention from whatever is his construct is earnest and wholesomely good. Yet, there is a refining process going on here, and the very care Byron takes to maintain an insouciant façade is evidence of being engaged in the same process Wordsworth is. Perhaps Byron is just a different *kind* of farmer than Wordsworth and Michael; his work *is* humble, and the sense that he knows what his audience wants (the mythical Byronic virtues of charm, darkness, sensuality) and is laboring to give it to them. It is just that, unlike Michael and Wordsworth, part of Byron's "farming" involves hiding his tracks, making the "farm" he works on as evanescent as possible (and making it seem like there is no farm whatsoever). So Byron *does*, in fact, wind up being presaged by Michael, not to the extent that Wordsworth is, but to significant extent nonetheless. Since the standard Byronic topoi were all in place before *Don Juan*, Byron's subsistence depends on extending them. His need to deflect attention from this process, in a sense makes Byron's method of cultivating his materials more demanding than Wordsworth's or Michael's, with the added weight of feeling compelled to satisfy a large public (which Wordsworth did not need to worry about). Byron's readers have to work less hard than Wordsworth's do; but Byron's alchemical process of text-creation involved much more backtracking, careful placements of "hints," and disappearing acts than Wordsworth's did. Byron actually has far more of a "flock" than Wordsworth; the text as his Luke will almost certainly not disappear, but will occupy a significant public space.

……..

There are reasons to write about *Don Juan* and *The Prelude* now that are particular to the present moment. I think that teaching these two epics can be more instructive and more entertaining (if more time-consuming) than teaching shorter pieces because of their connection to two modern realities: the cinema and the Internet. The history of the production of Byron's epic is particularly suitable and relevant, because, as is shown in St. Clair's book, Byron took steps to ensure that his epic would be available to the widest possible audience. By allowing pirated editions to proliferate (owing in part to the government's refusal to grant him intellectual property rights), Byron made a gesture that was as egalitarian as his poetry was aristocratic. Thus, Robertson's charge of "aristocratic individualism" is, to some extent, refuted by Byron's (anti) business sense, and his business sense does, in fact, seem to be as "anti" as his epic impulses. This is pertinent because it shows a clear line being drawn between different ends of Byron's binds: the text creator, who fashions an aristocratic textual self, and what work the audience is expected to do. How that audience acquires the text counts here; and again, the situation arranged itself in such a manner that very little work (other than pleasurable reading) needed to be done by Byron's

audience. An argument could be made that Byron's digressions would tax an audience's intentions, but that does not refute the intimation, shown by the material and economic modes of production of *Don Juan*, that Byron did in fact *care deeply* about his audience, and that he was eager for his work to be read and disseminated among all classes of people. In short, the Byron who *manages* his work appears substantially different than the Byron who appears *in* his work. There is a modern-day poetry equivalent: poets who chose who disseminate their work online guarantee that a potentially wide (not entirely class-bound or cash-bound) audience might be reached. If Byron were alive now, we might see him place the entirety of *Don Juan* online, to go with pricey print editions. Pirated editions in early 19th century England and online publishing in the early 21st century have much in common—high numbers of readers, velocity of responses, subversive potential, and a generalized egalitarianism. Byron was far ahead of his time, and he was richly rewarded: *Don Juan* became the most widely read long poem of the 19th century. The discrepancy between the "middle Byron" of his text and the egalitarian, non-materialistic businessman (excuse the oxymoron), that is relevant and parallel, in some senses, to contemporary poetry dissemination, needs to be investigated. It heightens the impression that *Don Juan* was a labored-over construction, meant both to provoke and to please, to be attractive and to repulse, and Byron was the puppet-master, not only of *Don Juan* but of himself, as he appears in his text. To be short, Byron was a far less pessimistic, more forward-thinking, and (ultimately) more compassionate presence than he was given credit for. Maybe the egalitarian, compassionate Byron was displaced out of *Don Juan*, maybe not, but Byron's actions in perpetuating the consumption of his work were, at best, classless and selfless.

Both *Don Juan* and *The Prelude* can be taught as "cinematic": they have elements of scene, character, encounter, dialogue, and mise en scene that link them to our modern (and postmodern) cultural heritage. While there is pungent irony in the fact that a textual Wordsworth who goes out of his way to appear egalitarian actually takes a sinecure position as Distributor of Stamps (enforcing policies of censorship), *The Prelude* has scenes that can be enjoyed not only in imagination's labor, but also as imaginative ends in themselves. That is, Wordsworth's audience must choose how much labor they wish to exert to consummate their minds. If they choose a lower level of appreciation, they can merely "enjoy the scenery" the way one would a beautiful movie today. Not that movies do not have potentiality to consummate minds; just that it is important to note two things: that Wordsworth could not compel his audience to exert the kind of labor that he might wish them too, and that this also applies to modern readers of *The Prelude* (particularly students), who might choose to see it as a movie, rather than buying in so completely to Wordsworth's ethos that there is commensurate tightness between all the links of his binds. Byron's binds are loose, meant to be loose, so that labor feels like pleasure; this includes the labor of finding and purchasing the poem. Wordsworth is much more convoluted, forcing readers to deal with his material absence (he is dead when the poem comes out), insistence on unitary presentation (which necessitates displacements, elisions, and complications that Wordsworth is aware of), veneer of absolute self-confidence (Wordsworth has absolute belief, or wants to appear to have absolute belief, that his mind has been consummated), and reliance on a relationship with nature (intercourse) with nature that is his presumed stronghold. To master all these levels of labor, one must have faith in Wordsworth's vision; to find a wide audience to submit to such an austere faith would seem to be impossible. What I argue for is a lesser level of dedication, a *comfortable* level of labor, which would approach *The Prelude* more like an audience might approach a movie today: as the vision of, say, a Kubrick or a Scorcese, not to be accepted uncritically (as Wordsworth might have wished), but to be analyzed objectively. Thus, there

is a much greater discrepancy between what Wordsworth wanted and what he got and what Byron wanted and got with his epic; Byron was more realistic about his audience's needs, and was rewarded with much greater popular recognition. Conversely, does that mean that Byron was *pandering*? That is certainly what Wordsworth seems to have thought.

……..

David Simpson presents the thesis that WW's encounters with what Hartman calls "boundary figures" are in fact encounters with specters, who can be taken to represent a kind of "death-in life." However, I would see that Simpson generalizes too much and that this cannot be taken as an axiom where WW, and especially the PL, are concerned. There is ample evidence that WW's encounters in PL involve more that just "death-in-life." The primary example I would use to argue against Simpson's thesis is the beggar WW encounters in London. What WW sees in the beggar is manifestly not "death-in-life," but the inscrutability and impenetrability of "other worlds." What would constitute these "other worlds," and how does the acknowledgement of them affect the Labor Chain? While Simpson claims that the "other worlds" are shadow worlds, of half-existence and death, I would say that the beggar could just as easily be taken (Bk 7) to represent the otherworldliness of a kind of heaven— a place of repose, dignity, and cessation of desire. Simpson's interpretation is equally valid, but needs to be balanced by this possibility. As with the wandering soldier, it is left to the audience to do the labor of figuring for themselves if these liminal/boundary figures represent a kind of hell (ghostliness) or a kind of heaven (freedom from care, worry, desire), or both. Simpson counts as evidence the fact that these figures are materially destitute, and thus force both WW and his audience to labor through middle-class guilt. Lack of material substance and sustenance turn them into ghosts, half-people. However, it seems to me that Simpson's interpretation is more a working through the labor of his own middle-class guilt, and that these figures are far more well-rounded (in their liminal way) than Simpson would have us believe. They are destitute, but they manifest extreme dignity; they are silent or almost silent, but they do not complain; they inhabit no "home" or stable niche in society, but they do not unduly take from anyone else. Their reliance on charity could be taken two ways: negatively, as a manifestation of insubstantiality; positively, as a willingness not to encroach, steal, or go in for the unproductive labor of the lumpenproletariat. Their striking appearances (especially the soldier's) make them very much alive, perceptible, and real to WW-as-protagonist. Are they, as Simpson claims, "spooky"? It is conventionally thought that spooky things scare us without being edifying. Since these boundary figures are so edifying, and since these encounters clearly took on great significance to WW as protagonist (and text creator), I would say that "spooky" is an inadequate and quite reductive epithet to pin on these figures. They would only be spectral to a crassly materialist consciousness, and WW is hardly crassly materialistic.

There is equally little "ghostliness" in DJ; DJ's encounters, in fact, have the opposite effect, of being so material that they border on ribaldry. If there is something spooky about DJ, it is in LB's appearance in the text; how, woven through the narrative, he appears and disappears. It is also, not spooky, but ambiguous to what extent LB is calculating the effects of his ribaldry. The early Cantos of DJ were harshly received; what allowed LB to persevere? LB's encounters, as represented in DJ, show us a man reckoning crass materialism and its emptiness, whether as applied to the haut monde or to hacks like Bob Southey. Yet, of course, LB's sensibility is tempered by the conceit that his life as a public figure (and in every

other material way) is over. LB makes *himself* into a ghost, a mere shadow of the public self he used to be. He implicates himself for being "spectral": an exile from the country that reads him, a presence no longer involved in human relationships, incapable (if also uninterested) in love and intimacy, "over everything," only kept back from ubermensch status by lack of desire, motivation. We are meant to *believe in* WW's encounters; are we meant to believe in LB's effeteness also? Is he as spectral as he would have us believe, or is this part of his extensive labor of self-representation?

……..

Simpson says that Wordsworth's narrators often act as though they are "immersed in a masquerade" (119). This makes a unique contrast to what McGann says about Byron, that he in fact *creates* a masquerade in *Don Juan*. So the issue of "masquerade" may be seen as pertinent to both *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*. However, look at the irony of Simpson and McGann put together: Wordsworth immersed, Byron creating. If Wordsworth is immersed in a masquerade, he is less in control of his labor than Byron, who controls his. Yet, it would be an unusual analysis that would maintain *The Prelude* to be a less-controlled performance than *Don Juan*. Masquerade leads to issues of *control*, which for both Byron and Wordsworth point back to the "middle self," their positions as text-creators. Following through, an argument is available that posits less control in Wordsworth and more in Byron. I think that this is untenable, but I would argue for commensurability of control between the two. That means that what needs to be argued for is more control emanating from Byron and his text creation. This would involve demonstrating that the way encounters work in Byron is as carefully crafted as it is in *The Prelude*. Simpson says that Wordsworth often comes face to face with ghosts: hollow, amorphous entities that nonetheless signify earthly realities of failed materialism. I would argue that in the teleological sense, Byron adopts a similar strategy through different means: Haidee, Julia, Dudu are all the opposite of ghosts: Byron goes out of his way to depict them in their material splendor. Yet they wind up signifying almost precisely the same failed materialism that Wordsworth's beggar, soldier, and peasant girl do. Their physical appeal is a quickly extinguished flame; they are "lit" only to be snuffed out. They enact this process through their interactions with Don Juan: ignition, consummation, extinguishment. What is in Byron dynamism is in Wordsworth stasis: the soldier, London beggar, peasant girl do not go through a transformative process: rather, they force Wordsworth-as-protagonist, and Wordsworth's audience as collaborative laborers, to self-transform in the process of registering, absorbing, and interpreting their existence. By showing transformation *in* his agents, Byron considerably lessens the labor necessary for his audience to appreciate his poem. By forcing a transformation in himself and his readers (who are, Wordsworth hopes, steeped in a process of serious, laborious identification with his self-identified protagonists), Wordsworth increases the labor-load. We are meant to share his bewilderment and investigate our own reactions to it. Byron creates a masquerade for us; Wordsworth takes us to a masquerade but limits the extent to which masks are removed. The removal of masks is an active process; if depiction of failed materialism is the ultimate end, we may see a similarity in Byron and Wordsworth: yet the division of labor created between reader and text-creator is radically different, as is the tone each text creator adopts. Wordsworth wants us to "skip over" his place as text-creator in his binds; we are meant to affectively bond with and actively identify with the "first Wordsworth." Byron changes this

so that we identify with his "middle Self," and his protagonist takes on the quality of (without being unduly harsh) a stooge or patsy.

This is important because it highlights the difficulty of Wordsworth's project, a genuine threat to the efficacy of his binds. Wordsworth forces the reader into a position in which we must trust the protagonist, and try to ignore his position as text-creator. If we mistrust one or the other, it makes it difficult for the chain to function, and the enormous demand placed on us as readers creates cognitive dissonance. The placement of protagonist and text creator here can be taken as a "double displacement," rather than a continuum; we have no way of knowing what is being elided, nor or we sure that what we are seeing is an organic representation. Wordsworth's "masquerade," unlike Byron's, is supposed to be objectively real; the masquerade effect is created by material circumstances; the protagonist is a bewildered spectator. Yet textual creation itself is a form of masquerade, and Wordsworth evades this acknowledgement (which Byron perpetually affirms). So, the leap of faith (or Coleridge's suspension of disbelief) is enormous, and what would be a real language of masquerades remains conflicted.

……

A key part of my thesis regarding LB, WW and the Labor Chain is this: that LB's engagement with his audience involved him doing "double time," in a way that WW did not. LB was, very evidently, a highly disciplined, highly productive, prolific poet. Yet the persona he created for himself necessitated that he appear to be just the opposite: an aristocrat without serious occupation. I am arguing that LB's persona was self-consciously crafted to divert attention away from the extent to which LB did labor with great vigor. LB must then, in DJ and elsewhere, attempt to "cover his tracks," to be what he is not, to be what his audience wants him to be (which is exactly what he is not). So LB's "double labor" involves textual creation that chafes against its own extreme discipline, skill, and liveliness. The net effect of this is that, because LB is doing so much labor (more, in fact, than WW), his audience has less to do; rather than initiating a potential collaboration (as WW does, and in the Iser-ian manner), LB seeks to entertain by the extent of his dexterity in maintaining a high level of both artifice and the appearance of intimacy. He does not necessarily want his audience to realize the different levels of labor going on; all his jumping around springs from an impulse that LB is not often credited with: the impulse to *take care* of his audience. LB reveals himself (once again) as the antithesis of his mad, bad image: a textual creator who creates a self-sufficient world in which his audience can feel entertained (by DJ's misadventures), loved (by LB's personal disclosures and confidences), and taken care of (by LB's playing a role that is expected of him, and that his audience finds both stimulating and, in a paradoxical sense, "attractively transgressive").

So, the common perception among Romanticists, which tends to take LB at face value and argue for a WW that labors with more diligence, is a perception that I would like to turn on its head. I would argue, in fact, that LB's labor (specifically as text creator) exceeds in measure that which WW overtook, because LB, beyond having to maintain a persona, take care of a large public, and develop a narrative around a protagonist that is not him (all the while including enough self-revelation to weave through a thread of confessional intimacy), was forced to work in a context where notice of his work was not only probable but guaranteed. However, the second part of this "labor thesis" is just as important, and maintains that in an equal and opposite sense, because WW did not have to worry about

taking care of a large public, he was confident enough to leave certain elements of his text (the most obvious being the handful of encounters that leave such traces in PL) open, thus opening the way for a more serious kind of labor, and a more genuine collaboration, than LB created for his audience. In short, part of what I'd like to say confirms received opinion: that PL is, in many ways, a superior work of art than DJ. But the ironic twist to my thesis is that, LB's famous (and perfidious) insouciance aside, this is because LB was forced to labor *more* than WW, and not the other way around. Byron, rather than not caring at all, cared *too much* about his audience to leave any mystery for them. This matters because it is a level of LB's stance and approach to textual art that is often confused and which two hundred years of scholarship have obfuscated. Byron's dependence on, and (contrary to received opinion) deep regard for his audience's needs (a mirror of his deep need to be loved and appreciated), has seldom been written about, but the evidence, when DJ is reevaluated (especially in comparison with PL) seems strong. It means that even after two hundred years, Byron is misunderstood, and that DJ's reception and consumption (including the ambiguities regarding pirated editions) testifies to this. I want to show that DJ is still misunderstood as a textual artifact, and that the very ease in which it can be consumed is evidence of a whole network of tensions and insecurities that LB was compelled to navigate (and, in the age of media celebrities, still has resonance with us today), and which WW was not.

…….

One thing I would like to argue for is a kind of role reversal, where labor and class are concerned: that was is visible in DJ and PL are a "bourgeois Byron" and an "aristocratic Wordsworth." LB's productivity level was high: he created a large body of work in a relatively short amount of time. This kind and manner of productivity has more in common with the bourgeois ethos that was nascent in early 19th century Britain than with the aristocratic indolence that was losing its power and prestige. So, "Bourgeois Byron" was the hard-laboring poet, crafting literary commodities for a market-place that materially rewarded him for his efforts (though he chose to refuse the material rewards). Byron's productivity could be seen as a kind of factory, and himself as the factory owner. He was a successful literary businessman, and the tremendous irony of his bourgeois work ethic is that one of Byron's most difficult tasks was to hide the fact of his own bourgeois industry! The cultivation of an insouciant surface improved Byron's literary commodities, by creating a persona that had an element of Otherness, to draw a middle-class audience in. Yet this effort in and of itself has the mark of an ambitious bourgeois, rather than a leisured aristocrat. Byron was no dummy: he realized that the influence of the middle-class was on the rise, and that he would have to put some elbow grease into his writing if he wanted to appeal to the middle-class: in effect, he was compelled to become what he was pretending not to be.

The difference between LB's textual self, and the closely guarded reality of what his actions amounted to (the creation and dissemination of successful commodities by an astute businessman with a knack for appealing to the bourgeoisie) made LB, more than a laborer, a kind of literary acrobat, swinging between different selves, different realms. It is important that LB receive credit for working much harder, not only than he has been given credit for, but than (arguably) WW himself. WW never needs to maintain a pretense to be (class-wise) something he is not. Because he is not aiming to *please*, but to *edify*, he does not need to be a contortionist. The ultimate goal of WW's Labor Chain is not to take care of his audience, but to give them the opportunity of using his experiences to take care of themselves. With

Byron, he is more inclined to take care of his audiences, babying them with lighter entertainment and, in a manner of speaking, sneaking the realm stuff in the back door. But note that WW's stance is, essentially, more aloof and aristocratic than LB's is: WW's text-creating self is sublime, raised far above any norm, and feels no need to be readily understood the way LB does. WW develops his narrative at his leisure without noticing what his product, as a commodity, lacks (intrigue, excitement, passion, sensuality). He may, as Simpson says, register the "ghostliness of things" in his encounters, but there seems to be scant evidence that WW cares about crafting a viable commodity. Despite being a card-carrying member of the bourgeoisie, WW is (or pretends) to be raised above the cycles of circulation, commodification, and consumption where PL is concerned; these themes are addressed *within the text*, but there is scant evidence that the text itself was intended for the kind of wide circulation that LB attained. WW is, in short, a textual aristocrat, and LB is a textual bourgeois. As such, the two models of Labor I have posited must be fit into this framework: WW's more demanding Labor Chain (which demonstrates aristocrat distance), and LB's less rigorous one (which demonstrates bourgeois concern with audience response and its material ramifications). I am arguing that WW's Labor Chain, because it enacted less closure, less ease, makes PL a superior work of art; but that LB needs to be reevaluated in light of an affiliation with the nascent middle-class that has not been much investigated.

……

And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indications, lost
Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper to explain
The story of the man and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn 'round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked
As if admonished from another world.
(PL, VII, 286)

The first thing I notice about this passage, is a sense in which Simpson's reading does not work. Simpson argues that Wordsworth's encounters are with specters, ghosts, or half-alive figures that somehow signify or represent the commodity form. As such, Wordsworth steeps these encounters in equivocations, ambiguities, and different kinds of darkness. However, Wordsworth presents this beggar as "emblem of the utmost," which implies, not merely solidity, but a kind of preeminence. The utmost is a peak, a pinnacle, and individualized

point; the essence of the commodity form is its exchangeability or substitutability. So, half-alive the beggar might be (immobilized, which might be what Langan would notice), but a representation of the commodity form would seem to be out of the question. If the beggar is individuated, what does he stand for? Geoffrey Hartman would read him as a boundary figure, connecting Wordsworth (and, through Wordsworth's binds, us) to the immobile, fixed, "sightless" qualities of Nature (as does the old man in *Resolution and Independence*). However, it is possible to complicate a Hartman-type reading just as it is to complicate a Simpson reading. Nature belongs (and resolutely so) to *this* world; Wordsworth etherealizes the beggar to represent *another* world. Not only is the beggar signifying a realm that is both transcendental and Other; he has the stature to admonish Wordsworth, which implies that the Other world is *higher* than this. The beggar is only a boundary figure because he physically manifests in this world; ontologically, Wordsworth presents him as fundamentally separated, cut off from Wordsworth's own self-representations, which we, as the readers, are encouraged to trust. Two pertinent questions arise from this reading: what other world is the beggar inhabiting? Contiguously, what labor are we, the readers, expected to do to "fill in the blanks" with our imagination, "create" this world *ex nihilo*? Wordsworth plays with ideas of Micro and Macro; the beggar is the emblem of two kinds of knowledge, self-knowledge and what might be generally kind "Universal" knowledge, which could be empirical or spiritual. Universal knowledge could be broadly defined, in this context, as any knowledge that takes a self beyond subjective concerns. This creates a binary opposition: there is subjective and objective knowledge, each imperfect ("utmost" implies limitation), each cohabiting (in harmony or in cognitive dissonance) within individual consciousnesses. To have and hold two kinds of knowledge at the same time leads away from a unitary model of selfhood, which Wordsworth both wrestles with and idealizes. It seems like one way to read the beggar is that he becomes an emblem for an "utmost," because for Wordsworth "utmost" means "most unitary." Wordsworth perceives the beggar as somehow beyond dichotomy; as having lost the need to balance imperatives while maintaining a placid surface; as so unitary that the very idea of "unitary" is irrelevant. The Other world is the achieved, unitary world that Wordsworth wants to achieve; it is a *world within this world* that is Other specifically because it is perceived as Other by Wordsworth. The beggar *has* what Wordsworth *wants*. All these levels are included in the labor that Wordsworth has done in painting this scenario. The labor we, the audience, are asked to do is complex. We must pass judgment on Wordsworth's conception of unitary selfhood; pass judgment on how close Wordsworth comes to unitary selfhood Wordsworth comes, both as text-creator and as protagonist; decide to agree or disagree with Wordsworth's perception of the beggar as having achieved unitary selfhood; decide of this Other world is, indeed, "utmost," and if the beggar is truly "emblematic"; and either add this encounter to our "store," as Wordsworth has, or decide not to "buy" it. I believe that the beggar is, in fact, a commodity, but not in the same way that Simpson does.

Simpson sees these boundary figures as, in and of themselves, representing commodity forms. I believe Wordsworth wants to present them as "priceless," and "sell" them to us as such. The beggar is only a commodity to the extent that we, as readers, can decide to accept ("buy") Wordsworth's mini-parable. To make this judgment requires labor; Wordsworth seems to be counting on his readers' unwillingness not to buy something they have labored for. But what makes the beggar worth "buying" is, specifically, his pricelessness. The binds that Wordsworth creates out of this scenario are arcane and abstruse— the beggar's connection to another world, which Wordsworth perceives, and which we can come to know through Wordsworth; the underlying premise that unpromising

surfaces can contain promising (spiritually promising) depths; the belief in the divinity of man, and the human form, even when nobility of form is lacking; the sense that all sensory particulars may be united in unusual contexts to form a perceptible spiritual whole. The encounter "admonishes" Wordsworth; since Wordsworth encourages us to follow his lead, we, too, are obliged to be admonished. But the other world that Wordsworth perceives is the saving grace; if we bind ourselves to Wordsworth and his perceptions, we may be shown what it is and how it may improve us as thinking, feeling, and subsisting individuals.

……

One afternoon, the first time I set foot
In this thy innocent nest and oratory,
Seated with others in a festive ring
Of commonplace convention, I to thee
Poured out libations, to thy memory drank
Within my private thoughts, till my brain reeled,
Never so clouded by the fumes of wine
Before that hour, or since. Thence forth I ran
From that assembly, through a length of streets
Ran ostrich-like, to reach our chapel door
In not a desperate or opprobrious time,
Albeit long after the importunate bell
Had stopped, with wearisome Cassandra-voice
No longer haunting the dark winter night.
(Bk III, 120)

This passage is anomalous in *The Prelude*, and also especially memorable, and so deserves some scrutiny, which I have not seen it receive. One ghost that Simpson does not enumerate (if we take this passage as a kind of "encounter") is Milton, and it can be argued that no ghost hangs so heavily over *The Prelude* as Milton does. I would say that, in many important ways, this particular vignette does qualify as a kind of encounter. Rather than meeting with the half-dead representation of a commodity form, Wordsworth encounters a particular space, which is ineluctably connected, by metonymy, to his most important epic forerunner. It is a unique encounter because it engenders behavior in Wordsworth that we do not see elsewhere in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth is driven to the Byronic act of intoxicating himself, by two factors: a group of his peers who are doing the same, and the extraordinary event of occupying the identical literal space that Milton had inhabited. Uniquely, this vignette stands out as the farthest from labor that Wordsworth comes in *The Prelude*. It is, in fact, a debauch. There is (for Wordsworth) an unusual degree of irony in this, for the labor that Wordsworth is performing in narrating this debauch is part and parcel of an effort tied to the inspiration (Milton) *of* the debauch, who probably would not have condoned the debauch! So this passage is evidence of a Wordsworth who is not completely averse to textual games, to types of *playing*, to labor that is not always completely in earnest. There is also an element of physical comedy (Wordsworth running "ostrich-like") which, while not presenting Wordsworth as Buster Keaton, humanizes Wordsworth in a way that is not merely respectable, professional, and transcendental, but *endearing*. Yet even in this, lighter context, it

is worth noting that Wordsworth's impulse is to atomize himself: the group drinking to Milton (we assume) hangs together, while Wordsworth separates himself to run through the streets. There are pronounced providential overtones: Wordsworth's extreme reaction, both to "sharing space" with Milton and to drunkenness, can be taken as a presaging of the labor that he will one day perform (and is, in fact, performing in the enactment of his narration). In this vignette, the burden placed upon the reader is slackened, because transcendental spirituality is supplanted by bodily sensation: we may have to strain to consummate our minds, but it is relatively easy to intoxicate our bodies (and to identify with the processes of intoxication). In this context, Wordsworth's binds are relatively conventional; he is writing about an experience (intoxication) that most adults are familiar with. However, there is a deep purpose to his intoxication which elevates the experience and makes it transcendental: the connection of the incident to the memory of John Milton. As such, Wordsworth encourages his audience to investigate the connection between *The Prelude* and Milton's texts, particularly *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth must, of necessity, separate himself from his audience; he has a personal connection to Milton, we (probably) do not; but we once again receive the distinct impression that Wordsworth has a "blessedness" that we may be able to attain if we follow him. That is distinctly (and manifestly) *his* perception.

There are "slackened moments" throughout *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth eschews hard labor in favor of nostalgia or straightforward reverie; this is one of them. Yet, even in this slackened context, there is the revelation of perceived intimacy between Milton and Wordsworth that needs some looking into. Several lines in the passage are addressed directly from Wordsworth to Milton. As such, we are presented with a direct implied comparison, which could be taken as a pretense. The comparison is made naturally and easily, and seems to have created little cognitive dissonance for Wordsworth. We, as readers, have two levels of labor (beyond the straightforward binds) to attend to: whether or not Wordsworth actually intends a direct comparison to be made between himself and Milton, and whether (if we deem this to be the case) we accept this comparison. Certainly, Wordsworth does not posit himself as drawing this comparison within the vignette, or not directly. We do not learn what his "private thoughts" are, but there is nothing to suggest that young Wordsworth yet deems himself ready to play the "heir apparent" role. Wordsworth as text creator, however, has deliberately set this textual event up as extraordinary, anomalous, and memorable. Its *sui generis* status within *The Prelude* isolates and highlights it. We may think of Wordsworth the protagonist getting drunk with the knowledge that he could become Milton, or with fear that he can never become Milton, but there is clearly a transaction being completed. Because Wordsworth does not here make a direct comparison, but does make a direct "I" to "thou" gesture in Milton's direction (an enunciation that suggests equality), I would wager that the evidence weighs things towards an interpretation that does, in fact, suggest that Wordsworth is directly comparing himself to Milton. But for a close reader, there is clearly some labor involved in ferreting this out. Once this is established, each reader must do the labor of deciding the aptness of this comparison. It does not seem that all this labor was an intentional move on Wordsworth's part; but there are occasions on which Wordsworth's binds, and things he either skips over or does not say exist in uneasy relation to each other, and this is one of those occasions.

…….

While thus I wandered, step by step led on,

It chanced a sudden turning of the road
Presented to my view an uncouth shape,
So near that, slipping back into the shade
Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,
Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,
A foot above man's common measure tall,
Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean—
A man more meager, as it seemed to me,
Was never seen abroad by night or day.
(Bk IV, 162-163)

The first line in this passage enacts a neat conflation of Langan's ideas about vagrancy and "wandering" (that vagrancy and wandering are a kind of manifestation of Romantic ethos and praxis) and Wordsworth's own ideas about providence, about wandering being in fact determinate, "mapped out" by the guiding hand of benevolent natural forces. In fact this line could be taken as Wordsworth's refutation of Langan's premise— the poet wanders (lets himself wander, free from the burden of time perceived as commodity, but secure in the knowledge that his experiences can later be crafted into useful commodities) specifically *because* he feels himself to be "led on." There is a deeply interfused presence that does, in fact, roll through Wordsworth's feet. It manifests gradually ("step by step") rather than in a rush; Wordsworth is seeking a kind of *synchronization* with this natural force. Time, freed from commodity form, is measured by a different form, priceless and incommensurate with it: the form of "a nature that builds." Nature (or natural impulse) co-labors with Wordsworth to enact the manifestation of providence; we labor to affirm this manifestation. Yet there is equivocation in Wordsworth's usage of the word "chanced," that implies an ambiguity on Wordsworth's text-creating stance: does Wordsworth really believe this is chance, or is he being a bit coy? This is an important question, for more than one reason: if Wordsworth is, in fact, in earnest, then his faith in providence is both less complete and less assured than we have been led to assume; if, however, Wordsworth *is* being coy, then "chance," is intended ironically (and irony for Wordsworth is not a characteristic gesture), and meant to reinforce that, (as the cliché goes) "everything happens for a reason." It is a subtlety that is never completely resolved; part of our labor involves determining these nuances for ourselves. Byron and his ironies are overt in comparison, and his overt ironies and absurdities add an egalitarian strain to an aristocratic performance; whereas Wordsworth's ironies are so neatly encased that only subtle readers will notice them. Wordsworth's willingness to let these delicate ironies stand is evidence of his aristocratic aloofness, *within the performance of egalitarian truth-seeking*. These figurations transpire on a site that holds the key that Wordsworth and Byron's binds: the site where Byron and Wordsworth create their texts. Text-creation would seem to have primacy over incident, situation, and encounter as creator and sustainer of meaning. It is the means by which incidences, situations, and encounters reach us, and (importantly), both Wordsworth and Byron recognize that text-creation is an incident, situation, and encounter in and of itself.

Notice the way Wordsworth phrases the first appearance of the soldier, as though the road he is traveling on is itself a kind of creator, with a work of art to offer him: "It chanced a sudden turning of the road/Presented to my view an uncouth shape." Catachresis makes the road an instrument of providence, with its own agency. It is also revealing that the soldier we are about to encounter is initially seen as a "shape," rather than a person. On one level, this confirms Simpson's suspicion that these encounters are with ghosts, the half-live,

the dead-in-life. However, Simpson's view fails to recognize that these encounters are not merely with ghosts; they happen between Wordsworth and *aesthetic objects*. A "shape" could just as well be found in a painting as in a haunted house; moreover, aesthetic shapes are just as redolent of commercial realities as ghosts are, perhaps more. This particular passage highlights the ocular nature of the early stages of this encounter: something is presented to Wordsworth's "view," and not to his immediate fear or displeasure (as would seem to be the case with a ghost). Hartman's view of these as "borderline" or "boundary" figures seems more germane; for now, it is enough to notice that the way these lines are framed makes explicit a connection between this encounter and the way Wordsworth encounters *art*, rather than commerce or law. It is almost like the "uncouth" nature of the painting of Peele Castle, put into a broader context. Wordsworth first registers this "shape" through *seeing* it, rather than feeling (or lamenting) it. Since we see through him, it is reasonable to guess that our initial impressions of this encounter will be aesthetic, rather than social, moral, or natural.

……

Conversely, WW's initial reaction to this shape does, in fact, enhance the impression that the soldier is not merely an aesthetic object but the manifestation of a *geist* to be encountered. The PL, as an endeavor, takes much of its weight from an air of intrepidity; yet we see that WW, as text creator, is significantly more intrepid than WW, as protagonist. Text creating WW is "over" his protagonist, securely above him; we, by inference, are meant to stand (also) securely above this protagonist. Yet, the position we maintain above him allows us to do the labor of understanding that he cannot. The idea of providence is passed along the Labor Chain; the protagonist *senses* it, the text creator both *posits* and *affirms* it, and it is up to us to *consummate* it (and our own minds in the process). In this particular context, it seems that we are to witness the enactment of a drama of providence. WW's protagonist resists the pull of this encounter; he seems to sense a kind of Otherness that is "too Other" to be managed along conventional lines; the drama is whether he will hold up his end of the providential bargain: providence bring gifts that take unusual, "ghostly" forms, that force a kind of reckoning. WW's response is marked by a recognition of his lack of power in the face of providence; yet he consolidates his own agency by placing himself in a relation of panoptical power of the soldier: "So that near, slipping back into the shade/ Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,/ Myself unseen" If this is, in fact, a kind of ghost, WW adopts not only a panoptical gaze towards him, by a mirroring sense of sameness: he slips, ghost-like, into darkness, becoming a "shape" for others as the soldier is for him. This is a point not much touched on by Simpson; if WW's encounters transpire between himself and half-alive manifestations of the commodity form (itself, of course, as Marx noted, a kind of ghost), does WW's own "slipping into darkness" qualify to turn him into (himself) a kind of boundary figure? To what extent does seeing the Other create Otherness in WW's protagonist? The text creator that is securely above lets this happen organically. We must labor with him to answer for ourselves whether WW, the protagonist, is "infected" by his encounters. Simpson affirms that WW is infected with confusion, ambivalence, fear, and misgiving; Simpson does not say whether or not this engenders a *likeness*.

However, the construction of the Labor Chain comes in handy to demonstrate why this might be the case. The WW most likely to take the ghostly form of the commodity is the WW *actively involved in creating the (or a) commodity*. As such, it is the text creating WW, the

second link in the Labor Chain, that would seem to be most likely to become the Other, if Simpson's premise is granted. The WW that hides behind trees does, in a sense, make himself ghostly, but only in a minor (and possibly comedic) way. The text creator is a commodity maker; the text is a commodity; thus, WW creating a scene for us has (in some sense) more in common with the soldier than the guileless, securely textually mastered protagonist. The protagonist hides behind a tree; the text creator hides behind text; both are laboring to come to terms with something not securely mastered. Indeed, as the episode continues, it is clear that WW has no intention of presenting a "closed" situation. It is our labor to interpret it, and to sort out three different possible ghosts: the soldier, the protagonist, and the text creator. I do not mean to imply that I accept Simpson's premise uncritically (or my own, for that matter): But commodities are not the only ghosts, and there are levels to ghostliness that can be taken beyond where Simpson takes his. Text itself, in the deconstructive firmament, is a ghost; the "non-presence of the present," in Derrida's words. Fixating too narrowly on a Marxist reading of this passage impoverishes it, both as text and as a multi-leveled textual construct. You could even argue that WW is hiding behind a tree because he feels the actual weight of the soldier's existence too strongly. It is such a weighty force that it rivets WW to a hiding place; there is nothing ethereal about it.

……..

"He performs as another icon of the new labor discipline, with the poet cast as the bewildered operative trying to keep up…" (Simpson, 93)

"it appeared to me/ He traveled without pain, and I beheld/ with ill-suppressed astonishment his tall/ and ghastly figure moving at my side" (IV, 166)

Simpson's formulation of this episode presupposes the agency of Wordsworth as text creator: the poet protagonist is "cast," in a kind of theatrical production that takes the form of a vignette, while the soldier "performs." Yet, because Simpson is arguing for the "ghostliness" of the soldier, this seems problematic. Ghosts are unpredictable; their movements cannot be anticipated, and their very evanescence insures a certain amount of inscrutability. Simpson argues that the soldier here is both ghost and "automaton," and that this combination aligns him with the "new labor discipline" (which Simpson never strictly defines, but which seems to refer to commodity forms taking the place of human ones, or of an interchangeability between the two); however, I think I viable argument could be made that "ghost" and "automaton" are mutually exclusive, when converted into human terms. The very essence of an automaton is predictability; Wordsworth's fear, in this scene, is specifically engendered by the fact that he does not know what is going to happen next, what speech or behavior the soldier will manifest. If Wordsworth were in any way certain, he would have no need to adopt a panoptical gaze. I also think that in some ways it is hyperbolic to call the soldier an "icon," even if (as is the case here) Simpson seems to be positing him as an anti-iconic icon (i.e. an icon who demonstrates his iconicity through negative/ "ghostly" attributes). Simpson gives way readily to his formulation, and, in some respects, loses the sense of Wordsworth's voice in the process. Wordsworth, both as protagonist and text creator, takes little for granted (where his providential encounters are

concerned), and maintains a distance of Otherness from the soldier, who manifests mystery, overpowering presence, and (despite his mysteriousness) substance; it is not for nothing that Wordsworth makes the uncertain semantic move of registering the soldier's "appearance" in traveling, rather than presenting the fact plainly: "The soldier traveled.." However, Wordsworth's uncertainty (even from the assumed height of his textual mastery) has a dual sense. It means what Simpson says it means, but it also means the opposite: Wordsworth is uncertain because the soldier *is a ghost*, but he is also uncertain because the soldier is *overwhelmingly real*. Wordsworth is able to channel this wavering sense of reality, and use it as a bind on several levels: we are drawn on by the mysterious figure of the soldier; we are curious about the interaction Wordsworth has with him; we want to know what the lesson Wordsworth derives from the encounter will be. It is a balance between ghostliness and reality, the real and the unreal, that makes Simpson's ideas take on flesh to the greatest extent, where issues of audience are concerned.

You could extend this formulation, also, to include the commodity form, and its implications: it was (and is) a ghost that has directly affected the lives of millions of people. However, there is some narrowness to this conception of the soldier, which negates other possibilities that a reader could labor to generate. Why is it that the soldier could not be taken as a military doppelganger for Wordsworth, himself? Wordsworth came of age in a violent era: the 1790s, when war with Revolutionary France was dividing English society. Wordsworth's Jacobin sympathies divided him twice over. It is not unlikely that Wordsworth had conceptions of the kind of soldier he would have made. This encounter may be an imagination, not just of an Other but of a second self. This makes the soldier a different, more personal kind of ghost than Simpson is positing: a path Wordsworth did not take, but that would have been available to him. The *overwhelming realness* of the ghost may have more to do with this possibility than with its status as a manifestation of a "new labor order." Divided labor has rendered this man homeless; but so has a life of abrupt stops and starts in military conflict. Simpson's "new labor order" dovetails with Wordsworth's binds only in one sense: it is a labored representation of the final bind: the reader's work. It is important that encounters like this be reopened, because Marxist critics like Simpson have, to an extent, *imposed closure* on it. While I would be belaboring things (pun intended) to go through every possibility of construction and reconstruction that a reader could make of this encounter, this novel possibility (the soldier as Wordsworth's second self) will suffice to make the point that Wordsworth has constructed this epic in such a way that the potential labor involved in interpreting it is (almost) endless. Wordsworth presumably wants his middle-class audience to apply their vaunted work ethic to the task of consummating their minds. The formulation of binds, as constructs, is congruent with *The Prelude* as an epic: a device for opening, rather than closing, which demonstrates Wordsworth's middle-class affiliation in its most positive light.

…….

FELICIA HEMANS: "RECORDS OF WOMAN"

The kind of binding sought by Felicia Hemans in *Records of Woman* and elsewhere was complicated, from the start, by Hemans' status as a female author. Being a woman deprived Hemans of a level of respect which both Byron and Wordsworth could, with some confidence, take for granted. Hemans was savvy enough to realize that being a poetess in Regency England made her stand out from the pack, even if it was in a context of extra limitations and condescension from patriarchal edifices like the *Edinburgh Review*. Thus, *Records of Woman* takes as its starting place the uniqueness, character, subjectivities, affective attachments, and domestic virtues that were commonly associated with Regency woman. In *Records of Woman*, we see female characters (many of them displaced away from England, for reasons that will be discussed) thrown into desperate, heart-rending, and pathetic situations. These situations evoke responses from female protagonists that can be construed as heroic; some demonstrate the virtues of the New Woman envisioned by Mary Wollstonecraft. These women do not so much thwart domesticity as they do enliven it with their perceptions and affective responses. Hemans was rewarded for these canny textual manipulations of prejudices and presumed virtues with popular success that placed her still beneath Byron, but (arguably) above Wordsworth in the marketplace. Susan Wolfson, in her chapter on Hemans in *Borderlines*, posits her success this way:

> Hemans' poetry of "Woman" traces its "feminine" ideal on a fabric of dark contradictions. Nineteenth-century ideology tended to read the darkness as a peculiar Hemans melancholy, or a "feminine" excess that could be trans-valued as patient suffering, forbearance, faith, and martyrdom. (47)

The two component parts that Wolfson reads into Hemans, her "melancholy" and all the manifestations of her virtue, combine to make *Records Of Woman* the commodity it was. There are many reasons why *Records Of Woman* could have struck such a responsive chord: Hemans' considerable technical finesse, her choosing of exotic and/or famous locales or characters, the skillful way in which she domesticates her woman without making them the slaves, dupes, or "artificial, weak characters" (39), that Wollstonecraft sees in the unrefined domestic; but, ultimately, the most logical reason for Hemans' success is that women (specifically middle-class women) were reading in numbers that they never had before, and they were hungry to read about characters that they could identify with in print verse. The reading public as "luxuriant misgrowth" had, as one integral part, a female component. But the melancholy bifurcation of women that Wolfson notes makes the whole phenomenon of Hemans success take on a darker tinge. Wolfson does not enumerate precisely what these contradictions are, but certainly they include the following elements: women who were relegated to the private sphere could suddenly and unceremoniously be thrust into the public spotlight (Properzia Rossi, Joanne de Arc); virtuous women could be hitched to unfaithful men (Arabella, Indian Woman); or women could find themselves powerless to protect those that their domesticity bound them to (Greek Isle Bride). Feminine excess as such would tend to read woman betraying the manly stoicism that their male counterparts enacted. However, there is a certain irony is portraying Hemans protagonists as excessive (even if excess is posited as manifestation of "sensibility"); often, Hemans protagonists are reacting specifically *against* excess, against circumstances that have arisen because something or someone got out of control. No doubt that notions of excess, both embodied in female protagonists and reflected in extreme circumstances, allowed Hemans to create a bind that would be attractive to an audience used to (on a general level)

the mechanized humdrum of middle-class life. It is a different form of Byron's exoticism: with *Don Juan*, we get Byron, whose status as a peer makes him attractively Other; with Hemans, we do not get a central protagonist but a poetess displaced into many protagonists, each of whom has some level of excess (inward or outward) to deal with, and these levels of excess become *our* riches as an audience, and make *Records Of Woman* a valuable commodity. Wordsworth's system parades its desire for balance and continence; Byron's protagonist(s) parade their profligacy; Hemans's protagonists display their exotic particularities, in all their wealth of excess. There is no more excessive character in *Records Of Woman* than Properzia Rossi, who acts (with more directness than usual, for this text) as a displaced Hemans, bifurcated between art and love. Crucially, Hemans is not merely an artist but a *famous* artist, which lends credibility to the grandiosity of her affect, makes her a maker of commodities turned into a commodity for the duration of the poem:

> Tell me no more, no more
> Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain
> To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?
> Have I not lov'd, and striven, and fail'd to bind
> One true heart unto me, whereon my own
> Might find a resting-place, a home for all
> Its burden of affections? I depart,
> Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me; I must leave
> The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death
> Shall give my name a power to win such tears
> As would have made life precious. (1-11)

Notice what the poem presupposes: there is a "someone" that is being addressed in an imperative fashion ("Tell me…"), and this someone is complementing the artist on the loftiness of her gifts. If Properzia Rossi claims the kind of posthumous existence that Keats eventually did, it is not because, as with Keats, obscurity has effaced her as a name writ upon water; rather it is because she is *too much* a woman of the world, too much coveted, too much prized. Hemans' makes the assumption that woman are both capable of having lofty gifts and capable of demonstrating them to the world and having them be recognized. It is a spiritual gift ("soul's…gifts"), not related by Properzia to the material realities of money and commodity fetishism. But her assumption of privilege, particularly of being wanted by an audience, is seductive specifically because those levels are simultaneously presupposed and transcended. The transcendence of art over its status of a commodity could be taken as a displaced form of an argument for women as more than bodies. Yet, that Properzia has both of these levels covered (women as more than bodies, art as more than commodity), and that this is visible from the opening lines of the poem, creates an exoticism that could enter her readers (male or female) into a whole other world, an alternative social reality with its own glories and limitations. It is important to note that Byron talks about himself in much the manner that Properzia Rossi does (not merely in *Don Juan*, but in "Fare Thee Well" and elsewhere), and it is his assumed privilege to do so. It is a fortunate accident (if not exactly, to enjoin an irony, a fortunate fall) for Hemans to have to do this; considering the status of women artists in England at the time, it *is* an obligation. But this poem has its air of the exotic specifically *because* it is set in Italy, because we can trace to what extent we want to see a displaced Properzia Rossi in Hemans and to what extent we do not. Hemans is very adept at using her resources *and* her limitations to craft poems that can entice, entertain, and

broaden conceptions of what constitutes the feminine in her society. Domesticity is by no means ignored; it is clear that Properzia Rossi's domestic affections have been rebuffed.

……

There is an uneasy relationship at work between domesticity and art that pervades *Properzia Rossi*. That women should work is not in question, either in Hemans' poems or in the greater societal context that produced them (though female labor, as part of the workforce, was still a relatively new phenomenon during Hemans' lifetime); what lingers are the doubts (born out by some of the factual realities of Hemans' life, like the lack of domestic skill that Wordsworth chided her for) that they (domesticity and art) are of commensurate weight and importance for women to pursue. Hemans walks this fine line by presenting a protagonist who merely *resorts* to art, when her domestic presence has been thwarted. Art is a last refuge, something beside the point created only so that the object of Properzia Rossi's affections will understand her affective attachment to him. The extremity of the affect reinforces that, for many of these protagonists, sanity and common sense (or lack thereof) are, indeed, an issue. Tricia Lootens calls Hemans' protagonists "figures in extremis; they are heroines, but for Hemans they are also women whose sanity, and perhaps even humanity, is questionable" (243). The extremity of a protagonist like Properzia Rossi becomes a textual gamble that Hemans makes; will readers accept these female extremities (perhaps owing to their exoticism), or will they reject them as *too extreme*? It is a gamble (and *The Prelude* and *Don Juan* also involve their own sort of gambles, which are, where gender hierarchies are concerned, certainly less precarious than Hemans') that could have gone either way; fortunately for Hemans, the chord she struck did not prove too extreme for readers to bind to Properzia and her other protagonists. It is also interesting to note how these characters refute Mary Wollstonecraft's notions of domestic women, who "satisfied with common nature…become a prey to prejudices, and taking all their opinions on credit… blindly submit to authority" (41).

Properzia cannot be satisfied with common nature because her nature is shown to be incorrigibly uncommon. Though she may pine for the love that is about to extinguish her, the authority she submits to is that of her own inspiration, and her blindness also is born of her channeling impulses that are working through her, rather than impulses that are being dictated to her by another person:

> Awake! not yet within me die,
> Under the burden and the agony
> Of this vain tenderness,-- my spirit, wake!
> Ev'n for thy sorrowful affection's sake,
> Live! In thy work breathe out!— that he may yet,
> Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret
> Thine unrequited gift.
> It comes— the power
> Within me born, flows back; my fruitless dower
> That could not win me love. Yet once again
> I greet it proudly, with its rushing train
> Of glorious images:-- they throng— they press—
> A sudden joy lights up my loneliness,--
> I shall not perish all! (19-32)

The work that Properzia is discussing, the forces she is evoking, have a dual purpose: to indefinitely extend the life she is about to lose, and to reach the object of her affections that she has heretofore been unable to reach. These forces are seen to be part of her self, a portion of her own interiority ("my spirit, wake!") that dwells not in her conscious mind but in her sub or unconscious, and it is a part of herself that she valorizes. Her notion of a life extending beyond her death can also be taken as a kind of self-valorization. Yet she swings back and forth between valorizing her gifts and degrading them; "sad mastery" becomes a "fruitless dower." "Fruitless" implies that Properzia has not had children; Hemans, of course, did have children; but the deep ambivalence Properzia manifests regarding children, marriage, and domesticity may be one source of the questionable sanity that Lootens posits. Once this is in place, another question is begged: if it would be possible for a female artist in the early nineteenth century *not* to be torn by so many conflicting impulses that sanity becomes an issue. "Female hysteria" was not yet introduced as an issue when Hemans was writing these poems; but they manifest many of the symptoms, from obsessive relationships with men to extreme emotionality.

From whatever angle it is taken, *Properzia Rossi* is both a singular character and a singular poem. There are formal elements within the poem that make statements, in and of themselves: in 132 lines, "I" crops up 28 times, roughly once every four lines. A few things may be deduced from this fact, the most obvious being that this is a character Hemans identifies with so completely that there is a conflation between her own "I" and the "I" of her protagonist. The "sculpture" of the text is also interesting; mostly in rhyming couplets, each stanza ends with a non-rhymed line. Hemans also mixes in occasional Shakespearean stanzas (ABAB) at irregular intervals. This method of sculpting combines tightness and looseness in such a way that a text that could otherwise be claustrophobic and static *breathes* (though I hesitate to call this a method of "female" sculpting). The "I" we see here is unconscious (importantly) not only of the impulses that guide her hands but of the force of her own egotism. It seems relevant that the man, the object of her thwarted affections, does not make a direct appearance, even in her thoughts. He is elided, even though he is supposedly the pretext for the poem. What may be deduced from this is that Properzia (as Felicia Hemans) was a woman well ahead of her time, a woman who wanted it all: career, art, family, love. Her desire nature is every bit as excessive as Byron's, but unsanctioned by social hierarchies. It is also important to note that she still has half of what she wants: her career and her art. The idea of the glass being only half-full, of her desires being half-fulfilled, seems unacceptable to her. There is a sense in which we see that her selfishness is more monstrous than the circumstances that have pushed her to her final desperate acts.

The question remains, what about her makes her capable of binding to an audience? I would argue that it is not only excess but *extravagance* that makes Properzia appealing as a character. All the exhortations, exclamation marks, and passionate ejaculations bespeak a state of total self-indulgence, which is aristocratic in nature. The transcendence of materialism, the sense that her art is above commodity, also elevates her sensibility above a middle class one. Thus, Properzia's exoticism was not only of nationality but of *class*. It is a "double whammy," and matches in complexity (albeit in miniaturized form) the total package that Byron offers in *Don Juan*. Unlike Byron, Properzia does not climb down the mountain to show us what it is like at the top; she plunges down the mountainside, and we witness her fall, though she maintains grandiloquence throughout it. Unlike in *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*, there is little sense of an awareness of the reader; rather, we are overhearing a dramatic monologue, that creates an entire world in front of us (again, miniaturized, and

compressed into a single vignette, unlike *Don Juan* and *The Prelude*), that is quickly effaced by the next poems in the series but may be returned to.

…….

The quagmires that complicate female fame when placed in relation to the domestic sphere are magnified when the fame is specifically *military* fame. This is most visible in the *Records Of Woman* poem that addresses Joan of Arc, and does so in a third person omniscient (to borrow a term usually ascribed to novelists) voice. Joan of Arc (in the context of a commodified literary work), unlike Properzia Rossi, is a widely known figure, one Hemans does not necessarily have to "sell" to an audience as worthy of representation. Hemans' task is to place Joan in a context where her public fortune will be contradicted by her inability to maintain a domestic place for herself, so that the incommensurability between public and private sphere engagements will be underlined. That Hemans relates less personally to Joan is evidenced not only by a third person perspective but by an emphasis deflected partly away from Joan's interiority. We do see into Joan, but only to a limited extent: Hemans' "camera" pans out to show us the spectacle of Joan's public success (manifested in a frenzied, adoring crowd), and how its scope is shadowed, for Joan, by the presence of the family she grew up with, who still recall her ability to engage domesticity and the virtues attendant upon it. Lootens article makes an intriguing connection between Hemans' portrayal of domesticity and "National Identity." Here, Lootens notes "ambivalence about the connections between domestic happiness and military glory" (240). The ambivalence is manifested in Joan's shock and affective reaction to her family, in the way this reaction is portrayed by Hemans, and (presumably) by an audience who must decide for themselves whether female fame and domestic virtue are capable of cohabiting in individual subjects, or if the pull of the dichotomy is too strong, and must force a reckoning and/or a decision. In this context, these overt ambiguities *are* what bind the audience to the poem and the poetess: we must decide for ourselves what is to be done with the figure of the famous female, whether there is a dissevering which makes the phenomenon unworthy, or if military and artistic triumphs (as in *Properzia Rossi*) are redemptive. Wolfson seems to think the answer is clear: "In the bad bargain of female fame, domestic paradise is forever lost" (70). Joan wants "nothing more to be restored as daughter of home." This is how the encounter (and this may be termed a "Hemansian encounter", a kind of translation, in non-providential terms of Wordsworth's encounters in *The Prelude*) transpires in text:

> "Father! and ye, my brothers!"— On the breast
> Of that grey sire she sank— and swiftly back,
> Ev'n in an instant, to their native track
> Her free thoughts flowed.— She saw the pomp no more—
> The plumes, the banners:- to her cabin door,
> And to the Fairy fountain in the glade,
> Where her young sisters by her side had play'd,
> And to her hamlet's chapel, where it rose
> Hallowing the forest unto deep repose,
> Her spirit turn'd. (69-78)

It is interesting to relate this to Wordsworthian encounters. Rather than Wordsworth *seeing* a blind beggar with his eyes closed, Joan closes her own eyes and is in a moment

transported back to a spot of time which nourishes her just as Wordsworth is nourished by his. But this manifests in Hemans as a vignette, rather than an extended, discursive meditation; it is a kind of "sight bite" (rather than sound bite) with a rhetorical purpose and an allegorical subtext. Hemans seems to be convincing us that what Joan is envisioning is superior in virtue to what is actually before her (an adoring throng that she has attracted through military victory). The allegory seems to imply that female fame and female domestic virtue are *not* commensurate, that Joan's life would have been better spent attending to hearth and home, an Angel in the House, rather than a demon of warfare. However, it is important to note that there is a sense here of Joan being *used*. She is not given a voice, as Properzia Rossi is, and the last portion of the poem, which represents the allegorical thrust of the whole piece (and there is, slightly ironically, a certain amount of phallic thrust to this piece, demonstrative of Hemans desire to be *seminal*), seems to come from Hemans, and Hemans alone:

> Oh! never did thine eye
> Thro' the green haunts of happy infancy
> Wander again, Joanne!— too much of fame
> Had shed its radiance on thy peasant-name;
> And brought alone by gifts beyond all price,
> The trusting heart's repose, the paradise
> Of home with all its loves, doth fate allow
> The crown of glory unto woman's brow. (89-96)

For an audience to perceive this as either entertaining or useful enough to bind to (or both), they must acknowledge that these issues are pertinent. If the combination of fame and womanhood is deemed of no interest, it would be difficult for a poem of this sort to bind itself to the attention of individuals. It seems that what is meant to entertain is the issue of fame: for a middle-class audience, fame held (and continues to hold) a great attraction. It is one apotheosis (along with material wealth) of business, and a life of productive labor. The middle-class were (and remain) heavily involved in issues of mobility and, if they were (or are) successful, in *rising*. Anything that would take an individual above the common mean, thrust them into a spotlight, and force them to function or perish, would seem to be of interest. Hemans subtly uses her audience's interest in fame to introduce the issues that would later constitute one basis of feminism: the possibilities for women in the public sphere. Hemans use of fame as a bind is made even sharper and more effectual by an engagement with recognizable history. Audiences like to see familiarity and novelty combined, and Hemans does this with great skill.

However, the duality of entertainment/usefulness is completed by the allegorical suggestion of a kind of inevitability: if you put a woman into the public sphere, *this* is what will happen. Domesticity will be killed off, the public sphere will assume a dominant position (penetrating the female subject, robbing her of agency), and an Edenic "paradise" will be shut off both from view and from a female subject's participation. The levels on which Hemans is working simultaneously make it difficult for her to demonstrate Byron's directness. Few would question whether a man like Byron belongs in the public sphere; he has a place that is easily acknowledged and acts as a resource and a springboard for him. Hemans must attack things from a more sideways angle: she performs femininity in her texts (things deflected, direct assertions not made), but must keep other balls in the air to say what she wants to say (and they must be visible only at strategic moments of disclosure, having

been properly contextualized). If we find "the heart of the woman under the robes of triumph" (Wolfson, 69), we nonetheless do not get an absolute decision *from Joan* as to whether her conquest of the public sphere was worth it. Joan has "lost paradise," but she has gained something else; textual equivocations on Hemans part make this easy to miss. The allegorical resonance of the piece is tinged with edges of incompleteness. The simple equation, woman=domesticity, does not do justice to a complex character in a complex situation, as Joan is. The incompleteness of the poem's allegorical dimension makes it more palatable, and also adds a rich source of rumination. Hemans' audience responded warmly; she had touched a nerve.

……

That there is some overlap between the terrain that Hemans stakes out in *Records Of Woman* and what may be broadly called "Byronic" is arguably. Byronism, as Christensen defines it, is involved not only with moody outlaws, Satanic melancholy, and wandering, but with the strength to represent these things textually in an effectual way. Hemans' version of this set of characteristics is visible in *Indian Woman's Death Song*, where we see a Medea-like protagonist propel herself and her child towards certain death. Wolfson reads this as a "Byronic anthem to freedom" (60), and in its intense rhythmic cadences and elegiac import, it certainly resembles parts of Childe Harold:

> "With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go
> Athwart the foaming brine;
> Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,
> So not again to mine.
> Welcome, welcome, ye dark-blue waves!
> And when you fail my sight,
> Welcome, ye deserts, and ye caves!
> My native Land— Good Night!" (I, 190-198)

The major difference between *Indian Woman's Death Song* and this passage is in the extremity of the context in which it appears. Harold is leaving England, going into exile, having been forced by circumstance and his own dark impulses. The Indian Woman in Hemans' poem is bravely facing extinction, for the simple reason that her husband has betrayed her, and she cannot imagine a life without successful matrimony. As in *Childe Harold*, Hemans' is speaking *through* her protagonist. The poem is divided into two major sections; a sonnet-length introduction, in the third-person, and then the bulk of the poem, in the Indian Woman's voice, in the first. This gives a sense of complicity between the Indian Woman and Hemans', as text creator. She endorses the woman's song by introducing it. That the poem involves infanticide constitutes another gamble on Hemans' part; it would have seem to have been far from guaranteed that an early eighteenth-century audience would accept (let alone enjoy) infanticide. However, the gamble paid off, her two visible reasons: first, the woman's exoticism makes her Other enough so that she constitutes neither a threat or an insult to Hemans' audience; secondly, because Hemans' labor here involves crafting lines with sonorous resonance (as manifested in incantatory rhyming couplets, that begin fourteen lines into the poem) so that the poem's sound is (as Wolfson notes) pleasing to the ear and engaging to her audience's emotions. This woman's relation to domesticity is

surprisingly uncomplicated. That she has been betrayed is her only motivating reason to commit this double-murder:

> Roll on! – my warrior's eye hath look'd upon another's face,
> And mine hath faded from his soul, as fades a moonbeam's trace;
> My shadow comes not o'er his path, my whisper to his dream,
> He flings away the broken reed— roll swifter yet, thou stream!
>
> The voice that spoke of other days is hush'd within *his* breast,
> But *mine* its lonely music haunts, and will not let me rest;
> It sings a low mournful song of gladness that is gone,
> I cannot live without that light— Father of waves! roll on! (20-28)

The simplicity of this rhetorical logic has moved Lootens to call this woman a "primitive protagonist" (243). What is most striking about the woman is not merely her capacity for language but her capacity for *action*. Whether suicide and infanticide are moral is one issue; but that, in their performative aspect, they are *effectual* is difficult to argue against; the climax of the presented situation manifests what might be called *negative effectuality*. This is a woman, whose sanity is as questionable as Properzia Rossi's was. Properzia Rossi's action constituted creation; Indian Woman's constitutes destruction. Properzia Rossi's situation offered at least a kind of redemption; Indian Woman's offers no, except the solace of oblivion. Lootens asks, "does Hemans' overwhelming melancholy cast doubt on her faith in redemption…of woman's love" (245). Melancholy is not necessarily context-dependent; here, there is no faith in redemption specifically because the situation is reduced to basics: he cheats on me, he does not love me anymore, the child and I must die. That this is the course of events is made to seem inevitable, the effect of overwhelming forces that exert unconquerable strength; "the soul of the woman, Hemans lets herself say through this exotic voice, is driven out of this world by gendered tyrannies, propelled to death by the Father of ancient waters" (Wolfson, 307). Domesticity alone is no match for "gendered tyrannies," that allow males to overthrow domestic ties whenever they wish and put females in a powerless, subaltern position. Hemans' labor involves presenting this in such a way that her melancholy, embodied in the Indian Woman, is compelling enough to hold her readers attention. This poem has an incantatory quality that helps to offset the melancholy of its presumed situation and sentiments:

> And thou, my babe! tho' born, like me, for woman's weary lot,
> Smile— to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave thee not;
> Too bright a thing art *thou* to pine in aching love away,
> Thy mother bears thee far, young Fawn! From sorrow and decay.
> (35-38)

The encounter between mother and child exists as a displacement of the patriarchy that dictates the life of this woman— they tyrannize over her, she tyrannizes over her babe, and it is her behavior that exerts the strongest tyranny. You could say that Indian Woman is beating her patriarchal foes at their own game, stealing the keys of death and life for them, and taking back her life by deciding to end it, and her child's life with it. But it is important to note, if we put Hemans in relation to Wordsworth, that the encounter does not involve mutuality— the woman does not recognize the Otherness of her child. She narcissistically

relates to it as merely a part of herself, as subject to the tyranny of patriarchs as her. Again, she displaces the narcissism of the patriarchal community that assumes her compliance. Her final act of rebellion, that will forever sever her from the patriarchs, is a way of forcing an encounter with them. Only, they will not be encountering a live woman, but a corpse. By the time the encounter happens, she will have displaced herself out of herself; self-elision substitutes for self-presentation. She will have removed everything from her physical organism that they can control. All these elements, made palatable by the Indian Woman's exoticism, combine to make the kind of poem that can enact a binding process with Hemans' audience. The emotions in the poem are clear and recognizable; the situation is simple and has universal resonance (potentially for men and women); and understanding and appreciating the poem does not take a great effort expenditure (though the exoticism and extremity of the character, the situation, and the thematic elements of the poem may be said to enact a confrontation with Hemans' audience; and, to an extent, textual confrontations can take effort to work through). What labor is to be done involves accepting the extremity of the situation, the extremity of this woman's decision.

……..

It is important to note that while *Records Of Woman* directly addresses issues of the feminine, there is an indirect gaze directed also at the masculine, the patriarchal, what issues orders of what constitutes decorum, what attachments are and are not appropriate, and what modes of expression are appropriate for each sex. As Norma Clarke notes, "the pages of *Records Of Woman* are filled with heroic suffering women and eloquently empty of adequate men" (76). The "emptiness" in these poems may be taken as a displacement away from the truth of Hemans' life; that her husband deserted her, and that the ideal of domesticity she was interrogating and often espousing was one she could not live up to in her own life. Marriage in these poems is seldom uncomplicated; often, as Clarke notes, "Marriage…is a bloody affair…awash with blood" (79). To make "bloody marriages" appealing to an audience, Hemans must labor against the impulse to merely confess; she must create scenarios that are compelling enough so that the "company of flesh and blood" generated is not one that complains, but one that avows strength and the pride of self-sacrifice in devotion. Nowhere is this more visible than in "Arabella Stuart," the first poem in *Records Of Woman*. Arabella is a young woman of noble blood who has been imprisoned for initiating an affair that presents political danger to the King of England. It was said that, having failed to escape with her lover Seymour, she degenerated into madness. The poem maps this degeneration, even as it registers the strength of her affect and her convictions:

> 'Tis past!— I wake,
> A captive, and alone, and far from thee,
> My love and friend! Yet fostering, for thy sake,
> A quenchless hope of happiness to be;
> And feeling still my woman's spirit strong,
> In the deep faith which lifts from earthly wrong,
> A heavenward glance. I know, I know our love
> Shall yet call angels from above,
> By its undying fervour…(28-36)

In Emma Mason's words, "Stuart is rendered, if not mad, emotionally broken by circumstance, a victim of the king's panoptical control and of Seymour's cowardice" (36). Yet, despite the "breakage," we are left to decide for ourselves if we find Arabella's "woman's spirit strong," and exactly what that strength is made of. It certainly involves devotion, but it also seems to involve a certain intransigence, an ability not to be moved (affectively or in principle) by outward circumstance. As in Anna Barbauld, the "feminine" finds refuge in a heavenward glance (though it is sexualized, due to Arabella's relationship to Seymour, unlike the platonic heavenward glance that Barbauld directs in poems like *A Summer Evening's Meditation*), and this has particular resonance and efficaciousness because the gaze of heaven is seen to be a leveling gaze, playing no favorites. Heaven is also a symbol, not of intransigence but of solidity, fixity, permanence. It is an opposite realm to the royal court, which was (and is, in modern political terms) fraught with contingencies, circumstantial inconveniences, factions, and spilled blood. What is most hopeless, in Hemans' presentation of Arabella, is hope itself; hope not of heavenly intervention but of the removal of oppressive circumstances. In the poem as in Hemans' life, the oppressiveness of circumstances was a continual reminder of how little effectuality was in woman's strong spirit. That Hemans' did earn a living from her writing was surprising, for her era; that it did not deliver her the male companionship she craved might have made it difficult for her to take pleasure in this achievement. While Hemans had at least some consolation, her protagonist here has very little, except hope that the pleasure and freedom that have been denied to her will be delivered at a later date. But her nobility is touchingly expressed, and this is a poem that, unlike *The Prelude* and *Don Juan*, goes straight for the emotions. Hemans' was often accused of sentimentality, and it has been noted that her sentimentality is what got her booted from the canon during the modernist era. The other levels of her poetry, exoticism, engagement with gender, attaching gender to politics, expressing inward realities in spontaneous overflows, were deemed unimportant by a new ethos of objectivity and distance, and the influence of the modernist sensibility (possibly a contradiction in terms) is only beginning to wane.

By the end of the poem, even Arabella's delusive belief that circumstances might changed has been effaced. In the midst of overweening affectivity, Arabella reckons the fact of her captivity and that it is unlikely that she will be rescued. It is part and parcel of Hemans' project that even with circumstances bearing down with incorrigible force, the female spirit remains steadfast, and the sense of devotion to an elusive male (as in *The Prelude*) perpetuates a performance of all these virtues, on a kind of psycho-affective trapeze:

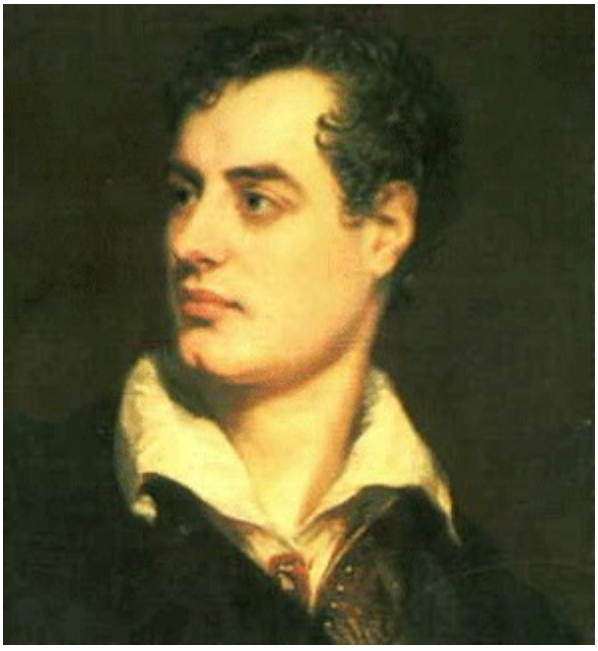
> …too long, for my sake, desolate
> Hath been thine exiled youth; but now take back,
> From dying hands, thy freedom, and re-track…
> the sunny ways of hope, and find thou happiness! Yet send,
> Ev'n then, in silent hours a thought, dear friend!
> Down to my voiceless chamber; for thy love
> Hath been to me all gifts of earth above,
> Tho' bought with burning tears! (248-257)

The Romantic irony in this poem does not merely result from displacements; it results from the obviousness of the fact that Seymour is not *worthy* to be loved. Arabella equates Seymour's evanescent affections with "all gifts of earth," but her very devotion begs questions. The extremity of Arabella's affectivity begins to seem like an Achilles' heel,

though the force of the emotion (and of its expression) likens Arabella's sensibility more to a male than a female role. It is not necessarily Arabella's love that is compelling; it is Arabella's *need* to love that makes her a heroine. She is devoted to love as a principle; and dedication to this principle dictates her actions, thoughts, and behaviors. It is obvious that she deserved better than Seymour, just as Hemans' biographers and critics have argued that she deserved better than Alfred Hemans. However, this sense of Arabella as a victim, of someone who deserved better, is ultimately why the poem could be both understood and appreciated by its audience. An Arabella who is not deluded, who knows she deserves better and says so, may not have been an attractive commodity to nineteenth-century audiences. Woman must be noble, but must be *unconscious of her own nobility*. This leaves a space for readers to fill in the blanks for her, to feel what she lacks. Byron can afford (sometimes) to be direct; Wordsworth's convolutions have (often) no obvious end; they are both working on less delicate (even land-mined) ground than Hemans' is. For Hemans' to bind these protagonists to her readers, she must make them sympathetic by positing them as not demanding sympathy. They must give everything they have to others, and often receive nothing in return. Whether they are supremely good or murderous, as in *Indian Woman's Death Song*, they must demonstrate a base-line sense of idealism of justice, and it must be (grievously) transgressed. This assures that these women lack the self-consciousness that they are not allowed to have, and that both Byron and Wordsworth demonstrate in spades. It is a sideways maneuver that allows Hemans to place herself in the poems but not be detected, and a sideways maneuver that allows us to feel for women that cannot feel for themselves.

……
….

BYRON AND VOICE IN "DON JUAN"



Discussing labor and *Don Juan* may seem to present certain contradictions and limitations. After all, Byron presents his epic as a site for improvisation, extemporaneous digression, and conversational élan. Jerome McGann says, "Byron's *Don Juan* manner seem(s) to represent a synthesis of direct self-revelation, objective storytelling, and the art of the poet-raconteur" (McGann, 280). Yet a synthesis implies things, if not antithetical at least separable, being combined. There are no syntheses without labor, even if the labor is performed so naturally as to seem effortless. In fact, Byron's effortlessness in *Don Juan* (manifested in easy rhymes, surprising wit, and extensive, effective use of aposiopesis) resembles the effortless grace of a modern athlete like basketball great Michael Jordan. It is no doubt laborious to make a slam dunk after enacting a ground-defying leap; but all we see is the startling beauty of the gesture. So it is with Byron. It is also interesting to note that the level of objectivity that McGann sees in Byron is matched by the completely subjective quality that Byron's contemporaries saw in him. This is what Hazlitt has to say:

> He is like a solitary peak, all access to which is cut off not more by elevation than distance. He is seated on a lofty eminence, 'cloud-capt', or reflecting the last rays of setting suns; and in his poetical moods, reminds us of the fabled Titans, retired to a ridgy sleep, playing on their Pan's-pipes, and taking up ordinary men and things with haughty indifference…he exists not by sympathy, but by antipathy…all is strained, or petulant in the extreme. (Hazlitt, 177)

What would a man this isolate, this "petulant," this wrapped up "antipathy," have to do with "objective storytelling"? Byron continues to generate opposition, across vast expanses of time, between readers who would like to see their own projections in him. My own argument leans far more towards McGann's position than Hazlitt's. It seems that Hazlitt's experience of Byron was jaundiced by actually having known him. Byron, by all accounts, had tremendous personal magnetism, and left indelible impressions in the minds of many he encountered. With historical distance, it is clear that *Don Juan* takes on much of its piquant quality specifically because Byron is so objective, so "analytical" (also McGann's phrase). For the sake of my argument, I must forget the slam dunk quality of Byron's talent, and make the assumption that, however easily the lines came to Byron, labor was involved in the production of this poem, and that much of this labor was involved in an effort to *take care* of his audience. In this way, I am moving even farther from Hazlitt, and past McGann; positing a Byron that can not only be objective, but is capable of caring about other people. This caring is generalized out towards a wide public; Byron could have said, as Gertrude Stein eventually did, "I write for myself and strangers." Nevertheless, the idea of a bourgeois Byron, creating specially-designed commodities to satisfy a niche (that was larger in numbers than any of his contemporaries could boast) is predicated on a Byron who has an affective attachment to this mass of strangers. There is a reciprocity between Byron and his audience that critics of Byron often miss; Byron's version of binding, unlike Wordsworth's, takes its strength in Byron's willingness to "make things easy," (or at least easier) than Wordsworth does. It would have been unlikely that Byron's popularity could be so overwhelming had Byron been as glacial as Hazlitt claims; Hazlitt dehumanizes him, and robs him of his potency in the process. What is continually interesting about Byron, particularly in *Don Juan*, *is* his humanity, and the objectivity McGann sees is adopted (I am arguing) specifically to keep tight reins on the parts of him that *are* "strained" and "petulant."

One essential facet of Byron is that it is a meta-poem, a poem that enumerates its own composition. As a meta-poem, Byron creates part of the textual bargain that makes *Don Juan* an attractive commodity: you can learn, not only about an interesting protagonist, but about how poetry itself is created. You can see into the mind of the poet *as creator*. *The Prelude* does something similar, but there is frequently a sense of difficulty and obfuscation; Wordsworth has something invested in keeping his processes secret. It is part and parcel of an aristocratic aloofness. Poetry, of course, has traditionally been the province of aristocrats; that Byron pursues a "meta" impulse distances him (or displaces him) out of his own social sphere. These are secrets of production; they show how this kind of labor is performed. Where *The Prelude* is concerned, we can achieve mastery by climbing up a metaphorical mountain to meet Wordsworth; where *Don Juan* is concerned, we have a sort of wise-cracking Virgil who walks up the mountain with us, pointing out scenes along the way. Byron totalizes this so that the picture includes not only production but consumption; how poets are "consumed" (textually and socially) in the public sphere:

> In twice five years the "greatest living poet,"
> Like to the champion in the fisty ring,
> Is call'd on to support his claim, or show it,
> Although 'tis an imaginary thing.
> Even I— albeit I'm sure I did not know it,
> Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king—
> Was reckon'd, a considerable time,
> The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. (Canto XI, LV)

Alan Liu has famously likened Wordsworth, during the Snowdon episode in *The Prelude*, as a kind of Napoleon. Wordsworth has achieved an epitome of power, conquered consciousness, sees things from the highest possible vantage point. It is then possible for him to taste real power. Byron *calls himself* Napoleon, and critics like Jerome Christensen have seen in him (and in the industry around him) a kind of despotic power. Yet it would be hard not notice how arch this self-reference is; it is self-conscious, self-deprecating (once the "imaginary" quality of the power is registered), perhaps even self-castigating (for the same reason). Moreover, Byron knows that his audience *will be entertained* by hearing him talk about himself this way; they are, and most likely have been, his consumers for many years. Byron is calling a spade a spade; he is commercially powerful, his labor is effectual (effectuality is another one of Christensen's characteristics of Byronism), and part of the reason is that he does not hide behind the kind of systematic approach that he deplores in Wordsworth. It is also somewhat curious (given *Don Juan's* wild success) that Byron talks about his power in the past tense; the implication of this passage is that he has surrendered the crown. Given that *Don Juan* was the most widely read long poem in the nineteenth century (as noted by William St. Clair), this can be parsed as an admission that Byron is simply *tired* of the Napoleonic role. For him (though circumstances still validate him), the game is over; he wants to play (the form his labor takes this time around), to entertain, to make another winning commodity; there would seem to be more use in more conflicts, born to oppose though he might be.

This impression is enhanced because Byron then goes on to talk about other contenders. Elided from the list is Percy Bysshe Shelley; Edward Trelawny claimed, in his gossipy memoir, that Byron was averse to "puffing" Shelley (despite their friendship) because Shelley's condition as an atheistic disgrace would reflect poorly on him. Blake, of

course, was not then sufficiently well known enough to merit consideration (though it turns out Wordsworth had already read him by the 1820s); that leaves Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and a host of lesser lights who had achieved some renown in the time. Byron always seemed to reference Wordsworth with a certain vengeful glee; here, he is mocked for having "supporters, two or three" (XI, LIX). To Byron, Wordsworth's systematic approach was good reason to keep him obscure, in his place. The caustic quality of his language, however, seems to have two sources: a desire to enact vengeance against an aesthetic that threatened him, and a desire to be entertaining. These kind of dual impulses are what taken *Don Juan* out of the realm of *mere* entertainment and make it art. They are also evidence of labor. The view in we get does not gloss over Byron's own faults. He labors to be as honest as he can be, saving us the labor that could exhaust us in *The Prelude*: trying to unearth intentions, figure out what the elisions and inclusions mean, "crack the code." This is the way Byron deals with John Keats:

> John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique,
> Just as he really promised something great,
> If not intelligible, without Greek
> Contrived to talk about Gods of late,
> Much as they might have been supposed to speak.
> Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate;
> 'Tis strange the mind, that fiery particle,
> Should let itself be snuffed out by an article. (XI, LX)

There is undoubtedly some crassness to this treatment. We know now (and Byron might have known then) that Keats was not killed off by his Blackwoods' article; that, in fact, his TB was not caused by anything poetry related. Byron plays this for laughs but, as always, the impulses in evidence are not simple. Byron includes praise for *Hyperion* that is not merely backhanded; given his earlier, harsher evaluations ("Poor Johnny Keats's piss-a-bed poetry," etc), this is no small thing. Moreover, it should be noted that at the time this Canto was released, it is likely that the greater part of Byron's audience had not even *heard* of John Keats. It is easy to forget that Keats appearance in so high-profile a poem was a kind of *introduction* into the world at large for him. It is odd to think of Byron as Keats' patron; but, in a real sense, that is exactly what he was. Byron, being Byron, does it completely on his terms; but remember that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge were given an entire eight-line stanza in this particular section of the canto. Byron's textual generosity (leavened, of course by his backhanded humor) necessitated that Keats be given an introduction that, given the circumstances (and that Byron could certainly have gotten away with eliding him, as he did Shelley), was more generous than not. Keats was made a part of thousands of lives, just through this introduction; it would be an interesting project to try and determinate how much of Keats eventual valorization began here. Byron would not be Byron if this were done *earnestly*; but, by hook or by crook, the labor is performed, Keats gets his posthumous introduction, and Hazlitt's evaluation sinks further into the historical distance. Would it occur to Napoleon to give favors to rivals this way? I am not an expert on the subject, but my guess is that it would not. If, as Christensen claims, Byron's despotism was real, it was certainly benign, which immediately makes it non-despotism. Christensen sees a boogey-man in place of an artist; I see an artist who is fond of playing boogey-man.

Where Christensen's book is concerned, there is an extremity to the fashion in which Byron is dealt with that belies Byron's complexity. This is particularly visible in the manner

in which Christensen chooses to end. Christensen's ending, is, in fact, stunning, and very Byronic, but also likely to become infamous in the annals of Byron scholarship. It is (unusually for a book of academic criticism) a vignette, which takes us to Byron's corpse, lying "in state." His friend Hobhouse is viewing the corpse, and Christensen appropriates this gaze, redirects it, and makes it a metaphor:

> …Hobhouse cannot be blamed for refusing to recognize the decidedly unbeautiful body steeping in spirit, whose "parchment" skin and "forehead marked with *hack* marks" register the unsparing application of the caustic of satire to the incurable itch of scribbling... if Hobhouse had listened as well as looked, he might have heard the lordly hack laughing at the ghastly figure he has cut before us. (Christensen, 363)

The pun that Christensen makes on "hack" is Byronic indeed; but is it appropriate? The insinuation that Byron was a hack would be an insult tantamount to comparing Byron with Southey. Moreover, there is a certain irony in this final formulation, given Christensen's premise; his book is called "Lord Byron's Strength," and one does not often compliment a hack on their strength. If we take this to mean that Byron considered *himself* a hack, it might make more sense; but the continual labor of honesty and objective analysis, efforts made to entertain the reader, make it unlikely that Byron would give himself this designation. Like the scene at the end of The Exorcist in which Father Karras briefly gets possessed by Pazuzu, Christensen seems briefly to be channeling Byron as he memorializes him. The difference is that, in a work of art, one is *allowed* to channel, to make these little leaps. It is a daring move for a scholar to step into an artist's shoes. My own judgment is that this attempt does not quite work; Byron is too much *not* a hack, is in fact the *antithesis* of a hack, so that Christensen's "possession" winds up tainting slightly an otherwise magisterial work of scholarship. However, as anomalous as this textual incident is, and as much as it misses the plain truth, it winds up being prescient of a whole tradition of Aestheticism and Decadence, much of which sprung largely from Byron's sensibility. How could anyone read this passage and not be reminded of *Dorian Gray*? The body that represents a disfigured, corrupt soul, but reveals itself only in death: this is Wilde's own denouement, to a tee. "Ghastly" is a harsh judgment on Byron's textual character, and (I feel) as unfair as calling him a hack. Ghastly is a more pejorative way of saying ghostly; Byron's living presence is so obtrusively in *Don Juan* that there is really nothing ghostly about it, or him. You could say his ghostly/ghastliness arises from the elision of his physical body from England, where his commodity was consumed; but that distracts attention away from what constitutes textual encounters, generally. Byron did not do reading tours, as authors today do; his physical body was generally to be elided, whether he was dwelling in England or not. As with "hack," "ghastly" is an insult to Byron's labor. Byron goes so far out of his way to be human (even, one might say, humane), that it is hard going turning him in to Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray is all secrets; Byron, in *Don Juan*, is no secrets whatsoever. Whether Christensen sees "strength in ghastliness" his text does not mention; but strength and ghastliness are an odd conflation indeed. In short, Christensen's indeed is an intriguing misfire, a kind of textual arrow shot into the air. I do not think that it hits its target, but perhaps it does not mean to. It is memorable, thought-provoking, and Byronic; it is in a tradition that Byron initiated and may well have approved.

Much has been made, and over a long period of decades, of Romantic sincerity. Exemplary Romantic poems attempt (we are told) to achieve a transparency, whereby subjectivities are revealed, in moments of transcendent, spiritualized epiphany. Whether or not notions of Romantic sincerity can be applied to Byron is still in question. What constitutes specifically Byronic sincerity? Is there such a thing? I would answer that the very facticity of Byron's body of work engenders a resounding *yes*. This body of work is testament to a strong work ethic, highly unusual among members of the leisure class, and aligning Byron more with normative bourgeois behaviors and ethos than might be expected. That Byron has a concept of labor at all marks him out as unique, for the context and circles in which he moved. This is evidenced by how Enlightenment thinkers theorized the leisure classes. Here is Adam Smith, in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> The man of rank and distinction, on the contrary, whose whole glory consists in the propriety of his ordinary behavior, who is contented with the humble renown which this can afford him, and has no talents to acquire any other, is unwilling to embarrass himself with what can be attended either with difficulty or distress… he shudders with horror at the thought of any situation which demands…long exertion of patience, industry, fortitude… (Smith, 84-85)

Byron, on the other hand, courted difficulty and distress right from the beginning. His first efforts were scorned; he applied himself diligently, and the success of *Childe Harold* was several years (of frustration and incomplete successes) in the making. Bourgeois Byron seemed to shudder (like a good industrialist) at the thought of *not* laboring at his craft. It is a craft that, outwardly, he seemed to scorn. But extensive bodies of work do not happen by accident (even for poets who espouse an ethos of accident and improvisation, as Byron did), and that Byron was blessed with great fortitude, considering his beleaguered situation(s) seems reasonable beyond question. If Adam Smith had lived to see Byron, it is likely that he would have been stymied by him. Byron's great labors did, in fact, make him a paradigm-breaker; and I would argue that positive labor evinces a fundamental sincerity; if you labor at something (and the labor was, in Byron's case, not materially necessary and thus not alienated), you must sincerely want something from it. Byronic sincerity has to do with labor that is its own reward, which is performed because it is worth doing, and for the reason that the personality Byron reveals to his audience is compelling and unique, both through Byron's social position and through his specific experiences in the world. Byron's perversity necessitated that this be hidden beneath layers of insouciance and oppositional poses; but, by Smith's measure, there is nothing usual or proprietary about a man of rank scrambling to satisfy a rabid audience with successful literary commodities. Much of Byron's sincerity lies at the level of action, rather than speech (albeit action perpetuated in speech acts): *do not listen to what Byron says*, *watch what he does*. In this context, works of art are there own evidence, and make a highly unusual social statement by their very existence. Byronic sincerity is irreplaceable, and anomalous; it is the sincerity of individualism, heightened to an extreme pitch and thrown with fantastic velocity. There are things that Hazlitt says about him that are fair, like this:

> Byron makes man after his own image, woman after his own heart; the one is a capricious tyrant, the other a yielding slave; he gives us the misanthrope and the voluptuary by terms; and with these two characters, burning or melting in their own fire, he makes out everlasting centos of himself. (Hazlitt, 179)

Hazlitt approaches this "himself" in a pejorative light, but does not seem to register that this is Byron's consciously adopted strategy. It is predicated, as a strategy, on a demonstrable fact; that Byron's self was more unique, more singularly situated, and more interesting than Wordsworth's, Southey's, or Coleridge's could ever be. Byronic sincerity involves this self in all levels of social strata, and takes Byron into realms that the Lakers could not reach (both by want of charisma and want of social distinction). Both the Lakers and Hazlitt himself may have been effected (as we, centuries later, are not) by jealousy of Byron; of his mobility, his effectuality, his strength. However, I do not, as Christensen does, completely align this strength with despotism; I align it with sincerity that understands, completely and fully, the uniqueness of his situation, how it affects the world around him, and why he adopts a strategy that includes Byron himself as both a principle character and means of attraction. Truly, Byron *was* attractive, and he knew and used it. By incorporating himself into his work, he was playing to his strengths. His labor, then, was to create an accurate textual representation of himself (among other things), that gave pleasure and made sure that his customers were satisfied. I do not see the bad faith in this transaction that Hazlitt (along with the Lakers) saw. Had Byron's egotism been *mere* egotism, we would not still be discussing him; to be reductive, this would make him like Southey. But Byron is sincere with himself about what he can and cannot do; this manifests in texts that are branded with a distinctive individual stamp, and whose laboring creator knows what works and what does not. Jerome McGann highlights this sincerity with great acuity in *Fiery Dust*:

> The *Don Juan* manner develops out of our understanding that personae are being assumed and manipulated, that somebody…is having fun at playing roles…but this "nameless sort of person" can be seen as a persona only if we strip all useful meaning from the term…the "person" is the historical Byron…and the persona at the bottom of everything is Byron himself. (McGann, 287)

It is interesting that McGann makes a distinction between the "historical Byron" and "Byron himself." It is arguable that the historical Byron *is* Byron himself; that Byron's self-consciousness, rather than eliding history (as Wordsworth's often does), is constituted by it. It is, again, testament to Byron's self-conscious knowledge of his own uniqueness. It is legitimate for Byron to write about his history, because his history is (materially, blatantly) not like anyone else's. Wordsworth wanted to raise his audience up, into equivalence with him; Byron knows that his social station makes this process impossible. Peers are born, not made. The result is that Byron, *because he cares* (not to turn Byron into a textual Mr. Rogers), brings himself down a few notches, adopts a middle-class ethos of productivity, and happily (by the standards of his class) gets his hands dirty. Wordsworth speaks, in his Preface, of poets having "comprehensive souls" (81); however, comprehensiveness has limits. Wordsworth can never know what it is like to be a peer, to move in the beau monde. It is because Byron really is comprehensive, and knows himself to be, that he adopts a strategy that revolves around him. Binds to an audience, in his hands, are a bargain in which Byron's

audience can grow, not to *experience* but to *understand* all the levels on which Byron has lived. Byron's version of Snowdon is mostly material, and inaccessible; but Byron, unlike Wordsworth, adopts straight talk, to make clear in no uncertain terms what it is like; that it is, in fact, *not* a spiritual peak, and that it is in many ways not worth bothering with. Candor redeems superiority; unlike in Wordsworth, where superiority is (to some extent) an author's pretension. By the same token, Wordsworth's transcendent spiritual peaks have no echo in Byron; it is part and parcel of Byron's materialism that Wordsworth's mountains are not worth climbing. To Byron, they are (or seem) barely existent; the question is whether Byron is just too lazy to labor at texts the way that Wordsworth does.

Byron's self-consciousness of his own uniqueness, and the way this self-consciousness manifests textually, often takes the form of a kind of *seeing*. This is not the straightforward ocular representation we find in Wordsworthian encounters (straightforward only in the sense that we are actually seeing, through Wordsworth's eyes, an entity that occupies physical space); it is a mode of the witness to history, the poet that has experienced not merely encounters but epochs. Byron contains them in textual space, and sets them in order; it is characteristic of his labor that his comprehensiveness must be continually demonstrated. In this way, Byron transcends Smith, Hazlitt, and McGann at the same time; where Smith is concerned, Byron refutes notions of aristocratic obliviousness and indolence; that Byron notices (in great detail) everything around him that is not him refutes Hazlitt's accusations of extreme egotism; and in this process, role-playing seems to cease, as Byron comes down from the mountaintop, not to bequeath a tablet but just to inform:

> Talk not of seventy years as age; in seven
> I have seen more changes, down from monarchs to
> The humblest individual under heaven,
> Than might suffice a moderate century through.
> I knew that nought was lasting, but now even
> Change grows too changeable, without being new:
> Nought's permanent among the human race,
> Except the Whigs *not* getting into place. (XXI, LXXXII)

The enjambed rhymes in this stanza create a sense of the chaos, devastation, and upheaval that Byron has witnessed; his own place in the chaos, his particular station, is elided, though he does privilege his own viewpoint. There is, arguably, an element of egotism to this; but the egotism of *seeing* is significantly different than the egotism of *doing*. It takes its significance specifically from things it has merely witnessed, and is worthwhile only to the extent that things outside the self are noticed, registered, catalogued, presented, and then labored into representative text. Byron's ambivalence about metaphysics, and about systems that result from them, is explained by the feelings of impermanence that unsettle him; systems create illusions of permanence and stability that Byron has seen refuted by "that unspiritual God, circumstance," both in his own life and in the political changes he has witnessed. There would seem to be a connection between what is permanent and what is unitary; unitary things (poems or systems) are, to Byron, misrepresentations of an essential impermanence that he has seen demonstrated. But it is important to notice, in this textual instance, that Byron does not appear to be *trying* to refute Wordsworthian unitary or systematic illusions; it is one of the great ironies of comparing *The Prelude* to *Don Juan* that Byron so frequently erupts with volcanic overflows of powerful feeling, in a manner that Wordsworth does not. That is certainly the case here. It is almost a *cri de couer* that demonstrates a "strength" that is

more affective than Christensen seems to give Byron credit for. It is a picture of absolute discomfort: "change grows too changeable, without being new" posits Byron as, rather than a despot, a prisoner of despotic circumstance. There is ample evidence that Byron did, in fact, consider himself more ruled-over than ruling: Christensen's paradigm only works when Byron's texts are placed, as commodities, into a market place. Yet, Byron's labor seems to involve a willingness not just to disclose or inform, but to confess, and to do so with authentic urgency. This pivotal eleventh canto does have an explosive quality, unique in *Don Juan*. Byron's eruptive affectivity finds sufficient matter in what he has seen which, as he knows, and as his readers knows, distinguishes him from the vast majority of the human race. If "circumstance, that unspiritual God" is a card game, Byron has been dealt a royal flush; but he has experienced this fortune as, often as not, something as bothersome as his club foot. What he sees is conditioned by the hand he has been dealt, and covers a scope and a kind of extremity that Wordsworth (and Coleridge) could not claim. At this point in the text, Byron adopts anaphora, which he does not make frequent use of, and that lends this series of stanzas a heightened sense of drama and importance:

> I have seen Landholders without a rap—
> I have seen Joanna Southcote— I have seen
> The House of Commons turn'd to a tax trap—
> I have seen that sad affair of the late Queen—
> I have seen crowns worn instead of a fool's cap—
> I have seen a Congress doing all that's mean—
> I have seen some nations, like o'erloaded asses,
> Kick off their burthens— meaning the high classes. (XXI, LXXXV)

Certainly the final couplet here holds a rather startling punch. It is especially startling not only for the unconventional rhyme of "asses" with "classes," but because it directly implicates Byron himself; he is, of course, a member of the high classes. When politics comes up and push comes to shove, Byron is more than willing to see things in a stark light, even if it forces him into an uncomfortable position. Where these revolutions are concerned, it could be argued that fine distinctions are erased; Byron becomes *merely an aristocrat*. He is potentially part of a "burthen" that "overloads," and he knows it. J. Michael Robertson has presented strong evidence that Byron knew how to transcend his own status as a "burthen," how to preserve his individualism in spite of it:

> Byron is able to appear both an individualist and an aristocrat without betraying his essential individualism because the typical English aristocrat was both an individualist and an aristocrat— except that the typical aristocrat's individualism was only superficial…(Robertson, 641)

Neither being an aristocrat nor being an individualist necessarily denotes pragmatism. In fact, it could be argued that neither an aristocratic stance nor an individualistic stance is pragmatic. Pragmatism, as we have come to know it, is a quality of the middle class. It is the conventional mark of the businessman. In presenting the high classes as "burthens," Byron aligns himself unreservedly with middle class pragmatism. What is interesting is that this displacement is so *forceful*, and it is a force that is not visible in *The Prelude*. It seems that it is the force of affect, and demonstrates exactly *why* Byron was so simpatico with his audience. Politically, Byron's sympathies were with the nascent middle class. His experience took him

into other worlds (which, he knew, held a certain amount of allure for middle class readers); his pragmatism, the part of him that *demonstrated* what a peer was really like, how he lived and what he did, could not have been more bourgeois. Robertson misses Byron's pragmatism, and in doing so misses the secret of Byron's success. It was not a calculated pragmatism; it was an organic equivalent to Wordsworth's ethereality. Byron's displacement out of the aristocratic class worked because it was not forced; he himself felt (and with great force) how burdensome the aristocratic system had become, both to France and the England. That he *acted* on his feelings in the creation of literary commodities, devoured primarily by a middle class audience, further perpetuates an image of Byron as not merely a hard-headed pragmatist but an "affective pragmatist" as well. In today's parlance, he *felt* the middle class. Byron dramatizes this by using aposiopesis between "burthens" and "meaning the high classes." He is creating drama around this textual moment because he wants this stance to be known, in no uncertain terms. He does not dwell on it, because he does not need to; unlike in Wordsworth, there is not an (albeit rewarding) code to crack.

There is hard evidence that the affective pragmatism I have posited in *Don Juan* was, in fact, a deliberate move on Byron's part. The struggles between Byron and John Murray regarding *Don Juan* demonstrate two strong convictions on Byron's part: that Byron thought that the approach he had adopted was worthwhile, and that he believed the general public would agree with him. As we know, Byron was vindicated on both counts. One particular correspondence with Murray sheds as great deal of light on the subject. Murray was pressuring Byron to write an epic. In 1819, Byron answered him thusly:

> So you…want me to undertake what you call a 'great work'? an Epic poem, I suppose, or some such pyramid…You have so many 'divine' poems, is it nothing to have written a *Human* one? without any of the worn out machinery? (Letters and Journals, p.284)

As illuminating as Byron's response to Murray is, it does beg a few questions. What, in Byron's mind, separates the *Human* from the 'divine'? Significantly, Byron conflates the 'divine' with worn out machinery. To him, they are flip sides of the same coin. The kind of humanism that Byron is espousing is (I would argue), a pragmatic humanism. It has its basis in feeling as common as those Wordsworth himself espouses in his Preface. The difference is that Byron has no need to colonize and appropriate the voices of the rural poor or anyone else (though his texts do demonstrate the ambition to colonize the attention and funds of middle-class readers, via seduction). Grounding himself in common feeling balances the extremity of his experiences and their textual representations. Because he is a star, he must force himself to keep his feet on the ground. What is Human is just this attempt at balance: between the psyche and the emotional nature, the outward and the inward, concrete experiences and imaginative truths. Balance is, in fact, one essential facet of Byron's labor; Byron writes from an inner necessity to balance the diverse elements and impulses that have constituted his existence. The difference between Byron and his audience is that Byron's experience has been "extreme in all things"; what Byron shares with his audience is the level-headedness to keep these extremities in perspective. Moreover, the way these confessional strains appear in *Don Juan* refute John Lauber's claim that "it is a poem which is all episode" (614); in fact, much of what is compelling in *Don Juan* is what happens when Byron forgets the episodes he happens to be addressing, and chooses to extemporize, as happens in Canto Eleven. The fourth and final anaphoric stanza reinforces the impression that Byron is using

his extraordinary experiences, his breadth of vision, specifically to bind himself to his audience, rather than standing apart or indulging in indolence:

> I have seen small poets, and great prosers, and
> Interminable— *not eternal*— speakers—
> I have seen the funds at war with house and land—
> I have seen the country gentlemen turn squeakers—
> I have seen the people ridden o'er like sand
> By slaves on horseback— I have seen malt liquors
> Exchanged for "thin potations" by John Bull—
> I have seen John half detect himself a fool.—

The chaotic facility of Byron's rhymes add to the sense of intimacy and uniqueness that binds Byron to his audience: "and/land," "squeakers/liquors," etc. His usage of the Spenserian stanza is certainly a marked departure from the careful treatment Wordsworth gives the Spenserian stanza in *Resolution and Independence*. Byron's technical irreverence is seductive to an audience that may or may not respect technical poetry conventions to begin with. That Byron apostrophizes the "people" is a key move to register, because it seems "on the surface" so uncharacteristic. To this day, few people write about Byron as a poet "of the people" the way that, say, Walt Whitman is thought to be. Yet Byron's massive audience is testament to the fact that he was, for want of a better epithet, the "people's poet" of his day. There is, in these lines, an incantatory power, rare both in *Don Juan* and in Byron's oeuvre, which takes its power from the compulsion to *attest*. What makes the moment uniquely Byronic is that this happens in the past tense; these are things Byron *has seen*, rather than things he is seeing or may see in the future. Byron thus, even at the height of his passion, avoids playing the prophet or seer. In fact, there is pessimism at work that borders on nihilism: the much vaunted Byronic despair. Yet once again, aposiopesis creates high drama, which begs the question to what extent Byron is merely "staging" his authenticity. Jonathan Shears writes, "Aposiopesis creates a role for the reader as actor central to the establishment of meaning" (187); in other words, the drama of the moment occurs as a reciprocal movement. Byron invites us to bring what *we* have seen to the occasion. Particulars are mixed with generalities in such a way that much that is left out can be read in: who the small poets are, who the great prosers, etc. More particularity would be speechifying; this, Byron will not stoop to. His labor is to create a dialogue, which leaves space for additions and subtractions, as individual readers deem necessary. It is far from dialogism, in the Bakhtinian sense, because Byron's voice is so distinctive, singular, and recognizable. Yet the spaces and breaks of aposiopesis prove Shears' point that Byron *actively courts collaboration with his audience*. This is done directly and pragmatically; in Wordsworth, the project is more obfuscated by systematic reasoning.

Shears continues, "Byron incorporates an implicit invitation to the reader to become an actor and as a result tells stories in which a sense of theater in continually kept in play" (187). The invitation to the reader, both to collaborate and to be "in cahoots" with Byron, is one facet of the labor that Byron is performing in the composition of *Don Juan*. It is the labor of being "Human," as Byron sees it, and it is important to note that Byron's conception of the "Human" seems to depend not just on "context," as McGann posits, but on perpetual renewal of efforts to connect, on *process*. The process by which Byron creates a textual version of the "Human," eschews the coldness and solidity of the unitary machinery (which Wordsworth still employs) for something more fluid. To begin fluid and remain fluid

is one challenge that Byron labors at, and he invites us to labor with him. The reciprocity that Byron envisions hinges on a *reasonable* amount of fluidity, going both ways. By "reasonable," I mean the amount of fluidity that an audience which desires both entertainment and edification (rather than the enlightenment Wordsworth seeks to impart) could be expected to invest in a poetic text in the early nineteenth century. Pragmatism and fluidity do not have to make uneasy bedfellows; through labor, we can find a happy medium. Aposiopesis exteriorizes this process, as a kind of *textual wave*; LB generates it, we ride it. Yet Byron has also to ride his spontaneous overflows, and we have to generate the energy to continue reading the poem closely. The binds are there to bring us close to Byron's vision of the "Human"; how close we come is determined on the extent to which we are willing to buy into the commodity that Byron is selling us. Wordsworth is not as directly engaged with commodification, but you could say that his ambition binds him to it to an extent. Byron takes the commodity status of his art very seriously, but in doing so is able to transcend it, specifically because the text (to him) must be a commodity before it is a mode of entertaining or edifying. To make a commodity good, you must give great thought to how you might engage your audience. By not acknowledging this process, or acknowledging it in a cursory way, as Wordsworth does, the risk is run of creating dramas that no one can identify with. On the other hand, Wordsworth's distance from commodification gives him a freedom to maneuver in that Byron does not have. He can thus take his ethereality to the unprecedented heights of Snowdon, while Byron remains earthbound, both ruling and ruled-over.

To what extent was *Don Juan*, for Byron, a "song of Himself" (not, perhaps, a precursor to Whitman's more earnest endeavor, but perhaps a sort of textual cousin)? The two strains that run side by side in *Don Juan*; Byron narrating the story of *Don Juan*, and Byron digressing, extemporizing, and confessing home truths about his life and the unique context he inhabits; an individual reading of *Don Juan* depends on whether we give these strains commensurate weight. It would be difficult to maintain objectivity in doing this, because it is (to an extent) a question of taste. What Christensen calls "circumstantial gravity" (214) in *Don Juan* (and McGann has a similar take on the importance of context in the poem) can be applied equally to both strains: Byron and his protagonist are about equally "tempest-tossed" where circumstances are concerned. Byron, then, not only has to present a balanced account of himself (in the context of his digressions), he has a hero to account for. However, I would argue that Byron, as he presents himself, and *Don Juan*, as he appears in the text, are not commensurate. Byron is a self-conscious Romantic genius, inhabiting many levels of textual and non-textual consciousness (sensualist, intellectual, moralist, aristocrat, bourgeois, rebel, poet, poet-hater); *Don Juan* seems a cipher in comparison, a parody of Byron as he existed as the young, struggling poet who scribed *Hours of Idleness* and *English Bards*. I half-agree with Christensen that "Juan commands its reader to reoccupy the institution of a society in turbulent passage to a democracy that is more than nominal" (253); while it is often difficult to decipher what Christensen is talking about, I take this to mean that Christensen sees this poem (in the Byronic strength it evinces) as a "command" to register a new level of freedom, as manifested (somewhat ironically) in another commodity. But if Byron is the avatar of this new level of freedom, as Christensen suggests, then it is a freedom mediated by the circumstantial gravity by which Byron himself is ruled: the despotism of time, fading interest, used up spiritual, emotional, and artistic resources (cultural and literal capital squandered), lack of belief, faith, and outright disbelief in redemption. Freedom and a kind of nothingness, blank space, are conflated, so that freedom is registered as a loss, merely a less onerous shackle than slavery. What freedoms Byron

documents are in the immediacy (McGann's term) of moments as they pass. Does this amount to "turbulent passage" or discursive stasis? McGann again:

> …invention or creativity was a means to an end. The ultimate purpose of the imagination was not to create, as High Romanticism suggested, self-generating and self-justifying worlds, and orders…it was to present fictive conditions in terms of which the human world would be more completely revealed…(be) more susceptible to human judgment (161).

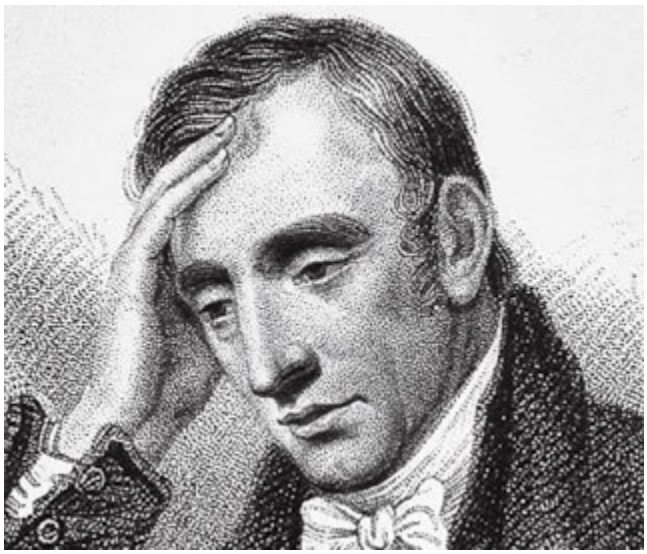
The democracy that Christensen speaks of is represented by a symbolic power that no one can seize. Christensen sees this as somehow having a "real" manifestation in *Don Juan* (which puts Byron in the strange position of fulfilling Wordsworth's desire to manifest a real language of men, albeit transposed from the setting Wordsworth envisioned). However, if Byron is, in fact, pronouncing judgments (moral, immoral and otherwise), does this not place him as a textual artist who is, in some senses, seizing the symbolic power that is available to him? It seems that the textual world of *Don Juan* does not merely make the human world susceptible to human judgment; it makes *Don Juan* susceptible specifically to Byron's judgment. It is part of his labor to use his unique social position to make unique judgments which (as he and his audience both know) only he is capable of making. Byron's very "specialness" as a social and textual entity both embraces and contradicts democratic impulses at the same time, and with the same strength; embraces, because Byron's pragmatism, openness, and productivity align him with the nascent middle class; contradicts, because Byron both knows and enacts the senses in which he is above the law, so singular as to be a law onto himself. All these judgments are clearer in the digressive parts of *Don Juan* than in the episodic ones. Byron's candor is itself an exceptionally complex textual entity, and, in its complexity, manifests as Byron's greatest strength. I would affirm, with Christensen, that it is more democratic than not; but that there is a turbid quality to Byron's politics (in the broad sense) would be hard to deny. This turbidity is especially apparent when Byron handles money and marriage, those two great bourgeois concerns (not to say that they also held no interest for the other classes). It is at this point where Byron's sympathy with the middle classes somewhat abruptly ends; he has *participated*, along with the middle classes, in these concerns, but is not merely *above* them, as Wordsworth would like to present himself, but is *poisoned* by them with a sickness onto death (even as they remain preoccupations):

> I'm serious— so are all men upon paper;
> And why should I not form my speculation,
> And hold up to the sun my little taper?
> Mankind just now seem wrapt in meditation
> On constituencies and steam-boats of vapor;
> While sages write against all procreation,
> Unless a man can calculate his means
> Of feeding his brats the moment his wife weans. (XXII, XXI)

There is a certain quality of vengeance to this final couplet and its end-rhymes, which breaks with the wonted breeziness of much of *Don Juan*, and into a mode of dissatisfied distaste. Byron is immersed in middle class concerns, but his immersion (necessary for the success of

the poem) is distasteful to him. At different junctures in the poem, everything seems distasteful to him. That is why, in one sense, "strength," both as Christensen defines it and in a general sense, is an open question: is it stronger, as a creator of literary commodities, to affirm or to deny? Byron seems to be banking on the fact that it is more wise to trust his spontaneous overflows (whether they happen to affirm or deny) than to subjugate them to a system, in the manner of Wordsworth. But this very self-indulgence (which might be how Wordsworth would characterize an outburst like this) complicates the relation of Byron to democracy that Christensen wants to posit. It is, in fact, democratic to say what you want; but if what you want to say is heartily misanthropic, the principles of democracy are rhetorically confounded. There is no good reason for Byron to say "brats" instead of "babes," other than the bitterness that has surrounded his family life. As a law onto himself, he throws a word like "brats" into his poem knowing that it will add pungency and a sense of unmediated candor. That Byron considers the issue of "means" at all is highly unusual, for a peer, and bespeaks a general awareness of conditions at the time he is writing this. Because his social position (and positions) are so complex, Byron's directness can never really be direct. "Brats" in his textual mouth means something very different than it would in Wordsworth's. The truth seems to be that Byron can get away with talking like this, and Wordsworth cannot. Byron knows this, and takes advantage of it. His complexity and general social elevation make him untouchable. This affirms Christensen's designation of strength, but refutes the notion of a fully Democratic Byron. It is Byron's specific glory that he is not fully anything. Even, in the general sense, "strong." He is at the mercy of his own complexity, his own singularity, and how little freedom it has won him. Wordsworth's bounded quality, though it necessitates a more unitary presentation than Byron must offer, gives Wordsworth the freedom of workable dimensionality. With fewer levels to manage (and far fewer people watching), Wordsworth can get on with his project in a more objective (or what he hopes can be more objective), thoughtful fashion than Byron can. He knows who he is; it is arguable that Byron remains unknowable, even to himself.

WORDSWORTH'S "PRELUDE": THE SNOWDON EPISODE



The notion of an *exceeding Wordsworth* leads to another facet of the argument I will be developing. It is a facet that emerges when Wordsworth is placed in a dialectical blender with Byron. The entire construction of *The Prelude* is, as I have said, contingent on the presumed willingness of a (presumably middle-class) audience to labor along with Wordsworth. Unlike bodies (in the context of marriages, intercourse), minds are not consummated merely via pleasure and ecstasy. Not that pleasure and ecstasy are unseen by the poet; Wordsworth's frequent recourse to formulations of pleasure in the Preface make clear that it is of key importance to his aesthetic. But the consummations, both achieved and projected, that Wordsworth enacts in *The Prelude* are of a more demanding nature. They necessitate labor, that goes beyond John Donne's famous pun ("until I labor, I in labor lie" (85)), and mix effort and reward in a tight matrix. Specifically, Wordsworth demands something not only by inclusions but by elisions, not only by textual activeness but by "wise passivity." In a certain sense, Wordsworth establishes himself as a *textual aristocrat*. By this, I mean that Wordsworth's textual approach in *The Prelude* puts a minimum of effort on ease and comfort. Serious parsing of the poem is potentially both rewarding and pleasurable; but Wordsworth does not insure his reader's ease or comfort. Thus, Wordsworth's awareness of *The Prelude's* commodity status is offset by its being above commodity status: what Kathy Psomiades calls a "priceless commodity." Wordsworth most assuredly does not *take care* of his audience, in a way that manifests eagerness to insure the success of his commodity. Wordsworth, in fact, seems to desire an engagement *above* commodification, apart from the bourgeois desire to turn a profit through an appeal to pleasure principles. Look at the way the first book of the thirteen-book *The Prelude* of 1805 begins:

> Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze
> That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
> And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
> And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives.
> Oh welcome messenger! Oh welcome friend! (I, 1-5)

It is important to note that "friend" here does not denote us; this apostrophe is to Nature. Right from the beginning, Wordsworth makes clear the reader, though implicitly included, does not necessarily rank first in Wordsworth's estimation of textual necessities. Wordsworth's conceit (and it is a trope of Romantic sincerity, and spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings) is that he is compelled to write from inner necessity, and no other reason. He is aristocratic because his pursuit of this sincere, necessitated ideal is uncompromising. Presupposed in this uncompromising stance is that Wordsworth can *afford* to be uncompromising; he can spare the cultural capital. This is a stance within a stance; Wordsworth's vaunted ethereality arguably conceals the full blown pride of a Mandarin. This was duly noted in *The Spirit of the Age* by William Hazlitt, in his essay on Wordsworth:

> Everything…that is not an absolute essence of truth and feeling, he holds to be vitiated, false, and spurious. In a word, his poetry is founded on setting up an opposition (and pushing it to the utmost length) between the natural and the artificial; between the spirit of humanity, and the spirit of fashion and of the world! (Hazlitt, 203)

The binary parts of the opposition that Hazlitt notes (natural/humanity vs. artificial/fashion) are not what Wordsworth is trying to surmount; Wordsworth begins with the assumption that he (as text creator) has already achieved his own version of "natural humanity": he is going to show us how it happened, and how we, through him (and it is almost a mode of presenting himself as a "personal Jesus") can achieve the same thing. If we were standing on the same lofty plain he was, there would be no necessity to read the poem. The exceeding Wordsworth must have already exceeded us for his binds to function; and our own non-consummated status as minds and hearts rests on our living out middle-class realities (the artificial pleasures and paradises of the city, fashions, commodity fetishes). I do not necessarily think an elaborate justification of what qualifies as properly "aristocratic" is necessary; but I think it does not need evidence to support the notion that an aristocratic ethos takes as its basis an assumption of superiority such as Wordsworth is demonstrating here. Conceptually, Wordsworth's method of binding is resolutely middle-class: labor is, after all, labor (along with the production and consumption of commodities) is what distinguishes the middle-class. In practice, because "the ties that bind" is *my* interpretive construction rather than something built organically into *The Prelude*, and because its enactment hinges on a narrator who does not always makes things explicit (and, in fact, seems to make a point of leaving in puzzling ambiguities), I am positing, not Wordsworth as an aristocrat, but perhaps a *textual* aristocrat, someone both more aloof and more stringent than the bulk of *The Prelude* criticism has tended to present him as. This interpretation develops in comparison to Byron (who we will be getting to shortly), who I would also like to invert. For now, a few more lines from Hazlitt's essay will take us deeper into the terrain I wish to cover and the possibility necessity of an author's "binds" as an interpretive tool for *The Prelude*:

> He sometimes gave striking views of his feelings and trains of association in composing certain passages; or if one did not always understand his distinctions, still there was no want of interest…his standard of poetry is high and severe, almost to exclusiveness. He admits of nothing below, scarcely anything above himself. (Hazlitt, 209)

If Hazlitt is to be taken at his word, then why a formulation like "binding" might be useful seems clear. It is, of course, two links Wordsworth, one link us: we account for precisely 33% of the action. Wordsworth's intense exclusiveness (also known as the egotistical sublime) shuts out everything but him; accept that saving grace, that 33%, Wordsworth's awareness of an audience, of those who might labor (as Hazlitt did) to understand his "distinctions." Hazlitt's use of the word "distinction" in this context is interesting; it implies that what early audiences found confounding in Wordsworth is not just what he associates but what he *separates*. What is artificial and what is real? What is authentically human and what is not? Wordsworth, as protagonist, quibbles; Wordsworth, as text creator in *The Prelude*, does not. Yet ambiguities are presented, particularly in the famous encounters, which we, as an audience, can quibble with endlessly. The fundamental issues of my argument have to do with how much we want to give this textual creator credit for. We must decide for ourselves whether or not he is standing securely above us; if he is or he is not, we must decide for ourselves why. If Wordsworth will allow in "nothing below" himself, and will admit of "nothing above," the best we can labor for (if we accept his premises) is to *become like him*. We cannot beat him, so we must join him. The poem creates a

social context which is not social at all; distinctions between us and the author remain impregnable. Byron tells us (almost) everything we might like to know about him; he inhabits a world which is, in a sense, more bourgeois than Wordsworth. Byron is used to making concessions to commercial interests; in fact, he seems to relish the process. He is engaged in the perpetual reconstruction of what Jerome Christensen calls "Byronism" (XX, Introduction). His commerciality is part of his glory. Wordsworth's borderline solipsism admits no glory but what is self-contained; the appeal to Others (and to commercial interests) is an appeal to labor first, pleasure second. Yet the implicit reward may, in fact, be greater than what Byron offers. It is a comparison between easy access and tough love, between promiscuity and continence.

Wordsworth's tough textual love is complicated by the fact of his bourgeois upbringing and status. It would seem, ostensibly, that there would be more at stake for Wordsworth than for Byron, where crafting a successful commodity was concerned. After all, Byron's social stature was assured; Wordsworth's was not. Romantic criticism over the last few decades has found one focus (among many) in the idea of *displacement*. Usually, when critics like Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson speak of Romantic displacement, they are referring to a process of elision by which direct historical reference is excluded from Romantic poems. This evinces the belief (what McGann perceives to be an illusion) that poetry can, via imagination, transcend the shackles of history (and culture) and achieve transhistorical, universal essence. Here is McGann on Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage":

> "The Ruined Cottage" is an exemplary case of what commentators mean when they speak of the "displacement" that occurs in a Romantic poem. An Enlightenment mind like Diderot's or Godwin's or Crabbe's would study this poem's events in social and economic terms, but Wordsworth is precisely interested in preventing— in actively countering— such a focus of concentration. (McGann, 84)

The idea of displacement I am arguing for takes McGann's conception of displacement and re-focuses it back on the poet himself. The moves that Wordsworth makes in *The Prelude* (and elsewhere) displace him out of his recognized social sphere and into a higher one. I call it an "aristocratic" sphere for want of a better term. He is above us (in the sense that he presents himself as having already attained a consummated mind and makes the assumption that his audience does not), and his conception of himself as above pivots on Wordsworth's "actively countering" an emphasis on his perceived social and economic status. As we will see, an argument exists that Byron achieves the same thing in reverse; that a "bourgeois Byron" emerges who is displaced down out of aristocratic ethos and praxis (and whose maintenance of an aristocratic veneer acts, ironically, as evidence of this displacement). It is precisely Wordsworth's "focus of concentration" that, in his self perceived emphasis on labor, lifts him above interest in commodity-structuring. Perhaps because *The Prelude* is an epic, Wordsworth must go in to it as an *embodiment* of ethos, a unitary presence. This goes part of the way towards explaining why something that had heretofore been visible *in poems* was now visible in Wordsworth, both as protagonist and text creator, linked together by memory, imagination, and self-posited sublimity. McGann remarks of the "Intimations Ode," "all contextual points of reference are absorbed back into the poem's intertextual structure" (McGann, 88); in *The Prelude*, all contextual points of reference are absorbed back into the structure of the poet himself, as he (most specifically, his mind) is represented in the text. The displacement I am arguing for as more extensive and more thorough than what

McGann posits; it is a fundamental (and fundamentally personal) displacement that happens on a pre-textual level, on a level of assumption and pretension. This argument could just as well be said to cover the shorter poems, but it is at its most evident in the PL. It is a "strategy of displacement" (McGann, 90) that covers not the text but the sensibility behind the text. If one were to be uncharitable, it could be called a pose. In any case, it is necessary to Wordsworth because the case he is trying to prove must be presented as already having been won by him. His mind is consummated; to make us join, this must be evident in every apostrophe, every providential encounter. That this is a conflicted set of beliefs, pretensions, and stances is evident by the fact that Wordsworth withheld the poem from the public realm for so long. Wordsworth clearly felt that what he had done could be perceived as overstepping his bounds. Byron, whose stance was a stepping down (if not a stooping) had no such scruples. Moreover, Byron was handsomely rewarded. *Don Juan* became the most widely read long poem of its day. But if Wordsworth had towed the bourgeois line, the binds he created would not have had (or continue to have) their efficacy; for the reward to be reached, there must be a destination that is both lofty and secure.

Marjorie Levinson, also discussing Wordsworth's shorter poems, created a formulation that suits my argument even more aptly than McGann's does:

> The original scene is registered stylistically and through the pattern of negations that the verse develops. The intention of the narration is to de- and re- 'figure the real,' so that the narrator-poet may restore continuity to a socially and psychically fractured existence. The larger boon sought by the poet and offered to his contemporary reader was the displacement of ideological contradiction to a context where resolution could be imagined and implemented with some success (Levinson, 6).

I argue that, where *The Prelude* was concerned, much of this action happened "offstage," was, in fact, pre-textual, so that many of the approaches Levinson describes become axiomatic in *The Prelude's* textual enactment. It is important to note that "the patterns of negation" are, in the context of *The Prelude*, balanced by patterns of affirmation; because Wordsworth directly addresses the French Revolution (among other things), it would not be fair to register the standard Romantic elisions as constituting a dominant strategy in *The Prelude*. What *is* dominant in *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's de- and re-figuring of *himself*, both as protagonist and as text-creator. Continuity has already been restored; a unitary presentation is presupposed; what is hanging in the balance is how *accurately* the process might be transcribed. On this accuracy hinges Wordsworth's narrative credibility; on this credibility hinges the amount of cultural capital we are willing to grant Wordsworth. It is only once these questions have been sufficiently resolved that we may begin the labor of ascending the mountain on which Wordsworth stands; Wordsworth's labor is to make us see the mountain. To a close reader of *The Prelude*, it can be argued that ideological contradictions are *not* resolved, specifically because their resolution is presupposed. "Some" success does not do Wordsworth justice; a consummated mind (like a consummated marriage) is, to Wordsworth, a black and white affair; either consummation has been achieved or it has not. One must succeed in having the necessary revelations that Wordsworth has had; they must then be held in consciousness in a particular way. Wordsworth begins from a position of almost complete success; the more pertinent displacement seems to be out of a bourgeois reality and into the assured realm of the aristocrat. It is also an interesting question what is

being "sought"; the poem shows a protagonist seeking, a text creator seeking, but they are seeking two different things: the protagonist seeks unity with a series of present moments, the text creator seeks unity (via precise textuality) with a series of past moments, but in between there is the assurance that a past that has been fully assimilated is both presentable and, in some senses, finished. It is the antithesis, in many ways, to *Don Juan*, which displaces a series of present moments into the poem in a tautological way (the present is the present, as the present), creating illusions of intimacy and "immediacy" (McGann's term for Byronic temporality) which *The Prelude* cannot reach. The key difference between my formulation and Levinson's (though I am attempting to expand rather than contradict her) is that Levinson shows Wordsworth adopting socio-historical displacements to try and offer something to his readers; I see Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, displacing himself out of his wonted socio-economic sphere (at the level of psychology and self-schemas) in order to lift himself and, potentially, his readers above all questions of history, economics, and social contexts; *not partial resolution but totalized transcendence.*

Alan Liu has posited the Snowdon episode in *The Prelude's* final book (13/14) as a culmination of Wordsworth's endeavor. It is here (if anywhere) that we witness the consummation of the poet's mind; here we may join Wordsworth and consummate our own minds, through him. Rather than an engendering an apocalypse, whereby the mind somehow exceeds nature and enters a kind of void (a threat which Geoffrey Hartman pointed out, that "the mind (is) a power separate from nature, and opens the way to a new fear of nature's death" (229)), Wordsworth finds a perfect balance between his own vision of nature, and the perceived bounty which nature presents to him. Wordsworth, as text creator, must find a way to represent this that will bind the reader to his vision. Thomas Pfau points out one key element of his strategy:

> As Wordsworth shrewdly intuited…an audience preferred to be manipulated at the level of desire rather than to be subjected to didactic verse. Hence, to enable its prospective readers to coalesce into a class of like-minded subjects, an "imagined community," Wordsworth's *Prelude* encourages a highly collaborative…mode of…"overhearing" (Pfau, 271)

So, to make Snowdon enticing to us, Wordsworth has to "manipulate us at the level of desire," make us *want* to climb Snowdon with him. This is one of the few instances in *The Prelude* wherein Wordsworth creates dramatic tension and release in a concentrated way; the encounters do not resolve ("climax") like the Snowdon episode does. It is also important to remember that "consummation" has sexual connotations. Wordsworth shies away from direct representations of sexuality in *The Prelude* (Annette Villon is elided, Julia and Vaudracour's encounters are only hinted at), but Snowdon is a moment in which nature is sexualized, with Wordsworth's success in climbing Snowdon a kind of phallic triumph, and his vision a moment of "deep penetration." This fits in somewhat to Liu's assertion that Wordsworth atop Snowdon achieved Napoleonic grandeur, power, and (perhaps) despotic force; though despotic force and sexual force are separated by issues of intimacy, relations-to-one versus relations-to-many, and public space versus private space. Whether we see Wordsworth as an emperor or a groom ravishing a quiet bride, the import is much the same: Wordsworth is triumphant, sees what he wants to see, and his eyes take the place of a phallus. The tension and release that builds throughout the episode is an opening through which we can both collaborate with Wordsworth and be transubstantiated into his body.

Didacticism is complicated in the Snowdon episode because it is implicit in Wordsworth's textual representation of it that it is meant for public usage, meant to hold currency (cultural capital) for anyone who wishes to climb with him. As the tension builds, we want more and more to share Wordsworth's climax. The beginning of the episode is uncharacteristically terse, compressed for velocity, and one gets the sense that the time for discursive rambling is over, the time for action has begun:

> In one of these excursions, travelling then
> Through Wales on foot and with a youthful friend,
> I left Bethgelert's huts at couching-time
> And westward took my way to see the sun
> Rise from the top of Snowdon. Having reached
> The cottage at the mountain's foot, we there
> Roused up the shepherd who by ancient right
> Of office is the stranger's usual guide,
> And after short refreshment sallied forth. (XIII, 1-9)

Also uncharacteristically, Wordsworth uses rhyme and near-rhyme several times in this passage: "then/friend," "sun/Snowdon," "right/guide." This enhances the impression that, as in a film, the action is speeding up (blank verse often being perceived as a form prone to stasis), headed towards an irrevocable target. The enhanced velocity (which is usually Byron's province) has the desired effect of hastening the reader's desire, via suspense: what is so extraordinary at the top of this mountain? There is a contradictory force generated, that we feel we are slipping even as we climb. Wordsworth's labor feels less like labor and more like something he is falling into. We descend with Wordsworth as we ascend. The Snowdon episode begins with this sense of disruption, of the unitary premises of *The Prelude* being unsettled. This effect depends on what has come before; unlike *Don Juan*, which resists its own efforts to build to anything and which goes out of its way to dissolve its own ambitions in digression. *The Prelude* delays gratification until Snowdon; *Don Juan* is meant to continually gratify. The advantage in Wordsworth's approach is that we get a sense of reward for our labor at the end, and it is (potentially) a reward for a job well done (though we must decide this for ourselves); Byron tosses off rewards here and there, but ends in anti-climax. What has Byron consummated? This episode also demonstrates the degree to which Wordsworth was misunderstood. Hazlitt can hardly be blamed for misreading Wordsworth; he never read *The Prelude*; but nonetheless, it is hard to read passages like the following without cringing for Wordsworth, and the degree to which he was reduced:

> His style is vernacular; he delivers household truths. He sees nothing loftier than human hopes; nothing deeper than the human heart. This he probes, this he tampers with, this he poises…and at the same time calms the throbbing pulses of his heart, by keeping his eyes ever fixed on the face of nature. (203)

Snowdon is precisely the moment at which Wordsworth goes beyond this formulation. Nature, as he sees it on Snowdon, is as lofty and as deep as the human heart. Hazlitt does not even bring "mind" into this, but it is specifically Wordsworth's emphasis on "mind" rather than heart that makes *The Prelude* singular in his oeuvre. The catechresis by which nature is given a face is apropos for the Wordsworth whose work Hazlitt knows; but

Wordsworth, with *The Prelude* subtracted from him, is not Wordsworth as we know him at all, and one who can easily be stereotyped. Of course, it can be said that even within the Wordsworth that Hazlitt *did* know, there is ample evidence (in "Tintern Abbey," "Immortality Ode," "Resolution and Independence" and elsewhere) that Wordsworth's truths were more than "household." Marilyn Langan specifically associates Wordsworth's early work with vagrancy, ambulatory excursions: "the "democratic" right to wander" (79). What is important in this context is to recognize that *The Prelude* was a leap forward for Wordsworth, and Snowdon was a leap forward for *The Prelude*. Looking at the key passages from the later sections of the Snowdon section will confirm that it has a sui generis quality within the poem, without which it would be unlikely that *The Prelude* could compete with *Don Juan*. On Snowdon, Wordsworth is *in the moment* in a way that he seldom is, unmediated (initially) by an impulse to look forwards or backwards. As the episode continues, we see this present-mindedness reconfigure all the books that have come before it, in a dazzling representation of illuminated consciousness (and, crucially, represented with the same intensity, tension and release, with which it was originally felt). It does not *feel* like labor; it feels like a spontaneous overflow. The climax justifies the ascent/descent.

During the Snowdon episode, the reader's sense of being "in the moment" with the protagonist is accomplished through Wordsworth's own convergence with his protagonist. It is one of the few moments in *The Prelude* that can be directly compared to *Don Juan*; the Wordsworth that climbs Snowdon is more transparent than at any other time in the poem. By transparent, I mean that the Wordsworth presented in the Snowdon episode appears to be *feeling* a spontaneous overflow, which the Wordsworth writing *The Prelude represents* in the most unmediated fashion he is able to. We find ourselves able to bind ourselves to the protagonist in a way that we have not been able to for the majority of the poem's duration. In a sense, this possible confluence of us with the protagonist is as sexual as the protagonist's sensations on Snowdon's peak. His "deep penetration" of nature and natural scenery is bound to our deep penetration into his immediate sensations. So, for a close reader of *The Prelude*, we get three bindings in one episode: to the protagonist, to the protagonist's perceptions of nature, and to (in our imaginations) nature itself. Wordsworth as narrator can give us himself and his perceptions more easily than he can the actual, physical, literal scenes he saw on the top of Snowdon, in their facticity. Still, as a moment of "pay-off," it both rewards the steady labor of ingesting *The Prelude* and points to what the deeper aims and motivations of the poem have been. This is reflected (pun intended) in Wordsworth's use of light imagery in the episode. It is important that Snowdon be brightly lit, for it to function as both a direct representation of the wonders of nature and a metaphor for the mind's possible binding to nature as a source of solace and illumination:

> …at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
> And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
> Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
> For instantly a light fell upon the turf
> Fell like a flash! I looked about, and lo,
> The moon stood naked in the heavens at height
> Immense above my head, and on the shore
> I found myself a huge sea of mist,
> Which meek and silent rested at my feet. (XIII, 36-45)

This passage posits Wordsworth as a kind of Romantic as far as possible from Byron and his Satanic outlaw protagonists. Wordsworth here inhabits the "happy Realms of Light," and is "cloth'd with transcendent brightness" (Milton, Bk.1), the precise antithesis of Milton's Satan, who Byron so resembles. But the comparison to a Miltonic angel (or even, perhaps, to Milton's God) is complicated by the sexualized (potentially secular) language; the moon "standing naked" is open to Wordsworth's penetrating gaze, the mist is meek and silent beneath him. Yet if this passage counts as an encounter, and one that occurs in another ambulatory context, there is a kind of shock tactic that nature uses to get Wordsworth's attention; the light falling "like a flash" demonstrates something penetrating through to Wordsworth, so that posited a recumbent nature (both above and below Wordsworth) is too simple. It also complicates Liu's positing of Wordsworth as a Napoleonic figure in this encounter; Napoleon's despotic demeanor is predicated on him being more or less unchangeable; nothing can move him. Nature is encompassing this protagonist, manifested in light and mist both above him and below him. The picture we are made to see is of a man joyfully engulfed, living in his senses, and it is not until later in this passage that the inevitable lesson is conjoined to this vision, and we see how this lesson complicates things. It is interesting that this all transpires in silence, that Wordsworth gives the ocular such hegemony; the Romantic canon is filled with instances of joyous noise, from Shelley's skylarks to Keats' twittering swallows. However, this gap is soon filled in when Wordsworth registers "A deep and gloomy breathing-place through which/ Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams/ Innumerable, roaring with one voice!" (57-59). Between the moon, the mist, and the "one voice" of these waters, WW demonstrates the "similitude in dissimilitude" (85) that he mentions in his Preface. All of these natural elements are forming a unitary lesson for him, which ends up being the crux of the Snowdon encounter (it may also be said that this encounter has a purity that Wordsworth's human encounters in *The Prelude* lack, freed from the material constraints of the commodity form that Simpson sees in them, if we credit Simpson's account). The passage shows that, even in the midst of a "universal spectacle," Wordsworth must perform the labor of extrapolating a useful lesson, one that will enable both his own productivity and that of his audience. It is as though Wordsworth strategically lets himself drift into the world of the negatively capable, but only so far that he can make something definite, solid, and positive from it. He grasps for reason, but in this context, not irritably. Everything is measured, formed into a serviceable whole:

> A meditation rose in me that night
> Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
> Had passed away, and it appeared to me
> The perfect image of a mighty mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an underpresence,
> The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim
> Or vast in its own being. (XIII, 66-73)

The meditation "rising" is both phallic and penetrative. It must happen at night, when marital consummations, also, take place, and it must happen organically. It also weirdly complicates the sense in which Wordsworth as protagonist straddles the line between a Miltonic angel and fallen angel. First, we see Wordsworth in the happy realms of Light; then, as the epiphany rises in him, he is again, solitary, atomized, like Milton's Satan. This makes Wordsworth himself a kind of boundary figure, of a different sort than Geoffrey Hartman

imagined. Rather than seeing an "Other" who represents a link to another world, Wordsworth as protagonist *is* a link between two worlds: an atomized world of contemplation, and a social world of productive labor. Wordsworth as textual creator manifests this dichotomy, gives it its own light, makes it perceptible. It is worth pointing out that here, as in *Tintern Abbey* and elsewhere, Wordsworth's relation to "God" is somewhat ambiguous. Does he mean the Judeo-Christian God, or does he have his own individualized take on what God is, and does? Wordsworth looks amorphous next to Milton on this level. He also looks amorphous next to an avowed atheist like Shelley, or a pantheist like Blake. Wordsworth, like Byron, wants to write something with utility value for the general public. Both poets know that it is in their best interest not to get too specific, where religious beliefs are concerned. Byron *seems like* an atheist, but never spills into out and out atheism. Had he done so, it might have cost him his public. Wordsworth certainly has less of a public to lose, but he seems interested in gaining a public reputation and a public voice for himself. He wants to have it both ways: to be representative, while maintaining his integrity. It suits his purposes to affix this climactic encounter to God, without being too specific about *which* God he is addressing. Wordsworth seems to assume that most of his audience will take this God for the Judeo-Christian one. There is no evidence otherwise. But that no reference to a Savior is made, or to Calvary, is revealing. Wordsworth's equivocations could be taken as him "playing the game," and it is a game of establishing *likeness*, the same way that Byron's game is establishing, on some levels, *difference*. There are complexities and levels to this positing; Byron's difference (his aristocratic position, fame) are actually used as ways to attract, entice, and seduce us, a way in which we get closer to him; Wordsworth's "likeness" is a method of becoming more representative, conforming to a standard that will allow him to speak in an acceptable public voice, and this position will have the contradictory effect of elevating him. Representativeness and likeness are linked ineluctably; this impression is enhanced by Wordsworth's implying that what is behind Snowdon is God "or whatsoe'er is dimmed…". Christianity's God is irreplaceable; Milton's God represents this; Byron's "unspiritual God" is circumstance; Wordsworth's mediates all of these Gods, while retaining a certain nebulousness.

Even as the Snowdon episode reaches its climax, Wordsworth seems to recognize that what he is doing (both within the narrative and in the creation of the narrative) is unique enough that it needs some justification. Wordsworth must prove the utility value of Snowdon; how it can be both assimilated and integrated into middle class consciousness. What Wordsworth must avoid is the appearance of this episode being so peculiar to him as to be meaningless to everyone else. This passage is perhaps the most passionately felt in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth goes so far as to feminize nature, which becomes a "she." Yet Wordsworth is keenly aware that this is the scene that both offers the greatest reward and requires the most intense labor. Wordsworth's rapture is not straightforward; it hinges on recognitions that are by no means general. Wordsworth's fear of crafting a limb for his textual body with no connective tissue brings to mind (and may have brought directly to Wordsworth's mind) a passage in Adam Smith regarding private passions, and their potential ridiculousness when placed into the public sphere:

> Even of the passions derived from the imagination, those which take their origin from a peculiar turn or habit it has acquired, though they may be acknowledged to be perfectly natural, are, however, are little to be sympathized with…are always…ridiculous. (41)

Middle-class sensibility is a large and amorphous subject that resists easy generalizations; yet, to the extent that Smith is at least somewhat representative (and his sentiments seminal), it can be seen that propriety is seen to dictate sympathy, and that privately held passions (especially of the obscurer sort that Wordsworth is enumerating) leave Wordsworth open to accusations of self-indulgence, impracticality, and ridiculousness. If, as Liu writes, Wordsworth on top of Snowdon resembles Napoleon, it is a Napoleon who may have more in common with an institutionalized madman who *thinks* he is Napoleon than Napoleon himself. Wordsworth is at such a far distance from proprietary notions of business and commerce that even homologies between him and middle class concerns seem strained. That Wordsworth's passions, on Snowdon, are derived from his imagination would seem to be beyond dispute. For Wordsworth to make this episode translate as cultural capital, he will need to demonstrate exactly how and why it has practical value to his audience. The direct sympathetic influence of nature will need to be manifest in such a way that nothing ridiculous remains, and Wordsworth's formulations stand naked before the reader even as the moon stands naked before him as he stands on Snowdon. In the process of doing this, Wordsworth reveals that it is nature, not himself, who is Napoleonic, and that nature's hegemony is benevolent, and has utility value for those willing to gaze intently at what "her" power is and how it works. In setting this forth, and in displacing attention away from his own position (and his potentially ridiculous passions), Wordsworth makes the clearest case possible for the rhetorical blending of mind and nature as productive, and not at a distance from propriety. This takes the form of a kind of "power blazon":

> That dominion which she oftentimes
> Exerts upon the outward face of things,
> So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,
> Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence
> Does make one object so impress itself
> Upon all others, and pervade them so,
> That even the grossest minds must see and hear
> And cannot choose but feel. (XIII, 77-84)

Nature's dominion is seen to be widespread and general. The "outward face of things" encompasses humanity in its jurisdiction; humanity is posited as part of a larger whole. What is interesting, and not quite clear, is just who Wordsworth is referring to as "gross minds." This can be taken as an implication of middle class materialism, and certainly "gross" is a word that has business/financial (thus middle class) associations. If middle class minds are the referent here, "even" implies that Wordsworth has very little respect for the world they inhabit. But that nature is a despot, and Wordsworth only a messenger figure or a proxy for nature, seems to be the subtext of this passage. It also contains enough fuzziness to require labor; we register nature's dominion and "cannot choose but feel" something; what? The fear and trembling associated with Burke's sublime? Wordsworth's own formulation of the internal echo between our minds and nature? Wordsworth implies that this question is a matter of individual initiative; that, if we follow Wordsworth up the proverbial mountain, we will feel something, but he cannot tell us what. Feeling is directly tied to sensory data, "seeing" and "hearing," but again, we know a unitary premise but labor is left for us to do. Wordsworth's commodity is *challenging* in a way that tweaks the very notion of what the commodity form is; it has the quality of a shape-shifter (or calleidoscope) that never shows the same thing to more than one person. It is designed, it would seem, to do this, rather than

to occupy space as something reproducible and aimed at a target market, as *Don Juan* was. Byron points out the ridiculousness of the world around him but is, in today's parlance, always cool; Wordsworth deliberately courts ridiculousness specifically to transcend this kind of facility. Wordsworth has his own brand of uniqueness, and the very obscurity of his systematic, unitary mode of thought is, in its way, as gutsy as Byron's candor. What Wordsworth seems to want to avoid is a text that is *merely* pleasurable; something as ornamental and stylized as the Neo-Classicists he is still attempting to supplant (as of 1804, when this episode was written); Alexander Pope's "true wit" extended past Pope's conception of wit into something more celestial. It is here that Wordsworth strangely dovetails with Adam Smith, when portions of Smith are de-contextualized, like this:

> …that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure…has not… been taken notice of by anybody. (238)

It is unlikely that Smith had precisely in mind what Wordsworth accomplishes with the Snowdon episode; but Smith's pragmatism, which demonstrates the efficacy of art in creating effects in and of itself, fits with the manner in which Wordsworth makes a walk to a mountaintop much more than what it would be in the hands of a Neo-Classicist. Snowdon is designed like this: a means to an end. It is Wordsworth laboring to bind his audience to him by building a solid set of stairs leading to his self-created peak. What he wants to avoid is the process by which his audience might fall in love with the views collected while climbing up the stairs. Thus, the deliberate lack of ornamentation in Wordsworth's poetry, up to and including *The Prelude*, and Snowdon, is a concerted attempt to create utility value, through a substitution of *shared labor* for ornament. The general public's neglect of Wordsworth's work had much to do with this lack of ornamentation, which was seen to be more apropos in other kinds of arts (and Smith is not talking about poetry here), but which made Wordsworth look perverse and antisocial. Byron, of course, was a fan of ornamentation, and of the Neo-Classicists. He struck a hard-won balance between the ornaments of wit, cleverness, strategic disclosures, and the kind of base-line pragmatic insight that makes him still readable today. Yet, over the centuries, Wordsworth's very convolution has won him a deeper respect and loyalty than Byron's many strengths have. Snowdon can be taken as kind of a crossroads, where all of Wordsworth's impulses meet in a convergent pattern. It is a pattern that requires labor to decipher, and the reward for this labor is not assured. But "contrivance," in the pejorative sense, is avoided.

As Wordsworth moves from the actual experience of Snowdon to the moral lesson he extrapolates from it, he extends the usage of sexualized language. This enhances the impression that Wordsworth is self-consciously positing Snowdon as the precise locale of the mind's consummation which *The Prelude* has been moving towards. Like a work of pornographic literature turned inside out, the Snowdon episode functions by letting us, through empathy, experience Wordsworth's ecstasy (and, of course, it is worth noting that Byron was taken to task for being pornographic in *Don Juan*). The moral lesson can afford Wordsworth no slackening of intensity; though cut off from the vistas of sight and sound that rivet us to Wordsworth's actual experience, this portion of the text is freighted with the duty of both consolidating the experience of Snowdon and rendering it both potentially

permanent (in its import) and intelligible. The passage begins with nature again made preternatural, as a "power":

> The power which these
> Acknowledge when thus moved, which nature thus
> Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
> Resemblance, in the fullness of its strength
> Made visible— a genuine counterpart
> And brother— of the glorious faculty
> Which higher minds bear with them as their own. (XIII, 85-90)

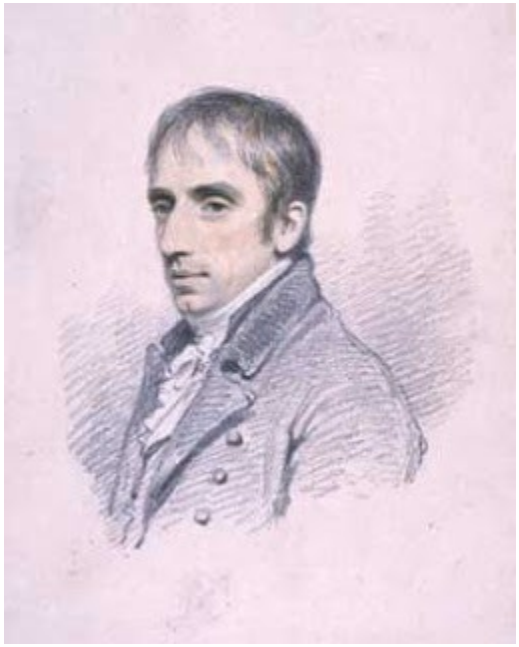
Wordsworth is exercising his demarcative imperative (to use Bourdieu's term) to separate what he calls "higher" minds from what can be implicitly read as "lower" minds. Wordsworth is specific about what constitutes a higher mind; as to what constitutes a lower mind, Wordsworth is fuzzy. Having a higher mind here hinges on a kind of possession— something that can be borne with individuals as their own. This sense of possession could be taken to imply the other, more usual sense of possession— the possession of commodities. The essence of the commodity form is that, despite its ghostliness, it can be possessed. The problem, traditionally, is that possession of commodities engenders the necessity for more commodities. The possession of the "glorious faculty" that Wordsworth enumerates is an end in itself; it engenders no more buying. But Wordsworth's sense of his audience here is complex, and (to a degree) uncomfortable. Just at the moment where we want to join Wordsworth, we are given the laborious task of figuring out whether or not we "qualify" to stand atop the mountain with him. Whatever "it" is, a glorious faculty or an etherealized commodity, do we have it? To have been transubstantiated into Wordsworth's body would be to have a vision "thrust forth" upon us, to penetrate and be penetrated; Wordsworth's has done the labor of representing this experience in such a way that we can read this as a "porous text"; but Wordsworth is not capable of stepping out of the text to inform us of our progress. He is a textual aristocrat; where our own situation as readers is concerned, we must be "self-oracular" about what we have accomplished and what we have not. As a "Peer of consciousness," Wordsworth has his "glory," and presumes that its textual manifestation is adequate evidence. But, unlike Byron, it can be argued that Wordsworth never quite looks his readers in the eye. His gaze is deflected upwards, while we direct our gaze upwards to look at him. Thus, the binding that occurs here is both more loose and tighter than the binding Byron creates in *Don Juan*; looser, because less personal, and less audience-aware; tighter, because Wordsworth's very unwillingness to get involved with his audience engenders (possibly) a greater desire, a more piqued curiosity on the part of the audience both to understand and to possess attainment of what Wordsworth has already attained. Wordsworth's presentation is drastically less pragmatic than Byron's; but in some ways it is more unique, less reliant on facility, and more upon a singularity of vision, rather than personality.

Alan Liu calls the Snowdon episode "Wordsworth's moment of Absolute Knowledge," but goes on to say that "such knowledge is the knowledge of many things"(447). This seems very reasonable; where the unitary system of *The Prelude* is concerned, Snowdon is the moment when all the strands meet. Wordsworth's mind is consummated, and we watch it being consummated; as we do so, we are given the opportunity to consummate our own minds similarly. However, it is also arguable that the process by which this happens (especially as pertains to the manner in which we are meant

to acquire Wordsworth's knowledge) demonstrates that on only one level is the unitary system not air tight; it does not seem that Wordsworth has Absolute Knowledge of the best way to relate to his audience. The binds linking Wordsworth as protagonist to Wordsworth as text creator here are fitted precisely; but as to the potential Others that Wordsworth is speaking to, all we know is that we are compelled to accept Wordsworth's presumptions and the system he espouses. Liu says that "Wordsworth's vision on the mount is the imagination of empire. Or, rather, we can say that it is the imagination *not* of empire— but with a stress underscoring the overdetermined nature of the negation" (447). Wordsworth is trying not to be despotic, but the system he completes with the Snowdon episode puts him in the position of despot, where his readers are concerned. Yet Geoffrey Hartman saw these issues as germinating from an essential confusion: "the incident is a difficult one to interpret, not only for us but for the poet himself" (60). It is possible that the despotism Liu sees in Wordsworth arises from the difficulties of his position, of having to close his system and open it at the same time. Liu and Hartman seem to agree that, as Hartman said, "Snowdon is a magic mountain" (67). It is the nature of the magic over which they disagree. Hartman seems to take Wordsworth more or less at his word; that the consummation of the poet's mind is real, and that the link between man's mind and nature is secure. The process by which this happens is "naturally magical." The magic Liu sees is more of a disappearing act, where Wordsworth can continue to evade historical forces by a reenactment that redoes them, sideways (but with not dissimilar intentions). Wordsworth wants to *rule*, somehow, and Snowdon becomes the panacea by which he is able to do it.

My own position is that Snowdon is less magical than it is cathartic. It seems reasonable that a system, withheld over a long period of time but held in the poet's consciousness (and that is determinative of what the poet writes), could build up enough force to perpetuate a spontaneous overflow at the appropriate moment. That is one way to look at Snowdon. However, the obscurity and uniqueness of Wordsworth's vision, and the fact that he *is* conscious of his audience, mediates the experience into something more diffuse (and potentially confusing) than a mere catharsis. It is a *mediated catharsis*, complicated by Wordsworth's awareness of an audience that he struggles to find a place for. Whether or not Wordsworth is acting out a despotic impulse may be less important than his awareness that all these impulses are being watched. As such, self-consciousness mediates between his desire to spill the essence of his seminal system out at last and to continually defer until the moment is as perfect and as perfectly set up as possible. It is, in the most general sense (and to resort to a cliché) a labor of love; of *his* love Wordsworth is sure; of *our* love Wordsworth is not sure, and this engenders the fuzziness that makes Snowdon so hard to interpret. If one bind in the system is not operative, the system may collapse; yet Wordsworth has no way to tell if this final bind, poet to audience, is successful. So, Napoleon or not (and certainly part of the system does involve a despotic impulse), Wordsworth is faced with radical insecurity, even at the moment that serves as the hinge of his entire epic endeavor. Wordsworth, like Byron, was writing for a middle class audience; but his non-pragmatism makes his commodity "riskier," in a generally sense, than Byron's was.

WORDSWORTH'S "PRELUDE": WORDSWORTH IN FRANCE



When circumstances take Wordsworth to France in Book IV, we come face to face (though not for the first time) with one level of the reality Wordsworth posits in *The Prelude* — the relationship of the artist to public and private spheres. Wordsworth visits and lives in France at a moment of intense turmoil and transition; the public sphere includes far greater numbers (everyone, in fact, who dares to address the political situation in public) than it usually does, as the fate of the nation hangs in the balance. Everyone is compelled to produce a public self that chooses a side and sticks to it— are you for or against the Revolution? Do you stand with the deposed royals, or with the usurpers? Yet the text is narrated by a first-person (semi-omniscient, in the sense that Wordsworth acknowledges mystery while claiming knowledge of some universal truths, usually personal, rather than political ones) voice, assured and settled, guiding us through these encounters and vignettes from a place displaced from their original context. This particular section of *The Prelude* highlights the manner in which Wordsworth maneuvers between public and private sphere presentations and representations in *The Prelude*. If this textual manner could be made into a diagram, it would look something like this:

P P

Pr

Wordsworth, as he presents himself as a wanderer in France, and in earlier, less portentous areas of the text, inhabits a realm of minor public stature. He ambulates, an "infinitely mobile subject" (142), as Langan says, partly to transcend the parameters of time and space, as they "disrupt, intersect, and rupture the desire for formal completion" that is his ultimate, systematic, unitary telos in *The Prelude*. However, Wordsworth's involvement in the public sphere (as protagonist) complicates as well as informs Langan's formulation; it is in and from time and space, which chafe against systematic reasoning, that the public sphere takes its energy. The public sphere is (among other things) contingency embodied. Wordsworth, as he travels, as he encounters, must (of necessity) experience the same contingencies that those he encounters do. Even with notions of providence creating a silver lining, Wordsworth's stature as a minor public figure in these early books hinge on an immersion in realities that Wordsworth is destined to refute by the end of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth is able (ultimately) to refute material realities (as manifested in temporal, spatial, and material dimensions) by retreating into a private sphere realm in which experience becomes text. It is in this private realm that Wordsworth fully realizes not mere contingencies but the negative affect that makes them undesirable. The telos of his textual representations of these contingent elements (that are so constitutive of public sphere life) is to enumerate their full powers to create discordant affect. The text must show what the system, in its unitary reality, is not, before it can be demonstrated what it is. The labor of engaging his audience depends on Wordsworth's making these representations as poignant and lucid as possibility. It is an appeal to our sympathy, through representation of pain, which Smith discusses in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> Pain…whether of mind or body, is a more pungent sensation than pleasure, and our sympathy with pain, though it falls greatly short of what is directly felt by the sufferer, is generally a more lively and distinct perception than our sympathy with pleasure (65)

Smith was writing out of sympathies that could generally be described as middle class, as Wordsworth was. Smith's sympathies presuppose the time and energy to *have* sympathies: a certain amount of leisure. I call these sympathies middle class not only because they presuppose time and leisure, but that they address issues of equality: Smith seems to be discussing what happens between two members of the same class, rather than sympathy that has in it condescension or ambition. The continuity between Smith and Wordsworth hinges on recognizing that once one has enough material comfort not to be fully occupied with work at all time, one can begin to feel. Where affect is concerned, Wordsworth engages his audience in a way that cannot exactly be called time-worn, but is often conventional nonetheless, and consonant with Enlightenment thought (like Smith's) regarding emotion. Smith is talking (presumably) about one to one, in the flesh encounters; I am discussing how Wordsworth creates text that his audience will encounter. Yet the connection to Smith's moral sentiments holds, as does Wordsworth's Enlightenment-derived humanism. Wordsworth's texts are meant, then, to emerge in the public sphere as commodities, which will have the dual effect of bifurcating Wordsworth from his own direct presence and creating stature as a major public figure. By "major," I mean a public figure whose voice commands respect, prestige, and the power (spiritual, if not material) of an aristocrat. This process valorizes the text-as-presence, validates the reality of text as something real in the world, and creates a completed (and complicated) circuit that allows Wordsworth both to represent contingencies, transcend them, and then present these completed epiphanies to the world. Nowhere is the operation of this circuit more visible than in Wordsworth's approach to his time in France. Wordsworth's ambivalence is present, but held as an interior reality, even as he acts out his minor public role as Revolutionary enthusiast:

> Where silent zephyrs sported with the dust
> Of the Bastille I sat in the open sun,
> And from the rubbish gathered up a stone
> And pocketed the relic in the guise
> Of an enthusiast; yet, in honest truth…
> I looked for something I could not find,
> Affecting more emotion than I felt. (IX, 64-71)

Wordsworth's candor here is strategic. He aligns a public stance with contradiction, falsity, and ineffectual action. It is not in the public sphere that he is able to redeem himself; he must take his experiences into a private sphere, in order to recast them as commodities (that may nevertheless evince "priceless" value). The process must be revelatory; the revelation must be of ultimate, non-contingent truth; and gratification must be deferred until the proper textual moment. Battles that are won in the public sphere have, for Wordsworth, a hollowness; they are unrefined, and still partake of the contingency that Wordsworth is fighting. In this particular context, Wordsworth drops the guise of the textual aristocrat and, rather than promulgating "leveling" theories, levels himself (which has the contradictory effect of elevating his position). We do not have to climb to reach Wordsworth at this juncture; he is accessible. However, as *The Prelude* continues, it becomes clear just how strategic this self-leveling is. If Revolutionary France does not, as Liu says, "embody the beautiful" (369), Wordsworth must not betray himself by falling head-over-heels in love with it, either its ideas or its material manifestations. That the Revolution "may be a work of apocalyptic imagination" (Hartman, 245) does not change the fact it is not completely encased and consolidated *in* Wordsworth's imagination. Ultimately, nothing outside of

Wordsworth's consciousness can have the kind of unitary solidity that Wordsworth's own consciousness has (if we accept his self-representations somewhat uncritically, without bringing in McGann's conceptions of romantic ideology). This is the ultimate truth, which for the sake of his unitary thesis, Wordsworth *must* convey. This is a truth that would be difficult to prove in the public sphere, using anything *but* text; speech acts seldom have the efficacy that text does, when its aims are so recondite. These truths and levels, all operative at once, engage the reader by hoping that complexities and convolutions hold interest, rather than engendering mistrust and distaste. Wordsworth's candor often seems strategic; it is arguable that Byron's is, also, but Byron presents his confessions in the form of spontaneous overflows, which sweep unitary realities aside in favor of immediate (and immediately performed) affective ones. The major public sphere presence that Wordsworth ostensibly wants must be turned to good account; everything is subsumed into a system that can (he hopes) take its place as public property, to which readers may freely bind themselves.

It has been posited that Wordsworth, like Byron, created his own kind of irony. Byron's ironies (as will be shown) are rather more overt; they involve the poet telling us the levels and layers of societal, social, and literary corruption he has seen. Wordsworth's ironies are linked to deliberate displacements, whereby signifiers of contingent culture and history are removed from the text, in the interest of promulgating a unitary system of thought, for the reader's acquisition. The ironies manifest when, as Scott Dykstra writes,

> …the idealized surfaces of the poet's texts are "ruptured" by moments of ideological self-contradiction and "logical scandal," at which…awareness of historical or political actuality is said to become manifest to the trained eye. (904)

This brings up an interesting point regarding New Historical interpretations of Wordsworth, and our idea of his labor. We do not presuppose to know, when we read Wordsworth this way, whether or not these displacements were intentional. Nor is the question of intention relevant to all readings of Wordsworth. It is relevant to *this* reading of Wordsworth because if they are intentional, then they can be interpreted as part of Wordsworth's labor, the manner in which he attempted to bind himself to his audience. If they are unconscious on Wordsworth's part, then it does not make sense to regard them as part of his labor, especially because it may take a "professional" reader to locate these displacements in the first place. The middle course would seem to be this: to regard the displacements, the manifestations of irony, as part of Wordsworth's plan for *The Prelude*, without taking intentionality for granted. New Historicism does, in fact, seem to fall with some frequency into the "intentional fallacy" that the New Critics argued against. It is also arguable that Wordsworth was writing specifically for "trained eyes," that his labor was for a small number of people ("fit audience though few") who might be amenable to acquiring a new system of thought and feeling. Marjorie Levinson argues that "Wordsworth is most distinctively Wordsworth…in those poems where the conflicts embedded…are most expertly displaced" (4). Levinson sees these displacements as absolutely essential to Wordsworth's identity. The task of the New Historian becomes the revelation of displacements deciphered at last. Whether this is part of the labor that Wordsworth had in mind for his audience to perform is an open question. These issues are omnipresent in the text. The "hunger-bitten girl" episode in Book IX is a case in point:

> And when we chanced

> One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
> Who crept along fitting her languid self
> Upon a heifer's motion— by a cord
> Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
> Its sustenance, while the girl with her two hands
> Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
> Of solitude— and at the sight my friend
> In agitation said, 'Tis' against that
> Which we are fighting!" (IX, 512-520)

This vignette is presented in a way that seems straightforward. It is a detailed portrait that winds up, as it continues, registering as another providential encounter, but for a slightly different reason than the discharged soldier and the blind beggar. Here, the girl becomes directly a symbol for pertinent, present political realities. The encounter is mediated by an Other, who creates the scenario of a kind of "double encounter." It is Beaupuy who takes the encounter, situates it is a present moment, and immediately turns it into fodder for revolutionary zeal.

The manifestation of the public-private-public chain formation through which Wordsworth emerges as a professional, representative middle-class poet is highly visible in Book 10, wherein Wordsworth directly addresses the French Revolution and his reaction to it. Several critics have noted that a "direct address," in a poem known for its convolutions and opaque surfaces, is a revelation in and of itself. This problem (and the dichotomy between direct reference and obfuscation is taken by many critics to be a problem) forms one crux of Alan Liu's argument:

> The true apocalypse for Wordsworth is reference. What now shocks us most about Wordsworth's poetry, after all, is its indelible stain of referentiality, its insistent mundanity. We flinch before the topical… as before a devil; we seek ways to textualize it, to exorcise the mundane demon through phenomenal, psychic, or metaphoric displacement (35).

There is a sense in which Liu seems to be answering Geoffrey Hartman, who felt that apocalypse occurs, for Wordsworth, when the mind oversteps the bounds of nature, is alone in a state of being beyond nature, and can no longer naturalize itself. Liu takes Hartman's formulation and makes it pragmatic. Reference, in Liu, is the "going beyond," the step past the bounds of what is natural, what can naturalize. What these two formulations share is a belief that something is at work in *The Prelude* that is almost (and ironically) occult (in a manner of speaking), a scheme that dictates the composition of the poem, which is meant to be ineffable. The problem for Liu and Hartman is that this scheme is frequently breached. Wordsworth's breaches (manifested, for Liu, in topical allusions) can be interpreted as proof that he cannot live up to his own system, and so the displacements that become visible are chinks in the armor, cracks in a stony façade. One gets the sense, in Hartman and Liu, that great effort has been made to "crack the code," to demystify the system. However, the system can only be demystified if it is made as entirely visible as possible, which both Liu and Hartman attempt to do. Liu and Hartman are trained (professional) critics, just as Wordsworth was (arguably) "vying for professionalism" in composing this poem. If trained critics are driven to intense irritation attempting to figure out what the system is, what it

means, and how it is being breached, it is easy to see that the unprofessional reader might have a hard time either comprehending or appreciating *The Prelude* (and it is Wordsworth's very incomprehensibility that Byron frequently derided). Wordsworth's compact with a projected audience hinges not only on labor, but on innate ability. Wordsworth wants his readers to have a *feel* for what he is doing. Part of this process involves following the P-Pr-P formulation, the manner in which public Wordsworth becomes private, in order to process data he has collected and "plug it in" to the system; and then emerge again as text-creating (commodity creating) poet, a public figure with something ineffable to sell. This process takes place on a more surface level than Liu and Hartman are looking at; but I would argue that where *The Prelude* is concerned, the surface can be as instructive as the depths. This passage occurs shortly after the beginning of Book 10:

> This was the time in which, inflamed with hope,
> To Paris I returned. Again I ranged,
> More eagerly than I had done before,
> Through the wide city, and in progress passed
> The prison where the unhappy monarch lay,
> Associate with his children and his wife
> In bondage, and the palace, lately stormed
> With roar of cannon and a numerous host. (38-45)

One does not normally think to associate the word "inflamed" with the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*. If Wordworth is inflamed, this is one of the final stages of his inflammation, a public jaunt before the Revolution collapses and Wordsworth must go into hiding to rehearse a later, more effectual public presentation of himself. Here, he is mostly anonymous— he "ranges," but does not show anyone reacting to his appearance. But his faith and belief in the cause of Revolution allows him to transcend the atomized isolation that is often associated with Romantic literary figures. His belief, his "at-oneness" with a cause, also separates him severely from what the commonplace of the Byronic hero is— the Satanic, moody outlaw. If the new ministration in France is divine (as Wordsworth initially thought), Wordsworth is content to be a minor angel, affirming where possible, avoiding perceptions that would interfere with his perception of the Revolution. What is important to the structure of *The Prelude*, is that this presentation is, in modern parlance, a "set-up." It is Wordsworth's destiny to plunge from the safety, comfort, and inspiring joy of Heaven into a realm of darkness, out of the public view, where he must build his own way back to heavenly realms, or even create a heaven for himself and his readers. This happens not only through apocalyptic referentiality, but, as Langan says, by "including in the domain of referentiality those elements of spoken and written language exploited by Wordsworth to produce the effect we call 'literature'" (141). It seems that literary composition is another kind of apocalypse, in and of itself. By representing himself, in this passage, as a kind of flaneur (though without the perversity of the Baudelairian flaneur that became manifest roughly sixty years later), and by the fact that we feel we are being *led* somewhere, we see that Wordsworth's system is not just affective, psychological, and intellectual, but *literary* as well. Since literature, in and of itself, stands as a kind of figurative language, a self-consciously literary system may constitute a kind of "breach" away from the system of good faith that Wordsworth insinuates. The literary effects Wordsworth creates are specifically *apocalyptic* effects: setting his readers up for falls, adding sensory data when appropriate occasions arise (prisons, monarch, canons), calmly leading the narrative forward even when obfuscation and

convolution create a surface opacity. It also skirts the obvious to note that the situation Wordsworth witnessed in France was literally apocalyptic; that it convulsed the whole of Europe, and that its aftershocks touched almost everything and everyone that Wordsworth knew. Wordsworth's directness in relating these events makes Liu flinch, but it allowed Wordsworth to speak in the least mediated voice he could muster. The next passage builds in tension and intensity from the first:

> I crossed (a black and empty area then)
> The Square of the Carrousel, few weeks back
> Heaped up with dead and dying— upon these
> And other sights looking as doth a man
> Upon a volume whose contents he knows
> Are memorable but from him locked up,
> Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
> So that he questions the mute leaves with pain
> And half upbraids their silence. (X, 46-54)

Note the literary effects: Wordsworth is crossing a black and empty area, without knowing that his later judgments will show the entire revolution to be a black and empty area. Lucy Newlyn noted that Wordsworth's use of the blank-verse form "kept action to a minimum" (111); here, the action seems deliberately slow (or slower than usual), so that we may grasp the horror of the vignette being offered. One revelation of *The Prelude* is that the voice he is looking for in the mute leaves and the unreadable tongue is his own. The cardinal sin of displacement, for Wordsworth (rather than for Liu and Hartman), is to look outside the self for answers that are already situated in an interior realm. It would be easy to credit this idea with facility, but Wordsworth's belief in interiority is as obfuscated and convoluted as the other parts of his system. In this passage, the initial stage of being public is still being investigated, but there is a note of foreboding, of things being out of place. It is almost ghastly. Wordsworth does not unduly emphasize corpses, but they add to the ambience of the passage, and one can see in them an exterior echo of Wordsworth's hollowness, before he has done the private work of turning sensory data (on all levels of experience) into text.

The shape of the formulation I have presented, that represents the arc of Wordsworth's strategy of appearance in *The Prelude* (P-Pr-P), is necessitated specifically because the first public Wordsworth, walker of Paris and London streets, observer of humanity, prey to encounters, is not deemed adequate to Wordsworth's ambition. Wordsworth's initial public self is not *effectual* in the manner that Lord Byron's was. Had Byron wanted to, he could have wielded real political power; his incredible popularity in the Regency beau monde guaranteed that all his actions would be duly noted by influential people; he was a celebrity, with the rights and privileges of influence that celebrity grants. Byron's textual self is an *extension* of an already developed public persona; Wordsworth starts from a modest position of having little public persona (at least among the general public). By this, I mean that Byron crafted an identifiable textual persona for himself, aided and abetted by his appearances and scandals in society. The Byronic outlaw; moody, brooding, dangerous; was already established as a cultural icon by the time Byron begins the composition of *Don Juan*. This gave Byron considerable advantages in binding his audience to his text. Wordsworth's position vis a vis any public is more tenuous, having less familiarity to rest on— his encounters cannot be deemed providential until he creates textual representations of them; his scruples, enthusiasms, and depressions cannot become

representative until they are turned into text. Wordsworth must formulate a public persona through text, rather than extending something already given, as Lord Byron does. It is to Wordsworth's credit that he openly acknowledges his lack of agency during the period he dwelt in revolutionary France:

> An insignificant stranger and obscure,
> Mean as I was, and little graced with powers
> Of eloquence even in my native speech,
> And all unfit for tumult and intrigue,
> Yet would I willingly have taken up
> A service at this time for cause so great,
> However dangerous. (X, 130-136)

Thus, the compact that Wordsworth creates with his readers is one that hinges on the acknowledgement of the process of transformation Wordsworth is enacting— that the second step in the formulation, in which Wordsworth retreats into himself to create representative text, is where Wordsworth finds the effectuality that Byron takes (to some extent) for granted. Wordsworth presents himself as almost a Hephaestus figure— ill-mannered, mean, and inarticulate. "Graced with powers" is specifically what Byron is; not merely powerful but capable of using his powers gracefully. Byron takes for granted that both he and his audience know this. Things are trickier for Wordsworth because he must create a self that his audience will buy. There is nothing "given." Wordsworth sets these lines up so that a double-sympathy is engendered— we sympathize with his obscurity, and with the desperation of the situation revolutionary France has tumbled into. Wordsworth, in private, crafts a portrait of a courageous interiority, a self that wants to do good in an effectual way but is prevented by circumstances from doing so. We labor along with Wordsworth by imagining how it must have felt to witness France's post-revolutionary destruction and dissolution. There is a sense of *sameness* here that depends on Wordsworth's audience being middle-class; an average middle-class Brit in revolutionary France could not have done much more than Wordsworth did. But the most important facet of these lines is that, from this depth, they lead to an upward trajectory, in which Wordsworth's courageous interiority is developed to an extreme extent (on Snowdon and elsewhere). The private sphere, which is where courageous interiority can become exterior (in text or in speech acts), leads back into a new kind of public life, in which interiority can manifest in the commodity form, that nonetheless takes on the attributes of being priceless. "Insignificant stranger" becomes "significant companion"; "obscure" becomes well-known and accepted. Of course, these are ideal relations, and the fact is that *The Prelude* did not see the light of day until Wordsworth had died, and was not readily embraced by a great number of people on its first release. But the intentionality behind Wordsworth's moves in this section of *The Prelude* do point to a burgeoning, redemptive public self that Wordsworth was crafting out of the ashes of public obscurity.

As this passage continues, Wordsworth pulls a move that is characteristic of his new "public self": taking the seed of nobility that is in his own self-avowed interiority and developing it. By nobility, I mean Wordsworth's idealism in the face of dashed hopes, his belief in the subsistence of positive dreams and that, even if only on a personal level, they can be realized. These are often expressed in spontaneous overflows, in a kind of mushroom effect, and they require a certain amount of grandiloquence. This is an issue that recalls very exactly what Jerome McGann's positing of romantic ideologies: that, here, Wordsworth

shows unthinking, uncritical belief in his own self-representations. Whether or not Wordsworth did actually feel these things, or whether he is crafting, in private, a textual self who he *says* felt these things during the initial go-round (and who may or may not be aping a representative nobility), leaves the matter open to interpretation. This is where the ideology achieves a maximum level of openness, to acceptance or critique:

> Inly I revolved
> How the much the destiny of man had still
> Hung upon single persons— that there was,
> Transcendent to all local patrimony,
> One nature as there is one sun in heaven;
> That objects, even as they are great, thereby
> Do come within the reach of humblest eyes…
> …that a mind whose rest
> Was where it ought to be, in self-restraint…
> Fell rarely in entire discomfiture
> Below its aim, or met with from without
> A treachery that defeated it or failed. (X, 136-157)

What I see in this passage is not only the displacement that McGann, Levinson, Liu, Simpson, Pfau, and others see in Wordsworth; these seems to be a level of Romantic sublimation going on as well. What I mean is this: Wordsworth's adoption of courageous interiority as a solution to outwardly unpromising circumstances (and his manner of representing this interiority in text) does not merely displace these circumstances; it all sublimates the affect and cognitive dissonance these circumstances generates into a potent psycho-affective force that Wordsworth can harness to use for his own ends. Wordsworth, specifically, harnesses this sublimated energy to make himself effectual, to valorize himself, and to open the process of valorization up to his readers who might follow him along this path. "Inly" must be how this goes, because outwardly, no validation (let alone valorization) is possible. Displacements do not necessarily employ the forces of what or who is displaced; they are, in many ways, a "pure negative." Sublimations, on the other hand, use the accumulated reserves of inward forces that outward forces generate in order to attain other ends— in this case, the cultivation of courageous interiority. Wordsworth's interiority is courageous specifically because he is using accumulated energies that would otherwise have no outlet. If displacement is conscious, as it appears to be here, does it cease to be displacement? Romantic sublimation is in Byron, as well, as we remember that Byron, as an exile, still cares very much about England. But he uses the force of his psycho-affective energy to forge a connection, rather than making a palimpsest. I am not attempting to "displace displacement," but I do feel that the concept can work in tandem with sublimation to achieve a greater modicum of understanding, where *The Prelude* and *Don Juan* are concerned. Even Wordsworth's withholding of *The Prelude* from general release is a kind of sublimation, a strategy to ensure maximum potency at the latest possible date.

The sense of romantic sublimation that follows Wordsworth in Book X hinges on a single conceit— that Wordsworth is able to take the absolute misery of post-revolution France and transform it into something (in his private and privatized consciousness) representative, exemplary and meant for public usage. It is the argument of McGann, Levinson, and other New Historicists that Wordsworth's effort to transcend history (and the culture that goes along with it) is a failed. It seems that, once credit is given to Wordsworth's

attempt to at least *try* to transcend history, he does so by a combination of displacement and sublimation. Sublimation, like displacement, is a private sphere activity. Deconstructionists might argue that text is, in its very essence, consciousness displaced to begin with. In any case, how *The Prelude* is read depends largely on how much credit is given to Wordsworth's attempts at transpersonal and transhistorical transcendence. The binds that attach his audience to this labor can be either positive or negative— we can read *with* Wordsworth or *against* him. In this context, the implications of a negative bind would be an audience which perceives itself to be forced to accept Wordsworth's premises. On some levels, New Historicist engagements with *The Prelude* seem to demonstrate a mixture of positive and negative binds. The manner of New Historicist binding seems purposefully, not negative, but interrogative. It may be useful to attempt an effort to re-interrogate the ways that displacements and sublimations interact. Sublimation occurs when Wordsworth attempts to salvage an air-tight, ineluctable moral lesson from the wreckage:

> that tyrannic power is weak,
> Hath neither gratitude, nor faith, nor love,
> Nor the support of good or evil men
> To trust in; that the godhead which is ours
> Can never utterly be charmed or stilled;
> That nothing has a natural right to last
> But equity and reason; that all else
> Meets foes irreconcilable, and at best
> Does live but by variety of disease. (X, 167-175)

Wordsworth's usage of absolutist words (nothing, all else) points to the force of the sublimations and the displacements going on. The subtle difference between displacements and sublimations is this: displacements are not meant to be overtly visible; it takes a sharp critical mind to see them. It is unlikely that Wordsworth hoped his readers would spot the process of displacement by which material destruction became spiritual creation. Sublimation, however, does not necessarily hinge on things being hidden. Sublimation is a kind of energy transmutation, whereby energy that arises for one purpose can be used for another purpose. I would argue that both sublimation and displacement mark what is going on here. It would seem that Wordsworth would prefer to bind his audience to himself and his poem by a process of sublimation (which does not involve willful obfuscation) than by displacement (which does, or may), though the boundaries between these two forms of textuality can be thin. And all this subterranean activity occurs in the private context of text creation, where Wordsworth must attempt to balance all of these impulses and forge a unitary, complete self to the greatest extent possible. Wordsworth must state overtly exactly what was not the case ("tyrannic power is weak"), because doing so was his way of defeating tyranny. What remains unclear is how many truths Wordsworth subjugated to his unitary system, knowingly or unknowingly. That tyrannic power was *not* weak is demonstrated by the rise of Napoleon, which was in its bloom as Wordsworth was writing this. The issue of "godhead" again brings up the central (and centralized in the text) amorphousness of Wordsworth's religiosity. The question remains: is Wordsworth adopting religious language in an effort to pander to a middle-class audience who he knows may be "bound" by (or to) it? The ambition to be exemplary makes the issue of candor a difficult one to tackle, where *The Prelude* is concerned. It is difficult "across the board": for Wordsworth, for readers, and for scholars today. The idealism of Wordsworth's devotion to "equity and reason" seems to

refute his own experiences, in France and elsewhere. To the extent that many of Wordsworth's spontaneous overflows of feeling, like this one in Book X, do refute Wordsworth's experiences (that are openly and overtly stated), it is not unreasonable to wonder if Wordsworth is trying to bind us to a system that melds idealism and a certain amount of misrepresentation, as well as candor. There is candor (as will soon be shown), but some candor seems subsumed beneath the public sphere text that Wordsworth is creating, both for his own perceived benefit and for the perceived benefit of his audience. This text must, if it is to be effectively public, uphold a façade of idealistic faith.

Candor is, indeed, a major issue in *The Prelude*. To a major extent, candor was what Lord Byron was selling in *Don Juan* (and the singularity of his situation made his candor both entertaining and compelling). One aspect of Wordsworth that disturbed Lord Byron was the sense in which candor was overtaken by a need for systematic unity. If systematic unity is prioritized (and the system becomes the main attraction of the commodity to be sold), then all facts, representations, encounters, and imagery provided must cleave to it. But in some places in *The Prelude* (and Book X is one of them), the circumstances that Wordsworth is writing about force his hand. There is no way to sustain the narrative (especially as it focuses securely on Wordsworth) without engaging in certain personal revelations. These ruptures necessitate candor, as in this passage:

> In this frame of mind
> Reluctantly to England I returned,
> Compelled by nothing less than absolute want
> Of funds for my support; else…
> I doubtless should have made a common cause
> With some who perished, haply perished too— (X, 188-196)

It is true that, as David Simpson says, "these moments record the history of the years around 1800 with extraordinary precision and analytical power, and without any loss of urgency about the claims and aspirations of human feeling" (114) However, the "urgency" that one could glean from this passage is not only directed at transpersonal levels but at personal, material, contingent ones. Wordsworth leaves "reluctantly" (and part of this reluctance can be traced to Annette Villon and her displacement out of this text, though some sexual energy may be thought of as sublimated into the Julia/Vaudracour episode), and in the context of his departure, human feeling is dwarfed by material necessity. WW's public self in France is considered by himself to be a failure— not representative, not exemplary. One subtext is that Wordsworth in France is *not* middle-class, but poor. It will take a middle-class amount of material sustenance for Wordsworth to go into the private sphere and create the public sphere self he desires to create. Thus, Wordsworth is sublimating not only the emotions of the failure of the French Rev, but his own failure to materially sustain himself in its aftermath. But it is the combination of the two levels (sorrow over a national, public situation and sorrow over a public one) that constitute the miniaturized entirety of Wordsworth's system, which flirts both with displacements and with straightforward candor. The use of the word "absolute" creates an interesting parallel: his absolute inability to materially sustain himself, the absolute ability of France to live up to its revolutionary power. It does not, in fact, seem "doubtless" that Wordsworth would have "haply perished"; the entirety of *The Prelude* does not see Wordsworth fight, and his wise passivity and what enable the encounters to occur that teaches him what he knows. It is not in character for the private

sphere Wordsworth, creating a new public self, to speak of his own life in casual terms: it is an instructive "textual leak."

ADAM FIELED, 2009-2012

Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Fieled

by Adam Fieled

Table of Contents

Apologia

The guiding principle of many of these essays is simple: to pierce through the layers of mediocrity, laziness, and bad faith that cover, like a blanket, both the theoretical apparatuses and the textual practices of many modern poets. To an extent, of course, there is a degree of self-privileging at work that I am uncomfortable with: nevertheless, to state my cases in the strongest and most stringent terms necessitated that I privilege myself. A piece like "Century XX after *Four Quartets*" is broken into its own layers: the central premise, that the second half of the twentieth century saw a precipitous decline in the quality of English language poetry, is buttressed by the conviction that some boundaries between low and high art need to be reinstated. I continue to stand behind these theses, and the other 2010 essays that followed all found different ways to enumerate these conclusions. Let there be no doubt: English language poetry, as an enterprise, has reached a critical juncture. To the extent that experimental poetry is aligned with post-modernism, a new century is testing what durability post-modern theory, praxis, and texts have. What post-modern textuality lacks (spirit, narrative) is becoming significant to a substantial number of poets. The overwhelming reaction that "The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry" received on the Buffalo Poetics List is evidence of this; it was a public spectacle involving poetry and metaphysics, something that has not occurred at any other recent juncture. "On the Necessity of Bad Reviews" is more practical, yet it shares with "Decay" a sense of moral outrage at a poetry world so jaundiced against candor, progress, and distinction that anodyne and pabulum are the only palliatives. There is indeed, I hope, a moral compass at work here— necessitated by the knowledge that the brittle immorality of post-modernity needs to be held in abeyance. "Entitlements.." points to some of the sources of this immorality—to the extent that artistic entitlement is taken for granted (often backed up by capitalistic interest), and history's "slow time" unacknowledged, all the higher arts will continue to languish.

Post-modern practices enact the sense that devolution is evolution. To the extent that there can be morality in art (and moral imperatives have never been artists' strong suits), it should be aimed at maintaining, not stability and routine, but healthy instability, a perpetual possibility of combustion in many directions. Post-modernity has seemed to impose, at least where poetry is concerned, a sense of stasis. Early essays like "Loving the Alien" and "Wordsworth @ McDonald's" comprise attempts to work within static confines; by "The Conspiracy against Poems," these confines have been assimilated and seen through. Thus, the progression of these essays is a head-on collision with the post-modern— first in complicity, then in confrontation, and finally in a movement towards what comes next. This is the problem that remains with us: what comes next. The answer, I hope, will be found not only in essays but in poems. But legitimate pushes come in all shapes and forms, and it is my hope that these essays have created, for fit audience though few, a context of healthy ferment.

Century XX after Four Quartets (2010)

With the remnants of the twentieth century still surrounding us, it may pay dividends, as the twenty-first century takes off, to take stock of these remnants and begin to make judgments. Newly ended centuries tend to leave detritus; this can create a hostile environment for artists who wish to sew new seeds and blaze new trails. Few seem to remember that when Wordsworth and Coleridge put out Lyrical Ballads (though the release and dissemination of this pivotal text spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century), it received hostile reviews and a good amount of indifference, as well. With hindsight, we realize that this was the text that almost single-handedly initiated British Romanticism. The early twentieth century was also inconclusive; William Butler Yeats was only beginning to receive the recognition that would lead to laurel, Walt Whitman's poems were yet to receive the blessings of posterity, while a host of lesser lights congregated around minor poets or reveled in the just-dimming glow of Decadence and Aestheticism. What do we see around us in 2010? It is a poetry world stumbling for direction, still largely lost in the theoretical wilderness of post-modernism, which espouses, among other things, the notion that distinctions between high and low art are both superfluous and illusory, that high art is the imaginary creation of hegemonic white males, and that artists can safely toss history in the dustbin and create out of momentary impulses, that have a better chance of capturing authentic effects than the backwards/forwards time-warp effect that Modernists like Eliot and Pound thought efficacious.

I would like to argue, firstly, that the demarcations between high and low art need to be reinstated. My reasons for this are manifold, but the simplest is this: I do not believe that much English language poetry composed after 1943, the year that Eliot's Four Quartets were released, deserves the title of high art. Before I explain why the twentieth century, post Four Quartets, was mostly a washout for English language poetry, let me explain what distinctions I believe subsist between high and low art. High art is defined by a sense of aesthetic balance; a host of factors must be present and accounted for; technical competence is a necessity, breadth of vision (so that any narrowness of focus is soon dissipated into fusions with larger wholes), narrative solidity (even when, as in Four Quartets, it is a loosely woven narrative, that makes frequent subtle shifts in different directions), and, most importantly, continued serious engagement with serious themes. If this harkens back to Matthew Arnold's emphasis on truth and seriousness, and if this seems regressive, remember that, in poetry, the impulses of post-modernism have all but flushed these constituent elements. Low art impulses often maintain a stance that technical competence is unnecessary, that breadth of vision is too ambitious, that narrative solidity is a remnant of the nineteenth century (and, to the extent that Yeats and Eliot, the only two twentieth century high art poets in the English language, had strong nineteenth century affiliations, this may be the case), and that "seriousness" is an outdated and outmoded concern. So that, the notions of high art and low art have been both displaced and misplaced, with disastrous results. We are surrounded by detritus that attempts too much with too little; that encompasses not worlds but narrow grooves; that shies away from responsible, serious engagements, or courts these engagements with such brow-beating incompetence that the matters were better left alone; and that uses sly evasions to explain its own horrendous deficits.

Back to T.S. Eliot; what is it that makes Four Quartets high art, and almost everything that followed in the twentieth century dross? Four Quartets, however sententiously, starts from a high ground; the artist is coming to grips with the limitations of

living in space and time. Eliot flattens space and time out in the context of an investigation of four places, each with its own peculiar resonances, which birth separate and discrete impulses in the poet, resulting in slight shifts in perspective and emphasis. Four Quartets is useful, also, because it demonstrates the loosest narrative emphasis possible in a poem that attempts to achieve and maintain the durability and permanence traces of high art. Narrative is the backbone of serious poetry; Four Quartets has an "I" that dictates terms, but in such a way that "I" is not an obtrusive presence. If there is an imbalance in Four Quartets, it is or may be a sense of oscillating perspectives that leads to a less than unitary presentation, or a loose sense of coherence that sometimes meanders away from central points. However, there is a sense that this is redeemed by a spirit of inquiry that balances philosophical concerns with concrete details, fragments of colloquial speech with natural imagery, traces of humanity's past with visions of possible human futures. That Four Quartets spans all this ground does not, in and of itself, make it high art; but that Eliot's language is taut, sinewy, disciplined, and rich makes the whole of Four Quartets ring as a solid, major work of high literary art. If another such work exists that was released between 1943 and 2000, I haven't seen it.

The Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School (first and second generation), the Confessional poets— what do these poets lack, so that the appellation high art does not affix to their work, nor the appellation high artist affix to them? For many of these poets, it is the ragged lack of discipline in the language of their poems themselves. Trying to read Beat poetry is like trying to eat raw slabs of uncooked red meat. Thematically, the Beats might have been redeemed by an egalitarianism that harkened back to Whitman; formally, they were creators of tremendous Babels that are even now beginning to collapse. The Objectivists did have ambitions consonant with the approach of high artists— but their panoramic viewpoints were undermined by impoverished lines that displayed little heft, music, and which demonstrate, rather than the rawness of uncooked red meat, an overwhelming brittle dryness. The New York School poets evinced significantly more delicacy, thematically and formally, than the Objectivists and the Beats; however, the primary perpetuators of New York School poetry tended to get lost in certain extremes: either language so steeped in colloquialisms that it lost its sense of itself as art, or language so bent against narrative that it lost its sense altogether. Had the Confessional poets widened their scope, they might have gained a sense of consonance with poetry as a high art form— but the narrowness of their thematic scope precluded a sense of serious engagement with issues that transcended the personal. As such, they, along with the Objectivists, the Beats, and the New York School poets, fall squarely under the rubric that covers minor poetry and poets, when placed next to the scope and achievements of Eliot and Yeats. Other groups, like the San Francisco Renaissance poets and the Language poets, seem like a mélange and a mish-mash of these styles. Minor Modernists (Pound, Williams, Stevens, Stein) initiated many trends toward disjuncture and colloquialism; because the high art balance of Yeats and Eliot was (and remains) more rigorous and more difficult to achieve, it has inspired fewer immediate imitations.

High art balance, as such, depends on serious engagements with the history of poetry, and also with a sense of discernment. Though Eliot did dote upon some minor French poets, his knowledge of the history of major poetry artists, as expressed in his early essays, was complete and solid. It allowed him vantage points that set his sense of aesthetic equilibrium on a high level. Because he had the discerning impulse to separate wheat from chaff, he could accomplish the major feat of moving poetry forward in innovative ways

while also conserving the best of poetry that had come before. Yeats' engagement with history was no less complete; though he lacked the theoretical bent that defined Eliot, it would have been unthinkable for him not to know the Romantics, the Neo-Classical poets, the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, back to Dante, Chaucer, and beyond. Yeats also had a comprehensive knowledge of Irish mythology, which added an ancillary resource to his repertoire. Put simply: these are men that did their homework, on any number of levels. Because they maintained a sense of discipline and responsibility about their traces, moving forward meant taking history into account at each juncture. The idea that history is a flush, that the canon of English language poetry was largely created by and for white males and so has a built-in obsolescence, is pitifully shallow and ultimately pernicious. If this canon is not yet a fully multicultural canon, it is nonetheless an indispensable resource; it is the only true measure we have of how far our own arrows can sail out into the universe. Century XX encouraged poets, after 1943, to eschew the essential challenge presented by Eliot and Yeats; how to move forward and conserve at once. As the twenty-first opens, it is this dual impulse which again presents itself as our brightest hope to rise to the challenges presented by a rich, if increasingly distant, past.

Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History (2010)

It is a topos that needs to be revisited periodically: capitalism is only a problem for those who have no capital. The brighter bits of Marxism reinforce and attempt to resolve this: a redistribution of goods and material wealth to level societies whose material facets have been skewered towards a chosen few. But the problem with poetry is not factory owners; with so little capital invested in poetry, "ownership" as such is more a spiritual than a material issue. The problem with poetry and poets is that you can't feel the sting of capitalism unless you have no, or little, capital; if you attempt to live off of your poetry (or even as a low-ranking academic) this will almost certainly be the case. Not too many poets have the material shrewdness to earn, through their own efforts, vast amounts of capital; what does happen is that people enter poetry (and the other arts) and are able to do so because of the capital they have inherited. This is more problematic than it appears to be at first— if you can't feel the sting of capitalism (its' greed, lack of justice, spiritual entropy), but have had to expend no effort in casting off the shackles that capitalism imposes, your relationship both to the arts and to society itself becomes so ineluctably warped that you might as well be an alien. In America, we call these folks "trust-funders." Whatever they are called, the attitude they tend to adopt in relation to poetry is one of entitlement; that they are entitled to deem their creations (however meager or nonce) poetry, to adopt an attitude of totalized complacency (without having earned it through genius or innovation), to turn workshops into exercises in egotism and readings into travesties. The attitude of entitlement fits snugly into a post-modern ethos— that art requires a minimum of effort, that any hokey contrivance can, will, and does pass for art, and that the only absolute is simple: capital can and will buy status. That's the post-modern spirit (which is, of course, a blatant oxymoron); to the funded go the spoils. Marxism works for many poets because they've never had the experience of having no capital, so they don't see or feel its dark edges— conspicuous consumption has engendered an ethos of complete indulgence. Entitlement means that, no matter what these poets create, it has to be as good as anyone else's creations: they're as good (of course) as Keats, or Yeats, or Eliot. Post-modern capitalism looks in the check-book rather than the history books to see what the balance is; high numbers take the place of high thoughts.

So the approach that many poets have to Marxism is twice-removed from Marxism in its pure state: by a surfeit of capital, and by a self-satisfaction that accepts and encourages the existent capitalistic system (implicitly, if not explicitly). Poetry becomes a business like any other— if you do good business (manifested in book sales, reading attendance, blog numbers, Google hits, or votes on Goodreads), and if what is quantifiable works in your favor, you are entitled to assume parity with anything or anyone. What is a poet (or an artist) legitimately entitled to? Not much. If you are serious about what you do, if you are not caught in a welter in which post-modern and capitalistic ethos creates a bogus sense of validity, you know that genuine imposition can only be created by history (assuming you are not imposed upon too much be material circumstances). History, if viewed properly, takes back entitlements. The flimsy history created by post-modernity contrives to impose an intimidating veneer; but a lack of real engagement with history creates a sense of the ephemeral which, if not embraced, (and post-modernists do express consonance with the "ephemeral" as such) must be rejected absolutely. Many post-modern equations are simple: "incorporate or perish" is one. What, beyond creating an imposing veneer, constitutes post-

modern "incorporation"? Nothing. Post-modernists, for what's often an obvious reason, feel entitled to stop at the surface; the reason is that a persistent sense of entitlement inhibits and destroys human depth. Deprivation often engenders depth— if you have never been deprived, it is difficult to imagine a need for depth. And if you espouse and embrace Marxist levels of material engagement, but fail to connect them to your own existence and begin to take some personal responsibility for it, you become a kind of sham factory owner. Anyone in the arts who has not inherited funds the way that you have becomes an underling. Underlings can be brushed aside; what begins as warped Marxism becomes straightforward Darwinian obduracy. Simply put, the arts aren't fair, and they never have been. What post-modernity imposes is a context in which there is not only no justice in who "gets in," there is no justice in what they feel they are entitled to do when/if they do get in. What do they feel entitled to do, more often than not?

Post-modernity often seems to represent an infinite regress towards oblivion; a plummet that never ends, and in which any kind of ascension becomes the butt of arrogant laughter; if history and art don't matter, and if you happen to be an artist, satisfaction arises not from what you create but in the sense of entitlement that justifies creating nothing. As much as Marxism is embraced, senses of base and superstructure in this grow confused; there can be no modes of production if what you produce is an acknowledged nothing. One gist of post-modernism is that there is no base— because, we are told, the idea of a "base" in art is a hokey contrivance, and there is no point in actually producing anything (except to preserve appearances.) So why be an artist at all? The reason is simple: because it's easy. Entitlement, if taken to an extreme (as it often is) negates a sense of responsibility. Do whatever you want; who cares? As the flush ethos dictates, check your numbers, throw out some more red herrings, everything's fine. But the depth engendered by deprivation has a difficult time accepting this— and post-modernity, like every other paradigmatic movement in the history of the arts, must end. While there is no sure sign that a nascent depth is going to permanently erode the foundations of post-modernism, it is doubtless that different eras require different artistic modes of production to hold a mirror up to dynamic circumstances. In Western life today, a sense of anti-dynamism, of stasis, has been put in place by harsh economic circumstances. It is likely that the post-modernists will respond to this in the same manner that they responded to fin de siècle entropy— with more acknowledged nothings, bolstered (at times and only in bits) by theories that dictate the shrewd and compelling nature of nothings, to reflect back the nothingness that will have been imposed on us if we have borne the brunt of these circumstances. In other words, post-modernism's potency and efficacy are crippled by the complete material security that enfolds many of its' constituents. We need something new right now.

Are any of us entitled to a new movement that evinces more depth and more engagement on more levels? We are not. But to the extent that one seed may be put into place (and with the hope that the seed may grow), I will say that what we need is to move upwards, towards some kind of affirmation, rather than towards new and greater levels of oblivion (born, more often than not, from obliviousness). Those who have inherited money often inherit nothing from history; those who have to create their own lives may create something worthy to be inherited, that has consonance with the more developed moments in art's history. In this context, the important thing is that nothing is to be closed, and what is created is a mystery that each artist must resolve for him or herself. No one should be entitled to anything but the right to create; the world owes none of us anything, not even this. That the right to create should be earned is something that post-modernity has

completely lost touch with; that material wealth is, itself, a red herring where the arts are concerned is something that needs to be looked into. But if something is to rise, and shortly, from the ashes of a fading post-modern regime, let's hope that when/if we have earned our places, it is because we know that in art, there is no way to earn anything but through intense and devoted labor.

On the Necessity of Bad Reviews (2009)

The attitudes prevalent in the poetry world today have created an atmosphere in which bad reviews of poetry books are (for the most part) unacceptable. The phenomenon of the poetry review-as-puff-piece takes place in a wide variety of contexts— online journals and blogs, print journals, press releases, and anthologies. The poetry protocol of gathering positive quotes to use on book jackets fits squarely under this rubric. I would like to opine that this trend, which encourages clannishness, reinforces coterie affiliations, and establishes poetry as a lightweight art-form, is largely negative and needs to be changed. Even popular music contexts encourage more healthy debate, where aesthetics are concerned, than poetry does. Aesthetic debates in poetry tend to be "my group against your group," a struggle for uncontested hegemony, rather than the productive arguments that initiated movements like British Romanticism and Modernism, and resulted in stunning new work. "Soft poetry culture" necessitates that interviewers ask easy questions, older poets are surrounded by fawning sycophants, while younger poets jockey for position based on their connections and alliances. For poetry to become a culturally heavyweight art-form again, poets (especially the ones being nurtured in MA and MFA programs) need to be taught to question their teachers, challenge poetry systems, and (perhaps most importantly) to write both good reviews and negative ones. The poetry world suffers from a dearth of angry young men and women, of rebels and revolutionaries. The first question that arises from these assertions is a crucial one— if "soft poetry culture" is predominant, how and why did it become this way? The answers are complex and myriad— nevertheless, a tentative investigation may be fruitful if it is agreed that these issues are, in fact, issues, and important ones.

Most poets in this day and age have some affiliation with academia. If you are reading a modern poet's book, there is a very good chance that the poet has not only a university degree but an advanced degree (usually an MFA or MA) as well. The relationship between poetry and academia has become so entwined that it may no longer be worthwhile to investigate whether or not this basic association itself is healthy or unhealthy. What, exactly, are poets being taught in these programs? Programs vary widely, and it would be absurd to generalize; nonetheless, I have both an MFA and an MA, one from a conservative institution, one from a liberal institution. This puts me in a unique position to comment on this situation. I do so, enjoining the caveat that I welcome both commentary and dissent, and that there may or may not be representativeness to my experiences. I have found conservative and liberal poets to be roughly 70% similar; they tend to credit themselves with much more differential than is actually there. Both sides cling very closely to coteries and coterie affiliations; both tend to encourage their students to accept their pronouncements uncritically. In my experience, poetry teachers at this level tend to only use "hardness" (hard pedagogical techniques) to keep others soft. Soft poetry culture dictates a strict master/servant relationship in these contexts— masters can be as hard as they want, servants (students) must remain soft. In more exacting disciplines (the natural sciences, for example), this division is more necessary— answers can be proven, things need to be learnt. But in art, which has as its ontological foundation what might be called "total subjectivities" (no one can prove what works, what does not, and even master narratives often come down to people's opinions), master/slave dynamics are not only unproductive but actively unhealthy. Liberal poets, I have found, are 30% more genuinely liberal than conservative poets, and 70% as pigheaded, domineering, and coercive. Investigation of these issues becomes like playing with Russian dolls; opening up one issue leads directly to the discovery

of another one. What leads poetry teachers in these programs to disseminate soft poetry culture through hard tactics? If it has the effect of softening sensibilities, why do sensibilities need to be softened?

I wrote, in a preface to Ocho #11, that poetry is a tough gig, and it is. Material rewards are scarce, competition is fierce, and tremendous dedication is required to even get a foot in the door. Those who have the good fortune to become successful in poetry tend to be warped by the atmosphere of deprivation that surrounds poetry endeavors. The line between those who are successful and those who are not can be thin indeed. Poets are fiercely protective of their little domains (and they usually are very little indeed), and this fiercely protective instinct gets enacted by a process and an impulse not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu calls the "demarcative imperative." Those who are above are forced by ambiguous circumstances to say they are above, and to enact this superiority. Students must be softened into receptivity— a student reacting to hardness with hardness would be an impermissible threat, in a radically unstable, ambiguous context. This is how soft poetry culture is perpetuated— through the hardness of teachers. And it is through teachers that students often obtain their first publication opportunities. Thus, young poets become "foot soldiers" for their teachers— they are soft meat, determined to carry the torches that have been passed down to them. Because so many poetry contexts are predicated on regionally or aesthetically dominant coteries, to break out of these rigid structures is a task indeed, and one younger poets are not encouraged to undertake. "Toe the line," goes the master narrative that dictates so much of younger poets' behavior, "and you will be rewarded; expressions of individualism will lead to irreversible exile status. It is softest (and most rewarding) to conform."

Textual expressions of conformity often take the form of puff-piece reviews. In an unspoken fashion, this becomes a mode of "playing the game," which necessitates perpetual softness. It also must be noted that "screaming at the other side" (who may or may not be listening) of the liberal/conservative, experimental/mainstream divide does not necessarily qualify as hardness. It reinforces a poet's own coterie associations, and is often used as a tactic to draw attention to one's self. Honest looks at those within one's own domain are hard to come by, and this fact prohibits poetry from becoming as rigorous (formally and thematically) as it could be. Students beaten into softness are so terrified of losing their little places that criticism of what immediately surrounds them would be unthinkable. Combat (perverse as this sounds) needs to start at home; conflict and warrior skills should not merely be aimed at distant enemies. Conflict within coteries should be encouraged; individualism needs both to be espoused and practiced by teachers. Taking this a step further, the question remains as to what a more ideal (or "heavyweight") poetry world would look like. Why would, not a dominant strain of bad reviews, but a balance of good and bad reviews, inject new life into an art-form that many people have given up for dead?

Young artists need to have teeth, bite, and guts. To the extent that young artists are being taught that teeth, bite, and guts (and I will resist the temptation to get academic with these words, as commonsense definitions apply) are negative, undesirable attributes, the poetry world looks (at least from a distance) like a realm of stilted pabulum. Non-poets tend to think of poetry as boring; it often is. Artists that work in other mediums actively employ the works of canonical poets, while eschewing works of contemporary poets, for a simple reason: because contemporary poets are not good enough (this applies to everything from R.B. Kitaj's usage of Eliot to Lady Gaga's fascination with Rilke). Older poets have had their shot; the decades to come may show to what extent they have or have not succeeded in their

endeavors. But the real fate of modern poetry is in the hands of younger poets, who (whether they realize it or not) do have options. One healthy option to explore is the possibility that an approach grounded, not in softness or hardness alone, but in a balance of softness and hardness (as manifested both in poems and in reviews), would be conducive to the growth of healthy, diverse poetry contexts, which could transcend the usual coterie prejudices. As a final confession, I will say this: I have written my share of puff-pieces. But the time has ended in which I can do this in good conscience; and to the extent that I feel writing negative reviews could, in some sense, be productive, I will be willing to get the hatchet out.

Wordsworth @ McDonald's (2005)

With the advent of the Information Superhighway, cell-phones, and other Digital Now-signifiers, we have an entered an era in which *all reality is virtual*. Poets who give serious thought to the *why* of their craft are faced w/ a dilemma: how to create poems in the Wordsworthian manner (i.e. *real language of people*) when technology has outmoded the Romantic model that still dictates so much serious poetry. Language poetry schematized a new model— oblique, skewered, post-modern. This model was a useful innovation that has, in roughly thirty years time, grown stale and somewhat irrelevant. Poets, & what's left of their audience, still want the Wordsworthian model to hold. They want feeling to be relevant & language to enact a mimesis of interior (*real*) processes. The problem is, that if we acknowledge a central *virtual quality* to modern life, *real language* may be an impossibility.

So, we can't depend completely on Wordsworth anymore. For the creation of *virtual poetry*, it will be necessary for the poet to internalize things ordinarily seen as epitomizing crassness & "low" reality— like McDonald's. As one sits in McDonald's circa 2005, it becomes clear that agile minds are working to keep the corporate axles greased— minds from which it is possible to learn. Hanging in the window, a large picture advertising chicken strips; a young African-American male dangling one in front of parted lips, beaming; inscribed on the blank space above his head, a motto: "*I'm lovin' it*". This is obviously rhetorical, in that the "I" here is general & universalized. "I" is all of us, in the contented bliss of a chicken-strip meal. So, McDonald's is subtle enough to posit an "I" that really means "you". How many poets left in America can say the same? How many poets are so subtle, so engaged, so *virtual* that their "I's" resonate as "yous"? Poets want a perpetual striking of Wordsworth's bell; they still believe in "real language" (even Language poets inherently must believe before they deconstruct); their "I's" stay isolate, separate, derelict. Let's set up a small chart & enumerate exactly the binary being portrayed here:

Wordsworth (*language/ real men*)	**McDonald's** (*I'm lovin' it)*
gender-specific, un-PC (language/men)	gender-neutral, PC (I)
static/abstract	"I" *In medias res*
definitely serious-intentioned	moderately serious

Immediately it becomes apparent that the McDonald's ad execs are, on some level, more linguistically sharp than us, the poets. Their motto is PC, active, & moderately serious, where Wordsworth is sexist, static, & excessively serious. What I'm calling for is a poetics equal parts Wordsworth & McDonald's. Post-modernists would resolve this binary tension by making a mockery of it (especially the Wordsworth half), in an attempt to reinforce an ethos of "virtuality" or "nothing real". Though reality has grown to be (arguably) virtual, I am looking for an earnest attempt to implement both sides of this binary, the Wordsworth & the McDonald's, the "I" that's "I" & the "I" that's "you", the static & the active, definite & moderate seriousness. This does not preclude irony & slant; rather, they become a tool to express underlying profundities. What's needed to achieve balance is *Negative Rhetopoeiac Capability*. That is, a poem must attempt to straddle the Wordsworth/ McDonald's binary without irritably grasping after rhetorical reason, or making a mockery of either side. This ensures a poetics both *actively virtual* & *substantially real*.

Some of these Frank O'Hara bits are illustrative of successful work in this vein:

"I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue/

and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and/
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton/
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with/
her face on it"

"Leroi comes in/
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12/
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop/
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible/
disease but we don't give her one we/
don't like terrible diseases.."

O'Hara's conversational diction fulfills Wordsworth binary-end, even as his affirmative, ebullient voice veers into "*I'm lovin' it*" territory (*in medias res, active, performative*). This is "serious ephemeral" poetry, using Pop Culture references as quotidian signifiers that nevertheless have substantial internal ("felt") relevance. O'Hara, though he skirts post-modern (or "Pop") territory, does not make a mockery of anything— he's kidding, but he isn't, he's at McDonald's reading Wordsworth, he is where we want to be.

O'Hara's oeuvre as a whole is useful, because O'Hara has a key "Wordsworth McDonald's" quality that most serious poets lack— "*charm*". His poems, in their moderately serious/ actively engaging tenor, are *charming*. Why wouldn't Wordsworth at McDonald's be charming? Can you imagine the Bard of Tintern Abbey reckoning a "Solitary Milkshake", finding himself overwhelmed by a spontaneously felt Big Mac? O'Hara's charm comes from unexpected juxtapositions charged w/ feeling. He is, in this sense, a good Wordsworthian— but *he lives in the present moment, always*. Dualism is manifested as whim. Modern signifiers are internalized, processed, felt. So, McDonald's has led us from Wordsworth to Frank O'Hara, who was virtual before virtual became real. He instinctively navigated a Mannerist-space that has yet to be pursued by a substantial number of serious poets (who perhaps mistrust his merely *moderate* seriousness). Yet, poets who lean & cling to Wordsworthian "reality" can often be heard complaining about lack of interest. Poets who want to achieve something *real* in this day & age really have no choice but to *get Mannerist*. Mannerism is differentiated from Pop (and the post-modern ethos that followed in its' wake) in this way— Pop is a Campbell's Soup can, Mannerism is a Campbell's Soup can *held by Michelangelo's David*. Mannerism includes Formal Rigor, depth, gravitas (Wordsworth virtues) along with spontaneous, active, Pop-based signifiers and imagery (McDonald's).

Claiming an essential *virtuality* to modern life needs some justification. What I mean to say is that image/ technology-saturation has become so rampant in Western society that even those of us who'd like to lead pure, uncluttered, Wordsworth-style existences have cell-phones, use the Internet, watch TV & movies, etc. Cell-phone communication seems particularly distressing, substituting expedience for intimacy (transpiring as it does while we are "multi-tasking"), breaking down boundaries (anyone w/ our number can reach us anytime, so long as we keep our phones on), often poisoning our relationship to the *Now* by taking us out of the present moment. So, imagine— one is at a dinner party, adjourned to the living room to watch (if we are lucky) something by Cocteau or Godard. Our cell-phone rings; we're expecting an important (perhaps career-related) call; we answer. We are living in three realms— dinner party, Cocteau, cell-phone— at once. These situations have become familiar and common to most of us. They happen all the time, and they (for me at least) have added up to a feeling of alienation from the *essential presence of the Now*. This is especially

pertinent for city-dwellers. The unreality/virtual component goes way up, it's hard to feel solid with a flux not only in the outside world but in one's hand-bag and one's computer. When I speak of an encroachingly preponderant *virtual world*, that's what I mean.

Poets must address this situation *precisely*. When Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, spoke of "gross stimulants" contaminating mass aesthetic judgment, could he even have fathomed our current level of emotional dispossession and image-centered "savage torpor"? I'm all for a poetry that confronts this head-on by using some of it! The architect Robert Venturi says, "*Viva Mannerism that richly acknowledges ambiguity and inconsistency in a complex and contradictory time."* Maybe we could go so far as to call O'Hara a "Mannerist"— his exaggerated reactions and humor, his implicit ethos of "*mess is more*". McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" also has the essential Mannerist hyperbolizing spirit. Wordsworth, the sober, steady *philosophe*, was obviously no Mannerist— but why not keep some of his level-headed piety regarding art's pleasure-giving, insight-shedding mission, his emotion-cherishing mind?

To me, it's a question of letting in. Don't write off McDonald's for its' Mannerist modernity or Wordsworth for his Romantic self-absorption— rather, let them both in *equally*, so that what we produce is contemporary *and* durable, Mannerist *and* tradition-preserving, face-to-face intimate *and* cell-phone expedient. O'Hara was, as far as I can tell, the greatest master at absorbing modernity-signifiers in such a way that he represented them without condescension, and with a loving eye. This has obvious ties to Warhol, Pop-art in general, Rauschenberg's Combine-paintings, etc. Mannerism, however, has grounding in tradition that Pop lacks. Pop did away with the past in embracing glossy surfaces; Mannerism wants the glossy surface *and* the earthy depth. It's an impossibly ambitious stratagem for a new urban poetics— but why not?

Loving the Alien (2006)

Poetics involves both "transcription" and "recollection", exteriors internalized and interiors exteriorized. Each process involves the assimilation of interior and exterior elements, "the ineffable In of Out and Out of In". Maybe we could call this point of in/out convergence *meta-rational*. We recognize the "rightness" of Out becoming In and In becoming Out, but we don't know exactly how or why it happens. Pursuant to this, it's possible to construct a neat little binary from the compositional theories of Jack Spicer and William Wordsworth. On the one hand, we have Spicer, "spooky" California *poet maudit*, with his transcription theory— everything worthy to be written is "dictated" by an unknown (alien) Other. On the other hand, Romantic man-of-Earth Wordsworth posits a poetry of recollection (introspective and otherwise). Wordsworth's famous "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" is ancillary to this. Yet, if we throw Jack and William into a dialectic blender, we see that each theory leaves something unaccounted for; transcription must be done from an inside (with what Spicer calls "furniture", whether the space is den or living room apparently doesn't matter), and recollection must be inspired by outside things (Tintern Abbeys or Candlestick Parks, numinous or sub-numinous things-in-themselves). It becomes clear that Wordsworth and Spicer fit together like puzzle pieces, but the puzzle is larger than them.

Certain things seem apparent. If we "transcribe", it's because we feel the Martians have something worth saying (else why would we do it?) Let's call this "Martian empathy". The Martian isn't strictly Other, but is both potentially comprehensible and definitely social; "transcription" is, in a sense, "recollection" of our interactions with the Martians. The dialectic knot tightens and the meta-rational comes into play again; we feel the "rightness" of the interaction without seeing how it is or isn't logically determined. Conversely, "recollection" is transcription of outside things (persons or the inanimate Natural forms Wordsworth loves), what they've "told" us merely by existing in the manner they do. This is the "language of voiceless things", not Martians but certainly things that aren't "given" to human consciousness, things that can only be "seen into" with conscious effort. Because the experience is heightened and changed during the compositional process, "recollection" is also meta-rational. The raw experience is "charged into life" by being put in verse, by the "spontaneous overflow" that may or may not have been felt at the "encounter point", but which is discovered in recollection ("mind associating ideas in a state of excitement"). What transcription and recollection share is the experience of the alien becoming familiar in a moment of meta-rationality.

Spicer's poem "Thing Language" bears this out:

This ocean, humiliating in its' disguises
Tougher than anything.
No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
Or crash of water. It means
Nothing.
It
Is bread and butter
Pepper and salt. The death

That young men hope for. Aimlessly
It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No
One listens to poetry.

Spicer uses "ocean" as a metaphor for the vast universal body of poetry, "art-language". There must be some "recollection" here— that the ocean is "tougher than anything" is a subjective pre-value judgment, obviously born out of lived ("recollected") experience. The only way to know how tough the ocean is is to swim in it! Spicer's poet-life, rather than his Martian-encounters (however indistinguishable the two may seem to him) allow him the luxury of this large, authoritative utterance. He's "recollecting in tranquility" the tumultuousness of the creative process. Any feeling of a "beyond-Jack" speaking through him would not be distinguishable to even a preternaturally close reader. Likewise "no one listens to poetry", a maxim meant rhetorically with years of hard poet-living behind it. The Martians, should they have dictated this to him, would've been telling him what he already knew (and had worked into gist-rhetoric) before. Tinges of Mannerism here, "I'm lovin' it" grandiosity transposed into a minor key (and intermixed with a few flatted fifths)— the exaggeration of "tougher than anything" and "no one". The poem fits in so well with what Spicer said in his lectures (poetry as meaningless conglomerate of contingencies, not for pleasure, essentially a negative apparition), that one feels the presence of a hyper-personal "schtick" that Spicer developed in all areas of his literary practice. The hyper-personal is what Spicer wanted most to avoid, maybe because he knew that it'd be impossible. The boundaries between "Zen emptiness" and hyper-personality are paper thin— both are exaggerated ("Mannerist") states, extremes. The "ocean", seen in its' totality, has a "blankness"— the subject objectifying the ocean, on the other hand, has only his developed sense of self ("personality") with which to counter (or reflect or balance) the blankness. Spicer isn't *in* the poem but directly *behind* it, which is really just as visible. The bind of ineluctable "Self-hood" was familiar to him, "transcription" being the surest antidote. Yet the obvious preponderance of recollection (at least in "Thing Language") makes the entire intellectual construct behind "transcription" seem strained.

On to W.W. Here's his famous short poem "A slumber did my spirit seal":

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

First, a digression…one way "transcription" is supposed to happen is through metaphor. The spirits "told" Yeats (in the anecdote delivered by Spicer in his lectures) "We're giving you metaphors for your poetry". That would be a good "furniture arranging strategy", no? Wordsworth's poem is (it seems to me) essentially metaphoric— "slumber" is a metaphor for lover/love interest (possibly "Lucy", could be anyone), revealed in third-person signifying "she" used from the third line on. A love affair, or

"being in love", awakens us on certain levels, on others "puts us to sleep". So, while part of the poem is "recollection" (Wordsworth is talking, albeit metaphorically, about a relationship he's had), in using "slumber" as abstract personal pronoun (highly unusual for him), one could argue that Wordsworth was mitigated by Martian influence, i.e. he was transcribing a metaphor the Martians gave him.

The difference that leans me towards Wordsworth's base position (poem-as-recollection) is that, while the metaphor used in this poem might be Martian inspired (transcribed), everything else about it (its' tone, form, subject and object) came from Wordsworth's furniture (recollection-material). Both transcription and recollection are often operative in poetry, but recollection is both more necessary and more ubiquitous. Poets write about what they know about and what they know about is their furniture. Spicer's error was to choose the metaphor of something inanimate (furniture) for what is actually *most animate* in the poet's consciousness. This is what we can classify as all "recollection material"— thoughts, feelings, dreams, whims, etc. Transcription becomes problematic if the Martians have to deal with *reactive*, rather than *inactive* material. Not that Spicer's perceived Other isn't a provocative thought— it is— just that Wordsworth's ideas have superior grounding and superior relevance. You can get away from transcription anytime you like (maybe even use your favorite lines), but recollection is unavoidable. This begs the question that each poet must answer for him or herself— to what extent should Martians be sought? They do seem to have some good ideas.

17

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry (2010)

Artists that live in the western world in this day and age are often forced to confront dominant strains of materialism, greed, and capitalistic interest. To an extent, poets get the worse end of this bargain— unable to make a living from their work, forced to support themselves by means that might be distasteful to them, surrounded by influences that anathematize the values they hope to embody. Yet poets, like everyone else, are themselves dominated by social interests which make the interests of those around them difficult to avoid. We must live in society; not only that, but because we must subsist through means that are not (for the most part) generated by our work, we must participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the materialism, greed, and capitalistic interests that run rampant through the majority of the population of the respective societies we inhabit. The chameleonic tendency of poets (and of artists in general) has been widely noticed; unfortunately, many poets take on stripes that sully the spiritual essence of the duties they perform when they compose. We cannot shut the world out, but by letting it in we corrupt ourselves; this has always been true of poets and other artists to some extent, but it is especially so in 2010. Even as the Internet has revitalized certain aspects of poetic practice, the forces of greed have grown more extreme as recession has swept Europe and the States, making resources scarce and even minor material gains hard-won. It is not surprising, then, that strains of materialism prevalent in western societies have infiltrated poets' texts. What are these strains, and how do they operate?

The theories of Karl Marx have exerted a powerful influence on the few preceding generations of experimental poets, but it is a more ambiguous influence than has been generally noticed. Because Marx espouses the replacement of capitalistic materialism with another kind of materialism (the material domination of the working classes), what we have in Marx is a kind of meta-materialism, that feeds on itself, with anything transcendental presumed guilty until proven innocent. Poets that subscribe to Marxist tenets have political agendas; poetry becomes an agent to fight capitalism. But this poetry still has its intellectual roots in a materialism that is more or less complete. That there might be other aspects to reality than the material; that consciousness is vaster than merely material perceptions can encompass; that the transcendentalism that would ascribe to the visible world an incomplete-at-best importance; these schemas, often dismissed as Romantic and thus regressive, are denied outright. What is, is— poetry that seeks to affirm this wants to embody text as a sole agent, a kind of material, that can, of its own essence, create worthwhile, substantial, memorable poems. It would be precipitate to assert that there is no spirituality whatsoever in the poetry of the American Language poets, for example: but that this spirituality is one that denies that "spirit" is, in all its ontological nebulousness, an important agent in poetic practice, would be difficult to deny. Poets with Marxist leanings bridle at words like "soul" and "spirit"; they perceive these words as tokens of delusion, demonstrations of an inability to face the concrete realities of the world and thus to have contemporary efficacy. Looking beyond Marx, some generations of experimental poets have also sought to embody the relationship to language initiated by the Deconstructionists of the late twentieth century. This consummated relationship is, I feel, less a success (and I do believe the Marxist poets understand Marx) than a misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, a spiritual essence inherent in Deconstructionist philosophy that

is often ignored. The Deconstructionists, with, among others, Jacques Derrida, leading the pack, saw in language a kind of dissolution of subjectivity, a movement subjects could make from unitary realities to realms that encompassed more than subjectivity alone could hold. It would be amiss to ascribe any kind of transcendental aim to Deconstructionism, especially where subjectivity is concerned; and there exists a chance that Deconstructionists might have been even less comfortable with words like "soul" and "spirit" than Marxists were. But that language itself is an arbitrary system leading to an infinite regress, balanced with the realization that words are tactile objects that are capable of containing, in their infinite admixtures, entire worlds; can, potentially, lead to a relationship with language that has a more than invisible connection to realms of subjectivity and transcendental engagement than is commonly supposed. The notion of Romantic Deconstructionism is absurd; but that Deconstructionism does not necessarily negate all forms of transcendental engagement has been misunderstood by experimental poets, who seek to evacuate all hints of anything transcendental from their texts, seemingly forgetting that poetry and philosophy serve very different functions, and fulfill very different ends. To be short: just as there is a lexicon that serious philosophers have a right to use (and this formulation is, admittedly, rather over-determined), there is a lexicon that poets have a right to use, and the inheritance of words like "soul" and "spirit" from our forefathers is a worthwhile one. Certain poets have used Deconstruction as a pretext to shun a serious, responsible engagement with the history of poetry; beneath their decimating gazes, centuries have been emptied of worth and meaning, and little fads of disjuncture and paratactic repetition have taken root as valuable. Without calling for a precise return to the Romantic, poetry needs to derive what spiritual seeds there are from Deconstructionism (and they are considerable, though they may have been unintended as traces), not to evade the serious tools that poets toil with to create meaning: narrative, the body, human relationships, and the levels that trace all of these things, horizontally and vertically.

I do not presume to demonstrate that poets do or do not have "souls." What I will say is that the metaphysical is part of our inheritance that needs to be reengaged. It is not only an efficacious way of connecting ourselves to our forefathers; it is an efficacious way of doing something more urgent, and more necessary: through these investigations, we can begin the work of separating ourselves from the debacles of capitalism, now that it is has subsumed so much of the western world. There is a level on which we are shying away from a direct engagement with the materialism of our respective societies by doing this; but that our narratives may draw from both levels, from an engagement that is also a disengagement simultaneously, has not yet been explored to a great extent. I foresee a return to spirituality that is not merely (or entirely) a rejection of Marxist and Deconstructionist thought, but a hybrid that uses all of these elements to make larger mosaics; poems that read like the great literary narratives that have sustained literary communities for centuries, from Dante to Goethe, from the British Romantics to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. This, that I envision, is not a return but a movement outward into something more expansive, more developed, and more encompassing than anything that was created by an English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative (2010)

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, Stoning the Devil. The object of this discourse was to give the term "post-avant" concrete significations. "Post-avant" is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or Flarf) was not known. Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a "blog," virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it "the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements." I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as "anything with an edge." I feel ambivalent about this move now— if "diasporic movement" was top-heavy and academic, "edge" was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with "edge," and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs, the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments. What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, "post-avant," which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

> Many people continue to complain that "post-avant," as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that "post-avant," in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem…what does "post-modern," in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about "Romanticism" or "Symbolism"?

In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like Objectivism and Surrealism. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term "post-avant"; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be "post" whatever "avant" is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets

think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does one's frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have been the manifestations of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters— in these works, visual artists have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry— however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like Warhol, Nauman, and more contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and Paul McCarthy have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than "frames of reference" and "maximum range potentials." I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called "post-avant" or "edgy" allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism— that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels— firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of

words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. Roland Barthes discusses the necessity of *bits* of narrative, *bits* of representation; as he says, "the text needs its shadow" (32)— the novels of Robbe-Grillet demonstrate how this can be done. There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish. There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are *merely* tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to *what* should be represented and *who* should be representing it. Much of the poetry I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual— thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with "sex at the center." Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex's centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like Brooklyn Copeland's chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that Yeats wrote of has all the durability and permanence (not to mention tactility) of words, with the added bonus that affect, sexuality, and their representations are *not* arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. "Write what you know" is a pretty hoary cliché— nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjuncture, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the *what*; as to the *who*, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no "correctness" in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and "correct" for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor artist strategies. They let their

texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. "Post-avant," as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

"Anything with an edge: Rethinking Post-Avant" (2009)

Many definitions have been posited for post-avant. There was a flurry of action about five months ago, in which I and a handful of other poets had it out over what post-avant means and what it does not. It was my impression that no general consensus was reached, and that much had been said but little of it had a substantial impact. This goes, certainly, for the things I said too; I do not privilege my own formulations here. Nonetheless, I think the discussion is a worthwhile one, and thinking about it has led me to some new conclusions. Here is the original definition I posited for post-avant: *the diasporic movement of Lang-Po towards a new synthesis with erotic and narrative elements*. That's roughly it. What I have been thinking over the last week is slightly different, and simpler. It is defining post-avant poetry as *anything with an edge*. This begs some immediate questions. What do we mean when we say that a poem, or a book of poems, *has an edge*? How do we strictly define *edgy poetry*? Colloquially, if it is said that something has an edge, it usually denotes that it is pointed, direct, sharp, and that it skirts the uncomfortable or the unsettling. It may deal, thematically, with a difficult issue, or it may take an unusual stance on an issue that has become stuck in a rut of settled representations. One obvious historical example would be **Shakespeare's** sonnet *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...*, which takes **Petrarchan** conventions and turns them on their heads. Or, the way **Pound** conflates two seemingly irreconcilable disparates in *In a Station of the Metro*, creating an unlikely synthesis of urban and rural imageries. Perhaps, owing to the sophisticated games played in his sonnets, we could call Shakespeare the first post-avant poet. Why not?

What else is *edgy*, pointed, direct, and sharp? I might be useful to name some things that are *not* edgy, but that tend to bear the post-avant moniker. Lazy disjunctive writing is, for me, *not* post-avant, *specifically because it has no edge. Having an edge necessarily connotates making some kind of sense*. It is hard, actually, to have any kind of thematic element included at all, if you do not make any narrative sense. I have no intention of picking on anyone in particular, but we all know lazy disjunctive writing (most of us know it a mile away) and it is not difficult to see that by this new definition, it does not fit under the rubric of post-avant. Epiphanic poetry, anything that relies on sentiment, would obviously not be post-avant, in these terms. How about spoken word poetry? That is a tough nut to crack; good spoken word poetry certainly has an edge, certainly carries thematic elements, so it would be hard-going to deny it a place in post-avant. What needs to be discussed is how stringently standards of *formal rigor* are applied to post-avant. If no standards are applied, someone could get onstage at a reading and say *shit fuck piss* ten times and be post-avant. All those tired arguments about "serious" poetry versus "performance" poetry need to be dragged out of the closet for the thousandth time; we have to find ourselves making distinctions and setting boundaries that might be unreal. I have no intention of laying down my version of the law; but where performance poetry is concerned, inclusion under the aegis of post-avant cannot, I think, be taken for granted. Which may, unfortunately, invalidate the *anything with an edge* tag-line. Or maybe not. The beauty of dealing with a new movement is that it is still amorphous and, if you are lucky (which I may or may not be), you can do your bit to shape it.

I affixed a picture of **Frank O'Hara** to this post because (perhaps this is a bit obvious) *anything with an edge* follows directly from *going on your nerve*. Why is it that O'Hara (along with few others) gets respect from *both major sides* of the American poetry landscape? How is it

possible to be loved by both **Billy Collins** and **Language Poets**? There are myriad reasons, but I would say that a major one is the deft manner in which O'Hara creates *narratives that have an edge*. New York City created O'Hara just as surely as Paris created **Baudelaire**; O'Hara's version of Negative Capability meant creating poetry that mirrored, as precisely as possible, the edginess of New York street-life mid-century XX. If O'Hara was a kind of conduit, this was facilitated by the seeming impetuosity of his poems. Is "anything with an edge" impetuous? Not necessarily. But the element of conscious craft and "edginess," taken as an indicator of aesthetic worth, make uneasy bedfellows. On the other hand, the tension between uneasy bedfellows can make for interesting poetry. There is no way to seal this thing up in one post (and blog-posts are often themselves "go on your nerve" exercises); but I think the idea of post-avant and *anything with an edge* could lead to a fruitful discussion, especially because it gets boring writing *a diasporic movement*... over and over again. I have always felt that O'Hara's best poetry *started something that has not yet been finished*. How would O'Hara feel about potentially having started a movement? Well, he did **Personism** already, so technically this would be the second movement...the more (I hope he would say) the merrier! I hope to go into what constitutes "edginess" and "anything with an edge" in days to come.

Book Review: Jordan Stempleman's Facings (2008)

When comparisons regarding poetry and poets become an issue, it is easy to remember a cliché that, in the manner of the best clichés, always seems applicable: *comparisons are odious*. Yet comparing things is both central to poetic practice (for those of us hardy enough to go in for a good simile or metaphor now and then) and critical practice as well. Put simply, comparisons are how a vigorous literary mind works. We are able to make sense of what is new by comparing it to older things. It works if you reverse the equation, too; as T.S. Eliot noted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," remarkable new works transform and transmute our conceptions of older masterpieces (if we posit that there are, in fact, poems good enough to be considered general masterpieces.) It would seem that, if comparisons are odious, we, as poets and critics, had better get used to the unpleasant smell of ourselves and of others. Or, we could throw the cliché out the window, working under the assumption that throwing clichés out the window is part of our job anyway. That's probably better.

All these issues have been going through my head as I've read, re-read, and re-read Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*, which was put out by Otoliths in 2007. Not only have I been tempted to compare it to things, but there is one specific, generally regarded masterpiece that I've been tempted to compare it to: John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.* All the same, I've been wary about this comparison. Those are some mighty big boots to fill, and I do not believe that absolute, unequivocal parity has been established. Nevertheless, all of *Facings* is of a high quality, and a handful of the poems do, in fact, compare (and achieve parity or near-parity) with the poems in Ashbery's book. Thematically, Stempleman and Ashbery cover much of the same ground: alienation, isolation, displacement (sexual, emotional, spiritual, what have you), and the theme that would bind them both to *Four Quartets* era Eliot (to extend the comparative reach), temporality.

I believe it may be best, when one is being ambitious and daring, to get down to brass tacks as quickly as possibly. Here, quoted in full, is a poem from Stempleman's book, called "The Apartment":

> He asked, who lives there,
> then brought over his
> laundry, covered all the
> windows with socks, his old
> t-shirts, pillowcases now
> separated from their sheets.
> The day seemed to go on
> forever. The sunlight, and only
> the sunlight, almost made its way
> through, went on trying to get in
> for a very long time.

We see a move here that Ashbery often makes: the placement of a character that remains unnamed, never "takes on flesh," and is surrounded by images of implosion and

desolation. An obvious example from *Self-Portrait* would be "A Man of Words," with its memorable opening lines, "His case inspires interest/ But little sympathy; it is smaller/ Than at first appeared." In the interest of comparison extension, I'd like to opine that the tradition that Ashbery and Stempleman are plugging into here has as much to do with Bertolt Brecht, and his famous alienating techniques, than with any poet in the Modern or Post-Modern canon (though of course Brecht also wrote poetry.) Brechtian alienation gives us characters that we are not meant to identify with. Given his very catholic taste in art, it is certainly likely that Ashbery would incorporate Brechtian alienation techniques into his poems, and Stempleman has followed suit. It is also worth noting that while sophisticated techniques are employed to create a certain ambience around an amorphous character, we nonetheless have a linear narrative here. Just as "A Man of Words," despite some opacity, tells a story (literary grandeur gone to seed), so Stempleman's poem tells a story too. Temporality extended (the day going on "forever," sunlight trying to get in "for a very long time") gives a sense of stasis, while the title of the poem tells us that, unlike Eliot's "Prufrock," we are looking at a poor man ("old t-shirts" is another clue) wasting away. Rather than Ashbery's faded grandeur, Stempleman gives us grandeur that never was, is not, and can never be. It would be a bit of a stretch, but you could see in "sunlight" a metaphor for the creative process. Yet this potential saving grace is thwarted, and the ruination that ends Ashbery's "Man of Words" is also in evidence here.

It would seem that the ability to tell a story, without resorting to epiphanic commonplaces, confessional melodrama, or pseudo-profound mythologizing, is relatively rare in modern poetry. When a middle-of-the-road stalwart like Billy Collins tells a story, we plug up our ears and stick to a party-line that has become rote: give us inquiry, give us exploration, do not give us hokey generalizations and anecdotal pap. What is remarkable about Ashbery, and Stempleman after him, is that a story is *half-told*, a narrative *half-presented*, in such a way that we are invited to create a story along with the poet. In this specific case, Stempleman's language leans towards the homely (in contrast to Ashbery's more baroque tilt): laundry, socks, and sheets. The combination of quotidian items and an incompletely sketched, though obviously alienated character, who moves through the poem in a kind of ellipse, is novel. To bring biography into the equation, Ashbery is an urban poet; New York and New York life constitutes part of his métier. Stempleman is rooted in the Mid-Western (based as he is in Iowa City); homeliness substitutes for urbanity, domestic detail for baroque. Yet the mood, the ambience, is strangely similar.

An even greater quotient of palpability, and affectivity, is visible in "The Retired Couple":

> Stop licking the bread
> before calling me into that impossible position again.
> The night to remember is impatiently waiting
> to be left alone.
> It is said there is a greenhouse in this night,
> filled with a kind of bamboo
> that can tend to itself.
> I mean, that's actually why it's there.
> To live without us, without so much as a visit,

doing whatever it is the unthinkable do.

On the surface level, this poem brings to light another predilection that binds Eliot to Ashbery, and then Ashbery to Stempleman; aphorism. Ashbery's famous "The night, as usual, knew what it was doing" (not actually from *Self-Portrait*) is echoed here by Stempleman's "The night to remember is impatiently waiting/ to be left alone." With Stempleman, as with Eliot and Ashbery, aphorism becomes a way of building what is durable from what is memorable. Like an affecting bit of melody, these lines stick in the reader's head without effort, rendering the poem a persistent presence, something ineluctable. The substance of this particular phrase is the same kind of desolation visible in "The Apartment," only this is a two person, rather than a one person scenario. This heightens the emotional tension, ups the ante, as in Ashbery's "Poem in Three Parts." It is also worth noting that something is in this poem that is *not* in Ashbery (or most Eliot); the use of conversational diction we see in "I mean, that's actually why it's there." It is important to remember that Stempleman is, in fact, a younger poet writing in 2008 America. The overt and excellent classicism of his work would tend to elide this from his profile, but at odd moments such as this, colloquial America jumps into the picture. This is not a fault, and it is to Stempleman's credit that he is able to mix different worlds of language use so effectively.

Ashbery and Stempleman both deal with issues of emotional entanglement. Yet their approach is oblique enough so that, as with storytelling in these poems, we are encouraged to participate. The first two lines of Stempleman's poem are potently ambiguous: "Stop licking the bread/ before calling me into that impossible position again." Beyond the brutal sting of a near end-rhyme, what is enunciated here could be a reference to the sexual, the emotional, the spiritual, or any combination or permutation of these. "Impossible position," of course, implies that this retired couple no longer have sex, that physical intimacy has become an impossibility. Yet this is fertile ground for glossing; "licking the bread" could refer to money, or the ravages of age that have forced these two to eat lightly. "Licking the bread" is also repellent, an image of repulsion (leading us back to the Brechtian.) We are not invited to feel along with these two; we may feel like we're looking down the wrong end of a telescope. "Licking" is, or maybe, overtly sexual, so that thematically we have both a kind of avowal and denial in two lines. In short, the way Stempleman opens the poem may give the reader a swift kick in the gut, such as we see when Ashbery writes, in "Farm," "Living with the girl/ Got kicked into the sod of things."

I don't have many gripes with *Facings*. I find all of it admirable, some of it stunning. However, I have taken the initiative here and compared it to a masterpiece. If I'm not arguing for parity, it would seem fair that I should lay out some reasons that *Facings* is not a masterpiece on a level with *Self-Portrait*. Very little has been said or written about Ashbery's sensuality. People tend to think of him as an intellectual poet. Yet, *Self-Portrait* is full of sensual details, and it is part of the greatness of the book that it melds the sensual and the intellectual so seamlessly. Stempleman can be a little barren this way, a little short on the sensual details, the "limpid, dense twilight(s)," "smoking dishes," "snake plant(s) and cacti" we see in Ashbery's book. Shortly, what is abstract in Stempleman is more or less equal to what is abstract in Ashbery; what is not in

Stempleman is the palpable half of the equation. There is more breath is Ashbery's line, more expansiveness, than is found in Stempleman's rather crimped line; Stempleman, in his lesser poems, tends to rely on the merely clever. Yet, Ashbery did not come to *Self-Portrait* until he was in his late forties; Stempleman released this book at age 30. As an unbiased observer, there would seem to me to be little reason not to believe that, in time, Jordan Stempleman could write a book that would achieve absolute parity with Ashbery, and set the poetry world on its ear all over again.

The Conspiracy against Poems (2010)

There is no historical evidence to suggest that during the Romantic era, something called "Poetics" existed. At the time, Wordsworth and Coleridge, both identifiable as "Lake" poets, initiated investigations of a theoretical nature, centered on poetry. These investigations were one of Coleridge's métiers; Wordsworth rarely identified himself as something other than a poet. The controversies that surrounded Wordsworth, from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* forwards, were centered jointly on his poems and the theories that buttressed them. Why is it that in 2010, a majority of poets, particularly those toiling in experimental milieus, seem both more grounded in and more stimulated by theories than by the poems they bolster? What is this nebulous entity, "poetics," and how has it sapped the life out of what it is meant to serve? The chief weakness of the pursuit of "poetics," as I see it, is that it puts premiums on two red herrings— novelties and political correctness. "Poetics," as practiced by the bolder American universities, wants to investigate the newest of the new, anything (striated, of course, within the taut bounds of political correctness) that has not been done before. But practicing "poetics" creates and perpetuates its own kind of romantic ideology— an unthinking and uncritical belief in one's self-representations as planted firmly in the new, fresh, and bold. This insidious addiction to novelty cuts off poetics from a serious engagement with poetry's history. It upholds the post-modern ethos that history is essentially a master narrative created in a homogenous vacuum, and thus worthy to be trashed. Why poetics configures a conspiracy against poems is that it bifurcates poetry, as a realm, into two realms (poetry and theory) and dictates that poems should serve theory and not vice versa.

Poets weaned on poetics never quite reconcile themselves to the reality that poems spun out of flimsy theoretical material cannot have any great or striking impact, either in the long or the short term. All this movement towards theory and concept is mirrored in other art forms; but as the post-modern impulse ages, it may be seen that when taken to an extreme, as it has been in experimental poetry, it creates such an aura of rapid obsolescence around new poetry that one wonders why new poems are being written at all. As the novelty aspect of poetics pushes for newness and gimmick-consonance, the political correctness angle further sharpens things against the emergence of poems. Simply put, poetics is mainly a construct established and put into propulsive motion by white, middle-class academics; and as multiculturalism has emerged as a subsidiary branch of post-modernism, a sense of guilt moves participants not only towards the outré but towards anything ethnic or deviant. The problem with poetics generally is that there is little quality control. The conceit of post-modern poetics is that there is no such thing as "quality"; quality is a teetering edifice erected by hegemonic white males to reinforce a master narrative patched up against invasion. Yet the way post-modernists striate things cuts off the levels of nuance within consensus opinions (borne out or subtly shifted over long periods of time) that build canons. Could it be possible that poems sometimes last because they have quality? If quality is not completely subsumed in evanescence, then both novelty and political correctness approaches become quixotic arrows shot at wavering targets. But the point is that in many circles these approaches have become standardized. Generations are now beginning to emerge who have been weaned on these approaches. The upshot is that poets have been formed who respond to theory first, poems second. If poems are a subsidiary branch of theories, then poetry as an

endeavor has become so bastardized and decadent that it has ceased to be itself. I want to argue for the permanent preponderance of poems over poetics, and that poems, rather than poetics, need to be starting the fires that add luster to our lives as artists.

There is obviously a neat meta-irony at work here. If this piece starts any fires, it may seem, in the short term, to annihilate itself as poetics qua poetics, willy-nilly. But the larger issues may make the endeavor worthwhile— that post-modern theory may be killed by artists with art, and if the first baby steps remain theoretical, so be it. What kind of poem, in 2010, could start a fire? Wordsworth's arsonist techniques involved what he deemed a new kind of language. This is what, at the risk of growing tautological, we need now— a new kind of technique. This language, not qua poetics but beyond poetics, would have to eschew certain kinds of novelty and political correctness. It isn't enough to wish for a return to narrative— it needs to be determined what a post-post-modern narrative is (and I freely admit that post-modern is important enough that it needs to be assimilated). The inescapable accusation that follows hard upon these assertions is of regressive conservatism— that moving into a new language world that has consonance with narrative and engages the entire history of poetry is tantamount to going backwards. Yet, it has not yet been widely noted that post-modernism has pushed the art-forms it has infiltrated so far in narrow directions that there is no room for any movement but a backwards one. In an experimental landscape dominated by poems impoverished on both sound and sense levels, to argue *for* sound and sense becomes a radical move. Thus, sound and sense, the ostensible pillars riveting poems to the ground that they might ascend, become signifiers of detested Romantic impulses, holding out bogus claims of transparency and dangerous delusions of grandeur. In such a landscape, the way forward is the way back, because it must be. For every gimmicky vista that opens up and is instantly thwarted, poets lose more of the capacity to both appreciate and generate the kind of texts that make poetry worthwhile— texts that find inventive ways and shrewd angles with which to create the balance of sound and sense that is the hallmark of durable poetry. Poetry that is truly inventive does not need to entail gimmickry— nor does it need to recreate Romantic sincerity, Victorian sonority, Modernist objectivity or post-modern acerbity. And because invention cannot be anticipated, it would be destructive for me to predict what form it will take or how it will be disseminated.

Poetry is shrewish. For poems to come along and start fires, they would have to burn through enormous resistances. The reason, historically borne out, is that movements become entrenched, and entrenched movements have a tremendous capacity for denial, obliviousness, and discouragement. Because poetry contexts do not entail gross, or even minor, amounts of capital being made or spent, the rewards poets work for are more or less intangible. As such, there is a tremendous delicacy to poets that often congeals into rigidity. That mature poets are often stiffened into rigid postures, and demand degrees of obeisance, necessitates that younger poets receive strong encouragements to conform or be killed. It is also inevitable that each generation will raise only a few poets above the crowd. Nevertheless, to the extent that poets are willing to take up cudgels, a preponderant sense of poems is worth fighting for. Post-modernism has been attenuated into something quite tame; to the extent that the only leaps left to make are, at least in the short term, backwards leaps (into narrative, emotion, sonority) means that the post-modernists expunged too much from what poetry had been before they put up their grayish fortresses. Yet this cannot be a manifesto, because I do not wish to promote any agendas. The essential agenda here is to create, if possible, a context in which poets can decide for themselves the best means of arson, because these grayish fortresses need to be burnt to the ground. It is over the ashes of

the moribund that we invent; and if what we invent is poems, and if the poems are built sturdily enough, we do not need to worry that we will appear grayish to whoever succeeds us. That this work needs to be accomplished in different solitudes, rather than in groups, is worth considering; isolation is not merely Romantic, it may be a job requirement. Clannishness and conformity are the major enemies here.

Twenty-First Century Poetry and Poetics (2010)

What does it mean to be a twenty-first century poet? We are still living with the traces of the twentieth century all around us; but the mounting importance of the Internet (and other, related technologies) is changing mass-consciousness (and with it, perhaps, the Collective Unconscious) with incredible speed and also, as far as the Internet is concerned, with a sense of permanence. The Net has altered most of our lives in ways none of us could have foreseen twenty (or even ten) years ago. The proliferation of blogs and online journals has signaled major changes in the way new poetry (especially new poems composed by younger poets) is disseminated— new poems are published with greater rapidity, and for wider audiences. It is no longer as drastically difficult for a younger poet to reach a wide audience as it has been in the past; however, gaining respect from the old guard is quite another issue. Academic institutions have generally been slow to recognize online publications; and, to the extent that the old guard is often affixed to academic posts, a battle of generations has erupted that calls into question what party holds the reins of power as regards the future of poetry and poetry dissemination. But the days and years tell us unequivocally that this is a new century; that what worked before might not necessarily work now; that currents and tides moving mass consciousness cannot be ignored; and that the evolution of poetry into an again-relevant cultural art-form may depend on what perceived relationships subsist between poetry and nascent mass consciousness. We can, thus, begin to examine in depth what constitutes this mass consciousness, as it relates to poetry and poets.

Facebook is as good a place to start as any; a site dedicated to the development of individually based, collectively shaped communities. Many (though not all) younger poets have elected to maintain Facebook pages. On these pages, poets can, at any moment, posit a "status update" for themselves and their friends. These status updates can take many forms — adverts for new online publications (which might include links), quips, complaints, even gibberish or Jabberwocky-level nonsense. But with these updates, a younger poet is empowered to reach an audience of hundreds (or even, sometimes, thousands). Poets who are used to Facebook or take it for granted tend to forget what it represents (and what some online publications also represent)— the problem of geography solved, to a greater extent than was ever possible in the past. For centuries, poets have been limited by geographical constraints— unable to communicate with a wide audience at once. The level of empowerment that Facebook grants younger poets is substantial— a ready community, whenever one wants it. Poets can comment on one another's status updates, "like" them or actually leave added comments, and all this can happen almost instantaneously. What Facebook amounts to is a perpetual stage— poetry, perhaps the least performative of the major art-forms, becomes performative online. Facebook, and the Internet in general, have created ferment and excitement around poetry that has no precise parallel in the history of English literature. They cut across boundaries of place, nationality, sex, age (though most Facebook poets are younger poets), religion and even genre; it is not surprising that dramas, intrigues, and wars are often engendered online. But, where the Internet is concerned, Facebook is just the tip of the iceberg. With so many online journals operative, it would be unfair to single out journals for praise and analysis (though *Jacket* would be an obvious choice); rather, it might be more profitable to gaze at another level of the Internet's seminal influence on this generation's poets: the demands of reading poetry online, and the skills

poets have developed to cope with these new demands. This will also lead us to realizations as to why online formats are (in some ways) ideal for poetry consumption, in some advantages they confer over print.

This is the most common complaint voiced by older poets about the Internet— that it is difficult to read poems online. While online consumption of poems is certainly an acquired skill, it is by no means unattainable, though it requires concentration. There are some distinct, unavoidable disadvantages to reading poems online— you cannot scribble in the margins (as poets are wont to do), and, unless you have a laptop (which many poets do), you cannot carry the poems around with you. Nevertheless, the compensations are more extreme than the disadvantages— the way one click can take a reader from one journal to another, from a link to a journal, from a blog to a journal, ad infinitum. This kind of mobility makes the lives of younger poets more fluid, exciting, and stimulating than they have been at almost any other juncture in poetry history. The excitement is largely specific to poetry— poems, because of their brevity and tendency towards compressed form, are ideal for the formats available online. Longer works of fiction and non-fiction require too much concentrated attention to make sustained online reading tenable (though as online reading skills develop over the coming decades, this may change); online reading of poems is very tenable indeed. Because this is so, poetry has received a very welcome infusion of new, vital energy; this infusion has resulted (as has been said, but it bears repeating) in a feeling of empowerment among younger poets, and has (in this poet's opinion) killed off the terrible lethargy of the second half of the twentieth century, where poetry is concerned. All the lax movements, the dull rhetoric and the third-rate texts (often bandied about as treasures) may fade from vision; who survives in this century may be determined by who is able to woo this benevolent beast, the Internet, in the most artful, thoroughgoing fashion.

Projecting these circumstances into the future, questions arise as to how memorable poems and poetry books will be preserved. Print libraries and archives remain the accepted channels; however, changing technologies may make these repositories more obsolescent than poets have ever imagined. Online archives like *Pennsound* have already developed, to collect, maintain, and preserve sound recordings of poets reading their texts. This makes sense for poems presented orally, wherein all the audience has to do is sit back and listen. Online archives for poetry texts have yet to be established on a wide, solid basis, though there are niches here and there where they exist. It seems likely that at a certain moment of time a balance will be struck between print resources and online ones; successful poets and poetry texts will be disseminated and preserved in print and online formats simultaneously. This creates a scenario that is already largely in place— that print poetry books, never big money-makers, will become even less successful when portions of these book, even entire portions of these books, are available online for free. The Net is, to some degree, an egalitarian phenomenon, that flouts (at least in the material sense) the rules that dictated prior monetary arrangements, where poetry is concerned. Poets will make less money than they ever have from poetry (though this is usually not much); but they will be read by far greater numbers of people than would have been possible in the past. Just as a wildly vast audience embraced Lord Byron in Regency England, vast audiences will be more attainable to gifted poets than has ever been the case before. This may not alter the material characteristics of poets' lives, but it will buoy them up with the knowledge that they are being read, preserved, and treasured for the original works they spawn.

This seems to me to be the ultimate goal: once the young generation has experienced the empowering influence of the Internet, they may translate these feelings of empowerment

into poetry texts that can surpass the traces that their predecessors have left in their books. Without pointing fingers, it is worthwhile to note how little artists in other disciplines have been inspired by English-language poetry of the last fifty years. Poetry and poets have fallen out of circulation; contemporary poets are not referenced by contemporary painters, sculptors, dancers, serious musicians or architects with any frequency. Poets that do not feel empowered tend to create hermetic texts for small coteries; narrow in scope, limited in vision, minimally efficacious in reaching wide audiences. The Internet has the power, in this new twenty-first century, to open up that scope and widen that vision, so that younger poets may, in fact, make this an excellent century for English language poetry. In an America plagued by recession and never-ending political battles, this may not be the time for prophecy; but the Internet is its own New America, and can be taken seriously as one key to the fate of this art-form, poetry, that needs to be made new all over again.

Best of Stoning the Devil

2006-2009

Adam Fieled

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Reading Balzac Backwards: the Poet as Painter (3/19/06)

In **Balzac's** classic short story *The Unknown Masterpice*, the painter Frenhofer says to his friend Porbus, "Never forget, Porbus, we're not just artists, we're poets!" I've always wanted to say the same thing in reverse (to whatever poet happens to be close at hand): "never forget, we're not just poets, we're painters!" Poets and painters share a good amount of common ground: an obsession with "lines," methods of "coloring," modes and mechanics of "rhythm," ins and outs of form, formal processes. Writing-space, like canvas, is two-dimensional, and poetry these days veers wildly between abstraction and representation. Most would associate "representation" with Centrist poetry and "abstraction" with experimental verse, but of course there's a certain amount of overlap, and boundaries tend to disappear when we use these broad, universal terms.

So, if poets are painters, how do they become "painterly"? The immediate answer would seem to be a recourse to "projective" modes, wherein the physical appearance of the poem has an impact above and beyond the words themselves. But a problem has developed for experimental poets of my generation; we tend to write "left-justified" because we all publish on the Net, and Net publishing finds "projective" writing problematic. Blogger won't accept it, HTML tricks are a pain in the ass to learn, it's simpler to avoid "painterly" appearances. Can "left-justified" poems be painterly? Well, yes; I tend to think of **Rothko's** rectangles & **Pollock's** "allover" compositions, which exude a kind of muscle and heft, a contradictory, impenetrable earth and airiness that good "left-justified" poetry sometimes replicates.

But doesn't that align us against LANGUAGE poetry, all the Old Guard? They rebelled purposefully against "left-hand margin" poetry, now here we are taking it up again, for our own particular, very practical reasons. Just goes to show how much poetry is born out of contemporary necessities, rather than "free-wheeling" improvisations and inspirations. We can't paint with the jagged meandering menace of **De Kooning** because he finds no echo in "left-justification." **Barnett Newman**, with his "zips", is someone we find some affinity with. Likewise, we might find ourselves returning to **Eliot**, who leaned towards "left-justification", rather than proto-projective **Pound**. Now, it's taken for granted that young Centrist poets (whoever they might be) won't have this problem-- they're writing for print journals. The irony, of course, is that "left-justified" is a trademark of Centrist verse. So, on a surface level, there may seem to be a homogenous quality developing in the coming generation and their work. But limitations are a challenge to invention, so us experimental "painters" have to find new ways to invent-- new kinds of lines, new rhythms, new "colorings," etc. It won't be easy. Or, some technology might come along that makes the "left-justified" problem disappear, and we can all go projective again. Actually, the more I think about it the more I enjoy the idea of a forced "left-justification" rule. Limitations can be liberating, just as too much freedom can be a burden. In any case, it will be curious to see what develops. Keep your eyes on the left hand margin, folks....

Narrativity is Money: 8/17/08

This is something I heard through **Roland Barthes** (I say "through" Barthes because he acknowledges that the idea did not originate with him): that each narrative is *a staging of the father*. Narratives, like fathers, tell us something about how to read the literary works in which they are contained. Even when a narrative is not immediately apparent (as in many of the more extreme forms of experimental poetry, or in a book like *Finnegan's Wake*), every time there is an intrinsic progression in the work, every time we do not get a pure paratactic, we are being asked to follow a line that is, for want of a better word, narrative. More than a way of simply acknowledging, affirming, or even potentially denying the reader (who in innovative works will be asked to contribute and collaborate with the author and his/her elusive construct), narrative is the means by which the author courts, seduces, or teases the reader, making the book a kind of literary automative vessel to take us from point A onwards; whether to B or to Z depends on the proclivities of the author. Narratives are engines; they propel books, allow them to rise above stasis and redundancy.

In our society, money fulfills the same purpose that a narrative does inside a book. It is one engine that drives us onward, and lack of it is the cause of social stasis and an inability to gain solid material ground. We (even those of us who are not materialists) look to money to move us forward. This is particularly true for writers, who need to buy (somehow, someway) the freedom to create. Freedom is tied intrinsically to capital (or lack thereof), and the freedom we need cannot exist without some kind of cash nexus being involved (however miniscule the amount of money involved might be). Just as we look to narrativity to move us through the often opaque substance of serious literature, we look to money to give us head-room to develop ourselves, and (often) the more money we have, the more literary development is facilitated. No one can create without the freedom that, in this society, only money can buy. Is the print literary system in America as much a plutocracy as the government? Probably.

As far as literature goes, plutocracy is lousy; who knows how many of the uneducated masses could be writers and poets if given the proper opportunity. These people are denied movement, progression, dynamism. Yet, I'd like to argue that, where literature itself is concerned, narrative, that staged parent, *is* a good thing, when developed in a balanced way. Mainstream poetry addresses the problem of narrativity by over-doing it. It is the literary equivalent of an over-protective yet patronising father, who is eager to tell us what to do, how to read, what constitutes meaning and truth, and why these things matter. The real-world synecdoche for this would be the hopelessly, uselessly rich. In short, over-done narrativity is a bit like **Paris Hilton**: spoiled, eager to corrupt via beat-you-over-the-head single-mindedness.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the fence, experimental poets react away from bombast, but with, unfortunately, what often amounts to a different kind of bombast, a different form of the same thing. Here, lack of narrative becomes a stand-in for egalitarianism, a form that reacts against "monied" complacency. The problem is that as long as word follows word, narrativity is always implicitly present, in fact *must* be present. Attempting to write without narrative is like trying to paint without color. The implicit narrative created by this kind of

poetry is like a father who shuts himself up in the attic and refuses to talk to his children. The reader is left feeling like he or she is having a conversation with a brick wall. Too little narrativity is no better than too much, and younger experimental writers are always throwing bunches of words together without rhyme or reason in emulation of these difficult Dads and Moms. Does this poetry make a kind of statement against plutocracy, aesthetic and society? Certainly. But, like a close reading of **Marquis de Sade**, it begs the question: just as Sade's extreme rebellion against Christianity suggested an inordinate obsession with Christianity (the expression of which paid back-handed tribute to Christianity), so experimentalists often pay back-handed tribute to their mainstream counterparts by extreme rebellion.

Aesthetic Economies: 8/20/08

What I've really been dealing with lately is the issue of *narrative economies*. Creating a work of art, beyond demonstrating the modicum of material power necessary to find the time, space, and energy to create works of art, mirrors the process by which we balance our check-books. Narrative economics is this process: how to use aesthetic scruples to say enough (so that something is actually, palpably, demonstrably said, and many mainstream poets are militant about the necessity of a "said quality"), while not saying too much (so that the poem becomes the too-secure sound of an expensive car door, maybe a Jaguar, being slammed shut). Within the economy, or economies, of narrativity, there are a range of options, and no two poets approach the travails of narrativity in the same way. The *persona poem*, made fashionable by **Pound** and **Eliot**, picked up by everyone from **Robert Duncan** and **Charles Olson** to **John Berryman**, is an interesting twist; we narrate, but not *as us*. Narration happens behind a mask, which, in a contradictory way, allows us to tell the truth (**Wilde** said, *give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth*).

There are other ways, other narrative routes to take; but, more importantly, it helps to recognize that there are myriad issues, myriad economies, all of which come into play in the creation of serious poetry. Narrative economy is one; what about the ratio of concrete particulars to generalites, or the ratio of intellect to sensuality, or metaphor to plain statement, or lapidary language to linguistic simplicity? In all of these cases, the poet (if he or she is a serious craftsman, craftsperson, whatever) is driven by an aesthetic Superego that necessitates how everything must be *earned*. Perhaps, out of all these economies, narrativity is the most direct analogue to the "actual financial", but each economy has the potentiality to demonstrate, via careful application, the same sort of skill with which "monied" people save, invest, and cultivate their holdings. The poem can be taken as micro or macro, depending on one's proclivities; if it is "micro", we privilege the "actual financial", and socio-economic data takes precedence over art; for aesthetic aficianados, the poem is "macro", a higher level, a more fulfilling echo of what takes place in work-a-day bourgeois and upper class life. Either way, the issue is the same: a tension exists between opposing forces (impulses to spend, impulses to save) which can only be reconciled incompletely, imperfectly, and with a perfect awareness of this imperfection.

I would opine that the best poets (for me, at least) are the ones who create an impression of solidity by a scrupulous devotion to aesthetic balance, scrupulous spending and earning. This is a poem by **Rae Armantrout**, from her collection *Veil*. It's called *My Problem*:

It is my responsibility
to squeeze
the present from the past
by demanding particulars.

When the dog is used
to represent the inner
man, I need to ask,
"What kind of dog is it?"

If a parasitic
metaphor grows all
throughout-- good!
Why stop with a barnacle?

A honeysuckle,
thrown like an arm
around a chain-link fence,
would be far more

articulated,
more precisely repetitive,
giving me the feeling
that I can go on like this

while the woman
at the next table says,
"You smell pretty,"

and sends her small daughter's
laugh, a spluttery orgasm,
into my ear--
though this may not have been
what you intended.

It may not be a problem
when I notice
the way the person shifts.

This is an incredibly rich poem. It would probably take about twenty pages to unpack the whole thing. However, just on the surface, you can see that Armantrout is attentive to economies, and her sense of aesthetic balance allows her to walk a tightrope, and I say tightrope because this is a "risky" poem. Why? Because Armantrout seems to be writing specifically about the travails of linguistic representation. This is a "meta-poem": writing about writing, language about language. Yet, we get a depth of sensuality, concrete detail, sonorous richness, that is quite unusual in writing-about-writing: look at the near-rhyme of "barnacle" to "honeysuckle", and the palpability of the image of honeysuckle around a fence. Not content to throw in a single image, we get a complete mini-vignette: a woman saying something jejune, her daughter erupting in a "spluttery orgasm" of laughter. The poem "comes", as it were, with this orgasm; Armantrout's scruples, her compunction, her unwillingness to settle for the easy, find release (albeit vicarious release) in this moment. Yet the first four lines of the poem open up a specifically intellectual world, and "metaphor", "particulars", and "articulation" are all name-checked. Armantrout *earns* the parts of the poem that are about intellection through the sensual bits, and vice versa. The risk is that these two facets will cancel each other out; here, they coalesce into a potent whole.

Armantrout is, indeed, a very rare poet. Most poets wind up being spendthrifts, one way or another: all sense, all intellect, all lapidary, all banal. No one will be surprised if I venture that **Eliot**, in his best work, is a master of balance; however, some may be surprised if I opine that Armantrout might be a poet in the tradition of Eliot. If you're willing to look beyond superficial classifications, I think it might become visible how Armantrout, being extremely adept at balancing aesthetic economies, could be classed with Eliot, and that other, more schmaltzy New Critical giants who have been paired with Eliot in the past could be chopped down to size by Armantrout's daring and ambitious poems.

The Bee-Gees: Satan's Henchmen? 11/28/09

Why *Saturday Night Fever*, both the movie and the soundtrack album, have held an irresistible fascination for me for my entire life is something I'm only now beginning to understand. When I saw the movie as a child, it "creeped me out" completely; in particular, the scene in which one of the characters falls to his death from the **Verrazano Bridge** in Brooklyn gave me nightmares. This was unusual; I've always been a fan of horror movies. But, for some reason, that scene was so desperate, so haunting, and so vivid that I still can't escape chills when I think about it. Looking objectively, as an adult artist, at *Saturday Night Fever*, I think I understand why the movie gives me so much discomfort. The lives of the characters in the movie are pitiful and pointless, and are thusly more frightening than anything **Dario Argento** could dream up. Lives lived for nothing, tossed away at the drop the hat, and passions become thin gauze to hide terrible, black spiritual emptiness; that's why the movie gives me chills. That the movie, as a pop culture phenomenon, seems so innocuous (people think of **John Travolta's** ridiculous dance moves, the schmaltz of the soundtrack album, which we'll get to shortly) is part of the reason it's so creepy. This is a movie that was a huge popular success, yet everyone in the movie but Travolta has been relegated to near-complete obscurity. Without being unduly romantic and/or fatalistic, I think this has to do with the fact that the vibe of the movie is so horrendous, so chilling, and much more insidious than anyone's ever come out and said. The spiritual emptiness of this movie isn't just creepy; it's evil.

I know the way this post is titled skirts the ridiculous. Yet, I will insist upon this: if you listen to those famous **Bee Gees** songs from the soundtrack album (*Night Fever, You Should Be Dancing, More Than a Woman, How Deep Is Your Love*), and you listen intently for the sound of the dreadful spiritual emptiness I've been describing, you'll hear it. Is it jaw-dropping to think that songs which everyone laughs at could actually be, for want of a better word, Satanic? It is. But remember (and this is half tongue-in-cheek); it's the Devil's best trick to make you believe he doesn't exist. Actually, the creepiest song on the album for me is **Yvonne Elliman's** *If I Can't Have You*. This is the song I associate with the guy-falling-off-a-bridge scene. If you pay attention to the lyrics, they present obsession-bordering-on-psychosis. That, combined with the kitchen-sink production and a few great hooks, makes the song heartbreakingly bleak but completely unaware of its own bleakness. It's a mean, nasty, brittle little piece of Hell, disguised as an upbeat disco pot-boiler. There's also a cocaine vibe to the whole album which reeks of the 1970s, and of the fact that coke is often used to disguise awful spiritual emptiness. "Night fever, night fever; we know how to do it," is the coke ethos in a nut-shell. But that this ethos is infernal is not something the Bee Gees wanted you to know, because on the surface it's enormously seductive, as evil always is. The album didn't sell 25 million copies for nothing.

That both the album and the movie are schmaltz, "not-art," is also interesting. There's a level on which any work of art that knows itself to be art is wholesome and comforting. The artist is trying, in however bleak a fashion, to do something noble, to create something worthwhile. When garbage is put out just to rake in bucks, you can get levels of creepiness that art doesn't offer. Crassness, especially the raw crassness of this movie and these songs, is more deeply creepy than the darkest **Goya** or the most abject moments of **Sartre**. This

stuff wasn't put out for a noble reason, and its' darkness is partly that it was meant only to seduce people into spending their money on it, which they did. But the blackness that was captured here was captured by accident, and it's a specific level of "lowness" which art can't get to, which only schmaltz can reach. This makes the whole thing even more horrendous, and more fascinating. Are there lots of **Tony Maneros** in the world? There are, but an artist will always try to show something redemptive, either about Tony, or about the lessons that can be learned from Tony. The movie just throws him out, into a vapid world, where he lives a vapid life in which even the exciting bits are tinged with lust, destruction, death, and carelessness. The Bee Gees songs are laughable specifically because they represent this emptiness so well. But that they lead straight into a grave is not something you find out until the gang hits the Verrazano Bridge.

So, this is conclusive: specifically because it couldn't care less about anything but money, schmaltz can actually reach levels that art can't reach. A dark movie, made by dark people, for dark reasons, could still be art; a movie that couldn't care less about its own darkness can be nothing but schmaltz. If you laugh at the Bee Gees, remember how many people bought this album, and absorbed the vibes this stuff was putting out. Without getting moralistic about it, the whole phenomenon of *Saturday Night Fever* is terrifying, from back to front, and that everyone thinks its funny only makes it more evil. But I, being an artist, see something redemptive; that this kind of schmaltz can teach us lessons about places we can never get to, can never reach. Would we want to or not is another question.

Blogs as "Priceless Commodities": 10/5/09

Can we, in fact, call blogs "priceless commodities"? Can we call them commodities at all? It requires some juggling. "Commodities" are almost always involved with money, or "capital." The commodity form, as it was handed down (representationally) from **Marx**, is a kind of ghost: mass-produced, infinitely reproducible, always replaceable. Blogs are a different kind of ghost: you can't touch them, they inhabit a screen, and they are infinitely reproducible only in the sense that their spectral presence manifests wherever and whenever the correct code is placed into digital machinery. Art blogs are not involved with capital, but they are involved with *cultural capital*. I wrote about this at some length in the spring, but I bring it up for a few reasons: I have changed my mind about **Bourdieu** (who initiated the term *cultural capital*), and I have begun to think of blogs (my own and others) in commercialized terms, *as though they were commodities*.

The criticisms I posited against Bourdieu had their basis in a feeling that Bourdieu's critique of industrial capitalism capitulated too much. It seemed to me, on first encountering Bourdieu's ideas, that terms like *cultural capital* were an attempt to mirror bourgeois standards of value rather than supplant them. Bourdieu seemed to want to *compete directly* rather than *subvert*. I see now that my criticisms were naive: I did not then appreciate the power of the capitalist juggernaut that has dominated Western society time out of mind. Where this is concerned, intellectuals and artists have neither the material skills nor the resources needed to supplant or subvert. Moreover, we have inherited ideologies that are difficult to dislodge. The minute we put our work into any kind of marketplace (including a digital one, as I am doing here), the commercial lexicon becomes natural to us. The acquisition, dissemination, and consolidation of cultural capital is a real process, and (at times) a troubling one. Cultural commodities resist the assignation of fixed values; fluctuations are normative.

On this blog, I (and those that comment) decide what is worth what. There is a kind of Cultural Capital Chain being forged here: I attain cultural capital from acquiring readers, and the more cultural capital I acquire the more I can disseminate (i.e. the more respected/well-known the blog becomes, the more readers will feel they are gaining cultural capital from reading it.) There is genuine reciprocity going on here, and at a more intimate level than almost any other context could create. I am not writing *for* the **New York Times** or **Harpers**; I am writing directly *to* my audience. *The commercial exchange is a direct transmission*. It is almost a kind of barter: your hits for my knowledge, impressions, critiques, musings, etc. It's a fair deal. I am selling you a commodity, you respond with an affirmation or "coin" that registers on my hit counter. But, of course, in directly commercial terms, the exchange is negligible, a kind of "ghost exchange": there is nothing material behind it. Blogs (and online journals) are liminal entities, so completely tied up with a Bourdieu-ian model that the original, Marx-derived formulations recede into the distance. If I think about this blog as a commodity, am I right or wrong? Is this post a commercial venture? Who decides if the "coins" you give in return mean anything? For those of us that work seriously on the Net, these things need to be thought through. And Bourdieu needs to be given credit as a seminal theorist for us.

Derrida and Siddhartha: 4/04/09

To what extent does language constitute consciousness? The question is pertinent, not only to literary theorists working under the rubric of **Deconstructionism** (and, to a lesser extent, the rubric of **New Historicism**) but to those who seek spiritual solace in Buddhism. The Buddhist's focus, indeed, is just as much on consciousness as on morality, and "right" consciousness creates right morality. Judeo/Christian cognitive systems often (but not always) privilege morality and its expression in strictly defined (ethical) behavioral patterns over consciousness; i.e., your consciousness can be shaped, refined or even reified in any way, as long as you tow the party line. In the context of most Judeo/Christian systems, a given subject is by no means compelled to investigate his or her own subjectivity; questions of language and consciousness can be discarded if deemed uncomfortable or irrelevant. For a Buddhist, the linguistic investigations of Deconstructionism have (I would think) a more urgent pull. Buddhist meditation hinges on the ability for the mind to achieve a serenity that is both cognitive and affective (the mind and the emotions are stilled simultaneously.) If most of what constitutes consciousness is language, then what a Buddhist in meditation is doing bears a close and ineluctable relationship to the inquiries of **Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Foucault, Barthes,** and their compatriots. Buddhist meditation may be seen as a mode of *controlling language*, if we accept that language is the basic fabric and texture of lived human consciousness. As cognitive science has yet found no way to *map consciousness precisely*, there is no way the say that, for example, consciousness is 75% language, 25% something else. But I, personally, accept that the basic fabric of consciousness is language. All this begs the question: why is it relevant that there should be a correlation between Buddhism and Deconstructionism? The one system controls language via meditation, the other via demonstrating language's limitations and ultimate evanescence. Is this "never the twain," or can we develop a unique dialectic here? Is "controlling" and "demonstrating" the same thing?

If we can develop a synthesis from Buddhism and Deconstructionism, it hinges on a few things. First, we must accept the premise that Buddhist meditation, becasue it is consciousness based, is (largely) language based. We must also accept that Deconstructionist inquiry demonstrated that language, already known to be arbitrary, is also fundamentally flawed as a representational tool. For Derrida, it seemed that language is, to a greater or lesser extent, *empty*; empty of content, empty of significatory power, empty, ultimately, in its attempt to manifest the presence of what it signifies. This emptiness, in Deconstructionism, is seen to be negative: it renders most of human consciousness illusory and imprecise, and certainly radically demystifies literature. Buddhism makes similar claims about the illusory nature of consciousness, about its emptiness, the emptiness of all things, and the Deconstructionists demonstrated that language is very much a *thing*. However, "emptiness" does not have to have pejorative connotations. The energy to create, to lead a fulfulling life, to participate in a community, to go forth into the world, emerges out of positive emptiness. Positive emptiness is a condition in which acknowledgement of fundamental illusion, rather than leading to despair and negation, leads to modesty and grace. A substantial analogy would be a skilled doctor working with faulty tools: he (or she) would not stop working, but would work with the modesty that would take imperfection and errancy for granted. "Doctor" is good, because it leads to the idea of the **Bodhisattva**, a Buddhist that leaves the

sangha to go out into the world and help people. Implicit in this is the belief that people are worth helping, that the emptiness of consciousness does not render it (or its "carriers") either unintelligible or unsalvagable. These configurations are, admittedly, crude, and need developing. "Grace" needs to be looked into, and I intend to. For now, I define grace as a state of affective harmony born of acknowledgement and acceptance of imperfection, combined with an attitude of expectancy for its arrival. Modesty is, I hope, self-explanatory.

Positive emptiness would be a good recuperative angle to fixate on Deconstructionism, because it leads us away from the *Zero mentality* that would have us believe that accurate signification is impossible and that textuality must always fall short of representational truth. If language is seen to be "positively empty," we use it with a certain amount of resignation, but with the modesty and grace that come from "right knowledge" as well. **Deconstructionist dharma** only starts to be a problem at the moment in which it changes our affect, makes us believe that the collusion of language and consciousness is a hopeless mess. What I am saying is that it *is* a mess but it is not hopeless. What is the Buddha's **First Noble Truth**? *Life is suffering*. Amended to fit the angle I am playing here, we can say, with full confidence, *language is suffering*. Yet, just as Buddhists are not encouraged to kill themselves, the status of language-as-suffering doesn't mean we have to follow **Wittgenstein** into an ill-at-ease silence. The synthesis of Buddhism and Deconstructionism would make clear that the collusion of language and consciousness is, for better or for worse, *what we have* or, better yet, *what we own*. If it is a mess, it is a mess that defines our humanity, and, as the primary means of our suffering, can also perhaps be the primary means of our deliverance. What it can deliver us into is a mystery that we can only begin to configure. Derrida says, *there is nothing outside the text*, just as Buddhists say *there is nothing outside consciousness*. Both imply something else: that what we take to be all-prevalent and substantial is, in fact, an empty space. This makes our judgments, where "emptiness" is concerned, a key both to our self-definitions and our attempts at self-fashioning. It is our choice to see either negativity or positivity, negation or possibility, elision or inclusion, in emptiness. The basis of what choice we make is *spiritual*, affective in essence: do we react with emotions of fear, mistrust, and hopelessness, or do we brace ourselves to work resolutely with our faulty tools? I hope that some of us will opt for the latter, as the New Historicists certainly have.

Waxing Hot: Essays and Dialogues

By Adam Fieled

Table of Contents

Apologia

I would like to begin this apologia by discussing what I'd like to call the Blackburn Incident. In February 2012, UK poet Michael Blackburn took my Cordite piece, "Contextualists and Dissidents: Talking Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons," and reprinted it on his posterous blog under the moniker "Gertie Stein's Tender Buttons: you either get it or you don't." He didn't seek to get this title change or this reprinting approved by myself or Cordite; he just did it. The piece itself is ambiguous; I meant it as a half-parody. That is, what it opens up is the possibility that earnest exegesis of this Modernist text ("Tender Buttons") which may be in the process of becoming "classic" has a hinge to fraudulence and inherent self-parody. The piece is only a half-parody because it does not completely eschew earnestness itself; it is "backed up" by quotations and documents the way most academic writing around Modernist poetry is, and the tacks it sticks to, where interrogation of a literary concern is concerned, are standard and standardized. What the Blackburn Incident brings into focus is that the Internet, and Internet publishing, has become inherently ambiguous, and printings and reprintings carry the weight of ambiguous meanings in most cases. Did Blackburn and his circle mean to criticize this half-parodic piece, or were they half-parodying the half-parody? Did they espouse what I espoused, or was their gesture an attempt at critique? Because the Blackburn Incident forms an interesting continental tangle and triangle (i.e. I composed the piece in America, it was published in Australia, and Blackburn reprinted it in the UK), it demonstrates the geographical fluidity that has crept into poetry and poetics through the Internet. This fluidity may be a source of resentment to the provincial (and, if provinciality is a Blackburnian flaw, to Blackburn himself), but it is difficult to deny that it creates a dynamic around poetry which is not only new but "nouveau."

The new and the "nouveau"; these are the primary subject matters me and my cohorts are dealing with in this essays and dialogues. Much of the perceived novelty here has to do with the Internet and its possibilities; some of it has to do with the unsettling of preconceived theoretical notions regarding Modern and post-modern poetic practice; and some pieces, like the "Rock Wax" dialogue with Matt Stevenson, simply bask in the freedom of a new era to encompass pop culture subject matter in new and innovative ways. Who is at home in this New Age? What the situation looks like could remind one of the American Wild West in the nineteenth century; the Digital Age is an age of scurry around cowboys, Indians, and the melees between them. If the Internet is the new Wild West, a chiasmus with print and print culture becomes necessary, to set in place the preservation of what has subsisted amidst all the "nouveau" scrambles. If some text does not deal directly with both at once, and with the perceived and possibly troubled relationship between them, a necessity has been cast off. The "Waxing Hot" dialogues themselves have begun to enact this process; they began on my blog PFS Post, and many of them migrated over to the UK print journal Tears in the Fence. This is a process which may be called "threading the needle"; making sure that print and online vistas open at the same time, in such a way that they form a harmonious whole. The net result of "Waxing Hot: Dialogues and Essays" should be just that; the formation of a harmonious whole between the nouveau and the traditional. If the book succeeds in conveying the impression that this is a viable reality, then I and my cohorts have done our jobs; even as the Wild West impinges on any attempts to ignore it.

Waxing Hot: A Collection

These Poetics dialogues originally appeared on PFS Post between 2006 and 2009. Some have been republished in Tears in the Fence (UK).

Robert Archambeau & Adam Fieled

AF: Let's address single poems vs. long, conceptual, book-length poems. The trend in post-avant seems to be towards the latter; I prefer the former. Where do you stand?

RA: You're probably right about the trend toward book-length works in post-avant writing. I have nothing like, you know, *actual data* to work with, but that's never stood in my way before, so let's roll with the assumption that there is a trend toward book-length poems. I suspect you're right for two reasons: an institutional one and another that has to do with the large-scale history of poetics. You really can't underestimate the influence of that massive institutional edifice, the MFA program, on poetry nowadays. One of the things many people are encouraged to do in such programs is to write series of linked poems. I understand why: it's a way to get students to stretch out beyond the short lyric, to explore a form or a topic, and to understand the architecture of a book. So that's the institutional reason. The other reason is that our poetics have evolved to a point where we aren't really asking for a very rigorous coordination of parts into a whole. That is, you no longer have to write with the kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder level of attention to how your book-length project adds up to a whole in order to think of it as a single project. Milton would have died a little to think that a part of *Paradise Lost* had only an oblique connection to the unified whole, for example. But in our time (and I don't mean this as a judgment, but as an observation) there is a strong sense that the truly sophisticated work eschews classical decorum, or even the kind of hidden unity behind a façade of fragments that we find in a poem like Eliot's *Waste Land.* Some of this comes from the triumph of deconstruction and post-structuralism: after Derrida and company showed us all the fissures and disunities in the texts we'd thought of as whole, the goals of the Big Unified Work seemed less viable. And when Deleuze and Guattari described the rhizome as the form of our time, they authorized a lot of works in which various parts connected with each other somewhat haphazardly. So we see a lot of book-length poems where the bar for textual unity has been set fairly low. You can call it a book-length work if a lot of the parts only sort of connect. In a way, you could say what's changed hasn't been a matter of substance so much as it has been a matter of labeling. I mean, Wallace Stevens presented his first book, *Harmonium*, as a collection of individual poems. But those poems have enough by way of thematic and stylistic overlap that, had he been able to anachronistically appropriate Deleuze and Guattari's language and called it a single, rhizomatic whole, no one now would bat an eye. Anyway, this movement toward big works that are really collections of linked fragments isn't as new as we'd like to think. The roots of it go back at least as far as Poe's essay "The Poetic Principle," in which he argues that the unified long poem isn't really possible.

But I notice that I haven't answered your question, which didn't call for a long, pedantic ramble, but a statement about my own preferences. Do I prefer the book-length work or the collection of individual poems? I don't think I can answer that in the abstract. Certainly some of my favorite poets work in long forms: John Matthias still seems to me like the great contemporary master of the long poem, and I love his work. Then again, Mairead Byrne (to pull one example from the air) writes these tiny little poems that I

think are fantastic.

I suppose a question behind your question is this: should we try to judge a poem on its own terms ("Hey! Look at this haiku — see how it does *exactly what a haiku does*!") or should we try to judge a poem against some larger standard ("A haiku? That sentimental seventies orientalist drivel has no place in the post-avant era! Balderdash! I condemn these offensive lines!"). Let me throw that question back atcha, Adam. I'm interested in what you have to say: I've been asked to come up with some remarks for a panel on evaluative criticism next month, and have been waffling about which way to jump on the issue.

AF: I have mixed feelings about it. I also have to be careful— I don't want to just justify my own habits and inclinations. There are two basic forms I'm addressing— the long poem, as exemplified by Rachel Blau DuPlessis' Drafts, and the collection of short poems that conform to a central thematic or formal rubric. At the moment, I'm thinking of Chris McCabe's Hutton Inquiry. I love Drafts, I love Chris's book too, but I can't help a feeling of disappointment with the less accomplished variants (I will not name names) of these texts. Where's the adventure? Where's the variety? In a strange way, I think it's just a kind of marketing scheme; publishers in post-avant are more likely to pick up a manuscript that has a kind of superficial cohesion. Somehow, aesthetic stasis has come to signify consistency; dullness becomes a stand-in for solidity. I like the loose connection of a distinctive voice— O'Hara, Ashbery, Creeley. Or like a number of your fellow Chicagoans, including you— I call you all, and you might want to kill me for this, the *Chicago Eliotics* (formality when its good, tight, and productive, as I believe Eliot at his best was)— Allegrezza, Elshtain, Halle, Muench, Bianchi, Sawyer, throw Lundwall and Stempleman in there for the hell of it. Steve (Halle) writes loosely connected manuscripts, Bill too, etc, etc. What I don't like is MA or MFA programs where kids feel that to create a manuscript they have to be massively pretentious or write the same poem sixty times. My own MFA program was pretty loose that way; I'm grateful. I'm not a Centrist, but I appreciate the way someone like Gerry Stern gives every poem a lot of energy and attention. Michael Waters is like that too, Paula McLain. Centrists generally believe more in single poems. They are less overtly ambitious, less conceptually ambitious, but often have superior craft skills. And post-avantists sneer at craft the same way Centrists sneer at concepts and they're both wrong, or half-right. So, I'm a single poem person. I do write serially, but I have no intention of writing a series of fifty or sixty. Do Berrigan's sonnets each have a particular identity? Certainly not the way Keats' do, or even Edna Millay's. When your shtick is indeterminacy, you had better work double hard to be memorable, or you wind up right in post-avant's scrap-heap. I think single poems, and the single poem approach, winds up producing more memorable poetry than the other approach.

Here's something to follow-up on what you said— post-structuralism engendered a massive critique of poetic representation, and textuality in general, right? We learned that words, being more or less arbitrary, are not to be trusted. I'm starting to feel ready to trust language again; how 'bout you? Can or should we make another bold stab at

transparency?

RA: Transparency, eh? The funny thing is, there's been a tradition of transparent, neo-Augustan poetry in this country, but it has been, for the most part, a fairly submerged tradition. I'm not talking about the kind of backyard epiphanic lyric tradition that we find everywhere. I'm talking about a more essayistic, thesis-driven kind of poetry, the sort of thing written by, say, James McMichael and Laton Carter. I wrote a piece about them, and Ken Fields, for the *Notre Dame Review* not long ago. To avoid repeating myself, I'll just mention that anyone who wants to check it out can find it online here:

http://www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr23/Robert%20Archambeau/Archambeau-review.pdf

For me, poetry is rarely at its best when it moves to extremes of transparency or indeterminacy. Since I've already invoked the ghost of Wallace Stevens, I may as well mention his famous line about these issues: "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully." In a paragraph I love, Reginald Shepherd name-checks most of the big thinkers on this issue (and uses a lot of language from Sartre's "Why Write?" too). Check it out:

> T. S. Eliot said that the poet must be as intelligent as possible; Wallace Stevens said that the poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully. It is in the play between the intelligence of language and the resistance to intelligence of language as an object that poetry occurs. What matters is not what a poem can *say*, a preoccupation Harold Bloom shares with the multiculturalists he so despises, but what a poem can *do*. I look to poetry for what only poems can do, or what poems can do best–to alienate language from its alienation of use (the phrase is Adorno's), to treat language as an end-in-itself rather than a mere means: to communication, expression, or even truth. This moment of apprehending language as an in-itself and a for-itself provides both a model of the possibility and a palpable instance, however fleeting its recognition, of what Kant calls the realm of ends, the possibility of being-for-itself, of non-alienated existence. To imagine language as something which one simply "uses," either well or badly, is to imagine a world which is simply a collection of objects of use. Poetry leads us away from this instrumental reason.

The language poetry tradition has been deeply invested in the idea that poetic language ought to avoid mere meaning, in order to avoid being mere a commodity or a mere utility. There's this sense that if you say something clearly, you're complicit in a world that sees everything as a means to an end, and nothing as valuable in itself. On the other hand, people like James McMichael and Laton Carter are all about clear statement, often as a means of understanding and controlling the self, trying to keep from being a pawn of passions and urges (including, I suppose, the passions and urges planted in us by the culture industry so deplored by the language poetry tradition). It's possible that these very different alternative traditions are working toward goals that are more similar than they seem. And there are other ways of working toward such goals: Shepherd, for

instance, is neither so opaque as language poetry nor so essayistic and transparent as McMichael and Carter. I suppose he occupies a space closer to my own most immediate sympathies.

As for the "Chicago Eliotics" — aw, gosh. I'm not at all sure there's anything like a school of poetry here in the Big Onion, but there's certainly something percolating. We'll probably be able to make more sense of it when Bianchi and Allegrezza's new anthology, *The City Visible* comes out next month. They've put together a big collection that pulls together work by poets who've been reading around town at a group of Chicago venues that have become oases of interesting poetry (Danny's Tavern, Myopic Books, Series A at the Hyde Park Art Center, the Discrete Series at the Elastic Arts Center, others too). Then again, all of this is happening at a time when geography seems to matter less than it once did. You're in Philly, for example, but looking at P.F.S. Post I see you're totally plugged in to what's happening back here…

AF: I'm not familiar with McMichael or Carter, but I take your point. The problem with the meaningful-language-as-instant-commodity argument is that it doesn't (for my money) hold up to reason. In this case, context is more important than substance, i.e. if you put a poem in a journal or a book, it becomes a commodity anyway, owing to its contextual placement. It would seem like the only way to be a good Marxist-in-poetry would be to stop publishing, or, better yet, stop writing. Anything in the public domain is a commodity to one extent or another; that goes for Duchamp, and Warhol, and Koons, and all the lang-po people as well. I don't think discussion of degrees is that important; a lang-po poem being 50% commodity, an epiphanic ode being 90% commodity, etc. If you want to move language too far from meaning, you'll find that you can't do it; you can't take away its status as a commodity either, unless you burn it. Furthermore, you wind up writing nonsense, and being as arbitrary and capricious as the precious Neo-Classicists that Wordsworth rebelled against. I mean, what do we want from poetry? I like your idea of moving away from extremes, which, given the climate of post-avant in 2007, is actually a pretty extreme idea. How many post-avantists care about balance, harmony, grace, and beauty? How many younger post-avantists could actually admit that they want to write beautiful poetry? What was standard for centuries is now anathema. As Dylan sang, "what's good is bad, what's bad is good". I don't think moving towards the beautiful means moving towards the center, either—Bill and Simone's work both attest to that. Simone has given us a prime lesson in how to be sexy without being sappy. Bill's work, beyond being conceptually sound, entertains. Ray's does too, in its polyvocal, acidic punch. I would talk about your stuff too, if I didn't think I'd embarrass you…

I'm not sure I agree with Shepherd's paragraph, thoughtful though it is. He uses terms from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (in-itself and for-itself), and I'd say misuses them; he's talking about poems, but Sartre's idea of the for-itself specifically refers to human consciousness, the part of us that can self-reflect, bounded by temporal and spatial restraints. A poet can self-reflect; a poem itself may represent this process but cannot, obviously, literally self-reflect. I like the idea, self-evident though it is, that poetic

language is not instrumental, and should not be expected to be instrumental; but Shepherd doesn't seem to leave any room for mystery. He seems to know what a poem should do, and I definitely don't know what a poem should do, and I'm not sure I want to know. I think melding epistemology to poetics is probably a bad idea. Don't you think all good poetry has a kind of ineffable X-factor going for it? Isn't good poetry a mystery, to a greater or lesser extent, even though good poetry means a lot of different things to a lot of different people?

RA: I hear you about commodification. Some people have gone to extremes to keep their work from being chewed up by the culture industry, but in the end real purity (which I'm not so sure is even desirable — words like "purity" make me nervous) doesn't seem very possible. I mean, think of the people who've gone to extremes in trying to avoid being chewed up by the culture industry. There's a real irony to the fate of the Dada crowd, for example. They started out trying to short-circuit the whole gallery and museum system, doing things like presenting mass-produced objects as art and displaying their work next to axes that could be used by viewers to destroy works they didn't like. Fast-forward several decades, and the National Gallery of Art is reverently presenting their work. Anyone coming at the exhibit with an axe would be hustled out the door and into a squad car in no time. Or think of Jeremy Prynne, for many years England's most deliberately obscure poet (in every sense of that word): for a long time he chose to publish in the most weird little, non-commercial venues, and stayed off the reading and lecture circuits, too. Now you can order up his poems on Amazon.com, he's being talked about for some of the big prizes, and he's a star in China, where one of his recent books sold 50,000 copies. In the end, the big cultural institutions devour whatever they want. I suppose we might ask whether the institutions are changed in the process. I think there's something to this. Certainly the boundaries between "mainstream" and "otherstream" seem more fluid than they used to.

As the idea of an "Ineffable X factor" in poetry, I suppose I have divided feelings. On the one hand, I've never liked the Romantic notion that "we murder to dissect," that "our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things" and all that Wordsworthian jive (I say this as a guy who loves much of Wordsworth). When I was teaching in Europe, one of the things I got really enthusiastic about was structural narratology, an approach to literature that comes out of linguistics, and seeks to define and describe the properties of literature with something like a scientific precision. I learned an awful lot from that very rational way of thinking. Then again, there are so many different ways for a poem to succeed or fail, any attempt to define a single set of criteria for what counts as a good poem is probably doomed. So in the literal sense of the word "ineffable" ("unspeakable") what makes good poetry good remains ineffable.

Or do you mean that good poetry is mysterious in that it resists paraphrase, or points toward the unknowable or unspeakable? A lot of people are intrigued by that notion, and there are some poems I'd consider "great" that come out of that tradition (some of Celan's poems, for example). But there are other poets who aren't mysterious in this sense, and write remarkable works. Recently I had the good fortune to spend a few days

hanging out with Albert Goldbarth, whose poems are talky and full of explanations and conclusions. Goldbarth's not mysterious in the Celan sense, but at his best I think he's produced work of truly enduring value.

AF: I think the greatest mystery in poetry is that good poetry (whatever that might happen to be to/for any individual subject) appears natural, effortless, organic. Coleridge was always talking about the organic, an organic sensibility, balance, harmony, and the like; you can get this balance from the poetry itself or its conceptual basis; but why would we read anything if it didn't, on some level, please us? I think a primary difference between post-avant poetics and Centrist poetics is that post-avantists enjoy being challenged. They want confrontation, conflict, dissonance; they are not put off by having to read texts a number of times; they can apply themselves patiently to a text, and, as Roland Barthes said, help generate the texts they are reading. The mystery is not in a Romantic genius talking to us from a lofty perch, but in the interrelation between the text-as-object and an individual subject; the text creates its own phenomenological ecstasy, half in-itself, half in the reading subject. We participate in our own enlightenment; we generate our own epiphanies; we collaborate with the text, and, if it is good, it will meet us halfway. I don't think this process can ever be fully defined. The closest I've ever seen is Roland Barthes' "The Pleasures of the Text". He describes it as a kind of lovemaking — a perverse, transgressive roll in the hay. Sex, of course, is a mystery too; why are we attracted to one person and not another? Why does this person make us flip, and this person turn us off? Textual pleasure is the same way; identifiable, but essentially a mystery. The canon, that shriveled entity, can be seen as a kind of bordello….and we are, all of us, regardless of sex, always about as randy as a sailor. We are building bordellos of our own…but I digress.

RA: The canon as bordello? Hey: I gotta go. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature* just started looking a whole lot more interesting…

Robert Archambeau and Adam Fieled 2007

Barry Schwabsky & Adam Fieled

AF: Could you go into some detail as to what exactly you learned from Harold Bloom, what you retained from your interactions with him, and how it has led you to schematize art & poetics for/to yourself?

BS: Well, that was a long time ago—circa 1979-80. At the time, Bloom was teaching two seminars, one on Freud and one on Wallace Stevens. I believe his book on Stevens was just about to come out. It was striking that he read Freud as a literary text while reading Stevens in a somewhat psychoanalytic way. For him, the turns of thought that Freud called "defenses" were synonymous with the turns of language Bloom liked to call "tropes." While I had read Stevens a bit before, I wasn't deeply familiar with his work, having come to

modernist poetry through Williams and Pound (to whom Bloom was not sympathetic). So the fact that Bloom "gave" Williams to me is already something very important. But his seminar was amazing. I've never experienced anything like it. Basically he would walk in each week with a massive pile of notes. He'd sit and start speaking from the notes but he hardly ever seemed to get past the first page of them, because he would start digging so deep into the matter at hand in what seemed a completely spontaneous manner. And just in order to follow Bloom's train of thought in this monologue, you had to think so hard! Yet if you did, it was coherent. But eventually, he would get to a place where it was really difficult to follow him any more—the effort was too exhausting, maybe. And somehow just at that point Bloom would turn it around and pose it as a question to the class. And we would just sit there, stunned. How could you deal with such an elusive question? There would be some moments of silence, until one student or another ventured a response. The rest of us would be flummoxed—the response was even more incomprehensible than the question! But then Bloom would say, "So what you mean is that…" and would give a summary of what the students had just said, which would turn out to be something absolutely brilliant, and you would think, "Ah, that's amazing!" while feeling like one of those little cartoon "genius" light bulbs had switched on above your head. And from there Bloom would take off on another intellectual excursion for twenty minutes or so, until something similar would happen all over again. I've never felt so intellectually challenged and stimulated, unless maybe by Paul de Man.

Now you have to remember that this was well before Bloom started emphasizing the idea of the canon of great books. He was working with the notion of influence, which in my view was a way of revising the idea of "tradition" such as you find it in Eliot for instance—a way of insisting on the idea of conflict or at least ambivalence between one work, one poet, and another, in contradiction to a more idealizing view of tradition. And this was tremendously important. I just happened to read an essay from 1982 by the art historian Linda Nochlin, in which she disputes "the premise that there is in fact an ongoing an continuous stream of great art with which the artist can be fused" and which she says is "that same tradition that Harold Bloom has recourse to in his formulation of the great (male) writer," but in fact, in those days at least, Bloom was saying exactly the opposite! Anyway, there was somewhere in there an idea that impressed me very much, which was that a canonical author—by virtue of his poetic strength—was always in reality a heretical author, and that canons are formed by casting a veil over this conflictuality that never really goes away. So that a great poet is not only radical and in conflict with tradition but because of this also serves to bring out what was already radical in his or her precursors. In retrospect, maybe this wasn't exactly what Bloom wanted to get across but this is what I got out of it.

On the other hand, there was a melodrama to all this that in the long run I found a bit overwhelming and unrealistic. There was too much about power and anxiety, not enough about the eroticism of language. He's a moralist where I'm more of an aesthete. So his thought came to seem one-sided to me. But his passion for poetry was such a generous one that I value even his "wrong" ideas!

AF: I find this binary, aestheticism versus morality, intriguing, instructive, and omnipresent in serious art. Look at post-modern poetry: most of it (whether of the "Language" school or of other semi-related sub-movements, even Flarf) cuts against the grain of epiphanic poetry, the backbone of English Romanticism that Bloom so treasures. In the "epiphanic" model, the poet finds (often) an Other, usually in nature, that surfeits his/her consciousness until a transcendental state is achieved, and the poet then extrapolates a moral lesson (though this is more true of first Gen English Romanticism than second, with WW being exemplar.) Yet Lang-Po is ultimately just as much about morality as English Romanticism: only, the paradigm changes. Here, the poet subsumes the Self, the "I", and demonstrates that text is just text (and much ideology has been pirated from post-structuralism), that pretending that text is more than text is morally unsound (and that we then know that text cannot open a transparent window onto anything except its own "textuality"), and that the politics of the epiphanic "I" represent a kind of despotism, rather than a democratic undertaking. Yet, the eroticism you missed in Bloom is also (for me) missing in most (though not all) Language poetry. Common ground shared by Harold Bloom and Lang-Po: who would've guessed? Yet, I have to ask: what is lost, both in theory and in practice, when eroticism is lost? Pound, Picasso, so many others demonstrated a "phallocentric" orientation: in our PC world, we can amend this to Eros-orientation, what have you; how much of art's generative power is lost when the groin, the loins are taken out (in the sense that art may be preoccupied by straightforward eroticism or even just the Sontagian erotics of the creative process itself, or what we might even, with reservations, call "Beauty")?

BS: I don't see the drawing of a moral lesson as typical of good Romantic poetry. Its morality does not reside there. The epiphanic moment you speak of is one in which the Self is momentarily broken open. In that sense, Language poetry could be seen as one big epiphany, without the lead-up or the trail off—a steady-state transcendence of subjectivity. Well, I told you I found some reason in Bloom's notion that we are still working out the consequences of Romanticism. In any case, I don't see the work of Lyn Hejinian or Ron Silliman or Barrett Watten or some others associated with Language poetry as being disembodied text—at least when the work is at its best. Its language is very physical, very present, very engaged with the senses. To me—and I've said this before, at a reading of hers here in London that I organized—Lyn's writing in particular is *pure pleasure*. Something like what Roland Barthes called the text of bliss. What could be sexier than that? It's not erotic in the traditional sense of a love lyric—unlike a lot of my own poetry, by the way—but it is charged with eros in a different way, and I respond to it viscerally. Lately I've been reading *The Grand Piano*, the serialized "experiment in collective autobiography" by ten of the Bay Area Language poets, which is now up to its third of ten projected installments, and so far it seems to be mostly about libido.

Even though what I do is very different, all that writing was tremendously important to me —a huge challenge, not to avoid being morally unsound, but to avoid writing badly! I remember reading *Ketjak* shortly after it was published—I'm not even sure how I got to

know about it—and it was just so obvious that this was the thing that somehow had to be dealt with, the next great thing after Ashbery. And it was *in my way*, sure—so high you can't get over it, so low you can't get over it—exactly the same feeling I'd had when I saw (I can't even say "read") "Clepsydra" for the first time. "What do you do with *this*?" Well, you don't try to repeat it, that's for sure. It does seem to disqualify certain possibilities, sure—it makes them unattractive. But that's what might eventually give you the pleasure of discovering new possibilities, right? Anyway, I guess I'm very romantic in my view of Language poetry. They maybe thought they were critiquing the construction of subjectivity and "the voice," and probably they succeeded in doing so, but in the process, but in the process they ended up getting at a kind of collective subjectivity, a collective voice. Silliman, to me, is comparable to Whitman. The difference is that while Whitman declared, "I contain multitudes"—and he really did—Silliman contains them without bothering to say so.

AF: Well, it will help to remember, as we carry this conversation forward, that we are of different generations. I was born in the mid 1970s ('76, to be exact), and my introduction to poetry came, as it often does for American teenagers, through the Beats: Ginsberg, Corso, Kerouac. These are poets (and/or poet-novelists) who value the same things Shelley and Keats (if not Wordsworth and Coleridge) valued; spontaneity, personal expression and poetry expressive of the Self (or a multiplicity of Selves, as in Whitman), the notion of an individualistic poet, a "wilderness voice", taking a stand against a repressive cultural milieu (though that stance is much more pronounced in Shelley than in Keats, and Wordsworth started that way but later, according to Shelley and others, "sold out".) By the time I started seriously investigating Language poetry, and this happened through Anne Waldman (oddly enough), I had already written and read a lot of poetry. I had my own ideas about what a poem could/could not do, and though these ideas were tinged with naivete, some of them have stuck. The fact is that I don't get the "pure pleasure" you speak of from Hejinian, or most other Language poets. I find them (not always, but often) pretty boring. I know the Barthes text you're quoting from, and I actually wrote and published an essay quoting "The Pleasure of the Text." It happened to be about Rae Armantrout, one poet who others group under the Language aegis (I think mistakenly), and who I do get pure pleasure from. If I remember correctly, the text of bliss is one that threatens you, "brings to a crisis (your) relationship with language," but the crisis we get from Lang-Po has been around for thirty years now, and perhaps it isn't much of a crisis anymore. I feel a very compelling compulsion to look for the new, what hasn't been done. That's both in my writing and in my reading. I'm looking for a "buzz." I don't get it from Lang-Po (and I've only seen bits and pieces of Ketjak, though I know other classic Lang-Po texts, Progress, My Life, etc., very well). You resisted this when I first brought it up, but I have to reiterate that I think following the precepts which dictated Lang-Po, the most salient branch of post-modern art in poetry, would be a mistake. Do you have pronounced ideas as to what could effectively follow Lang-Po?

BS: Obviously we just disagree about the value of Language poetry, and although of course I've read the Beats—how could I not, Allen Ginsberg is my homeboy!—their work was

never in any way formative for me. Still, I can't tell you how surprised I was when a reviewer of my book *Opera* referred to me as a "post-Language poet." It really made me look at myself with new eyes, because it's certainly not a term I'd ever have thought of applying to myself. I'm not actually trying to write the next thing after Language poetry! Nor do I put a name to what it is I am writing. Honestly, I think it is mostly just traditional lyric poetry—as long as your idea of the tradition consists mostly of Sir Thomas Wyatt, Pierre Reverdy, Paul Celan, and Jack Spicer. You know, you can't necessarily decide what you should do and then execute that decision. Some people can, but not me. For me, it's not a question of what I should write or even what I could write—but of what I can write. I recognize that my capacities and aptitudes are fairly limited. There are all kinds of things I like to read but are part of an endeavor that I know it's not in me in contribute anything substantial to. To some extent these limitations are almost physiological: I've got a nervous disposition, I'm easily bored, so it doesn't work for me to try and do anything in too systematic a way—it's got to be something more mercurial. And then there are questions of what you might call self-image that reinforce this. There are a lot of people out there who are trying to be professional poets. I don't think they really are that exactly—in most cases it would be more accurate to say that they are professional poetry teachers. But in any case, they need to have a certain track record, they need to publish a certain amount and so on. And I think it makes more sense for those people to do project-oriented works than it does for me, so I kind of steer clear of their territory. I believe in a division of labor! It's all worth doing, but that doesn't mean that I have to do all of it. I cultivate an idea of myself as an amateur, so I like pushing the idea that I will write poetry without a plan or schedule, that it will be something I dip into periodically—like a dilettante! Why not? (Anyway, it's hard enough for me to do that with the writing I have to work at systematically, my art criticism.) I admit that this is really a sort of vanity, not very different from my notion that since I don't work in an office, I will never dress in any clothes that anybody would ever be likely to wear to the office—that way no one will ever mistake me for an office worker. Likewise, no one should ever mistake my poetry for that of a creative writing professor. Ridiculous, I know, but there you go.

AF: Well, no, actually I think that's pretty reasonable. Poetry has become all tied up with academia, which isn't necessarily a positive development, nor is the idea of "professionalism" with regards to poetry all that pertinent. Your profession is what you make money from, right? No one (or almost no one) makes substantial money from poetry. So, the idea of having a "poetry career," or being a "professional poet," seems slightly daft. I'm speaking from the "inside" here; I'm a PhD candidate with an MFA under my belt as well. What happens in these programs is that a certain kind of spontaneity-inhibiting pseudo-discipline is taught, where every line has to have a rational purpose, every poem must neatly fit under a certain rubric (which changes wildly from program to program), everything must be justified. Poets stop taking risks and start writing to satisfy a "meat market": small presses, journals (online and print), reading series, etc. I can't at all claim immunity to this process; it's just something that happens. My own way of fighting back is by writing poems that deliberately transgress the seemingly set-in-stone boundaries of poetic decorum. I have made a conscious decision, for example, to write a lot (and directly) about sex and sexual politics (and not from

the vantage point of a PC academic feminist, to be sure). I mean the kind we hear about when Mick Jagger sings "Under My Thumb", or when Updike's Rabbit Angstrom deals with his wife (and this is not to be taken for misogyny either, as is often the case; the issue is the psychic struggle to the death between men and women, or between lovers in general). Post-avant poets, I've found, are very squeamish, and rather than try to appease them, I'd like to make them vomit! So I deliberately transgress and I take the heat for it as well. To bring up an earlier point, I get a buzz from poems that transgress, and do so with intelligence and style. I have the capability to churn out as much safe "product" as I want to. The point is that I *don't* want to. I want to bring back direct treatment (sans Lang-Po obfuscatory techniques) of sex, and if I say "I" again....no! God forbid! Here's something: we all know the mythology surrounding poets in/around among painters in history: Apollinaire/Jacob/Picasso, or Ashbery/O'Hara/Larry Rivers, etc. It seems that this kind of frutiful connection is absent from our post-avant world. Do you agree? Has the art world become segregated, and if so how and why?

BS: I'm squeamish too. I could never have been a doctor. Maybe that's why I took up writing—an activity that deals with blood only in fancy. I don't have anything against poets finding harbor in the universities. I can't say it's not a positive development if it has given more poets a way to keep going and keep producing. Most of the contemporary poetry I like is written by people who teach. But that's just not where I ended up.

But as far as poets and art, maybe there's less of a disconnect than it might seem. The editor of *Artforum*, Tim Griffin, is a poet, though he seems to keep that a little sub rosa. Likewise another of my favorite writers there, Frances Richard. I'm in awe of her work. These are people who are, I suppose, somewhere in between my generation and your generation, but in any case, they're young enough to make me think that the connection is still there. But remember that the relation between the two arts has changed because so much art is now so permeated by language—or even just is made of language. So these arts impinge on each other's territory now in uncomfortable ways. Gris could illustrate a book by Reverdy, but how could Lawrence Weiner illustrate a poet's book? Words illustrating other words? An intriguing idea, but hard to see how you'd pull it off. More reasonably, the poet would just transform into the artist, as happened with Ian Hamilton Finlay, or else the artist into the poet, as occurred more recently in the case of Kenny Goldsmith.

Of course, assuming there is the "segregation" you speak, there could be more practical reasons as well: The dispersal of the poets around the country due to their becoming part of academia, as we've discussed, while art scene remains focused on a few urban centers; the rise in the art market that has vaulted at least the better-known artists into a completely different economic stratum than almost any poet—things like that mean that artists and poets may simply cross paths less than they once did.

AF: That's fascinating, and it brings up another salient point: who determines now what poetry is or is not? If I want to call Bruce Nauman a poet, is there anyone who could give

me a reasonable reason not to? How about Barbara Kruger? Ed Ruscha? If a genre is, as Fowler says, more of a family than a classification (with fluid boundaries), would some kinds of intercourse between painters (and/or conceptual artists) and poets be incestuous? I have a nagging sense of disappointment about this issue. In some ways I really would like it to be 1955 or 1915 again in NYC or Paris. I mean, you would think that Silliman and Nauman would have a lot to talk about, right, even if they couldn't collaborate? Don't the best movements always go across all (or most of) the disciplines? The threads tying conceptual art to post-avant poetry seem thin indeed. Again, po-mo art seems a lot rougher, a lot more direct, "in your face", than the kind of poetry we're dealing with, that tends towards abstraction and (often) obfuscation. Would Nauman be happy at this point, to be called a poet? Or are these designations superfluous?

BS: I don't suppose Nauman or Kruger or Ruscha would be particularly interested in being called a poet, although they all use language brilliantly—Ruscha's in particular seems rather "poetic" to me, but that's probably not a qualification for being a poet! I'm sure they're all pretty well satisfied with the designation "artist." Maybe one reason is that as a category, "art" has become a lot less determinate than "poetry." Poetry does at minimum have to be language, right? Whereas art really can be just anything at all—language, video projection, oil on canvas, dead cow, live horse, walking, whatever. Personally, I'm satisfied with just working on language, but that scope means a lot to some people.

Silliman and Nauman probably would have a lot to talk about, except I don't think Nauman talks about a lot with almost anybody. By reputation, he's a pretty taciturn, pretty close-to-the-chest kind of guy. Silliman spoke somewhere about having been influenced by Philip Glass in writing *Ketjak*—which seems pretty obvious once it's pointed out—so he might have a lot to talk about with Chuck Close, whose work, especially early on, was pretty connected with that of Glass (of whom he made a famous portrait). I can see Flarf as connected in spirit with a lot of recent figurative art. But it's hard to think about it in terms of a period style, partly because even within any one art, there are so many different, seemingly contradictory things going on at any one time. Probably the underlying connections will become more obvious as the present recedes into history.

Maybe more than with artists, I think poets might have a lot to talk about with musicians. On the other hand I also wonder why even seemingly almost innately unpopular forms of music are still nonetheless so much more popular than poetry. For instance, I went to hear the re-formed Slint the other night. I read that their *Spiderland* album has sold 50,000 copies since it was released in 1991. That's not much for a rock record, I guess, but it would be an enormous amount for a book of poetry. And yet honestly, I can't see why anyone who could get into that record couldn't get into any advanced form of poetry. I just don't see the difference really. One is no more or less esoteric than the other. What do you think?

AF: I think people are just more willing to take a chance with music. I'm not familiar with the group you've mentioned, but I assume they're "avant", i.e. "out there". Even the most

esoteric forms of ambient, electronic, and other branches of avant-garde music have more appeal for masses of people than poetry. It's always hard to tell how and why cultural mores form, but my hunch is that people become attached to music because it's so rampant in our society (in a way it wasn't in 1907 or 1807). Previous cultures didn't have recorded music or recorded music devices, or entertainment devices that invariably have a musical component (i.e. TV commercials ubiquitously feature music, etc.). A child born in the US or the UK will be hearing music every day. In Wordsworth's day, people told stories to amuse each other. Now, we switch on a TV, and there's music, or a radio, and there's music. Poetry is much harder to come by in quotidian life. So people accustom themselves to music from a very early age, rather than people telling stories (though obviously parents do still tell their children stories) or people reading aloud from books, and where once books were ubiquitous, music is now. That doesn't make it better or degrade poetry as an art form. It does mean that if you go into poetry, you better be sure no money and a limited audience doesn't bother you. Does it bother you, or do you have enough invested in your art criticism that poetry seems like a "side project", something done more or less for pleasure?

BS: From www.allmusic.com: "Though largely overlooked during their relatively brief lifespan, Slint grew to become one of the most influential and far-reaching bands to emerge from the American underground rock community of the 1980s; innovative and iconoclastic, the group's deft, extremist manipulations of volume, tempo, and structure cast them as clear progenitors of the post-rock movement which blossomed during the following decade." Check them out.

Anyway, I disagree that poetry is hard to come by in daily life. I mean, you could say that art music is rare in daily life, but jingles aren't, and background music isn't, and forms of manufactured pop music that are maybe one-third of the way from jingles and background music to something I would actually think of listening to aren't—but we accept those as music, of a sort. Well, by the same token advertising slogans are poetry, of a sort. (Lew Welch: "Raid kills bugs dead!") There are all kinds of artful uses of language in our daily lives. But I admit you're right insofar as this art of language is detached from any intimacy with the book as a medium. Régis Debray recently wrote that just as the ground of symbolic authority had once shifted from "God told me" to "I read it," it's now shifted from "I read it" to "I saw it on TV."

If I have a complaint about all this, it's not because I personally crave a large readership. Really. I don't need to be popular. But I think it would be interesting—enlivening—if some form of poetry were. Like most poets, I guess, I would like to be more popular among my fellow poets, mainly. That's what will determine whether the work has staying power. It is done for pleasure—or at least that sort of "negative pleasure" that is the relief of an overwhelming necessity—but hardly a side project. Rather, the ground.

Barry Schwabsky, Adam Fieled 2007

Gabriel Gudding & Adam Fieled

AF: You write, in Rhode Island Notebook, that "most literature is delusional, pretty, petty, and false." It seems like the composition of R.I.N. might have been a concerted, specific attempt to write something realistic, gritty, pertinent and true. Something, in other words, that transcends the artificiality of most literature. Is there a grain of truth to this?

GG: Maybe. Most poetry is a kind of verbal costume. An ideational schmaltz. An emotional uniform. A mental getup. This is just as true for avant garde and post-avant work as it is for mainstream stuff. Though I don't think the costumed life or the costumed mind is peculiar to poetry, necessarily, as a genre, it's no secret poetry tends more toward stylization than other modes. Poetry is the country music of literature. Given to schmaltz, nostalgia, over extension, socio-emotional reactivity, and alienation from material reality. The flipside is the hipster reaction to this: flaff, whathaveyou, langpo, N/Oulipian generativity (hipster maximalist masculinist compulsive text generation), irony as a modal approximation of self-awareness, and a conflation of experiment in form with soi-disant radical politics (the result being merely a more extravagant quietism). Our capacity for delusion is almost total.

AF: OK. I'm curious to what extent these kind of thoughts might have directed the composition of R.I.N. You include heaping gobs of concrete particulars: times, distances, amounts of gas, temperatures, highway and town names. Do you feel that these details "naturalize" the book somehow, give it stable/solid/palpably non-delusional roots?

GG: Good question. Not sure if they're less delusional but I can say they are less stylized. Maybe they do something not often done in poetry. These are the local details of your average person's world, least ways of my world. I wanted to include that stuff. Just the attempt to write the in-between, overlooked, peripheral -- as a part of the greater truths, larger narratives, and more overt emotionality of most poetry. Not sure if these elements naturalize the book, but my hope is the sum total makes for a book that does not much move via typical poetry modalities. There is that huge long section around page 90 or so where I wrote down ALL the signs I saw from Ohio through Indiana and into Illinois. Horrifying. We *READ* all that stuff: it affects us. It moves us. It makes us. We need to become aware of that. I feel it needs to be in our literature. It is an important part of our disgusting history. I really do conceive of the book as a history. My daughter Clio was named for the muse of history. The book is dedicated to her.

AF: It is interesting that you allude to history, because the book not only documents itself via concrete, particular travel details, but via an engagement with the history of poetry. I think one of the most interesting aspects of this are the pastiche-poems included, which take on Gerard Manley Hopkins. It seems like you were taking Hopkins' purity and religiosity and "humorizing" them, not in a malicious or sardonic way, but playfully and tenderly. How do you think that, in the context of RIN, poetry history intersects with "our disgusting history"? In other words, you deal, in RIN, with several different kinds of history. I take "our

disgusting history" as a reference to the ugliness of American highways: of roads, paved surfaces, road-signs. Your engagement with Hopkins is a nod to a different kind of history, a cultural one. Your book then becomes a kind of textual site where different histories intersect. What would you imagine to be the cumulative effect of these colliding histories? How did you envision these histories coming together, both for yourself as you were writing and for the reader? Was there an intended cumulative effect, something you were trying to show and/or demonstrate?

GG: There was a hoped for cumulative effect. But much was arrived at, discovered, in the writing. And the book became in one sense oppositional to the idea that the imagination is a refuge. We are told by poets for the last two hundred twenty years there is some kind of glorious refuge in imagination, imagination is this transcendent, palliative kingdom: the safety and order in the supreme fiction, the imagination as oasis, a good poem as a Wallace Stevens'. Memorial vacation get-away, and that this capacity of fantasy is some kind of "palace of wisdom." This is complete bunk. Absolute delusion. It's the intellectual equivalent of tourism: the knowing, willful engagement in the delusive economy of deflected escape. It makes sense that Stevens constitutes the pinnacle of this romantic ideal -- as his poetics is strongly related to the rise of modern tourism. Where Stevens thought he was speaking of the nature of mind and imagination and its relation to reality, he was in fact writing deeply classicist and racist poetry. This book stakes an oppositional poetics to Stevens, Ginsberg, Spicer, Ashbery, siding with Loy, Lola Ridge, Rakosi, Niedecker. I wanted to write the kitsch, the radio, the a-magical, the quotidia of civic life, the road sign -- things normally kept from poetry -- as a means of reminding myself how much stuff we IGNORE in order to pretend to touch the real or the supreme – or "the mind," as if the mind were this Ashberian numinous burning collagic machine of lyricism.

AF: This question, of what is real, and may be realistically portrayed in literature, can lead in many different directions. What I'm curious about is how it ties in for you with the idea of privilege. In lots of schmaltzy poetry, we see a privileged, patriarchal figure having some kind of epiphany. However, in fighting against this attitude, in willfully structuring your poem so that ephemeral elements (road-signs, McDonald's, radio) take a prominent position, can it be argued that you are enacting a different form of the same privileged status? That is, do you find yourself to be in the position of telling the reader "what's really real"? Was an effort made to efface or subsume the (male) ego and its drive to direct, control, dominate?

GG: It's a fair question. Sure, that could be argued. Anything can be argued. But the book is not a case for the real, the true; it's not even, to my mind, a comment on "the poetic." What it is, for me, in its largest dimension, is the story of a family falling apart and a nation going insane. Those are mysteries. Ridiculously huge and never-ending conundra. I don't know how a nation goes insane. And though I know how a family falls apart, the WAY that is does so is a deep, terrifying mystery. At an ethical level, though, it's a book about suffering and how to endure it – and in fact how to flourish in it. At an aesthetic level, it is textured by

what Bakhtin calls "primary speech genres" (road signs, radio utterances, bumper stickers, the makeshift reality of internal mental dialogue, embarrassing first draft crap), the book is perforce built on speech realities that fall outside what Bakhtin calls official speech. It is overtly badly stylized (poorly realized) speech. But nowhere does it touch on the nature of the real. It's just proffering the other things often left out of a book, a history, a politics, an organized "life": buildings the size of dust motes, blurry towns smeared into a chain of ramps and roadside islands. It says nothing about the way these things exist, just that they might. The towns we see from the road might exist. The people in the Hardees might exist. The rest stops might exist. The jerk in the adjacent car might. Your hands on the steering wheel might too. A way out of my sorrow might exist. A way out of literature might exist.

But at bottom the book (for me) is about the navigation of sorrow: how to anchor instead of grasp; how to sail instead of let go. I have no idea what it is for someone else. For my daughter Clio, I had hoped it would be a history, a partial history of what was happening to her family during a time of great sorrow.

AF: Partly I think it's the affectivity of the book that makes it so compelling. Without easing into sentimentality, it tells a real, heart-rending story in a narrative that's not always strictly linear, but that is traceable. However, the trend in the academy now is all towards New Historicism: tying literature in to larger historical patterns that dictate the behavior and production habits of authors, albeit sometimes unconsciously, or subconsciously. If, where this book is concerned, you had to New Historicize yourself, how would you do it? Can you tie the affectivity of a "time of great sorrow" into a prevalent, comprehensible Zeitgeist?

GG: First, thank you for seeing the affective nature of it in that light. It's heartening to know you've read it so well. Second, I see New Historicism as a literary *reception* movement coming to vogue in the late '80s and rising out of inter- and intra-disciplinary concerns about how to read (and write critically about) literature. I do not see it as a movement much affecting *production* concerns. So, the book is a history -- which is not to say it was affected particularly by current trends in literary historiography.

But I see more what you're asking now -- and I wouldn't call what you're asking me to do particularly "new historicism." Seeing the connections between "personal troubles" and "public issues" is precisely what C. Wright Mills, the great renegade sociologist, calls having a useful "sociological imagination." It's just good sociology. The book's appositions of national narratives and personal ones implicitly make this connection -- sometimes uncannily. For instance, the day the driver's family decides on "divorce" is the day the US begins the invasion of Iraq. It's a coincidence, yes, but it's clear that the larger socio-emotional climate affects a family's weather. What a horrifying time in our history.

AF: Dovetailing with this, I'd like to bring up the larger issue of historicity, as it applies to your (and all of our) endeavors. How important do you think it is for poets in our day and age to develop, hone, and maintain a historical sense, both as regards their own reading and

their literary production? To state this more clearly: is it worthwhile to regard ourselves as players in a potentially historical drama, or do you believe it more productive to (I'm paraphrasing Joyce) awake from the nightmare of history?

GG: I guess my answer depends on what you mean by "historical sense." I have a few friends, as well as a few former friends, who believe, despite their obscurity and in some cases because of their fame, that they are writing for the ages, who think history will exonerate them or uphold them, who feel their current lack of recognition will eventually be transmuted by play of decades into a trans-temporal audience or who feel their present recognition is logical and was inevitable. That's delusional. But both constitute a common pose, a frequent tactic, and a conventional gambit -- the former especially I'd guess commonly seen among non-bourgeois writers. Bourdieu addresses this well in The Field of Cultural Production. It's either delusion, on the one hand, or an expedient of aesthetic politics, on the other.

But if you mean is it a good idea to just try to have a relatively global sense of what's been written and why it's been written, then yes I think that's wise.

AF: Can you parlay your "global sense" into a précis of where you think poetry is going in 2008? Is "post-avant", in all its amorphousness, a viable entity and a worthy successor to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, or do you feel there are other currents currently existent that could lead experimental (or even mainstream) poetry down new, unexplored vistas?

GG: It's an interesting question. But I wonder about its intent. You seem to be suggesting that having a "global sense" about what's been written and what's being written necessarily implies having a market sense about what's the Next Hip Thing. Maybe I'm putting words in your mouth. Likely I have. In any case I feel that trying to know or trying to control the direction of the field is part of what Bourdieu calls the production of a collective misrecognition--a belief in "literature." This manufactured "cusp" or foreguard is the site upon which the struggle for the monopoly of symbolic power concentrates. It's not a matter of direction (where the field is going); it's a matter of the illusion of direction created by continual literary rebranding (done in interviews, blog posts, anthologies, reviews, manifestoes, movements, etc).

I mean, basically there have been over the past 150 years a limited range of techniques that just keep getting relabeled and rebranded: collage becomes "cut up" becomes "flarf" or "flirph" or whatever it's called now; disjunctive anacoluthon becomes what William James called "automatic writing" and Stein takes that into cubist dada which is then rebranded via a different set of theoretical apparatuses (Frankfurt School) as L=A=N....; a hodgepodge of sleep-based techniques and collaborative aleatoric methods morph (thank goodness) with oppositional leftist politics into surrealism which then meld with the rightist political quietism of late modernism into deep image and ...?

This is a market. Markets need a predictive mindset. If "art" and "writing" cannot divest itself of this fascination with symbolic exchange-value in favor of a use-value, it will continue to be just another inverted extension of the economic system.

Too, markets need a projected null point that serves to mask the manufacture of collective misrecognition: the new; imagination; the originary; celebrity and celebration.

Is it possible to write and to think about writing in ways that do not create and maintain hierarchies of artistic domination and power? Is it possible to write without belief in a universe of celebrants and believers? Is it okay to write without thinking oneself a potential object of celebration? And after having written, is it possible not to vie for status as a consecrated writer or as a writer who displays his own performative disinterest in the field of production?

AF: You seem to be commenting, with a somewhat negative slant, on the phenomenon of literature as a market-place, a zone of commodities, advertisements, and perpetuated illusions. You have also pointed out a kind of fallaciousness in the rationale of your friends and ex-friends that shun the spotlight, but dare to believe that their work might have lasting value. Do you see a contradiction here? In other words, if the literary market-place is not a desirable locale, and if obscurity is also not a desirable locale, is there a happy medium or a third realm that you find preferable, or that could balance the two?

GG: Adam, not to be obtuse, but I'm not sure what you mean by "viable." Or even what is meant by "post avant." The imaginary gestalt Silliman labeled "post avant" is I think a multipurpose fiction about which little can be said and a lot can be asserted. And that's the term's power. It's what Uwe Poerksen calls a plastic word: florid in connotation, imprecise in denotation.

But even if I did know what a post avant movement was, I probably wouldn't be qualified to answer your question about where it's going. I am not a believer in the dream of literature or the salutary originary power of the imagination or the notion that new stuff is best stuff: it's all new stuff. We just choose to fetishize some of it. Whether one movement follows another successfully is really of little interest to me. Whether writing is useful -- is to my mind a more salient question. So I don't see a third realm possible. There are no possible realms.

As to whether I think of my more ardent poet friends or acquaintances as "fallacious": no. I don't think of people caught within the dream of literature fallacious. I just think they are following the logic of the game they find themselves in. Part of that logic is belief -- believing in the religion of literature -- and part of that is the pretense not to believe. Performative indifference is part of an avant garde (or, as it's called now, "post avant") symbolic economy, just as the dream of what you call "lasting value" is part of a more

established symbolic/financial economy of letters. And the machine has to turn: margin to

center; acoustic to electric; Alan to Golding; outlaw to classic. The two different non-desirable-locales, as you call them, depend on each other. Sure you can find a viable third realm if you believe in Santa Claus. And lots of people do -- and one can make the flock move this way or that way: there are lots of tactics and strategies for planting one's brand. Take your pick. One can form a group, a "movement" -- or go it alone and play the transgressor, the outlaw, the shaman, versions of the sacred heretic: all of these things work. They each have their tactical logic. None of it matters.

I was speaking of a kind of manufactured cusp, a fabricated verbal frontier that we are encouraged to accept as real and even necessary. So, that third realm you speak of is always the next big thing: it is the cusp, the bubble, the next wave. Your question was "where [I] think poetry is going...," specifically whether the term post avant is a "viable... and worthy successor" to langpo. It's the same impulse relabeled. Langpo was not itself a viable and worthy successor to confessionalism, nor it to modernism, nor it to the Victorian era, nor it to the literature of post-1848 American democratic nationalism.

But then again, I don't believe time exists either. So take the previous for what it's worth to you.

Instead of where post avant poetry is going, I find myself these days wondering about why the Flarf movement is so white. Why "post avant" poetries are so white. Why is the Chicago innovative writing scene so white? Why for instance is there so little crossover between the scene surrounding the Palabra Pura reading series in Chicago and the experimental scene (Myopic series or Series A or Danny's Tavern). Why has there historically been so few women in the European and North and Latin American avant garde poetry scenes? Why is the spoken word scene at Nuyorican so much more ethnically and culturally diverse than the St Mark's crowd and why is the spoken word scene in Chicago whiter than white? Why did so few "experimental" poets write anti-war poems? How are some so sycophantic: why do they need an iterative white transgressive hero, a Ginsberg, a Spicer, a Berrigan, an Ashbery? or a white masculinely safe heroine, Stein, Moore, Bishop. Why do people keep reading the same writers over and over, even when they're ridiculously boring and shticky and predictable (Ashbery) or they know their poems by heart already? Why do so few study the anthropology and/or sociology of literary scenes?

AF: I agree that white hegemony within the poetry world is, in and of itself, an "undesirable locale," if we want to posit a state-of-affairs as a kind of place. How do you visualize a bridge being made, that might enable a multi-cultural element to be added to the present scenario (sorry for the buzz-word, couldn't resist)? Do you have any strategies that might enable the poetry world to broaden its cultural scope? You teach at ISU; do you buy in to the "think globally act locally" approach, and are there approaches you take in the context of your

classroom that reflect an interest in manifestations of diversity, cultural heterogeneity, and the deflection of an assumed, white male canon?

GG: I guess I don't know that I have any answers beyond the obvious, which I offer at the risk of sounding like any of the following is easy: make on the one hand a pointed self-examination (as best as one is able to actually do that) about motives and influences and biases in order to uncover where I might be denying myself some really amazing work; study the sociology and anthropology of literature to better grow beyond the neoromantic fetish of authorship and the modernist fetish of text; and reach outward and into other writing cultures. I think we make/join/encourage hegemonies/big.samenesses because of our incessant habit of valuation. By which I mean we often seem to need/want things to be the same, or enough the same, so that we can better evaluate what surrounds us (or at least exercise/display our discerning taste) rather than constantly dealing with things/situations that defy/challenge our perceptual categories. And so those are some outward-directed practices that will help. But it's important not to stop there. It's important to understand that our very affect has broadranging political effects. Cultivate affiliative mindstates. Be willing not to be cool. By which I mean, notice and resist the play of power in the field of cultural production, understanding that hipness is merely a performative resistance that is itself a tactic, often marked by sarcasm, used to acquire cultural capital. Cultivate an interpersonal responsiveness and then retain that capacity to be surprised. Easy, right?

I think a really fruitful way of doing the above is to develop a loving heart. A loving heart is an open heart. An open heart catalyzes a flourishing, courageous mind. I do think Emerson is right when he says in "Friendship" that "our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection.

Gabriel Gudding/Adam Fieled 2009

Adam Fieled & Steve Halle

SH: Useful concepts. I want to respond on Keats' "Negative Capability," which I think introduced several useful concepts into modern poetics, and also served as a birthplace for the non-lyric/non-Romantic (I guess what you'd call "post-avant") lineage alive in contemporary poetics.

First, I view Keats as the odd Romantic, along with Shelley. Whereas Shelley validated the entry of politics into poetry, Keats rebelled against the first wave of Romantics by

heightening the power of the imagination and downplaying Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime."

The imaginative poetry Keats penned allowed for oddly juxtaposed words; in his Odes, “Nightingale" & "Grecian Urn", for example; in order to create a reflection of his state of mind. Even though these two poems work in a highly stylized and rhetorical way, they reflect on Keats' consciousness-- the power of imagination and the untranslatable power of the mind to hold disparate concepts without struggle. The idea of negative capability is also (ironically) an example of negative capability because neither Keats, nor anyone since, has presented, as far as I know, a good reason why some people embrace mystery and some people need closure.

“Indeterminacy” in poetry, it seems to me, is another big point of contention among experimentalists today, and I would assert that Keats' negative capability is the concept which paved the way for indeterminate poetics. I believe a relationship exists between the misinterpretation of "first thought, best thought" and the misuse of negative capability. People like to assume that Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beats meant "first word, best word" or "first draft, best draft" and use their teachings, which are highly formulated methods for improvisational poetry, to justify writing whatever comes to mind. As we see with Bukowski, a poet who edited little (if at all), this work sometimes succeeds, often falls flat. The same is true for indeterminate poets whose work lacks closure. I think some poets misuse negative capability or “rejection of closure” as a means to avoid striving or thinking about their work. Poets who misuse negative capability think they can avoid essence, substance and arrival, but I think this is a big mistake because it fools poets into thinking they don't need intention or investigation and can operate solely on intuition.

Keats is also perhaps the first poet to address the idea that language is unsatisfactory for expressing ideas completely (though Shelley suggested this too). As skilled as any poet may be as “word-smith”, the poem will still be lacking to the thing-in-itself: be it the real triggering element of the poem or some abstract or intense thought or sensation the poet tries to grasp. Through negative capability and his understanding of the powers of and

limitations of art, Keats may have been the earliest antecedent to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of this century. Language poets, of course, understood the fallibility of linguistic expression, so they began to work with language the way a painter might work with paints, allowing for pure linguistic abstraction and/or frustration, depending on whose side you're on. Critics sometimes call Keats a "mood" poet, meaning that every single word did not have to make total logical sense in the poem. Instead, Keats' linguistic consistency depended upon creating the desired mood, a different way of hitting "the just note": le mot juste.

Previous to lang-po, I look at Keats as having laid the groundwork for the High Modernists, especially Wallace Stevens, who tried and perhaps failed as much as Keats did to create "poetry of imagination" or "supreme fiction". Like Keats, Stevens valued the imagination of the maker over the rational mind, even though I feel that Stevens, again like Keats, often wrote rational and calculated poems. Keats' influence and the influence of negative capability cannot be overstated in an existence wherein making rational sense of everyday life, let alone the "big questions", is nearly impossible.

AF: I take most of your points. The one problem I have with the schema that would put Keats behind lang-po & post-avant is that one could make a valid argument that Keats, bent as he was on Romantic (maybe post-Romantic) ideas of personal feeling & personal expression, pursued aims antithetical to these movements. It helps to remember that Keats mentioned "Negative Capability" in a letter, & he was referring to Shakespeare & Shakespeare's dramatic technique, rather than his own poetry, which is rooted very much in Romantic explorations of self & self-hood (whether this is done obliquely, as in "Grecian Urn", or directly, as in "Nightingale" & his great sonnets). In theory, Negative Capability (& its implicit ancillary devices, non-linearity, allusiveness, abstruse tangent writing, deferral of personal expression, etc.) fits in snugly to the po-mo ethos that dictates what many of us do. But Negative Capability doesn't factor as much into Keats' own poetry as most people tend to assume. Even when he steps beyond the personal, it's often to challenge a historical figure-- "Hyperion" is a direct response to Milton—or to tell a richly detailed but essentially linear story, as in "Isabella" & "The Eve of St. Agnes". So, I like the connection of Keats to

Stevens & post-avant, & I'm willing to give it some cred, but for me, Lord Byron takes the "proto-po-mo" cake. Remember that extreme self-obsession (like extreme impersonality, or anything extreme, in fact) is also a common "po-mo" trope—think of the self-mythologizing of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Robert Mapplethorpe, not to mention poets like Bukowski & Ginsberg & before them Williams & Pound. Byron's complete & often facetious self-absorption (pushed knowingly to the point of self-parody) paved the way for the "art of celebrity culture" or "art-in-kitsch" that dictates so much of what we've seen in the past fifty years (in the multi-media continuum of the "aesthetic").

SH: About the Net: the pros of the Internet poetry boom far outweigh the cons, i.m.h.o. It suits modern (United States) societal impulses to be able to get what you want, when you want it. In your case and mine, we publish virtually what we want, when we want to. In that sense, it's gratifying. We don't have to sift through mountainous submissions piles. As far as publishing our own work, 'zines and blogs can offer instant gratification to us like no print outlet can.

The "con" of instant gratification would seem to be instant disposability. A plethora of information means we face a choosier readership. When you purchase a print journal or collection, the tendency is to read it: it was a "monied" choice. As for my blog, people have to want to read what's there. If they aren't interested, they're a mouse click away from something different. You and I have both discussed new poetry and the prospect of the old theme of immortality through verse. I think it's pointless to think about, because we can easily lose focus on what's important: the real work we do. The value of the lifestyle we lead (internet or not) is in doing the work, the process. I think your outlook on this might differ from mine, but I respect even the untrained poet because, essentially, he/she is getting the same benefits from doing the work as I am, regardless of poetic knowledge, lineage, theory or literary history. That's not to say I find untrained poets' work interesting. More than likely, the opposite is true, but I think I can quickly discern whether or not anyone will challenge my intellect, which is a big draw for me.

In addition to the instant gratification/instant disposability dichotomy the Internet

establishes, the possibility of e-books excites me. I like materials and mobility. The combination of those two things is exciting. For the poems I write now, especially "investigative" poems, I like to have synthetic linguistic fragments or ideas handy. The Internet, and its ever-growing portability, enhances these desires for me. It's the old "writerly" advice I've heard from a number of sources: always have a book, a pen and paper on hand. With notebook computers and wi-fi technology, I can have all three in one. And given the trend of technology to shrink, portability will only increase. Bill Allegrezza's "moria" e-books are quite exciting because I can access them from virtually anywhere. The authors he publishes sacrifice money for hit counts. I think I'm resigned to the idea I'll never get rich off the "po-biz" game, so I'd rather publish an e-book that gets 3000 hits a month than make $3000 from a print book no one reads. The attention span and eye-training it takes to read an e-book will develop, as well.

The fact of the matter is, the Internet is the hub of the counterculture. This is where you MUST be if you write differently, think differently or live differently; our circle of "avant-minded" poets populates the Internet. The only way around its importance is with "eminence", which few younger poets can claim. The Internet is the only way around the taste-making large-scale corporations like Borders and Barnes and Noble. They don't carry counterculture material per se; they carry what sells because it's the essence of capitalism to do so.

AF: All good points & taken. One thing I would add about the Net is its international aspect. How else could we be in daily contact with poets in Mexico, Canada, England & Australia? This, I think, is the key to the success of JACKET. All artists have a need for commonality, to be part of a community larger than the small milieus that they generally, inevitably inhabit. JACKET has been instrumental in turning post-avant from a plethora of small, insular groups into a unified, international whole. So, we have a publication that everyone, or almost everyone, in the post-avant community reads. The consolidation & unification of post-avant is almost entirely due to the influence of the Net. Centrist poetry can lay claim to no such unity. Do English & Australian & Canadian Centrist poets read American Centrist journals, & vice versa? I would wager that they don't. What I think post-

avant really needs is a print equivalent of JACKET. If we could get in print what's already in motion on the Web, we'd really be poised for world domination.

SH: Where does post-avant poetry need to go and why does it need to go there?
This is a difficult question. I'm going to approach it from two angles, and then go on my own tangent. First, Ray Bianchi has said in conversation that post-avant poetry (I think he called it "experimental") needs an audience aside from poets. He compared post-avant poetics to contemporary visual art and avant-garde jazz, both of which he feels have an audience, albeit small ones, outside of the artists themselves. Regarding avant-garde jazz or improvised music or whatever they're calling it right now, I agree with Ray. Many of the local improvised music concert series in Chicago draw good-sized crowds. Sure, many of the non-musicians who go to these shows are artists, and experimental artists, in other fields, but it is an audience separate from the makers themselves; this is of utmost importance. People often compare modern poetics to a self-perpetuating system or "closed circle". Post-avant seems to be a scaled down version of that, based on its "marginalized" status. Even though mainstream poetry is not widely read, I believe occasional readers of poetry tend to buy what Barnes & Noble carries on its brick and mortar store shelves. It's a scary thought if you're an experimental or "post-avant" writer. B&N tends to carry only the APR/Poetry crowd and their predecessors.

Additionally, Ted Kooser's big push as poet laureate has been to encourage poets to make "more accessible poems." You and I have talked about creating a middle path between extremely experimental and Centrist work, but I'm not sure we've settled on an answer. Poetry, in its loftiest manifestations, must work to move human linguistic and artistic expression forward. Kooser seems almost to suggest reversion to more basic creations, to expand the public's interest in verse culture. I think it's a dangerous idea. We first must answer this question: what do we (as poets) and everyone else (potential readers) want from poetry? I myself want poetry to live up to other art forms. What I mean is, poetry seems to be years behind other art modes (visual art, avant jazz specifically), with notable forward-thinking exceptions like Gertrude Stein and her aesthetic progeny. "New Thing" jazz started

happening in the mid 1960s; Abstract Expressionism in art in the 1950s. What is the poetic equivalent of these, and when did it come into fashion?

Post-avant poetry might be the answer to that question in a general way (or at least some of its subsections). I don't feel that post-avant needs to reach toward the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream and post-avant or experimental poetics will merge--that seems to be the trend. When will this happen? Not for a while. I've generally heard it said that any move to anthologize poets is way behind the current trends in poetics, sometimes 50 years behind. Pierre Joris' and Jerome Rothenberg's Poems for the Millenium is perhaps the closest thing to an "anthology of the now" we have in poetry, and I don't think it's up-to-the-minute. Anthologies bring experimental verse to the classroom and seal its canonization. That's the path to "mainstream" readership and exposure to non-poet readers. Perhaps moves toward online anthologizing and the instantaneous possibility of the Internet will help post-avant poetry.

Speculation aside, I don't know if I'm as distressed about post-avant's lack of non-poet readership. I see a great amount of high-quality work emerging from the post-avant community, especially through editing Seven Corners. I like the directions post-avant is headed in: investigative poetics, destabilization of the egotistical sublime, improvisational poetics, contingent poetics, synthetic language, multilingual poetry, expanded translation, re-co-opting language through political-poetic experimentation, etc.--important and interesting stuff, for my money. I'm sure you notice the same thing in PFS Post--the poets are there, the work is good, what else can we ask for? The commitment should always be to doing the work, the "real work" as Gary Snyder would say. If the work is good, the readership will follow. For me, being a poet, post-avant or otherwise, is about the "process" of it all, the practice, the involvement with the art and the critical discussion that it creates.

AF: I think "process orientation" is indeed important, much more than the petty rat-race that poets (myself included) often get sucked into. My own particular preference would be towards a new kind of Formalism. When you say Formalism, people think you mean rhyming poems, odes & Shakespearean sonnets. I don't mean that at all. For me, Formalism

means, quite simply, the willingness & devoted impetus to create new forms. For me, Picasso was the ultimate Formalist, though he's been tagged "Cubist" & lots of other things. Formalism ties in to "seriality", working in series; you create a new form, then bend it & twist it every which way; exploring, seeing what works, "milking" it. Picasso spent decades proceeding in this fashion; as did Matisse, Monet, Braque, lots of the best visual artists. I suppose you could call Robert Creeley a serial poet—he came up with a signature style, & then most of his poems became (for the most part) variations on a theme. O'Hara's "Lunch Poems" are another good example of serial poetry composition. Yet, no one talks about Creeley or O'Hara as Formalists, because, again, Formalism is associated with archaisms, tepid retreads of old forms. Maybe Neo-Formalism would be the movement I'd most like to create, if I should have the good fortune!

Steve Halle & Adam Fieled 2006

Contextualists and Dissidents: Talking Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*

The world of literary critical discourse is governed by one central imperative: to expound. Every point must be developed, every quote "parsed", every nuance and inflection (whether of tone, dialect, or syntax) "unpacked" to find a maximum density of critical material. This is an industry that thrives on complexity, with the assumed premise that (usually) great works of literary art (though "greatness" or "privilege" are now much debated, and do not hold the currency they once did) are "complex organisms", in need of a specialist's expert appraisal. Whether it is a Deconstructionist or a Formalist reading, we can generally expect complex reactions and complex schematizations, and essential simplicity and simplistic reactions to be avoided like the plague.

How strange, then, to hear Paul Padgette make the following remark about Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* in the *New York Review of Books*: "You either get it or you don't." The breathtakingly blunt simplicity of this statement cuts right to the central critical crux that runs through the bulk of what has been written about *TB*; can it be criticized (as in, expounded upon) or can it not? Those that do engage in criticism of *TB* almost always do so within some contextual framework: Stein-as-Cubist, Stein-as-feminist, Stein-as-language manipulator. Others, like Padgette, are reduced by the extreme opacity of Stein's text to a bare assertion that the text is too hermetic to be "parsed" in the normal way. It is interesting to note that the "dissidents" (as opposed to the "contextualists") are often great fans of *TB* (as Padgette is), but evidently believe that the work either holds some "ineffable essence" or else must be read, first-hand, to be appreciated. That Stein's fans (literary critics, no less), would lobby against critical discourse is a tribute both to the power and the singularity of her work.

The contextualists have a problem, too. Because *TB* is determinedly non-referential, any attempt at contextualization must also be rooted in an acknowledgment that the work is beyond a single contextual interpretation. As Christopher Knight noted in a 1991 article, "One can locate it in the long history of nonsense literature…in the French Cubist movement…in the Anglo-American tradition of literary modernism…and in that relatively new artistic order— the post-modern." What is so baffling to literary critics is that, more often than not, one cannot "turn to the text" in order to verify these kinds of assertions. *TB's* sense (or non-sense) is determined largely by who happens to be reading it; it is extreme enough to stymie but not as extreme as, say, *Finnegan's Wake*, which by general consensus need only be touched by Joyce specialists. Simply put, there is enough sense in *TB* to make an *attempt* at locating it, but not enough so that any stated "location" could be feasible to large numbers of critics or readers. Thus, to this day, the pattern holds; dissidents argue against interpretation (and for first-hand experience), contextualists argue (with foreknowledge of "defeat", in the sense that no contextual argument about *TB* in almost a century has seemed to "stick") for a specialized interpretation. As Christopher Knight concludes, *TB* "embodies all…traditions even as it can be said never to be completely defined by any of them".

The most influential writing about *TB* seeks to straddle the line between dissension and contextualization. Richard Bridgman's *Gertrude Stein In Pieces*, more frequently cited than most Stein critical tomes, adopts something of a centrist stance. Bridgman makes clear that the ineffable quality of *TB* is not lost to him; the book is "all but impossible to transform adequately into normal exposition"(127) and "unusually resistant to interpretation"(125). Bridgman's use of the word "transform" in this context is very relevant. Just as Stein's language experiments transform conventional vernacular usage, so "normal exposition" would have to transform Stein's language back into something resembling a normal vernacular. Bridgman's work also points out the central critical dilemma surrounding *TB*; it is "all but impossible" to expound upon, but the "ineffable essence" that makes it so compelling also becomes a goad to try and expound nonetheless. "Adequately" also points to the manner in which *TB* turns literary critics back on themselves; critics are forced to confront the limitations of their own methodologies, criticize themselves and their own competence. Stein makes critics feel "inadequate", and it seems likely that, were she here to see the bulk of *TB* criticism, this would have pleased her.

Of those brave enough to "jump into the ring" with Stein, none does so with more panache than Marjorie Perloff. Perloff's attack on the "locked semantic gates" of *TB* is multi-tiered and determinedly contextual. In "Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp", Perloff posits a space for Stein's experiment alongside Dada-ists Duchamp and Jean Arp, while also granting its unique nature and inscrutable texture. Though this texture seems interpretation-proof, when Stein, for instance, talks about a carafe ("A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange…"(3)), Perloff claims that "Stein's verbal dissection(s) give us the very essence of what we might call carafe-ness." For Perloff, Stein is not talking "around" objects, but using language to "dissect" them, in much the same way that Picasso and Braque dissected objects, using Cubist techniques to put them back together. Or, in the same manner Arp and Duchamp "dissected" the nature of works of art by presenting "readymades".

It would seem that Perloff's use of the word "dissection" would make a Cubist analogy more apropos than a Dada one. *TB*, however, is so much like a Rorschach blot that almost anything can be made to "fit", and the more perceptive contextualiats, like Bridgman, realize this and foreground their assertions with a central disavowal. Perloff goes on to say, "to use words responsibly, Stein implies, is to become aware that no two words, no two morphemes or phonemes for that matter, are ever exactly the same." It could be stated, without too much hyperbole, that a discussion of literary "responsibility", as regards *TB*, is an extreme stretch. This leads to the major problem contextualists have in dealing with *TB*; no two of them seem able to agree about even the most general framework. Thus, reading contextual criticism about *TB* is like looking at snowflakes; no two contextual critics say the same thing, which makes "grouping" a problem and talking of a "majority" an impossibility.

Perloff saves her most provocative card for last; she says, "long before Derrida defined difference as both difference and deferral of meaning, Stein had expressed this

profound recognition." This is a plausible interpretation, and it would seem likely that others might come to similar conclusions. However, this is not the case. Virgil Thomson takes the more centrist tack that "if (Stein's) simplifications occasionally approached incomprehensibility, this aim was less urgent…than opening up reality…for getting an inside view." Between Thomson and Perloff, we get opposite ends of the contextualist stance, as presented in criticism. From Perloff, we get definite, authoritatively presented analogies (Duchamp, Arp, Derrida) that seek to situate Stein and her work in a specific literary and aesthetic context. In fact, Perloff's approach is both more definite and more authoritative than the vast majority of approaches that have been made to *TB*. From Thomson, we get a very anti-authoritative sentiment, which leans towards an abject-seeming generality; Thomson talks of getting an "inside view" of reality, but he cannot commit to a single or singular definition of what this reality is. He does not join in with the dissidents who argue against critical interpretation and/or the ineffable quality of this text, and in fact somewhat boldly claims to surmise Stein's "aim"; yet, though the "why" is accounted for in his interpretation, the "what" is lightly brushed aside in a platitude. Considering that Thomson is writing, like Paul Padgette, in the prestigious *New York Review of Books*, it is remarkable that a platitudinous statement in this context seems par for the course. Few knew what to do with Stein and her work during her lifetime; it appears that little has changed.

WORKS CITED

Bridgman, Richard. *Gertrude Stein in Pieces*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

DeKoven, Marianne. *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003.

Dubnick, Randa. *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Gygax, Franziska. *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Knight, Christopher. "Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons, and the Premises of Classicalism." *Modern Language Studies*, 21-3 (1991): 35-47. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003.

Mitrone, Mena. "Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation: Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons." *Modern Language Studies*, 28-2 (1994): 87-102. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003.

Perloff, Marjorie. “Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp.” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 23-2 (1996): 137-154. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/finnegan/English%20256/tender_buttons.htm.

Padgette, Paul. “Tender Buttons.” *New York Review of Books*, 16-12 (1971). http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510.

Ruddick, Lisa. *Reading Gertrude Stein*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Thomson, Virgil. “A Very Difficult Author.” *New York Review of Books*, 16-6 (1971). http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10510.

Composite Ideologies: Europe, America, Poetry, and the Internet

That there is a certain amount of distrust between Europe and America where the higher arts are concerned is a commonplace. The preponderance of cultural clichés institutes a dynamic that has in it a formulaic essence. On one hand, we have the stereotypical American: present-minded, intellectually shallow, lacking the proper self-consciousness to be a higher artist, invested in the naïve belief in the desirability of unbounded material gain. The American artist, to the European mind, may often seem like a caricature. On the other hand, a self-reflective American artist may seem, to him or herself, action oriented, daring, forceful (or, if gendered lexicons are employed, phallic), effectual. As the chiasmus spins itself out along formulaic lines, the European art-consciousness is thoughtful, mindful of a rich history, depth-consonant, scrupulous away from materiality and quantification, and self-conscious, in a positive sense, about motives and psychologies. That is, even if, to round the chiasmus off, the stereotypical American finds the stereotypical European impotent, "old," and ineffectual.

The issue needs to be raised, as the Internet has created a kind of lubricant between the two continents, so that essences are being mixed. The manner in which the Internet is structured has in it elements that are fast, fluid, and without boundaries— the sense that geography (for the time being) is a problem solved, that a click can take us from Europe to America and back again, and that the possibility of Intercontinental Literature has been engendered. What would constitute Intercontinental Literature? On the most superficial levels, one could play semantic games between continental stereotypes to find the keys (and in this playfulness may be the sustaining, qualm-dissolving essence of social lubricity)— daring depth, effectual self-consciousness, action-oriented scrupulosity. Intercontinental Literature is the point at which literary America and literary Europe begin, for want of a more ornate turn of phrase, to seduce each other. It is necessary to iterate, if there has been a consistent "winner" in this prolonged Cold War, where literature has been concerned, it has been Europe. There is no venerable canon of American literature (or theory) on the world stage, no "deep space" in the American literary psyche for a rich, permanently "worked" and sustained history. But the Internet brings something to the table, as the saying goes (and the table is set up like a feast, rather than an academic conference), that represents and re-posits America in a compelling light. There are elements involved in Internet literacy that partake of what I call the "ideal American." It is not merely that Internet navigation is potentially fast, fluid, and without boundaries; it is that literature on the Net is forced by the open-ended structure of the Net itself to present itself as egalitarian, uncompromised by coterie thoughts, steeped in social impulses. Sociable American impulses need to be preponderant over material ones.

To clarify "net structure," and the uncanny way it imposes an American ethos on anyone who attempts to pursue literature within its confines (which includes, at least to some extent, most current literati): in most contexts, to place something, some literary item, on the Net, is to position it in a kind of social space that is dynamic, and carries the potentiality for what might be called "mob" reactions. In other words, a substantial majority of literary websites are free and open to the public. The implication is that the potential safety of the literary "clan" or coterie is disrupted, in such a way that "slow growth" models of literary

dissemination are no longer completely adequate to deal with both the compensations and the deprivations of "Net-work." The "mob" mentality may or may not demonstrate a kind of omnipresence (i.e. plenty of websites, including literary ones, are left unmolested, untouched by the vital barbarity of mobs), but even the potentiality of a mob's presence carries with it a tension and tautness that forces literary creators to position themselves as on a raised dais, positioned as having been leveled into public prominence with everyone else. I consider this kind of American leveling process ideal because it adds an extra layer of self-consciousness that might be necessary in 2011 and beyond. The imperatives to make literature are especially urgent at a time in which the generalized Western economy is past the point of merely faltering and into free-fall. The political landscape, too, is fraught with entropy in such a way to suggest that if Western societies want to assert anything but complete stasis, something high and valuable must be pushed forward as evidence. The "ideal American" is ideal not only because the ethos it represents linguistically is productive (for once) on an Intercontinental level, but because the Zeitgeist does not seem to offer many alternatives. In an intellectual climate abraded by post-modernism, this is not an age of ideals. Whatever might be ideal must be built from the ground up.

It is important to note that the ideal American does not deal directly (necessarily) with literature: it deals with the structure, ethos, and praxis of the Internet. There is even a legitimate grievance with calling this structure, ethos, and praxis American, because America did not alone create this structure to be American. It is something set in place as a technological quirk of a place and a time. It is also important to differentiate Americanization from post-modernization. Post-modern "leveling" indicates the positing of a system of literary values; these values constitute an imposition on the substance of literature. Conversely, the Americanization imposed on continental literature by the Internet is an imposition on the style and substance of literature's dissemination, rather than its inherent substance. Literature and the dissemination of literature are political on different levels and for different reasons. Either is capable of making and reinforcing political statements. What the Internet may do to the substance of literature is not my concern here. But to create a context of "unlimited visibility," and to embrace the secondarily engendered concern of potentially unlimited conflict, to want to be "mob-prone," and instantaneously at that, is the desire-schema of literary creators who embrace the ideal American as a means of establishing political engagement. Again, this is American spirituality rather than American materialism. It is what has been buried under bad leadership and national corporate condescension. Consequently, large portions of the world population believe it to be buried.

Past this run of salvos, it remains to be seen how mixed essences may or may not be able to create a composite American/European ideology "around" literature on the Net. It is difficult to even work up a definition for something this amorphous, which does not even necessarily exist yet. It might even help to digress into a discussion of the ultimate supremacy of substance over modes of dissemination. Because if the composite ideology around Net structures involves dissemination against substance or essence, and if none of the egalitarianism of Net contexts does bleed into the literature itself, then the composite ideology, only enacted in dissemination, is one that has all the hallmarks of a minor, perhaps marginalized feature. However, contexts have the potentiality to alter substances, including literary ones, and they always have. A composite American/European ideology may be able to take certain modes of conservative and classicist thought and put something so dynamic,

so "now" into them, that they take wing into a realm of refreshment. What remains inescapable is that, if the idea that Net modes of literary dissemination are a manifestation (however arbitrarily) of American ethos, and if this ethos is being imposed whenever European literati use the Internet, and it is one of the few American impositions that may not be seen as an unwarranted and immature intrusion. As such, it represents not only a new "ideal" but something workable, something that might bear fruit. It represents a new engagement on a new level, and a new kind of opportunity for America.

Benjamin's Desktop: Unpacking the Phenomenon of Literature Online

In his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin was led to exclaim, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (221). This essay itself is heavily tilted towards a focus on works of visual, rather than literary art; how film and photography were ushering in a new era, as of the first half of century XX. This era transformed aesthetic emphasis from the "presence" of a work of art's "unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220), which manifested an auratic glow or sheen, and new techniques that opened up potentially broader (if also cheapening) vistas. To make a cross-reference, Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library" treats rare books as if they are capable of emitting a potent aura, just from the spaces they are able to fill in the acquisitive psyches of those who collect them. The import of the two essays, when conflated and applied to the present moment in literature, is that what print books can create is auratic presence; and that this is what the Internet specifically denies. Internet reproduction of literary artifacts is "digital," rather than "mechanical"; however, the net result is more or less the same; "presence" is diminished along with "aura," and the acquisitive impulse may be starved. The Internet, like film almost a century ago, opens a vista that it could be construed as "broad" or "cheap." The work of literature in the age of digital reproduction needs to be investigated, specifically because in diminishing the aura of print books, what consequences will follow are hanging in the balance.

"Digital reproduction," when applied to literature, is a strange phenomenon. On one level, all it means is that a web-page containing a poem, essay, or story, will look the same to all who venture to gaze upon it. However, what is produced and reproduced on the Net will often seem to follow a diasporic pattern: it will start in a digital locale, and then migrate to another digital locale, in such a way that one's feelings and reactions to the piece may be transformed by how and where they are seeing it. The "aura" of the piece is only present to the extent that some constituent element of the substance of the piece itself grounds it temporally, makes it part and parcel of a Zeitgeist. It must be looked into how much of Benjamin's sense of the "auratic" nature of print books is an illusory and inessential collector's conceit. There is no reason to assume that websites do not create and maintain, over periods of time, their own auras. Benjamin's notion of "aura" is bound up in materiality; what the Internet imposes on Net-readers is the dissipation of material and materialistic impulses. The materialistic essence of century XX may be about to be replaced by a renascence to spirituality in this century. The "unique existence" of works of literature "at the place where (they) happen to be" (220) will encourage us not to find an aura in this literature as a material object, but to forge a chiasmus between the unique existence that inheres in the literature and a reciprocally unique existence it engenders in us. Benjamin sees the auratic as a form of Otherness; what the Net imposes takes this Otherness and forces a radical subjectivity onto it, by de-objectifying it and demystifying its materiality. Thus, the relationship we forge gets us over the hurdle of material acquisitiveness.

This will register to some as a loss. If there were not compensatory excitements, in an age that demands sensory stimulation, then it is unlikely that literature on the Net could be considered "phenomenal." The compensatory excitements the Net offers for the loss of

materiality and (ostensible) permanence are stunning. The aura around the Net itself involves danger, risk, heedlessness; the Net paradigm insists on Net practitioners upping certain antes, as though the Net were a kind of gambling den. The aura that has accrued to literature on the Net must, of course, shift and transmute over time, but the present moment (and the Net, with its tinge of American ideology, insists on the intermittent preponderance of present moments) is steeped in Net practice working, both for writers and readers, as a kind of intoxicant. "Fast, fluid, and without boundaries" is a level and prescription of, not only the American but the Romantic— the "I" that belongs (through mutual empathy) to everyone, and forges instantaneous connections. So that the compensatory excitement of forging instantaneous connections is one frisson the Net offers. It is reminiscent of Barthes' discussion of wine in "Mythologies": "it is above all a converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and extracting from objects their opposites— for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative" (58). The pleasures of print are restrained pleasures; the wait of a period of months or years, the solidity of the material object once it arrives, its auratic presence on a shelf with other titles of a similar nature or from a similar source. If gratification is perpetually delayed, where print is concerned, creating a sense of permanent deferral from present moments, then the Internet creates moments intensely lived, that engender more expectations of intensely lived moments. If the Net can, as wine, "deliver (us) from myths, remove some of (our) intellectualism…make (us) the equal of the proletarian" (59), then perhaps the Net even has its own version of *vino veritas*: the frisson of sudden, unlabored truth.

It should go without saying that, if literature on the Net were not a subject that had a good amount of heft, where nuances and complications were concerned, it would not be worth writing about. Bataille's name for the general overabundance of life on earth, the "accursed share," also supplies a necessary wedge into the subject. Literature has proved, over a long period of time, that it does not *need* the Net to validate it. It is true of literary society as well as society in general that it "produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it" (Bataille, 106). So it is with literature on the Net: the surplus quality of Net publishing will be determined by how (and why) it is used. One possible use for literature on the Net, and also the investigation of the Net as a process, is that it can function as an antidote to the atrophied armature of post-modern thought that still hangs over avant-gardists on two continents. Post-modern poetics, especially in America, has always favored indeterminacy as a mode of expression; but I use the term "atrophied" because this kind of poetics has become *closed on indeterminacy*. Poetry, which has as a component part of its function the imperative to engage emotional and psychological levels, when made indeterminate as to at least some connotations, is only a few notches past banality. Net processes open indeterminacy up for investigation, by being determinative; you are in *this* place, doing *this*, and hiding is not an option. If a crisis forces you to react, the impulse towards banality cannot be followed. The Internet opens up vistas for psychologies and emotions to develop, beyond theoretical baggage. It could be the therapeutic solution to the traumas of post-modern practice, for those still young enough and dynamic enough to make moves.

Importantly, the Net is not nihilistic. It signifies mobility, which is a mode and expression of belief (i.e. you move because you believe it is worth your while to move). There is and has

always been a kind of nihilism to poetry books; they do not sell, they signify failure. Poetry as
a commodity is, and has always been, with rare exceptions like Byron, a failure. Of all the literary art forms that can benefit from Net processes and exposure, poetry stands to gain the most. The nihilism of waiting, say, two years for a poetry book to come out in print that few will buy or read can be supplanted if the publishing imperative is made dual, and remains that way. It remains to be seen to what extent print becomes nihilistic for the whole of literature. It would be reasonable to assert that literature that does not at least acknowledge the Net as a vital new force is already veering towards nihilism. Of course, the post-modern impulse had much to do with what could be termed (to be blunt) "happy nihilism," the gleeful pursuit of no significations. As such, it may be seen that the real "Lyrical Ballads" of a new form and era of Romanticism is the emergence of the Internet itself. It is also important for me to underline the facticity of the Net; it is popular enough not to need specific artists to proselytize for it. But it would be a supreme irony if post-modernity itself were toppled by a forward moving and thinking technology. It would also be a more sophisticated irony than most post-modernists could come up with themselves. As is rare with potent ironies, it ends in earnest triumph.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972.

Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share Volume I*. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

"There is Nothing Outside the Net": Internet Affirmations in the Twenty-First Century

Western society is sick for a sense of affirmation of any kind in 2012. Conditions of life, in America in particular, constitute a formidable denial— of rights, of substance, and (most importantly) of a sense of duration. Many of us cannot imagine our lives extending into an indefinite future— too much around us has come unhinged. What the Internet affirms is, to be simple, that a dynamic, available world still exists. In America, the Internet prospers at odd angles to an overwhelming societal stasis. Among other things, the Internet is a realm of self-generated contexts— a frontier for the pursuit of self-development. The emergence of a certain amount of naïve egotism among participants is unavoidable. But the dichotomy between imperatives— to consolidate and fulfill a naïve ego or to level things off on a dynamic transcendentalism— inhered in a different form in Europe two centuries ago. It was later dubbed Romanticism. The English Romantics, through periodical culture, were dealing with a new class of reader— middle-class, status-conscious, but (importantly) mindful that strength of thought could amplify and broaden status. Do thoughts in America in 2012 confer status? In the American Academy, form does seem to be preponderant over substance— academics advertise not what they think but what they've done.

It is arguable that the Net is creating a new class (a "Net class") of reader, who affix intellectual curiosity to the pursuit of information on the Net. Regency periodical readers might suffice as a rough equivalent. The difference splits downward on two levels— people who use the Internet for base reasons; and the facticity of class, as it applies here; that Net readers are heterogeneous, class-wise. The Internet might not be, as Wordsworth pictured Nature on Snowdon, "the perfect image of a mighty mind" (XIII, 69), but it may be the closest Western man has in 2012. Western intellectuals must choose— the Internet or the past. Timelessness in any direction is not an option— the Net drains vivacity away from the cult of sacrosanct textuality. Romanticism's vision-quest to soar above and beyond history and culture (and, as an adjunct, Modernity's vendetta against mass culture) is too quixotic, at this juncture, to be taken seriously. So, there is an unlikely chiasmus with moribund post-modernity— but it is a present-mindedness against banality. The Internet is not made to be a "lonely mountain" (XIII, 67) or to "feed upon infinity" (XIII, 70). It is a social and intellectual obligation, the Romanticism of which may be embraced or disregarded. If the Internet "moulds, and endows, abstracts, combines" (XIV, 79), and if the contexts thus created are new, we have manifested a median space between Romanticism, Modernism, and post-modernism— individuality, fragmentation, and egalitarianism.

To the extent that experiential peaks on the Net manifest as Baudelaire's "ineffable orgy" (20), intellectuals will have to get used to crowds. Even scholars may come to feel like artists; as "enjoying a crowd is an art" (20), and genuine Net communion has the potentiality to manifest at least part of the 1790s (for example) on a monitor. Because the Net affirms the present, it also affirms the future. Books go out of print; web-pages have no immediate necessary obsolescence. Everything on the Net is always waiting to be retrieved and recuperated. It is more than a gimmick to paraphrase Derrida's commonplace— "there is nothing outside the Net." Because the Net is an expanding universe (and there is no denying

a reversal of fortune could change this), because it both affirms and hastens engagements (and because antidotes in the West are scarce), it must be embraced. It's an embrace against corporate interests— a subversion of codes that affirm compliance with corporate ethos. Corporate interests favor mainstream media outlets— the dissemination of selected information. Some Internet franchises, like Yahoo, do fit this mold. But the generalized mold of the Net (to the extent that one exists) involves liberated dissemination (not only of information but of opinions, attitudes, ethos), and Yahoo now looks more like an outsider than a trenchant bellwether.

The Internet could wind up being the destruction of the "demographic"— the eclipse of target marketing. It is organic chaos trumping calculated entrepreneurship. Net entrepreneurship, like Mark Zuckerberg's achievement with Facebook, configures a vehicle for organic chaos that fulfills (also) a capitalistic function. Amalgamation of spiritual and material imperatives has been rare in America (at least outside the hypocritical hovels of the "Red") always. In a society already verging on chaos, the Internet fulfills some of the duties that party politics should— a force (in its size and scope) "over" the general public, yet accessible to it. Party politics in America in 2012 presents and represents an illusion of accessibility and serviceability, yet the corporate wheels that drive it are outside the parameters of public view. The Internet is our daily companion; party politicians are not. The "stasis model" of America that Washington has reified can only be broken by steady application. Where but online can this happen? And, for most of us, Net labor is seldom alienated— a termination of exchange values enhances use values. The American government's labor is alienated two times over— because direct control of specific contexts is usually left to others; and because, where general alienation is concerned, party politicians are all MacHeaths to most of us. The Internet counters governmental stasis with an "unpredictability model." The Internet may prove to be one of the most unpredictable contexts in the history of literature.

Literary minds are sharpening their impulses in response. It is a response to the imposition of speed. Reception Velocity— speed of literary exchanges— has hastened heretofore sluggish processes so drastically that patience with old-school literary methodologies is falling away. There was no corresponding development in Romanticism except, possibly, the system of dissemination that was developed by Lord Byron and his publishers. The sense of "push" that is familiar to us, living as we do in a society that favors force over finesse, was inaugurated, where literature is concerned, by the Byronic enterprise. If it is outré to dub the Internet itself Byronic, it has the potentiality to take literature and endow it with the excitement and urgency of Byron's best poetry. Stretch and strain would also accrue to an attempt to juxtapose Romantic conceptions of Nature with our present conceptions of the Internet; yet the chiasmus is compelling enough to take a brief look at. The force of Shelley's West Wind, its impetuosity and strength, is in the Net, not only in Reception Velocity but in language, as it has been imported (whether in literary contexts or not) online. If the Internet has a tie to Modernism and post-modernism, the most accurate signification around the Internet is its relationship to the Romantic endeavor. "Net Nature" has already become second nature to millions of people, many of whom do not realize that their collective consciousness has been transformed. As literature on the Net develops, it will leave behind an aura of passion, ecstasy (both in the modern and the medieval sense of the word), pathos,

and portent— everything that inheres in Lord Byron's poetry to begin with.

A more practical angle (and one developed against the manifesto impulse) is that America was designed to conform to democratic ideals, and so is the Internet. As beleaguered as America is, life on the Net offers a sense that American life (even when is abstracted and projected into the world through the Net) is moving forward. It is affirmative, even when it destabilizes contexts like literature, which were meant to be affirmative to begin with. If it is not a consistently high-minded collective enterprise, it is our duty as intellectuals to shape and hone it until at least part of it is. Those repelled by the Romanticism of the endeavor can choose to engage the brighter side of post-modernism's rubric— an endless horizontal, site to site, page to page. What the Internet ultimately affirms is that horizontals and verticals can be put into place, shown, and decided upon individually as ideas move out into collective space at lightning speed. The autonomy of the individual is the ultimate goal.

Works Cited

Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen*. New York: New Directions, 1970.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude*. England: Penguin Books, 1995.

Learning from Bukowski

There are few widely read poets in America today, beyond the minuscule community of poets & academics. One is Charles Bukwoski. Bukwoski is widely criticized by serious poets & academics for his self-mythologizing stance & lack of formal skill. I do not deny that Bukowski's lack of formal skill is a serious flaw. I would argue, however, that it is no more serious a flaw than Pound's obscurity, Shelley's ethereality, & Creeley's domesticity. Furthermore, poets & academics have much to learn from Bukowski's approach to life & literature. The sum total of Bukwoski's work presents nothing less than a compressed, crudely coherent philosophy of life. Bukowski's best poems are triumphs of *logopoeia*, articulating serious & universal problems & finding consoling resolutions in solitude, seriousness, literature & memory. Bukowski, a blue-collar Proust, was, for all his crudity, as serious-intentioned as any poet writing in America today. It's both reductive & cheap to linger on Bukowski's rough-hewn surfaces without acknowledging the polished if untutored precision of his worldview and its' presentation-in-verse.

Take these lines from *the secret*:

don't worry, nobody has the
beautiful lady, not really, and
nobody has the strange and
hidden power, nobody is
exceptional or wonderful or
magic, they only seem to be.
It's all a trick, an in, a con,
don't buy it, don't believe it.
The world is packed with
billions of people whose lives
and deaths are useless and
when one of these jumps up
and the light of history shines
upon them, forget it, it's not
what it seems, it's just
another act to fool the fools
again.

It would, indeed, be hard for the serious poet to ignore the technical flaws apparent here— arbitrary line-breaks, flat diction bordering on prose, boring word choices, etc. The poem does fail on that one level— but it is only one level. Even as it fails on the level of technique/formal skill, it succeeds on content-levels. We get real, hard-won, useful knowledge, maybe even, (dare I say it) *wisdom*. The usefulness of this wisdom derives directly from its' immediate cultural relevance, i.e., we live in a fame-saturated culture in which ciphers continually "jump up, and the light of history shines upon them". Bukowski is writing this poem as a famous poet who *sees through* his own celebrated status. Rather than wallowing in fame, he rejects it out of hand, and encourages us, his audience, to do the same. In this day and age in America, this stance (for a writer as successful as Bukowski) is both

radical & brave. It stands in bold relief to the shameless self-promotion of someone like Allen Ginsberg (probably Bukwoski's closest analogue), who spent his whole life courting mainstream media & public.

The irony here is that Bukowski's anti-fame, anti-celebrity, anti-historical (and, implicitly, anti-canonical) stance, rather than alienating his audience, brought them that much closer to him. Whether poets like it or not, the public could care less about conventional notions of craft & technique. They want their catharsis, & Bukowski, like no other modern poet, gives it to them. We may learn from the Bukwoski phenomenon that much of the general populace is both dismissive of popular culture & willing to read. What they don't want is self-infatuated preciosity; they want poems they can *use*, poems with a *logopoeia* relevant to their lives. Bukowski clearly sensed this, & was willing to cut out formalist re-bop & bare himself whole in these poems. Baring himself was enough, because Bukwoski had a substantial philosophic gift to impart, which, though base, was nonetheless in tune with the *fin de siecle* America Zeitgeist.

What can poets learn from Bukowski? Academic poets often consider form an end in itself. They discourage, in their workshops & presentations, discussions of content, as if content were somehow secondary. This is rubbish, & Bukowski was absolutely right to put content first. More important even than logopoeia is *rhetopoeia*, the rhetorical impact of any given poem. We must be convinced by the poet's *rhetopoeia* that a poem *needs* to exist, is a *necessary* entity. This Bukowski is able to do, time & time again, because (in his best poems) he has something substantial to say. Bukowski is a relevant poet because, while form can be faked, content cannot. You either have something substantial to express (whether it is on an emotional, psychological, aesthetic or any other level) or you don't. In considering Bukowski & form, give the man at least the credit of volition— his writing career spanned forty-odd years, if he'd *wanted* to learn form, he would've. Content was obviously so important to him that form was (mostly) superfluous; and who's to say he wasn't right?

I'm not going to try & justify Bukowski's technical incompetence, or to argue that the pursuit of formal rigor doesn't have its' own nobility. I merely want to make the point that Bukowski's sacrifice of form at the altar of content doesn't disqualify him from serious consideration as a poet & aesthete. It has its' own validity, in the catharses of myself & the thousands of normal people around the world who share in Bukowski's alienation, solitude, & appreciation of the redemptive powers of poetry & the written word in general. Those who would deny Bukowski's potential canonicity must remember that one hundred years ago, Whitman, roughly ten years dead, was in the exact same position that Bukowski is in now. Whitman was reviled by the academics & serious poets of the time, who now are considered irrelevant & hopelessly outdated. He had achieved some popular success (especially in England where his work was embraced by Wilde & others), but his place in the canon was far from secure. It took an impassioned essay from D.H. Lawrence in the early Twenties to seal Whitman's reputation as a canonical poet. After this, Whitman maintained a steady influence in world letters. It may take some years for Bukowski to achieve the level of critical recognition that he deserves. Literary critics are notoriously inclined to refute the opinions of the general public (dismissing them, perhaps, as image-besotted Philistines). But if popular opinion holds, this will become a likely event.

Excavation and Recuperation (and Contextualists and Dissidents)

Built into the structure of the Internet is a certain amount of depth and density. Google searches don't bring up everything; some sites are "embedded" more than others, and it varies country to country, continent to continent. Excavation can become a wonted task, and old texts that were not widely noted upon release can be recuperated. Excavation and recuperation are not just Internet processes; they are artistic processes as well. One goal I set to/for myself with the Blazevox book *Apparition Poems* (2010), was to excavate and recuperate certain aspects of the Romantic ethos. More specifically, the ethos that was set in place by **William Wordsworth** in his Preface (to *Lyrical Ballads*). That the task of the self-respecting Author was to enlarge the mind-capacity of his/her audience; that the dignity of the human mind is inherent and indestructible; that the human mind may be subtly, rather than grossly, stimulated; and that common situations can embody portentous meanings when recuperated with and by imagination; this corpus of notions hinged on other interests that were certainly not Wordsworth's (what about sexuality and sexual situations?) Almost precisely eighteen months after the release of the Blazevox book, I was able to excavate the following List-Serve directed (and quite jocular!) missive from a UK website, scribed by

Desmond Swords:

Bob Sheppard's Star Student Scott Desmond's Words Flyte Fielded.

Yes, yes, one read the pose by this 'poet, critic, and musician' colleague, currently where erm, you were a year ago, nearing the end of that long hard road to attainment as a pro in doctoral po-biz, Jeff - collegiately alleging a claim that nearly everything to follow Four Quartets has been 'dross'.

One chuckled at the ambition, audacity and foolishness of deploying such a term in the forum of Letters; before turning one's focus to adducing the verse and other critical prose assays by the author Adam attempting to pull off such a theatrically audacious play as this.

"She told me I love boy/girl poems, love
scenes in them based on a deep degeneracy
inherited from too much heat around my
genitals, as manifest in tangents I could only
see if I was getting laid. She told me this as

of telling was subsumed in an ass as stately as
a mansion, which I filled with the liquid
cobwebs of my imagination."

Yeats would be proud of the cant and ergo argoist, very very classy Adam Fieled's verse. Proper spillage. High Art indeed from our playboy crown-prince doing what one does.

Effecting agreement among this reader, on X and Y being the only two one is on collegiate amity and perfect accord with Adam about, as a bosom buddy chum and prophetical practitoner with the imbas to know why, when, what and how, for example, Eliot can successfully operate as a symbol for agreement between Fieled and oneself.

High and Low Art in the 'making' of verse activity, you know, as a 'poetry' - there's often very little agreement about, and in America, poetry atomised into 10,000 different individual, unique and original practices, all curated by a genius with big ideas about what kind of reality Poetry is, adam, the only critical debate in AmPo parish at present, as you know, has one essential point of agreement most practitioners of contemporary American poetry found as your datum: MFA.

After this, a forking occurs and we diverge into our own pool of plod and production sailor, not believing any of it matters. That our thinking is nought but a performance in print, anything other than that: Not real. Thought, Fielding.

Have a think about it. I'll get back to you.

What's interesting (and gratifying) to me about this piece is the context it arose from. I had just published a piece in the UK online journal *The Argotist* entitled "Century XX after Four Quartets." The gist of the piece was that poetry in the English language decayed horribly in the second half of the twentieth century. Other critical forays from this period, like "On the Necessity of Bad Reviews" and "The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry" got a bigger instant public reaction than this one did. A response that defended me with my Apparition Poems, and their excavated/recuperated Romantic ethos, was written and placed in a manner that straddled public and private spheres. Did Mr. Swords know he was being archived? The letter mixes jocularity (even, at points, to the edge of absurdity) with serious overtones. What could've been a post-modern performance from Mr. Swords was nudged in the direction of the Romantic by earnest edges. The dynamic between "Century XX...", the Apparition Poems, and Mr. Swords piece are interesting; on one level, radical and provocative

conservatism is getting "filled in" by the ironic humor that is post-modernity's trademark. The Apparition Poems form a middle ground here, as a site- not bereft of absurdities or earnestness, ironies or direct statements. The meta-nature of the poem quoted is heightened by an intellectually challenging and substantial narrative. Mr. Swords chose to defend me with a poem that would be offensive to a "pure" Romantic ethos. It includes sexual slang, and pornographic overtones. But that I was excavating and recuperating something Romantic (and many consider **Yeats** a latter-day Romantic) is hinted at. The structure of the Internet has created many circles like this in poetry. Excavation and recuperation are processes that force the issue of repetition. What is, and matters most, must be repeated.

The Future of the Novel in the Twenty-First Century

One amusing irony about poetry and poets is how frequently and with what malevolent glee non-poets dissect the lack of general "numbers" around poetry- of poets themselves, of poetry audiences, book sales, etc. Critics of poetic endeavor forget that it is an art-form covered with, and by, a long history, beginning before even classical antiquity and stretching into 2012. Novels, on the other hand, began to proliferate in the eighteenth century, then consolidated their position in the nineteenth and twentieth. With the twenty-first century and the advent of the Internet, the novel has been moved into a tight, awkward space. Kindles and Nooks aside, the novel is too cumbersome to feel at home on the Net. Net reading habits generally favor a proclivity for brevity and compression. So, the question arises: will the novel, unbuffeted by a long history, survive the Internet and the twenty-first century?

One feature of the best novels is the ability to peer, in a prolonged way, into the human psyche. Look at a Modernist monument like Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse- Woolf's innovative stream-of-consciousness writing style allows her audience to view her characters as almost transparent. Lyric poets tend to do the same thing, but speak from a single perspective. Woolf shows multiple perspectives and angles, or attempts to. How successful is she? What we know, from To the Lighthouse, is that her characters' thoughts are resolutely platonic- they don't think, for the most part, about money and sex. Whether or not Minta Doyle fantasizes about giving Ramsey some amorous attention, or Lily Briscoe pleasures herself to Paul Rayley, is something we never learn. In other words, there is a unitary character to Woolf's portraits of interiority which makes it clear that they all come from her. If, where truth consonance is concerned, Wordsworth is better, it's because we always know we're getting him. Wordsworth is more honest and, therefore, perhaps more worthy of preservation than Woolf is.

James Joyce is another interesting case-in-point, a twentieth century Titan (if we want to posit that the twentieth century produced any literary titans) whose body of work, when held up against the sudden preponderance of the Internet, may come into question. When Modernist scholars rate Joyce's achievements, they tend to place Ulysses at the top. Why shouldn't it be Dubliners? The twenty-first century may decide that Ulysses is a bore- too "purple" here (as is the last third of "Portrait of the Artist..."), too didactic there, too lost generally in its own speech patterns and rhythms to move out of "hermetic" mode. The Internet has created an atmosphere in which richly written short stories may have a better shot at survival than entire novels. "The Dead," from Dubliners, is one of the most pitch-perfect pieces of short fiction ever written, exquisitely detailed and ultimately harrowing. Unlike in Woolf, the tensions and ambiguities are fruitful in such a way that they point at the characters, rather than at the author- Joyce is successfully negatively capable. We may even wonder, at the end, if Gretta Conroy concocts her story about Michael Furay just to avoid sleeping with Gabriel. If this is so, in this interpretation the title of the story becomes an ironic indictment of Gabriel's sexuality, among other things.

By the standards here enacted, Proust would seem to have Joyce and Woolf beat by many

yards. His perspective isn't that different, in many facets of its enactment, from a classic lyric poet's. Proust's first-person omniscience has to do with a textually mastered interiority,

which combines a Romantic interest in achieving timelessness with Modernistic formal structures. If what gets manifested from this conglomeration of sensibilites is more substantial than Joyce or Woolf were ever able to achieve, it is a manifestation of the superior power, in art, of subjective viewpoints over attempts at ideal objectivity. Whether or not Proust has been configured, in France, as a closet Romantic (I don't know if he has), his Romanticism may be the key to his triumph and durability. Proust is, himself, a formidable hitch to literature on the Internet- an author whom obvious imperatives will always force into print contexts, and whom there is no obvious way around, which may not be the case for Joyce and Woolf.

Proust aside, the history of twentieth century literature in the twenty-first century may not be of as much ultimate importance as what will happen with the best of the more sanguine nineteenth- its avatars, from the English and German Romantics, the French Symbolists, to the incontestably great Russian novelists. Obviously, a responsible literary mind can't go around Tolstoy any more than it can go around Proust- it becomes apparent that novels have been produced to be ranked with the best poetry ever composed. It's just that, in the long view of things, the novel is still an upstart form, and thirty or forty solid monuments will have to compete with the social revolution issuing from Internet life. I would wager that many of these questions will be decided in the next twenty years- even one profoundly solid achievement on the world stage, where the novel is concerned (on a level with Proust, Tolstoy, etc) could tilt the novel towards a continuative imperative. If, on the other hand, the novel, both in the United States and on the Continent, sinks into a trough, it may be that forces of preservation move in around the thirty or forty solid talismans and the rest are rent asunder. Poetry will continue to manifest negligible "numbers," but will never die. The triumph of poetry has always been that it refuses to die. For the novel, life and death are hanging in the balance.

Political Algorithms

I.

1) If American society is now hinged closer to anarchy, confusion, and chaos than it has been in earlier eras, it has to do with an unfortunate chiasmus: an intense degree of liquidation of economic and other kinds of material resources (owing largely to poor governmental management, in the Aughts and before, of said resources), and an American press corps so suffering from this syndrome themselves that they fear only a voice of imbecility will be accepted and saleable. The crux is that no one is telling the truth.

2) The Internet is a monster hovering above this chiasmus, half benevolent and half malign, devastating the most repressive and rapacious of America's economic sectors, yet opening a vista of almost pure freedom for the populace.

3) For the time, American urban sectors may turn into an abattoir- millions of lives will, and are already, disappearing into thin air. Only the materially "backed up" will live, and loss of employment can be fatal.

4) Here's the major question: is the entire West headed for the Dark Ages again?

II.

1) It's uncertain when it was that the American populace began to take its cues, on a number of different levels, from the mainstream press. But, at a certain moment in the twentieth century, public discourse became mainstream press discourse, and the American psyche came to forget, for the most part, all discourse but media discourse.

2) If mainstream media discourse becomes degenerative, the American psyche degenerates right along with it. A lack of public intellectuals becomes a lack of private intellection among all classes; because media values permeate all classes. Class itself degenerates through lack of discussion.

3) To the American mind, those who don't die public deaths don't die (or never lived). An unreported plague becomes a hinge to widespread disorientation. The American populace looks for a discursive cue, and finds none.

4) The Internet is too new for the populace to trust it implicitly. It feeds on unproven, unsanctioned discourse. It's a site for the baptism by fire and refinement of the national psyche.

5) Those who want to survive in 2012 must speak.

III.

1) American politicians work in an intermediate space between the press corps and the public- their appeals have to be tainted by an inherent dualism. In other words, what they say to the people is said to the press first. The language of sound-bites has created an American populace who think in sound-bites, too. It creates a complex system whose unstated goal is the reduction and/or destruction of complexity.

2) The unreported plague that is sweeping across America is a complex phenomenon- were it to be reported accurately and responsibly, it would involve a meta-critique of the American press (an American press willing to critique itself). Because there is no public role for American intellectuals in 2012, and no place for them in the mainstream press, it is unlikely that this will or can happen.

3) Thus, for thinking Americans, there can only be a sense of profound anti-climax to the 2012 presidential election. The candidates have already demonstrated an unwillingness to look beneath any surfaces. For a serious public figure to do so would require the courage of moral heroism. American party politics is a dystopic landscape and has produced no moral heroes in more than half a century. What's distressing is that there can be no intermediate zones of halfway measures- the only politicians in America who could or can affect real change are moral heroes. All else is redundancy.

4) Responsible American citizens can only react to the mainstream press with an absolute negation. More disjuncture will create a profound chaos bordering on anarchy, but this state of affairs and its consequences are the wages of the continuation of American idealism.

5) If we have to move towards an embrace of chaos and anarchy, so be it.

“Rock Wax”: On Pink Floyd (Adam Fieled and Matt Stevenson)

AF: Matt, I was wondering if you could go a little bit into your memories and experiences of Pink Floyd's music: where and how you heard Floyd for the first time, what eras of Floyd music were important for you, and what their place in rock history is?

MS: I was aware of Floyd from classic rock radio, which is to say, THE WALL and DARK SIDE OF THE MOON. I had the usual WALL obsession phase rather late, as was the case with many of the stations of my adolescent development.

My introduction to the deeper catalog occurred during my first stint at college, at Susquehanna University. I was invited to a "party"/smoke session by a friend who lived in an off-campus frat house (where Murray Head - I think that was his name - who taught philosophy - was once seen literally dancing on a table). I remember being in the smoke room, with a good buzz on, when the stereo system began to play a menacing instrumental that sounded very much like the Dr. Who theme. I sat upright and asked, what the hell was this? It was fascinating. One of my friends told me it was Pink Floyd’s MEDDLE album. Right about then, a gruesome distorted vocal growled out: ONE OF THESE DAYS, I'M GOING TO CUT YOU IN TO LITTLE PIECES....Terrifying!

My response to terror and unease - sensations I don't enjoy - is to work through them if they're not coming from something obviously physically inimical. So I popped into the campus bookstore later that week and shoplifted a copy of MEDDLE, still possibly my favorite Floyd album.

On my roommate's advice, I also got a copy of DARK SIDE OF THE MOON and laid down one night with a head full of hemp and some headphones to "really get the experience." I hadn't heard the full album before, so I wasn't ready for the Nick Mason-orchestrated sound collage at the beginning. Consequently, when the screaming started, I bolted upright and tore off the headphones. It took me a minute to calm down, rewind the tape and try it again.

I notice that fear is a key emotion in the aspects of Floyd's "atmosphere." It's even there in the Barrett material - alienation and anxiety. You hear it in "Pow R Toc H" and "Jugband Blues." But the big spectral instrumentals, from "Saucerful of Secrets" on, have that dark vacuum chill of outer space. DSOTM is musically pretty, but still pretty grim. Floyd's aggression came in the form of volume and strangeness rather than velocity and harshness (though they could be pretty harsh if they wanted: "Nile Song" for example).

I suspect that the chill comes from a lack of pure improvisation, or is somehow connected to it. Floyd's compositional style involves those big architectural structures we've mentioned, which may incorporate greater or lesser degrees of improv but bounded by the overall push of the composition. "Echoes" on MEDDLE is the classic of the type. Compare it to the

more abstract (and scary!) stuff on the studio part of UMMAGUMMA, probably their wildest (and most Eris-influential) music. Also compare to ATOM HEART MOTHER, not

my favorite and incidentally the most typically pseudo-classic prog-rock of their stuff. Later Floyd...I'd have to say that they delivered on the "concept album" concept better than anyone. The Kinks tended to be very narrative with their rock operas. Time and many critics have led to a re-evaluation of SGT PEPPER as a not-quite-successful effort. TOMMY and QUADROPHENIA were intermittently successful, but kind of obscure. LAMB LIES DOWN ON BROADWAY much the same. But on DSOTM, ANIMALS, and THE WALL, it was quite clear what Waters was talking about. He managed to craft intelligent material in a way that rock fans (and succeeding generations of rock fans) can relate to. This is partly because he was stung by critic's reviews of spacey Floyd albums as meaningless.

Without getting to into his own material, we should discuss the extent and limitations of Barrett and the catalyst to Floyd's initial success. We can also discuss the way that Floyd was the main British band to work with light shows and full-environment performances, influenced by rumors of the Grateful Dead and other San Francisco acts plus the pop art/op art/multimedia art happenings around London in the 60s.

AF: Well, I can say that Barrett-era Floyd and the sort of shows they did were a huge influence on me. When they were "The Pink Floyd," Barrett and the others did a series of performances associated with something called the London Free School. As I understood it, the London Free School was a loosely knit organization oriented around putting on rock shows and other performances in a multi-media context: rock with movies, movies with poetry, etc. I've always been attracted by the ambience of multi-media in the arts, and in the mid-Aughts I put together something called the Philly Free School here, in emulation (I thought) of the London Free School, and we hosted a string of multi-media performances mixing all the art forms we could in as Swinging London-ish a fashion as we could. Syd Barrett, as a talented painter who was also a talented rock songwriter, was an excellent avatar for that whole vibe. What has been implicit in Floyd from the beginning is that music is never seen to be enough: there has to be some spectacle to go along with the music to enliven it in a live context. It may be that one of the reasons this was is that the band members all had more advanced ideas about popular music than other pop musicians of their generation: they were products of a relatively sophisticated middle-class environment (Cambridge), rather than coming out of the proletariat. If I don't consider them pretentious, it's because, as you already noted, their ambitiousness musically has always been undercut with the sense that they build a real sense of harmony and beauty into their songs, to make them not just palatable but enjoyable, in a manner that other psychedelic and or prog-rock bands didn't. Barrett wrote killer hooks, and in songs like "Arnold Layne," actually tackled risque subject matters in a way that few else had.

As for "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," if it remains a psychedelic masterpiece to me it's because the "spacy" elements ("Interstellar Overdrive," "Pow R Toc H") are balanced by the whimsical pop stuff in such proportions that the album never drags. There isn't much platonic child-like innocence in pop music, and scarecrows and bikes and Siam cats were and remain an essential diversion away from both the sleaze and grime of much rock music

(even good stuff like the Stones) and the nihilism of later-era, Waters-dominated Floyd. They also provided an interesting template for mid-era, between-Piper-and-Dark Side Floyd, and

people like Robyn Hitchcock have made sure that no one's ever going to forget Syd. In terms of weighing who Syd was, what's your feeling about the whole child-like innocent vibe? Also: did Waters turn to some kind of nihilism in his lyrics just to rebel against Syd, "spaciness," and the way the whole band started?

MS: Re: the origins of Floyd - your "Philly Free School" is quite similar to the impulse behind the UFO club/London Free School/IT magazine scene that produced Floyd (and Soft Machine) in the swinging London psychedelic & art scene; aside from the obvious parallels of multimedia happenings, the London scene was inspired greatly by second-hand reports of the West Coast/San Fran scene - Ken Kesey's parties and then the psyche club scene in San Francisco. The idea of a rock band having their own light show crew was inspired by reports of the Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead. And of course, there were the drugs and the new technologies, creating a bit of a scene just as they did in the US. So PFS seems to me very much part of The Tradition. Personally, I'm proud when I feel Radio Eris is part of The Tradition.

Anyway, it's interesting to consider that the Floyds had the interest in experimentation, Cage, Stockhausen, electronic compositions like Morton Slobotnik, etc, because being relatively privileged they could afford to be weird. Perhaps it takes the urge to commercial success (and consequent discipline and craftsmanship) that came from working class desperation, plus the willingness to be bold and experiment that came from the art school background, to create the formula that pushed the big bands over the top.

An interesting tangent: There's a lot of back'n'forth influence between the Floyds and the Beatles. If you listen to ABBEY ROAD and DARK SIDE OF THE MOON, you'll here a lot of the very same synth, guitar, and keyboard sounds, and not just cause they were in the same studios. Also, the somewhat working-class Beatles, having their initial success, started making the London psyche scene and were introduced to weird noises partly by events at which Pink Floyd performed. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure Barrett's pop songwriting was very much inspired by the Beatles. And if it hadn't been for the commercial prospects created by Barrett's way with a song, Floyd would never have had any serious management, which allowed them to capitalize on their initial success, creating the breathing space needed to synthesize their experimental and commercial sides.

A quick word about Roger Waters' lyrics: Rog's nihilism seems to be largely personal neuroses coupled with a Marxist social conscience. The lucidity of the lyrical content to Floyd from DSOTM on, while influenced by Rog's personality, was very much (as far as I can tell from interviews I've read) a reaction to the hurtful comments of British rock critics, taking Floyd to task for being abstract and experimental at a time that the counter-cultural zeitgeist was zagging towards MC5-style social radicalism. So in a sense, yeah, Rog's lyrics darkened, but less as a direct rebellion against Syd. The ghost of Syd haunted

Roger all through the latter phases of the band's career from DSOTM through WISH YOU WERE HERE to the WALL.

"It could never have happened without (Syd), but it couldn't have gone on with him" was

the general take on the situation expressed by the other founding members of the band. It's interesting to speculate whether a Floyd with Syd could have delivered work like DSOTM. Would a break have to have occured anyway? A common strategy of the music industry is to focus on the primary songwriter in a band and run a divide-and-conquer maneuver at some point, as the songwriters (and the song rights) are the main source of income. It's possible that such pressures would have fissured the band anyway. I might suggest that without the romantic Hanged Man/Fisher King character in their origins, and the psychic tragedy associated with the story, Floyd would not have had some of the...magic? Aura? which contributed to their eventual success. Peter Jenner and others will talk about how, once Barrett was definitely out of the band and not able to write usefully - preventing even a Beach Boys type of arrangement where Brian would stay home and compose songs the band would perform without him on the road - pressure was bought to bear on the band to step up and start writing. "Julia Dream" is occasionally mocked for being an obvious attempt to imitate Syd's style. Likewise "Point Me At The Sky" (a song I think is really cool but apparently not that successful commercially). Some fans swear there's a whispered "sssSyd" at the end of "Julia Dream." I think that this accounts for the transitional period with lots and lots of instrumentals but little lyrics of consequence until DSOTM came along. Sometimes they'd stumble on something for the vocals to do, like "Nile Song," but it's nothing to build a big fan base on... as with most bands, either you like their flavor of filler or you don't.

AF: Okay. The back and forth between Floyd and the Beatles is certainly interesting. If Floyd have an advantage to me, it's because their albums sustain a cohesive mood, while most of the Beatles records are all over the place, mood wise. Paul McCartney has talked extensively about his adventures in Swinging London among the avant-garde cognescenti, and the result we hear in a track like "A Day in the Life" is striking, and influenced by some of the then au current names you mentioned. Here's a twist, though: why did the media react to the Beatles like they were prophets and seers, and (then and now) pay very little attention to Floyd? The Beatles were "personalities," while the Floyd guys seemed to seek to be faceless. It would be funny, if a bit daffy, to think of Syd-era Floyd on the Ed Sullivan Show, or of the early Floyd doing a movie like A Hard Day's Night, but it didn't happen that way. Could it have been the middle-class maturity of not wanting the crass aspects of "show biz" to accrue to their work? On the other hand, John Lennon (the only Beatle who grew up solidly middle class) was very vehement about schematizing himself as an artist in later interviews, just as it would be easy to think young Syd or Roger Waters does. And the Beatles are a strange phenomenon simply because they became so powerful and influential to the whole of Western society, just for being rock musicians. Floyd's power doesn't seem to work politically, i.e. they're not on any left-wing frontlines the way Lennon was in the 70s, but if there's something political about The Wall, it's in the way it implicates society for crushing individuality out of innocent individuals, both directly (teachers) and indirectly (a war that kills one's father).

Which brings me to the next issue I thought it would interesting to cover: The Wall. I saw the movie about a month ago, and I found it intermittently gripping. The cartoon stuff, I thought, was a bore and a waste of time. But again, I can't hear those songs, as

trenchantly written as some of them are, and not miss the musicality of Rick Wright that's gone from the record. There's a gracefulness to Wright's Floyd stuff that morphs into something crass and gauche without him in the mix. Do you agree?

MS: Very much agree that Wright's influence is audibly missing in the THE WALL. Interestingly, the tours for TW involved use of a "click track" to keep the band in sync with the stage show...almost all chances for improv were frozen out by now. Old friends of the band (Peter Jenner, Joe Boyd among others) really felt TW was a Roger Waters album. THE WALL seems so much a scream of frustration, and yet at the same time it's oppressive and over-controlling, both as a recording and as a theatrical production and movie. I've gone back and forth on it over the years; mostly, I think it's a great piece of work that I don't particularly need to hear any given year. It definitely doesn't breathe, sonically, and once could argue that's either the cause or the effect of Roger's freezing Rick Wright out of the band. More on THE WALL at the end of this chuck of gabble.

It's interesting that there was very little marketing of personality with the band after Syd left - their faces rarely even popped up in the cover art, except for UMMAGUMMA and a promotional "newspaper"/program done up for some shows. Members of the band could actually wander about before shows and rarely be recognized - compare that to the lack of privacy experienced by the Beatles. I'd prefer the Floyd approach myself if forced with the choice.

I think the facelessness works with the abstract & spacey aura; compare to my point about later Floyd being much more controlled and insistent on message, whereas the mid-period music works better as wallpaper for one's own thoughts. Somewhere around here we'll find the line Floyd crossed that makes some count them as "prog rock" and the Beatles not "prog rock." Floyd's big, abstract, instrumental compositions and moody instrumentals aren't "songs" properly, and the Beatles mostly did songs. Mostly...the Beatles did some of everything, after all.

Floyd in the media game...Syd did not do well playing the TV game. When Floyd did successive TOP OF THE POPS appearances one year, Barrett apparently had little patience for the lip-synching required. It's noticed that his Carnaby-street finery degenerates from show to show; at the final appearance it's soiled, stained and ragged. On the Syd-era Floyd's US tour, they popped up on a TV show, can't remember on the top of my head - American Bandstand? - and Syd wouldn't talk and leveled a dead-eyed stare in response to the typical dopey questions asked by the host. It's my opinion that the media frenzy of a Beatlemania would've destroyed him even more quickly than his eventual fate as it occurred. In fact, I'd bet it was the aftermath of that experience that disinclined the Floyds from pursuing mass-media-personality status.

There was probably an embrace of counter-cultural values involved. The Beatles were too big; they belonged to everyone, and started out as purveyors of pop who became experimentalists. Pink Floyd started out (after initial scuffles - ever head the EMI acetates

of "Queen Bee" and "Leave Lucy?" Of academic interest mostly) as the house band of the cultural underground. You could say the Beatles started commercial and bought in to the counter-culture - they weren't faced with tensions of selling out until well down the line. Floyd as an organization, until DSOTM, constantly danced a line to avoid being labeled as sell-outs, whatever the life-styles and pursuits of the individual members. They did an ad for a French soft drink which created a bit of a flap among their fans and the British rock press for a bit; I think they had to turn around and donate their fee to charity or something, "and we never did drink the damn stuff anyway," Gilmour groused after the fact. DOTSM was the moment where, like the Beatles, they became too big to be counter-anything.

Roger Waters was the most politically engaged Floyd - very active with left wing causes, especially the nuclear disarmament movement. You see echoes of this in the movie of THE WALL. His first wife was a committed neo-Marxist. I think the second was more of a socialist; maybe I'm getting them confused. Nick Mason and Rick Wright both dove cheerfully into their roles as wealthy playboys and tax exiles. Gilmour enjoys work too much to lose himself in than, apparently. Consequently, he was the only member of the band to fight for his role in the teeth of Roger's control-freak-ness.

As a band, Floyd's political stance came more from their origins than their art, except for the anti-commercial art-for-art's-sake stance they settled on in their middle period. There are definitely political aspects to DSOTM, ANIMALS, and THE WALL; not quite so much WISH YOU WERE HERE unless you interpret the critique of the music industry as political - one could, fairly, I suppose. ANIMALS would be their most explicitly political album. But Roger's lyrical pessimism is very de-powering, isn't it? You're basically fucked and trapped by The System.

It's interesting to consider the interplay of Pink Floyd and the English punk movement:

- leftover drop-out political types joined or followed many of the punks. John Lydon could tolerate Hawkwind - aggressive psychedelic guys who followed in Floyd's footsteps and emerged from the same scene - and was a pot-smokin' fan of Kraut-rock bands like Can as a young guy; both his and Sid Vicious' mothers were hippies. Incidentally, when told that Johnny Rotten was recruited into the Pistols in part due to his t-shirt, an old Pink Floyd shirt to which he'd added in marker "I HATE...", Nick Mason chuckled that he'd not have gotten as much mileage from an "I HATE YES" shirt. In interviews, many of the Floyds expressed support for the impulses of the punk movement that often reviled them; they were canny enough at least to see it was much less of a new revolution than it was being advertised as.

- ANIMALS is sometimes considered Pink Floyd's "response" to punk. Many of the new

generation of British rock writers hailed it as a sign of life and conscience on the part of old hippies...it was surprisingly well received at the time. Musically it's pretty aggressive compared to DSOTM or WYWH.

- Nick Mason produced the first album by The Damned and I think he dabbled in some other punk group production as well (Meanwhile, Gilmour had helped Kate Bush get her start). BTW as good a place as any to mention the many, many ways "Arnold Layne" was re-worked by various punks. I'm thinking specifically of "Grimly Fiendish' by The Damned, but I know there's a couple of other instances of old Arnold being re-tooled for the new era. Madness, the ska-punks from East London, had a song on similar themes - less cross-dressing, more panty-sniffing on the part of the protagonist. Is it Floyd influence, or is it just some aspect of British culture in general? Don't ask me...

- Syd's cult expanded among fans of bands like The Television Personalities ("I Know Where Syd Barrett Lives") and Barrett and early Floyd numbers were covered by various second-wave punks. It was easier to like Barrett as he went away early and didn't get rich and "sell out."

Re: THE WALL/ TW movie

I think the movie's quite successful. Frankly, it buries TOMMY (to think of one example). Father going off to the war...a part of TOMMY and also The Who's earlier (and for me, better) opus "A Quick One While He's Away." XTC masquerading as The Dukes Of Stratosphere have "(You're A Good Man) Albert Brown" which talks about it some. I suspect we could find a few other examples, but Pete Townshend's the main one that springs to mind. I don't think The Kinks did so much with it. I'm not sure, but The Pretty Thing's SF SORROW concept album might deal with that theme to some extent. I might be mistaken; I haven't heard the whole piece.

TW's over-produced aspects, influence of / lack of Rick Wright, see paragraph at top. Incidentally, consider that THE WALL has the most danceable Pink Floyd ever - Gilmour produces disco and funk sounds all across the album. And disco and late 70's (white) funk is a very controlled, produced style of music. "Brick In The Wall pt 2" sounds like a Niles Rodgers/Chic production, or like the stuff the BeeGees did for SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER. Tight, baby.

AF: The last thing I want to investigate is Pink Floyd’s place in rock music history. Writers who deal with rock music tend to think in clusters: British Invasion (Beatles, Stones, Kinks, Who), punk (Pistols, Clash), and so forth. Pink Floyd remain sui generis for a number of reasons: their mystique is all about the albums and not the personalities, their music changed several times in a more substantial fashion than other big-name rock acts, their middle-class stance could be perceived as distant, calculating, and pretentious by a business populated at the top by those from working-class backgrounds, and (besides Syd) they weren’t big on debauchery (an extension of rock stars acting out their flamboyant “personalities” like Keith Moon or, in the 90s, the Gallagher brothers). No one seems to put Roger Waters in the grouping of the “big songwriters” with Neil, Bruce,

Bob, Van, Joni, Lou, etc, nor did they give rise to an army the way the Cure and Led Zeppelin did. To make a long story short, Pink Floyd and their legacy remain amorphous.

What key points would help carve an apropos place for them?

MS: I question the phrase "middle-class stance"; should be "bourgeois" to be more precise. Floyd were definitely exemplars of art for art's sake, making the least concession to traditional consumer models of the music industry while still raking in the cash for their live performances during the lower-profile middle period. Interesting that they managed to stay together for a long time compared to most of their peers. I think on could argue the band dissolved at any given point from THE WALL onwards. I'd argue that they were still Pink Floyd as much as the Rolling Stones are anything (for example) all the way through DIVISION BELL. But I wouldn't argue strongly.

Floyd's biggest musical legacy tended to be on the Continent via the Krautrock bands. In a sense, i guess, until DSOTM onwards, they were the biggest cult band in the world, although some would argue that for the Kinks as well. I don't know what to make of the Radiohead phenomena in regards to all this, but I'd be open to the idea that Radiohead followed a similar career path only guided by knowledge of history: early Pop success followed by a move to more abstract sounds in the teeth of conventional industry wisdom, finding continued success there despite not playing the established Brit music industry game. The primary difference to me is that Radiohead came up via the usual Britpop channels, whereas Floyd emerged from the underground. It's easy to forget, but, Syd's pop success aside, they started from the most commercial, idealistic scene in 60's London, and clung to those ideas for a surprisingly long time. They're too big to summarize neatly. Some people love Syd and the myth of the lost mad genius. Some people love them for their space/ambient rock, and the larger part of their audience know them mostly from their hugely successful concept albums. It's similar to the way many Rolling Stones or Bruce Springsteen fans hate the larger part of the Rolling Stones/Springsteen fandom.

Occupy and American Spiritualism

As the Bush regime progressed, during the Aughts, towards decimating the material resources of America and the rest of the West, many young, educated American liberals like myself were hung out to dry by the sense that we weren't doing anything about the situation. What could we do? Those born, as I was, during the 1970s, have neither guns nor numbers with which to pick up any availabe cudgel, to achieve any ambitious political goal. That's why, with 2011 and the advent of the Occupy movements, I and many of my ilk were heartened by the idea that symbolic political acts could still be a potent force in American culture. What I want to argue, however, is abstruse- not necessarily that the Occupy movements were politically efficacious in their time, but that, over a long expanse of time, they will be perceived as historically efficacious as a manifestation of American spiritualism. By "spiritualism," I mean this: the willingness of a mass of Americans to enact something simultaneously whose motivation (direct, in this case) is not solidly material but at least partly spiritual. The subtext of the Occupy demonstrations is plain- that a surfeit of material wealth in the hands of the few against the many is causing massive entropic damage to the infrastructure of American society. However, the Occupy protestors were acting in such a way that few direct concrete changes were being brokered- the protest was meant to be symbolic.

The most obvious level of Occupy symbolism would be a materialist's objection to Occupy- that the Occupy symbol was ineffectual in instigating fruitful political conflict and change. But what the world at large, and the history books will note, is that the liquidation of material assets in the Aughts failed to kill off the spirituality built into American idealism. It must be noted that effectuality is difficult to come by in American politics if not backed by ample funds. It's also the case, in 2011/12, that American political machinery is in an extreme state of disrepair, so that even ample funds (for lobbyists, etc) don't guarantee efficaciousness. On a more personal note, I have to confess that I did not take part in the Philly Occupy movement. During the monthg when protestors were camped out at City Hall, I interrogated myself as to why this should be. The excuses for me piled up thick and fast- on the banal side, I don't have a tent and camping equipment; on the social side, no one I knew was a direct participant, though many I knew supported the Occupy movements. What it led me back to was a thought that might or might not suffice as a mere rationalization- that by making a choice to live as an artist in American society, I was demonstrating willingness to make a stand against crass materialism. So my satisfaction with the Occupy movements was tinged with disappointment at not being able to participate.

This, now, is 2012, and we have a presidential election on our hands. It's fair to wager that the Republican candidate won't take any notice of Occupy; Obama, if he's smart, must. Occupy wasn't completely necessarily anti-government- the beauty and bane of the gesture was its broad vagueness. If the presidential election seems, in its opening stages, like an anti-climax, it's because too many millions of Americans are dying off for lack of material

resources. For many, the Occupy gesture was a last stand- a way of setting in place and consolidating a sense of meaning, purpose, and idealism into lives too bitten-into to recover. Occupy was, in many ways, like a work of art. The judgment of serious minds on Occupy depends on to what degree symbolic acts can be accepted as significant. The intellectual

environment of the American academy at the moment is heavily steeped in Marx-derived materialism- the idea that material effectuality is the best criterion of intellectual worth. But 2012 is forcing intellectuals into a contorted position because material circumstances are degenerating, and to afffect material change seems like an impossibility. The spiritual is forcing its way to the surface and provoking a confrontation. Spiritualism is a tortured ethos for materialists to swallow- too light, too evanescent. But what if there are no other options? What if it comes down to "spiritualized" action or non-action? Some remnant of idealism (a more pragmatic cousin to spiritualism) somewhere on the American landscape may be the only victory we can hope to achieve in 2012; and it would be a substantial one.

Credits

Adam Fieled's Fair Game— "Rock Wax: On Pink Floyd (Adam Fieled and Matt Stevenson)

The Argotist— "Composite Ideologies: Europe, America, and the Internet"

As/Is— "Learning from Bukowski," "The Future of the Novel in the Twenty-First Century," "Political Algoriths"

Cordite— "Contextualists and Dissidents: Talking Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons"

Pressure Press— "Occupy and American Spiritualism"

Tears in the Fence— "Waxing Hot: Steve Halle, Robert Archambeau, Barry Schwabsky"