# Lyric as Comedy

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Abstract

Although the twentieth-century lyric poem might seem to intensify a genre of sentiment into a genre of meditative or tumultuous solipsism, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, A. R. Ammons, Lucie Brock-Broido, and Terrance Hayes write lyrics that are funny, on several planes. Each of these poets enacts a self-revealing comedy of the mind and its often labored, blinkered, or illogical cognitive processes; each also creates a comedy of style, where language and form exceed and confound paraphrase. This thesis brings out such comedies, arguing that lyric is a livelier, more paradoxical, and certainly less solipsistic genre than is yet recognized. While most theories of the comic emphasize superiority, incongruity, or subversion, lyric poetry suggests that comedy originates in something miraculously apt and failed, at once: the comedy of lyric springs from deflected, or misdirected, perfection, and from the miraculous achievement of a less-than-sublime end.

Berryman, who sets formal wildness in a fixed stanza, provides an opening instance of how comedy balances between the decidedly flawed and the marvelous. Lowell's incongruities, which undermine every quality that threatens to dominate a poem, surprise by the unlooked-for harmonies they produce. Ammons turns his concerns about inarticulate failing into a comedy of ineptness, enacting the workings of an inconsistent mind with precision. Brock-Broido's humor appears as utter doubleness, requiring that we see the beautiful and the ludicrous together; her comedy does not extinguish her Romantic postures, but suffuses them. Hayes enacts the luck of the erratic, associative mind, as it takes in, is altered by, and transforms its surroundings: disparate styles, tones, devices, and allusions come together to convey something beyond their semantic point.

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A version of Chapter One (""There ought to be a law': The Unruly Comedy of *The Dream Songs*") is forthcoming from *Modern Philology*, © 2016 by The University of Chicago.

# INTRODUCTION

On Halloween evening in 1963, when Robert Lowell had finished his half of a poetry reading at the Guggenheim Museum, John Berryman went to the podium. He began by trying to tell a joke; after a meandering exposition, he stumbled over its ending, and finally concluded: "Well I think we can easily work out, since we are not here in the Yale Graduate School of Theory of Diction, a joke's very much like a poem and vice versa" (Academy of American Poets reading).

The most conspicuous note in that assertion is brisk irreverence. Berryman enjoys knocking together the prevailing images of comedy and poetry, which suggest little kinship. We tend to think of comedy as social, loud, heartless, and often rather puerile; poetry, on the other hand, is regarded as private, subtle, emotional, and generally lofty. Comedy, to Henri Bergson, "demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (5); poetry as defined by Wordsworth "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (611). The comedian needs "the audience" above all else, according to Eric Bentley (232); poetry, for John Stuart Mill, "is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (348). But when such disparate realms are brought together, our conceptions of both might be expanded.

I focus here on recent poetic comedy, from about 1945 to 2015. My particular object is the recent *lyric* poem—a poem that represents the activity of an inner life through thoroughly compounded, interlocking, associative structures.[1] After a survey of our current comic theories, an essential component to comedy emerges: wonder, arising from a perception that the perfect and the off-kilter exist simultaneously. The modern lyric displays this aesthetic dimension on several levels,

[1] To avoid some monotony, I will use the word *poem* as a synonym for *lyric* (but here *poem* does not encompass, e.g., primarily epic or narrative; nor does it encompass mnemonic rhymes, the experiments of Flarf, or the work of the conceptual writer Kenneth Goldsmith).

ranging from the superficial (but helpfully evident) to the innate and central. From an external perspective—as parodied in novels, plays, and other genres less manifestly bound up with flawlessness—the lyric offers a slow-motion view of how a reputation for beauty, loftiness, or emotion can elicit comic failure: what D. B. Wyndham Lewis called "good bad verse" (*viii*). But even within the ambitious, serious modern lyric, failures of decorum and of register rebound into comedy. Here the workings are more complicated than pure subversion: while poems call attention to indecorousness, excess, laxity, and other flaws and inconsistencies, these characteristics, in turn, create poems of startling brilliance and accuracy. Lyric shows comedy springing from a synergy of wayward, unpromising, or unlikely elements.[2]

And of what significance is comedy to lyric? As we will see, comedy draws attention away from the self, and complicates that self's view of its predicaments and of the broader world. Simultaneously, comedy radiates outward: within lyric, the silent laughter it encourages gives rise to moments of inexplicable delight, offering an image of the lyric that does not simply stop with silent apostrophe from one ego onto the world.

**1. Our current comic theories**

Our most influential notions of comedy's origins circle around the perception of something off-kilter. The word *off* encompasses anything not quite right, whether originating in something laughably bad or laughably strange.[3] One of two major lines of thinking locates the source of

[2] As Freud suggests, "We have only to study the peculiarity of [a certain joke's] form of expression to grasp what may be termed [its] verbal or expressive technique … something which must stand in an intimate relation with the essence of the joke, since, if it is replaced by something else, the character and effect of the joke disappear" (16). Replace "joke" with *poem*, and one point implied by Berryman's comparison becomes visible.

[3] See, e.g., OED *off* 1g: "In bad condition; wrong, abnormal, odd" (as of ill health, spoiled food, or aberrant behavior) and 5b. "Distant or remote in fact, nature, character, feeling, thought, etc.; far from what is true, accurate, or likely to be the case."

comedy in the clumsiness and defects of others; the other finds it in absurdity, and incongruity.[4] Of course, such a division immediately invites resistance: these two categories are necessarily crude units into which many differing notions have been compressed. Mary Beard ends her overview of these theories by reiterating that such terminology "is dangerously oversimplifying and encourages us to shoehorn long, complicated, nuanced, and not always consistent arguments into its tidy but rigid framework" (40). Her wariness of reducing Kierkegaard and Kant to short quotations grouped under one-word labels is justified: many of these disparate arguments cross categories. They tend, however, to confirm similar emphases.

Our earliest idea of comedy located its origins in a sense of superiority, where laughter derides and corrects misbehavior. To Aristotle, comedy is "a mimesis of baser but not wholly vicious characters," and "the laughable is one category of the shameful" (45).[5] Thomas Hobbes explains the satisfaction that comes from such spectacles: laughter "is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (54-55). Roger Scruton hears that scornful note in laughter: "If people dislike being laughed at it is surely because laughter de-values its object in the subject's eyes … Amusement may thus be described as a kind of 'attentive demolition'" (208-09). This sort of comedy stems from pride in ourselves as compared to some inferior other. It can be

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[4] The relief theory—where laughter is caused by a release of nervous energy—is often listed as the third of our major ideas of comedy. It is articulated in Herbert Spencer's "On the Physiology of Laughter" (1911) and Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), and it will be relevant to this study—in particular, in its emphasis on the pleasure of surprising economy (see, for instance, the unlikely aesthetic satisfaction provoked by a site like "Things Fitting Perfectly Into Things," where the rim of a lampshade wedges precisely into a bundt pan). The theory of relief, however, remains somewhat more restricted than that of superiority or incongruity. For further explorations of each of these three concepts, see Mary Beard's *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, Andrew Stott's *Comedy* (Routledge, 2005), and Alenka Zupančič's *The Odd One In.*

[5] Sir Philip Sidney echoes that idea: "Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one" (117).

seen in the characters squabbling on Greek vases from 400 BCE, in *Volpone,* and in the ineffective violence and bad haircuts of the Three Stooges—and in countless viral videos of Dogs Who Can't Climb Stairs. It is alive today in theories that draw the comic from a moral element; its most significant recent articulation is Henri Bergson's contention that we are biologically and socially disposed to shame people out of being inflexible. Any moment where habit or abstraction takes over—where one ceases to be alert to the lively world surrounding one—is a moment left open to walking into a door, or failing to notice the stain on one's shirt before leaving the house.

The theory that has become especially prominent in the twentieth century, and more central to our comic experience, is that of incongruity: of surprising inconsistencies and clashes. "The essence of the laughable … is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another," says Hazlitt (5); disparate concepts or feelings, yoked together, throw the mind off its guard. Kant defines the comic along similar lines: "Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh" (161). Here surprise and oddity are the source of the comic: today it can be seen in the hybrid creatures dancing in the margins of medieval manuscripts, in the Marx Brothers' non sequiturs, in Monty Python's Flying Circus, and in puns or rhymes that pull together disparate meanings through a single sound. The theory of incongruity can also encompass matter that jars not only intellect but also emotion. According to Luigi Pirandello, "Every feeling, thought, and idea which arises in the humorist splits itself into contraries. Each yes splits itself into a no, which assumes at the end the same value as the yes" (47).

The theory of incongruity has been very productive, generating a wide range of variations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Arthur Koestler draws on it when he finds comedy in "the

discovery of hidden similarities" (27).[6] Fred Robinson stresses the idea of incongruity in his study of "the paradoxical relationship between form and formlessness, immobility and flux, what the intellect perceives about reality and what the intuition can evoke about reality" (16). Alenka Zupančič, in one of the most interesting recent guides to the comic, sums up many other arguments that emphasize "two different (often directly opposed) levels or experiences":

> High-low, soul-body, mind-matter, artificial-natural, spirit-letter, human-animal, divine-human, ideals-reality, spontaneity-habit, culture-vulgarity, high aims-low needs … to name at random a few of these couples that appear frequently. The descriptions of the relationship in which comedy puts these two elements are also rather similar: one element … gets its breakthrough to the detriment of the other element, previously dominating or "usurping" the whole picture. Or, to put it in even more general terms: two elements which, because of their opposing tendencies and connotations, exclude each other (that is, exist in the mode of either/or, or as the other side of each other), are being posited on the same level, within the same horizon. (111-12)

But despite the generative power of incongruity, difficulties and uncertainties remain. Not all incongruities are comic; ruins, for example—spaces meant for people, now completely devoid of people—are not usually funny. Alexander Bain, writing of the "ludicrous" in his 1859 treatise *The Emotions and the Will*, lays out this difficulty:

> There are many incongruities that may produce anything but a laugh. A decrepit man under a heavy burden, five loaves and two fishes among a multitude, and all unfitness and gross disproportion; an instrument out of tune, a fly in ointment, snow in May, Archimedes studying geometry in a siege, and all discordant things; a wolf in sheep's clothing, a breach of bargain, and falsehood in general; … are all incongruous, but they cause feelings of pain, anger, sadness, loathing, rather than mirth. (247-48)

The hodgepodge nature of Bain's list does lend itself, here and there, to the comedy of incongruity he has reservations about: to list 'a fly in ointment' so near Archimedes studying 'in a siege' and the

[6] Koestler's idea of "bisociation" locates "three domains of creativity which shade into each other without sharp boundaries: Humour, Discovery, and Art" (27); the logic *behind* the emotion is the same for each of these events—the perception of a hidden similarity—but "the emotional climate is different in the three panels: the comic simile has a touch of aggressiveness" (27).

cliché of 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' is to remind us how often the incongruous does indeed give rise to the comic. But his broader point—that incongruity itself is not a reliable generator of comedy—holds. Bain's images of the "decrepit man under a heavy burden" and of human failure also challenge the superiority theory: we do not laugh at all these images of weakness. If we see someone laughing at them, we tend to find it cruel—the laughter of what Auden called "human swine" (371). As many people have pointed out, we do not always laugh at human failure, or sheer oddity: these qualities can as often cause feelings of pain, unease, or bafflement.

Moreover, it is not always clear why something even *innocuously* bad or strange should lead to a feeling of pleasure. This link is a particular problem for the incongruity theory; superiority theorists can explain the joy of laughter somewhat more readily. For those who argue that laughter comes from instantaneous self-comparison and self-congratulation, joy arises from the perception that one is, at least, considerably more modest than a baboon, or more perceptive than a blinkered charlatan from Dickens. Even Hobbes unites laughter with joy—it "is always joy" (64). Darwin, who dwells at length on laughter's roots in pleasure, is helpful here; he reiterates the centrality of enjoyment: "We may confidently believe that laughter, as a sign of pleasure or enjoyment, was practiced by our progenitors long before they deserved to be called human; for very many kinds of monkeys, when pleased, utter a reiterated sound, clearly analogous to our laughter" (362). For Darwin, pleasure and delight run through a scale, where laughter is strongly related to smiling: "Laughter seems primarily to be the expression of mere joy or happiness. We clearly see this in children at play, who are almost incessantly laughing. With young persons past childhood, when they are in high spirits, there is always much meaningless laughter. … A man smiles—and smiling, as we shall see, graduates into laughter—at meeting an old friend in the street, as he does at any trifling pleasure, such as smelling a sweet perfume" (98). But the connection between this delight and our comic theories remains

slightly unclear; after a cursory glance at laughter's potential foundations, one might ask: why is comedy pleasing?

**2. Another view of comedy: "flawless shambles" and delighted wonder**

In Article 125 of *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes seems to anticipate Darwin's focus on joy; he writes, however, that joy itself is not enough to cause laughter:

> Now although Laughter might seem to be one of the principal signs of Joy, the latter can nevertheless cause the former only when [joy] is merely moderate and when there is some wonder or hatred mingled with it. For we find by experience that when we are extraordinarily joyful the subject of that joy never makes us break into laughter, and we cannot even be incited to it by some other cause so easily as when we are sad. (85)

Descartes is usually grouped with Hobbes as a supporter of the superiority theory, on the basis of Articles 178-181. His praise of "moderate Bantering, which constructively admonishes vices by making them appear ridiculous" (117), is in line with those of other theories that correct, such as Aristotle's or Bergson's. But Article 125 holds alongside with "hatred" (*haine*) another emotion: "wonder" (*l'admiration*). For Descartes, wonder is the first of the passions; but that passion has been taken for granted or disregarded. As Philip Fisher has suggested, wonder is "the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity" (2), having been supplanted or overshadowed by concepts such as the grotesque and the sublime. In the realm of comic theory this neglect certainly holds true, especially as the incongruity-theory has gained strength in recent years.

If we return the ingredient of wonder to comic theory, a connection appears that explains some of the pleasure we find in laughter. As the preceding pages have suggested, our present theories center on a sense of something flawed, absurd, excessive, incomplete, erratic, pointless, or jarring—something off-kilter. This study does not seek to downplay or dismiss those qualities; the comic may certainly startle with its oddity, or appeal to our capacity for *schadenfreude*. Animus, in

Frost's mischievous and malicious sense of the word, should not be washed out of our comic theory.[7] But the sensation of the comic also involves wonder, though that wonder can be so muted as to barely register, or may be only a particle of admiration within other emotions.

This delighted wonder arises when one encounters a moment where everyday life gathers itself up and swerves from regularity into coincidence: an instant that exposes a sense of the perfect balancing with the imperfect. While an aberration or flaw is necessary to comedy, it needs the friction of an opposite element, and that opposite ingredient has been overlooked. The moment of comedy seems as right or perfect as it is incongruous. It seems more than the sum of its parts; we have a sense that it could not have happened otherwise; paradoxically, the strange or inept turns out to be perfect, in its way.

The films of Buster Keaton offer one face of the harmony suddenly arising from dissonance. In *Steamboat Bill, Jr.,* for example, Keaton's character—in the wake of a concussion—escapes from bed to wander around town, during a ferocious storm. As he pauses in the street, rubbing the back of his head, the front side of a two-floor house detaches itself from its building, and falls precisely around him, with the opening of one tiny window framing his feet. We laugh not simply at Keaton's obliviousness or bad luck, nor at how bizarre this accident is, but at its amazing convergence: at how the upright little human and the enormous, flattened house work together geometrically. So too in a short where Keaton and his fiancée put together a house from an assemble-by-number kit: we laugh because the misaligned house is not just terrible, it is consummately terrible. That sense of disastrous perfection is intensified when a train barrels right through the middle and converts the wildly

[7] Frost compares the feeling of poetic inspiration to "when you feel a joke coming," and conflates that sensation with animus: "You see somebody coming down the street that you're accustomed to abuse, and you feel it rising in you" (*Paris Review*). Terrance Hayes, in an interview with Charles Henry Rowell, admits that "Most of the invention in [his first book] began with a simple desire to challenge, sometimes impress, and mostly *piss off* the people sitting in [his graduate workshops]" (1075-76, my italics).

crooked house back to a rubble of its individual pieces. These moments are both catastrophic and miraculous.[8]

In other words, comedy requires the perception of something as *right* as it is off: the moment of comedy is marvelous in a way that resists logical explanation. The elements somehow click together, and proliferate. The comic involves a feeling of singularity: that a moment has "selved" itself like a creature seen by Hopkins. This sort of marvel is present even amid malice or derision; it is a sensation located near Fisher's description of wonder as "an aesthetic response of delight, a feeling of seeing the impossible happen" (4). Unforced laughter—including laughter from slapstick or vulgarity—needs this germ of the impossible, whether it comes from the physical feats of Buster Keaton or of what Geoffrey Hill calls the "flawless shambles" of Laurel and Hardy (57), the verbal feats of Alexander Pope or of a presidential candidate. Often it takes the form of misdirected perfection: something both risible and miraculous, something tremendous resulting in a mildly unlucky or embarrassing end.

My emphasis on the incongruously and dazzlingly perfect is not intended to defang comedy, or to render it saccharine. As Fred Robinson has declared, the comic must involve emotions from two sides of the spectrum: "Without joy, comedy tends toward the satiric, the corrosive. Without sufficient irony, comedy tends toward romantic affirmation. In either case the comic spirit and the comic range diminish" (23). But the joy Robinson identifies in comedy (and the delighted wonder my study will concentrate on) has been less fully analyzed than its corrosive opposite.

This reinstating of wonder and delight seeks to confirm that doubleness is central to

[8] When Keaton, chased by the police in *Three Ages*, jumps off the top of one apartment to reach another several yards away, his inevitable plummet downwards is funny not only because it is unsuccessful, but because it is visually perfect. His horizontal leap is enormous, but just as his hands brush the edge of the facing roof, he drops vertically; the sense of uncanny geometrical precision continues as he descends through the window awnings of three separate floors.

comedy, as the incongruity-theory would suggest. But whereas the incongruity-theory springs from the perception of a contradiction—any of the "high-low, soul-body, mind-matter, artificial-natural" combinations that Zupančič lists—, we might locate that incongruity at a slightly deeper level: the incongruity at the heart of comedy is one of oddness itself and rightness, at once. Rather than arising from an incongruity of two disparate objects, feelings, styles, or concepts, comedy lies in the infinite loop of imaginative paradox caused between incongruity and *its* opposite: a sense of seeming perfection. Alexander Bain's skepticism might be addressed by suggesting that comedy arises not simply from incongruities, but from how the underlying incongruity and rightness interact.

This proposal is also quite close to, and to some extent affirms, a relatively recent argument known as the incongruity-resolution theory. As relayed by John Morreal, this concept involves "the fitting of the apparently anomalous element into some conceptual schema … The pleasure of humor in a mature person, according to this view, is not the enjoyment of incongruity, but the enjoyment of a kind of puzzle-solving" (252). Wordplay demonstrates this idea clearly: in *the alcoholidays*, a coinage relayed by Freud (21), the incongruity of the odd-looking portmanteau resolves when one finds a relation between alcohol and a holiday, and identifies the shared syllable on which the joke pivots.[9] Babies, for instance, laugh when one repeatedly covers and suddenly reveals one's face; they might do so, in the resolution theory, not just out of surprise but through a dawning sense of confirmation: they begin to suspect what's coming, and are thrilled when it does. Marie Swabey, continuing the resolution theory, has argued that comedy emerges from a logic that the incongruity throws into relief: "The perception of a logical incongruity as incapable of truth or reality against the normative

[9] A notion of comedy centered on wonder would add that *the alcoholidays* is funny because its expressiveness is superbly overdetermined: the syllables mashed together are expressive of the way that Christmas eggnog and punch run into New Year's champagne, or the way one may talk when one has taken too much of any inebriant, or the generally rumpled state in which one emerges from holidays. The two nouns—though we have never seen them merged this way—seem to have been destined for each other.

background of a universal relevance … affords the basic satisfaction of the comic perception" (13). That satisfaction Swabey finds in the unexpected reinforcement of the *normative* may address the difficulty we have seen in the incongruity theory, where pleasure seems less inherent: the idea of resolution resembles a compression of a comedy in the theatrical sense, where a crisis that has built up over five acts finally untangles itself and disperses.[10]

But that emphasis on resolution can be so neat as to flatten, or at least reduce, the imaginative proliferation that comedy encourages. While some jokes (especially riddles) do operate like windup toys, delivering an oddity that is then suddenly cleared up, few jokes involve merely an intellectual 'click'; the ends of more resonant jokes do not simply retain but increase their unruly coincidences. A sense of satisfied resolution, which involves making sense of seemingly disparate elements, is not the same thing as delight at deflected perfection, or perfect catastrophe. Comedy is an unruly form of delight—not a logical solving of a puzzle, but a recognition of a thing fortuitously poised between the absurd and the marvelous.[11] Even a successfully lofted cream pie or the machine-fiasco in *Modern Times* involves a sense of wondrous operations.

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[10] In his overview of humor and incongruity, John Lippitt is skeptical of the resolution theory that I have just described: hidden congruities, he finds, "cannot explain humour such as the opening verse of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*" (150), of which he quotes the first stanza. Lippitt contends that "What is amusing about such nonsense verse is precisely our failure to 'resolve the incongruity': try as we might, we cannot make any sense of this poem" (151). But the amusement behind Jabberwocky is more complicated. While each reader's sense of what it means to "gyre and gimble" differs, the words do convey something distinct: two of them, *galumphing* and *chortle*, have been so expressive that they have entered English dictionaries. While Lippitt's claim—that we do not actually resolve the meaning of "Jabberwocky"—is true in one sense, it may lay insufficient emphasis on the lines' fusion of nonsense and expressivity, or wrongness and rightness. We see this highly questionable language as semantically unsound and yet efficient: when Humpty Dumpty defines "slithy" as "lithe and slimy," he explains: "You see it's like a portmanteau, there are two meanings packed up into one word" (215). *Slithy* elicits wonder, like Mary Poppins' carpetbag: it amuses because it works so inimitably while being also vague.

[11] We might say that if one were to unfold a tiny ball of a comic moment, it would spread out into a comedy in the drama's sense of that word, as with the happy ending of *Twelfth Night* or *The Importance of Being Earnest* (retaining the creases and folds of its former crises, mortifications, and confusions).

Zupančič, building on Bergson, argues that the laughter he finds in the clash of the rigid against the flexible *élan vital* is actually still deeper, that what Bergson perceives as undercutting and triumphing over the undesirable, actually depends on that undesirable quality: "In fact, comedy is a constant reversing of the two series: now we laugh at a (physical) slip that undermines dignity, now we laugh at a dignity that strives to control such slips at all costs. We could even say that what is comical is this reversibility as such" (113). She suggests that "the spirit itself comes to life only with the (dead) letter, that vivacity as such emerges only with the repetition, and does not exist outside or prior to it" (125). Zupančič's emphasis on the almost unfathomably two-sided nature of the comic is an idea I echo when suggesting that comedy is caught between wrongness and rightness. One is led to describe the feeling of amusement as "absurdly right," or "miraculously wrong"—these overly paradoxical phrases speak to the glittering paradox that occurs when one is caught in a moment of amused delight. (Laughter is sometimes followed by the exclamation of "that's wonderful," or "that's just perfect."[12])

This comedy of the unexpectedly perfect can be seen in the wonder of revelatory anagrams, such as James Merrill's detection of *stupor* within *Proust*. It can be seen in Joyce's figures for the week: "After suns and moons, dews and wettings, thunders and fires, comes sabotag" (*Finnegans Wake* 409), or "All moanday, tearsday, wailsday, thumpsday, frightday, shatterday till the fear of the Law" (301). Its delight is also heard in Harryette Mullen's forecast of "Slipshod drudge with chance of dingy morning slog" (45), and in the architecture of this long sentence from Samuel Beckett:

> Watt, reflecting on this, heard a little voice say, Mr Knott, having once known a man who was bitten by a dog, in the leg, and having once known another man who was scratched by a

[12] This concept may also explain how some jokes tip over into the unfunny, whether through the passing of time or a change of perspective: once a comparison no longer seems inaccurate *and* apt, it lacks the two ingredients necessary to cause that moment of amusement. While the Three Stooges do not delight as many people now as they did in 1950, the scenes that do are ones choreographed in a way that transcends ordinary physical violence: where one character's dance of pain is perceived as an actual dance by the others, who join in vigorously.

> cat, in the nose, and having once known a fine healthy woman who was butted by a goat, in the loins, and having once known another man who was disembowelled by a bull, in the bowels, and having once frequented a canon who was kicked by a horse, in the crotch, is shy of dogs, and other four-footed friends, about the place, and of his inarticulate bipedal brothers and sisters in God hardly less so, for he once knew a missionary who was trampled to death by an ostrich, in the stomach, and he once knew a priest who, on leaving with a sigh of relief the chapel where he had served mass, with his own hands, to more than a hundred persons, was shat on, from above, by a dove, in the eye. (240-41)

Beckett's sentence, with its pivots and joints, is about as perfect as a sentence can be; at the same time, it is a quivering tower of excess. To take only its last few phrases: our amusement—or at least some part of our amusement—comes from the unbelievable precision of this indignity, an act foreshadowed by the almost causal rhyme of "above" and "dove," and committed by the bird best known for symbolizing the Holy Spirit. The sentence, like Keaton's tumbles and jumps, or the crumbling stanza of Chaucer's Sir Thopas, vibrates between disaster and faultlessness.[13]

As even a glancing appreciation of Beckett's sentence suggests, comedy also stimulates the imagination; the name of the comic muse, Thalia, or Θάλεια, has its roots in 'luxuriant, blooming,' and θάλλειν, 'to bloom' (giving rise to the notion of Thalia as also the muse of *pastoral* poetry [OED]). Faced with something comic, the imagination reacts by enhancing and augmenting it. When Brock-Broido sees "Red grapes, a delicacy, each peeled for us—each sheath / The vestment of a miniature priest, disrobed" (*Stay, Illusion* 12), the metaphor is not simply jarring (though it jars when it condenses a priest into a grape) and profligate (why specify a *miniature* priest?) but startlingly apt.

[13] Countless genres and acts might seem to be excluded from the idea of delighted wonder emphasized in these pages: that of flyting or the Dozens, which disparages; that of the shaggy dog story, which surprises by meaninglessness; that of dirty jokes, which appeal by allowing one to dwell on what one pleases. To borrow Auden's assessment of "Horror Jokes": it may be that some of these genres have "the same relation to the comic as blasphemy has to belief in God, that is to say, [they] impl[y] a knowledge of what is truly comic" (372). But others might affirm this study's interest in the comic as reflective of the perfect. The shaggy dog story, for example, creates a moment of baffled retrospect where each of its pointless details bristles with non-significance: in its way, the story selves itself perfectly, as an incarnation of digression. Friedrich Dürrenmatt takes "the dirty story" to argue that "the comical exists in forming what is formless, in creating order out of chaos" (254). And the Dozens are funny not simply through the act of insult, but by being spontaneously, inventively *good*—whether stunningly accurate or brazenly inaccurate.

Some priests wear such wine-colored robes in certain liturgical seasons; many priests pour the wine of such grapes; the luxury sometimes indicated cartoonishly by peeled grapes is a luxury that priests have been accused of. Sometimes such luxuriating is suggested by grape-like rondure: Chaucer's ornately-dressed monk is "a lord ful fat and in good poynt" [I.200].) Brock-Broido's metaphor, comic because both excessive and unexpectedly fitting, spurs the imagination to branch out on further correspondences. The readings that follow attempt, in part, to document how the moment of off-kilter perfection encourages the viewer to augment its varieties of paradox.

The anonymous *Hymn to Hermes* shows the delighted, marveling laughter I have been describing. Hermes, confronted by Apollo for cattle-stealing, responds by playing the lyre he invented a little while before:

> Upon his left arm he took
> the lyre and with the plectrum struck it tunefully, and under his hand
> it resounded awesomely. And Phoibos Apollon laughed
> for joy as the lovely sound of the divine music
> went through to his heart and sweet longing seized him
> as he listened attentively. (lines 418-23, trans. Athanassakis)

In this account, beauty seems to lead to laughter—it provokes laughter even in Apollo, who had a grievance and was not in a mood to be delighted. The first sounds of lyric, then, produce both joy and laughter, at the "lovely sound" (θεσπέσιος). That early relationship between pleasure and laughter seems to have dissolved, however. Although M. L. Rosenthal has suggested that the "readiest quarry for examples of modern American humor is our most serious and accomplished poetry" ("Volatile Matter" 2), little work has followed that suggestion.

Lyric's comedy calls attention to a deficiency, perhaps a deficiency not limited to English. Our words for how we perceive and react to varyingly comic encounters are located not so much on a spectrum as on an on-off switch, with the only words between *hilarious* and *solemn* being diluted adjectives such as *droll* or *amusing* or *entertaining*. Such adjectives seem weaker versions of these poles,

rather than expressive of different tones and kinds of laughter—and this lack of a more exact terminology is unfortunate. Most of the comedy in our lives exists not in things at which we literally laugh, but in the slighter, more elusive comedy of tones, glances, pauses, and gestures. These glints of comedy are not trivial: they aerate most days. Analyzing only the loudest instances of comedy is the aesthetic equivalent of studying the mating rituals of flamingos and bowerbirds only, while disregarding those of the wren, grebe, or snipe: what it neglects turns out to be equally interesting. It may be at least and possibly more rewarding to look closely at comedy in cases that are not so overdetermined as a carnivalesque novel or television series (the latter, for example, might combine the humor of large-scale plot devices, of individual actors' physiognomies, of the characters played, of dialogue, and visual stunts). In an unpublished essay on movie tempo, William Carlos Williams suggests the need for films "to go slow": "A comedy could be multiplied four or five times by this effect, going back over the ground as many times as necessary until the scene has been fully, fully, fully, fully realized and every drop of juice has been scraped up from the saucer" (122). While few directors have followed Williams's exhortation, the lyric allows us not only to go back over the comic ground again and again, but to isolate and magnify its origins.

**3. Lyric's comic contradiction: the perfect, off-kilter, and expressive**

When Berryman declared, sweepingly, that "a joke's very much like a poem and vice versa," he was flouting the sentimental, idealized terms in which lyric has traditionally been viewed. This view is, of course, a stereotype—and a stereotype that most readers, both general and specialist, recognize immediately as such. Nevertheless, it continues to hover. The word *poetry* itself has been burdened, since at least the 1650s, with the figurative meaning of "Something comparable to poetry in its beauty or emotional impact; a poetic quality of beauty and intensity of emotion" (OED 6a). And for centuries the genre of lyric has been accompanied by a reputation for beauty and intensity; John

Ogilvie, writing in 1769, declared that "the Lyric compositions of the sacred Writers contain all the beauties, of which this species of the Poetic Art is naturally susceptible" (*xli*), which Edward Young echoed by asserting an "*Idea of Perfection* in the Poem" (14). Such descriptions are heard repeatedly, through Romantic critics to Adorno, whose essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" begins by slyly encroaching on "the most delicate, the most fragile thing that exists … when part of the ideal of lyric poetry, at least in its traditional sense, is to remain unaffected by bustle and commotion" (37).

Both halves of Rene Wellek's "typological pair" of authors—"the 'possessed,' i.e., the automatic or obsessive or prophetic poet, and the 'maker,' the writer who is primarily a trained, skillful, responsible craftsman" (79)—have helped to elevate lyric. The exalted emotion requires a vehicle worthy of it; the magnificent form needs a worthy subject: the poem takes on the burden of existing both as a well-wrought urn, and as a prophetic receptacle. Louis de Jaucourt, writing the entry for *Poème lyrique* in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in 1765, binds lyric with feeling, defining it as "a type of poetry totally devoted to sentiment; that's its substance, its essential object" (839). A hundred and fifty years later, the English poet John Drinkwater claims that lyric is "the result of the intensest emotional activity attainable by man focussing itself upon some manifestation of life, and experiencing that manifestation completely … the characteristic of the lyric is that it is the product of the pure poetic energy unassociated with other energies, and that lyric and poetry are synonymous terms" (63-64).

The technical polish and emotional intensity of the lyric have been a rich source of comedy in *other* genres well before the scene where Orlando hangs his bad verse on trees in *As You Like It*—and since that vandalizing, the poem has been targeted more and more. G. Gabrielle Starr, analyzing the position of the lyric poem within the eighteenth-century novel, suggests that lyric "often represents a kind of ideal—of beauty, decorum, communication between hearts—but it is an ideal that calls as loudly for violation as for worship" (125). As she shows, the burlesques in Fielding's

novels violate that ideal. So does *The Pickwick Papers*: "[Mrs. Leo Hunter] dotes on poetry, sir. She adores it; … her whole soul and mind are wound up, and entwined with it. … You may have met with her 'Ode to an Expiring Frog,' sir" (203-04). In *Huckleberry Finn*, Emmeline Grangerford's elegy for young Stephen Dowling Bots is similarly bathetic; in the twentieth century, maudlin poetesses appear in Nabokov's *Pnin* and Kingsley Amis's *The Russian Girl*.[14] See also the discussion of poetry in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where Shanahan declares, "you can get too much of that stuff. Feed yourself up with that tack once and you won't want more for a long time" (72).

As Starr suggests, satirical attempts on the poem seem to be responding, in part, to the sheer idea of the lyric as perfect: placed on a tightrope of proportion and ardor, the poem asks to be brought to the ground. While feeling itself is being mocked (especially any powerful, unironic emotion), so is technique, especially the moments where ordinary English gives way to archaisms, or where meter is padded out with syntactic inversions, or where sense is warped by the need to rhyme. We can see such comic potential, loudly and blasphemously, in the line that Thom Gunn creates to rhyme with Wordsworth's definition of poetry.[15] Novels return again and again to the poem, making it clash with the world outside it. The dealer in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* is "high on his own supply and Alfred Lord Tennyson's brooding lyricism" (37). Longfellow's "Excelsior" was travestied by A. E. Housman (in "The Shades of Night"), and illustrated by James Thurber (in *The Thurber Carnival*).[16]

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[14] The "maudlin Poetess" is from Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, which attacks bad poetry written by all kinds of people; but more broadly, the attack on poetry as sentimental often tends to be about gender, and about keeping women in their place.

[15] "*Spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling*: / Wet dreams, wet dreams, in libraries congealing" (*CP* 449).

[16] Comic badness may have gained momentum alongside Romanticism, with Byron's consciously bumpy meter and far-fetched rhymes; it is stretched further in Edmund Clerihew Bentley's squat quatrains, and Ogden Nash's wobbling rhymed lines. For a related wave of more specific comic badness, see Don Marquis' "archy" poems, where a self-titled "*vers libre* bard" is reincarnated as a cockroach: "expression is the need of my soul," he says, and types uncapitalized, unpunctuated poems by jumping with great effort from key to key (4). The conservative Marquis is mocking what he perceived as the avant garde's rather self-important disregard of conventions; but he is also tinkering with the idea of the Poem with a capital P, the free outpouring of the human voice; it jams up against physical constraints, against bare language.

Because lyric poetry is often viewed as unified, as formally and verbally flawless, any moment that fails to meet that standard is brought out in a way that might escape attention in prose. Paul Fussell offers one reason for this noticeableness: "Every part of a short poem is large, just as every part of a large poem is small. Just one of the occasional, tiny defects of taste in *Paradise Lost* would sink a sonnet" (160).

Allen Grossman has suggested that a poem, "like an example," always misses the mark, in that "an example is always other than what it explains, as a poem is always other than the impossible work that it replaces … Or the poem is like a translation, because translations are always bad translations" (13). According to Grossman, no poem can express fully what its poet wants to express; the language is always inadequate.[17] Ben Lerner, summarizing Grossman's idea of the "virtual poem" and the "actual poem," writes that "the poem is always a record of failure" (*LRB*), making an explicit connection between ideals and comic failure: "To read abysmal poems is often hilarious, but there's an element of idealism mixed into the hilarity: reading the worst poems is a way of feeling, albeit negatively, that echo of poetic possibility." When D. B. Wyndham Lewis introduces *The Stuffed Owl,* his anthology of bad poems, he makes a similar point: loftiness elicits bathos in the inadvertent slide "from the peaks into the abyss" (*x*). Those impossible standards make lyric a rich ground for failure, and for comedy.

But so simple an account only touches the surface of lyric's potential for comedy; and it risks implying that the comedy of lyric is based primarily in subversion, which fails to catch at the resonance of this humor. When lyric fails to live up to its ideals, the comedy that arises seems not

[17] Fred Miller Robinson's study of linguistic comedy makes a similar point: his chapter on Joyce, for example, asserts that "Joyce recognizes from the very start that how we talk about things can be funny because things have a deeper and more forceful life than language can express" (28). Auden, writing about Byron, has made a related point: "Serious poetry requires that the poet treat words as if they were persons, but comic poetry demands that he treat them as things" (399).

only inept, but exactly what that poem needed: the comedy of the lyric depends not merely on the failed poem, but on the failed and therefore beautifully expressive poem. More poems than we have recognized depend on something decidedly imperfect to give them buoyancy. When one of Fussell's "tiny defects of taste" appears, when syntax is awkwardly twisted or padded, when the emotion behind an enjambment "too far exceeds its cause" (in Bishop's phrase [3]), when sound resists or fails to live up to sense, when the indecorousness of the outside world invades a stanza, whenever something sticks out spikily—there a lively comedy is likely to arise.

**4. Lyric's formal workings**

An unlooked-for and unlikely convergence is essential to the comic, whether in an inadvertent faux pas, a fall, a pun, a narrative, or a lyric. In the lyric, comedy emerges from indecorousness, lopsidedness, excess, and other kinds of flaw—and from those flaws emerges a poem that balances precision and excess, logic and swerves from logic, pattern and breakage, stasis and liveliness, calculation and spontaneity. This motion of a poem, in which luck accumulates, is conducive to wonder and delight: Johnson writes that "The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights … Poetry pleases by exhibiting an idea more grateful to the mind than things themselves afford" (*Lives of the Poets* 85). We might take an almost identical description for comedy: it surprises and delights beyond its individual components.

Berryman's impertinent linking of the poem and the joke reminds us that both jokes and poems involve something that cannot be translated or paraphrased. A joke, too, is a well-wrought urn. The final elements of each, whether the punchline or simply the closing line, shape the whole utterance, and settle its ultimate form. Both draw out resonances from language, literal and figurative, that might not be perceived otherwise. That aspect of Coleridge's definition of a poem—"the parts of which mutually support and explain each other" (318)—might equally speak to puns,

riddles, jokes, and a number of verbally comic utterances more broadly. If one significant source of the comic is that of a convergence in disharmony, it can also be located—much earlier—as central to lyric. Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* lays special stress on "the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived" (610). The subdued sense of delighted wonder present when one reads a comic poem comes, to a considerable extent, from the perception that it is more than the sum of its disparate parts, and that its parts combine in more ways than are usually, or should be, possible. This synergy holds true not simply for well-wrought poems that unite lines through traditional patterns (e.g., rhyme and meter), but any arrangement of words so fortunate. The comedy of lyric depends on how words are arranged and directed, what they connote, how they interact with each other on logical or illogical levels; how they jostle and cooperate. It emerges, for example, in moments where pentameter arises from or dissolves into free verse, and from assonance's modulations between the tongue-twister and sonority.

Light verse is one of our most visible forms of comic delight and surprise; see Hilaire Belloc's "The Hippopotamus," from *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*:

> I shoot the Hippopotamus
> With bullets made of platinum,
> Because if I use leaden ones
> His hide is sure to flatten 'em.

What delights here is the expressive flattening of "them" into "'em"; the transmutation of the Latinate "platinum" into the ordinary contraction; and the way that *platinum* and *flatten 'em,* despite their gulf of difference, are extremely close sonic relations. Such verse recalls how the last line of a joke stands what preceded it on its head: expectations are surprised or innuendos confirmed; logic

evaporates in a burst of surprise. Light verse is formed of slow-motion jokes that build with each foot to a punchline, to a rhyme that sums up the comic detonation.[18]

Auden, writing of Dryden's and Pope's satires, says that they presuppose "certain eternal laws of reason and morality," and therefore "the stricter in form their verse, the more artful their technique, the more effective it is" (295). Comedy of form before Modernism, with a few exceptions (such as Chaucer's deteriorating *Tale of Sir Thopas*), tends to depend on a strict form, e.g. Pope's substitutions and normative meter in "Pretty! in Amber to observe the forms / Of hairs, or straws, or dirt, or grubs, or worms." And in the final couplet of Julia's indignant speech in *Don Juan*—"Ungrateful, perjured, barbarous Don Alfonso, / How dare you think your lady would go on so?" (I.146)—Byron plays Latinate and Greek polysyllables against the more mundane Anglo-Saxon words, and binds *go on so* (i.e., commit adultery) with the name of the offended husband.[19]

Light verse continues to use those inevitable yet always surprising elements of rhyme and accentual-syllabic meter, as do the lyrics of show tunes or hip-hop, and some of the poems of Paul Muldoon or Michael Robbins. But the writers I consider here—like most lyric poets writing after 1916—do not use set forms so visibly. While Lowell begins in and returns to meter, an equally significant number of his books are in free verse; the most visible formal constraints that Ammons turns to are visual, not sonic; Brock-Broido writes in units patterned by the stanza, but not usually

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[18] In his essay on *Don Juan* in *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden describes the many possibilities of the ottava rima stanza: the poet can, e.g., "use the couplet as an epigrammatic comment on the [previous six lines], or he can take seven lines for his theme and use the final one as a punch line" (399).

[19] Comic poetry can also be malicious, cruel, or condescending—see Donne's "Elegy VIII: The Comparison," Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," Rochester's "Phillis, be gentler, I advise," and Larkin's "Sunny Prestatyn." But without some element of aesthetic delight that the reader perceives as at least equal to the meanness, these poems would cease to amuse (for certain readers, some of them certainly may already have done so). Pope's couplet—"Cibber! write all thy verses upon glasses, / The only way to save 'em from our arses"—suggests the necessity of aesthetic delight: if one doesn't hear a rhyme, or if one finds it simply a *strained* rhyme rather than superbly fitting one, one probably will not view this imperative as more than a wordy scatological threat.

by audible feet; and although Hayes's poems are sonically elaborate, they rarely tap into the expectation and surprised confirmation of regular end-rhymes. To formally conservative poets and critics, free verse lacks the comic potential of more established forms: "Except perhaps for Billy Collins and a few others," asserts A. M. Juster, "wit is rare in today's free verse, and nobody has written an acclaimed long humorous poem in free verse" (*x*). (Most immediately, such a statement neglects Kenneth Koch's decidedly long humorous poems in free verse, such as the twenty-five pages of "The Art of Love.") The journal *Light*, seeking "funny, well-crafted poems," admits that "Most of the time, this will mean work that rhymes and/or scans—but we are also open to comic free verse."[20]

How can a poem can be funny when deprived of the traditional signs and techniques of comedy? Before 1900, the comedy of the poem tended in several respects to resemble the comedy of the novel: with rhyme and meter on autopilot, it drew on characters, situations, plots, and even slapstick, as in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," *Don Juan*, and *Hudibras*—and in Harry Graham's short, grim fates. Its satirical points are often aimed at others: Chaucer's rooster, Cowper's hare, the bad poets of *The Dunciad*. In the twentieth century, light verse derives much of its comedy from the morose reflections of one's own generally unfortunate personality, an *I*: see Samuel Hoffenstein's "Poems Intended to Incite the Utmost Depression," or Sophie Hannah's *Pessimism for Beginners*. A prosodic reflection of this inward turn is found in Ogden Nash's Procrustean couplets ("I sit in an office at 244 Madison Avenue / And say to myself You have a responsible job, havenue?") and Stevie Smith's lopsided lines ("Yesterday I hittapotamus / I put the measurements down for you but they got lost in the fuss"). Whereas the masterfully varied couplets of Pope or Dryden mock from a

[20] The Submission Manager for *Light*: <https://lightpoetrymagazine.submittable.com/submit/18417>.

superior position, the poems of the last hundred years often enact their writers' own ineptitudes, as we will see at moments in Berryman and Ammons, especially.[21]

**5. Lyric's comic mental drama**

Twentieth-century poetry in its more manifestly ambitious and serious senses has come to focus on a single, erring, malfunctioning mind. This is a comedy of the mind's waywardness, broadly construed. Its wanderings, cul-de-sacs and ruts, its succumbing to a passing mood or fleeting image, emerge in the linguistic interstices and minutiae of the lyric. This poetry can embody instants of forgetting, irresolution, afterthought, detaching from a subject to slip into mechanism, obsession, disorientation, whimsical or nonsensical associations, and other less than central, serial mental processes: for example, how an overheard adverb can stick in the mind and fill sentences constantly until another takes its place. It brings out a mind's unruly multifariousness through a range of poetic strata, enacting its continual self-consciousness, its varying senses of proportion.

Often the surprising delight of this poetry is in its verisimilitude, as it suddenly identifies a mental state never before so distinctly articulated. Berryman describes such a kind of comedy in Shakespeare, quoting a long, rambling speech from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where the clown Launce wanders on stage to bemoan at length the disgraceful behavior of his dog Crab, "the sourest-natured dog that lives" (II.iii). Berryman identifies this comedy as one of "a definite and irresistible *personality*, absorbed in its delicious subject to the exclusion of all else; confused, and engaging" (*Berryman's Shakespeare* 27). It is exactly the kind of comedy exhibited by his own character, Henry; it is seen not only in Lowell's meditation on the flounder, Ammons's page-long speculation on the process of

[21] Auden has said that "If formal verse can be likened to carving, free verse to modeling, then one might say that doggerel verse is like *objet trouvés*—the piece of driftwood that looks like a witch, the stone that has a profile" (294-95).

cutting down Christmas trees, Brock-Broido's glancing at the mushrooms by her walkway and declaring that she would "as soon / Die as serve them in a salad to the man I love," and Hayes's non-hierarchical memories of his childhood, but—more quietly—in the very idea of the lyric poem.

Midcentury popular comedy provides one analogue for this comedy of mental error and felicity; by the decade in which Berryman stood up to tell his joke and read from *77 Dream Songs*, a parallel had emerged between the poet and the comedian. At the beginning of the twentieth century, American popular comedy took place in variety theater and vaudeville: all the jokes are already arranged, many of the characters stock, and the comic routines set. But by the middle of the century, comedy has begun to turn to the solitary standup comedian, who delivers quips, jokes, and one-liners within a more fluid material, consisting of whatever comes into his or her head to say: it is a free-flowing, associative performance, based in personality, inflections, fraught gestures, doubletakes, blank expressions, and significant pauses. Matthew Daube, describing the performance of Mort Sahl, who "engages the audience as silent partners in a comic conversation," identifies this shift: it leads "away from the transposable joke telling of vaudevillian comics, whose material could be delivered by any comedian with the requisite technical skill, to humor contingent on the revelations of the comic's stream of thought" (61).

Daube's depiction of a comic *conversation*, where one speaker's dramatically enacted thought processes draw in the listener, is still more central to lyric. Whereas stage comedies and novels tend to look at the failures and oddities of the human mind from above, or from a distance, lyric homes in on the erring mind. Unlike an audience watching a Tartuffe or Pecksniff undo himself, a solitary, silent reader sees—and imaginatively enters into—the conscious portrayal of flaws. As one becomes better acquainted with the sensibility that speaks, one sees with growing amusement that such oddities and tendencies are part of a single, contradictory individual. We come to know Berryman's most frequently-trodden syntactical paths, the adverbs that Ammons leans on, and the disparate

nouns that Brock-Broido yokes with ampersands. A *Collected Poems* provides a nearly lifelong set of glimpses of a poet's inner life; Lowell can look back and see the "deadpan" humor that amused his younger self, and compare it with the "exaggerating humor" that has become his.

The lyric becomes more comic not only on better acquaintance, but under closer observation. It invites one to magnify the tiny: Fussell's aphorism proposes that "Every part of a short poem is large." While there is no system of standardized notation for representing the layers and sudden sea-changes of thought, or mood, the lyric is the perfect place to capture what Hayes calls our "floundering interiors" (*Wind in a Box* 19). These interiors are full of both reasoning and irrationality, thought and huge jumps in association, as memories jumble with real-time observations of the external world.

In its view of lyric, this study echoes Helen Vendler's emphasis on the inner life: "the purpose of the lyric, as a genre, is to represent an inner life in such a manner that it is assumable by others" (*The Given and the Made* xi). Lyric represents that inner life in great scope and depth: it includes not only rational processes of thinking, but moments of barely thinking at all. Its more unaccountable, peripheral flotsam and jetsam are also present. Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that lyric poetry "presents us with poetic language per se" (2), which exposes the physical, irrational aspects of language, showing meaning tugged and strained along various lines: "poetry ensures a constant alternation or pulse of sense and nonsense" (3)

> Lyric poetry is not mimesis. Above everything else, it is a formal practice that keeps in view the linguistic code and the otherness of the material medium of language to all that humans do with it—refer, represent, express, narrate, imitate, communicate, think, reason, theorize, philosophize. It offers an experience of another kind of order, a system that operates independently of the production of the meaningful discourse that it enables. This is a mechanical system with its own rules, procedures, and history. It works with a kind of logic that is oblivious to discursive logic. (2)

Perhaps, however, the logic of the poem is not oblivious to discursive logic, but interacting with it in a more complicated way. Lyric poetry presents a tension *between* mimesis and formal exuberance; the

several logics of the poem often express, in part, the tensions of the single mind, with its objective correlatives and unreason, its blind spots and sudden perceptions, its justified and unjustified moods, what it holds foremost and what lurks in its periphery.[22]

The opening stanzas of Marianne Moore's "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing" provide one image of this mind: it

> is an enchanted thing
> like the glaze on a
> katydid-wing
> subdivided by sun
> till the nettings are legion.
> Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti;
>
> like the apteryx-awl
> as a beak, or the
> kiwi's rain-shawl
> of haired feathers, the mind
> feeling its way as though blind,
> walks along with its eyes on the ground. (*CP* 134)

Moore's poem, which praises "conscientious inconsistency" and the "confusion" of "unconfusion," sees the mind's iridescent glints of unpredictability as a marvel. But Moore looks with equal attention at the kiwi—the earthbound, lumpy bird more like a mammal. The mind's ability to proceed both at the speed of light and by laborious "feeling its way" recalls Philip Fisher's exploration of what he calls "a poetics of thought": "How we think and what it is that leads us to think about this rather than that are topics within the aesthetics of wonder" (6).

As the remarks above suggest, one of the most important levels of lyric's comedy is that of the erring but serendipitous mind, as in Berryman's self-conscious outbursts, or Brock-Broido's exaggerated Romantic postures. This level of comedy plays with proportion: Ammons's seemingly

[22] Robert von Hallberg's view of poetic language is that "lyric poetry is by definition musical, and that its sounds evoke a sense of justness" (227). That sense of justness, alongside the less-than-discursive logic that Blasing identifies, are two significant components in the comic modern lyric.

indiscriminating swoops from the galaxy to the cereal bowl, or Hayes's recollection, in the space of two pages, of James Brown "in a cape and sweat / Like glitter that glows like little bits of gold" (*How to Be Drawn* 8) and his mother's "punch[ing] clean through the porch window" (9). In such instances, delight arises from not simply from another's error (although these minds can seem, in their particular ways, ridiculous) but from the '*I have seen it'* feeling one experiences upon seeing a fresh description of a familiar object: shortcomings create perfect, living transcriptions. This comedy revels in the ambivalence central to good lyric poems: Pirandello has said that "All the soul's fictions and the creations of feeling are subjects for humor; we will see reflection becoming a little devil which disassembles the machine of each image, of each fantasy created by feeling; it will take it apart to see how it is made; it will unwind its spring, and the whole machine will break convulsively" (47). The comedy of poetry breaks that machine and snaps it back together.

**6. "Coming to terms with our Self": comedy's work within lyric**

Lyric is marked, on one side, by reverence, as in the description offered by E. D. Hirsch's *How to Read a Poem*: "It precedes prose in all languages, all civilisations, and it will last as long as human beings take pleasure in playing with words, in combining the sounds of words in unexpected and illuminating ways, in using words to convey deep feeling and perhaps something even deeper than feeling. The lyric poem immerses us in the original waters of consciousness, in the awareness, the aboriginal nature, of being itself" (288). But for every tribute so appreciatively oversimplifying, there is an oversimplifying condemnation, as documented in the introductory chapter of Gillian White's *Lyric Shame*. Ron Silliman refers to lyric as "a simple ego psychology in which the poetic represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object" (*xx*). Jed Rasula claims that "the most painful truth about recent decades of American poetry is this: the lyric voice has contributed to a mode of subjectivity as distinctly American as self-help primers, television game shows, and video

arcades" (3).[23]

While bringing out the unruly comedy of lyric may not bridge such divisions between appreciation and disapproval, the comic seems ideally placed to target those images of self-pity and "simple ego psychology." The modern lyric is often represented as profoundly serious, or worse than serious. In most accounts, the twentieth century intensifies a genre of feeling into a genre of meditative or tumultuous egoism. Harold Bloom finds that "the subject of modern poetry is endlessly solipsism" [sic] (*The Visionary Company* 462), and he is supported by several of his opposites, from Language poets to comic theorists. Even some of the relatively few critics writing about humor in contemporary American poetry echo similarly narrow ideas of the lyric; John Vernon, for example, says that "poetry today is dominated by the lyric, and the lyric is rooted in romantic melancholy. When contemporary poetry is funny, it is usually anti-lyrical, which means anti-poetic" (304).[24] Such views are, of course, extremes: most people who write, write about, or teach poetry are fully aware that its subjects are much wider than endless solipsism, and that a poetry consisting predominately of romantic melancholy alone would be a stultifying thing.

More poets than we have yet recognized escape self-absorption and tragedy through showing us the mind's unruliness. Rather than a "simple ego psychology," they reveal a fallible brain in its multifarious confusions. The lyric is riddled with incongruities, excesses, and unrulinesses, and with the moments of forgetting or misremembering that James Merrill describes as "dreamy

[23] See also Marjorie Perloff's description of lyric in a 2012 *Boston Review* forum: "Language poetry provided a serious challenge to the delicate lyric of self-expression and direct speech: it demanded an end to transparency and straightforward reference in favor of ellipsis, indirection, and intellectual-political engagement" ("Poetry on the Brink").

[24] Jonathan Holden's "Poems versus Jokes," for instance, claims that that jokes "summon nasty feelings only in order to gain relief from them," while poems "summon desirable feelings not in order to devalue them or to dispel them but in order to dwell on them, to work them up, to glorify them" (165), which seems unfair to both.

blinkings-out" (572).[25] Those inconsistencies are valuable both aesthetically—they keep the poem lively, keep it from being sealed off—and mimetically: the indecorous lyric expresses the wayward goings-on of the mind. The chapters that follow present the lyric as a genre with as much potential for comedy as the novel, as full of human interest as the drama, and as full of life generally as any other genre.

Moments of comedy transform the poem. Roger Scruton's essay on humor brings up one aspect especially important for a study of a genre as famously self-absorbed as lyric: "Humour is not, normally, self-directed. Indeed one of its values lies in the fact that it directs our attention unceasingly outwards" (210). The comic gives its poets a slightly different focus: it changes perspective. After Lowell asks, "What use is my sense of humor?" he shows that humor balances, connects, and levels. Brock-Broido suggests that the comic helps one see oneself as a less-significant primate: "We have come to terms with our Self / Like a marmoset getting out of her Great Ape suit" ("You Have Harnessed Yourself Ridiculously to This World"). Laughter is an evanescent, ephemeral, unstable phenomenon: it can be vanquished or quenched by another emotion, instantly. But it can also rise up to baffle such moods, or cause the mind to swerve; it distracts, leavens, and makes bearable.

Moreover, laughter is able to take over the mind, briefly but completely. It does so in Catherine Clément's study of syncope, where it "exhausts consciousness," and is "a divine jolt, an acceptable spasm" (8). While the strongest of emotions—fright, despair, anger, relief—might also momentarily overpower the logical, self-conscious brain, amusement seems distinct in the frequent sense of mutuality it elicits. Alice Rayner describes laughter as forcefully shared: "the explosion of a

[25] As Nikki Skillman notes, "Merrill's association of mnemonic loss … bears out the etymological sense of oblivion as a smoothing over of both glories and mistakes, and his choice to portray his 'dreamy blinkings-out' as forms of 'grace' and 'clemency' recalls the close relationship between amnesia and amnesty, forgetting and forgiving" (151-52).

laugh, like Clément's syncope, breaks into a dimension of mutuality in excess of or beyond the mutual understanding that created the joke or humor in the first place" (36). Georges Bataille describes a similar, not quite justified connection: "the flashes and reboundings of laughter follow the first opening, to the permeability of a breaking smile. If a group of people laughs at a sentence betraying an absurdity or an absent-minded gesture, a current of intense communication passes through them. … they are no more separated than two waves, but their unity is also undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters" (98). And this reciprocal sensation of laughter (even if we must call it something weak, like "amusement") runs diluted through all the scale, to less manifest forms of amusement.[26]

The reciprocity caused by and felt in laughter—out of all proportion to what two individuals might have in common—is important to the lyric, a genre defined by M. H. Abrams as "any fairly short, non-narrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling" (89). Jonathan Culler argues for the centrality of apostrophe to lyric, suggesting one might take it as "the figure of all that is most radical, embarrassing, pretentious, and mystificatory in the lyric, even seeking to identify apostrophe with lyric itself" (60).[27] For Culler, the apostrophe embodies lyric's power; moments of comedy, however, swerve away from the vatic force to something more unpredictable and more thoroughly intimate. Moments of shared amusement put

[26] Laughter itself is not integral to the comic. According to Mary Douglas, "it would be wrong to suppose that the acid test of a joke is whether it provokes laughter or not" (148). Over the course of a day, one may be silently and invisibly amused by all kinds of things that would odd or unacceptable to laugh at; on the other hand, one might register amusement at other things simply because one is expected to.
The feeling of amusement more broadly has consequences for even less social genres. We experience a spectrum from uncontrollable laughter to wry grin, from raised eyebrow to no expression at all. As Darwin pointed out, "Between a gentle laugh and a broad smile there is hardly any difference, excepting that in smiling no reiterated sound is uttered" (161). The momentary *sensation* expressed by a laugh can be attenuated down to an unreacting face; see also Koestler, 28-30.

[27] Culler suggests that apostrophe "is the pure embodiment of poetic pretension: of the subject's claim that in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy" (63).

writer and reader in slightly closer relation. In the instant of amusement at a rhyme, pun, or wry insight, we are drawn into an experience shared by the originator; comedy creates something as reciprocated as direct eye contact. When in a late, rueful poem, Lowell tells his estranged wife that "I don't need conversation, but you to laugh with" (*CP* 783), the line, above all else, implies closeness.

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A year before his Halloween reading at the Guggenheim, Berryman opened another reading from the *77 Dream Songs,* on a note of gleeful warning:

> Prepare to weep, ladies and gentlemen. Saul Bellow and I almost kill ourselves laughing about the Dream Songs and various chapters in his novels, but other people feel bad. Are you all ready to feel bad? (1962)

Although the next chapter emphasizes Berryman's laughter, that laughter should not be allowed to occlude his suffering. Nor should comedy mitigate the record of Lowell's vacillations between depression and mania, Ammons's terrible anxiety, Brock-Broido's increasingly frequent elegies, or the frustration and unease that surfaces in Hayes's poems. To focus on the humor of contemporary poets should not be to constrain or reduce, but to expand.

CHAPTER ONE

*"There ought to be a law": The Unruly Comedy of* The Dream Songs

William Empson once divided literary critics into two kinds of "barking dogs": "those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up" (13). John Berryman recalls that depiction of criticism in Dream Song 75, where he imagines his soon-to-be-published book as a tree: "Bare dogs drew closer for a second look // and performed their friendly operations there. / Refreshed, the bark rejoiced." These half-resigned, half-gleeful lines anticipate that critics will engage in territorial marking on Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* (1964). The sequence, which is spoken by someone usually viewed as an undisguised figure for Berryman himself, both rejoices at and rebuffs such "friendly operations."

This chapter explores the multilayered comedy that unfolds in *The Dream Songs*.[28] First we will see how Berryman adopts an intricate, cinctured stanza, only to diverge from the formalist ideals it evokes: he distends and defaces his sestets every way he can. This behavior is in part expressive; such breakages help Berryman depict the inner life of his speaker, Henry. The poem's conspicuous violations of meter, form, and language capture an unusually wide range of moods, and even transitions between moods. What gives Berryman's comedy its most intriguing aspect, however, is an intersection between a pointedly imaginary character and a half-fixed, half-malleable stanza. As the stanza is stretched and shrunk from line to line, it begins to seem that Henry himself is responsible for all prosodic decisions; the stanza has been commandeered by the character. This

[28] The primary study of humor in *The Dream Songs* is in Ronald Wallace's *God Be With the Clown*; Wallace describes how Berryman's comic mode draws on the principles of the *alazon* and *eiron*, the figures of self-deceiving braggart and ironic self-deprecator from Greek comedy (171-201). Anthony Caleshu's "Affective Postures in *The Dream Songs*" (*After Thirty Falls* 101-20), also bears on this chapter's interest in comedy and performance. The steadier critical emphasis, however, has been on the tragic dimension of *The Dream Songs*; Samuel Dodson has argued that "Berryman's Henry is always anchored in the elegiac mode" (12).

technique allows the poetry to achieve a comic self-consciousness; Henry's relation to his form is something new in American poetry.

**1. Berryman's stanza**

Even at their most turbulent, the Dream Songs are fitted into a form that literally resembles a well-wrought urn—a far cry from the page-ranging, unconfined verse of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) or Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1960). Instead, Berryman borrows from Yeats, an exemplary craftsman to midcentury critics.[29] Each sestet splits into symmetrical halves, with two pentameter lines checked by a short line (then repeated). The divisions of this stanza seem to impose order, each with a pause for reflection; superficially, the form suggests the "so-called fifties poem," described by Edward Brunner as "metrically regular, organized by stanza, and usually in rhyme" (6).

The platonic idea of Berryman's stanza is demonstrated in Song 164, which Henry plummets through:

> Three limbs, three seasons smashed; well, one to go.
> Henry fell smiling through the air below
> and through the air above,
> the middle air as well did he not neglect
> but carefully in all these airs was wrecked
> which he got truly tired of.

Each couplet, syntactically complete, is unhurried. Meter is steady, with conventional substitutions. That steadiness requires precise articulation of all three syllables of "cárefŭllў," and it keeps Henry from expressing his grievances too theatrically: "His friends alas went all about their ways / intact" suppresses "alas" into a single unpunctuated iamb.

[29] I thank Stephen Burt for pointing out that Yeats's "Two Songs of a Fool" was an inspiration to Berryman. For early traces of the stanza, see Berryman's nine "Nervous Songs," written mostly around 1942 (*CP* 49-54).

In many more songs, however, that uniform, polished stanza vanishes. Most songs are riddled with ungainly substitutions or prose-like rhythms. Some append random, irrelevant lines to the three-sestet structure; in many others, lines bulge out or stop short. As if to draw attention to the model sestet hovering behind each poem, many stanzas begin with pentameter that immediately falls apart. The final stanza of Song 69, for example, opens with clear iambs that immediately deteriorate:

> I feel as if, unique, she … Biddable?
> Fates, conspire.
> —Mr Bones, please.
> —Vouchsafe me, Sleepless One,
> a personal experience of the body of Mrs Boogry
> before I pass from lust!

Line 14 drops the usual pentameter for an extravagantly short imperative. Although the unnamed interlocutor tries to hush Henry ("Mr Bones, please"), he reiterates and escalates his appeal with an archaic "vouchsafe," leaving his line two feet short of the underlying meter. Complete deflation follows: it stems not merely from the euphemistic "personal experience" and the cartoonishly ugly "Mrs Boogry," but from the breathless, clumsy, prose-like line itself. In its lurches from three- to seventeen-syllable lines, the stanza seems like a decayed version of Song 164's symmetrical, balanced sestet.

Berryman's stanza inhabits an uneasy position between neatness and sloppiness, tension and slackness, closed and bursting form. On one hand, its hypermetrical lines (such as the one about Mrs Boogry) offer an affront to critics who value compression. For example, in a 1937 essay on "The Morality of Poetry," Yvor Winters declares that prose-like poetry "lose[s] the capacity for fluid or highly complex relationships between words; language, in short, reapproaches its original stiffness and generality" (Davis 237). R.P. Blackmur, writing in 1952, agrees: it "produces flatness, inhibits song, and excludes behavior; and I see no sense in welcoming these disorders"; such "deliberate flatness" is "the contemporary form of Georgian deliquescence" (376). We might imagine Blackmur

reading Song 204, in which Henry, listening to Schubert, moves from the pentameter of "I'm playing it as softly as I can" to the bloated, 14-syllable declaration that "my gramophone is the most powerful in the country." Or we might picture Winters reading Song 208's aggressively dull report of the contents of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Its unrelievedly long lines and sing-song double rhymes recall Ogden Nash: "Vozhnezsensky was good on watermelons / and Nevada's Miss Breadlove outstripped the felons / to be crowned the Narrative Poet Laureate of North America." These lines run out of metrical steam, as does the song's protracted seventeenth line: "Henry his horns waved at the future of poetry, where he had been": a sentence both contorted and flabby.[30]

But Berryman's stanza can also suggest that words are being arranged to suit prosodic requirements alone. As often as Henry rails across line-breaks, he stays within them, under the guise of the incompetent versifier who pads or constricts his utterances to obey the form, as in Song 108's ungainly contortions: "the dead of winter when we must be sad / and feel by the weather had." That awkward arrival at "had" recalls Ezra Pound's condemnation of inversion: "Mr. Yeats has once and for all stripped English poetry of its perdamnable rhetoric. … He has made our poetic idiom a thing pliable, a speech without inversions" (11). Berryman makes his poetic idiom into a speech audaciously full of inversions. In Song 298 ("He was on TV / with his baby daughter, / and Housman's rhyme O in this case was 'oughter'"), improvising Henry just has to survive the line, as he has to survive the evening, in a half-automatic fashion. Berryman's exceptionally pronounced inversions often arrive at rhyme words that are superficially uninteresting, defying Pound's command never to "put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush" (7). Slush would probably be suspected in Berryman's use of the interjection "O," which elsewhere serves as rhyme to "woe," "go," "ago," "Sappho," "Kyoto," and "dough" (among others). We often

[30] As the second part of this chapter will begin to argue, a closer glance suggests a method to this flatness: the line mocks not only the drab future of poetry but Henry's theatrical boredom.

see Henry stifled by his container, forced to cram in or pad out his syntax, as if verse warps and even steers his thought.

Berryman's rhymes are one of many lenses through which to consider his unpredictable mixture of dexterity and ineptitude, tidiness and sloppiness, and calculation amid accident. As described by Gillian Beer, "Rhyme has the tendency to emphasize either the fortuitous or the willful in composition. Sounds intervene and challenge the dominance of syntactical order, threading unforeseen words together in patterns that suggest a new taxonomy framed by sounds alone" (184). *Fortuitous* and *willful* are perfect words for the poem's lurches between premeditated, staged, and off-the-cuff speech; so too is the affinity for nonsense heard by Donald Wesling: "words working together in rhyme entangle form and meaning … Successful rhyme is illogical and canny, striking and familiar, prominent and subsumed" (23). Rhyme's paradoxes go further, however. It is also a device that promises the gratifying of expectation: "the production of like sounds according to a schedule that renders them predictable: a continuing expectancy, continually fulfilled," as Hugh Kenner puts it (294).

This feature is turned, in Berryman's hands, into an expectancy *unpredictably* fulfilled. The Dream Song sestet has, in theory, over seven hundred different possible rhyme schemes, although a few patterns occur again and again. Berryman changes schemes between nearly every stanza: a pattern set in one stanza is discarded in the next, or maintained for two and altered in the third.[31] Given his seemingly manageable three-sestet obligation, Berryman is oddly negligent—though he can also adhere to a rhyme scheme punctiliously. His rhymes can divide the sestet into perfect, Petrarchan tercets (*abcabc*), or into envelopes or pockets (e.g. *abxbxa* or *abbacc*). He can leave lines conspicuously unrhymed (*abbaxx*), or highlight a single pair of words (*axaxxx*). He pulls together

[31] Peter Denman surveys Berryman's many patterns of rhyme (*After Thirty Falls* 93).

lines of dramatically different length in contrapuntal rhyme (matching lines with differing numbers of feet, like Ogden Nash). He frequently wrenches rhymes: *nonsense* to *immense, typewriters* to *secret curse,* and *alas!* and *ass,* all in Song 83. He uses slant rhyme (such as the garishly jokey *hubby* and *hobby*, Song 117), eye rhyme (*sounds* and *wounds*, Song 120), rich rhyme (*hurt* as verb and noun, Song 117), identical rhyme (the hopeless *bottle* and *bottle,* Song 209*)*, and broken rhyme-words (in Song 115, *frisky & new* is complemented by *u-/sual*; in Song 12, *Poe* with *O//ver*).[32] For every rhyme that "tend[s] to hover on the verge of antithesis and hence to throw a stress upon whatever difference of meaning appears in the rhyme words," as W. K. Wimsatt writes of Pope (*The Verbal Icon* 159), another seems entirely illogical or nonreferential, impelled by song rather than by sense, as when Henry irreverently completes "chauffeur" with "*brrr*" (Song 200), or "Maker" with "purr" (Song 317). As Anne Ferry points out, such minor parts of speech "are fundamentally different from the parts of speech traditionally allowed in rhyming. They have a function in relation to other words but no inherent signifying capacity" (14). To alter syntax so as to arrive at rhyme words that have "no inherent signifying capacity" defies the expectation that rhyme-words involve a heightening of significance.

The lack of logic that some of Berryman's rhymes imply leads us to a larger difficulty: more generally, *The Dream Songs* seems to go against the expressive ideals traced by critics who expect "every short poem to justify its form," as Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* repeatedly prescribes (158). Of one sub-par example (not from *The Dream Songs*) Fussell suggests that "Here we

[32] Henry tends to be a pessimistic—even fatalistic—rhymer. In Song 266, "Was then the thing all planned? / I mention what I do not understand," his rhymes underscore a plaintive relationship between God's baffling, past-tense "planned" and a present-tense inability to "understand," accentuated by the dutiful pentameter. Song 94's "God, / tuning in from abroad" implies the naturalness of God's absence; *married* is placed with *buried* in Song 80 and, ironically, with *varied* in Song 300. Although the end-words of Song 140's "In the first of dawn, / he fails a little, which he figured on" are not so semantically linked, the very sound of lackadaisical correspondence confirms the certainty of failing. So too with Song 209's "Henry lay cold & golden in the snow / toward whom the universe once more howled 'No'—": we hear the *No* coming, just as Henry glumly—with his "once more" —anticipates it.

might contrive a reason for the space between the first stanza and the second, but it would be hard to find one for the space between the second and the third. This three-stanza arrangement is an example of what we can call pseudo-form." He interrogates another by saying, "We can embarrass this poem … by asking why it presents itself in three stanzas" implying that its form and content are insufficiently fused" (159). Berryman's poem is not easily embarrassed: its form and content sometimes dovetail, sometimes are entirely at odds. Justification for a stanzaic anomaly, for example, is not always obvious.[33] Song 253 breaks the sestet pattern to deliver a single line about a shopping trip: "On John R st. in Detroit he made a bargain." (John R Street was known for its nightclubs and music; one stretch was part of a red-light district. Isolating the line as Berryman does offers a tantalizing mixture of specificity and vagueness.) In Song 252's conversation about less-than-thorough sightseeing, Henry declares that "Konarok both [men] missed, / for diverse & trivial & fatal // reasons"; the contradictory, sensational adjectives and the significant gulp of white space across the stanza accentuate only the completely unenlightening "reasons."

But Berryman was a meticulous, obsessive prosodist: he even corrected the pagination in George Saintsbury's *Historical Manual of English Prosody*. And the New Critics were his mentors, colleagues, and friends.[34] As Eileen Simpson's memoir suggests, Berryman respected Allen Tate, who eventually helped him find work at the University of Minneapolis, and venerated R. P. Blackmur, who taught with him at Princeton: "praise in general meant little to John. Praise from

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[33] Although syntax often disregards the stanzaic boundaries, extra-stanzaic features—such as the lines appended to or broken off from a sestet found in a few dozen songs—are rare, and suggest that the topic is so immediate and critical as to require a departure from the tripartite structure.

[34] That many of the first readers of *The Dream Songs* were New Critics and friends—and that Berryman has their reactions in mind—has not been the subject of much discussion, but Berryman's attitude toward the New Criticism has been considered in several studies. In "Songs of the Self: Berryman's Whitman," Gareth Reeves describes Berryman's "struggle … [to free] the poet from the New Critical emphasis on the poem as an autonomous, closed form" (47). Brendan Cooper's *Dark Airs: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of Cold War Poetry* explores Berryman's "inclination for a more 'personal' reading of Eliot that challenges New Critical assumptions" (29).

Delmore [Schwartz] or Mark [Van Doren], or Allen Tate or R. P. Blackmur was what mattered" (32). Berryman was aware, however, that even his early poetry failed many of their ideals. In 1936, for example, he received a letter from Tate, regarding the results of a *Southern Review* contest: "If your poem had been cut down to proper length considering the form I should have placed it first … [Randall Jarrell] didn't have your line by line excellence, but what he had was better subdued to form" (Travisano 128). Berryman responded: "Thanks very much for your letter and the criticism therein—your use of 'form' still puzzles me a bit" (129). Frustration becomes explicit when Berryman relayed Tate's statements to his mother: "[Tate] condemned [the poem] for length & formlessness—neither he nor Mark seem to realize that something damn important is being said" (*Letters to His Mother* 55). In a 1948 review of Berryman's first book, *The Dispossessed*, Winters took a dim view not only of Berryman's "somewhat loose iambic pentameter, which displays no real organization of lines into varying rhythmic and rhetorical units," but his "disinclination to understand and discipline his emotions"; Winters hoped that he would learn to "think more and feel less, and to mitigate, in some fashion, his infinite compassion for himself" ("Three Poets," 404-05). Berryman, in turn, argued throughout the margins of Winters' *In Defense of Reason*, and all over the pages of Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn*: "Brooks in a way understands; but he does not understand what he understands," Berryman writes next to one passage. "Dog bites dog," he says of another; "No!" or "My God!" to many.[35]

Berryman's longest reply to New Critical desiderata, however, is *The Dream Songs*, which intensifies the disorganized and undisciplined form regretted by Tate and Winters. Several of his friends and first readers missed the poem's playfulness, to varying degrees. On April 27, the day *77*

[35] One scrap of paper in Berryman's archives is entitled "How + whether to write criticism"; it begins with a list of possibilities, each of which is rejected by a pencil that bears down more firmly with every passing *ugh*: "crit theory ugh / Eliot's sugg's **ugh** / […] heavy-handed acad. New Crit. **ugh**" (Box 6, Miscellaneous Prose: Folder 1: Prose projects).

*Dream Songs* was published, Berryman "received unwelcome reviews from Tate … in letters and from Lowell in *The New York Review of Books*" (Mariani 406). Lowell's review admitted tones of frustration: "How often one chafes at the relentless indulgence, and cannot tell the what or why of a passage" (*Prose* 111). The apparent lack of formal rationale—and the lack of rationale for entire songs—presented a significant obstacle even to appreciative critics. M. L. Rosenthal found the form "a tedious excuse, as it were, for proliferation without qualitative development" (*New Poets* 123).[36] Asked about Berryman in a 1974 interview, Tate answered, "He was an original poet and a very interesting one, but he wasn't a great poet. … He never grew up. That was his whole trouble. And *Dream Songs* is simply paranoid projections of childhood manias and obsessions" (Travisano 81). Such a view reduces the poem to flat transcription. Attention to Berryman's comedy, however, can counter such views, and can explain the poem's seemingly haphazard form.

Somewhat surprisingly, Berryman and Tate collaborated on a textbook called *The Arts of Reading* (1960).[37] Among the poems for which Berryman wrote commentary was "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Taking up the surprise of the "patient etherized upon a table," Berryman writes:

> [Lines 1 and 2] were a come-on, designed merely to get the reader off guard, so that he could be knocked down. The form … is reductive; an expectation has been created only to be diminished or destroyed (341).

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[36] John Fuller regretted "the carelessness, romanticisms, and sentimentalities that turn up almost as frequently as the fragments of taut perceptions and the occasional really striking and moving passages" (7). Frederick Seidel put a similar emphasis on the inexplicable and extraneous: "When the happening doesn't work, lines seem simply irrelevant and odd. The elaborate style has disconnected and distorted part of a Song" (258). Those notes of frustration continued through the decades that followed. David Perkins writes: "No norm [of diction] is preserved, and no generalization can be made except that Berryman uses any language that seems effective. … Sometimes the highjinks have a particular function in their context; sometimes they merely signal a break-loose, slapdash state of mind" (401). Kevin Young has linked the vexing speaker with a vexing style: "Henry, while likeable, often vexes us, just as the poems … provide an odd mix of monotony and 'scrambling, sitting, spattering' rhythm" (161). Similarly, Kenneth Lincoln describes the technique of *The Dream Songs* as "wild confessional when it works, maudlin drivel when it doesn't" (176).

[37] Tate wrote the analyses for "To His Coy Mistress," "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," a song by Carew, and John Crowe Ransom's "The Equilibrists." Among the poems for which Berryman contributed were several anonymous songs, Walter de la Mare's "Song of the Mad Prince" (a question-and-answer lyric in eight-line stanzas, with alternating short lines that recall Berryman's own), and a Wordsworth sonnet.

Exactly such come-ons and expectations appear in all poetic strata of *The Dream Songs*. Berryman takes as his victim-reader a prosodic, linguistic, and moral judge, the kind of academic mocked in Song 35, "assembled … in the capital / city for Dull" (the 1962 MLA conference). These poetic misdemeanors are close, in spirit, to Umberto Eco's idea that comedy occurs when

> there is the violation of a rule (preferably, but not necessarily, a minor one, like an etiquette rule); … we are, so to speak, revenged by the comic character who has challenged the repressive power of the rule (which involves no risk to us, since we commit the violation only vicariously). (2)

If we hold Eco's rule-challenging and New Critical desiderata in our heads as we read, the first category of Berryman's comedy begins to emerge: a pointed formal unruliness. This comedy kicks over and slips under hurdles; the poetry violates any rule that occurs to it.

Berryman's development of a style that diverges markedly from his friends' ideals can be seen not only as provocation or rebellion, but as a way of teasingly prodding those friends to read with new imagination. *The Dream Songs* solicits the type of generous reading that Berryman pictured when he declared that the New Criticism "should be replaced by a criticism less crabbed, more tolerant, better informed, more independent of its objects" ("The Old Criticism": JB Papers, Box 2, folder 71).[38] Robert Lowell—another protégé of Tate—became such a reader: although he first reacted with skepticism to *The Dream Songs*, he later wrote, "I am afraid I mistook it for forcing, when [Berryman] came into his own. No voice now or persona sticks in my ear as his. … A voice on the page, identifiable as my friend's on the telephone" (*Prose* 117).

[38] The draft is Berryman's most severe appraisal of the critical atmosphere in which he developed: he seems to debate between the New Criticism's "American generals," listing "John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, ~~Yvor Winters~~ ^Robt Penn Warren and ~~R. P. Blackmur~~ ^Cleanth Brooks" (Box 2, Folder 71). Berryman admits that "there are differences among the four critics I have named, as among their disciples […] But they have shared important attitudes, and above all exerted an influence in common, and it is this school-aspect with which I am chiefly concerned." Although he suggests that these writers' criticism has value, he focuses on their shared "orientation to 'tradition', a kind of local seriousness, a pontifical tone, ^an interest in form, attention to individual features of style, deliberate inattention or indifference to the work of personality in poetry."

## 2. "Thought rushed onto a thousand screens": A comedy of thought

Berryman's "voice on the page" depends on the transgressing of formal standards for much of its animation and lifelikeness. The stanzaic irregularities, flouted prosodic rules, and syntactic contortions of *The Dream Songs* allow Berryman to present an inner life in more expressive ways than are conventionally possible. When he breaks a rule, he invites us to think about why he does so; the poem plays its regular stanza off an irregular sense of control, obedience, and proportion.

A slight anomaly in Song 215 offers a case in point. The poem recalls a visit to Yeats: after the end of the first stanza ("Humourless, grand, by the great fire for a look / he set out his death at twilight" [5-6]), and before the opening of the second, Berryman inserts a single unaccompanied line: "The goddamned scones came hot." A formalist might cast a cold eye on this interjection; to make such a sentence into its own stanza might seem unjustified, or self-indulgent. But that extraneous line—surrounded by white space, in the middle of the page—emphasizes both the disjunction of Henry's memory and his memory's comic lack of selective hierarchy. If one visits Yeats and tries to commemorate Yeats's somber dignity, one might remember the scones more vividly than anything else; the stanzaic aberration captures the discrepancy between what one thinks is most important and what one actually recalls. The final lines of T. S. Eliot's "Mr Apollinax" touch on a related feeling: "Of dowager Mrs. Phlaccus, and Professor and Mrs. Cheetah / I remember a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon" (*Collected Poems* 23).

*The Dream Songs* present impercipience, fixations, afterthoughts, whimsical associations, passing moods, and countless other erratic mental processes. As Helen Vendler writes, the poems express "the ultimate familiarity of the dialogue of the mind with itself" (*Part of Nature* 123). "Thought rushe[s] onto a thousand screens," as Song 267 says.[39] Berryman's sestets offer just over a

[39] Deborah Forbes points out Berryman's apparent transcriptions of both thought and talk: "By incorporating slang, by appearing to unselectively represent the more or less random movements of human consciousness,

thousand such screens: the ideal of balance and regularity they suggest creates a structure that makes out-of-balance and irregular ways of thinking even more noticeable. For example, Song 164 (discussed earlier as an example of an "ideal" sestet) later uses a pointed enjambment and a thirteen-syllable outcry to embody resentment: "His friends alas went all about their ways / intact. Couldn't William break at least a collar bone?" (7-8). Henry's desire for company in injury is as unabashed as his disregard for the pentameter.

This second level of comedy is one of fallible mind. The stanza works as an index of Henry's excitement, which often grows uncontainable. In Song 4, for example, Henry becomes overcome by an imaginative impulse; it permeates his language, syntax, and rhythms:

> Filling her compact & delicious body
> with chicken páprika, she glanced at me
> twice.

This narrative owes its impetus to an initial trochee within good pentameter (Berryman's substitutions often seem to be wearing stage makeup), to a participial phrase's tug forward, and to the way the woman is mentioned only as possessor of the "compact & delicious body": she is already such a central character in Henry's mind that he does not think to introduce her. Bathos and melodrama contend for the same space; they merge when a one-syllable line, "twice," disrupts the set form. The line puts a huge amount of weight on a word that reveals the woman's glances as insignificant: as the sentence deflates for the reader, it reaches a seeming pinnacle for Henry.

Although the next sentence begins metrically (and opens with another participial phrase and alliterating trochee, as if Henry imagines that he is responding to an encounter initiated by the woman dining), it immediately gives way to a fifteen-syllable bulge:

> Fainting with interest, I hungered back
> and only the fact of her husband & four other people

---

and most of all by restaging the gap between poet and speaker as a natural function of self-consciousness, Berryman presses the dramatic monologue back in the direction of personally direct, sincere speech" (102).

kept me from springing on her

Henry minimizes "her husband" by tucking him into the middle of the line, and moves quickly on to "four other people": the husband alone would not be a deterrent. As Henry imagines approaching the woman, his sentence ignores bounds, running on with his imagination and jumping across the stanza:

> or falling at her little feet and crying
> 'You are the hottest one for years of night
> Henry's dazed eyes
> have enjoyed, Brilliance.' I advanced upon
> (despairing) my spumoni. —Sir Bones: is stuffed,
> de world, wif feeding girls.

Though these lines rush along in full pentameter, they come to a bumpy halt at "hăve ĕnjóyed, Brílliănce." When iambs then restate themselves, it is only to heighten the bathos of dessert, bathos exacerbated by a line break: "I advánced upón / (despáiring) mý spumóni." That parenthesis interpolates a change of mood, to the despairing: the only "my" in the poem is applied to an elaborate, multi-colored dish of ice cream that contains a hopeless *moan*.

Although the anonymous interlocutor (who, as the voice of restraint, does not disturb the sestet form) attempts a remonstrance, here as elsewhere, Henry ignores him and keeps going. Again Henry begins a stanza in pentameter, for a spectacular, telegraphic list; but he soon gives meter up completely:

> —Black hair, complexion Latin, jewelled eyes
> downcast … The slob beside her feasts … What wonders is
> she sitting on, over there?
> The restaurant buzzes. She might as well be on Mars.
> Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
> —Mr Bones: there is.

As he speculates feverishly about "wonders," he stretches one line and runs over its end. By the self-castigating penultimate line, he has slipped into prose. (The stanza is perforated in another way by the spatial caesura of line 14; such caesuras offer the typographical equivalent of a comedian's pause,

and replicate the halting, struggling, blanking-out moments in thought and speech. In Song 26, for example, one enables Henry to find an extravagant phrase: "his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement."[40]) Henry's impulse to create striking tableaux for himself shapes his language and form.

When Henry conforms to his stanza, it is as expressive as the dramatic changes of Song 4. After denouncing "Iowa, / detestable State" in Song 290, Henry grows effusive about Ireland:

> Adorable country, in its countryside
> & persons, & its habits, & its past,
> martyrs & heroes,
> its noble monks, its wild men of high pride
> & poets long ago, Synge, Joyce & Yeats,
> and the ranks from which they rose. (lines 7-12)

This wandering sentence without a main verb represents how Henry contemplates Ireland in his lazier, nostalgic moments. The stanza is snugly routine; the rhymes are complacently bad ("past" and "Yeats"; "heroes" and "rose"). The steady meter lays stress on ampersands, the most automatic of connectives ("& pérs|ons, & |its háb|its, & | its pást"). That sudden profusion of ampersands emphasizes the poem's *and*-heavy lists; it suggests that Henry has imagined these vignettes before, drifting in exactly this order, with the same idealizing adjectives. Even a formally inconspicuous stanza conveys an unmistakable state of mind: it stages one of Henry's favorite mental pictures, a pre-packaged idea—Ireland as picturesquely heroic—to which he often returns.

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[40] See also Song 73, where reflections inspired by a Kyoto rock garden are interrupted by a three interpolated lines. As with the line about the scones in Song 215, this aberrant train of thought breaks the stanzaic form:

> —from nowhere can one see all the stones—
> but helicopters or a Brooklyn reproduction
> will fix that— (lines 13-15)

Though awed by "austere a sea rectangular" and "fifteen changeless stones," Henry becomes fixed on the idea of seeing all the stones at once, forgetting that the impossibility of doing so is part of the design, serving as an incitement to meditation. The thoroughness of his distraction emerges in the caesura's pause of straining thought.

A less classifiable but equally tangible *idée fixe* appears in Song 55, when Henry undergoes an "interview" at the gates of Heaven, usually a site of joy or comfort:

> Peter's not friendly. He gives me sideways looks.
> The architecture is far from reassuring.
> I feel uneasy.
> A pity,— the interview began so well:
> I mentioned fiendish things, he waved them away
>
> and sloshed out a martini
> strangely needed. We spoke of indifferent matters—
> God's health, the vague hell of the Congo,
> John's energy,
> anti-matter matter. I felt fine.
>
> Then a change came backward. A chill fell.
> Talk slackened,
> died, and he began to give me sideways looks.
> 'Christ,' I thought 'what now?' and would have askt for another
> but didn't dare.

The paratactic syntax of the beginning, in which one short sentence follows another without subordination, hovers between portentous terseness and inarticulate petulance.[41] Berryman's simple present allows for a tinge of the stative, and can thereby denote a permanent condition rather than an action ("Peter's not friendly, he has never been friendly"). The sentences that follow, even the longest, pointedly avoid grammatical complexity: no dependent clauses, no inversion of subject and predicate: always a subject and then a verb. The song's metrical motions, however, are more diverse. After the first line, the poem rarely falls into regular pentameter, though most of the lines in the first two stanzas come quite close to it. Between the redundancy of discussing "God's health," the "vague hell of the Congo" (also a dance, in keeping with the earthbound tendencies of this song), and "anti-matter matter," meter sags; but in "Talk slackened, // died, || and hé begán to gíve me sídeways lóoks," clear iambs again emerge. The effect is one of urgency, agitation, of returning to

[41] As Cristanne Miller observes of Dickinson, parataxis "both makes the speaker's voice sound impulsive or natural and increases the elevating ellipticism or obscurity of her message. Thus the same syntactic device leads to comparisons with a child's voice and with that of the author of the Bible" (32).

the real problem. As Henry returns to St. Peter's indescribable, ominous sideways looks, he becomes so agitated that he taps into what is traditionally characterized as the most "natural" English meters.[42] The resurfacing meter and phrase make a striking representation of uneasy, half-articulate singlemindedness: he has no better term than "gives me sideways looks"—he uses the phrase twice. Shaken, Henry then collapses into prose rhythms. Another martini is so imperative that he need not name it.

Song 55's representation of uneasy singlemindedness is emblematic for Berryman, who transcribes not only his moral but mental failings: pettiness, impercipience, a lack of proportion, dull-wittedness. Henry seems to fail to register the gravity of the situation; his language makes the day of judgment into a business interview, and its failure is merely "a pity." Initially, the humor here seems directed at Henry's fixation on Peter's ominous "sideways looks," and on how he is being viewed. But the superficial look is significant: it is the only way Henry can tell whether something is going wrong, and something does go wrong in the third stanza. His thought is only half-articulate, as is often the case in his attempts to define something (see Song 1's "it was the thought that they thought they could *do* it," where the italics strain against an unidentified "they" and "it"); but his feeling that these sideways looks are a portent is legitimate. The comedy is not one of readerly superiority, but of recognition.

The grammar of *The Dream Songs,* like its prosody, provides a set of laws to break—and, occasionally, to conform to. Berryman owned two copies of H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, and many of the practices condemned by Fowler are committed by Henry: archaism, clichés, elegant variations, and gratuitous inversion, among others (Kelly 125). Henry employs linguistic opposites:

[42] In Berryman's recordings of this poem—which lack the visual indications of line-breaks—a pentameter line is audible, beginning after the pronounced caesura of "died," as Henry returns to the source of unease. Dickens provides an analogue: the emotional climaxes of his novels often grow iambic, inadvertently.

both scholarly and forcefully nonstandard English, often within the same Song.[43] Song 114, for example, begins with a neologism merging *whip* and *chirp*, suggesting that Henry is already in such dire straits as to be reaching for animal- or baby-like sounds. Two lines end with "whines," and his "ich" is more of a squeak than an *I* would be:

> Henry in trouble whirped out lonely whines.
> When ich when was ever not in trouble?
> But did he whip out whines
> afore? And when check in wif ales & lifelines
> anyone earlier O? (1-5)

The most salient disarrangement is the stammering "When ich when was," with its sense of desperate confusion ("when, when?"). Henry has himself so much at the front of his mind that his pronoun ousts the verb out of its proper place; then he shuttles back to another "when." He welters in alliteration, and deranges his meter: a regular first line, a completely trochaic second line, an enjambment that sharpens "afore," and the tumbling "ánÿŏne éarlĭĕr Ó." What is comic here is the iridescence between the speaker's seeming collapse and his expressive success. Dickens has similarly manipulative characters: in *David Copperfield*, for example, Mrs. Gummidge elicits sympathy by repeating, "I am a lone lorn creetur … and everythink goes contrary with me" (44), and Uriah Heep constantly proclaims that he is "umble" (232, 233, 234, *passim*).

But within the off-kilter language that characterizes *The Dream Songs*, moments of complicated syntax pointedly invoke tradition, formality, and stability. Because joints and pivots such as *wherefore, thus, therewith,* or *whereat* involve differentiating relations between parts of speech, they imply reasoning and forethought; at such moments, Henry's grammar indicates that he has pulled himself together and knows what he is going to say next—or that he wants to seem as if he does. It can signal pomposity and a little grandiloquence, as if he is proud that his syntax is muscular

[43] For recent discussion of Berryman's use of blackface dialect, see Cooper, *Dark Airs,* 177-190; see also Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' brief paragraph in "The Blues: A Craft Manifesto."

enough to classify and connect any topic to any other. In Song 215, where Henry is gratified to be taking tea with Yeats, his syntax rises to the occasion; the opening two lines, framed by "took" and "took," even display epanalepsis.

> Took Henry tea down at the Athénaeum with Yeats
> and offered the master a fag, the which he took,
> accepting too a light
> to Henry's lasting honour.

The slightly faux-regal air is brought out particularly by Henry's "the which"; it creates a little pocket that serves mostly as a redundant flourish. The grammar creates structures so intricate as to be themselves a source of self-contentment. Sometimes, however, these phrases and clauses entangle Henry. Although Song 83 opens with a veneer of impressiveness and stately pauses—"I recall a boil, whereupon as I had to sit, / just where, and when I had to, for deadlines"—its seemingly precise grammar will not parse.

At the end of Song 114's first stanza, Henry delivers a thesis—"I am fleeing double"—and takes the remainder of the poem to explain it. At first glance, his syntax resembles a complex logical structure, with colon-directed deductions that are building to a point; but this structure is undercut by its nonstandard grammar, to half-doleful, half-facetious effect.

> —I am fleeing double:
>
> Mr Past being no friends of mine,
> all them around: Sir Future Dubious,
> calamitous & grand:
> I can no foothold here; wherefore I pines
> for Dr Present, who won't thrive to us
> hand over neither hand
>
> from them blue depths nor choppering down skies
> does Dr Present vault unto his task.

Song 114's "wherefore" frames Henry's thought as highly sensible; the long, seemingly deductive clauses reason out that his current state is every bit as useless as his past and future. But the clauses quickly crumble into confused pronouns, verbs, and baby-talk: "Henry is weft on his own. / Pluck

Dr Present" (15-16). This state of mind fuses self-pity and self-congratulation: Henry shows both how palpably time oppresses him, and that he is capable of adopting a slightly wry, droll tone towards his situation (his personified figures act in a literal cliffhanger, where Dr Present is neither swimming nor flying to the rescue). The grammar dramatizes how he draws himself up into rationality, attempts to be jocular, and dissolves into plaintiveness. Henry is defying advice repeatedly dispensed in Saul Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*, where another despairing protagonist is advised about the importance of "the here-and-now. The real universe. That's the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real—the here-and-now. Seize the day" (62).[44] Henry, however, has decided that even his present is failing him.

*The Dream Songs* collapses between speaker and reader: we see not only how Henry thinks, but even how he wants to be perceived. Berryman's comedy of mind relies on grammar to bring out emotional states, from the pompous to the piteous, and to show the often off-kilter directions of Henry's thought. In Song 57, syntax accentuates an incongruous mutation of tone and topic; it tracks Henry's shift from assurance to doubt, and from a metaphysical Hell to another compact & delicious body:

> In a state of chortle sin—once he reflected,
> swilling tomato juice—live I, and did
> more than my thirstier years.
> To Hell then will it maul me? for good talk,
> and gripe of retail loss? I dare say not.
> I don't thínk there's that place
>
> save sullen here, wherefrom she flies tonight
> retrieving her whole body, which I need.

[44] Bellow's sense of humor stimulated Berryman; inside the cover of *Herzog*, he keeps track of every time he laughs: "I chuckled first at the bottom of p. 2, next at v. top of 7, 8 B- 9 T, 11 m, 7x, 93 103!, 108, 111t, 116, 122-3, 152 is great, 166, 173-5, 196, 216-7, 277…" (UMN archives).

Unconcerned, even cocksure Henry depicts Hell as a place of "good talk, / and gripe of retail loss," summarizing Book II of *Paradise Lost*; he then dismisses the idea of it with "I dare say not." But "I don't thínk," with its careful, tentative accent, seems to second-guess his certainty.[45] While the stately, archaic "wherefrom" intensifies the Miltonic echoes, the subject then changes completely, pivoting on "body" in a short, decided relative clause: "which I need." The sentence enacts, with flamboyance and precision, a thought descending from heroic melancholy to a slightly petulant, bodily demand. The sparkle of humor in this Dream Song is in part explained by Lydia Davis' account of Proust's style: Proust felt "that a long sentence contained a whole, complex thought, a thought that should not be fragmented or broken. The shape of the sentence was the shape of the thought, and every word was necessary to the thought: 'I really have to weave these long silks as I spin them,' he said. 'If I shortened my sentences, it would make little pieces of sentences, not sentences'" (*xvii*). Although Henry's sentence is nowhere near so long as Proust's, rarely has a thought been represented with such sympathetic humor, and precision.

### 3. A character in a stanza

We have moved from seeing *The Dream Songs*' rule-breaking as incompetent to seeing it as deftly and comically true-to-life. The change of view is summed up in W. H. Auden's "Notes on the Comic," which describes how we first laugh at the clown as

> the clumsy man whom inanimate objects conspire against to torment; … but our profounder amusement is derived from our knowledge that this is only an appearance, that, in reality, the accuracy with which the objects trip him up or hit him on the head is caused by the clown's own skill (373).

[45] Accent marks give Henry a means of seemingly neutral emphasis—or show that he is trying to be neutral. His italics, on the other hand, are more emotive, even childish, raising the voice to make an obvious contrast more obvious, as in Song 276's "*They'll* miss *me* too" (10). While italics involve immediate and primitive emphasis, accent marks show Henry attempting to put some distance between himself and his emotion, to stress a point without seeming too involved.

Auden suggests that comic delight comes not from mere ineptness but from something near to the awe and admiration I have described, and which I find in Berryman. And Auden's image of a dexterous clown is apt not only for Berryman, but for Henry himself. When we read *The Dream Songs,* we watch Henry—"an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)," as Berryman's preface says—interact with a stanza (*xx*). Sometimes, as we have seen, this imaginary character obeys the form, padding and arranging lines until they scan. Equally often, however, he seems to ignore it, with prose-like lines that go on for fifteen syllables, and comically haphazard rhymes.

Behind these appearances is a reality of expressive skill: Henry himself seems to wield his form, to dramatic effect. The character stuck in the printed page has been granted a strange amount of formal power. If we accept the fiction that Henry is the speaker who violates nearly every rule of English, we should also consider that he ignores or adheres to his stanza, moves into and out of pentameter, and rhymes when it suits him. While in most comic poems the meter and rhymes seem to be going on autopilot, here they have been hijacked by the character. Like Auden's clown, Henry can do exactly what he wants within the form: whether he disrupts it or defers to it, he uses it to capture distinct, fleeting, vivid states of mind.

Song 67 shows Henry wielding the form, while he discusses the writing of poetry, with a glamorous surgical metaphor:

> I don't operate often. When I do,
> persons take note.
> Nurses look amazed. They pale.
> The patient is brought back to life, or so.
> The reason I don't do this more (I quote)
> is: I have a living to fail—
>
> because of my wife & son—to keep from earning. (1-7)

Henry truncates his second (usually pentameter) line, putting extreme stress on "persons take note." The pentameter of lines 4-5, by contrast, sounds pointedly calm, even blasé ("or so"), and controlled. Henry's tone is intensely calculated, deliberate: the conspicuous, parenthetical "I quote,"

and the colon that brings line 6 to an immediate halt, announce that he has planned each statement. And he exploits his stanza-ending to trick the reader, in slow motion. Around the edges of this grimly clever explanation glints another kind of comedy, that pointed out by Auden: Henry manipulates his form for an audience whose attention he wants to hold, despite his desperate situation and his almost antagonistic terseness.

At this high point of theatricality, the voice of the conscience intervenes. Henry does not simply refer to his own self with several pronouns: he gives his conscience a wholly distinct identity.[46] By doing so, he can represent the way his posturing or imperceptiveness is interrupted by an occasional moment of clear realization; it lets him keep some thoughts untouched by self-ostentation.

> —Mr Bones, I sees that.
> They for these operations thanks you, what?
> not pays you. —Right.
> You have seldom been so understanding.
> Now there is further a difficulty with the light:
>
> I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
> operations of great delicacy
> on my self. (8-15)

When Henry's more discerning, wider-minded self becomes involved, it is to sum up the financial problem with slightly dry sympathy: "thanks you, what? / not pays you." Most of Henry's mind, however, continues to dilate upon his sensational operations. At the second stanza's end, he hastens to tell us about the lack of light, fitting thirteen syllables into a space that typically holds less than six. His three-syllable conclusion—"on my self"—throws immense weight on each word of his grave revelation. It brings every formal element available (a drastically curtailed line, monosyllables, the sudden absence of rhyme) to bear on what seems to Henry most crucial.

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[46] Given this chapter's interest in the *character* as poet, the figure of the friend is interesting: Henry not only shapes his poem's form but fashions another voice for it.

Song 67's final dialogue balances and compresses several states of mind. When the fainter, wry voice of conscience infiltrates Henry's exhibition to inquire "Will you die?," the question (asked mostly in thrillers), it is poised between mockery and genuine concern. In response, Henry fractures his form both horizontally and vertically, for a hyperbolically suspenseful pause:

—My
friend, I succeeded. Later. (18-19)

At the last minute, however, he shifts toward manifest nonchalance, with a pun: by 1954, "later" is U.S. slang for goodbye, according to the OED. Through fluctuating meter and sleight-of-hand syntax, he operates with great delicacy on his readers, as well as on himself; his relish of the performance and the attention, though not explicit, is audible.

"I wants to make your flesh creep," says Joe the Fat Boy in *The Pickwick Papers* (107). Henry's style implies a similar desire, but also an awareness that he is performing, and of how his utterances are perceived and even scanned. The principle behind this comedy is put into words by Eliot's "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," which describes "situations where a character in the play *sees himself* in a dramatic light: … It is a sense which is almost a sense of humour (for when anyone is conscious of himself as acting, something like a sense of humour is present)" (81). Henry is conscious not only of his theatrics, but of the theatrical potential of his own stanza.

Berryman's character draws on techniques to well-established effects; it sometimes seems as if Henry has read Paul Fussell's examples of imitative meter and is compiling an anthology of exemplary cases. As Song 67 suggests, he exploits line- and stanza-breaks for impish mock surprise; in Song 82, such a line break makes surliness all the more aggressive: "I bow, & grunt 'Thank you. / I'm glad you could come / so late.'" Henry also uses the laws of stanza and meter to seem submissive. In Song 266, when asking God, "Was then the thing all planned? / I mention what I do not understand," Henry maintains his meter, rhymes fully, and speaks in standard English without

even a contraction; his doubt, such dutifulness implies, is honest, unrhetorical doubt. He also uses meter for specific cues. When his obsession with Miss Birnbaum stirs him to demand "a phó|tográph!| from Héaven!| by Héav|en, pléase!" (Song 227), the feet suggest that the first "Heaven" is elided into one syllable, poetically (or gathered in as an amphibrach), while both syllables of the second come at full volume, in desperation. Even the moments where Henry seems to lose all grip on his stanza, as in Song 46, show him doing so with intent:

> I am, outside. Incredible panic rules.
> People are blowing and beating each other without mercy.
> Drinks are boiling. Iced
> drinks are boiling. The worse anyone feels, the worse
> treated he is. Fools elect fools.
> A harmless man at an intersection said, under his breath, "Christ!" (1-6)

After a line of pentameter that is hurried along, toward its end, by an anapestic substitution, the stanza quickly runs wild. First a line is distended to contain a whole sentence. The four short sentence that follow are so hasty as to step on their own heels. Enjambment places italicized pressure on "Iced"; the Lowell-esque prosodic force is comically greater than the word itself). Henry rhymes "mercy" to "worse," desperately, and "iced," nonsensically or blasphemously, to "Christ," ending his stanza with a sixteen-syllable prose rush. The violence being inflicted on this sestet is so exaggerated as to call attention to itself as a deliberate act, expressing incredible panic at Henry's behest.

Our sense that this protagonist is wielding the form he is placed in is a new one in poetry. Berryman's dramatic monologue is very different from the prior notion of a dramatic monologue; the way his character speaks in verse differs from Frost's blank verse monologues or the couplets of Lowell's "Mills of the Kavanaughs." Those verse forms are not foregrounded as Berryman foregrounds this one, by an alternately warped or conformed-to stanza. Similarly, in elaborate stanzas like those of Donne, the speakers are not so assertively put forward as personae, not

troubled by a preface that reiterates the poems as spoken by someone "not the poet, not me." It is as if Berryman has taken to a dutiful extreme the New Critical separation of speaker and author; as Wimsatt and Brooks have claimed, "Once we have dissociated the speaker of the lyric from the personality of the poet, even the tiniest lyric reveals itself as drama" (*Literary Criticism* 675).

Berryman's use of a distinct character and a prominent, set-but-varying form creates the impression that this character is not merely talking (with John Berryman arranging his words for a stanza), but manipulating his verse form.[47] Although we tend to think of the novel as the site for such hall-of mirrors play—*Tristram Shandy* ruffles its own fictions; Molly Bloom begs Joyce to let her out of *Ulysses*; Flann O'Brien's characters try to kill their author, another fictive character, in *At Swim-Two-Birds*—*The Dream Songs* presents the added interest of watching a character conscious of the form in which he speaks.[48]

*The Dream Songs* shares with Chaucer's *The Tale of Sir Thopas* (another poem told in sestets by a deliberately inept teller, a version of Chaucer himself) a comic shimmer between incompetence and skill, embodied in Auden's clown. While both poems first invite laughter at what resembles a poetic failure, such laughter gives way to delight at finely balanced, perfectly timed performances, and at games with authorial control. Chaucer steps into his poem as a character who fails as teller and as metrist; Berryman, relinquishing control even further, allows a character to deliver his entire book and direct its form. Berryman's formal and self-reflective play, however, has a persistent ethical component: his subject is not metrical incompetence but moral failings: anarchic impulses, inattention, a lack of proportion, and egoism.

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[47] Samuel Maio offers a survey of previous explanations for Berryman's use of an imaginary character, and describes Henry as "an outlet for Berryman, one that allowed him to say anything" (116).

[48] I thank Marissa Grunes for catching a related moment in *As You Like It*: to Orlando's "Good day and happiness, dear Rosalind," Jaques replies, "Nay, then, God be wi' you, an you talk in blank verse" and then leaves (4.1.28-29).

Henry's use of the third person provides an emblem for the poem's focus on an unruly, bragging, half-oblivious, half-regardful self. The poem's pronoun-changing—e.g. Song 78's "Darkened his eye, his wild smile disappeared"—has been construed primarily as expressing fragmentation, depersonalization, and dissociation.[49] But it is also a device that expresses self-consciousness; it has been capitalized on by comic novelists. Dickens uses it constantly. In *Dombey and Son*, Major Bagstock speaks like this: "Joe Bagstock, Ma'am … has not had the happiness of bowing to you at your window, for a considerable period. Joe has been hardly used, Ma'am. His sun has been behind a cloud" (74). When the more melancholy protagonist of James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" lapses into heroic daydreams, he returns again and again to his name: faced with an imaginary firing squad, "'To hell with the handkerchief,' said Walter Mitty scornfully" (20). And in *The Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer revels in the third person: "Still, Mailer had a complex mind of sorts" (5). These instances, each to varying degrees, suggest characters imagining their own celebrity, picturing themselves as those writing about them would.

Just as these characters aspire to being noticed and narrated, so too "he" and "Henry" reminds us how Berryman's character dwells on himself, while self-dramatizing or self-denouncing. The name "Henry" receives about a parade of epithets, from "Huffy Henry … unappeasable Henry" (Song 1) to "impenetrable Henry, goatish, reserved" (Song 297). The name is pushed around and sometimes used as metrical stuffing, contributing to the speaker's sense of himself as a movable, kickable object; as Song 70 querulously declares, "Henry hates the world. What the world to Henry / did will not bear thought." But in a study of how Shakespeare's tragic heroes refer to themselves in

[49] Louise Glück asserts that "the drama of the poems, is the absence of a firm self. The proliferating selves dramatize, they do not disguise, this absence" (76). To W. S. Merwin, the "different personae … shift their shapes, their presences, their identities insofar as they have any such thing, sometimes in midsentence, with the mere changing of the indicative pronoun. The reader's resulting uncertainty is just what Berryman intended" (*xxv*).

the third person, S. Viswanathan suggests that something more complex than self-pity is occurring: the third person "suggests a paradoxical, simultaneous coexistence of feelings of self-contempt and a proper sense of one's public worth, not necessarily vanity, producing a dramatically profitable tension between the two attitudes to oneself" (414). We see this paradox constantly in Henry's attitude, where eulogy and self-mockery occur in a single breath. *The Dream Songs* responds to Yvor Winters's early recommendation that Berryman "think more and feel less, and to mitigate, in some fashion, his infinite compassion for himself" ("Three Poets," 405); here inordinate feeling is entwined with humor and thought. By creating a character who seems cognizant of his verse form, Berryman intensifies the poem's play, and the way it records every passing mood.

Berryman faces us with an imaginary character who is aware of being in a poetic sequence, and who expresses himself through his confining form. Although Henry is still frequently described as a confessional stand-in for a maudlin, attitudinizing John Berryman,[50] *The Dream Songs* asks us to reconsider the places in which the poet seems to maunder or brag. In these places, the clown stumbles not only for our amusement, but to convey exactly what he wants to convey about his inner life. Passing judgment on the speaker of *The Dream Songs* becomes harder than the poem's confessional label and its author's turbulent biography might have led us to expect; in the same moment that we identify obtuseness or self-absorption, we realize the prosodic and linguistic techniques that carry it out.

Berryman begins thinking early about what one can do with characters who seem aware of having roles and an urge to perform in a drama. The title poem of his first book, *The Dispossessed*, opens with a line from Pirandello's metatheatrical "Six Characters in Search of An Author":

> 'and something that … that is theirs—no longer ours'

[50] For a recent overview of Berryman's place in confessional poetry, see Philip Coleman, *John Berryman's Public Vision* (3-21); and for an instance of how Berryman's reputation as a *poète maudit* continues into the present, see Christopher Benfey, "The Genius and Excess of John Berryman" (51).

> stammered to me the Italian page. A wood
> seeded & towered suddenly. I understood. (*CP* 66)

In the play, six fictional characters interrupt a rehearsal, begging the stage manager to allow their melodrama to be enacted. Eventually the manager insists that his own actors take over the six characters' plot. As the two levels of fiction clash, so do tragedy and comedy, with the manager exasperatedly declaring, "I should like to know if anyone has ever heard of a character who gets right out of his part and perorates and speechifies as you do. Have you ever heard of a case?" inadvertently recognizing their reality even as he dismisses them (*Plays* 45). It is one of the dispossessed characters, trying to explain his dismay, who stammers: "Something that is … that is theirs—and no longer ours …" (*Plays* 50).

In Berryman's early poem, the "stammered" line leads to a revelation. The image of the suddenly towering wood, with its "whole bole, branches, roots," anticipates Dream Song 75, where the newly published book takes the shape of an "unshedding bulky bole-proud blue-green moist // thing," a "flashing & bursting tree" (the same tree that the critics "performed their friendly operations" on). Trees spring up when inspiration hits: the root of inspiration, for Berryman's first book, is in questions of characters and authors, about what is "ours" and what is "theirs."

In *The Dream Songs*, something that was Berryman's—a precarious mind, with its shortcomings and turbulent emotions—is no longer simply his. The confession of *The Dream Songs* makes fun of Berryman's every failing, at a remove, with humor and care. This comedy depends not only on an irreverent burlesque of the idea of a tidy, unified poem, but on a true-to-life representation of the "giant faults" of a human mind (Song 79). The formal innovations of *The Dream Songs* simultaneously pull us in and keep us at a remove: they serve as a reminder of how much artfulness—and thought—goes into Henry's blurted-out wildness. As we move from the laughter of superiority to the laughter of delighted wonder, we move into the territory that will

concern us for the rest of this study. *The Dream Songs* offers us an opening instance of how comedy balances between the manifestly flawed and the brilliantly *right*. As Berryman's unruly comic poem suggests, and as Robert Lowell's "farfetched misalliance" will reveal in greater depth, the paradoxes at work blossom from miracle and mishap.

CHAPTER TWO

*Robert Lowell's "farfetched misalliance"*

In the year that the severe, topheavy, violently enjambed pentameters of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1947) won the Pulitzer Prize, Lowell was also writing letters in the following spirit:

> Morning scene: Bob Giroux staggers into the Taylors' kitchen in pajamas, wipes percolator with his bath-towel, lights already lit burner, makes coffee but forgets to put coffee in. Dilly with a beer can in one hand and a huge ham-bone in the other. (*Letters* 61)

A few paragraphs later, Lowell observes that he's "writing like the villain in Pickwick," referring to the disjointed narratives of Alfred Jingle; although Lowell's own descriptions never reach that state of syntactic extremity, they do fix on glinting, deflating peculiarities as Dickens does. The voice of the letters is often self-deprecating, sometimes pseudo-apocalyptic; in a letter to Bishop, for example, Lowell relays his hungover and uncaffeinated trip to a Staten Island literary conference:

> Lunch: ham mostly fat and terrible things, egglike, that look like they've been through a steam laundry. A joint conference on drama, poetry and fiction in which the conference director, a Mr. Rust Hills, makes more and more surly references to my colleague Saul Bellow's heroes. Mounting explosive heat. I side-step the conference nymphomaniac. Swimming. Something has gone wrong with the tide, at every six inches there are deflated contraceptives. Boys of five blowing them up like balloons. Hideous blue and bloated things floating. The water striped with reddish algae that stains. Red sand on the beach, that also stains. […] Stifling sleepless heat, sounds of intimacy, outrage and drinking. A young bearded poet announcing that he is the best poet of 24 in America, then rapping each dormitory door with a toilet brush. (*Letters* 387)

Each phrase equates and accumulates grievances, dramatically. Even the weather seems almost supernaturally bad: "Something has gone wrong with the tide, at every six inches there are deflated contraceptives," as if dredged up by something abnormal. Lowell's faux-meticulousness ("a Mr. Rust Hills") sits alongside quasi-Biblical repetition ("reddish algae that *stains*. Red sand on the beach, that also *stains*"; "mounting explosive *heat* … stifling sleepless *heat*") and casually roughened grammar ("ham mostly fat"). The "terrible things, egglike" and the over-sonorous "hideous blue and bloated

things floating" emit literal unspeakableness. As an epistolary performance, it rivals the letters of Flannery O'Connor, or of Bishop herself.

Lowell's poetry, however, is frequently set up as the midcentury's archetype for unrelieved seriousness and megalomania.[51] This reputation derives, in part, from a conflation of Lowell's work and his life; such a conflation seems partly behind Harold Bloom's early, influential claim that the poetry is merely a rehashed biography:

> Our disease is not so much alienation as it is solipsism, and the subject of modern poetry is endlessly solipsism, or more simply the hopeless question: why is there no subject? There is a recent fashion for confessional verse, stemming from the conversion of Lowell's style that took place in *Life Studies*. The fallacy of the fashion, and even of its distinguished inventor, is that confessional verse is indeed too easy, vulgar, and disgusting when all verse is necessarily afflicted by self-consciousness anyway. (462)

While the impression of easy, self-indulgent directness has been dislodged by studies of Lowell's verbal artistry and philosophic ambiguity, claims of both excessive self-regard and sloppiness recur.[52]

Lowell's humor is crucial: it leavens poems that might otherwise be so laden as to be prostrated. As Irvin Ehrenpreis has suggested, a "comic element releases [Lowell] and gives him a feeling of magical transcendence. Often the danger springs from [Lowell's] own unmanageable emotions, … impulses that now seem predetermined and external, beyond control." As Ehrenpreis suggests, humor evades what Stephen James has called "tyrannical personality traits" (30). According

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[51] For critics who do point to Lowell's humor, see George McFadden on *Life Studies* (96-106); Irvin Ehrenpreis on Lowell's wit across the books (*NYRB*); Frank Kearful on humor of language in "The March 1" and "The March 2" ("Poetics and Politics," 89-100); and Steven Axelrod on the humor, amid deprivation and crisis, of *Day by Day* (*Robert Lowell,* 235-38). More critics, however, have resembled John Vernon in finding Lowell "humorless" (307): for Paul Breslin, Lowell, like Plath, is "seldom funny, and even when [he is, his] is a muted, saturnine humor" (57). Bonnie Costello contrasts Lowell with Bishop "who, unlike Lowell, finds much use for her sense of humor" ("Tragicomic Mode" 461); Charles Altieri writes that Lowell "has never been a very playful man, at least in his poetry" (60).

[52] For summaries of Lowell's reception, see Steven Axelrod's introduction to *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell* (1-26) and Stephen James, *Shades of Authority* (9-10); for a history of the confessional label more broadly, see the first chapter of Philip Coleman's *John Berryman's Public Vision* (3-21).

to Paul Breslin, Lowell "understood the seductiveness of self-aggrandizement" (86); in the words of Derek Walcott:, "Lowell in his ranting mania, a full Caligula … fantasized dictatorship" (97).[53] Megalomania and dictatorial fantasies are among the dangers that Ehrenpreis perceives Lowell's comedy as reacting against: this comedy undercuts not only external forces that threaten and press, but his own tendencies. It helps him elude seemingly uncontrollable *internal* elements; it forces his poems away from the threat of any one dominating view, style, or tone.

The late poem "Unwanted" offers a tentative, retrospective description of this humor, its technique, and its consequences:

> I was surer, wasn't I, once …
> and had flashes when I first found
> a humor for myself in images,
> farfetched misalliance
> that made evasion a revelation? (*Collected Poems* 831)

The sentence almost trails off in uncertainty about even his surer years; but it revives to achieve clear pentameter in "a humor for myself in images" before culminating in "revelation"—revelation offset, of course, by its question mark. These somewhat unfastened lines suggest, however, that Lowell's surprising linkages (primarily of metaphor, an "evasion" because it calls one object by another's name[54]) are the source of his humor, and that humor, in turn, gives rise to moments of understanding.[55]

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[53] On Lowell's troubled relation to power, see also James, 9-45.

[54] In Vendler's words, "Allying an image to something else—a proposition, a theme—in a 'farfetched' way describes the creation of metaphor—that transfer across…that brings two unlikely things together" (*Last Books,* 75).

[55] Syntactically, "misalliance" seems to be in apposition to "images" and is thus grammatically derived from "humor"; but "a humor for myself" and "farfetched misalliance" are paralleled on the page, with each phrase given its own line. Whether nested or appositive, each depends on the other, and both are responsible for Lowell's flashes of perception.

Lowell's humor does not always result in revelation, delight, or hope. Vereen Bell opens his study by stating that "Robert Lowell's poetry is identifiable by nothing so much as its chronic and eventually systematic pessimism" (1), and to find a consistently uplifting or therapeutic agenda in this poetry would be misleading. Humor is not a panacea in Lowell, and his attitude toward it is extremely mixed. But Lowell's fluctuating humor does persistently undermine its prevailing situations, whether of pessimism, mania, self-righteousness, or even satire; it vivifies his poetry, and reveals a mind more self-questioning and self-ironizing than is often noted. This humor is grounded in incongruity and alliance; formal insubordination—whether of image, language, structure, or prosody—persistently undermines its predominant styles, and subverts every quality that threatens to overwhelm a poem. This chapter follows how humor runs under and against Lowell's authoritative judgments in *Lord Weary's Castle*, the isolating "I" in *Life Studies,* the traditional expectations of the sonnets, and the atmosphere of exhaustion and enervation in *Day by Day*.

### 1. "One laughs out in church": *Lord Weary's Castle*

Lowell himself later deprecated the surface of *Lord Weary's Castle* as often "stiff, humorless and even impenetrable" (*Prose* 226). Of its focal poem, "The Quaker Graveyard," Randall Jarrell wrote that "the coiling violence of the rhetoric, the harshly stubborn intensity that accompanies its verbs and verbals, the clustering stresses learned from accentual verse, come from a man contracting every muscle, grinding his teeth together till his shut eyes ache" (*The Nation* 76). John Berryman, too, stacked physical verbs to express the poems' severity: "[Lowell's] earlier poems writhed crunched spat against Satan, war, modern Boston, the Redcoats, Babel, Leviathan, Sodom" (*Freedom of the Poet* 287). But Jarrell also seems to find something verging on the comic—a mixture of grandeur and particularity: "The poems' wit is often the wit of things: the 'poised relations sipping sherry / And tracking up the carpet,' […] The 'corn-fed mouse / Reined in his bestial passions' […]. One laughs

out in church" (77).[56] Berryman, in turn, punctures his list of Lowell's targets by tucking the specificity of "modern Boston" in between the all-encompassing "Satan" and "Sodom." Both critics bring out a lack of proportion: that war, Babel, and a contemporary city are equivalent, and that the mouse should be "corn-fed" and yet have ambitiously Latinate "bestial passions" to rein in.

Lowell flouts decorum in unlikely, and unpromising, places; in the elegy for his grandfather, "The bread-stuffed ducks are brooding" (*CP* 24). The declaration is pulled between Miltonic portentousness and an implication that the ducks have eaten so much as to become immobile. A like incongruity occurs in "Mother Marie Therese," where the "hysterical hosannas" of nuns "rouse / The loveless harems of the buck ruffed grouse, / Who drums, untroubled now, beside the sea" (*CP* 98); instead of a solitary, intoning bard—such as the one who plunges off a cliff at the end of Thomas Gray's ode—there is a frilled, thickset bird, surrounded by assonance.

Such moments of concrete, slightly unnecessary particularity in over-dressed language might not be noticed, or might be explained as badly overwrought glitches in vehement, apocalyptic poems. "Winter in Dunbarton," which Richard Tillinghast describes evocatively as "seeth[ing] with a conviction that there is something terribly wrong with the world" (208), briefly swerves out of its grisliness to present figures that are usually festive, dumpy, child-made, and exemplified by Norman Rockwell's covers for the Christmas *Saturday Evening Post*:

> This winter all the snowmen turn to stone,
> Or, sick of the long hurly-burly, rise
> Like butterflies into Jehovah's eyes
> And shift until their crystals must atone
>
> In water. (*CP* 26)

[56] Jarrell took this paragraph out of the essay when he collected it for the 1953 collection *Poetry and the Age*; the omission may owe something to the publication of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* in 1951, where the "wit of things" is so relentless as to become monotonous.

The snowmen's doomsday-like ascension and dissolution are undermined by their overdone style. The periphrasis of "And shift until their crystals must atone // In water" might come from Pope's *Peri Bathous* (where letters are opened by exclaiming "wax! render up thy trust," and where to cut bread is to "strip white Ceres of her nut-brown Coat" [427]). Lowell intensifies his periphrastic, vatic grandeur by stagily enjambing across the stanza break before coming to a sudden and dramatic halt.[57] Nick Halpern's sense of early Lowell's "prosodic excess—in the alliteration, the enjambment, that does not quite correspond to the themes" (53) is apt for this stanza.

Language and form at odds with their subject matter emerge in another poem of judgment, "At the Altar"; it is the fourth and final part of a sequence that culminates in adultery, drunk driving, and death. The speaker crashes his car into a church, from which he sees his own funeral; he concludes the poem with a posthumous speech from Hell: Lucifer "watches me for Mother, and will turn / The bier and baby-carriage where I burn" (*CP* 47). Although a summary of the action suggests dark irony, in which alliteration caps off Oedipal mockery, the poem's stylistic misalliances combine to less classifiable effect. They begin with its array of lights, which transform and conflate people and objects; "the Altar" of the poem's title turns into the "gold table" of a nightclub:

> I sit at a gold table with my girl
> Whose eyelids burn with brandy. What a whirl
> Of Easter eggs is colored by the lights,
> As the Norwegian dancer's crystalled tights
> Flash with her naked leg's high-booted skate,
> Like Northern Lights upon my watching plate.
> The twinkling steel above me is a star;
> I am a fallen Christmas tree. (*CP* 47)

Heavily enjambed, unpredictably alliterating couplets push syntax onward, until a climactic declaration: "I am a fallen Christmas tree." This sentence splices an often-tragic *I am* construction—

[57] Wallace Stevens uses a comparably ungainly enjambment and stop to more obviously playful effect: "We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango / Chutney" (401).

heard in Leontes's "I am a feather for each wind that blows," Antonio's "I am a tainted wether of the flock," and Satan's "which way I fly is hell; myself am Hell"[58]—with an image of contemporary domestic disaster: not a fallen man, but a mess of tinsel, electric lights, and glass balls, forced to lie prone until hauled upright.[59] Half-campy and half-grim utterances such as "I am a fallen Christmas tree" recall T. S. Eliot's alignment of a dramatic sense with a humorous one: "when anyone is conscious of himself as acting, something like a sense of humour is present" (81).[60]

Stylistic discordance also diminishes the next fall, ten lines later, as the drunken speaker crashes his car into a church:

> Time runs, the windshield runs with stars. The past
> Is cities from a train, until at last
> Its escalating and black-windowed blocks
> Recoil against a Gothic church. The clocks
> Are tolling. I am dying. The shocked stones
> Are falling like a ton of bricks and bones
> That snap and splinter and descend in glass (ll. 15-21)

Amid the echoes of Marlowe (Faustus, about to be carried to hell, declares "The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike" [5.2.68]) and the tumult of verbs is an oddly commonplace phrase: the stones of the church "are falling like a ton of bricks." This simile, a cliché frequently used for lesser weights, adds not force but its reverse: it takes violence *out* of the fall. Conversely, an abstraction—"the past"—slams into a literal, physical "Gothic church." Such a conflation of

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[58] From *A Winter's Tale* (2.3.153), *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1.114), and *Paradise Lost* (4.75). Henry Fielding burlesques the construction: "I am a multitude of walking griefs" (*The Tragedy of Tragedies* II.8).

[59] In "91 Revere Street," the Christmas ceremonies are venerated and cloying; Lowell relishes their being disrupted: "Outside on the streets of Beacon Hill, it was night, it was dismal, it was raining. Something disturbing had befallen the familiar and honorable Salvation Army band; its big drum and accordion were now accompanied by drunken voices howling: *The Old Gray Mare, she ain't what she used to be* […]" (*CP* 132).

[60] A decade later, Lowell—dryly or sheepishly—summed up the poem's plot in a reading: "[It's] a poem in four parts with all the vices, or as many as I can get into four parts […]—and finally, in the last part, there's an automobile accident where the hero and his mistress crash into a church" (Berkeley recording, 22:12). Frank Kearful notes the irreverent conflation of "Easter, the Star of Bethlehem, a star on top of a Christmas tree, and the children's verses, 'Twinkle, twinkle little star'" (Kearful 2007/08; 41-42).

enormous violence and flimsy commonplace encapsulates the way *Lord Weary's Castle* flickers between fearsome scenes of judgment and colloquial phrases that exceed—or fall short of—the subject; elsewhere in the book, one encounters "the hero skating on thin ice" (*CP* 48) and a whale "sick as a dog" (*CP* 16).

This strangely over- and under-stating language counterbalances the rigid authoritativeness that has been repeatedly ascribed to Lowell (Louise Bogan labelled his "tendency toward moral rigidity and emotional morbidity" in an early review of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* [110]).[61] More recently, Jahan Ramazani has sketched how all-knowing the volume's pronouncements can seem: in the elegies of *Lord Weary's Castle*, "it is the poet, and not God, who assumes the role of almighty judge […], damning the dead with astonishing confidence. Charon-like, he ferries them to the hell of his unforgiving poems, where they will forever remain sealed in representations of themselves as selfish, pretentious, and domineering" (232). Although Ramazani's description of Lowell's superior, too-confident tone is apt, that tone is permeated by its own inconsistencies and excesses.[62]

Decades later, in *Day by Day,* Lowell tells his mother that "Your exaggerating humor, / the opposite of deadpan, / the opposite of funny to a son, / is mine now" (*CP* 789). Lowell's natural mode of being funny was to be "deadpan," to overlay humor on grimness, not to be manifestly jocose. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, the deadpan is a form that "denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener is supposed to receive the story" (91). Replace *story* with *utterance*, and Lowell's own incongruities and absurdities draw on a similar pose. A remark he made in a late interview with Ian Hamilton is relevant: "I had a mechanical, gristly, alliterative

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[61] A few years later, Stephen Spender made a similar point regarding *Life Studies*: "[Lowell's] weakness is a judgment sure to the point of rigidity and lacking in a certain freedom: the freedom which allows that the judge might not be 100 percent right" (17).

[62] For another view of style in *Lord Weary's Castle*, see Vereen Bell (10-31), who contends that "the rational faculty begins by seeking to discover order and succeeds only in imposing it" (10).

style that did not charm much, unless … something *slipped*" (*Prose* 286; Lowell's ellipses, my italics). What "slips" most often in *Lord Weary's Castle* is decorum and proportion; the book's speeches seem to come from a declaiming prophet who fails to notice the unnecessary motions of his gait. Lowell's dramatic rhetoric is tripped by the slang, clichés, puns, incongruous metaphors, sonic oddities, and bathetic particularities within it. Such language aerates its somber, too-certain scenes: a Christmas tree falls into a vision of judgment, "blue thunderbreasts" and "buckets of blessings" appear in a prayer (*CP* 25). It is the verbal equivalent of the poet's youthful "doodl[ing] handlebar / mustaches on the last Russian Czar" (*CP* 171). If traces of "farfetched misalliance" can make "evasion a revelation" in *Lord Weary's Castle*, they do so in this infiltration of decorum, whereby the lines continually upset or question or undermine their declamations.

The humor of *Lord Weary's Castle* is glancing, erratic, and disruptive. It is a form of what Philip Fisher has called "double consciousness"; here, in contrast to "the single-mindedness of the passions," something approximating "a sense of humor about oneself and one's actions" is present (*The Vehement Passions* 42). It might be compared to the moment when one has an uncontrollable impulse to laugh in the middle of outrage, tears, or "church" (as Jarrell said); it subverts the absurdity of one's wrath or certainty even while one is experiencing it. Lowell's half-virtuosic, half-clumsy linguistic and sonic effects begin to unsettle the image, set forth at the beginning of this chapter, of oracular, stentorian verse; but his humor does not take a specific direction: rather, it shows a voice in rebellion against everything, including its own brutality. Lowell's misalliances—of the incongruously too-particular, the sonically outrageous or delightful, the visually excessive, the rhetorically over-grand, the formally conspicuous—disrupt the censorious perspective, the black-and-white of salvation and damnation. Something *funny*, in both sense of the term, acts as leaven within Lowell's dominant, tempestuous style; although peripheral, humor weakens any authoritative point of view. It even undercuts his own sarcasm. However, the stylistic mismatch does not attack

or burlesque a particular moral stance. Lowell's humor is not inherently redemptive, transformative, or otherwise morally positive; and it can be brutal—laughter is explicitly brutal in several early poems.[63]

There are certain kinds of humor that Lowell mistrusts throughout his work. First, he is repelled by the snowballing, complacent laughter of a group, that directed at something or someone: the kind described in Henri Bergson's declaration that the comic "will come into being […] whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence" (8). Lowell's tone towards such a group, such as the police who "with jocose civility, / […] laugh at everything I say" while they invade his room (*CP* 821), is caustic.[64] And when Lowell is not the subject of laughter, he can still find it threatening, as in this sonnet:

> the virus crawling on its belly like a blot,
> an inch an aeon; the tyrannosaur,
> first carnivore to stand on his two feet,
> the neanderthal, first anthropoid to laugh— (*CP* 423)

In the sequence from virus to tyrannosaur to neanderthal, laughter is not divine or even human—only "anthropoid." It is another weapon, like teeth or legs; another means for an organism to become superior. The laugh seems to be an unnerving laughter of triumph at the evolutionary stage one has reached.

Second, a tendency to be amused by everything—including by nothing at all—is tied, in Lowell's work, to mental instability. He ends one late poem with the ominous "I grow too merry, /

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[63] A king with a "Breughel-peasant laugh / Exploding" kills a pet dog on a whim (*CP* 43), and Satan "laughs into my face until I cry" (*CP* 20).

[64] "Visitors," from which the former lines are taken, is—perhaps in response to the police officers' voyeuristic amusement—one of the most aggressively *joking* poems in *Day by Day*. "They are fat beyond the call of duty," Lowell declares; outside his window, "on the grassy London square, / black cows ruminate in uniform, / lowing routinely like a chainsaw"; his "visitors are good beef" (*CP* 821).

when I stand in my nakedness to dress" (*CP* 819); he is painfully conscious of how his own mind might turn against him, and the fear of that instability arises frequently and vividly. The madness of Harry Kavanaugh is shown in "a joy that made your teeth / Grin all to-whichways through your lower lip" (*CP* 84). Later, the character "baby-smile[s] through strings of orange juice" (*CP* 86). A poem for Israel Citkovitz, Caroline Blackwood's former husband, shows a smile as purely physical, completely detached from the person: "I see your face smile, / your mouth is stepped on without bruising" (*CP* 748). Uncontrollable, irrational humor and mania were linked throughout Lowell's life; Ian Hamilton describes how Lowell held Tate "at arm's length out his second-floor apartment window; suspended thus, Tate was forced to listen to … [his 'Ode to the Confederate Dead']" (*A Biography* 155). It is an entertaining scene to picture; but within a few days Lowell was so unstable and confused as to be forcibly hospitalized.

Even in the volumes after *Lord Weary's Castle,* the humor Lowell values inclines more toward a brief, inward flash than to anything registered physically, aloud; an overtly jocose style would be too close to the complacent laughter of Bergson's group, or turn into the untethered, estranging hilarity of a manic episode. Lowell is ambivalent about the possibilities of humor; in one sonnet he seems to idealize and dismiss it:

> If words were handled like the new grass writhing, rippling
> in an urban brook, grass washed to double greenness,
> one could get through life, though mute, with courage
> and a merciful heart—two things, and a third thing:
> humor … as the turned-out squatter clings
> with amused bravery that takes the form of mercy
> to the Old Square in Caracas, his shaky, one-man hovel,
> the spoiled baroque cathedral from the age of Drake.
> The church has hay in its courtyard; householders own the Common—
> conservatives reduced to conservation:
> green things, the well, the school, the writhing grass;
> the communist committed to his commune,
> artist and office-holder to a claque of less
> than fifty souls … to each his venomous in-group. ("Caracas 2"; *Notebook* 28)

The bare abstractions—courage, a merciful heart, humor—stand out among the dilapidation and chaos of the rest of the sonnet, but they are entirely provisional: *if* words were handled in this way, one *could* get through life with only these virtues. In reality, the evicted squatter will be pulled off the square, and words are handled by communist, artist, and office-holder as things to be manipulated. A few years later, when revising this sonnet for *History*, Lowell emphasizes humor further, writing "to the first thing: / humor" (*CP* 543), but the possibilities for a powerful verbal humor remain hypothetical. Instead, Lowell's humor tends to what his sonnet for Harpo Marx called a "wincing smile" (*CP* 540).

### 2. "What use is my sense of humor?" *Life Studies*

"Waking in the Blue" asks this question after eleven lines of suffering, in which the speaker projects his mental state onto everything in his limited range of view.

> The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,
> rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head
> propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*.
> He catwalks down our corridor.
> Azure day
> makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
> Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
> Absence! My heart grows tense
> as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
> (This is the house for the "mentally ill.")
>
> What use is my sense of humor? (*CP* 183)

As an "agonized" window in a mental hospital becomes still "bleaker," and crows "maunder on the petrified fairway," Lowell summons up detachment sufficient to end the first stanza with a gratuitous, parenthetical explanation. The couplet, which plays up a modern euphemism with mannered quotation marks and nursery-rhyme rhythms, mocks and flattens the pain that came before it; it is as if Lowell forces himself back to irony, away from the consolation of tragic grandeur.

The poem ends with a similar jostling of registers. Its chastened last sentence seems resigned to a situation and future shared with the other mental patients:

> After a hearty New England breakfast,
> I weigh two hundred pounds
> this morning. Cock of the walk,
> I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
> before the metal shaving mirrors,
> and see the shaky future grow familiar
> in the pinched, indigenous faces
> of these thoroughbred mental cases,
> twice my age and half my weight.
> We are all old-timers,
> each of us holds a locked razor. (ll. 34-50)

Although Lowell "strut[s]" before a mirror, he renders the other inmate in the caricatured language with which he also describes himself; he sums them up with a dismissive article (*these* mental cases), sudden rhyme, and pun.[65] As Bell asserts, Lowell's "sense of humor and his breakfast enable him to function in the normal world, suddenly no longer terrified but smug—'cock of the walk.' But at the end, Lowell turns the poem ominously back toward its original psychic provenance" (62). In such a reading, despair brackets the poem, as in fact it does; this sense of humor is superior and flimsy. But in spite of that final image, with its return to the first stanza's hyper-significant language, the poem exemplifies how a heart grown "tense / as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill" can still draw on humor.

The most immediate answer to line 11's question—"What use is my sense of humor?"—occurs in the sketches that follow it: they move the poet's gaze away, if only temporarily, from the "agonized blue window" to the schoolboyish, phallic caricatures of the patients:

> I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,
> once a Harvard all-American fullback,
> (if such were possible!)

[65] "Thoroughbred" a "well-born, well-bred, or thoroughly trained person" (OED, n. 2), such as a Boston Brahmin; and as adjective, "Thoroughly educated or accomplished; hence, complete, thorough, out-and-out," a 'real' mental case (a. 2).

still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties,
as he soaks, a ramrod
with the muscle of a seal
in his long tub,
vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing.
A kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap,
worn all day, all night,
he thinks only of his figure,
of slimming on sherbet and ginger ale—
more cut off from words than a seal.

This is the way day breaks in Bowditch Hall at McLean's;
the hooded night lights bring out "Bobbie,"
Porcellian '29,
a replica of Louis XVI
without the wig—
redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,
as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit
and horses at chairs. (ll. 12-32)

Lowell's language both ridicules and disguises these figures. They are seen not as people—Stanley, rendered flatly, would be torpid; "Bobbie" would be rampaging—but as Dickensian studies: stylized, disconnected pieces of figurative language. One is a 'ramrod,' one 'swashbuckling'; one has a golf cap, the other lacks a "wig"; a seal soaks in a tub, a beached whale thrashes on land.

Visual connotations are as alive to Lowell as etymologies are to Milton; the characters here gain considerable energy from having each of their images *seen* as fully as possible. Night lights "bring out" Bobbie; he is attracted like an insect, or exhibited like a performer. "Porcellian," though biographically accurate (the man on whom this inmate is based had been a member of that eating club), suggests a pig treated with Latinate grandeur; "without the wig" offers an implied rhyme to that imaginary pig. After fleetingly resembling a pig and a bald monarch, the character is metamorphosed immediately; he becomes, amid difficult-to-articulate *r*'s and *w*'s, "redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale." "Redolent" conspicuously prevaricates as to how Bobbie smells—it can mean fragrant, or pungent, or evocative; it may allude to a chapter of *Moby Dick*, where Melville defends the sperm whale against charges of foul smell:

> Nor indeed can the whale possibly be otherwise than fragrant, when, as a general thing, he enjoys such high health; taking abundance of exercise; always out of doors; though, it is true, seldom in the open air. … What then shall I liken the Sperm Whale to for fragrance, considering his magnitude? Must it not be to that famous elephant, with jewelled tusks, and redolent with myrrh, which was led out of an Indian town to do honour to Alexander the Great? (449)

The image of the alliteratively exuberant "redolent and roly-poly" sperm whale lasts only for a line, however; Bobbie then takes the characteristics of a large baby, as he "swashbuckles about in his birthday suit / and horses at chairs." ("Swashbuckle," from *buckler,* n.: at the beginning of the line this figure has armor, but by its end he has nothing, except a very faint resemblance to Don Quixote, who tilted not at chairs but at windmills.)

That metaphoric virtuosity does not account fully for the lines' subdued humor. Lowell's comedy depends on a texture of startling connections. Nearly every word in this poem works both centripetally and centrifugally. For example, the "mare's-nest" is a figure of speech that can be taken in at least three ways: it describes an untidy head of hair (from which the night attendant rouses); it suggests the befuddlement of the student faced with C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning*; and it holds for the study of the book itself, the title of which is enough to entangle one in circles of interpretation.[66] But the mare's nest then extends outward. In its implausible, fantastic drawing-together of creatures, it encapsulates the poem's strange mixing of animals, such as the patient compared to a "whale" who then "horses" at chairs. It is the first of several animal metamorphoses: the "catwalk[ing]" attendant, the patient "hors[ing]," the "thoroughbred" mental cases, and the "cock of the walk" with a "turtle-necked" shirt also join the "mare's nest." The close-up image of a single snarled head, in turn, has points of contact with the "crimson golf-cap" of Stanley and the figure of Bobbie "without the wig," before ending with the unnumbered "crew

[66] A mare's-nest is an emblem for an "an illusory discovery, esp. one that is much vaunted and betrays foolish credulity" (OED 1), cautioning those who might seek the meaning of meaning.

haircuts" of other attendants.

Farfetched misalliance here becomes a distinctive comic game, in which language links unrelated facets. By drawing one into uncannily intertwined words, it relieves the monotony of the flat "hours and hours" spent under the attendants' "slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle," to which the poet's "grin" is implicitly contrasted.[67] The linguistic animation, whereby words actually seem to take on a life of their own, is Lowell's version of Berryman's "inner resources." Against the poem's preoccupation with time and enclosure, the liveliness of language—in which a shirt that could resemble prison stripes becomes an mock-exotic "turtle-necked French sailor's jersey"—is a counter. After the out-branching and in-gathering strands of "mare's nest," other double meanings and incidental echoes begin to emerge.[68] Given the varied compression of each charged word, only a few seem incongruous on first reading. Instead, they blend in a general atmosphere of liveliness and idiosyncrasy. The subsequent effect, however, is that what initially seems to be colloquial, or a vivifying detail, strikes against other oddities and ignites; delight, and teasing significance, accrue.[69]

Critics have tended to single out either Lowell's centrifugal or centripetal force. The former is described in David Kalstone's account of *Life Studies*' seemingly random coincidences as a "linguistic tease, not fully worked out" (*Five Temperaments* 54) and in Bell's statement that such

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[67] The title of "Waking in the Blue" traps a return to consciousness in a gerund, continually; the poem frequently looks at the time: "In between the limits of day, / hours and hours go by." Time is fast-forwarded, rewound, and paused: just after "This is the way day breaks," "the hooded *night* lights bring out 'Bobbie,'" and the poem ends after breakfast, with the rest of the day remaining to be faced. Years and dates are dwelt on: Stanley is "now sunk in his sixties," hoarding "the build of a boy in his twenties," with his cap worn "all day, all night."

[68] The puns begin in the title. Beside the "azure day" seen through the window, "the blue" is also slang for the sea (OED 5a), as in *Moby Dick*'s "the three ropes went straight down into the blue" (336), and "into the blue" as "into the far distance or (fig.) into the unknown; (b) Army slang to a distance from base, the main body of troops, etc." (P3 a.). With this pun coincide, e.g., sea creatures, harpoons, a hall named for the maritime navigator Nathaniel Bowditch, and a sailor's jersey.

[69] Other minuscule connections abound: "hearty" is the adjective that Lowell, whose "heart grows tense," can apply only to his breakfast, not himself; the "kingly granite profile" sends out threads to the "Victorian plumbing" and to Louis XVI.

coincidences "both provoke[e] our attention and elud[e] our understanding" (53). The latter involves the individual words' double- and triple-edged meanings, which Christopher Ricks touches on in his description of the "anti-pun," where Lowell "invit[es] a word or sense which is then fended off." Ricks, stressing the technique's similarity to objects that fail to collide, argues that "whereas in a pun there are two senses which either get along or quarrel, in an anti-pun there is only one sense admitted but there is another sense denied admission. So the response is not 'this means x' (with the possibility even of its meaning y being no part of your response), but 'this-means-x-and-doesn't-mean-y', all hyphenated" (265-66). Lowell's two senses, however, frequently *do* relate to each other: if not as legitimate puns, as puns of connotation, or as what William Empson called "subdued puns" (102). In the two senses of "maunder," for example, crows dawdle and chatter. Together, puns and verbal echoes reinforce Kalstone's idea of a "linguistic tease"; such linguistic correspondences are a form of large-scale wordplay. They send the reader back and forth across stanzas, following these lively, fluid and often-nonsensical connections, in which a word becomes linked to a piece of recent slang, to a poeticism, to an age-old symbol, to a realist detail.

These are not connections that one can explicate, generally: it seems likely that not even Lowell could explain why the poems of *Life Studies* interlock the way they do. Pirandello's essay on humor speaks to similar waywardness and inexplicability:

> Don't we often feel a spark inside ourselves, strange thoughts like flashes of folly, illogical thoughts we dare not confide even to ourselves, arising from a soul different from the one we recognize in ourselves? For these, we have in humor research into the most intimate and minute particulars—which might look vulgar or trivial if compared with the ideal syntheses of most art—and work based on contrasts and contradictions in opposition to the coherence sought by the others. We have that disorganized, untied, and capricious element, all the digressions which are seen in a humorous work in opposition to the orderly plan, the composition, of most works of art. (58)

*Life Studies* is driven by similarly irrelevant details—that nevertheless work together to charge the poem, compressing immaterial ideas and concrete objects in punning, multiplying ways. As Bergson

writes, "Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic" (115); here, literal words are tugged toward figurative senses, and the figurative comes to seem peculiarly literal. Lowell's language puts pressure on even the commonest phrases, such as "crew haircuts" of the attendants. In the context of the complaint at their uniformity and mild condescension ("There are no Mayflower / screwballs in the Catholic Church"), "crew" recalls athletes, such as B.U. sophomores; a body of soldiers; and a slightly derogatory term for a group (OED I.4).[70]

But Lowell's minute, teasing connections of language are also sympathetic. As we have seen, the poems of *Life Studies* rely on *sympathy* in its first dictionary sense: an "affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other" (OED 1.a.). The way Lowell's words pull towards each other, drawn by initially unperceived affinities in imagery, sound, connotation, and etymology, has something in common with sympathetic vibrations, in which an unplayed instrument responds to harmonically similar tones, or pendulum clocks fall into synchrony. But *Life Studies* is also based on sympathy in the more common sense, that of fellow-feeling based in *syn-* and *pathos,* shared suffering. Although the book repeatedly moves toward romantic isolation (the seven-year-old "skulked in the attic"; the adult finally says, "I myself am hell; / nobody's here"), it records, in part, the speaker's effort to extricate himself from solipsistic alienation.

"Waking in the Blue," which sets Lowell between the hyper-idiosyncratic patients and indistinguishable attendants, begins with a seemingly exceptional "I," tragic and ironic. Its first question—"what use is my sense of humor?"—stems from a sense that humor is out of place in

[70] Stanley is "sunk in his sixties," but also, as a more aggressively mocking writer might have said, sunk in stupor and a bathtub; the verb, topically and aurally close to line 16's "soaks," draws out those implications.

such a dire situation; Lowell "grin[s]" at Stanley, who is "more cut off from words than a seal" and who makes no response. Lowell also caricatures the patients, and then the attendants; although he had been a Catholic in the 1940s, his mocking, ventriloquizing observation that "there are no Mayflower / screwballs in the Catholic Church" severs like an excommunication. It is at this point that he begins to portray himself from an external point of view, as a set of Dickensian features. His "hearty New England breakfast" is a version of "sherbet and ginger ale"; like the other "Bobbie," he is big, in fact, he is the "cock of the walk," strutting in a sailor jersey as Stanley constantly wears his crimson golf cap. His look into the mirrors, which should reflect him, reflect all the "thoroughbred mental cases." The final lines shift rapidly from seeing the comic aspect of this commonality—"twice my age and half my weight"—to seeing, from the "we" of a shared and frightened perspective, the internal terror that each of the patients has: "*We* are *all* old-timers, / *each* of *us* holds a locked razor." The poem's caricatures give way to a sense that the agony of the opening is also suffered by the characters the poet depicts, even if they are laughable.

A similar motion towards sympathy runs across the book. "91 Revere Street" opens with the snobbery of a cousin's family book, in which ties to a Jewish ancestry are suppressed; the prose narrative frequently alludes to the layers of insulating, sequestering snobbishness most frequently expressed by Lowell's mother (e.g. *CP* 124, 125, 138). Czar Lepke has "his little segregated cell" and "air of lost connections" (*CP* 188); Lowell's Aunt Sarah is "Up in the air" with her soundless piano (*CP* 165). *Life Studies*, as its punning title suggests, concentrates on people, seen from varying angles—the confounding view of a child, the insane, the almost omniscient, the immediate present, the retrospective. "Life studies" are figure drawings, or sketches "from life"; but "studies" can also mean, more generally, something "worth studying, or that requires to be studied" (OED 7b). The attempt to represent likenesses accurately is also an attempt to think about other people's

experiences and perspectives, in a way that the "I" of *Lord Weary's Castle* did not.[71] It opposes the forms of what "Skunk Hour" calls "hierarchic privacy." While the outwards-radiating, connecting words do not equalize what they connect, they do link heterogeneous people and traits and aspects, and counter tendencies to distinguish and isolate.

Linguistic coincidences bring out how people share unexpected traits: that Ford Madox Ford, Lowell's father, and Lowell's daughter all "mumble" (*CP* 154, 125, 181); that Lowell eventually finds that he has inherited his mother's "exaggerating" sense of humor. The characters in *Life Studies,* literally related or not, share actions and qualities to an unprecedented degree. Stewards "tiptoe" through a train as Lowell's father tiptoes down stairs; Colonel Theodore, an uncle so distant that Lowell's mother pretends to strain to remember his name, wears spats of "pearl gray plush with pearl buttons" (*CP* 148), while Lowell's five-and-a-half-year-old self is put into "formal pearl gray shorts" (*CP* 164). Marie de Medici's infant son's fingers are "dimpled" (*CP* 116) as Lowell's daughter is "dimpled with exaltation" (*CP* 185).[72] The situation of "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" (*CP* 118) in "the black forest of the colored wards" resonates with the Harvard "thoroughbred mental cases" staying at McLean's: the former has "no knives, no forks," the latter is forced to use a "locked razor" (*CP* 184). The statement that "It's time for feeding" (from the Munich poem) sympathizes with a "hearty New England breakfast" (from the McLean poem); and the soldier's declaration that "We're all Americans" with the Harvard "all-American fullback." These tiny links, unfolding across lines and individual poems, constitute the book's fabric: it is sympathy

[71] Stephen James discusses Lowell's "abiding preoccupation with solipsism and narcissism" (25-28).

[72] As if to heighten the already pervasive interrelations even further, Lowell's language binds people to objects, and figurative to literal language (as we have seen in "Waking in the Blue"). The infant daughter's "sky-blue corduroy" (*CP* 185) in turn, links to the "sky-blue tracks of the commuters' railroad" (*CP* 175). Those tracks "shone like a double-barreled shotgun," recalling earlier "double-barreled shotguns" (*CP* 166) of a duck blind; one could cycle through the poems this way almost endlessly.

reflected formally. Lowell's mediating misalliances partially offset his isolated suffering, and link him—in spite of himself—both to specific people of all sorts (aunts, convicts) and to the world generally.

The play of verbal echoes finds an ideal prosodic counterpart in Lowell's free verse. In "Waking in the Blue," erratic rhyme—in which words find unexpected matches—flickers throughout. "Azure day" is tethered to the mundane "fairway"; "kill," as we have seen, is rhymed to the mocking dactyls of "This is the house for the 'mentally ill.'" Rhyme is never so constant as to be expected; it catches one's attention and excites curiosity. Meter fluctuates, also. The opening lines evoke and just avoid pentameter; several have the necessary ten syllables—"Crows maunder on the petrified fairway"—but flatten their feet. Elsewhere, the poem is infiltrated by triple rhythms, such as "still hóarding the búild of a bóy in his twénties" and "slíghtly too líttle nonsénsical báchelor twínkle." Pentameter resolves in "and sée the sháky fúture grów famíliar" before triple rhythms again interfere: "in the pínched, indígenous fáces / of these thóroughbred méntal cases."

Elsewhere in *Life Studies*, the sudden appearance of rhyme or meter can be comic in ways that draw near to Ogden Nash or the clerihew. A description of "óranges, lémons, mínt, and péppermínts, / and the jug of shandygaff, / which Grándpa máde by blénding hálf and hálf / yeasty, wheezing homemade sarsaparilla with beer" (*CP* 164) is funny because it moves into pentameter to list ingredients of a drink, because the last letters of "shandygaff" do not resemble those of "half," and because of the way meter falls off immediately thereafter, as if it simply cannot be carried through to the end of the recipe. "Italian china fruity / with bunches and berries / and proper *putti*" (*CP* 181) joins an ordinary adjective with the Latinate cherub. When Lowell's father, wearing "a blue serge jacket and numbly cut / white ducks he'd bought / at a Pearl Harbor commissariat … / and

took four shots with his putter to sink his putt" (*CP* 172), four slanting rhymes highlight the four clumsy shots.[73]

"Home After Three Months Away," the poem that follows "Waking in the Blue," shows Lowell's humor—now poignant and mock-heroic—working against other tendencies: the speaker's susceptibility to exhaustion, depression, and surrender. Again, faint puns and interrelations proliferate. Home from McLean's, Lowell writes about a few moments of a *single* morning:

> Dimpled with exaltation,
> my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
> Our noses rub,
> each of us pats a stringy lock of hair–
> they tell me nothing's gone.
> Though I am forty-one,
> not forty now, the time I put away
> was child's play. After thirteen weeks
> my child still dabs her cheeks
> to start me shaving. When
> we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
> she changes to a boy,
> and floats my shaving brush
> and washcloth in the flush … (*CP* 185)

Lowell's daughter, dimpled with exult- and exaltation, holds her *levee*, "a reception of visitors on rising from bed; a morning assembly held by a prince or person of distinction" (OED *levee*, n.2). The now-current meaning of *levee,* and one that hovers in the background of these lines, is that of "an embankment to prevent the overflow of a river" (OED n.1); it suggests the kind of games children play by blocking water in tubs.[74] (Lowell's daughter does something similar when she floats his shaving brush in "the flush.") The lines call up the comic loftiness of the queenlike Harriet, but also

[73] The linebreaks of such loose verse do not jump out as they do in *Lord Weary's Castle*, but the enjambments can be similarly ungainly: "There are no Mayflower / screwballs," put the two compound nouns, one delicate and one not, in even stronger contrast.

[74] A *levee* holds a river back; although Lowell reverses verb and object, the meaning is not erased; rather, it is folded into the primary meaning of "to hold a levee," just as "exultation" is included in "exaltation."

the sense that one pays a visit and leaves, that Lowell's visit may not be permanent, that elsewhere Stanley soaks "in his long tub," where razors are not for granted. As a French royal custom that reached its height of grandeur at Versailles, the levee also recalls the "replica of Louis XVI." As in "Waking in the Blue," Lowell looks into a mirror; now, however, he sees not other inmates but only his momentarily incapacitated self:

> Dearest I cannot loiter here
> in lather like a polar bear. (ll. 26-27)

The rhymes of this poem constitute another, unexpected form of happy misalliance. The surprising, sudden couplet of "in the tub. / Our noses rub" expresses sheer relief at being away from McLean's tubs. (Part of what makes the *levée* comic is the line's unceremonious ending in "tub"; the word's potential inelegance is brought out by the Latinate words—like "exaltation"—that precede it. The rhyme between "time I put away" and "child's play" highlights a pun that spans the insignificant and the terribly significant; the next couplet's "thirteen weeks" and "cheeks" quietly reinforces the implication that while the lost time was of trivial length, it would have been full of such images. In "when / we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy, / she changes to a boy," the semantically unexpected rhyme emphasizes the suddenness of Harriet's transformation, especially as the meter narrows to trimeter. When meter and rhyme stabilize once more, by "brush" and "flush," it leads to a two-line song: that song's image of lingering "in lather like a polar bear" takes in to the speaker's pang at being limited to a child-friendly simile and simple form. (The couplet is the simplest way of organizing one's lines, and the four-stress line is a meter of songs or light verse.)

Although the simplicity of the end-stopped couplets is reassuring (they show Lowell turning his language *to* someone, thinking of someone else), they soon disintegrate: when he looks to the view outside the window, he begins to project on it, as in the opening of "Waking in the Blue":

> Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.
> Three stories down below,

a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,
and seven horizontal tulips blow.
Just twelve months ago,
these flowers were pedigreed
imported Dutchmen; now no one need
distinguish them from weed.
Bushed by the late spring snow,
they cannot meet
another year's snowballing enervation.

I keep no rank nor station.
Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small. (ll. 28-40)

As fatigue and depression gather, several of these lines expand to pentameter; the string that begins in *pedigreed* and ends in *weed* sounds like soured Skeltonic doggerel, without Skeltonic energy.

The poem, however, resists a wholly flattened ending. Although it threatens to sink into depression, it is countered by wordplay both apprehensive and prosaic (tulips, "*bushed* by the late spring *snow*," "cannot meet / another year's *snowballing* enervation"). After "enervation" Lowell pauses, begins a new verse paragraph, and shortens his pentameter to trimeter: he thereby emphasizes the slightly Ogden-Nash like rhyme to "station." Lowell's resigned conclusion—"Cured, I am frizzled, stale, and small"—aligns him with his opening, in which "gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze" (l. 5) were tied onto a magnolia tree. This melancholy declaration accepts ridiculousness: Lowell is no longer the "Cock of the walk" weighing in after a massive breakfast—he is a cured, frizzled, stale porkrind.

"Waking in the Blue" and "Home After Three Months Away" embody Lowell's slight, multifaceted connections. Barely any of them are jokes, but each time another reveals itself, the effect is one of unexpected pleasure in the far-reaching incongruities and felicities. The basis of Lowell's humor is in this surprising aptness: in the way each element reaches out to others, in the constant, surprising indecorousness. Alexander Pope's essay on bathos, curiously, offers satirical instruction that overlaps with Lowell's technique:

> [The aspiring poet] is to consider himself as a *Grotesque* Painter, whose Works would be spoil'd by an Imitation of Nature, or Uniformity of Design. He is to mingle Bits of the most various, or discordant kinds, Landscape, History, Portraits, Animals, and connect them with a great deal of *Flourishing,* by *Heads* or *Tails,* as it shall please his Imagination, and contribute to his principal End, which is to glare by strong Oppositions of Colours, and surprize by Contrariety of Images. … His Design ought to be like a Labyrinth, out of which no body can get clear but himself. (395)

Traces of a similar principle are evident in Lowell. A discordant "Landscape, History, Portraits, Animals" are mingled everywhere, from *Lord Weary's Castle*'s corn-fed mouse and bread-stuffed ducks to the *History* sonnet in which Attila "mounted on raw meat and greens / galloped to massacre in his single fieldmouse suit" (*CP* 448).[75]

Lowell's "Contrariety of Images" also involves the reuse of tempestuous emblems from *Lord Weary's Castle*. In "The Quaker Graveyard," "góbbets of blúbber spíll to wínd and wéather" (*CP* 17) during a scene of carnage; now the nurse ties "góbbets of pórkrind in bówknots of gáuze," gathering them into a garden decoration, as the meter is tugged from mostly iambic to dactylic. *Lord Weary*'s tempestuous, gory whale hunt, closes, ominously, "And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill. / The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" (*CP* 18); "Waking in the Blue," maintains that rhyme—"as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill. / (This is the house for the 'mentally ill')"—but turns it into a nursery rhyme, and binds it to contemporary jargon. Elsewhere in *Life Studies,* for

[75] Lowell's discordant landscapes, for example, graft the apocalypse onto contemporary Boston: "The wild ingrafted olive and the root // Are withered, and a winter drifts to where / The Pepperpot, ironic rainbow, spans / Charles River and its scales of scorched-earth miles" (*CP* 69). These line drop one of the city's least timeless, most domestic nicknames into the middle of a Biblical scene. The elegy for Arthur Winslow moves from Charon to declare that "On Boston Basin, shells / Hit water by the Union Boat Club wharf" (*CP* 25). While I am passing over *For the Union Dead*—it is relatively close to *Life Studies* in style and effect—that collection depends on landscape in the way that *Life Studies* depends on people. In "The Public Garden" (*CP* 341), children are "punting a football in the bricky air, / the sailors and their pick-ups under trees / with Latin labels. And the jaded flock / of swanboats paddles to its dock." Here the feel and colors of fall condense to "bricky"; a linebreak separates the romantic couples from the prim Latin labels; and the whole scene seems to converge when the *flock* rightly returns to its *dock*. "July in Washington" (*CP* 366) observes "swan-white / power launches," and marks them with an ironically revealing linebreak. In a poem that draws heavily on Jonathan Edwards, old New England houses "stand in the open air, // out in the cold, / like sheep outside the fold" (*CP* 353). Landscape even invades and comically defamiliarizes the "malignant surf of unopened letters" on Lowell's desk (*CP* 357), as it does in Elizabeth Bishop's "Twelve O'Clock News" (174).

example, the "ballooning spinnakers" of a turbulent ship (*CP* 15) are tamed into the five-year-old Lowell's "sailor blouse washed white as a spinnaker" (*CP* 165). Motifs such as whales and spinnakers are not distinct to the early poetry: but there they occur with such force as to carry their original atmosphere into the poetry of "the tranquillized *Fifties*" (*CP* 187). Splicing them into this book of sketches might be considered a large-scale technique of misalliance; they add to the linked incongruities that are everywhere in *Life Studies*.

While we are passing over *Near the Ocean*, Lowell's "top-heavy Goliath in full armor" (*CP* 385), there is more work to be done on how Lowell's desire to speak publically intersects with his awareness of his unstable perspective. One stanza can be devoted to a guinea pig, and another to the skinnydipping president—and each can use the same triple-adjective device. The octaves magnify changes of register; distortions that might not be remarked in a looser form—such as rhyming *blue* to *statue* (*CP* 387)—boom here. Lowell tends toward lists, sometimes to being trapped in a list for a whole stanza, like a hamster in a wheel ("a fieldmouse rolls / a marble, hours on end, then stops" [*CP* 383]); to breaking off, and then to working himself up again; to sweeping from the private to the public.

### 3. The sonnets: "beautiful sunlit playgrounds of plastic balloons"

Lowell said, understatedly, that the sonnets of *Notebook* were "less a prosodist's darling" than the poems that preceded them, in *Near the Ocean* (Meyers 156). Almost entirely unrhymed, and very free with meter, the sonnets have been criticized for lax meter, language, and structure.[76] A first glance

[76] Calvin Bedient's review does so at length: "The great loss is the poem itself, the poem as distinct from lines of poetry. … [Lowell's] faithful 14-line form (the sonnet razed, destructured) is a perfunctory repository for contingent facts and feelings" (15). Clive James, with similar disappointment, notes that "trimming things to fit an arbitrary frame is not a discipline. And without its rhyme-schemes, the sonnet is an arbitrary frame" (34); according to Robert B. Shaw, the form is "little more than a box to fill" (171).

might seem to confirm critics' impression of Lowell's sonnets as perfunctory, automatic, arbitrary, cobbled together, or slipshod. Whereas the multi-page poems of *Life Studies* rely on inter- and intra-textual echoing, the sonnets often seem to be composed of serial surprises: single images align with pentameter and turn into epigrams. The speaker in "Sheik Without Six Wives in London," faced with his "six Rolls Royces snowed with parking tickets," declares, "I am an iceberg melting in the ocean" (*CP* 584). In the most aggressive instances of such stand-alone lines, the unexpected element is delayed until the final phrase: "I have ripened on remorse like Stilton cheese" (*CP* 588).

Because the space within the sonnet's shell is relatively free, its blank verse can look more disheveled than it would in its customary, page-spanning context. The last word of the line, free of the burden of semantically 'telling' rhyme, bears less weight, and the sentences are not pulled forward from one end-word to the next. Lowell exaggerates this lack of momentum: "I ate and bred, and then I only ate," a guinea pig says in her dramatic monologue (*CP* 633). Another sonnet opens, "Four windows, five feet tall, soar up like windows" (*CP* 616); as Nick Halpern remarks, "Simile usually offers a hope of escape: similes like these awaken that hope to thwart it" (92). Lowell turns to pointed, inelegant repetitions to puncture his lines: "my window, five feet wide, is raised a foot, / most of the view is blanked by brick and windows" (*CP* 603). Accentuated by such syntax, and by the constant images "of dust, draff, kitchen middens, and various wreckage" that Stephen Yenser notes of *History* (306), Lowell's sonnets can sometimes resemble fourteen lines of detritus and trouvailles, stacked without a clear direction.

Yet the fourteen-line form deepens, sharpens, heightens, and energizes Lowell's assortment of perspectives and tones. Berryman's throwaway remark about how "a joke's very much like a poem and vice versa" (AAP recording) is relevant to these sonnets: the basic structure of a joke, with its buildup of unspecified length and eventual punchline, has something in common with a

sonnet's various courses and outcomes: whether the end's shift of logic or emotion will end in retraction, expansion, or an ironic twist, and how one will get there.

To yoke the connotations of blank verse to those of the sonnet is to work with a farfetched misalliance of structure. Lowell takes a usually unlimited, stichic form, the main vehicle for dramatic and narrative work (before college he wrote a "huge blank verse epic on the First Crusade" [Meyers 38]), and traps them what Donne in "The Canonization" called the sonnet's "pretty rooms." In a way, even an unrhymed sonnet is more limited than the tight octosyllabic couplets of *Near the Ocean*, since it invariably cuts off at the same place. Given Lowell's longstanding fixation on freedom and restriction, it is interesting that he should choose this container.

Irvin Ehrenpreis' idea that Lowell's comedy is bound up with freedom is upheld in the sonnets. Many enact a sense of release vividly and comically; they create a sense of being pent up, and then escape it. One in which a captured turtle is released, for example, begins with a pronounced quatrain, made tighter by parallelism: "Weeks hitting the road, one fasting in the bathtub, / raw hamburger mossing in the watery stoppage, / the room drenched with musk like kerosene—/ no one shaved, and only the turtle washed" (*CP* 635).

> He was so beautiful when we flipped him over:
> greens, reds, yellows, fringe of the faded savage,
> the last Sioux, old and worn, saying with weariness,
> "Why doesn't the Great White Father put his red
> children on wheels, and move us as he will?"
> We drove to the Orland River, and watched the turtle
> rush for water like rushing into marriage,
> swimming in uncontaminated joy,
> lovely the flies that fed that sleazy surface,
> a turtle looking back at us, and blinking. (ll. 5-14)

From this poem's acutely felt mixture of "uncontaminated joy" and ironic recording—"lovely the flies that fed that sleazy surface"—comes delight and faint comedy. It achieves its tangible senses of confinement and freedom in part through Lowell's slight delay of the volta. Because a weary

question begun in line 8 continues into line 9 (where, in the majority of sonnets, some form of a turn would take place), the helpless resignation is compounded: nothing changes at the moment it could and should. Although the delay is only momentary, it magnifies the relief when line 10—"We drove to the Orland River"—begins the return. At last, Lowell sees "the turtle / rúsh" for water (as the meter returns to pentameter after the thirteen-syllable tenth line) and the poem ends in present participles: "rushing," "swimming," "looking," the wonderfully inscrutable "blinking." The equivocal grammar of the title, "Returning Turtle," expresses how strongly this vicarious relief is felt: as a gerund and object, "we return him"; as a participle and subject, the turtle himself returns to his water. The conflation of different perspectives is apt: the turtle can, in his slow way, "break loose," as Lowell wishes he could do at the beginning of "Waking Early Sunday Morning" (*CP* 383).

Although it may seem that a sonnet with only the ghost of a traditional structure cannot raise expectations to surprise, Lowell repeatedly toys with or overturns his form's conventions. He manipulates the sonnet's structure, often splitting it 9-5 or 10-4, or, as in "The Restoration," flipping octave and sestet.[77] The meditations of "Flounder" show one such exploitation of the turn's tendency to present, in the words of Paul Fussell, "a logical or emotional shift by which the speaker enables himself to take a new or altered or enlarged view of his subject" (115).

> In a day we pass from the Northern Lights
> to doomsday dawns. Crowds crush to work at eight,
> and walk with less cohesion than the mist;
> the sky, without malice, is acid, Christmas lights
> are needed to reveal the Thames. God sees—
> wash me as white as the sole I ate last night,
> acre of whiteness, back of Folkestone sand,
> cooked and skinned and white— the heart appeased.
> Soles live in depth, see not, spend not … eat;
> their souls are camouflaged to die in dishes,
> flat on their backs, the posture of forgiveness—

[77] The sonnet takes place after the 1968 sit-ins at Columbia; it is turned on its head, as the president's library is. As Stephen Burt observes, Lowell's "psyche contains both the college president, the supposedly mature authority who owns the library, and the students who appropriated or defaced it" (*The Forms of Youth* 125).

> squinch-eyes, bubbles of bloodshot worldliness,
> unable ever to turn the other cheek—
> at sea, they bite like fleas whatever we toss. (*CP* 675)

The mixing of tones here is important: one of the winning aspects of Lowell's humor is that he does not give off a sense of trying to amuse, and is never self-congratulatory. Rather, humor is initiated by a single utterance—here, a single Biblical allusion—and then percolates outward, with the speaker convincingly unaware that anything is faintly comic. (Bergson warns that "the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink," for "no sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared" [52]; here a food is at the heart of the sonnet.) Although the lines descend to and zoom in on the eyes of a bottom-dwelling flatfish that ends "in dishes," they begin in the sky, and in evocations of high modernism.[78] The scene is enclosed in an overflowing quatrain, with identical rhyme linking ephemeral, natural, and rare "Northern Lights" to bulbed, garish "Christmas lights."

In "Flounder," the volta arrives prominently and conventionally, in line 9, after a second quatrain as audibly outlined as the first (by "sees" and "appeased," and a full stop). The speaker works out the relationship of the soul and sole with slightly ponderous brooding: "Soles live in depth, see not, spend not …" [*they don't spend,* he decides; *what do they do*?] "eat," which terminates, awkwardly, one foot short.[79] Each of the next few lines deals out a picture of the immobile fish; each advances slightly toward clownishness, and the poem could end with this series of comparisons, making a wry statement about the state of the poet's soul. But after making literal the Bible's exhortation to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), Lowell moves abruptly to an enigmatic close:

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[78] After the nightscape of "Northern Lights" and "doomsday dawns" (which might have emerged from Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn") comes a morning that recalls the commuters and "brown fog of a winter dawn" in *The Waste Land* (39).

[79] The fish is an equally immobile version of the lilies of Matthew 6:28, who "toil not, neither do they spin."

"at sea, they bite like fleas whatever we toss." As in the turtle sonnet, the shift is to open space, in contrast to the claustrophobic span of low, mist-covered sky and plate; the fish is back in its natural, secular environment, which is not a sonnet's metaphysical conceit. Lowell's adhering to the basic outline of an octave and volta points up how ungrounded, how "at sea" his reflections are: the prayer ends with the opposite of insight. (Both of the fish's names pun, tellingly: if "sole" can be elevated to "soul," the "flounder" of the sonnet's title evokes its verb: to struggle, to be perplexed.)

Lowell has other means of pushing at the sonnet's form, and they need a more systematic survey. The last that this short overview will note is his use of a series of turns. "After the Play" begins with clichéd slang and a couplet: "'I've been married umpteen years,' Ben said, / 'I've walked where angels fear to tread.'" The unknown, impressively drunken Ben holds "the restaurant spellbound stumbling / from the men's room seven times in twenty minutes"; the eighth line ends with his annoyed "fellow power man friend" saying, "This is impossible."

> *This, this.* They left Ben confessing to the toilet. …
> To hell with artists painting Cromwell's warts,
> London bluedays, sidewalks smeared with dogmess,
> pekinese and poodle, poodle and pekinese—
> sometimes the palisades of garbage bags
> are beautiful sunlit playgrounds of plastic balloons. (*CP* 584; ll. 9-14)

The first turn, in line 9, leaves Ben "confessing"—a word that speaks to how Lowell's own revelations were perceived—not to be seen again. Line 10's independent proclamation, however, is an even more vigorous departure, a decisively pentameter "To hell with artists painting Cromwell's warts." After rejecting the practice of recording such sordid details as "Cromwell's warts," Lowell unaccountably continues listing them in line 11. The euphemistic "dogmess," which fails to be even *defiant* slang, is followed by a chiastic, alliterative chant on its sources, two particularly fussy breeds of lapdog; this is not much better than painting Cromwell's warts. In the last two lines, however, garbage bags transform into sunlit, translucent, balloon-filled playgrounds; the change is reflected so

closely in the style as to delight. The cluster of plosives and the relatively restrained iambs of "Sómetìmes thĕ pálĭsádes ŏf gárbăge bágs" transform into a rarer string of dactyls (or anapests, depending on how one scans) and intricate, chiastic sound patterns: "ăre **b**éa**u**tĭfŭ/ sún*ĭ*t **p*I*á**stĭc **b**ă*ll*óons." The alliteration takes in and redeems, retrospectively, the "pekinese and poodle." This couplet extricates itself and takes off; it does so both by anticipation (e.g. by the French "palisades") and by sudden difference (e.g. a single declarative sentence of which "balloons" is the last word). Much of what engages and interests in Lowell's sonnets depends on the play of seemingly dashed-off or fragmented impressions against this core of structural wit.[80]

### 4. "One wishes heaven had less solemnity": *Day by Da*y

*Day by Day* is focused on estrangement, loneliness, sickness and aging, and the death of friends: almost every form of loss one could experience. The style is attenuated, faded, and fragmented; its humor is fleeting and subdued. While *Lord Weary's Castle* forces incongruous detail next to grandeur and underscores the clash formally, *Day by Day* smoothes out, often trailing off into white space. Marjorie Perloff writes, of its ending: "'We are poor passing facts'—surely this statement … contains a bleak, despairing view of existence, and *Day by Day* is, to my mind, an almost unbearably painful book" (H1). The book records intense pain. Whereas the glints of humor in *Lord Weary's Castle* often seem to distract, in *Day by Day* they help the poet avoid all posing or dramatizing. The momentarily lighter tones throw their darker situations into relief.[81]

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[80] Changes of sound pattern can be disconcerting within the sonnet, a tendency Lowell exploits; after the relatively bland, stately iambs on "the old United States of William James," "the catbird's coloratura cluck / sínging|fúck, fúck|abóve|the brúsh|wood rácket" (*CP* 555) startles with its brassiness. Sound comically accentuates moroseness, as in the Hopkinsian overabundance of: "horsedroppings and drippings … hear it, hear the clopping / of the hundreds of horses unstopping … each hauls a coffin" (*CP* 603).

[81] Although *Day by Day* has been met with appreciation by many readers, Donald Hall finds it "slack and meretricious" (7), and argues that its language "is trite, and its connections unfixed, its overall tone proclaims the lassitude and despondency of self-imitation" (10); Harold Bloom, similarly, hears a "curious flatness or

Helen Vendler describes Lowell as faced with representing his "present paradoxical state, of being wildly alive and yet certain of death" (*Last Books* 72). The paradox is baffling and frightening; but Lowell describes bodily infirmity in language that is tinged with humor, and sometimes explicitly funny. "Bright Day in Boston" opens with *joy*: "Joy of standing up my dentist, / my X-ray plates like a broken Acropolis…" (*CP* 794). To stand someone up is usually to fail to keep a date; Lowell declares that he is standing up his dentist, of all people, and uses a slightly archaic construction (the exclamatory "Joy of") to express the delight of doing so. The prosaic and the lofty are at greater variance in the next line, where ruined teeth are made both more wrecked and more honorable by being aligned with the broken columns of classical architecture. Rueful amusement amid decay appears frequently: for example, "I sleep, / an old walnut soaked in rum, / too slippery for the stars to crack / in their rigid, identical glass wheels" (*CP* 817), or the resigned declaration that "We are at least less run-down / than Longfellow's house on Brattle Street" (*CP* 811). In "I lie staring under an old oak, / stubbly, homely, catacombed by ants, / more of a mop than a tree" (*CP* 778), the modifiers only describe the oak, and yet the oak—with its "weak, wooden heart"—also communicates Lowell's state.

Objects, often animistically vivid and significant in the earlier work, here become a way of representing painful deterioration that one perceives as if it is happening to someone not oneself. "Domesday Book" shows an estate going to seed as "the elephantiasis of the great house / is smothered in the beauty of its English garden" (*CP* 764). Dilapidated, and so immense as to look bloated now that its inhabitants have left, it succumbs to nature and, less romantically, modernity:

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deadness of tone" (1977: 24). Stephen James, describing the book's "absence of imaginative response," argues that "Nor is there the poetic will to compel the elements of the natural world into metaphors, or to vivify them with descriptive acuity" (2013: 192). William Pritchard, on the other hand, writes: "Only when we read *Day by Day* as a *Life Studies* written 20 years later, by a poet who knows his career as a writer and his life as a man are about to end, does its beauty and pathos emerge."

"The hectic, seeded rose / climbs a neglected gravel drive / cratered to save the children from delivery vans." (In keeping with "elephantiasis," Lowell's "hectic" rose suggests not only frantic activity, but that the grounds have taken on the color of consumptive fever.) The house itself is of "beef-red bricks"; elsewhere it is "a blaze of salmon-pink" (*CP* 773), superimposing the short lifespan of a blocky, hearty, perishable slab of meat onto an edifice. In Lowell, food gives a slightly deceptive solidity and tangibility to fragmentary, wandering, often abstract phrases.

Although oaks and houses are deteriorating, such objects are still—ironically—more enduring than the people who live with them. Lowell also uses the permanence of things to reflect his own aging, and his astonishment at how he has aged; the utter strangeness of realizing that an inanimate object may be around longer than oneself can provoke baffled dread or laughter. Often Lowell's reaction is almost whimsical. When he visits the apartment he once shared with Elizabeth Hardwick, the "old movables keep their places"; but they seem to have shrunk or become strange: "Cousin Belle's half-sofa, / her carrot dangled before famished heirs, / is twenty years lighter" (*CP* 754). In retrospect, the interpolated cliché has the fleeting effect of making the "half-sofa" flimsier, less consequential, as the poet's own distance from the object wobbles: "The small portrait of Cousin Cassie, / corsetted like the Empress Eugénie, / and willed to father when I was seven, / is now too young for me to talk to." Loose syntax ("corsetted … willed"; "the *portrait* … is now too young") conflates a being and a thing completely: the painting is much more real than the person who owned it.

Sofas, portraits, and bureaus "with the solidity of Spanish kings" (*CP* 755) are a source of comedy and pathos not only because they underscore the decades, but because they point out that the poet himself is the absent "movable": by *Day by Day*, Lowell had separated from Hardwick (whose apartment he recalls above), and his marriage to Caroline Blackwood was strained. In "The

Withdrawal," a tree at their manor house in Kent is preserved at a moment of intense beauty, lightened by unlooked-for rhyme:

> Only today and just for this minute,
> when the sunslant finds its true angle,
> you can see yellow and pinkish leaves spangle
> our gentle, fluffy tree—
> suddenly the green summer is momentary …
> Autumn is my favorite season—
> why does it change clothes and withdraw?
>
> This week the house went on the market—
> suddenly I wake among strangers;
> when I go into a room, it moves
> with embarrassment, and joins another room. (*CP* 783)

The unsophisticated words of the first lines—"pinkish," "spangle"; "our" tree, "gentle, fluffy"—make the property seem unwary, unprepared for the abrupt "went on the market." That the room "joins another room" is literally true; here, however, the speaker, in self-reproach at his part in the separation, sees autumn withdrawing with its spangled trees, and the betrayed house avoiding him. Although the house is responsive like a house in Dickens—"the cottage furniture began to be wrapped up for preservation in the family absence—or, as Mr Meagles expressed it, the house began to put its hair in papers" (*Little Dorrit* 548)—sorrow emerges through the almost whimsically imaginative pictures. Such images of lost places—Auden's "clean cliff of books / above a wave of trash" is another—are a source of pathos and comedy; they are associated with people, beloved surroundings, and remembered events. The solidity they impart to the poems is bolstered by Lowell's metaphorical objects—kicking sidewalks, x-ray plates like a broken Acropolis, one turtle with a "brown Franciscan cowl" and another in "see-through yellow tortoiseshell" (*CP* 809-10). Objects reiterate the aging and separations that confront the poet, while also keeping poems "attached to life at all four corners," to use Woolf's phrase.

But the subdued humor of *Day by Day* also suggests that Lowell—after the prophetic stance

of *Lord Weary's Castle*, and the sometimes supercilious voice of *Life Studies*—has come to emphasize the *allying* aspect of his farfetched misalliance. The first section of "The Withdrawal" ends by addressing Blackwood: "I don't need conversation, but you to laugh with— / you and a room and a fire, / cold starlight blowing through an open window" (*CP* 783). Reena Sastri has argued illuminatingly that *Day by Day* depends on dialogue, and "that the volume's intimacy involves, at times, an implicit overlap between addressee and reader, an imagining of the reader as interlocutor" (481). In "The Withdrawal," though Lowell says he does not "need conversation," he emphasizes something as intimate: the difference seems to be that laughter is not conscious or voluntary but spontaneous, and to "laugh with" someone is to participate in briefly putting aside one's logical faculties for delight. As Lowell goes on to admit, however, that intimacy is only temporary:

> One wishes heaven had less solemnity:
> a sensual table
> with five half-filled bottles of red wine
> set round the hectic carved roast—
> Bohemia for ourselves
> and the familiars of a lifetime
> charmed to communion by resurrection—
> running together in the rain to mail a single letter,
> not the chafe and cling
> of this despondent chaff. (*CP* 783-84)

This keen awareness of laughter's evanescence is also conveyed by Georges Bataille: when people laugh, "a current of intense communication passes through them. … those who laugh together become like waves in the sea, as long as the laughter lasts there is no longer a partition between them, they are no more separated than two waves, but their unity is also undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters" (98).[82] Lowell's comedy admits a similar precariousness.

[82] Bataille's figure for laughter—of passing "from a sad and empty solidity to the happy contagion of warmth and light, to the free tumult that air and water communicate to one another" (98) resorts to images similar to Lowell's: "a room and a fire, / cold starlight blowing through an open window" (*CP* 783).

CHAPTER THREE

*The Comic Badness of A. R. Ammons*

In his early journal entries, A. R. Ammons admits to being worried about his abilities: "It's a shame that a person should want to write as much as I do and not have the ability to do it. I conjure God to allow ambitions only to those that can fulfill them. For what a torture it is to be constantly setting goals and projects for oneself which for lack of intellect cannot be attained nor carried out" (*Letters* 3). Later the same month—March 1951—he refers again to a lack of skill: "we who have little power in effectively expressing ourselves" (7). That tone of dejection occasionally gives way to cockiness, but such moments lead right back to self-deprecation. When Ammons received encouragement from Josephine Miles, his professor at Berkeley, he wrote: "I have been dejected ever since the interview [with Miles]. I don't believe she meant what she said. It was too generous for one of her capacity. Besides the moment I begin to feel that my work is important, a little valve inside closes and I'm doomed" (13).

Ammons develops a comedy that stems from ineptness and inarticulateness. "I'm soaring today like a // dead mole," he announces in *Bosh and Flapdoodle:* "I have as much get up and go as a / rock bottom" (69). His books draw on a conversational voice that sometimes natters about calories or weather.[83] Through redundancies and lumpy repetitions, fake accents, confused syntax and prosaic similes, forms that resemble cookie-cutters, and other aspects usually dismissed as in

[83] A number of readers have been less than enchanted by Ammons's loquacity, especially by the voice in the more expansive poems where a strain of folksy garrulousness can seem to dominate. Willard Spiegelman writes that "Ammons's greatest failing is the tedium of indiscriminateness" (Kirschten 6); Hayden Carruth calls Ammons' poetry "dull" and "talky" (Kirschten 8). Marjorie Perloff says that *The Snow Poems* read like "doodles drawn by eighth-grade boys during a boring math class … Ammons may be entertaining himself, but he can hardly be said to entertain his readers" (Kirschten 15).

some way bad, he conveys an inimitably lively sensibility.[84] We begin with the speaker of *Ommateum,* who strives for vatic power and finds the glimmerings of a ludic style. *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) revels in comic mundanity, seeming sloppiness, and the minutiae of linebreaks: such elements enact a mind's inner workings. In the long poems *Garbage* (1993) and *Glare* (1997), Ammons compounds this comic ineptitude through brassy, clumsy repetitions of morphemes, words, lines, images, and entire scenes: such repetitions also bring us further into a memorably tangible ordinariness, the opposite of the . The chapter concludes with a discussion of Ammons's last book, *Bosh and Flapdoodle* (2006)*,* where failure, comedy, and virtuosity interact most acutely.

Ineptness has often been viewed as central to humor. Its physical manifestations are in clumsiness: Buster Keaton tries to open a newspaper and eventually trips over it; an important general in *Martin Chuzzlewit* comes "darting in with such precipitancy that, hitching his boot in the carpet, and getting his sword between his legs, he came down headlong, and presented a curious little bald place on the crown of his head to the eyes of the astonished company" (352). Its mental equivalent appears in the dabbling of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, or Monty Python's *Upper Class Twit of the Year* sketch. Verbal ineptitude is heard in the speeches of the rude mechanicals of *Twelfth Night*, the Eumaeus episode of *Ulysses*, and the poems of *The Stuffed Owl*—and in Ammons's poems.[85]

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[84] For a superb description of Ammons's style, including note of his "willingness to be ineloquent for the sake of exactness" (107), see Nick Halpern's chapter on Ammons in *Everyday and Prophetic*, 99-137. Several writers have considered the foundations of Ammons's humor. James S. Hans focuses on the poet's playfulness: "it reflects the basic play of the universe, the modulation of specific energies through particular forms of order that allow pattern and relation to display themselves with as much intricacy as the local organization can support" (290). Linda Orr has described how "irony crouches even in Ammons' highest ambition" (11). Daniel Mark Fogel sets up categories such as wordplay, the bawdy, and parodies; he argues that all "forms of Ammons's humor are perhaps subsumed under his notion that the poem is a 'play-form' for the release of hidden and unacceptable passions" (Burak and Gilbert 153). Lorraine DiCicco argues that the long poem *Glare* is "similar to Seinfeldian sitcom specifically and to American-style stand up comedy generally in that it focuses on nothingness and even treats it similarly" (189).

[85] One of the best instances of this garrulity is Ammons's broadside "Shit List; or Omnium-gatherum of Diversity into Unity" (1979), which concludes with "the shit of the wasteful gallinule" (the gallinule is also known as the swamp chicken, and is conceivably a figure for the poet).

But as Ammons's work will suggest, ineptness is only the loud half of a doubled principle: these poems grow comic through being simultaneously bad and marvelous.

### 1. "I effuse": *Ommateum*

Early Ammons seems serious to the point of self-parody. The somewhat windily titled "Orthodoxy with Achievement" is spoken by a literally bloodless protagonist:

> Silent as light in dismal transit
> through the void, I, evanescent,
> sibilant among my parts,
> fearing the eclipse of a possible glance (*Ommateum* 16)

These lines seem to try to amplify themselves by piling one abstract, portentous, Latinate phrase upon another. A journal entry from the spring of 1954 records Ammons's frustration at this style: "*Ommateum*: cold as a dead fish in moonlight. Why! can't the thing live and breathe? Even a long poem does not demand so much dullness" (*Letters* 50). But even this early bardic dullness admits moments that undermine it, and free it. In the fourth poem of *Ommateum,* speech intrudes with comic inadequacy:

> I broke a sheaf of light
> from a sunbeam
> that was slipping through thunderheads
> drawing a last vintage from the hills
> O golden sheaf I said
> and throwing it on my shoulder
> brought it home to the corner
> O very pretty light I said
> and went out to my chores
> The cow lowed from the pasture and I answered
> yes I am late
> already the evening star
> The pigs heard me coming and squealed (11)

The poem begins magnificently: the successful impossibility of carrying off a sunbeam finds its verbal equivalent in calling that sunbeam a "sheaf of light." But by the inadvertent half-rhyming

couplet of *shoulder* and *corner*, which sounds a little like doggerel within Ammons's free verse, words become more homely. The speaker's second address—to the "very pretty light"—falls short of his earlier metaphor. And his next attempt at poetical language, which promises to be a description of the evening star, is interrupted by pigs' squeals.[86]

The very opening lines of *Ommateum* show us language failing. In "So I said I am Ezra / … Turning to the sea I said / I am Ezra / … and said / I am Ezra" (7), Ammons's attempt at a prophetic declaration does not hold up to the elements, which drown out and defy his words. The end of the next poem ends simply, "and I said Oh / and fell down in the dust" (8); that exclamation is deprived even of the force of a comma. Upon going out to address the sun, another speaker begins with the unpromising "I said / It's very hot in this country" (14). As a general rule, any appearance of "I said" heralds insufficiency, as in "Bathing in the morning river / I said Oh" (16), or "Looking through the wattles to the sun / I said / It has rained some here in this place / unless snow falls heavily in the hills / to do this" (22). Weather seems to be resorted to from a scarcity of other topics.

Vocatives and dialogues generally are an especially pointed way to show language as inarticulate or insufficient.[87] Ammons directly addresses everything—the reader, strangers, mountains, creatures around him; in one of *The Really Short Poems*, the poet's efforts to communicate with an interlocutor are comically unceasing:

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[86] Harold Bloom might read this poem's admissions—"yes I am late," "yes I am late"—as being late in his own historical sense: that this poem resembles not only Ammons's modernist precursors (for instance, Williams's "The Late Singer" repeatedly announces "I am late at my singing" to open *Sour Grapes* [*CP*1 137]) but Keats's "To Autumn," with its declining sun and harvest fields.

[87] In *Ommateum* and subsequent books, Ammons often resorts to a "you," whether the disembodied *you* of *Tape* (alternately a muse, a lover, and a reader), or the informal, corporeal *you* of "if you bite me in the ear, I will knee you in the nuts" (*Sphere* 58).

The spider, dashing from
marginal boughshade
to cross the driveway

hits the hot macadam
and, legs dancing,
scoots back for

the cool: brother,
I effuse, hot
weather we're having! (57)

In its proportions, the poem resembles a scaled-up haiku, mixing precise observation ("marginal boughshade") and cartoon ("legs dancing, scoots back"). Ammons's sudden change to direct speech makes fun of his own unrestrained addresses and projections while still employing them; the spider, simply trying not to burn, is accosted by Ammons's Whitmanesque self, which wants to see them as "brother[s]."

Within a few years of those early, dispirited journal entries, Ammons has begun to exaggerate the insufficiencies of his own language, and turning to speech that markedly fails to suit the situation—while also being beautifully and ludicrously well-rendered. His windiness in the opening of "Ballad" is a foil to the aggrieved and practical-minded tree:

I want to know the unity in all things and the difference
between one thing and another
    I said to the willow

and asked what it wanted to know: the willow said it
wanted to know how to get rid of the wateroak
that was throwing it into shade every afternoon at 4 o'clock:
        that is a real problem I said I suppose
and the willow, once started, went right on saying
I … (*Diversifications* 40)

Here, too, Ammons's slightly windy beginning is punctured by the willow's more practical question of "how to get rid of the wateroak." The specificity of "four o'clock," which reproaches his ambitions for unity, is an instance of Ammons's understated attention to natural cycles—and of the whimsy around the edges of his allegories.

Although Ammons is one of our most famous and steadiest observers of nature, he often resorts to something that verges on the inarticulate (as heard in the "Oh"s and "I said"s of *Ommateum*). Natural elements—elm, icicles, quince bush, light, snow, sunset, jay, maple, cloud—become comic as Ammons collages, sketches, and caricatures them, applying the most human-made and contemporary of similes to even the timeless ecological image. For every case where Ammons swirls abstraction and generalization into his particular views, there is a parallel moment where the universal is brought down to the tangible and physical: the two are often soldered together. He is sharply aware of the degree to which metaphysical language is rooted in the physical, and that one form of futility is our inability to speak without the physical.

In one winter-long journal of meals and weather and snow, a clouding sky becomes a slightly Hopkinsian breakfastscape: "the whey-gray whey rose / shutting off from earthly / view the fine white / cumulus heights (yoghurt)" (*Snow* 222), where the speaker feels compelled to sustain his metaphor with an elbowing parenthesis. A clear day's rather consciously motivational declaration is attached to a frosted cake: "all you can do / with a day like today is / slice it and eat / it, cake / blue, radiant, / frill green, also / just-right cool" (*Snow* 227); here the garishly bright dyes of food coloring become justified. The simile bestowed on a snow-covered tree uses a pronounced stanza break to underline its use of advertising language: "the pear tree looks like lime sherbet with whipped cream // topping" (*Sphere* 53). These similes flaunt their constructedness: to find something as sensuously appealing as nature, the artist has to resort to images of dessert.

But while the language's gaps and shortcomings—and the speaker's shortcomings—are flourished, the comparisons are comic because they are also serendipitous, and apt. They balance between comic incapacity and felicity, tilting toward one or the other by moments. For Ammons, beauty and wonder exist comfortably alongside the ungainly and frivolous. He does not let sublimity

go undeflated for long; nor is his comedy isolated from the aesthetically striking, as when he becomes a modern Danaë:

> this afternoon I thought Jove had come to get me: I walked
> into a corridor of sunlight swimming showering with turning shoals
> of drift pollen and not yet knowing it was pollen thought perhaps I
>
> was being taken or beamed aboard but saw over the roof the high swags
> of the blue spruce swaying and felt stabilized from wonder:
> I would still rather beget (though I can't, apparently) than be
>
> begotten upon, I think I'm almost sure, but I don't know that a vague
> coming of a shimmery gold coating would be so bad: I sneezed: my
> eyes watered: the intimacy was sufficient: nothing is separate: (*Sphere* 54)

"Nothing is separate,"[88] and this encounter with the divine does not end simply with a final puncturing by a single comic pin. Ammons keeps modulating: from the absurd idea of the sauntering poet's being pursued by Jove; to the translucent, oceanic beauty of the pollen-filled "corridor of sunlight"; to the science-fictional rapture of "beamed"; to a parenthetical allusion to his own low sperm count; to "I sneezed," the climax of his three-stanza relation with pollen; to the Latinate "sufficien[cy]" of the encounter.

This fusion of the maladroit and splendid, the rambling and precise, defines Ammons's comic depictions of the world around him. He can grow Tennysonian to describe the utterly prosaic: the first two lines of the following lyric form one of stately pentameter, followed by iambs and anapests:

> It does not rain in
> air-conditioned rooms
> and the fan-wind blows
> (dust weaves in the rooms
> looms and glooms
> of loom-gloom) leaves

[88] "Nothing is separate" also applies to the poem's echoes. These lines are from canto 98, but variations on their images and grammar appear in canto 34, "a golden dream swims with the light, schools / of thoughts turning, bunching, heading down, up: nothing is // wrong" and canto 111: "nothing is set up … aspirations (misdirections) move in the upper branches of / the mind like vine vipers, slender, loopy, slithery:"

pittering across
dome-locked, skyless pavilions
are grocery tickets or nasal
tissues (*Snow* 224)

Ammons invokes Tennyson not only in pentameter and assonance, but in his transformation of the Lady of Shalott's loom and room. But his slightly lurching linebreak for "nasal / tissues" is a reminder of how unattractive the actual "air-conditioned room" must be.

In Ammons, mottled, squawking slang perches alongside discussions of catalysts, gravitational fields, and electromagnetism. His blending of languages is distinctive not only in its different kinds of vocabulary but in its different kinds of syntax: long, complex clauses; phrases tossed loosely together; ungainly interpolations, both brief and even longer than the clauses they interrupt. The scientific jostles against the contemporary, the southern dialectal against the poetical; each diction is both heightened and tinted. While these dictional and syntactic variations are comic on their own, Ammons's exceptional variety of language is also key to his comedy of *failing thought.* It represents shifting moods, astute perceptions, labored calculations, mental ruts and potholes, irrational associations, and undignified impulses. The speaker of many Ammons poems has little sense of proportion and even less of a filter. In "Guitar Recitativos," for example, Ammons uses the pose of the dumb, self-absorbed lover: "What I mean is could you just peel me a few of those grapes over there /… Oh about half a bunch" (*CP* 219). Ammons takes up aggressively flabby language with glee: "I feel approximately like that: also, / I don't feel good" (*Glare* 220). Rarely has Pound's condemnation of "slush" (7) been so happily ignored.

"Renovating," from *Uplands* (1970), makes a predicament funny by showing the less-than-rational relations in a speaker's line of reasoning. It is one of a series of six poems whose first lines begin with "I can tell you what I need." The needed items range from one of Archimedes' levers to "a stronger assortment of battleboats" to "money." Each displays Ammons's mixture of precision

and sloppiness—of terms from recent sciences, attention to the whimsical and corporeal; the following is a poem of the absolutely unpoetical:

> I can tell you what I need is a good periodontist:
> my gums are so sensitive, separated and lumpy,
> I have to let my cornflakes sit and wilt:
> the niacin leaks out before I get it in
> and the ten percent daily requirement of iron
> rusts: I've got so mashed potatoes best
> accommodate my desire: my gums
> before them
> relax and, as it were, smile: I have bad dreams that
> snap, crackle, and pop (to switch seeds)
> have built an invisible wall soggy-resistant: what
> I could use with my gum line
> is like a new start
> or at least a professionally directed reversal or
> arrest of what has become abrupt recession. (*CP* 224)

As Ammons explains the critical state of his gums, he turns to the pathos of pentameter: "I have to let my cornflakes sit and wilt," and then to a labored alexandrine: "the niacin leaks out before I get it in." With "and the ten percent daily requirement of iron / rusts," Ammons resorts to prose rhythms, followed by a linebreak that accentuates its joke; it is the metrical equivalent of saying "wait for it." Language is bloated by "mashed potatoes" that best "accommodate my desire," and permeated by "snap, crackle, and pop"—the mascots of Rice Krispies. In the last three lines, for example, the meaningless "like" and affirmatively clichéd "new start" are followed by a periodontist's own euphemistic advertisement ("professionally directed reversal") and the punning "abrupt recession." The linguistic shifts are ideal for depicting this speaker's wryly self-deprecating complaint: he wants to reveal every detail about the state of his gums, and grasps at every kind of language to do so.

This comedy is based in personality, as articulated in *Glare*:

> I suppose you would like to
> know something about my inner life: well, it
> stinks: no, no, I don't mean that, I'm kidding:
> what I mean is that I think you would like to

> think that my inner life stinks, it is so
> comforting to know that other peoples' inner
> life also stinks: but no, seriously, I don't
> mean that about you at all:
>
> […] well, I confess, my inner life
> stinks but only when it isn't gloriously
> fragrant (267-68)

The colossal, vehement gap of "it // stinks," the fated rhyme of "think" and "stink," and the flurry of "I think … you think": the pleasure of reading the productions of this inner life is similar to that found in Berryman's petulant conclusion that "I have no / inner resources, because I am heavy bored" (Song 14). Ammons's inner life, as recorded in the language of these long poems, presents brilliance, mundanity, and muddle. (We see one instance of this in the phrase "other peoples' inner // life": while "people" asks for a correspondingly plural "inner lives," it seems as if the speaker, despite his frequently arresting capacity for self-effacement and multiple perspectives, lumps the inner lives of other people into a single one.)

### 2. "this / idle tendance / of typewriter": *Tape*

In *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, his first book-length poem, Ammons augments his comically ambitious and unambitious style through constrained free verse.[89] *Tape* consists of about seven thousand lines on a two-inch-wide roll of adding machine tape, unwinding from an ashtray and coiling into a wastebasket. Within its confines, Ammons records gustatory, financial, social, and natural events: from any mundanity may spring a page of ecstatic apostrophe, or several pages of meditation on the poetic process (puns on the *tape* and *try* in "tapestry" turn up throughout). The formal aspects of *Tape* have been taken for granted at best, and more often deprecated. To Ian

[89] Susan Stewart provides a helpful context for *Tape*'s composition, and an exploration of its thirty-three sections: Ammons "designs his narrow paper, diurnal obligation to write, and roll of tape defining the length of the work as a means for producing a field for thought" (24).

Sansom, *Tape* "is remarkable only for having been written on a roll of adding-machine tape. With the tape's length and breadth determining its shape and size, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* quite literally invites readers to never mind the quality but feel the width."[90]

Although the basic form of *Tape* may resemble what Justin Quinn as called a "cookie cutter" (in his otherwise appreciative 2003 review), what happens inside the cutter is unpredictable. Some passages zigzag or spiral down the page; some string out phrases into a lean vertical line. Some passages exploit the margin for near nonsense ("3:20 pm: today is near- / ly shot already: / got up ear- / ly" [165]); those that use the 25-character wide line to its full capacity for several lines on end briefly resemble prose; still others are as elaborately indented as a diagrammed sentence.[91] While Pound's *Cantos* and Olson's *Maximus* poems tend to suspend words across the page so widely that one reads the lines as a visual arrangement, the tightly constrained *Tape* uses spatial changes so slight that they resemble punctuation marks. Like many comic performers, Ammons depends on lulls and on sudden, expressive emphasis; there is a difference—although one of microseconds—between a direct, uniformly aligned descent and a passage that has more vertical and horizontal action. Despite his occasional dismissal of "the bitchy requirements // of form or rhyme" (*Garbage* 120), Ammons's poetry depends on shape and sound; they are central to his "curvatures / of intonation, gestures of / emphasis, clusters of / relationships" (*Snow* 174).

Ammons's interest in mimetic forms surfaces a few months before the beginning of *Tape*. As he reveals in a letter to Denise Levertov, he had asked Hugh Kenner "about Yvor Winters's 'Fallacy

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[90] Near the end of *Glare,* Ammons remarks "in my last (and nearly first) review from / England, it is observed that I am on automatic, // good lord" (202). The review mentioned is Sansom's, which mentions Ammons as a case of American language "on automatic," with a "massive oeuvre [as] a kind of giant bulk bin fed by his extraordinary brush-equipped pick-up belt of a brain."

[91] For work on Ammons's prosody and form, see: Marjorie Perloff's " 'How a thing will / unfold': Fractal Rhythms in A. R. Ammons's *Briefings*" (reprinted in *Complexities of Motion*: 68-82), Michael McFee on Ammons's "anti-formalism" in *The Snow Poems*, and Stephen Cushman's *Fictions of Form in American Poetry*.

of Expressive or Imitative Form' which always bothered me a lot … Kenner wrote back something I want to share with you" (*Letters* 219).

> Look up Williams's poem about the cat stepping among the jamjars; and note that it contains, exactly, a single declarative sentence, which printed as prose would serve as its paraphrase; but that the poem, despite the fact that it contains the same words in the same order as its paraphrase, is not identical with its paraphrase; and the difference between the two is what I call the poem's form. Nothing to do with stanza pattern or lineation, though these serve as indications that one doesn't look at the sentence but at the poem. Difference rather of direction. The sentence records information; the poem on the contrary enacts, i.e. gets from its own beginning to its own ending with the same gingerly efficiency as that cat, dislodging nothing. (2 September 1963)

Ammons, who asks Levertov where he can find the "jamjar" [sic] poem, seems to have been struck by Kenner's account of how space affects relations between the words of a poem, by how form intensifies meaning, and by how a poem *enacts*. His own poetry, especially in the lineation and spacing of *Tape* and *The Snow Poems*, enacts not the "gingerly efficiency" of the stepping cat, but the rhythms of a comically unpredictable, inefficient mind.[92]

From *Tape*'s first half-casual, half-mock-deliberate lines, space guides timing and tone. After the date, a brief moment of suspense—*today I*—precedes the prosy "decided to write":

> 6 Dec:
> today I
> decided to write
> a long
> thin
> poem
>
> employing certain
> classical considerations:
> this
> part is called the pro-
> logue: it has to do with

[92] In her forthcoming *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain,* Nikki Sillman takes up Ammons as one of the midcentury poets who "have become more vividly conscious of the biological systems that mediate inner life than the poets of any other era" (5).

the business of
getting started:  (1)

The ostentatiously mimetic announcement of a "long / thin / poem" balances down the page, asking that each monosyllable be weighted. Like George Herbert's "most thin" in the dwindling center of "Easter Wings," Ammons's graphic momentarily impersonates a concrete poem; by the time "this foolish / long / thin / poem" shows up on page 2, it takes on the feel of a repeated joke. After a gap of white space—for breath? for thought?—the sentence swells into the Latinate, vague, mock-pompous "employing certain / classical considerations." The "this" that follows is exactly centered on the tape, with equal force on each side; the effect resembles italics—'*this* / part of my poem, right here.'

It is a humorously pedantic deliberation; Ammons is taking a long time in "the business of / getting started." His effortful undertaking emerges further in an awkward linebreak that splits "pro- / logue" across two lines, as if sounding out a new and fancy word. *Tape*'s opening is wryly, dutifully conscious of both its purported genre and form, with a "pro- / logue," as an epic requires; later we encounter epic catalogues of shopping lists, and invocations to a muse. Despite the opening announcement of a striking formal innovation, this poem is off to a comically slow-moving start; immediately after the impetus of "a long / thin / poem," Ammons broadens into the rhythms of prose.[93]

Ammons's spatial tinkering vivifies the "intellect" he worried about years before, and the

[93] The linebreak as source of sometimes-corny intensity amid flatter tones will continue through all of Ammons's books, including those in a set form. In *Bosh and Flapdoodle,* Ammons recalls his family's beliefs from sixty years before: "So there we were eating feathered dinosaur / meat for Sunday dinner and expecting the // return of Jesus Christ at any minute: *looking* / *forward* to the return when, by the way, highly // disturbing reorientations would be invoked:" (101). Here Ammons's italics become more incredulous by being split across a line. The scene is both absurd to this speaker (chicken is defamiliarized "feathered dinosaur meat") and yet a significant part of his character (the familiarity of the article-less "for Sunday dinner" suggests an ingrained custom).

ineloquent voice heard at moments in *Ommateum*: the magic lantern that throws Prufrock's nerves in patterns on a screen here magnifies daydreaming and distraction. In the following passage, for example, the poet wanders around the house, naps, makes up his mind to do errands, and sits around instead; at last, he decides he has to go pick out the Christmas tree:

> keep it cold in
> garage: so it don't
> turn stiff & sheddy:
> cut 'em around October:
> why
> they cut'em so soon?
> transportation:
> it's merchandising:
> dealerships to work out:
> farmers to contact: red
> tape: whatd'ya
> think?
> they can just appear up
> down here
> fresh
> two days before Christmas?
> sheez!
> some kindova nut:
>
> grows on a tree,
> a tree is part of
> Nature,
> Nature is beautiful &
> thank you for the
> compliment: (78)

This passage, which gives voice to an imaginary, indignant tree farmer, with expressively fragmented syntax and caricatured spelling, reveals an assortment of vocal effects. Several words whole take lines for themselves, resulting in pauses of deliberation or indignation. When the farmer in Ammons's head begins to list all the reasons why trees have to be cut early, he broadens his lines, expansively moving back to the lefthand margin and using all the space available, without stopping: "it's merchandising: / dealerships to work out: / farmers to contact." This volubility provides a contrast to the moment of a huge, apparent push to the right at "red / tape," an ironically heightened

delay before a punchline, a pseudo-accidental return to the poem's title. Again, space implies time, delay. Another gap—after the insult of "sheez! / some kindova nut"—gives Ammons's slow-thinking speaker a moment to find a response, one of many "thank yous" over the course of the book. Punctuation, too, contributes to the feeling of impromptu performance: the often semantically unnecessary colons imply that Ammons, like someone speaking aloud without preparation, is not quite sure what he is going to say next. His "keep it cold in / garage: so it don't / turn stiff & sheddy" suggests that he has to think for a second about why he keeps the tree cold. He strings thoughts along loosely, as one might in conversation, where one's voice rarely closes with a period even when a sentence comes to a grammatical conclusion.

The Christmas tree passage embodies the disobedient vagaries of the poet's mind. The subsequent pages reminisce about Ammons's childhood in North Carolina, where he would go into the swamp to cut a tree; almost a hundred and fifty lines later, he realizes, "2:29 pm: (still sunny) // I better get out of / here & go / get that tree" (81). But instead of doing so, he types out a little *abab* quatrain, and describes how he rested on the couch and thought up the poem; the tree that has been the subject of an entire day's musings has not been acquired.

As David Kalstone remarks, "Ammons' measured, skinny lines focus our attention on things and parts of things with the insistence of a slow-motion camera" ("Ammons's Radiant Toys" 15). This concentration and focus is especially valuable for a poem so composed of minutiae; the "long / thin" form of *Tape* exposes the comically effortful, out-of-proportion mind, comprised of countless everyday things. The spacing of *Tape* also has something in common with sentence diagramming, in which the logical relations between words are expressed spatially. By indenting, for example, Ammons can demarcate lists or dependent clauses or parenthesis: he can group and align a series of nouns or adverbial phrases. Any sudden shift becomes the center of *attention*, no matter what the shift is: whether the margin is shifted out to the left or inwards, a change invites focus, and

sometimes that focus is deliberately anticlimactic or nonsensical. Stephen Cushman has vividly described "the kind of shifting play of significance, the continual metamorphosis of meaning, that Ammons cultivates and wants to protect against overdetermining forms" (157). Just as Berryman plays within and against the confines of the sestet, Ammons plays with his margins and with their significance (or lack of). In this spirit, he carefully itemizes and arranges his meals, some of the least sensuous in any body of literature:[94]

> lunch: hot dogs and baked
> beans again: swell:
> 2/23: 11½¢ can: cheap:
> hotdogs run you around—
> oh let's see:
> this morning's coffee &
> a chocolate fudge cookie:
> maybe 30¢ altogether:
> & all
> that energy
> turned into verse (39-40)

Lineation has never been more impertinent: the minuscule indentations (why indent "beans"? why type this passage out at all?) accentuate the prosaic nature of the text, and flaunt the attention that the form solicits. The narrow constraint of *Tape* itself welcomes verbal badness—or at least seeming arbitrariness and seeming conformity. It toys with spontaneity and limit. As Ammons views the seemingly unending roll of tape that remains, he types, with an iambic strain, "Well / if / it / must / be / onward / to / the / end, / let's / get / there / in / a / hurry: or / is that cheating?" (59). *Is that*

[94] Five thousand lines later, an almost identical meal surfaces: "just had lunch: / cold baked ham: / coffee: chocolate fudge / cookie" [200]; in that second instance, Ammons breaks the phrase over the line, making a tiny disruption: it is clear that "cookie" will be the next word, but the enjambment allows a quarter-second delay and bathetic revelation. The "chocolate fudge cookie" brings together three different kinds of confectionery into one particularly sugary one—and sums up not only the atmosphere of Ammons's two months of meals, but the larger culture with which he sometimes interacts. It recalls M. F. K. Fisher's description of another linguistically and nutritionally unwholesome recipe, one that involves "a large package of sweet chocolate bits, a box of 'Butter Fudge' chocolate cake mix, a package of instant vanilla pudding, and a cup of imitation mayonnaise. … It was called *Old-Fashion* [sic] *Fudge Torte*" (Ricks 270).

*cheating,* as one might cheat in a game: the vatic voice of *Ommateum* has been exchanged for prolixity, both plodding and sprightly.[95]

### 3. The poem of *Garbage*

While Ammons's books after *Tape* and *The Snow Poems* adopt less formally flamboyant modes, their comedy continue to arise from seeming ineptness and inadequacy—and in the case of *Garbage*, from verbal scraps and excess. Despite the extraordinarily varied vocabulary that Ammons has on hand (terms from biology, Miltonic archaisms, obsolete North Carolinian slang), the lexicon of *Garbage* and of his other long poems often shows unexpected constraint, as if the poet is obliged to patch new clauses with scraps from previous ones. Ammons returns again and again—sometimes several times in a line, sometimes half a dozen times over as many pages—to the same, unique, often 'incidental' words. In these volumes, the comic badness previously evoked by staged inadequacy and garrulity becomes a quieter comedy, one of awkwardness and grace.

The words Ammons repeats are not obviously thematically or topically significant, in contrast to the way "waste" or "burn" might be to a poem about garbage, or to the way "nothing" appears 92 times in *Glare*. Instead, *incidental* words return: after the "words of poems read out loud settl[ing] down like minnows in a shallows" (37), patients appear "like minnows in the pool-head of a tidal rising" (91), and "twinklings like minnows surfacing waves" (105). Words crop up in

[95] *The Snow Poems* takes Ammons's expression of an inner life to its most striking, through devices that include using two or even three columns of type. Helen Vendler has described how a two-column format can show a "bicameral mind" (*The Ocean* 119); it can, for example, "emphasiz[e] the activity of the mind, since it shows the hesitations implicit in composition" (106). In one two-column passage, as the left-hand side discusses a tree, the right is blank except for an isolated "give / up" (17), as if to suggest the single thought waiting in the back of one's head; in another, as the left attempts a conceit about an willow, the right records a somewhat forcedly whimsical reflection on how "snow rhymes / soundwise but / contrariwise / colorwise / with crow" (30), enacting the wayward brain's associations. In another passage (analyzed at length by Vendler), a right-hand column's almost page-long, single-sentence query—"only / where / we / are / to / lose / all / are / we / to / have …" (81-82)—captures yet another unwilled thought, one that runs constantly in the back of one's head despite the pleasanter distractions of the left-hand column.

unrelated contexts, just far enough apart to seem both noticeable and uncanny.[96]

Canto 4, for example, ends at an enormous landfill off the Florida interstate, where a bulldozer operator contemplates a discarded wine bottle. His scientific epiphany is handled both lightly and earnestly: as in *Sphere*'s passage about golden shoals of pollen, aliens, Jove, and sneezing, Ammons moves between the visually beautiful and the slightly mock heroic. In this treatment, a heaving a wasp-filled bottle into a landfill becomes magnificent:

> the bulldozer man picks up a red bottle that
> turns purple and green in the light and pours
>
> out a few drops of stale wine, and yellowjackets
> burr in the bottle, sung drunk, the singing
>
> not even puzzled when he tosses the bottle way
> down the slopes, the still air being flown in
>
> in the bottle even as the bottle dives through
> the air! the bulldozer man thinks about that
>
> and concludes that everything is marvelous, what
> he should conclude and what everything is: on
>
> the deepdown slopes, he realizes, the light
> inside the bottle will, over the weeks, change
>
> the yellowjackets, unharmed, having left lost,
> not an aromatic vapor of wine left, the air
>
> percolating into and out of the neck as the sun's
> heat rises and falls: all is one, one all:
>
> hallelujah: he gets back up on his bulldozer
> and shaking his locks backs the bulldozer up (34)

The last couplet of this passage shows Ammons repeating, and toying with, words on a quite concentrated level. The driver gets himself "back up" onto his seat, vertically, and the bulldozer into gear, horizontally: the same two words of direction are rearranged and condensed into a single,

[96] A few further examples: after "a whirling rose of [birds'] wings" (34), see the "rats' hard tails whirl whacking // trash" (34), and "the / turkey buzzard whirling, the wind whirling" (84). So too with "a priestly director" (21) behind a bulldozer, followed by a "priestly plume" of smoke (30) and the image of "cuneiform / records in priestly piles" (73). Stephen Cushman notes (of *Sphere*) that "The engine of this verse is repetition. … Ammons does not say only once something he can say several times, running it instead through permutations of extended qualification, variation, and apposition" (158).

hefty, matter-of-fact motion. It is a satisfying sentence in how it hovers between awkwardness and expressivity.

These linguistic stumblings, turned into clusters of flashy reuse, are one of Ammons's most pervasive devices: "so; so / what, what is a poet: even getting old gets // old" (*B&F* 71); "we already have it, except we've had it" (*B&F* 61); "is a poem about garbage garbage" (*Garbage* 30); "poems / about nothing doing nothing" (*Diversifications* 32); "how well does this thing that / has to be done have to be done:" (*Glare* 71).[97] As Ammons remarks of garbage itself, this linguistic stammering helps "to get our attention, getting in the way" (18). Ammons gets all he can out of even unremarkable parts of speech; he exposes how oddly flexible the language is. Even in exceptionally bad jokes, Ammons doubles and dislocates phrases so as to vivify insubstantial particles.

The scene at the dump is repeated in three successive cantos: in each, a worker associated with garbage—a dumptruck driver, the bulldozer operator, the Commissioner of Sanitation in his Cadillac—approaches the edge of the heap and contemplates the scene, enacting a late-twentieth-century version of Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, or the sublime landscapes of *Ommateum*. Minute, tangential elements resurface again and again in each of the three encounters. In Canto 3, the "hallelujah" (voiced above in the scene with the bulldozer driver) belongs to the birds, excited for new trash:

> and meanwhile
> a truck already arrived spills its goods from
> the back hatch and the birds as in a single computer-
> formed net plunge in celebration, hallelujahs
> of rejoicing: the driver gets out of his truck
> and wanders over to the cliff on the spill and

[97] In *The Snow Poems*, line breaks bring this mischief to the fore: "As for fame I've had it / before I've / had it" (178). In *Garbage*, Ammons declares that his "house, paid for for // twenty years, is paid for" (15); he has enough money "to live / from now on on" (13); upon being besmirched by an overhead bird, he wonders "do migrating geese not do do" in flight (97).

looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine
rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the

birds white and clean as angel-food cake: holy, holy,
holy, the driver cries and flicks his cigarette

in a spiritual swoop that floats and floats before
it touches ground: (28)

As Ammons's ecstatically rangy, long sentence heads onward, shifting perspectives and clustering assonances, it moves past repeated words, constructions, and abstract patterns. The celebratory plunge of the white terns, for example, is echoed in the swoop of the flicked cigarette. In canto 4, that glancing comparison of terns' wings to angel-food cake turns into a declaration that terns must be "designed after angels, or angels / after them":

the arctic
terns move away from the still machine and

light strikes their wings in round, a fluttering,
a whirling rose of wings, and it seems that

terns' slender wings and finely-tipped
tails look so airy and yet so capable that they

must have been designed after angels or angels
after them: (34)

Again, "angel" is a relatively unimportant word for *Garbage*: as with other recurring nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions, it seems reclaimed for its own sake. So too the "fine" of "rosy-fine / rising of day" and of the "finely-tipped / tails" of the terns. While in most writing, one vets one's prose of unintentional or insignificant repetitions, Ammons's reusages appear to stem from purely verbal, or formal, high spirits.[98]

[98] Among the critics who have commented on the mottled language of *Garbage* are David Baker, who praises the poem's "tremendous variety of tones, its astonishing range of subject matter, its sheer readability" (96); J. Mark Smith, who compares *Garbage*'s vocabulary to recent word-databases and notes that "the text reminds its reader almost continuously that the field of things that could potentially be named therein is as open as are America's landfills" (172). John Wilkinson states that *Garbage* "makes great show of redundancy in trying to get at something without trying too hard, as though redundancy were an important resource, which may well be true if garbage is the poem's stuff" ("About About," 38).

These irregular, prominent echoes are a brassy instance of a repetition found in many forms: Ammons's repetitive language balances between abundance and conservation, familiarity and surprise. The scene above, of wonder and delight at a freshly dumped load of garbage darts, quickly from the mundane to the transcendent. These swoops are infused with a somewhat wayward humor by Ammons verbal echoes, which allow him to link disparate topics. In *Glare,* he exclaims "surprise! surprise!"—with its connotations of a party, where people jump out with balloons and presents—twice:

> so here I am fist-diddling in the
> poot-shanty when my grandmother
>
> appears at the door—surprise!
> surprise! she frowned (this is my
>
> grandmother poem) and my sex education
> was off to the races: (144)

"So here I am" is a classic beginning for an oral narrative—and the topic is a frequent one in standup comedy. Ammons quickly presents verbal distractions, however: rustic and colloquial compounds, and strategically outrageous parenthesis (as much of an intrusion as the grandmother herself). But what makes the intrusion of "surprise! surprise!" more resonantly funny is when Ammons returns to the phrase, for an entirely different subject:

> well, it's Easter
> morning right now, with a nor'easter,
>
> out-of-whack, whipper-jawed, eight-inch dump
> load of snow on the ground, and it, as they
> say, agoing to snow: surprise, surprise! (193)

The unlooked-for return delights by merging the early and mortifying memory in with the present weather report.[99] Unwilling to waste a joke by using it only twice, *Glare* also reuses the exclamation of "big surprise": a hundred and fifty pages after a sardonic "so / the big surprise is, fall has come"

[99] Another of Ammons's more strident repetitions occurs in *Easter* and *nor'easter*, made extremely obvious by his linebreak.

(131), appears the literally "big surprise" of a bull elephant's penis (289). The way these superficially connected exclamations pile up resembles an extended pun: one phrase is reused for very different, incongruous notions. While *Tape* shows the poet's mind taking in and privileging the ordinary event and insignificant thought, *Garbage* and *Glare* reveal an even wider range of unpromising materials being pulled together. The aspects of repetition that Krystyna Mazur finds in Whitman illuminate Ammons's comedy of mental untidiness. "By moving repetition to the center," Whitman "affirm[s] the accidental" (40); his poem "is an enumeration which does not assign priority to any of the elements it lists" (41). That anti-hierarchical nature of repetition is equally apt for Ammons's forcible yokings of distant, vivid memory and generic remarks on the weather.

The anti-hierarchical and often slightly awkward repetitions of single words also extend to Ammons's constant, impish allusions. Ammons turns Auden's "O all the instruments agree" into a statement about an actual forecast (*Tape* 34), just as Stevens's "it was snowing / And it was going to snow" (95) becomes an accurate predictor of a blizzard in the lines from *Glare* quoted above. The technique is not simply parodic but playful: Ammons takes lines that have been over-quoted to the point of becoming artifacts or out-of-context epigrams, and returns them to practical discourse. He alludes to numerous predecessors, recalling the act's root in *allūdere*, "to play with, to make a playful or mocking allusion to, to jest" (from *lūdere,* "to play").[100]

Ammons's lowbrow conversation with his high modernist precursors revels in the failure to be sublime. Stevens's haunting image of how "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down"[101]

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[100] He nods repeatedly, for instance, to Dream Song 14, reworking Berryman's "we ourselves flash & yearn" into "the great flash their selves / onto, obliterating, their surroundings" (*Snow* 190) and into "the world is ashen with // flash and burn" (*Glare* 107). Song 14's "I have no inner resources" is also linked to Whittier: "I don't like to be / cooped up: I don't have any Snowbound // resources:" (*Glare* 120). Lines from Berryman's final, poignant Song 385 ("My house is older than Henry; / that's fairly old") return in "my memory is about as long as // your dick: that's fairly short, hiccuped Henry" (*Glare* 203), a travesty that the older poet probably would have approved.

[101] "Of Mere Being" (*Opus Posthumous* 141).

changes to a much more corporeal image: "the pot lumps smooth with convexity, // the abs lose their trained ruffles, and the / flesh-flabby dugs dangle down" (*Glare* 213). Ammons may also be binding Stevens's image to Eliot's Tiresias, and his "wrinkled dugs"; the same page of *Glare* also draws on Frost's "The Road Not Taken," an idea prompted by having to "get // the garbage out by the road."[102] While Pound fills the later parts of *The Cantos* with Greek, Italian, and Latin, Ammons's long poems mix fake Yiddish with Chaucer: "und smalle foules haben / der tails / downgedroppen" (*Tape* 189) and North Carolinian slang. Instead of Pound's Chinese characters, Ammons types out the strata of his lawn (*Snow* 261). There is something brazen in this undisguised alluding; its intention, often, seems to be to make one aware of how one's perceptions are shaped by what one has read, of how such books become a part of one's mental life despite how little they might bear on the natural scenes one describes.

In all of these poems, Ammons takes up everything that falls short of the vatic. At times he recalls Pope's *Peri Bathous,* with its lists of figures of the vulgar, infantine, expletive, tautological, the jargon-ridden, and the inanity. Ammons's digressive side is immediately recognizable: constant self-interruptions and self-punctuations, running commentary on his thoughts and style, exaggerated spelling and onomatopoeic slang, repetitions and their elaborate variants, gleefully bad and gratuitously explained jokes, under- or over-punctuated exclamations, etymological play on a single word, typing out a grocery bill or a sophomorically bawdy concrete poem. He frames and preserves even his most quickly-devised verbal inventions, lineating a cliché into a two-line poem called "Their Sex Life": "One failure on / top of another" (*Really Short Poems* 136). He gives a single pun ("Bravery runs in my family") a page and a title ("Cowardice") to itself; the bravery here may be in the

[102] Among the poets whose famous lines Ammons brassily steals are Housman: "miltown can do more than / Milton can" (*Snow* 23); Whitman: "when I heard the learned astonisher, I said // to myself, well, I bedanged" (*Glare* 280); Cummings: "the coarse, ah, the coarse, unhappily // they are not refined" (*Glare* 227).

brazenness of the poet's awarding such a pun the status of a poem, flaunting the tenets of minimalism while resembling it on the page.[103]

In the words of James Hans, "Everydayness is as crucial to Ammons's work as it is to our lives, and it is one of the poet's great strengths" (289). Unlike Lowell and Berryman, who give their reader highly specific, luminous, bizarre, or metaphoric details about their family life, Ammons presents the details of the *flatly and generically* everyday: the accretion of mundanities, of the moments when life is not freighted with symbol. Against the countless insignificant things forgotten, Ammons's recurrences are a counter. Repetition—in *Tape,* that of the "chocolate fudge cookies" that fuel the poem's composition for over a month (11 Dec., 14. Dec., and 10. Jan); in *Snow,* of the pheasants constantly tracking through the snow—is a way of showing the everyday for what it actually is, and of pointing out the comedy in one's own monotonous, ordinary days.

Familiarity is at the core of Ammons's sensibility: that of the poet willing to address spiders, willows, an unknown reader, and mountains—and willing to give his readers abundant details about his digestion, head colds, desires, and whimsical trains of thought. *Glare* is threaded through by a pronounced routine that locates the poem in the mundane, while dwelling on the fact that such routines are essentially momentary. In the first canto, after envisioning the utmost stretches of the universe, Ammons concludes: "I must // get peanut butter and soda crackers / and the right shoe soles (for ice) //and leave something for my son and / leave these lines, poor things, to // you, if you will have them, can they / do you any good" (6). Even after the hodgepodge shopping list is completed—"I / bought a pair of shoes for ice: a // gritty or cusp-crested sole suctions / the slick:" (34)—it returns: "you / shouldn't buy shoes in the morning: for // because with day's stress your ankles swell / and what fits freely at dawn racks your // leggings by dusk: of course, if …" (115).

[103] See Pound's command to "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (3).

The second-to-last canto returns to the valedictory tone: "some notes: buy morning shoes in the morning / and evening shoes in the evening: okay, so // sure, fill the veins with ore" (291), alluding to Keats's letter of advice to Shelley in the next breath. Despite Ammons's increasingly bleak attention to both the end of his own life and the eventual end of the world, shoes attach the poem to earth.[104]

Such echoes of ordinary objects, errands and perceptions (e.g., the relentless noting of the date, the poet's age, and the weather) run through and across books. Ammons's meals become familiar, not as sensuous things elaborately rendered, but as essentials returned to again and again. In *Snow,* after describing the human body as city, Ammons writes, "I already came home at 2:30 / and fed my city a fresh / banana dunked milky in frosty / flakes" (262); in *Garbage*, he considers "how to slice a banana for breakfast oatmeal, // fourteen thick or thirty-three thin events, the / chunky substance of fourteen encounters or the // flavor availabilities in limp circles:" (95).[105] Although something done repeatedly may lose significance, those recurring acts are here recognized as essential: they constitute the very atmosphere one lives in.[106] While not in and of themselves funny, such repetitions allow Ammons to combine elements of standup (his staging of the tiny, illogical mental conections) and of serial comedies: as in sitcoms, we see the same objects and places again and again, and as they grow familiar their potential for humor grows.

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[104] *Glare* takes its title from its Canto 34, which recalls the death of Ammons's younger brother: "it has becoming a foundation: / whatever is now passes like early // snow on a warm boulder: but the / boulder over and over is revealed, // its grainy size and weight a glare:" (94-95). This image is anticipated on the poem's first page: "we are an absurd / irrelevance on this slice of curvature // and … a boulder from the blue / could confirm it" (3).

[105] In "Scarcities," the banana returns in "a cup of bran flakes with skim milk" (*Chicago Review* 104).

[106] While Hans writes that Ammons "isn't interested in expressing a self, doesn't devote his attention to the hum of subjectivity" (287), his subsequent remarks seem to distinguish between a self and an *ego*: "He doesn't tell us much about Ammons throughout his career because he realizes that none of that material really matters. … Ammons's poetry is as good as it is because he realizes that the best poetry has little to do with self-hood, even if it may use elements of the poet's life to express the manyness of the poetic context" (287).

Ammons charts the summits and bogs of his inner life with even greater tangibility through his repetitions of slight, insignificant verbal devices. We have seen the verbal hiccupping that persists each of his books, from *Snow*'s "nothing worth doing / doing" (161) to *Bosh and Flapdoodle*'s "so; so / what, what is a poet" (71), and to the joke of syntax and lineation in a four-line poem called "The Upshot": "It's hard / to live // living it / up down" (*Really Short Poems* 133). Another device is that of Ammons's appositive (or parenthetical) exclamations—his brief, tacked-on commentary, wryly expressing wonder or another intense emotion: "today is full of things, / so many" (*Tape* 12).[107] This characteristic, which runs through all of his books, becomes comic through the delight of recognition—of simply realizing that this particular mind tends to react with awe to a range of sights both humdrum and exalted. The habit contributes to Ammons's ebullient tone: we picture the poet rapturously appending these modifiers in a breath, as his colons and commas run on. In *Garbage,* we see "the farmers' market, so bright, so clear" (68); in *Glare,* "surely not a neutrino, so tiny" (50) and landscapes "strung with wires, phone, electric, / high-tension, so primitive!" (118); in *Sphere,* as part of a list oi inhospitable planets: "Venus too hot, so much // extravagance of waste" (31); in *Bosh and Flapdoodle,* via a digression on fat: "eat enough and they will make you // as slick as butter (or really excellent cheese, / say, parmesan, how delightful)" (27). The OED describes Ammons' *so* as "a mere intensive without comparative force" (14a); H. W. Fowler labels it as the "appealing *so* … more suitable for conversation, where the responsive nod of confirmation can be awaited, than for most kinds of writing. In print, outside dialogue, it has a certain air of silliness, even when the context is favourable…" (566). Ammons uses this "certain air of silliness": it shows a momentary flash of childlike delight, more a sensation than an articulated thought.

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[107] Frank O'Hara shares this effusive tendency: "Joe is restless and so am I, so restless" (224); "and I've just caught sight of the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria.* / What land is this, so free?" (256). The dog who speaks Thom Gunn's "Yoko" does, also: "And here a dried old turd, so interesting / so old, so dry, yet so subtle and mellow" (300).

Another recurring verbal habit is Ammons's use of a diluted—that is, not markedly contrastive—*but*. This conjunction often occurs half a dozen times on a page, often beginning several clauses in a row. It enacts the real-time imprecision of a mind uncertain what it is going to say next, often retracting or modifying a statement, and continually stringing clauses together: in *Glare,* "but / now I'm trying to remember a memory, … but // I've already told you about my memory / but I figure when I xerox the strip…" (175), or, earlier, "but it's not my feelings / but how can I change them, is it?, … not that you don't have your // own feelings: but you are, as I am / like a moray eel , sticking out only // a little:" (75-76). Prose stylists and grammar textbooks take a dim view of such repetitions—"Two 'buts' used successively are likely to cause incoherence," says one[108]—but Ammons's comedy depends on such incoherencies, as does standup; it is a perfect connector for a mind that constantly stages its slightly jumbled, slowly emerging thoughts.

Ammons's inordinately capacious parentheses suggest digressions so long that the mind nearly becomes lost in them. His repeating of particular words after digressions shows an erratic brain trying to get back to his main point or trying to remember what that main point was ("from hastening off … hastening off, I say" [*B&F* 88]). His associative play with words' sounds shows a mind very open to the trivial and illogical. His sudden forays into rhymed doggerel (in *Snow,* e.g., "the crow I think / has smelled my suet / but surely he / won't come to it" [136]) are the poetic equivalent of humming to oneself. Ammons's sudden shifts into other voices, like Berryman's shifts between pronouns, come to represent different perspectives one can take within one's own head—recall the vividness with which he pictured the impatient Christmas-tree farmer. Ammons's words of conversational filler, such as "well," and of extreme periphrasis or circumlocution, recall mental static and other unclear thoughts. His generic definite articles, found in references to "the jay," "the

[108] Robert Herrick and Lindsay Damon, *New Composition and Rhetoric for Schools* (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co, 1911), 340.

humidity," "the man," "the street," and "the cleavage" all suggest a particularly *local* perspective, in which the speaker takes an object as the only one around.

Throughout his career, Ammons uses verbal minutiae to dramatize the intellect he worried about in that 1951 journal entry. He dramatizes his sprawling thought processes most vividly in an unpublished draft ("Canto 57: Cybernetic"), where his response to ":what is the meaning of life:" appears in flurries and strings of question marks floating in various directions. The noise of the typewriter's return key—*chigachig*—erratically appears, as if to interfere with reflection: it is a wonderful representation of how one can be tripped up in the act of trying to think.

### 4. *Bosh and Flapdoodle*: The well-wrought DRAB POT

Such catalogues of Ammons's staged badness point, simultaneously, to its expressive, precise revelations: to the way it picks up perceptions and sensations usually too small or insignificant to register even in lyrics. *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, Ammons's final book, continues this comedy of drifting, disproportionate cognitive processes and their linguistic equivalents. One poem, about impotence, brackets its first line with an unspecified "it," suggesting an object so important that it need not—and ought not—be named:

> It used to flick up so often, I called it
> flicker: but now, drooping, it nods awake
>
> or, losing it, slips back asleep: I say,
> stand up there, man, but, you know, it's only
>
> me, and it takes no threat to heart, so to
> speak: it's lazier than a sick dog that won't
>
> lift his head to sniff the wind: (42)

Euphemism soon turns to comically ignominious metaphor. The first line break allows Ammons to drop a joke in the pet name of "flicker," an incongruous picture of a little buff-and-yellow bird. Various figures of speech, seemingly called to mind spontaneously, clash: the "flicker" turns into a

"man" and then the disquietingly extended metaphor of a "sick dog." The weak exhortation of "I say, / stand up there, man" is a feeble version of Rochester's threats—in "The Imperfect Enjoyment"—to his similarly disobedient member: "Base recreant to thy prince, thou dar'st not stand." The sentence, continually impeded by commas and sagging phrases ("you know," "so to / speak"), itself becomes so loose as to be plaintive.

Within a few couplets, however, Ammons moves from Rochester to Marvell. His thoughts on the weakness of the flesh turn to a digression on the *carpe diem* theme, and from there to a meditation on death: below are the last few lines of his page-long reflection:

> the walls of the grave your only embrace, and
> the soil you lie on all that lies on you: my
>
> goodness: fortunately, there are remedies—
> implants, injections, dirty magazines: the
>
> world is sometimes so well provided with 2nd
> or 3rd chances (43)

"My / goodness," he says, now with a linebreak that suggests a short, frightened gasp—the exclamation is a painfully inadequate response to the bleak, utterly final image of the grave. But even more jolting is what follows: Ammons seem to think of a remedy for death itself, though it immediately becomes clear that he has gone back to his main subject, erectile dysfunction and its cures.[109]

*Bosh and Flapdoodle* provides Ammons's final assessment of his poetry, in the two-page poem

[109] This mixture of jocularity and grimness occurs on every level of the book. As in his longer poems, Ammons immediately grounds the reader in time; the book opens, "Not two months off till the shortest day, the / shadows near noon all flop over one way as if // it were soon to be dusk" (13). These pages are bounded by the solstice; the absence, darkness, death of Donne's "Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day" lies in the background. Each of the one- or two-page poems that follow marks days until that shortest day: sixty-eight poems later, Ammons concludes, "the shortest day: / the sun is just now setting behind the branch // of the crabapple tree it always sets behind / this day of the year" (158). The final lines allude to the last pages of *Glare*: "up on the / north end of the west ridge where the sun sets … when it pales out front behind that limb / of the crabapple tree, nights will be long & // brittle cold:" (282). The recognition of that crabapple tree—that it has been a fixture of the poet's yard since the mid-1990s—is another instance of Ammons's homely, thoroughly everyday repetitions.

that concludes the book. "Way Down Upon the Woodsy Roads" reworks utterances from at least five earlier works, starting from its first couplets:

> Don't you think poetry should be succinct:
> not now: I think it should be discinct: it
>
> should wander off and lose its way back and
> then bump into a sign and have to walk home: (*B&F* 157)

"Discinct" recalls a declaration from twenty-five years before: "I never used the word *rink* in my work nor / *tosh* as in *turgid tosh* nor *slipup, backswing, tocsin, / discinct, skin-flint, razzmatazz*" (*Sphere* 27).[110] Here, finally, Ammons does use the word: in fact, he makes it *the* adjective to describe his style. His next couplet echoes *Garbage*, in which a poem is imagined charging off and getting lost: "should it be … long, hunting wide, coming home / late, losing the trail and recovering it:" (*Garbage* 19). In contrast to that energetic, ambitious, and purposeful description of a poem's trajectory, *Bosh and Flapdoodle* reduces the notion, comically, into a poem that has to "lose its way and / then bump into a sign and have to walk home." "Way Down" is so lacking in direction that it even shuffles into the sign that should direct it.

"Way Down" is also unabashedly and brassily *ordinary*; its next couplets pun on the Mack trucks and the layers of the "Big Mac" sandwich, on the "compact" of the small car and the cosmetics case consisting mostly of a mirror:

> who gives a hoot about these big-Mack trucks
> of COMPRESSION: what are the most words for
>
> the least: take your cute little compact and
> don't tell me anything about it:

Again, Ammons is retrieving a near-leitmotif from earlier works, where a McDonalds is a destination. In *The Snow Poems,* one passage ends, "we may go to / McDonald's for lunch!" (225); later Ammons broods on whether to go "to McDonald's for a Big / Mac" (262). Although the lines

[110] To be lax and loose—and, literally, ungirdled: the Latinate equivalent of "unbuttoned."

that follow leave those slightly garish references behind, they continue to dole out variegated summaries of his process and technique. In doing so, they also exemplify that technique.

> just turn me
>
> loose, let me rattle my ole prattle: poetry
> springs greatest from deepest depths: well,
>
> let her whistle: how shallow can anything
> get: (rhyming on the front end): I do not
>
> believe that setting words to rhyme and meter
> turns prose into poetry, and having written
>
> some of the shortest poems, I now like to
> write around largely into any precinct (not
>
> succinct) or pavilion (a favorite word) I fall
> in with: I have done my duty:

The satisfaction with which Ammons notices his "front end" rhyme of "let" and "get" is characteristic of his commentary on poem-making, seen in the alternately querulous and perky comments sprinkled through *Tape.*[111] Of midcentury American poets, Ammons's explicit reflections on his work are among the least melodramatic and self-indulgent—and often the most appealing.

While Ammons rarely expatiates in a solemn manner on what he is doing, here his casual, seemingly frivolous comments on his style are revealing. He embeds another particle of earlier work with "pavilion": a favorite word, as he says. It occurs, for example, when he, a vatic poet thwarted by an inadequate 20th-century diction, tries to have a discussion with an imperturbable mountain: "you don't mind, do you, I / said to the mountain, if / I use this ledge or, like, / inspiration pavilion // to say a few things" (*Snow* 81). It also occurs in the kenning-like image of rooms, in *The Snow Poems,* as "skyless pavilions" (224). Here, in *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, he declares that he likes to "write *into*" precincts and pavilions—airy, at least partially open forms, areas walled in only lightly, if at all.

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[111] In *Tape,* Ammons declares, "my song's now / long enough to screw a / right good-sized article / with" (29), a version of Berryman's vision of "assistant professors becom[ing] associates / by working on his works" (Song 373). In *Snow,* he exclaims: "what a nice stanza!" (168).

At line 19, Ammons has now reached the midpoint of his concluding poem; now he moves from a final statement of his poetic ideals to a much broader valediction:[112]

> I am a happy
>
> man: I am at large: life sho is show biz:
> make room for the great presence of nothing:
>
> do you never long to wander off: […]
>
> […] the animal in you, older
>
> than your kind, longs to undertake the heavy
> freedom of going off by himself into the wide
>
> periphery of chance and surprise, pleasure or
> terror: oh, come with me, or go off like me,
>
> if only in the deep travels of your soul, and
> let your howl hold itself in through all the
>
> forests of the night: it's the shortest day:
> the sun is just now setting behind the branch
>
> of the crabapple tree it always sets behind
> this day of the year. . . .

At that point, the last sentence of the poem ends; but Ammons drops down one more line and centers two words—DRAB POT—just below his ellipses.

On the face of it, this poem is a drab pot: garrulous; cobbled together; not extraordinarily striking or beautiful, at least not until its last few lines. It is even less enchanting than Stevens's "gray and bare" jar, on the hill in Tennessee. Its language—the middle of the poem mentions a twee "love nest," and uses the marketing language of "little colonial"—is not manifestly transformed or even particularly jarring. But underneath this seemingly unconverted language is an odd technique:

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[112] The allusions to earlier poems continue: his unsettlingly stoic command to "make room for the great presence of nothing" recalls a more spirited, Whitmanian declaration from *Tape*: there, the poet demands more room for himself: "back off there, populace! / the poet will have a little / room! / disburden the area: hey, / you: git off da stage!" (68). With this allusion Ammons spans both his first, ambitious epic—the moment when he jumps on the stage—and when he prepares to leave it. The utterance is near the very center of the poem, and its bleakest point; the tone is the tone of *Glare,* which uses the word "nothing" more than 90 times.

Ammons methodically takes the language of the poem's first half, on poetics, into the second half's more general context. If one sets its two portions face to face, the repetitions suggest a peculiar, near-mirror image—"*setting* words to rhyme" (*line* 13) reappears in the sun's "*setting*" (34); the "*shortest* poems" (15), in the "*shortest* day" (33), and so on through several other quiet pairs.[113]

This poem reuses almost systematically, and shows Ammons at his most nonchalant and yet most carefully artistic. Beneath a surface that treats poetry writing as something of preference and fancy, and beneath demands to be allowed to "rattle [his] ole prattle," appears a resonant, densely allusive final poem. While the poem's subject moves toward a freedom so wide as to leave poetry behind entirely, the threads of all these allusions knot to create a subdued sense of closure. Although his poem declares itself to be about the opposite of compression ("what are the most words for / the least:"), it conserves and salvages; it allows Ammons to combine his poetic work with the now-approaching idea of personal departure.

"Way Down Upon the Woodsy Roads" embodies the shimmer of comic ineptness that runs throughout Ammons. The TOP BARD hidden within the DRAB POT calls to mind the vatic summits attempted earlier. The *drab pot* itself sums up not simply the capacious vessels he eventually built, but the common, earthbound clay they are composed of (as are humans themselves, in Job 33:6). An earlier poem, "Utensil," anticipates the perfection attained by defect: "How does the pot pray: / wash me so I gleam? // prays, crack my enamel: / let the rust in" (*Really Short Poems* 47). Ammons's clay gleams; his cracks and rusty edges, for all their seeming badness, are some of our most comically eloquent expressions of an inner life.

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[113] The "*little* compact" of a dense lyric (7), in the "*little* mortgaged colonial" (25); the "*wander*[ing] *off*" that a poem should enact (3), in the broader "do you never long to *wander off*" (21); the "*duty*" that Ammons has done as a writer of short poems (18), in the "*duty*" that becomes one's burden (25); and the "not *now*" (2) that dismisses those short poems, in the "just *now*" of the sun's setting (34).

CHAPTER FOUR

*Lucie Brock-Broido's Lyric Postures: "I am on my one"*

"I came to poetry because I felt I couldn't live properly in the real world," Lucie-Brock Broido said in an interview just after the publication of *Stay, Illusion*. She continued: "I was thirteen and in Algebra class. That was the day I decided I would be a poet for all time. I walked out of class and dropped out of school. … And so I went to a place I felt I could inhabit which turned out to be, as we know about poetry, more hellish than the one I left!" (Maldonado).

That vehement ambivalence—about the real world, about poetry—suffuses Brock-Broido's poems. The winding clauses of "Hello Babies, Welcome to Earth" (from *Stay, Illusion*) are spoken by someone who sees the world from a vast temporal and spatial distance. Brock-Broido borrows the title from Kurt Vonnegut; he is a brassier satirist, but perhaps an elective affinity. Specifically, that title comes from *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, in a speech that the protagonist imagines giving at a baptismal ceremony: "Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded" (110).

Despite being "back home" in "Homestead," Brock-Broido's speaker conflates the earth with a snowball; it is tiny, spherical, and doomed, like Milton's "pendant world":

> At the theme park in Homestead, past the steel mills along the Allegheny River's
> Crinkled bank, I went back home to see if I could grok the way the children
> Felt about the Hurdy Gurdy Man, his lugubrious sweet music,
> His little capuchin with pin-striped train conductor's cap, held out.
> It was a time in the world that was the snowball's one last season on its way to Hell.
> *The earth loved us a little, I remember,* said the note pinned in the seersuckered
> Left breast pocket of the Surrealist's suit, on his way to Cincinnati then, by rail.
> Small chippy dogs would follow him; he carried bones of milk and scrap.
> Only some of us have opposing thumbs, but not to worry now.
> Poppet, if you've anything to say, you should say it soon I think. (*Stay, Illusion* 74)

When she tries to see how "the children" feel about an old-fashioned figure,[114] she does so with the ostentatious, outdated slang of *grok*, a word invented by the science-fiction author Robert Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). The effortful slang and the quaint details surrounding the "little capuchin" give this voice an air of obsolescence that verges on the posthumous.

For Brock-Broido, the comic frictions of the lyric—such as that of a little capuchin's wistfully pin-striped cap, set against the verb *grok*—reflect the comic frictions of living in the often ugly and hostile world at large. These poems both retreat from and draw on that world; while they create their own imaginative domain, they encompass some of the outside world's most raucous ephemera. Despite being intensely removed from the earth and other humans (this speaker sees herself simply as one of those with "opposing"—opposable, and recalcitrant—thumbs), "Hello Babies" retains traces of the actual and contemporary: "bones of milk and scrap" recall Milk-Bone® dog biscuits, without the brand name. Its ambivalence is in keeping with Pirandello's definition of a humorist:

> Comedy and its opposite lie in the same disposition of feeling, and they are inside the process which results from it. In its abnormality, this disposition is bitterly comical, the condition of a man who is always out of tune; of a man who is at the same time violin and bass; of a man for whom no thought can come to mind unless suddenly another one, its opposite and contrary, intervenes … (46)

In Brock-Broido's poems, as Helen Vendler has observed, "Comedy, tragedy, and irony are no longer discrete effects" (*The Ocean* 407): it is a thoroughly Pirandellian mixture.

But while some readers have recognized Brock-Broido as funny—Calvin Bedient praises her "imaginative finesse, chutzpah, swank, wit, humor, playfulness, and sheer brilliance" (288)—we have

[114] Kennywood, an amusement park—now more than a hundred years old, and complete with strolling musicians—lies four miles east of this Pittsburgh neighborhood.

no account of *how* these elegiac poems are funny, nor of what humor does for them.[115] And as with Lowell, most criticism has overlooked the humor of these poems, to concentrate on the beauty apparent in them.[116] Raymond McDaniel's adverse review of *Trouble in Mind* speaks to the frustrations—and misreadings—that result when one overlooks Brock-Broido's comedy:

> All language blooms under [Brock-Broido's] attention, but the blooming thereby made so overgrows the poems themselves that the shape of the garden beneath becomes lost. We do not need to distinguish between garden and jungle to appreciate the scent and texture of full flora, but such confusion obscures *indiscriminately*—archaic or facile barriers disappear, but so do poetic distinctions within the poems themselves. This book thus creates a hothouse closeness, but without the reciprocity of exchange—whether you read it as a superabundance of oxygen or of carbon dioxide, the book is chemically imbalanced.

Many of Brock-Broido's poems do inhabit an opulent world that mingles the most picturesque elements of the 14th, 16th, and 19th centuries. The jackets of her collections convey high, distant art: three take details from paintings by Vittore Carpaccio and Rembrandt, and the fourth sets a fragment from a medieval panel within a worn gilt frame. The poems' scenes tend toward the world of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* (*Stay, Illusion* sets a poem at "Castlestrange"), or to northern, Brontë-esque fields in autumn months. Like the speaker's often old-fashioned clothing—"I wore a pinafore / Of linsey-woolsey cloth" (*Stay, Illusion* 14)—Brock-Broido's language often wears the style and grammar of earlier, more remote eras.

But while the poems are verbally and visually rich, we need to distinguish between the "hothouse closeness" heard by a number of critics and the *air* that comedy brings into the

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[115] For early, significant reviews and essays on Brock-Broido, see Bonnie Costello on *The Master Letters,* Peter Davison on *Trouble in Mind,* Helen Vendler on *A Hunger* and *Stay, Illusion*; and Stephen Burt on the first two books.

[116] See, e.g.: "her mesmeric imaginings, her sibylline utterances and the lush exotica of her phrases" in the words of M. Wynn Thomas (247). Lisa Russ Spaar praises "a poetry of recherché beauty and arcanity in a language so baroque, damasked, and original as to sound at times like a translation of a foreign tongue" (214). Barbara Hoffert calls Brock-Broido's poems "Emotionally charged, baroquely sensuous, serenely gorgeous."

hothouse.[117] These books are not chemically unbalanced: they simply balance more radically than has been consistently recognized. Brock-Broido's sumptuous textures and dramatic excesses are a source of comedy; and it makes these poems more resilient and engaging. This comedy takes the form of doubleness, holding the beautiful and the ludicrous together. It does not extinguish her Romantic lyric postures, but suffuses them. Brock-Broido's style presents another angle on comedy as based in a synergy of the perfect and imperfect.

First this chapter will lay out the workings of Brock-Broido's comedy in one poem, "Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish," where beauty and a slightly malicious wit exist together, neither eclipsing the other. After moving through passages from "Haute Couture Vulgarity" and "Dove, Abiding," to establish how these lyrics assimilate the outside world, we will survey Brock-Broido's wordplay, showing how comedy is tucked within an atmosphere that camouflages it. "Certain Kinds of Dogs" demonstrates how Brock-Broido takes comedy *out* of one of her most obviously funny poems, in favor of subdued effects that meditate on the recluse and the *poète maudit*—in other words, on poses and personae near her own. And from that meditation on poetry, we will see how the late-20th—or 21st—century lyric here becomes itself a potentially comic genre, as Brock-Broido's exaggerated postures bend alternately to the rarefied, precious, wistful, or dramatic.

Brock-Broido's third and fourth books—my focus here—are less obvious ground for comedy of any kind. Her collections have darkened since *A Hunger* (1988), which was filled with outré personae, and *The Master Letters* (1995), which took Dickinson's inscrutable letters as a starting point for increasingly wild addresses to an array of authorities. *Trouble in Mind* (2004) revolves around the death of the writer Lucy Grealey; *Stay, Illusion* (2013) dwells on the deaths of parents,

[117] A. A. Farman's review of *Trouble in Mind* describes the book with another image of airlessness: the book feels "somewhat like the tsar's Amber Room, overly opulent, almost courtly, striking more for its craft and color and breeding than for its wit or wisdom or vitality" (*Rain Taxi Online*).

friends, and on one's own eventual death. These two volumes are grounded in the elegiac; their glances toward memory are shot through with a sense of loss, and every look toward the future is chilled, grim, resigned. Melancholy, pain, appalled indignation, and resignation are prevalent. And yet, as with Lowell's attenuated humor in *Day by Day* or Ammon's more explicit jokes in *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, these books also glisten with comedy.

**1. "Flattering you with a Thistle touch": Brock-Broido's comic doubleness**

"Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish" announces its twofoldness in its title; every word of it has two faces. First, each is a Scottish place-name: Scarinish, a village in the Scottish Inner Hebrides; Minginish, a peninsula on the island of Skye; Griminish, a settlement in the Outer Hebrides. Second, they are slightly muddled adjectives, each qualified with the suffix *-ish*: *scary,* or *somewhat scary*; *mingy*, a twentieth-century portmanteau of *mean* and *stingy*; and *grim*. This two-sidedness will continue to the last of the poem's seventeen lines.

"Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish" appears to begin as elegy, in part because it appears toward the end of a book filled with poems that speak to the dead.[118] The poem seems to address a vanished person directly, to say, as Bishop says to Lowell at the end of "North Haven," "Sad friend, you cannot change" (189). While apostrophe is a nearly defining feature of elegy, as in Catullus's farewell to his brother in Carmen 101 (*atque in perpetuum frater ave atque vale*), here the address quickly turns peculiar:

> You will not be a sepia hound in my dream at Trotternish, even
> One more time. Not a lighthouse keeper
> Landlocked in at Insch, not the deep sea diver with the metal
> Brain in the icy umbraged waters of the Outer Hebrides.

[118] *Stay, Illusion* is "a book of elegies" according to Dan Chiasson's *New Yorker* review; the volume includes poems in memory of her father, and of friends such as Liam Rector and Stanley Kunitz.

Not at the Firth of Lorne, where each man downed is a tricycle
Turned over, most of his spokes blown off, not even, were

You luckier, in the heap of small black mussels
Washed up on the Isle of Skye, huddling but still whole. (*Stay, Illusion* 67)

At first the through line for this motley collection of creatures seems to be that each is somewhat mournful or tragic: a regal sepia hound, a lighthouse keeper trapped 25 miles away from the sea; a diver trapped in the depths of the sea; other organisms stranded outside their element. But by the third couplet, with the image of the toppled tricycle with broken spokes, these sentences—*You will not*s—do not resemble elegy; they have an odd edge to them. Confirmation of this edge comes after the third stanza break, when "not even, were // You luckier" implies a just, and bad, reward.

How will the addressee return? He will go with Fergus (to adopt Yeats's title).[119] A solitary line, placed exactly between the four couplets on either side of it, begins to describe his fate. The description continues until nearly the poem's end:

You will come back as a starfish, two arms lopped off,

Scooped up by the mop-topped schoolboy, Fearghas,
Who will take you home to Dingwall when the blotted tide is low,

He will come back as a maimed starfish, with perhaps as few as three arms. The slight nonchalance in having arms "lopped" off—as branches are pruned with a single easy stroke—is reinforced by the sounds of the next line: *scoop* matched by *school, lopped* picked up in *mop-topped*, the rhythms that approach but frustrate scansion. This schoolboy Fergus wears a Beatles haircut, lives in the slightly nonsensical *Dingwall* (the name—again, that of an actual place, near Inverness—comes from the venerable *Ping*, but the current usage of *ding* is onomatopoeic and informal), and he will

Collect you with his blush balloons, his tin Sienna soldiers,
Coloring your endoskeleton with a spot of Maize and Timberwolf

[119] I say "he" because Brock-Broido has referred to the subject of this poem as male, in an interview with Shara Lessley.

From his set of crayons, flattering you with a Thistle touch, then some
Dandelion flourishes until his suppertime, one last dab of Fern—

At first, "blush balloons" aptly suggests the understated hue on a fair-skinned cheek, convex like the sphere of a balloon. And yet a blush balloon would actually be plastic, and nothing like the delicate gradations of a blush (furthermore, *blush* is, of course, also a cosmetic, as well as a 'designer color' like all the other colors at the end of this poem). The balloons' pale flat pink clashes with the tin soldiers, who have completely rusted, into an earthy Sienna.[120] The addressee will return only to dry up into nothing but an endoskeleton; and will be colored with a Timberwolf crayon, which joined the Crayola Hue Family in 1993. It is a flat gray hue. *Maize*, another appealing word, is a loud yellow; *Thistle* is a bright pinko-lavender formerly known as *Light Magenta*. (And to "flatter" someone with a "Thistle touch" is both to compliment and literally to nettle.)

After all this decoration, the former human will be put aside. His appearance in the speaker's dreams, we come to realize, will not be missed; he is being cast out, or expelled, to be ignored even by the boy who scribbles on him:

After which he will go on to his maroon arithmetic and Dostoyevsky
And his other sullen Prussian Blue and Orchid arts.

The relative clause of "After which" is a clean, swift pivot: it sums up and immediately turns away from the extraordinarily detailed scene that preceded it. The starfish's fate is merely another incident in Fearghas's afternoon, of about as much interest as his "maroon arithmetic." The interlocutor has been made to vanish from the poem, and from the speaker's thoughts, completely; the last lines do not even bother to mention what happens to him, because the focus has changed to the boy and his schoolwork. The grammar—its neat clauses, each leading logically to the next—confirms that the speaker is utterly in control, matter-of-fact, almost breezy.

[120] The motion of the first half of the poem (after the beautiful "sepia hound," a descent into less aesthetically appealing situations) is echoed in the second—a false aesthetic trail leading to seediness.

The comedy of this poem extends beyond the process by which its seeming elegy winds slyly into a dismissal. It depends on the shimmer between connotation and denotation, beauty and ugliness, which we saw in the place-names of the first four couplets and the color-words of the latter four. The places all suggest something irrelevant to their geography: e.g., the Firth of Lorne seems apt because the starfish is abandoned; Dingwall, because the starfish shrivels into *ein Ding;* the Isle of Skye, because it seems to provide the starfish's last glimpse of open air before he ends up on a cluttered shelf in the boy's room. Similarly, the colors suggest textures, images, or creatures with which they have nothing in common. The poem, swirling these two kinds of language together, is a kind of fantasia on deception. It is a seeming elegy turned malediction, or at least dismissal; this addressee—perhaps one who was scary, mingy, and grim—is, in his next life, shrunk, calcified, colored on, and laid aside. His world will not be a romantic, dramatic, glamorous world of hounds or divers, or even of living natural things like mussels; here the Ferguses of Irish myth and legend become a slightly destructive boy with an oversized bowl cut. Underneath the surfaces of lovely words, things are modern, and prosaic. Even the starfish is metamorphosed into a dry ornament; its metamorphosis turns the poem from fluidity and multiple possibil-ities to dryness, a state of being stuck.

Considering Brock-Broido's humor alongside the manufacturing gimmicks of Crayola crayons introduces a fundamental aspect of her comedy. For example, Crayola's Gem Tones set, which was released in the middle of the 1990's, takes its names from lapis lazuli, malachite, onyx, peridot, and other jewels. The actual colors bear little relation to the luster, shine, and layers of hues that they evoke in the mind's eye: crayons are waxy, imprecise, stubby, depthless, and can't be layered. And yet the names do evoke their depths and textures. In other words, part of Brock-Broido's comedy lies in its ability to simultaneously deceive, punctuate, and transform: although we know that the flora of Thistle, Maize, Dandelion, and Fern are in reality rather shallow, synthetic

colors, the mental pictures they call up do not easily vanish.

When the Crayola corporation calls one of its many shades of gray "Timberwolf," the effect is not altogether removed from Brock-Broido's describing vinyl as "avocado" (*A Hunger* 10), a bowl as "azure" (*Trouble in Mind* 38), or hair as "silver[ing]" (*Stay, Illusion* 24) rather than turning grey. By extension, any extravagantly suggestive metaphor in service of a more ordinary object works with similar vibrations between the mundane and the exotic. Brock-Broido's humor is often disguised by, and relies on, beauty, such as the layers of evocative place-names in "Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish." When, in a poem titled innocently "Selected Poem," she declares, "In the Gargoyle Store, I buy a gryphon off the rack" (*Stay, Illusion* 16), the gryphon may be bought ready-made in a store rather than carved by hand, and the line may mock its pseudomedievalist purchase—but a gryphon is acquired nevertheless. (Similarly, the gryphons and gargoyles of "What the Whales Sound Like in Manhattan" [*A Hunger* 35], with their "concrete wings," are situated precisely between the earthbound and the soaring.)

Brock-Broido presents a counter to still-prevailing conceptions of the limits of the comic. Vladimir Propp has claimed that "nothing beautiful can ever be funny, [though] digressing from it can be" (40). Henri Bergson almost takes for granted the opposition of beauty and comedy, issuing only a slight variation: "If … we wished to define the comic by comparing it with its contrary, we should have to contrast it with gracefulness even more than with beauty" (29). But the comic and the beautiful is certainly encountered in music—for instance, a bass line in Bach which proceeds to its final note in a slightly meandering and also direct way; the aquarium music in Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals*; the funeral march of Mahler's first symphony, played by bass, bassoon, and tuba; soaring and rasping moments in Prokofiev's first violin concerto; the waltzes of Shostakovich's poignant, carnivalesque jazz suites. The visual arts defy Bergson and Propp: a trompe l'oeil where goblets refract lemon peel can be comic even in its virtuosity; so can the corners of Bruegel's

paintings, Joseph Cornell's boxes, or M. C. Escher's paradoxical staircases, or Paul Klee's abstract, childlike, weightless fields of color. And the comic and beautiful are entangled in Brock-Broido's poems.[121] She offers images for this iridescence in an interview with Carole Maso:

> … turn the page to a slight angle, to a different slant of light, and you'll see—it's like those hidden 3D pictures where you tilt it one way you get the subterranean picture, the equal, secret opposite, like a laser postcard, and you'll see—shimmering beneath it a riotous circus of "other." (45)

**2. The "single person tax-bracket of one alive"**

"Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish" also makes clear that Brock-Broido's poems do not ignore the existence of Crayola, LLC, nor the existence of other kinds of contemporary kitsch. She does not simply work in watercolors and oils, or in the textures of a medieval tapestry: her range of media includes the most contemporary and aesthetically hopeless of materials. This fact has been overlooked by writers such as McDaniel, whose review asserts that "Her worlds lack the texture of the manifestly quotidian. Processed food products do not defile the Broidoverse." While Brock-Broido does not bring in chocolate fudge cookies as relentlessly as A. R. Ammons does in *Tape,* her two most recent books include the blue-and-red maps of the United States seen in TV polls (*Stay, Illusion* 8 and 34), a "Sears plaid / Couch" (*Trouble in Mind* 18), the "chat room // Of your fluorescent orange imagination" (32), and a number of other aspects of the contemporary world. Such entrances—"Your licensed massage therapist / Loves you more concretely than I do" (*Stay, Illusion* 78)—admit the contemporary, here the rather sanitized requirement that one have a license to give a massage. The slightly prolix image of a "single person tax-bracket of one alive" (*Stay, Illusion* 66) acknowledges the often-desired condition of solitude as something that can also be a lonely, mundane inconvenience.

[121] See also the unexpected aesthetic splice in "Ruby Garnett's Ornament, circa 1892," which bestows two seemingly opposing adjectives on a mummified canary: "You are beautiful, grotesque" (*Stay, Illusion* 60).

While readers like McDaniel and A. A. Farman find Brock-Broido to be suffocatingly detached from the larger world, William Logan's harsh appraisement of *A Hunger* complains of the opposite problem. Calling Brock-Broido "the poet laureate of *People* magazine" (Bo6), Logan asserts that the book "lives in a sea of contemporanea, as up to date as a fax transmission and as teasing as a newspaper filler." His review ended by declaring, "It is very difficult to sympathize with a poet who so enjoys her own frivolousness, and so overestimates the interest of haute couture vulgarity." (Perhaps grudgingly, however, Logan also admitted her "verve and occasional humor.")

That "verve and occasional humor" emerges in Brock-Broido's eventual response—as does a trace of defiance that is central to this poetry. Just as Ammons's *Glare* wryly acknowledges a negative review from Ian Sansom ("it is observed that I am on automatic, // good lord" [202]), Brock-Broido echoes Logan's critique, and thereby shows one of the ways that the contemporary proceeds into her poems. "Haute Couture Vulgarity" takes its title from the review, and welcomes the sea of contemporanea that it disparages. With "a mummer's wave to Media," and a nod to the "ruin in unwelcome worldliness," she sets herself in the middle of the United States:

> In Tornado Alley, the storms come like holy bowling balls down a long beige lane, striking the Most Mundane, the Plain, the God-Fearing Simple, the Moonfaced, the Righteous, the Just Married, the Unfashioned, the Accidentally Aryan Kin. This weather—an unwelcome shaman, punk funnel, white magic, black sheep, all through the oat belt, land of a sepia retrouvé charm. *Then why not buy a goddamn big Winnebago—& Drive.* (*Trouble in Mind* 44)

In this depiction, flyover country becomes an utterly featureless "long beige lane," with tornadoes regularly rolled in by a divine hand, which strikes down a list of capitalized, cartoonish figures. Sounds tilt this image toward the ludicrously apocalyptic: "h*o***l***y* b*ow***l***i*ng bá**ll**s dówn a **l**óng beige **l**ane, striking the M*o*st Mundane, the Plain." But then Brock-Broido switches registers, to render the tornados not as instruments of God but as rebellious, disheveled "punk funnels." She borrows from

Robert Creeley's slangily American poem "I Know a Man," and distends it; his "shall we & / why not, buy a goddamn big car" turns into "a goddamn big Winnebago."

Visually and verbally, that change is perfect: the single-syllable "car" thickens to the four-syllable generic trademark of the blocky motor home. Brock-Broido's first book had referred to such motor homes, pseudo-euphemistically, as "small vehicular domiciles" (*A Hunger* 51); here she simply uses the brand name. And that image takes an even odder cast from the capitalized—significantly capitalized, as if by Dickinson—*Drive*, set in what Bonnie Costello has called "the time-warp of italics" (*Boston Review*). The image draws together the impulse to take off—to drive wildly, as Creeley's speaker is doing and wants to do—with a top speed slower than that of even the biggest car. A Winnebago's bulk exceeds its pace.

Brock-Broido's comedy depends on all of the techniques displayed in that paragraph: subdued exaggeration, sonic excess, clashes of diction and tone, an impish use of other writers and of the outside world. Another example of how these poems admit the 20th- and 21st- centuries appears in the comically fed-up reproach of "Dove, Abiding": it uses both explicit images of that world, and comic euphemisms for it. The poem addresses a former lover, and begins abruptly.[122] Its first phrase is pushed to the right, as if to suggest speech or pent-up tension that preceded it:

> I have heard
>
> That you were living like a goat in solitude
> And turning in the proxy and the mud of it.
>
> Don't be coy with me. You
>
> Were mean and you were plump. Dove,
> Mistaken. You are not good. (*Stay, Illusion* 69)

"Turning," a more neutral version of the wallowing that it implies, suggests that the speaker doesn't *have* the word "wallowing" in her stock (despite her liking for *sallow, tallow*, *mallow,* and *the fallows of*

[122] I thank Helen Vendler for explaining the poem's situation (over email, Oct. 2015).

*Allhallowmass*, Brock-Broido has not yet let the word "wallow" into any of her collections).[123] Rather than the elided "You were mean and plump," the two adjectives are made wholly equal—in fact, "plump," the word on which that sentence lands, is given slightly more stress by being placed last. Although the cadences are of undisguised reprimand—the "You" at the end of line four, followed by that break of white space, is suspended dramatically—it seems that the worst charges the speaker can come up with are those of meanness and plumpness.

The poem then centers on the former lover's core of badness, describing the color of his heart with a simile so decisive and particular that it renders the heart not as the depths of the soul, sitting in perfect solitude, but as a literal internal organ, in a tray of similar things, in a shop of similar things. Again the sentence lands on a monosyllable, with heat:

> Heart
> The color of a tray of entrails in a Harlem shop
> For meats.

Brock-Broido keeps changing angle and metaphor rapidly, as if searching for a sharper way of summing-up her subject. Now she switches focus abruptly, turning from her addressee's moral decay to a female rival, referred to with pointed anonymity:

> I have heard Miss X has had a vision
> In her rooms. It was uncomely,
> A mess of hungry colors, like the Rockettes
> Singularly beautiful but all together hideous.

In this comically excessive simile, the colors are *hungry*: in the OED's 6th sense, they are "more disposed to draw from other substances than to impart to them." The word also brings "mess" back to its initial meaning, of a serving of food; it thereby not only recalls the meat shop's entrails, but turns the colorful vision into a Pollock-esque spattering. The eighty members of this precision dance

[123] For another instance of nominal politeness, see "the tenor, too large for good / Health" (*Stay, Illusion* 43).

company, each of whom must be between 5'6" and 5'10 ½," are the opposite of solitude and the opposite of a mess. (In a speech so vehement, "like the Rockettes" seems a comically ineffective insult; however, the dancers' homogenized kick-lines, enduring smiles, and tacky clothing might seem thoroughly hideous, especially to a speaker who uses a slightly archaic word like "uncomely.")

The unprepossessing world—the world of the Rockettes—is the source of Brock-Broido's most overtly comic moments. These poems, for all their creation of sealed-off worlds, depend on the world they may seem to shut out. Brock-Broido's poems do draw on an atmosphere that seems inimical to comedy: without it, the language of the "single person tax-bracket" or the "licensed massage therapist" would not stick out as incongruous and bracingly concrete. They would cloy. Instead, these poems ask the reader to look more closely at the specks in their archaic varnish. Part of the odd disparateness of Brock-Broido's reviews (that one reader points to *People* magazine, and another praises "recherché beauty and arcanity") is that neither reader sees the potential for comedy—which depends on both the depths of beauty, and on the less-than-beautiful topics often present.

### 3. A "recluse / Hiding hither": Hidden wordplay

Brock-Broido does not refrain from using many of the kinds of language around her. But unlike Ammons (who swings from the scientific to the comically provincial in equal measure), Brock-Broido admits other kinds of language in tiny doses, and often cloaks it. These miniature clashes often emerge within individual sentences, as in the pentameter of "If they are gentlepersons they shut up" (*Stay, Illusion* 86). While *gentlemen* would be a typically prim, slightly old-fashioned word, *gentlepersons* fuses that primness with a recent, gender-neutral coinage; while it retains the sheen of archaism, all politeness is suddenly dispelled by the loud, modern, spondaic "shut up." Stock phrases

like that are a particularly useful source for such miniature collisions. The title of "Self-Portrait with Her Hair on Fire" draws on contemporary slang for an emergency (originally military).[124] When circled by "a company of bees" in "A Girl's Will" (a puckish reworking of Frost's *A Boy's Will*), the speaker says "They have my back" (*Stay, Illusion* 45), mingling the figurative and the literal as Lowell does.[125] The snowball pictured in its "one last season on its way to Hell" in "Hello Babies, Welcome to Earth" stretches the instant melting of the snowball into a melancholy long dissolution—and it mixes the colloquial, low idiom with the high

Brock-Broido also perforates English through alterations so slight as to seem typing errors, or malapropisms: they are "hiding hither" rather than *hieing* (*Stay, Illusion* 83). Rather than open-heart surgery, "open-hearted surgeries" (48). The "widow-slickened night" of "Fata Morgana" seems simply to be missing an *n* ("windows" are more commonly "slickened").[126] The "once great-cloak" of "Brochure on Eden" suggests a "once-great cloak" that has fallen upon hard times, like the "distressed / Leather coat" in "Morgue Near Heaven" (*Trouble in Mind* 18). The little sentence "I am on my one" pushes the standard idea of being on one's own into a childlike *one*, making the condition of being solitary still more startling (*Stay, Illusion* 60). It has the comic, ungrammatical plaintiveness of Dream Song 114, where Henry "whirp[s] out lonely whines." "Extreme Wisteria" turns *hysteria* into a sprawling, climbing flower that droops like a purple weeping willow and can crush and strangle other trees; an extreme version of it is hard to imagine.

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[124] William Safire, surveying the phrase, quotes Donald Rumsfeld: "since I've been back in the Pentagon, there have been people running around with their hair on fire a lot of times" (Safire, "On Language," *The New York Times,* April 18, 2004).

[125] Brock-Broido's use of cliché differs from Lowell's, although both are playing with different kinds of language, and language's ability to wobble between literal and metaphorical utterances: Lowell's textures are not, on the whole, formed so manifestly from beautiful things.

[126] Both James Merrill and Terrance Hayes alter *windows* similarly: in "164 East 72nd Street" a typo "deplores / Even the ongoing deterioration / Of the widows in our building"; in Hayes's *How to Be Drawn*, "The windows shutter, the widows shutter, the winos hallucinate" (31).

Brock-Broido's twists of English rarely come at the end of a sentence, as a punchline (as is almost the case in "if they are gentlepersons, they shut up"). Instead, they are unannounced. In "Meditation on the Sources of the Catastrophic Imagination," the ingredients of comedy are submerged in hagiography and magical realism:

> Green as alchemy and even more scarce, little can be known
> Of the misfortunes of a saint condemned to turn great sorrows
> Into greater egrets, ice-bound and irrevocable. (9)

The transformation pulls the *r* off *regrets* to change them into *egrets,* a kind of wordplay found in Richard Wilbur's "Some Words Inside of Words" (which finds the *NaCl* in *barnacle*). It is embedded, however, between the great sorrows of the saint and the Latinate "irrevocable." This slightly diffuse grammar is the opposite of the snap heard in jokes that announce their twist as the final element. The play of "greater egrets" is the formal equivalent of something uttered in passing and in an undertone, heard only by the nearest listener.

A similar concealing—here of the particularly un-Romantic—occurs in "Domestic Mysticism," the very first poem of *A Hunger*. In seven stanzas of seven lines each, the speaker announces herself as fragile, feminine, otherworldly, someone who counts time by millennia, and who keeps "a covey of alley cats" seen as "portents with quickened heartbeats." (A *covey* is a brood of partridges, here transferred to a preternaturally close-knit group of cats.) In the middle of the poem, the speaker explains how the "work" she does "is peopled" by, among others, "the Blinkers, the Spoon-Fingered, Agnostic Lispers, / Stutterers of Prayer, the Flatulent, the Closet Weepers, / The Charlatans" (*A Hunger* 3). Such a list recalls eccentric characters from Edward Gorey's books; although "the Flatulent" might occur in an Ammons poem, to embed it amid quivering teacups, velvet, jewels, and wandering tribes of minstrel—and in the middle of a line in the middle of a poem—is to disguise it and, in the end, to emphasize it, comically.

Brock-Broido's quiet puns and tiny linguistic clashes bring up a comedy that comes from

delight at how breakage results in perfection. The potentially over-rich decorum of these poems is relieved by such breakages. Brock-Broido presents these lines as fixed, polished, and compressed, surrounded by white space that emphasizes each poem as carved and sculpted.[127] The seemingly crafted surfaces nevertheless contain bubbles and flaws, like pumice: these irregularities work to save the poems, and the irregularities *depend* on their settings of emotional drama and verbal perfection. The appearance of "the Flatulent," or the tampering with *regret* so as to produce *egrets*, is comic because it springs from an atmosphere where everything is expected to vibrate with significance and beauty. The voice that closes "Domestic Mysticism"—"I've got this mystic streak in me"—would be moderately funny in other contexts; but here its colloquial *this* bounces all the more irrepressibly against the visionary language that precedes it.[128]

Even when borrowings from more prosaic kinds of language are relatively extensive, they are worked into the Brock-Broidian voice. The slangily titled "Heat"—as in, the heat that one packs—picks up a character and his language from a recent *New York Times* article.[129] Brock-Broido takes the article's language and anecdote, but tones down its Dickensian cartoon:

> Open Carry is the law in Oklahoma now.
> I just feel more safe, said Joe Wood, cocked
> Among the waffles and the syrups and the diners
> At the diner there. (*Stay, Illusion* 10)

Brock-Broido uses the lawmakers' term for walking around with visible firearms, and then allows Joe Wood's "I just feel more safe" to sit for a moment without quotation marks, to be read in the

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[127] In the *Guernica* interview, Brock-Broido declared, "As an editor of my own work and others', that is where I feel at my most powerful. I am Edward Scissorhands" (Maldonado).

[128] See the OED, *this,* 5k. "In unliterary narrative: referring to a person, place, etc., not previously mentioned or implied. orig. *U.S.*"

[129] "'I just feel more secure and safe,' Joe Wood, an aircraft mechanic, told *The Oklahoman* newspaper, his Taurus PT145 pistol ready for action against any sudden attack by the eggs and burgers": "Oklahomans Packing Heat," *The New York Times* (November 3, 2012), A22.

same voice as what preceded it. The man's potentially phallic last name is made more apparent by its position next to "cocked." But rather than the stereotypically masculine "eggs and burgers" of the NYT report, Brock-Broido sets him amid entirely non-aggressive breakfast foods (syrups, plural!), subsiding into the shimmeringly redundant "and the diners / At the diner there." A decidedly un-Brock-Broidian protagonist is here spun into a style very much not his own.[130]

In addition to letting the language of the outside world infiltrate her realms, and in addition to glazing that outer world with her own language, Brock-Broido also allows words to jostle on their own terms. The yoking of words from disparate areas of English—and not only of the high-flown to the vernacular—is one of her most emblematic devices. While this kind of joining is not essentially comic, the way these words weld and infiltrate each other often draws on the comic paradox by which the off-kilter is somehow right. Like Berryman, who fuses "wicked & away" (Song 1) to form a particular state of being, Brock-Broido brings together words never before paired, and ensures that one will never again see either the same way. "Almost a Conjuror" declares, synaesthetically, that everything "is plaid / And sour in oblivion" (*Trouble in Mind* 48), fusing the contrasts and dissonances of plaid with the sense of taste. The whale stranded in Manhattan "was something / unemployed & elegant" (*A Hunger* 35), a phrase that seems both inaccurate and curiously right. These fused adjectives are comic because they draw together two disparate entities that seem wrongly joined—the categories don't match—but that become a new, inimitable, and inseparable thing (in the case of the whale, a passive, beautiful, and unwarranted happening on the streets of New York). Line and stanza breaks often accentuate disjunction, and the resultant

[130] Brock-Broido's allusions are often submerged or transformed to the point of vanishing; those here are relatively strong. In the final lines of "Another Night in Khartoum" (*Trouble in Mind* 36), "you could not stand / To be civilized" revises the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck runs away in the knowledge that "she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." The echo draws together the Nile and the Mississippi, and pushes the obstinately demotic American into the East African cityscape.

harmony: sheep, for example, become "fat and // Legible" (*Trouble in Mind* 4).

Another sort of unexpected fusion is attained by placing together words that are close in sound alone. When Brock-Broido thinks of the "seersuckered / Left breast pocket of the Surrealist's suit" (*Stay Illusion* 74), she encourages a form of sonic hallucination. Linked by their vowels and consonants, the words begin to point out their own contrivances and illogic: why would a Surrealist wear seersucker, and why this curious adjective, which threatens to break down even further, into "seer" and "suckered"? Whether the effect tends toward nonsense, a parody of Tennysonian sonority ("It was always autumn in the paraphernalia of my laudanums" [86]), or an exercise in elocution ("Arguably still squabbling about the word inarguably" [12]), such masses of sound charge their poems with energy that exceeds the bounds of grammar or semantics.

Variations on these amalgamations occur across books. In "A Girl's Will," Brock-Broido describes how "Miss Duncan kept her protégées (her / Isadorables) tucked in her own school of silk, batiste, and hurrying" (*Stay, Illusion* 45). Brock-Broido's fusion of "silk, batiste, and hurrying" creates an imitable flutter of activity in which motion and textiles are indistinguishable—and "tucked" somehow shrinks the Isadorables into handkerchief-sized dancers.[131] "Basic Poem in a Basic Tongue," despite its aggressively mundane title, imagines "The aristocracy in one green cortège at the registry of Vehicle and Animus" (*Trouble in Mind* 13). That coupling takes the hostility often present in the long lines at the registry of motor vehicles, and places it in another register entirely: "vehicle" returns to its sense of 'figurative language,' and "animus" recalls Frost's declaration, in his *Paris Review* interview, that inspiration is "mostly animus." The department of motor vehicles has metamorphosed almost past recognition: its despairing crowd of applicants has become a *cortège,* a

[131] Although the portmanteau is not the poet's, Brock-Broido contributes that linebreak's half-second's pause of knowing suspense before the inevitable joke.

solemn procession.[132]

Each of these kinds of fusion and associative links shows how Brock-Broido's comedy balances: the imagined and the actual, what a word suggests and what it means, how it operates in a poem and how it operates in the real world. One final emblem for this balancing lies in Brock-Broido's fascination with names. She has made this interest explicit in an interview with Carole Maso: "You know, I run this 800-number for title services—anyone who wants to call. I love to name things, poems, vehicles…" (44), recalling Marianne Moore's suggestions of *Thunderblender* and *Mongoose Civique* for what Ford Motors eventually called the Edsel. When speaking with *Poetry*, Brock-Broido considers the "Sanctimonium" ("the room you're carted off to when you've been unbearably self-righteous") and the "Pandamonium" (full of pandas), as well as the "state" of "Irrinois—that district somewhere between Annoy and Irritate."[133] Other names playfully conflate fact and fiction; "Ruby Garnett's Ornament, circa 1892" is set at the Dumas Brothel Museum in Butte, Montana. The only Ruby in the brothel's records is Ruby *Garrett,* the brothel's last owner, convicted of tax evasion in 1982—a lucky reversal of Brock-Broido's "1892." Although an actual Ruby Garnett exists (she is an R & B singer), she has nothing to do with the Dumas Brothel. It seems that Brock-Broido has turned an *r* into an *n* for the sake of putting two gemstones—two "Ornament[s]"—against each other. In invented names such as the Sanctimonium, actual ones such

[132] Just as these faint versions of zeugma suggest the porousness and waywardness of language, Brock-Broido also *untethers* adjectives from their rightful nouns, putting them in stranger relationships to each other. As with the "unemployed & elegant" whale, these uncouplings produce a vivid sense of meaning while still hovering near nonsense. In the announcement that "Here is the maudlin petty bourgeoisie of ruin" (*Trouble in Mind* 13) "maudlin" helps "petty" detach itself from its usual companion, the *bourgeoisie,* so that "petty" regains its more affective, negative meaning of 'small-minded.' The words, each slightly loosened from their standard relationships, begin to wobble until their positions are quite uncertain.

[133] The bleakly funny "Notes from the Trepidarium" (*Stay, Illusion* 32) twists the speaker's own irrational fears into a poem that ends with the menace of a world itself becoming a warm bath.

as Scarinish, and the peculiar falsehoods such as Ruby Garnett, Brock-Broido draws on the delight of near-miraculous serendipity, and on how a word can seem both incongruous and apposite.[134]

Within the overtly strange, wonderful, and beautiful spheres of these poems, the intrusion of an odd place-name, a pun, a bit of bureaucratese, or a short phrase from popular culture creates a comic verbal drama. While some of this wordplay would stand out in any setting—the Pandamonium, e.g.—the greater part of the humor percolating through Brock-Broido's poems is much more understated: its oddities become apparent only when seen in their lyric contexts, and those lyrics' dominant atmospheres of resplendence and drama.

### 4. "This is / Finally, *the world*": Muting comedy

"Certain Kinds of Dogs" appeared in the *American Poetry Review* in 2001. It was eventually placed in *Trouble in Mind*, but much changed; both the original poem and the decision to revise shed light on Brock-Broido's comic procedures. The first three stanzas, eventually removed, show a comedy full of the ungainliness of the outside world, of sonic and visual clownishness. The later version removes most of those elements; the result is a quieter comedy, but perhaps more revealing.

The earlier version of this poem is explicitly dedicated to Franz Wright, and opens by thinking about their conversations, both as looked forward to in the afterlife and remembered in the actual world. After a few short, relatively abstract lines ("eventual" as a noun is a Dickinsonian way of acknowledging something so inevitable that it needs no spelling out), the sentence suddenly grows markedly more concrete:

> In the eventual,
> I want to say everything to
> Brilliant Franz, himself one *eventual*
> *Ghost* he says, and this he told me

[134] See Kirk Johnson, "Dark Days for a Reminder of the Wild, Wild West in Montana," *The New York Times* (May 30, 2005), A9.

From the "nicotorium"
Where all of us here will be punished, eventually,
Sooner or later like some brindled basset hounds
Behaving badly. (4)

The image of the world as an airless room in which people can have a brief cigarette—the coinage of *nicotorium* is Wright's[135]—gives way to a simile that recalls the near-nonsense of a children's book. The low basset is saddled with alliteration, which seems to force the turn to the generic in that eighth line: while "brindled" is a suggestive word, "badly" could not be less specific. Such sonic excess is a way of pitching the poetic into the ludicrous, as Lowell's early poems demonstrated; here, however, unaccompanied by the physical violence of Lowell's poems, alliteration tilts toward the whimsical, or childlike.[136]

In the next stanza of "Certain Kinds of Dogs," similar metamorphoses occur: the lines *begin* with alliterative indulgence, and then swerve and double back on themselves. The badly behaving bassets kindle reflections on other kinds of dogs and their relation to humans:[137]

The word *longing* on a leash
Is a big black loopy Newfoundland, loping
Down the very street where only a nephrologist
Lives now, with no spleen of his own, clueless
As a Weimaraner photographed in a sharkskin suit,
Shiny, dying young.

The "very street" of this sentence turns from the immaterial *longing* to another immoderate dog (if a

[135] In *Stay, Illusion*, "A chimney swift flits through the fumatorium" (8): it recalls Bede's parable of a swallow flying swiftly through a banquet-hall before returning to the wintry night outside.

[136] Brock-Broido turns to such excess repeatedly and to similar effect, as with the "big beautiful / Blubbery white bears each clinging to his one last hunk of ice" (*Stay, Illusion* 7), or the "markets of the medieval" where "mostly meat" is sold (*Stay, Illusion* 12), or the vision that there "would be wandering tribes of minstrels / Following with woodwinds in your wake" (*A Hunger* 3).

[137] Dogs haunt Wright's own poems: "we are like dogs / who keep barking and lunging / at the hand" (63); or the conclusion of "Delivery": "You are finished with these dogs, these selfless and hardworking beings no one will remember, any more than they're going to remember that they themselves lived" (*Triggerfish Critical Review* 7 [April 4, 2010]).

basset hound is the quintessential low, waddling dog, the Newfoundland is the enormous, bounding one). The middle of the stanza loops back on itself, through the mention of a kidney specialist who himself lacks an organ. In this dizzying sentence, everything after "*longing*" is metaphorical; but within that metaphor Brock-Broido tacks again from imagined to novelistic, abstract to physical—the colloquial "clueless" leads to the Weimaraner, in his specifically sharkskin suit. This image, though it might seem baffling, is a direct allusion to the actual, non-literary world; the poet has in mind the images of the photographer William Wegman, who puts his own solemn-faced dogs into suits, galoshes, and ruffs.[138]

The third stanza returns the conversation to that same smoking room, in an airport:

> Here, in the vivarium of the nicotine-
> Addicted in the airport at Detroit, all of us inmates
> Darted together like tetras and crappies and porbeagle
> Fish in our tank, and so witnessed,
> We were homely there as wiry poodles shaven & aghast.

Brock-Broido's emphasis on the transient, hemmed-in state is not simply the state of the "nicotine- / Addicted" but that of human beings more generally. The glassed-in box that used to hold a mass of people smoking leads to a comparison with a bizarre aquarium, one filled not only with small freshwater fish usually kept as pets, but with game fish and sharks: a hodgepodge united by their comically idiosyncratic, suggestive names.[139] Jostling against this teeming aquarium is one final simile to a breed of dog, this time the poodle.[140] While poodles are not, usually, considered homely—they're elaborately coiffed—these poodles are "shaven & aghast" (experiencing something like

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[138] There is a faint collision between the more effortful humor of Wegman's posed photographs of dressed-up dogs, and the last words of the stanza: dogs of this breed tend to live for little more than a decade.

[139] For another jumbled list of creatures, see "Almost a Sorcerer": "The slight white poet would assume non-human forms, homely / Grampus fish, a wahoo, nuthatch, nit" (*Trouble in Mind* 48).

[140] In other words, the dog used to signify comically ostentatious wealth in Frank O'Hara's "A lady in foxes on such a day puts her poodle in a cab" (19), and one of the city lapdogs that Lowell singled out to dirty the sidewalk in a sonnet (*CP* 584).

Adam and Eve's distress at being found naked).

At this moment, the halfway point of the original poem, the style changes, while still dwelling on "the eventual" of death. Brock-Broido leaves behind the glass box of the nicotorium, and turns outwards, to summer fields:

> I want to call things
> As they are: *madness*—
> Callous, eventual mutants assuming our place
> In the sun.

The idiomatic "place in the sun" is from Pascal's *Pensées,* and the broader quote may be a spark to "Certain Kinds of Dogs": it sums up the rueful, Pirandello-esque ambivalence at the heart of the poem.[141] The science-fictional mutants, the source of the speaker's consternation, seem to be informed by the hodgepodge of dogs and fish imagined in the foregoing stanzas; but they seem also to refer to the human being more broadly, each generation of which assumes "our place / In the sun."

The final stanzas leave behind the motley dogs and fish to settle on a world less wildly collage-like. Like Auden's "The Fall of Rome," this poem moves from the hectic interior of an airport to somewhere "altogether elsewhere": from the airport's nicotorium to the dazzle and gloom of a New England fall:

> Here, waistcoat would
> Stand for—*waistcoat,*
> Your hunter green silk paisley one, your adulterated
> Sackcloth hectic spaniel of a once great-cloak.
> *Things as they really are:*
> It is Thursday and I want to die
> Later.
>
> Doctor—the phlox
> In the fields are afire, brilliant
> As Franz, strapped wildly in a cotton union suit,

[141] In Honor Levi's translation: "*Mine, yours.* 'This is my dog,' said those poor children. 'That is my place in the sun.' That is the origin and picture of universal usurpation" (25).

My feverfew, my Houdini, my—eventual. This is
Finally, *the world.*
*This* world is a world
As curious as the man in his worsted topcoat
Found face-up in a cold lake last
November, chaffy, husky, glume-nettles
Casing him like a snuffbox, surrounded by ironwood
Leaves, in a brittle of boughs a little
North of here,
In a New England,
Which will always be
A gorgeous gloomy place to
See this gaudy time of year.

For the version collected in *Trouble in Mind*, Brock-Broido cut out all but a few lines of the first three stanzas, and turned what remained into "Brochure on Eden."[142] The hectically indented lines of the earlier stanzas are smoothed out and turned into couplets, which tend to end where phrases end. The diction is also less sprawling: phrases with more than one or two adjectives are condensed. The Weimaraner in a suit, the poodles "shaven & aghast," and Wright's nicotorium are all gone. The only trace of the nicotorium is in a metaphorical "snuffbox," in the poem's final sentence; the only trace of the excessive alliteration remains in the *g*'s of the last couplet.

Without the collage-like first three stanzas, without the dogs that are cartoons of dogs, "Brochure on Eden" now takes place in one single outdoor region. It fuses its opposites poignantly: the fiery summer phlox and the cold November lake; the struggling patient and the utterly still, "encased" drowned man; the undeniable reality of "*the world*" and the "madness" of that world's processes; the desire "to die" and the desire "to die / Later," not to leave "our place in the sun." Even the odd "glume-nettles" convey ambivalence: although that word may look like a confected archaism, "glume" comes from the Latin *glūma*, for a husk, and attaches itself determinedly to the

[142] "Brochure on Eden" takes its title from one of Wallace Stevens's notebooks. As Peter Davison says in his review of *Trouble in Mind*, "When facing the ultimate, [Brock-Broido] even confesses to borrowing a number of titles from Wallace Stevens's discard pile as though costuming gloom with bright silks."

actual husks and nettles of an actual field. "This is / Finally, *the world,*" as Brock-Broido concludes.

The reduction also focuses. It anonymizes Franz Wright, replacing him with "a brilliant patient strapped wildly in a cotton Union suit." Even the unnecessary capitalization of Union ironically suggests a wholeness absent from the scene—the patient, "strapped wildly" in a transferred epithet, is compared to a Houdini, who escaped straitjackets. "Brochure on Eden" also asserts that Brock-Broido is not simply writing ornate, archaic, exotic poems for a world populated only by herself and her creations. Rather than suffering from "hothouse closeness," these poems reach out to other spheres. "Brochure on Eden" takes its speaker out of the glassed-in nicotorium and into the world at large, from which she considers and speaks to the wider literary world. This poem contemplates a writer who once mockingly described himself as "General Franz P. Wright, supreme commander / of paranoid recluses" (27), and the tentative, sometimes seemingly impossible position of such a person in the world.[143] Wright remembered how his father—the poet James Wright—responded to his son's early work by telling him, "I'll be damned. You're a poet. Welcome to hell"[144]; as Brock-Broido remarked in her interview with Ricardo Maldonado, the "place [she] felt [she] could inhabit" was "poetry, more hellish than the one [she] left." "Brochure on Eden" also renders its own speaker with irony: she addresses a "Doctor," and is herself another brilliant inmate of this curious world.[145]

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[143] In the years that this poem was published (2001 in *APR* and 2004 in *Trouble in Mind*), Wright struggled with severe manic depression, as he had for years.

[144] The letter is quoted in an interview conducted by Alice Quinn: "In the Beforelife: Franz Wright," *The New Yorker*, July 9 2001.

[145] A similar consideration of the recluse and *poète maudit* occurs at the end of "Dove, Abiding" (*Stay, Illusion* 69), where Brock-Broido alludes to several of Robert Lowell's poems, especially the seclusion of his great aunt on "her bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics" (*CP* 165). In Brock-Broido's version of this scene, the snacks and German editions of English books fuse into "dark / German chocolates." This pastiche creates a quintessence of Lowellesque isolation, which Brock-Broido combines with an element of the ostentatiously enigmatic: a "convalescence" announced and made dramatic, but not explained.

Like Robert Lowell, who finds that humor links him to others even when he perceives himself as isolated, Brock-Broido's comedy creates points of contact beyond the individual: it extends outward and is shared, even in wretched circumstances. In "The Matador," for example, Brock-Broido commemorates an unnamed friend who had probably been in chemotherapy. The last she saw of him was when he joked, as if in an attempt to make his visitor smile, of "When he lost his hair and said I did this to him with my grief" (*Stay, Illusion* 68). The poem's speaker responds to that effortful whimsicalness; she recalls how "the pink halo of a monk's scalp began to shine up through his own." To picture an ill friend's balding head as a monk's tonsure, and at the same time as a "pink halo," is to transform the friend into a comic saint, a little as Lowell's elegy transforms Berryman in *Day by Day*. Brock-Broido's next exclamation—"My grief can cause male-pattern baldness in a man!"—is curiously redundant, in its specification of "male" and "man," and mockingly self-congratulatory: her grief can do nothing. When, "many laters," the speaker finds her friend "bewitched // Into a tiny iron matador," she notices, in a parenthesis, "he wore a hat," and carries a "midge of scarf—ridiculous and red." As if paying tribute to his sensibility after his death, she continues to represent him with the lines of a playfully quaint cartoon.[146]

**5. "Infinite Riches in the Smallest Room": the lyric as comedy**

Juliana Spahr has remarked that it "is only recently, after modernism, that [lyric] has gotten its bad name for being traditional, for being romantic in the derisive sense. And while much ink has been spilt on defining lyric, there is no consensus on its value. Some argue that the lyric's intimate and interior space of retreat is its sin" (1). Spahr's assessment of lyric introduces a book that began as a

[146] It is a vastly different transformation than that of "Scarinish, Minginish, Griminish" (the poem that follows "The Matador" in *Stay, Illusion*); there the addressee does not retain any of his characteristics, and is not re-discovered by the poet. But the choice of the matador here is curious—Brock-Broido probably finds bullfighting deplorable (the word's root is in Spanish *matar*, "to kill").

1999 conference on "Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry." Brock-Broido gave a reading at that conference, and her statement on poetics, "Myself a Kangaroo among the Beauties," was eventually published in the spring-summer 2000 issue of *Fence*.[147] In Lesley Wheeler's summary of that talk, Brock-Broido

> cites her own "agoraphobia" in the face of Language Poetry's openness; she alludes to herself as a lyric poet and asserts, 'What I want is a poem which—when all is said & done—acts as a *palpable coffin*.' (18)

In that desire for a "palpable coffin," Brock-Broido playfully and defiantly aligns herself with the image of a sealed-off lyric, with a "space of retreat," to return to Spahr's phrase.[148]

Brock-Broido's recent books heighten what are regarded as typically lyric qualities: they become more manifestly isolated and nostalgic, elegiac and valedictory. Words themselves are increasingly given importance and physicality: "the tiny adjectival prows of leaves of sugar maples and of great // Oak trees" (*Stay, Illusion* 16). "Did you say I've said 'Lark' for the last allotted time?" she asks in "Non-Fiction Poem" (*Stay Illusion* 90), and five pages later, defies the imagined prohibition, picturing "An hour in the afternoon of a lark" (95).

From the beginning of her career, Brock-Broido has tended to frame a poem like a broadside, when possible, with an abundance of white space, centering it as if to preserve it on a page that itself resembles a work of art; now that white space grows even more palpable. Superlatives also increase, both as grammatical superlatives and more generally; in *Stay, Illusion*, one speaker "wash[es] the same slice of pear over and over again, the homeliest, / Most mottled one

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[147] Her statement was also published in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. Molly McQuade (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000); reprinted in Rankine's *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, 100-103.

[148] Helen Vendler's reading of the "cartoon identities" peopling the middle of "Domestic Mysticism"—that Brock-Broido is "mock[ing] the restricted scope of identity politics"—supports a sense that Brock-Broido, being one with "opposing" thumbs, is reacting at least to some slight extent to the poetic landscapes around her (*NYRB*). And as we have seen, these poems also respond to reviews: not only William Logan's but Peter Davison's (in "Extreme Wisteria").

which tastes more tart" (37). Another declares, "I caught you catch a pond of sunlight in your lap and when you stood, / The sunlight spilt; it could never follow you" (91). *Trouble in Mind* depicts the "one lamp left // On in the vaulted amber window of the Public Library / Where a cowled friar has been deep in study // Lucubrating" (43). These phrases heap up exaggeration and singularity. Linebreaks themselves—the feature that most distinguishes a poem from prose, and the feature that can transform prose into a poem, of sorts—become theatrically heightened: "one lamp left" is clarified at last by "On"; "deep in study" culminates, after another portentous gap, in "Lucubrating," a word used primarily in facetious depictions of study.[149] Brock-Broido has wielded enjambments for comic portentousness, bathos, and surprise since *A Hunger*—"Monday, after a long weekend, your sister woke / Tattooed" (51)—but by *Stay, Illusion* those overstated gaps of white space are still more pronounced. They cast the words on either side into even more loaded relations.

At first glance, there might seem aesthetic danger in this tendency toward the perfect vignette, the embroidered details, and the poignant moral. A hostile reader might decide that this poet has singled out elements selectively, adding phrases and phrases to make an image or metaphor still more unique. But the titles warn against such a simplistic reading; a number of them comically emphasize their status as poems. "Basic Poem in a Basic Tongue" is one of the most verbally excessive poems in the volume, shifting from the pretty to the overdramatic: "A muster of pale stars stationed like gazelles just looking-up, / Before the rustle of the coming kill" (*Trouble in Mind* 13).[150]

This excess is the source of a deeply submerged comedy: the poet is aware of her exaggerations, poses, costumes, and retreats; she heightens them to a point at which excess and

[149] The participle is also a pun, however, given that the friar is using a lamp, and "lucubrating" has as a root *lux,* "light"—the sentence arcs and doubles back on itself.

[150] *Stay, Illusion* includes "Selected Poems," "Uncollected Poem," "Contributor's Note," "Non-Fiction Poem."

bathos are inevitable.[151] The title of "Infinite Riches in the Smallest Room," for example, suggests the trembling intensity of something superlatively tiny, to what seems a nearly precious effect. The poem's comedy lies in extremes.[152] It is set in the weird scene of the speaker's yard, which seems scorched, filled with black flowers (as a number of Victorian gardens were), or thoroughly darkened by night:

> The flowerbed is black, sumptuous in emptiness.
> Blue-footed mushrooms line the walkway to my door. I would as soon
> Die as serve them in a salad to the man I love. (*Stay, Illusion* 3)

Within the extreme concentration of these lines, if one tilts them like a laser postcard (as Brock-Broido suggests to Carole Maso), the "riotous circus of 'other'" emerges. This type of mushroom contains psilocybins, and is poisonous when eaten raw: particularly not ideal for a salad. Why the speaker even brings up a scene in which she must choose between death and the preparation of a salad is unclear. However, the style in which she does so—"I would as soon / Die," only barely evading the cliché of *I'd rather die*—is dramatic to the point of excess, and turned into excess by the linebreak. For this speaker, a glance at the mushroom-beds leads her to imagine a scene all the way to the perilous salad. These lines are not far removed from moments of imaginative excess in Berryman's science-fictional Dream Song 50 (in which Henry imagines himself defending the edge of the galaxy with a weapons system including "Grenades, the portable rack, the yellow spout / of the anthrax-ray," and sharp "pencils"). They demonstrate how Brock-Broido's presents a comedy that almost seems inadvertent, one that draws on the minute foibles and erratic, associative thoughts of an imaginative personality.

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[151] In the words of M. Wynn Thomas, this later work is "repeatedly concerned with the equivocal sorcery of art, particularly as sometimes impatiently viewed in the harsh light of life's most cruel depredations" (245).

[152] Helen Vendler has pointed out, over email, that this title recalls Marlowe's image of "Infinite riches in a little room" (*The Jew of Malta* I.i.37).

As the title of "Infinite Riches in the Smallest Room" suggests, the isolated "pretty room" of the lyric finds an overdetermined emblem in the many actual little rooms appearing within Brock-Broido's poems.[153] Stephen Burt has pointed out that the precocious eighteen-month-old speaker of "Jessica, From the Well" "wants to be *noticed* for being *unreachable*" (Rankine 106). When the more distinctly persona- and theme-based collections of *A Hunger* and *The Master Letters* give way to *Trouble in Mind* and *Stay, Illusion*, these images of interior spaces grow even more constant.[154]

"Fata Morgana" is spoken from one such interior. Its title refers to a mirage, another potential figure for the evanescent, splendid poem itself. It also draws in Morgan le Fay, and on *fata* as Italian for *fairy*, thus invoking the pre-Raphaelite tendencies of Brock-Broido's language. The scene is set amid the turn-of-the-last-century decorations, in "the red room / Of my Beaux Arts and my irony," with a collection of "fetishes" and a "hummingbird," the most gorgeous little bird of all. The speaker sets her sheltered room next to remembrances, figured as a ship at high sea:

> I was steadfast, had a taxidermist's patience to replicate
> Each animal in proper form in after-life.
> Exactitude was my genius, though I was inexact, or wrong,
> In fact, and like my Captain kept
> My men a little hungry on a diet of mirage and pumpkin,
> Cabbages and salted pork,
> And all they ever wanted, in the end, was kindness, praising,
> And the limes. (*Trouble in Mind* 31)

Again, Brock-Broido amplifies and embroiders the isolated Romantic pose for which she is known, while undermining that pose; the stanza both exalts and mocks.

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[153] The image of the poem as a little room (from stanza, "room" in Italian) goes back to the sonnet's "pretty rooms" in Donne's "The Canonization," and has been reinforced by Wordsworth's "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room."

[154] Such rooms appear in titles, such as "Great Reckoning in a Little Room." *Trouble in Mind* includes them in countless varieties: "the dark/ rococo teratogenic rooms of the underground"; "your bed of straw floating on the curious island / Of your room" (22); "the alcove / Of my ways" (87); "the clouded leopards // Surround the clouded bed with their gold & cirrus / Air" (20). One speaker compares herself to Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, left in her tower: "And I am half sick of shadows, too" (46).

The drifting, puncturing sentence wryly manipulates Brock-Broido's distinct tendency to join two disparate kinds of noun with "and," as its parallels give way to essential asymmetry. "I was steadfast," it begins, steadily—and it steadily undercuts itself thereafter. Clause after clause surprises by tweaking the expectation of always-incongruous linkages that are characteristic in this poet's work. The inherently intangible *mirage* and the thoroughly physical *pumpkin* (the humble squash that Cinderella's fantastic carriage turned back into) is a typically Brock-Broidian joining—an unexpected linkage of mirage and pumpkin as the two basic food groups. But the next two yoked nouns, "cabbages and salted pork," simply continue the physicality. Then a reverse kind of disruption returns to the just-broken pattern: a triplet that begins in abstraction and ends, after the momentous pause of a stanza break, in the absolute essential to prevent scurvy: "kindness, praising, // And the limes." (Those needs now seem to supersede the need for mirage and pumpkin.) In the lines that follow, the domestic version of the lime turns out to be a "lemon custard," accompanied by "the lying still // In lemon light."[155] ("Silentium" draws together the exotic and domestic similarly, depicting "a teacup-tundra lit by cures of cream and unrelieved oblivion" [44], where swirling snow and milk are drawn together in a way both bathetic and dramatically vivid.)

Brock-Broido's lyrics show us how beauty and comedy can coexist: these stylized, gorgeous, and intense structures expose and need their minute failures, their improprieties, excesses, breaches of decorum. These poems also confirm the paradoxical doubleness of comedy in another respect—that of Pirandello's ambivalence, the condition of one "for whom no thought can come to mind unless suddenly another one, its opposite and contrary, intervenes" (46). At its core, Brock-Broido's sense of comedy seems to be provoked by her two-minded position: one's desire to create one's

[155] Custards are one of the more bathetic and ineffective of foods—see, e.g., Gwendolyn Brooks's "Pleasant custards sit behind / The white Venetian blind" (30).

own imaginative realm, that of "Domestic Mysticism," with its cats and velvet—and one's "fear" of "Not being of this world or in this world enough" (*Stay, Illusion* 49).

In the interview with *Guernica*, Brock-Broido remarks that poetry "is the skin that I have between my body and the world's body": it is a source of protection but also a sensory organ, a way of touching and perceiving the world—and also part of the image one presents to the world. The title of "You Have Harnessed Yourself Ridiculously to This World" confesses another angle of this predicament: though one can see that one's attachments to the world are ridiculous, one sees also that one's constructed avoidances of that world are laughable, too. The comedy of Brock-Broido's lyrics recognizes these wildly contradictory aspects: although they are not thereby thoroughly reconciled, they are better understood.

That same poem provides an emblem for the comedy of lyric more broadly: it ends with a statement of resignation, in which the dramatic postures and aspirations of a capitalized Self are recognized as excessive:

> We have come to terms with our Self
> Like a marmoset getting out of her Great Ape suit. (*Stay, Illusion* 7)

The regal *We* must settle for living with itself, and has never had more than illusion for an alternative; the marmoset—from the Middle French meaning *grotesque image, gargoyle,* a tiny squirrel-sized monkey that would fit in the palm of a gorilla—is hopelessly too small for her desired and unnecessary costume (she is perfectly equipped without any such suit). But the difference in verb tenses here is suggestive. The marmoset is still "getting out of" the Great Ape's suit; to "have come to terms" with one's self, even in the present perfect, does not mean one is stripped of all illusion—it means simply that one is aware of one's ideals and one's foibles. For Brock-Broido, comedy helps one see oneself as a small and sometimes ridiculous inhabitant of a world shared with other

primates: the capuchin and his cap, the "Lemurs in parlors, inconsolable" (*Stay, Illusion* 29), and the few others with opposing thumbs.

CHAPTER FIVE

*The "floundering interiors" of Terrance Hayes*

In each of the preceding chapters, comedy has arisen, in part, from the inconsistencies, improprieties, and flaws of a single personality, as it speaks within the frames of the lyric poem. Terrance Hayes's version of this comedy draws on the self's ability to take in a wide range of contradictory, unhierarchical perspectives: how it slides from topic to topic, what it tries not to think of and yet thinks of.[156] These poems seem to approach their subjects indirectly, even incidentally: the sight of incarcerated boys leads to the thought of carp in Japan; the boisterous music of James Brown, to a distant, troubling memory. The unruly intellect of these poems thinks about nearly everything, with more scope than proportion; it remembers both colorfully and hazily, exactly and haphazardly. Hayes shows us the mind as it assimilates, is altered by, and transforms its surroundings. These poems stem from seemingly "floundering" interiors (*Wind in a Box* 19).

Hayes's poems affirm an analogy between the less-than-strictly logical processes of the lyric and the serendipitous, erratic associations of the intelligence (in contrast to the working of more utilitarian language, and to a more reliably efficient machine). Like Moore, who imagines how "the mind / feeling its way as though blind, / walks along with its eyes on the ground" (*CP* 134), getting where it needs to go by upended, unexpected processes, Hayes draws on irregular locomotion to describe the poem itself: the poem is "imperfect, asymmetrical. Rules and laws are probably good for it, but it has a mind of its own. It can get across the room even when one leg is shorter than the other, even when it has no legs" ("Animal or Machine" 254). His own "imperfect, asymmetrical" poems bear out how comedy is generated by the off-kilter's seeming miraculously perfect. Hayes

[156] For Hayes's most direct and playful statement on perspective, see his tour of a "Sentenced Museum," which served as introduction to the winter 2010 issue of *Ploughshares*. It begins by "[s]uggesting the essential role perspective plays in aesthetics" (7).

shows us this kind of surprise in inadvertent and unlooked-for perfection on two main levels: the mental, as suggested above, and the formal. His work provokes delighted wonder at how an array of baroque, flawed, disparate things gather themselves to form the single expressive entity called a poem.

On first glance, Hayes's exuberant syntax, prolific rhymes, brimming forms, continual wordplay, and heterogeneous references seem to move outwards from—and in excess of—a poem's meaning. But a second recognition follows: that this off-kilter centrifugalism turns out to be necessary, even inevitable, to the poems' emotional situations. They are not, however, a simple reinforcement. These converging elements work *against* the mental dramas of the poems, which show a mind evading, sidestepping, wandering, or simply distracting itself. Although the speaker proceeds down cul-de-sacs of quotation, rhyme, and stylized rhetorical structures, these devices eventually turn him back to the memory he has been resisting, or to an idea not fully articulated earlier. What causes the frisson of amusement is how the elements of such a stylistic mélange come together to convey something beyond themselves— but also beyond their semantic point. These poems show a comedy of accuracy and excess. And as we will see, even in poems that do not enact such dramatic ambivalence or avoidance, Hayes's verbal flourishes help convey the *scope* of a single individual's mind at any given moment: even when focused on a particular line of thought, this mind does not devote itself utterly to that topic; it makes space for its surroundings, peripheral details, moments of inattentiveness or woolgathering. This refusal to dwell exclusively on a subject—the ability to admit the other things catching one's notice—is a large part of what makes Hayes's lyrics resonant.[157]

[157] Hayes has drawn pointedly on Frank O'Hara—see, e.g., "What I Am," a from *Muscular Music* (15-16). A poem such as O'Hara's "Fantasy," where the speaker moves about his apartment making a hangover cure for Allen Ginsberg while imagining himself in an Arctic spy movie ("Down / down down went the grim / grey

My emphasis on how form interacts with the mental drama of these poems departs somewhat from Dan Chiasson's reading of Hayes. Chiasson ends his evocative review of *How to Be Drawn* (2015) by suggesting that the "risk with Hayes's work, which fits strong emotions into virtuoso forms, is that the emotions may also come to seem virtuosic. The poems handle form so deftly that they sometimes seem backfilled with feeling, as though Hayes is afraid of his own aplomb" ("Sense of Self"). But while the relation of form to emotion is self-conscious and can sometimes be tense, these poems do not seem backfilled with feeling: the feeling within them is fundamental, and is both complicated and enhanced by the virtuosic elements that convey it. Hayes's work records the inner life of someone "a little bit / high strung and a little bit gutted balloon" (*Wind in a Box* 70).

In "New York Poem," for instance, a bounded space with a nearly boundless view provides a physical analogue for how the imaginative perspective works within the fixed, stuck, or pigeonholed one—and where syntax curls and extends to reflect these perspectives. Then, through briefer examples from a range of poems, we will take up several elements working alongside those grammatical trajectories, in particular Hayes's trapdoors of figurative language and clusters of sound. Lyric flamboyance and lyric situation work together in "How to Be Drawn to Trouble" and "Wigphrastic": here the comic emerges in glints and interstices, as several disparate topics gradually converge. Briefer glances at "The Avocado" and "Carp Poem" conclude the study: the imaginative waywardness and flippancy they express is a source of humor but also of reprimand.

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submarine under the 'cold' ice. … Let's see, / two aspirins a vitamin C tablet and some baking soda / should do the trick" [488]), parallels Hayes's unimpeded momentum and brio.

**1. Shortcuts and alternative takes**

One of Auden's aphoristic notes on comedy suggests that it arises from a "contradiction in the relation of the individual or the personal to the universal or the impersonal" (*Dyer's Hand* 371). Hayes's poems express a similar contradiction; many of them set a freedom of intellect and imagination against the constraints arising from gender, race, cultural identities, place, family, age, interests. In a prescient early review, Shara McCallum writes that "in a time when so many poems and poets are being divided between the 'political' and the 'personal,' Hayes walks the line between the two and makes it seem natural and effortless. Despite the poet/speaker's reticence at being 'caught in that space between personal and public,' these poems are a testament to how potentially viable and fruitful it is to inhabit that very domain" (694).

One of the richest products of Hayes's navigation of the personal and public—or the inner and the external—lies in his comedy, as seen in the angles of "New York Poem." Even the poem's physical location (the speaker is on a rooftop, both removed and exposed) bears out a keenly but quietly felt situation, set between a variegated, expansive outside world and an insular party; such juxtaposition of the inner and outer drives these poems, and the perspectival leaps essential to Hayes's work. From a grounding in the local and literal, the poem moves to slightly fantastic, figurative possibilities:

> In New York from a rooftop in Chinatown
> one can see the sci-fi bridges and aisles
> of buildings where there are more miles
> of shortcuts and alternative takes than
> there are Miles Davis alternative takes. (*How to Be Drawn* 10)

A trio of prepositional phrases stretches across the horizon of the first line. After a basic place-name, a particular rooftop; then a stretch outward again to Chinatown, a neighborhood whose name

recalls somewhere halfway around the world.[158] From this nonspecificity, the view sweeps outward, in a proliferating clause; "aisles / of buildings" conflate scale, moving so far out as to reduce everything to a miniature size. Just as the light-studded city presents numerous routes and passages, the sentence twists through clauses to finish on a completely different plane of meaning: topography suddenly vanishes into sound, through the pivot of *miles* and *Miles*.

Hayes writes in a conversational, flexible style that moves quickly down the page, gliding from subject to subject with seeming effortlessness. The first phrases of "How to Be Drawn" hover between the rhythms of dance and speech, with unexpected rhyme, persistent but unpredictable triple rhythms, and almost syncopated relations between clause and line-endings. It is an exhilaratingly rapid opening. But the scene is brought up short by the slightly thumping repetition of its final comparison: while "alternative take" should lead to an alternative, here it leads to five syllables of identical rhyme. The last two lines balance the new (in their move from the tangible cityscape to the unconfined music) and the unexpectedly same.

The lines that follow reveal the speaker's whereabouts: like many speakers in Hayes, he is at a party.[159] His seemingly out-of-nowhere allusion to Miles Davis leads into the scene, made comically flashy by visual and sonic effects:

> There is a white girl who looks hijacked
> with feeling in her glittering jacket
> and her boots that look made of dinosaur
> skin and R is saying to her *I love you*
> again and again.

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[158] Auden compresses and expands in a similar manner; in "A Summer Night," we see the world from the moon's view, where "Churches and power stations lie / Alike among earth's fixtures," before sweeping in to look at the "marvellous pictures" of the galleries (*CP* 103). Brock-Broido's prepositional changes proceed more sequentially: "I used to live in a train parked / In a yard in the middle of Virginia" (*A Hunger* 11), or "on the folding table at a yard sale / In a small New England town" (*Stay Illusion* 68).

[159] For example, *How to Be Drawn* opens with a birthday party, featuring several family members: "My uncle used the money I gave him / to buy a few vials of what looked like candy / after the party where my grandma sang / in an outfit that was obviously made / for a West African king" (3).

To be "hijacked" with feeling is to be overpowered by it—but the word also catches at "jacked," to be stimulated (often artificially). Like the adjective "sci-fi," heard earlier for the glowing bridges, the jacket suggests a slightly dated aesthetic repurposed as a trend, and the boots of seeming "dinosaur / skin" are equally modish. This visual spectacle is braced by sound, unlooked for but seemingly inevitable. "Hijacked" and "jacket," the third set of near-couplets in seven lines, reverse stress around the same root, their sounds binding so that the jacket itself shimmers "with feeling." The boots of apparent "dinosaur skin" lead, inescapably, to R's protestations of love ("again and again"). "Aisles" and "miles," "takes" and "takes," "hijacked" and "jacket," "dinosaur skin" and "again and again": the rhymes that dot these lines animate them.

After this effervescence, however, the middle of the poem casts the sections on either side of it into more charged relations: against the background talk of the party, a sharper tone emerges:

> On a Chinatown rooftop
> in New York anything can happen.
> Someone says "abattoir" is such a pretty word
> for slaughterhouse. Someone says
> mermaids are just fish ladies. I am so
> fucking vain I cannot believe anyone
> is threatened by me. In New York
> not everyone is forgiven.

"I cannot believe anyone / is threatened by me" startles, in part because of its lack of ornamentation: no high-spirited lists, no metaphors, just an adjective that might be facetious or might be harsh. The confession does not seem, at first glance, to be generated by anything preceding it—it is, perhaps, a thought that the speaker cannot frequently or easily put entirely out of his mind. To say that "In New York / not everyone is forgiven" is portentously open-ended, and suggests evasion, or understatement (perhaps *I* won't be forgiven).

The kernels of Hayes's poems often emerge in a pointedly indirect way. The innocuous "one" of the opening lines now begins to stand out: that a voice so seemingly conversational should

use that neutral, slightly formal pronoun (rather than a *you*, *I*, or *we*) slants the scene towards impersonality. Although the speaker is at this party, his remarks on it come from a distance, as a spectator. Despite being located within a nearly futuristic atmosphere, where China and New York merge amid countless "alternative takes," the speaker's ranging glances are suddenly interrupted by the baffling thought that he might intimidate others, whether by his dark skin or by his intellect and charisma. This poem depicts a perception of something that is not wholly articulated, but that sits at the back of the head, all the same, and sometimes approaches the front. What Hayes does brilliantly is implicitness.

After those brief, dislocated statements, which form a core of uncertainty at the poem's center, Hayes returns to the rapid condensations and expansions of the opening, gathering force through repeated salutations. His perspectives move in all directions, while the syntax keeps rolling forwards:

> Dear New York,
> dear girl with a bar code tattooed
> on the side of your face, and everyone
> writing poems about and inside and outside
> the subways, dear people underground
> in New York, on the sci-fi bridges and aisles
> of New York, on the rooftops of Chinatown
> where Miles Davis is pumping in,
> and someone is telling me about contranyms,
> how "cleave" and "cleave" are the same word
> looking in opposite directions, I now know
> "bolt" is to lock and "bolt" is to run away.
> That's how I think of New York. Someone
> jonesing for Grace Jones at the party,
> and someone jonesing for grace.

Syllepsis—in this case, prepositions made to work twice as much as usual—spins the poem outwards: people are writing not simply "about" the subways but "inside and outside" them. These prepositions include every poet in the city, then take in all the unpoetical people below or above ground and at the speaker's own rooftop scene. Now he actually hears music: whereas before it had

only informed his comparison, here it is "pumping in," overwhelmingly present—it engages several senses, and fills the room like oxygen. While earlier Hayes's speaker only overheard others, now he is talking with someone (or at least someone is talking to him). The moment of sharp unease at the poem's center has vanished, or rather passed.

Like the contranyms of "cleave" and "bolt," this final passage both is and is not going places. While its first few clauses seem to swoop through nearly the whole of New York, and while the poem ends with a conclusive repetition, the sentence also seems to build up momentum only to dissolve. It is grounded on repetition within change: it opens with the doubling of *Miles*, and ends with the doubled *Grace* and *Jones*. That palpable bracket is echoed in all the repetitions of "sci-fi bridges and isles," "of New York" (seven times), and of "the rooftops of Chinatown." The poem, on one level a tribute to New York's multifariousness, is also an emblem for the human brain's alternative takes and repetitions: that we perceive widely, nimbly, and erratically, and that an overwhelming number of thoughts filter through our minds, jumbling together the important and the irrelevant. This gaudy, ebullient poem captures a moment of unease, but pointedly does not let that unease become a focal point—it represents it as one of *many* kinds of thought that this party-guest registers. While it is one of his most troubled reflections, it passes nearly as quickly as the lexical banter he overhears.

**2. An "arrangement / of derangements": Hayes's syntax, similes, and sounds**

In its current sense, *scope* is defined as the "distance to which the mind reaches in its workings or purpose; reach or range of mental activity; extent of view, outlook, or survey" (OED 6a). Hayes's sense of scope finds its physical equivalent in the "miles of … alternative takes" within New York. It is enacted in that poem's long sentences, which can take countless turns before their conclusion, glancing to look "about and inside and outside" the subways.

The steadiness of syntax, or at least its grammatical dependability, can be finely expressive of how the mind operates, waywardly and revealingly. As Hayes demonstrates, syntax is both expressive and misrepresentative. On one hand, this grammar plays up the easy freedom of a mind's associative trajectory: that a single sentence can move fluidly from the image of a barcoded girl to a definition of contranyms, through prepositions and conjunctions. Hayes's sentences change constantly from the sinuous to the abrupt, the meandering to the slapdash, the vaguely run-on to the precisely connected, the elegant to the clumsy.

On the other hand, the stability and grammaticality itself, the near-guarantee that a sentence can be parsed, can serve as a contrast to the irrationality of that mind. For Hayes, a sentence's veneer of logic or clarity allows him to expose its opposite—a lack of proportion, or a moment of impercipience.[160] The opening of "A House is Not a Home" shows how syntax can comically express the workings of memory. It begins by focusing on an event, in specificity that soon gives way to near-euphemism:

> It was the night I embraced Ron's wife a bit too long
> because he'd refused to kiss me goodbye
> that I realized the essential nature of sound. (*Lighthead* 29)

That first line's initial definiteness throws into relief the slight disintegration that follows: the mildly, perhaps inaccurately genteel "embraced"; the object of the embrace, not herself provided with her name; the less-distinct, perhaps understated "a bit too long." In this grammar of the intermittently perceptive mind, what would seem to be the most curious revelation occurs in a dependent clause; and that explanation—"because he" had "refused to kiss me goodbye"—prompts more questions

[160] Paul Muldoon's syntax often proceeds in a similarly stately yet open-ended manner: in the sonnet-long sentence of "Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003," his focus shifts from looking at the "welts and weals" on a starling's skin, to comparison after comparison that move location and subject entirely, so that the poem ends altogether elsewhere, in "the hubbub / of all-night revelers at reveille." For an even more striking instance, see the hundred-line sentence that comprises "Turkey Buzzards," from *Horse Latitudes*.

than it answers.[161] But the sentence keeps moving towards its conclusion, towards the almost triumphant realization of "the essential nature of sound": attention is on physics, or perhaps philosophy.

The lines that follow link two instant acts with minute sensations from hours before:

> When she slapped me across one ear,
> and he punched me in the other, I recalled,
> almost instantly, the purr of liquor sliding
>
> along the neck of the bottle a few hours earlier
> as the three of us took turns imitating the croon
> of the recently-deceased Luther Vandross.

The slap and the punch match each other word for word, from "When she" and "and he," to "across one ear" and "in the other," remembered like a moment from an overly choreographed film. But rather than focus on this farcical moment, Hayes keeps each act in dependent clauses, subordinating them to the real subject of attention. The comedy here arises from how a sentence can obey every relevant law of grammar (the six-line sentence above is faultless in syntax) while going in so many different directions, and encompassing such a range of sensations. It makes its way from the slap and punch, to the close-up to an almost inaudible sound, the trio's singing, and the concluding genitive that smoothly relays the recent death of Luther Vandross. (Although that last line is not quite Nabokov's parenthetical "picnic, lightning," it is a peculiarly easygoing and way to mention a death: given the grammatical subordination, "recently-deceased" seems faintly ironic in its stiffness.) As with "the goddamned scones" that interrupt Berryman's thoughts of Yeats's majestic gravity, Hayes's syntax is comic because it is extraordinarily expressive of unhierarchical sensation. If a sentence could feel like a stretch—an expansion of what a muscle, or a mind, can do—these

[161] Assuming this speaker is of a piece with Hayes's other non-personae speakers, he is primarily straight (although Hayes's first book begins with "At Pegasus," spoken by a more ambivalent onlooker watching other men dancing at a gay club [*Muscular Music* 9-11]).

sentences do: they arch, bend, fold, and sprawl.

While Hayes's syntax draws on forward momentum to amplify the mind's deviations, similes open outwards and blossom from a single word or phrase.[162] These similes startle, in part because they are spoken by a voice that often sounds quite ordinary and casual (it is the opposite, for instance, of Brock-Broido, who places enormous pressures on every phrase through enjambment). The metaphorical liveliness of the following lines occurs within a prosaic assemblage of somewhat lumpy memories it does not linger over. Like Ammons, Hayes is willing to include both the densely musical and the slightly clumsy: his usually efficient syntax can be slapdash or include lumbering repetitions; his speakers are willing to use run-of-the-mill words like "stuff," and to relay his conduct matter-of-factly.[163] But this poem's prose-like scenes are shot through with inordinate figurative language:

> I loved Bruce Lee and a ten dollar ukulele.
> For my little mutt Shepherd and the saplings,
> I performed black Superman melodramas barefoot
> on the picnic table until a toenail opened
> on my big toe like the hood of my father's Lincoln
> and a fever broke. I dropped stuff.
> I showed Erica (my queen) McQueen
> my junior penis. I showed Connie Simpson,
> I showed Meko Jackson, I showed Precious Jones,
> and again and again they split like pigtails
> on a trampoline. (*Wind in a Box* 65)

[162] Syntax moves in a linear direction, through myriad objects, times, and ideas: sonic clusters concentrate and charge single phrases. The opening couplets of "A. Machine," for example, announce that "I am doing 85 outside the kingdom // Of heaven, under the overpass and passed over, / The past is over and I'm over the past" (*How to Be Drawn* 47). Although chiasmus tends to concentrate and slow down a line, it cooperates with these long, fast lines. They are not static but comically speedy, moving 85 miles an hour in circles, heading into the territory of nonsense.

[163] A good instance of Hayes's comfortably less-than-lofty diction occurs in "Black Confederate Ghost Story," where slang clarifies a Latinate verb: "And by *mortify*, dear ghosts, I mean scare the snot out of him" (*How to Be Drawn* 35).

Initially, these similes are striking for their incongruity; they would seem to bear out the discords drawn together that have been our most plausible source for the laughable. But Hayes's similes are comic because of their lavish mixture of *rightness* and incongruity. The toe's leisurely "open[ing]," seemingly of its own accord, makes clear the difference in durability between the barefoot human toe and the glamorous Lincoln. But in the same moment that we consider a small toe and an enormous car, we perceive that a toenail is the same squared-off shape as a 1970s Lincoln's hood, and it is positioned similarly: the image compresses a wild comparison of dimension and an apt comparison of form. The simile exposes not simply its inaccuracy, but its felicity. Incongruities and aberrances do not simply collide and collude, but create something in excess of themselves.[164]

Here that concept takes the form of unlikely verisimilitude: these images are simultaneously apt and not-at-all apt. The simile describing the girls who "split like pigtails / on a trampoline" is, again, outrageous along one line and perfectly apposite in another. Pivoting on the contextually primary meaning of *split* (to run away at top speed), Hayes returns it to its original meaning, of breaking into parts. The literal and figurative commingle: the pigtails split by flying up in the air on a trampoline become not one but several girls dashing away from the speaker's younger self. The immediate and helter-skelter motion of the hair doubles back on itself—and the comic jolt to the imagination (a jolt that forces us to consider how a running girl can resemble a bouncing pigtail and then to delight at its weird accuracy) might even cause us to think further: that as the girls run away, their hair will fly about as it would on a trampoline; that the young boy seems to be himself a kind of trampoline, sending each unlucky person he meets into flight. Hayes's metaphorical language is a

[164] Hayes's similes also suggest that comedy is, at its deepest, aesthetic, as suggested by Mary Douglas's claim that "[a] joke is a play upon form" (150). For Douglas, the excitement of a joke "lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general" (150-51).

vivid emblem for linguistic play, erring but also right.[165]

Similes in Hayes grow comic by the aesthetic and imaginative spark that occurs when a perfect likeness is struck against an inadequate or excessive one. When James Brown is remembered "in a cape and sweat / like glitter that glows like little bits of gold" (8), the jostling sense of accuracy is on one hand quite explicit: sweat under stage lights looks like glitter; glitter is very much like little bits of gold, in fact it is *supposed* to look like little bits of gold. But the very act of being so particular brings out a difference: after magnifying glitter into "little bits of gold," the contrast between sweat's fluidity and the little particles is rendered large. Glitter is not gold at all, but plastic; on the other hand, the sense of rightness is enhanced by the words themselves—as bits of flat metal combine at different angles to suggest a shimmering surface, Hayes's echoing consonants and vowels suggest a kind of sonic coruscation: *glitter*, *glows, little,* and *glows* seem slight variants of a single substance. As with the pigtails on the trampoline, this simile sends the imagination in all directions, finding both further dissonances and harmonies.

We encounter this comedy of aptness and outlandishness constantly. One speaker remembers the night he and friends dressed in skirts to put graffiti on a monument of Robert E. Lee: his friend's "thighs shimmered like the wings of a teenage / Cockroach beneath his skirt as a bullhorn of sheriff verbs / Like Stop! Freeze! and Fire! outlined us" (*Lighthead* 5). This scene is cartoonish, but also full of bizarre likenesses: the "bullhorn of sheriff verbs" compresses sound into something so physical as to fence the boys in. For every point of absurdity in the idea of a "teenage / Cockroach," there is one of likeness: the nocturnal sortie, the strong legs that might shine in

[165] The word "junior"—to take a less conspicuous instance—is not simply risibly odd and awkward, although the adjective is usually for a rank (a junior senator) or product (a junior toolbox), not a person. Referring to something lower-ranking or smaller than the average, and to a very young person, not long after he was acting out scenes from Superman, it is also *right*. The "junior penis" is not simply diminished but desexualized. (The triply repeated "I showed" also helps: the act is comically replicated, and reduced to a rather unremarkable verb. The act seems to be something that can be done as quickly as it can be relayed.)

nylons, the diaphanous wings, the gregariousness; the trespassers viewed as little better than insects by the citizens (as the poem goes on to reveal).

In Hayes's poems, the off-kilter most often takes the form of superfluity, of things manifestly beyond the paraphrase: within a texture of the relatively ordinary appear abundant internal rhymes, metrical variations, puns, and echoes. These poems display the efficiency of seeming inefficiency, and what W. H. Auden called "the luck of verbal playing." If comedy depends on the fusion of the off-kilter and the marvelously right, Hayes's acoustic effects—like his similes—bring the excessive and apt together. In the first stanza of "A Plate of Bones" (*Lighthead* 13), the brilliantly strange comes from ordinary syntax and easygoing diction, metamorphosed by its vowels and consonants. This poem plays on the proverbial "bone to pick"; it begins by showing those bones, still within fish, being driven "to church" by an uncle whose anger swells up at the poem's end. I partly represent its network of sounds:

> My *silk slick* b*lack* mu*scu*lar ba*ck*-
> *talk*ing un*cl*e driving me and a *sch*oo*l*
> of fish corpses to church. The *sick*-eyed
> gap-mouthed ba*ss,* the *k*ingfish without
> *k*ingdom, the *sl*ver-thin *sil*ver fish—each
> dead and separate in a *c*oo*l* bucket. Gilded
> and shapely as a necktied Sunday morning,
> the fish. *Sit upright*, he said, and I sat right up,
> riding shotgun looking hard at the road.
> He muttered, *Crackers,* as if it was something
> swinging from a thin clear wire,
> the clump of tiny maggots in a trout's brain,
> the flies lazing like the devil's jewelry at our backs.

The first line delights by its show of sonic force: it asks the reader to count off the strong stresses of "silk slick black muscular back- / talking uncle," someone who seems so awe-inspiring as to summon those resonances himself. By the end of the sentence, however, the sonic concentration has dissolved: "driving me and a school / of fish corpses to church." That lurch back into ordinary sounds complements the topical bathos: of all the places one could be driving, and all the company

to be driving with, church and buckets of dead fish are among the least thrilling.[166] When one moves from describing one's formidable uncle to describing the unglamorous task at hand, one turns to cliché (or in this case, toppled cliché—a school of fish *corpses*) and to sounds lacking the splendid vigor of the opening.

After the fizzling-out of "fish corpses to church," internal rhymes proliferate again, now with puns. The speaker sees "the *s*i*ck*-eyed / ga*p*-mouthed ba*ss*, || the *k*ingfish without / *k*ingdom," a mostly iambic pattern: within the context of Hayes's usually less regular verse, such regularity reinforces the phrases' mocking understatements. Then "the *sl*ver-thin *s*i*l*ver fish"—a delicate tongue-twister soon followed by the lumpy spondees of "each / dead and separate || in a cool bucket." These variegated glints of internal rhyme preserve their images, as snapshots, like the girl in her glittering jacket: their heightened sound heightens the scene's vividness. Like "The Blue Terrance," which also opened by remembering the speaker's past, the poem is based in memory; but rather than tumbling from image to image, "A Plate of Bones" *fixates* on one: and as one sees in its next stanza, this car ride is remembered vividly not because of its own significance, but because of what it is associated with: the uncle's anger that comes blistering out in the second stanza.

Sound alone in Hayes is material for a longer study; he appreciates the "dopey two-note melody" of Tupac Shakur (*Lighthead* 8), the extraordinarily deep voice of Paul Robeson (*Hip Logic* 40), and the "Center-stage, satin-tongue" of Billie Holiday (*Muscular Music* 67). The first sentence in *How to Be Drawn* brings in both a growled line of an Ol' Dirty Bastard lyric and Duke Ellington. For every poem made from the language and rhythm of the ordinary day, there is a *Finnegans Wake*-esque piece that progresses through the days of the week by puns and rhymes: "*moan* day as the week

[166] The importance of fish to Christianity—Hayes may remember Christ's promise, in Matthew 4:19, to make his disciples "fishers of men," or perhaps the miracle of the loaves and fishes, remembered in "Carp Poem"—only enfeebles and straitlaces the morning.

begins to unpeel again: / the bed moans, the bones moan" (*Hip Logic* 21).

Just as alliterative feats turn out to be an indispensable ornament, Hayes's verse forms convince by their aptness and expressiveness. Although "What It Look Like," the opening poem of *How to Be Drawn*, announces that its speaker "care[s] less and less / about the shapes of shapes because forms / change" (3), each of Hayes's books is thoroughly and essentially innovative. *Lighthead* reanimated the ghazal with invective, in poems that churned out comic insult after comic insult, not escalating but repeatedly flattening. That same book introduced both "the golden shovel," where a new poem springs from the end-words of another poet's work (Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool"), and the *pecha kucha,* which was inspired by PowerPoint slides, one of the least promising inventions of the millennium. Some of Hayes's short, verbally concentrated prose paragraphs are modelled on the multiplying puns of Harryette Mullen; others, with fill-in-the-blank gaps and lines struck out, derive from newspaper puzzles, or riddling moments in W. H. Auden's *The Orators.*[167]

Hayes is interested in form as a liberating constriction: as what Auden called a way to "force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self" (*CP* 642); he shows how those second thoughts can emerge from a curb that might seem arbitrary.[168] As with his similes, Hayes's new forms amuse because they are more productive than one would expect: an arbitrary-looking constraint gives rise to new insights, trajectories, tones. One such constraint appears in the anagram-

[167] From "Who Are the Tribes": "Among the many reasons to distrust - - - - - - were: (1) His theatrical grin (2) His chitchat was a simulacra [*sic*] of syntax, a meticulous mishmash of fuck thisness & fuck thatness […]" (*How to Be Drawn* 27-28); compare Auden's formally and tonally similar diagrams for identifying the enemy: "Three kinds of enemy walk—the grandiose stunt—the melancholic stagger—the paranoiac sidle" (*The English Auden* 81).

[168] In an interview with Jonathan Moody, Hayes lays out his interest in both spontaneous and gradual, layered reflection: "Surprise, I like to think, is the engine that drives me to keep writing. … But no, it doesn't always come naturally. Sometimes it's a matter of excavation. As in life, in poetry a discovery or two is usually buried beneath the first thoughts and assumptions" (*Nidus*).

based poems of *Hip Logic* (2002). Each is eleven lines long; and each line takes its end-word from the letters of the title, as the beginning of "a m b u l a n c e" suggests:

> Some fool ignores the manual
> Accompanying his sparkling ACME
> Chainsaw. Or maybe someone orders spoiled cube
> Steak from a diner menu.
> Or can't refuse his twelfth shot of Jim Beam. (29)

Letters fall into place as if guided by the invisible hand of a Ouija board; somehow the *am…ce* that encloses *ambulance* comes together at the end of the second line, for ACME. And of course the accident happens when "some fool" is at his sparkling zenith; with equal inevitability, the poem's one pentameter line arrives at the spondaic "Jim Beam." The coincidences of language seem momentarily fated, a grimly comic version of Hopkins's journal entries on Adamic language;[169] the components of *ambulance* seem occultly linked, by connections even slighter than morphemes. (Hayes repeatedly draws on meter within his free—or at least uncommitted—verse, to marked effect: if one is based primarily in the rhythms of speech, or prose, a move into iambs or dactyls will be noticeable. Depending on the content it might sound pointedly traditional, formal, stuffy, impassioned, or plaintive—or, as here, bathetic.)

Hayes's similes and sounds draw together the off-kilter and the perfect, into a marvelous convergence of unlikely elements: whether that of a simile that unites girls with their flying pigtails, or a "twelfth shot of Jim Beam" being fit into pentameter, they interact so as to seem perfect and inevitable: the comic event could not have happened differently. Just as Buster Keaton's tumbles fuse the disastrous and miraculous, or as Lowell's words come together to link wholly different

[169] Michael Sprinker sums up Hopkins's "astonishingly fertile imagination"—in which phonological resemblances imply the divine and miraculous—with a diary entry from September 24, 1863: "Hopkins assumes the existence of a primitive root, which he calls 'horn,' and generates from the various physical aspects of a horn a seemingly infinite variety of words that designate other objects whose shape or function resembles one of the physical characteristics of a horn, and whose pronunciation suggests a phonological affinity with the root word" (115).

aspects of reality with uncanny rightness, Hayes's figurative language convinces us, at heart, by its serendipity.

### 3. "How to Be Drawn to Trouble": Allusion and Distance

Hayes's poems are headily allusive: to non-verbal arts, to literature,[170] and to culture more broadly, both high and low (as readers such as Dan Chiasson have noted appreciatively ["Sense of Self"]). This allusiveness brings the scope of the contemporary novel into the poem. But in an essay launched from Chiasson's review, Arnold Klein suggests that such reviewers believe that language is "conceived of purely as a mode of reference."[171] Of the lines Chiasson quotes from Hayes, Klein writes: "the lines singled out for nearly unlimited praise comprise a 'catalogue,' that is, a list—for a list is semantically maximal and syntactically minimal, if not, indeed, syntactically null."[172] One of Klein's implied objections seems compelling: most contemporary writers bring in a wide range of images and objects from the outside world, whether Brock-Broido's trademarked crayons or Rita Dove's image of "the same / squeeze bottles of Heinz, the same / waxy beef patties and Salem potato chip bags" (198). Praising a writer for referential variety is not praising much distinctiveness. But Chiasson's review asserts that one way to "judge a poem" is "by how big a chunk of reality it smuggles into language before returning it, *transformed*" (my italics).[173] Hayes does not simply present a snapshot of the first decades of the 2000s: he presents a vivid and particular view of how a single

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[170] In an interview with Jason Koo, Hayes mentions the time an older student gave him the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*: he read it repeatedly. Within a few semesters, his basketball teammates would "take their lit books and open them up and read the beginning of a short story or poem and see if I could guess what it was" (61).

[171] Klein might also take exception to Abigail Deutsch's admiration for Hayes as "a gifted mimic: his poems offer imitations of ad campaigns, cd copy, job applications" (475).

[172] The Hayes lines are those listing hairpieces, from "Wigphrastic."

[173] The first of Auden's four questions for a critic: "Do you like, and by like I mean really like … Long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of ships in *The Iliad*?" (*Dyer's Hand* 47).

mind assimilates contemporanea, and of how that barrage of references does and does not affect the inner life.

While the sounds of "A Plate of Bones," the similes of "The Blue Terrance," and the near-anagrams of "a m b u l a n c e" show the inadvertent or resisted convergences essential to Hayes's comedy, "How to Be Drawn to Trouble" shows that same principle operating in allusion. This long poem shows the mind avoiding, and thus arriving at its topic. The speaker pivots to and from wordplay: that wordplay also helps express a memory as something not necessarily *dwelt* on—rather, as one of the wealth of significant memories that comprise one's inner life. "How to Be Drawn to Trouble" draws together two main subjects: the speaker's mother, who is seen in several glimpsed vignettes, and James Brown, remembered primarily through his 1956 R&B hit "Please, Please, Please."[174]

As the opening fifteen lines suggest, this voice moves easily between short, disjointed sentences and expansive, stanza-exceeding ones:

> The people I live with are troubled by the way I have been playing
> "Please, Please, Please" by James Brown and the Famous Flames
> All evening, but they won't say. I've got a lot of my mother's music
> In me. James Brown is no longer a headwind of hot grease
>
> And squealing for ladies with leopard-skinned intentions,
> Stoned on horns and money. Once I only knew his feel-good music.
>
> While my mother watched convicts dream, I was in my bedroom
> Pretending to be his echo. I still love the way he says *Please*
> Ten times straight, bending the one syllable until it sounds
> Like three. Trouble is one of the ways we discover the complexities
>
> Of the soul. Once, my mother bit the wrist of a traffic cop
> But was not locked away because like him, she was an officer
>
> Of the state. (*How to Be Drawn* 7)

[174] That song seems to be the poem's instigating element; at the beginning of the poem, it has been playing "all evening." To play this song all evening is aggressively repetitious: Brown repeats the word "Please" seven times at the song's outset, and another eleven times halfway through. He performs the song at the point of melodramatic collapse, supported by a softer, concerned chorus who attempt to drape a cape over him and lead him offstage—which he resists, every time.

The poem's first sentence is supremely brisk, prosy, and nonchalant—brisk in its arc, in the way it moves so clearly from fact to fact; prosy in how a song's title and performers take up an entire long line; nonchalant in how the word "troubled" is delivered so lightly that its echo of the title—"How to Be Drawn to Trouble"—might escape initial notice. It could stand in for a mild version of *disturbed, distressed,* or *irritated*; the speaker seems himself not overly concerned with distinguishing these possibilities. The passing emphasis on reticence—"but they won't say"—is also apt: the poem moves jerkily between its subjects, arriving at its final remembrance indirectly.

"How to be Drawn to Trouble" alternates confession with embellishment, nonchalance, and indirection, through the figure of a showy, literal entertainer and through the equally showy language that describes him. A brief, casual aside about the speaker's mother's tastes in music, for example, leads to a one-sentence set piece on Brown's stage persona. Those lines embody Hayes's compressed yet energetic language: the "headwind of hot grease" conflates Brown's pomade and his form of locomotion (he heads to the center of a stage with furious energy, sometimes seeming to move without the use of feet). "Squealing," while a strange way to refer to a human being, is also exactly right: Brown could and did; and the "leopard-skinned intentions" of the women captures their possibly camouflaged ulterior motives, while alluding to Brown's famous round bed in a leopard print.

Between brief, clipped memories of a family's past appear verbal performances. The speaker mentions his mother several times in the lines quoted above—but after each time he does so, he changes the subject. An incident is set down in the briefest possible language ("Once, my mother bit"), without any explanation of its strangeness, only of why the speaker's mother was not "locked away." After that fact, the poem swivels, moving to verbal and visual frivolity—in fact, to the poem's most explicitly humorous moment:

She was a guard at the prison in which James Brown
Was briefly imprisoned. There had been broken man-made laws,
A car chase melee, a roadblock of troopers in sunblock.

The stiff, stilted passive of "There had been broken man-made laws" gives way to an unruly cartoon scene. Hayes conflates persons and automobiles: a mêlée is usually a hand-to-hand scuffle between *people*, and a roadblock is formed by police cars, not police officers themselves. He punctuates: here the *roadblock* of troopers must be protected not only by weapons, but by the bathetic *sunblock*. That gratifyingly compact phrase implies stockiness and red necks, or general floridity; the stockiness finds its sonic equivalent in the near-spondees of "a cár chase mélée," which then gives way to a struggle between compound nouns and triple rhythms. In other words, language is at its most playful and even facetious just after the first indication that the speaker's mother has been the source of that indeterminate word *trouble*.

As we move further into the poem, its two basic threads—the once-imprisoned James Brown and the prison-guard mother—generate several smaller interwoven strands. But the quick, disconnected switches between subjects, times, and tones, continue and even increase:

After another of my mother's disappearances, my father left her

Bags on the porch. My father believes a man should never dance
In public. Under no circumstances should a grown man have hair

Long enough to braid. If I was a black girl, I'd always be mad.
I might weep too and break. But think about the good things.
My mother and I love James Brown in a cape and sweat
Like glitter that glows like little bits of gold. (7-8)

That first phrase comes without any precedent; it is the first time the speaker mentions his mother's "disappearances." As a participial phrase, it tucks the sentence's most startling revelation into a grammatically subordinate clause—as we have seen, a device Hayes uses repeatedly.[175]

[175] While "my father" seems a superficial lexical link between the two sentences quoted just above (a contrast with Brown, who was a spectacularly energetic dancer, in public), there is also an relationship: while someone

The speaker, now a third of the way into his poem, continues issuing slightly disjointed statements about his parents; just after he does so, he gives himself an imperative from another song, "Think,"[176] and then makes an especially manifest turn *away* from those more personal topics, towards linguistic frivolity: Brown "in a cape and sweat / Like *gl*itter that *gl*ōws like little bits of *g*ōld." This image is perfect for Brown, whose onstage exertions and gold lamé costumes had him sweating within the first minute of performance. The shimmering figurative language is one of Hayes's trademarks: not simply one simile ("sweat // Like glitter") but a doubled one that by short-circuiting increases its glittering. As with the opening of "New York Poem," with its "alternative takes" compared to "Miles Davis alternative takes," it is both a little awkward and completely surprising.

When the iconic image of James Brown—in the famous cape that he repeatedly throws off in "Please"—leads the speaker to think of a more particular photograph, the poem begins to approach the anecdote that ends it, and which binds all its disparate elements together:

> In the photo she took
> With him, he holds her wrist oddly, probably unintentionally
> Covering her scar.

The scar ties a chronological knot in the poem's center: it has not been mentioned previously; and its history is revealed only at the poem's end. It is apt that James Brown is "probably unintentionally / Covering" that scar, in the moment Hayes uncovers it so markedly yet quietly.

These braided memories continue for a number of four- and two-line stanzas. Hayes steadily alternates long-line quatrains and couplets, a pattern that embodies the poem's moves between

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who never dances in public is likely to be undemonstrative, or generally stoic, by the end of this poem, the father will seem to be echoing Brown's words of desperate supplication.

[176] Again, the music and the poem's actual events fuse: "Think," the song Hayes sparingly quotes is about a woman leaving, to whom the speaker says, "Think about the good things I done for you. / Now think of all the bad things I tried not to do."

topics: Hayes shifts constantly from one set of motifs to another; the stanzas, equally relentlessly, set one relatively spacious four-line view next to a tauter two-line view. Because the poem's fluid syntax tends to ignore these inch and half-inch units—often sentences overlap their containers on either end—the stanzas act like a ruler, contrasting the speaker's free-flowing recollections with the more measured, step-by-step proceedings of stanzaic form.

After one more memory of Brown's time in the prison where this speaker's mother worked, he relays the poem's final incident more fully. The straightforwardness characteristic of this poem is sustained—with slight tacks—through a number of clauses:

> My mother had gone out Saturday night,
> And came home Sunday an hour or so before church.
>
> She punched clean through the porch window
> When we wouldn't let her in. I can still hear all the love buried
> Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.
> It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to:
>
> *Baby, you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.*
> It's trouble he's asking to stay. My father might have said *Please*
>
> When my mother was beating the door and then calling to me
> From the window. I might have heard her say *Please* just before
> Or just after the glass and then the skin along her wrist broke.
> *Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease,* that's how James Brown says it.
>
> *Please, please, please, please, please, Honey, please don't go.* (9)

In another poet's hands, this final incident would be more foregrounded, or more pointedly eschewed. Here, however, it is relayed both straightforwardly and with arresting calm: Hayes's grammar again slips these keenly remembered images into dependent clauses, and lets the moment of the gashed wrist exist simply as half of a zeugmatic couple—"glass," "skin"—which, because of that zeugma, is all the more graphically seen.

Hayes's balance of the nonchalant and the aching renders vividly a half-suppressed memory of domestic catastrophe. The accumulated poem presents both drama and comedy, as its two

seemingly disparate themes—one of which seems, at first, an attempt to distract from or avoid the other—interlock and relate. While remembered sharply, this half-avoided memory of domestic tension and outbreak is distanced; the present is the music of Brown and "the people I live with." And while his sentences are roundabout, the speaker of the poem does not actually seem to be trying to hide any detail of this story. The memory comes out at its own pace, as he thinks more and more about that time.[177] As with "New York Poem," this poem acquires comic resonance not simply in its verbal extravagances, but in how precisely it renders a feeling difficult to capture in any literary genre: the feeling of recollecting the hazy and vivid details of the turmoil one is now separated from.

**4. "If you like 'like' like I like 'like'": "Wigphrastic"**

The *delight* we experience at Hayes's lines does not come from sympathetic or corrective laughter; nor does this comedy arise simply from absurdity or unexpectedness. Through its associative, verbal, and acoustic play, "Wigphrastic" bears out the idea that comedy also depends on the interplay of rightness and excess, from unpromising miscellaneous sources. As with much of Hayes's work, this poem is packed with ebullient sound-clusters, myriad allusions, seeming tangents, and gratuitous wordplay—verbal equivalents for the makeup, hair weaves, and other decorations that the speaker sees at a club, as pop music from the 1980s drifts in. As with "How to Be Drawn to Trouble," Hayes does not announce his topics; they seem to float to the surface, often whimsically, suggesting the imaginative unpredictability of this inner life.

The speaker of "Wigphrastic" is caught between seeing himself as a "we" and an "I": he uses both pronouns, from stanza to stanza. He has Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" and the songs

[177] Hayes's method here might be compared to that of Albert Goldbarth, who draws seemingly and markedly unrelated elements alongside each other. But Goldbarth tends to explicate one curiosity thoroughly before proceeding to another odd cultural detail: Hayes moves more quickly and repeatedly between two, and often between more than two.

of Klymaxx (an all-female funk band from the mid-eighties) in his head. Over the course of the poem, which begins by highlighting problems of race, this mind revolves until it is also—almost without acknowledging it—addressing questions of masculinity and desire; by the end of the poem it is somewhere else altogether, having accumulated both resolution and ambivalence. Meanwhile the syntax winds across the pages in quatrains, tercets, and couplets, overflowing its containers (or choosing new ones) as it pleases.

As the comically ungainly title promises, "Wigphrastic" examines wigs, for which an early 20th-century euphemism was a "transformation" (OED 4). Wigs are ideal for several of Hayes's frequent concerns: they muddle the distinction between inner and outer, while also dramatizing that distinction. They bring up artifice, disguise, and defense, and the constant questions of "what it is" and "what it look[s] like."[178] The poem is inspired by Ellen Gallagher's sixty-print work *DeLuxe* (2004-2005), which takes its images from magazines that catered to black Americans in the middle decades of the 20th century. Most of Gallagher's selections are from ads for wigs; others highlight personal or "beauty" products, e.g., underwear and bleaching creams. Gallagher then changes and obscures the faces and figures even more, with paint, modelling clay, and an X-Acto knife.[179] Hayes begins by quoting one of those advertisements, in the first two lines of a tidy quatrain:[180]

> Sometimes I want a built-in scalp
> that looks and feels like skin. A form of camouflage,
> protection against sunburn and frostbite,
> horsehair that covers the nightmares and makes me civilized. (14)

After the trochee of "Sometimes," a long string of iambs sets off that slightly nonsensical quotation: humans already have a built-in scalp that looks and feels like skin. The next sentence (Hayes's own),

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[178] These phrases are from "What It Look Like," the poem that opens *How to Be Drawn*. The word "like" turns up on practically every page of Hayes's books: eight times in that opening poem, for example.

[179] Images of the piece can be viewed at <www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gallagher-deluxe-t12301>.

[180] See, e.g., a design "with Built in Scalp that looks and feels like Skin" (*Sepia* 23.1-6 [1974], 33).

which elaborates on the uses of the wig, embodies the protective covering it describes: between the Latinate "camouflage" and "civilized," four non-Latinate compounds strike against each other. By being placed in close proximity, "sunburn" and "frostbite" are both revitalized, and "horse*hair*" threatens to pull "night*mare*" out of shape—until the relations between those unruly compounds are suppressed by the flat "makes me civilized." The ostentatiously symmetrical structure (of sunburn and frostbite,

horsehair and nightmares) is itself so "civilized" as to itself enact what it requests.

The next sentence, in contrast to that neat box, grows more expansive; it extends beyond its quatrain and culminates at the end of a tercet:

> Somebody slap a powdered wig on me so I can hammer
> a couple sentences like Louis XIV small and bald
> as a boiled egg making himself taller by means
> of a towering hairpiece resembling a Corinthian column
>
> or maybe a skyscraping Kid with no Play wig
> worn by someone playing *N. W. A.*
> at a penthouse party with no black people.

The freewheeling similes here span centuries and vast changes in scale. Hayes first compares himself to the 17th-century Sun King, who is in turn immediately compared to a "boiled egg": small, smooth, and white. The "towering" hairpiece then becomes one of the most elaborate columns of classical architecture—and then a massive hi-top worn by one member of the 1980s hip-hop duo Kid 'n Play. Hayes's punning flourishes make this sentence as full of coils as an elaborately coiffed seventeenth-century wig.

Then, suddenly, simile vanishes. The long sentence narrows to focus on the very specific and pointed scene of hip hop being played by rich, mainstream, white Americans at a party—not the rooftop party of "New York Poem." Already the poem has an edge to it, and much of the tension in the stanzas that follow comes from the alternation of proliferating, irrepressible frivolity and sharp commentary. The flourishes are key to Hayes's play with perception: winding fantasias sprout up

and blossom in a line of thought that is also tightly focused on a single concept. Ideas seem to bubble up in Hayes; they are self-conscious and yet not self-regarding, stagy but easy-going. These poems seem mindful of and speak to a reader, but much of the time they also feel like someone thinking to himself, hovering between a stream of consciousness and something rhetorical.

After imagining the penthouse party, the speaker looks at the people actually around him; over the course of this three-page poem, glances at the party are spliced with texts and ideas floating through the speaker's mind.

> We up in the club humming *Hmm-mmm, Hey Mamma*
> and our numbskull caps underscore the brain's captivity.

Hayes's poem takes place, as with the rooftop party of "New York Poem" and the birthday party of "What It Look Like," amid festivity. Once again, the speaker seems more an observer than a reveler, who sees this scene from a distance, even while his pronoun (*we*) joins him to it. As he does so, he adopts phrases in an African-American vernacular, and a scrap of song lyric that lacks semantic content. The phrase "we up in the club" is a common phrase from song lyrics,[181] and could be ventriloquized by the speaker or heard as part of the recorded music playing; but the "our" in the following line—which is not spoken in the stylized Black vernacular—turns the ironic "we" into a more self-conscious reality. Even if the *I* would prefer to remain abstracted from the scene before him, the music guides the *I* to take the *we* seriously; his next thought is to Norman Mailer's assertions on race and society, which place "the bohemian" and "the juvenile delinquent" in a trio with "the Negro":

> Somebody slap me. Norman Mailer's essay,
> "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,"
> never actually uses the word *wigger*. I'd rather say *whack*.

[181] See, for example, Olamide's "Up in the Club," or the lyrics of Beyoncé's "Partition."

It may be fruitful to consider me a philosophical psychopath. (14)

Gallagher's collage-like pieces turn out to suit Hayes, not only because of his ability to draw together aptly disparate kinds of language (the idea of the wig leads to the slang term *wigger,* which leads to a slangy portmanteau of "white" and "black," which leads to a remembered fragment of the Mailer essay[182]), but because the humor of each artist is both whimsical and pointed. The sheer volume of Gallagher's work is comic: the advertisements amount to an entire magazine, framed page by page on a wall, with detail and imagination lavished on each. For Hayes, the acoustic equivalent of Gallagher's stylized, heaped-on textures is associative, suggestive sound.[183] Abigail Deutsch writes that at times, Hayes seems "less about semantics than about sonics, granting *Lighthead* the feel of a variety show, with music breaking up the acts" (475). The lines that follow the first recollection of Mailer (who claims the hipster is a "psychopath" and likens him to the typical Black man [280]) dart away from that essay, to comprehend the sights at hand. As Hayes turns to layering words like plasticine and paint, he moves into and out of pentameter, and to stress-patterns that might be more clearly indicated with musical notation:

> We clubbing in our wigs of please and longing.
> The ladies wear wigs of nots,
> knots of nots: would nots, do nots, cannots,
>
> wigs dipped in dye swirl on their scalps, off their scalps,
> sides of scalps, their center parts, and irrigated plaits.
>
> Flirty bangs dangle below a bow clip of sparkle.
> A lady places her bow about face to place her face in place.
> Which is a placebo of place, her face is a placebo!

---

[182] Mailer writes, "It may be fruitful to consider the hipster a philosophical psychopath, a man interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying, at least for himself, the suppositions on which his inner universe is constructed": Hayes's revision lays slightly nettled stress on "*me*."

[183] Kristin Juarez, who describes Gallagher's modifications and "the insidiousness of fitting in, the audacity of standing out," suggests that Hayes "begins in the spirit of Gallagher's alternating geometric and organic helmets, masks, and googly eyes" (*Pelican Bomb*); perhaps one source of the varied contours Juarez perceives is Hayes's curling, spiky syntax.

> Let's wear ready-made wigs, custom-made wigs,
> hand-tied wigs and machine-made wigs. (14-15)

This close-up view of the hair of "the ladies" (as seen by the "we" that lightly aligns us with a male perspective) is nearly a metaphysical conceit. It sums up the varieties of hairstyle on display, while also making literal a protective resistance perceived in reaction to the men's "longing": the wigs that announce *would not, do not, cannot* with every shake of a head. From there the language becomes still more decorative—it moves toward near nonsense, first through the repetitive trochees (often ending with *-l* or *-r,* as with *dangle* and *sparkle*) that Hayes likes so much, then through the multiplications of *place* and *face*. The slightly Seidel-esque exclamation might seem to be justified by sound alone, but "placebo" has origins in the Latin *placebo*, "I shall be pleasing" (OED), the promises of those advertisements for whiteners and corsets.

The effusive sounds of this passage are a verbal equivalent of the scene that filters through the speaker's consciousness: they are almost devoid of semantic significance, like the "Hmm-mmm" hummed by the people clubbing (or by the performers in the music being played in the club). From here the swings between aesthetic embellishment and political recognition grow more abrupt: another pronouncement from Mailer on violence, more tonally unidentifiable statements ("Bullets shout through the darkness. Dumb people are dangerous"), then an inanely mixed metaphor from what is probably an online comments section, in response to Trayvon Martin's death: "Calamity pimps come out of the woodwork / and start to paddle their own canoes." Each of these fragments passes rapidly, with little appended commentary; the impression is not of a step-by-step reflection, but a flurry of overwhelming reactions and musings. Here Hayes's voice manages to be forcefully public and personal at once: it offers a vision of the modern-day United States (while glancing back fifty years, to a decade not as unlike the present as it might seem), and a representation of how one inhabitant of that world reacts to it. But the lines do not even stop at American culture: seeking

correlations for the barbarisms of this world, they spin out more and more widely, eventually to "the blonde and red-haired wigs" made from hair taken from captive slaves in the Roman Empire.

When the speaker emerges from this echo chamber of commentary, he hears music. Just as Miles Davis is present from the beginning of "New York Poem," and only explicitly heard later, the lyrics of this pop song—the 1984 single "The Men All Pause"—have been present, in fact, since the poem's first few stanzas.[184]

> the soft radar streaked music of Klymaxx
> singing "The men all pause when I walk into the room."
>
> The men all paws. Animals. The men all fangles,
> the men all wolf-woofs and a little bit lost, lust,
> lustrous, trustless, restless as the rest of us. (15)

The song is sung by a comically assertive and blasé woman in a "blue leather suit," who explains how "As soon as my feet hit the door / I had all attention from the dance floor." Once again Hayes draws out the scene and its implications, with a joke on *paws* and *pause*: these men (who are explicitly likened to canines in the song) don't even have hands—simply paws, with the connotation of "clumsiness, roughness, or greed," according to the OED. So too the one-word sentence "Animals," which reads like a complete dismissal of a barely human person. The next phrase seems to go further, as if it is about to give men dog-like *fangs*—but instead they have *fangles*. That tacked-on syllable tilts the image quite differently: men not as fanged, but as susceptible to new fashions and contrivances, as the women are to "bangs" and "sparkle[s]." The unlooked-for, abundant rhymes that follow, which are dropped into rhythmic units held just long enough that each change surprises, themselves lead to a change in point of view. Moving from the perspective heard repeatedly earlier (that of a *we* and *the ladies*), for a moment here the speaker sees the men in the

[184] "Somebody slap a powdered wig on me" is one of the poem's several variations on the song's "Somebody slap me"; the song's lyrics float through this poem.

room from a remove. After doing so, he moves through from the humanizing *lost* to the more predictable *lust,* to the unexpected *lustrous*, and eventually lands on a broader "us."[185]

As Hayes approaches the end of this long poem, he begins his next stanza with several short declarations that feel like conclusions:

> In my life the wigs eat me. The wish to live awhile on the mind
> of another human is not inhuman. The wish to slide
> for a while inside another human, it is not inhuman. (16)

As with the middle of "New York Poem," the short sentences—the disjointed ones that do not stretch luxuriously over half a page, the ones that restrain their diction—seem suddenly tense.[186] Their realizations are tonally odd: in the context of wigs, the lines admit that the desire to disguise oneself or to assimilate is "not inhuman." But those repetitions of "not inhuman," reinforced by those of "a*not*her human," make the near-cliché lines more repellent: although the act of wanting to possess another person is not inhuman, described in this language it is at least ambiguous.

"Wigphrastic" closes by turning outwards, to a *you*. It redoubles its wordplay, alliteration, and its scraps of language from advertisement; it suspends its implicit recognition—that a wig or several wigs are necessary—between the generously affirmative, ludicrous, and sardonic:

> If you like "like" like I like "like," you should wear a hairpiece.
> It is peace of mind. It is artistic. It is a lightweight likeness,
> comfortable, wash and wear, virtually looking and feeling
> with virtually no side effects. Let me hear you say,
>
> "This wig is terrific!" A colored despair wig
> for your colored despair, an economic despair wig,
> a sexual despair wig, a wig for expressive despair,
> political despair, a movable halo. New and improved,

---

[185] Hayes may be responding, in part, to Mailer's perspective, which seems to take for granted that anyone operating in the world is male: "the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it" (284). For a longer critique of Mailer's essay, see James Baldwin's 1961 "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" (reprinted in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, 289-303).

[186] Hayes is alluding to Williams's complaint about being stifled: "In my life the furniture eats me" (*CP*1 200).

your wig can be set upon the older wig
just as the older wig was set,
when it was newer, upon the wig beneath it.
Where's your wig? Wear your wig. Your wig is terrific. (16)

The play of "Wigphrastic" strikes only in counterpoint to its gravity: any one of its topics, taken alone, could be the subject of a much starker poem. Comedy arises from the *variety* of things glanced at, from the serendipity of what might not seem germane, and from how this welter of influences circles in offbeat proportions: it depicts a mind churning through an array of topics in a seemingly free-flowing, not very directed manner that nevertheless works toward a verdict.

**5. "Trying not to look": comic evasion and encounter**

Each poet in this thesis has revealed misgivings about laughter, or humor. In Dream Song 384, Berryman's "O ho" leads immediately to an "alas alas." Lowell has an even more ambivalent view: in his poems, audible laughter usually indicates madness; smiles are often defensive, fake, or desperate.[187] Ammons's waggish self-deprecation can shade into something nearer self-loathing, or into sneering: "I'm largely a big joke: if somebody else / doesn't make a crack about me, I do" (*Bosh and Flapdoodle* 39).[188] Hayes, who jokes as much as Ammons, is scathing about the potential brainlessness of laughter: the title of "Nothing" leads immediately to a harsh non-joke: "which is what the first idiot says / to the second idiot in the joke / I have made up but will not share / with you" (*Lighthead* 43).[189]

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[187] For laughter as madness, see "the king is laughing, all his men are killed" (*CP* 451). For smiling, see Lowell's father, who constantly "smiled his oval Lowell smile," and died after "a morning of anxious, repetitive smiling" (*CP* 175, 176).

[188] After Edward VI explains "I never smile / near [Henry VIII], must not laugh" early in *A Hunger* (18), words like "laughter" and "smile" are almost entirely absent from Brock-Broido's poems. The grim exception is in "Observations from the Glasgow Coma Scale": "SMILES OR COOS APPROPRIATELY" (*Stay, Illusion* 59).

[189] In "Squawk," a character exclaims, "We've spent our lives making you laugh, / and I'm tired of it" (*Hip Logic* 17); a sonnet in the same book simply repeats "We sliced the watermelon into smiles" for fourteen lines

The mind's tendency to evade somber topics, to distract itself from anything troubling or painful with spirals and curlicues of elaboration, is a source of humor and disquiet in Hayes. "Carp Poem" shows this movement dramatically; when the speaker goes to read at a New Orleans prison, his thoughts keep moving as far away from what confronts him as possible. The single-sentence poem begins by cataloguing everything outside the prison—the "spray paint," "granite / grooves," and the clothes of loiterers—as if to delay entrance further. Once "the black prison guard wearing the same weariness / my prison guard father wears" lets Hayes in, however, the mode of looking changes. These long-lined couplets juggle images faster and faster, as if trying to keep on metaphorical terrain as long as possible:

> I follow his pistol and shield along each corridor trying not to look
> at the black men boxed and bunked around me
>
> until I reach the tiny classroom where two dozen black boys are
> dressed in jumpsuits orange as the pond full of carp I saw once in Japan,
>
> so many fat snaggle-toothed fish ganged in and lurching for food
> that a lightweight tourist could have crossed the pond on their backs
>
> so long as he had tiny rice balls or bread to drop into the water
> below his footsteps which I'm thinking is how Jesus must have walked
>
> on the lake that day, the crackers and wafer crumbs falling
> from the folds of his robe, and how maybe it was the one fish
>
> so hungry it leapt up his sleeve that he later miraculously changed
> into a narrow loaf of bread, something that could stick to a believer's ribs […] (*Lighthead* 31)

From the sight of the orange jumpsuits arises a comparison that takes over. Hayes approaches the carp through a close-up that includes their usually invisible teeth, though the language of their "gang[ing] in and lurching" seems to come from the scene he is trying to repress.[190] He then turns to

(13.) Gwendolyn Brooks's "downtown vaudeville" sketches with aversion an audience's laughter at "the Negro clown": the "decked dismissal of his gift, / The sugared hoot and hauteur" (32).

[190] Although the grammar is not itself actually punning, these verbs have strong corresponding nouns: the young boys of this prison may well have been in *gangs*, and are now in the *lurch*—or simply *lurching*, left "To move suddenly, unsteadily, and without purpose in any direction" (OED *lurch*, v. 3, 2.).

a whimsical notion so involved that it provides practical alternatives: "rice balls *or* bread," just as Berryman imagines the dual possibilities of "helicopters or a Brooklyn reproduction" (so that he can see all of a large Zen garden in Song 73).

This sentence lacks the almost periodic architecture of "A House is Not a Home": here the emphasis is simply on moving forward, using whatever connections one can find. Just as the speaker goes "along each corridor trying not to look," each of these long lines draws the mind's eye further and further away from the orange jumpsuits assembled in the room. The phrase "which I'm thinking" activates another new line of thought; from the first wandering "I'm thinking" of *Muscular Music* (15), variations on that phrase have stippled Hayes's collections, as a capricious move away from whatever the topic at hand, away from what is logically significant.[191]

The imaginative passage of "Carp Poem," with its tourist walking on water, and its fish jumping up Jesus's sleeve,[192] wants to defy gravity, in both senses of the word. But just as its imaginative flourishes seem to have left behind the actual world entirely, they swing back to it:

> a footbridge of carp packed gill to gill, packed tighter
>
> than a room of boy prisoners waiting to talk poetry with a young black poet,
> packed so close they might have eaten each other had there been nothing else to eat. (31-32)

This ending might seem glib, were it not for the poem's being one long, swift sentence; even its last couplet avoids momentousness. Although the final image draws together the crowding fish and the boys desperate for mental sustenance, the last clause of all displaces emphasis onto a subjunctive, a conditional: the same grammar of imagining as dominated the poem's middle. Hayes also works against rhetoric, against the natural tendency to say that the boy prisoners are packed tighter *than* the

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[191] See, e.g., "I keep thinking" (*Muscular Music* 18), "& I start thinking" (*Muscular Music* 32), and "I'm thinking" (*Lighthead* 8).

[192] Again, the image comes near a literal pun on "to have something up one's sleeve," and again the images of the robe and sleeve are unintentionally drawn back to the jumpsuits of the young men around him.

carp: the literal comparison unsettles even more. Their "waiting" through the two dozen lines of Hayes's abstraction is a quiet rebuke; and these twelve couplets embed a formal recognition of the "two dozen black boys" whom Hayes eventually cannot avoid seeing.

Hayes's poetry continues a meditation on how the mind swerves back into seriousness from the flippant or playful, and how comic embellishments can shrink into bareness. The scene of "The Avocado" is set in Black History Month—a month remembered for unintentional misbehavior in several of Hayes's poems.[193] Here that willfulness asserts itself and turns back on itself relentlessly:

> "In 1971, drunk on the sweet, sweet juice of revolution,
> a crew of us marched into the president's office with a list
> of demands," the black man tells us at the February luncheon,
> and I'm pretending I haven't heard this one before as I eye
> black tortillas on a red plate beside a big green bowl
> of guacamole made from the whipped, battered remains
> of several harmless former avocados. (*Lightbead* 27)

In its first long sentence, "The Avocado" joins a phrase usually used for jokes—"stop me if you've heard this one before"—against a joking pastiche of Modernist poetry, running an echo of Williams's short lines about the red wheelbarrow into one long horizontal one. Just as the echo materializes, it vanishes, supplanted by a jolting three-word phrase that brings in images from another domain, gruesomely.[194] But although the sentence nearly buckles at the "whipped, battered remains," it then coasts: an immediate line break puts space between that phrase and a line of pure iambic pentameter, to arrive at the titular word.[195] What kind of speaker would deliver a sentence as

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[193] In *Wind in a Box*, the speaker remembers the "annual Black History Month / Talent Show where my roommate and I sang / 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' shirtless and baby-oiled" in what accidentally became a burlesque. When the speaker's roommate forgets the words, "he moaned *Baaaybay, Baaabay* and began to grind // toward the first row and though everyone laughed … I knew we'd lose, cursed by the ghosts // of Black History Month Decency" (8).

[194] If there were truth in the urban legend that splicing a single frame into a reel causes that image to register in the viewer's subconscious even though it can't actually be noticed by the viewer, these doubling phrases would be that technique's poetic equivalent.

[195] A further look into the etymology of *avocado* reminds us that the word is Spanish for *advocate* (now *abogado*), from anyone who lifts voice (*ad* and *vocāre*) to support a cause.

offhandedly and disconcertingly jocular as this one? Perhaps a speaker *born* in 1971, as Hayes was—someone who has heard some version of this story many times before, and whose desire to reach the luncheon table makes his lack of interest all the stronger.

The remainder of "The Avocado" continues to set one voice (that of the poem's first two and a half lines, a member of the protesting "crew") against a second, internal one, that of the "I" who is already listening only slightly, who is "eye[ing]" the food and composing a fantasia on the guacamole. When the older man's voice again cuts through his consciousness, some lines later, the list of demands has moved on to "Three: we wanted more boulevards / named for the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." *Three*: absorbed in the contemplation of everything but the man talking, this listener has missed the second demand entirely. After another extended passage of fancy he emerges from distraction to hear "Demand number twenty-one: a Harriet Tubman statue on the mall!" This list is a caricature of a speech—it is as if the poem's speaker has dramatized its interminableness.

But the nostalgic activist's mention of Harriet Tubman sets off the poem's ending, in a way; this speaker is listening to, or at least not successfully ignoring, the speech. Directly after he dismisses the speaker to himself ("and I'm thinking every time I hear this story it's the one telling the story / that's the hero"), he is suddenly faced with a reprimand:

> "Hush now," Harriet Tubman probably said
> near dawn, pointing a finger black enough to be her pistol barrel
> toward the future or pointing a pistol barrel black enough
> to be her finger at the mouth of some starved, stammering slave
> and then lifting her head to listen for something no one but her could hear. (28)

After the speaker makes one last attempt to reassert the poem's verbal elaboration (through the loud, three-part chiasmus of "finger … black … pistol barrel"), invention and caricature then yield to an attempt to listen. Tubman's lifted head is chasteningly free of irony or self-regard—of anything but total attention. But while the poem's earlier imaginative capers look painfully frivolous and

ostentatious next to this scene, that same imagination has also fashioned this more somber image. And although the comic can distract or dismiss, it can also make the mythologized seem suddenly new and indelible. Comedy "can get across the room" (to return to Hayes's figure for the poem) by wholly unexpected motions; it does so here. And it also clears space for lyric, for a moment of silent understanding that remains free of an audience.

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