Portability; Or, the Traveling Uses of a Poetic Idea

Citation

Published Version

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We call something "portable" if it retains its integrity, use, and func-
tion when carried from place to place.[1] Not just material objects but
also qualities and abstractions may be portable: the Health Insurance
Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, for example, helps workers
carry medical coverage from job to job. Most of us assume in our non-
professional, everyday lives that many objects, terms, and persons are
basically portable. My toothbrush will still clean my teeth when I get off
an airplane, and the word 'toothbrush' will mean the same thing; I will
be the same person when I get off the airplane as I was when I got on.

These working assumptions about the portability of objects, utter-
ances, and persons resemble those many readers have brought to lyric
poetry, which critics from Theodor Adorno to Charles Altieri to W. H.
Auden have taken to transport a voice or a self away from (if not
"above") its situation.[2] Henry David Thoreau portrayed himself, in his
most famous poem, as a "parcel of vain strivings," "brought / Alive / to
a strange place."[3] Helen Vendler goes so far as to state that in "lyric,

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This article began with a suggestion by Jon Plotz; it also responds to suggestions, com-
ments, and critiques from Langdon Hammer, Steve Monte, Joshua Scodel, an anony-
mous reader for *Modern Philology*, and David Wilson-Okamura. I wish to thank all five.

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., defines the term as "fitness for being carried
or moved from place to place, especially with ease."

2. "Poetry, in fact, bears the same relation to Prose . . . ," Auden wrote in 1935, "that
algebra bears to arithmetic" (*The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson [London: Faber
& Faber, 1977], p. 327). For Theodor Adorno's complex argument, see his well-known
"On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Webber Nicholsen
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 37–54. Charles Altieri has devoted a
book to *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (Cambridge University Press,
1989); his more recent views on such subjects are discussed below.

3. Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New
York: Library of America, 2001), p. 542.

the human being becomes a set of warring passions *independent of time and space*" (emphasis added).[4] Poems, and the people and things they envision, can begin in one place and time (where an author wrote them or where they are "set"), and arrive at other places and times, where they retain (at least some of) their coherence and their effect. (In this they are like toothbrushes, or like travelers.) Reading lyric, we assume or pretend that an object's function and meaning, an utterance's force and effect, and consciousness itself can travel from one place to another—that they retain at least some of their sense and force apart from their founding contexts.[5] We thus participate in the imaginative transport of subjectivity from one time to another and from place to place: this is the selfhood the poem, in John Keats's words, "hold[s] towards you," the psyche a poem claims to transmit.[6]

Much contemporary criticism seeks to dissolve, suspend, or disprove such claims. From deconstruction to cultural poetics and queer theory, recent literary thought often strives to shift our focus from people and objects, considered discretely, onto forces, situations, and systems. "It has become a commonplace," writes Martin Gloege, "to think of the 'self'. . . as a product of society, as a . . . trope or strategy of and within language."[7] Critics now like to show how objects, texts, and selves depend indissolubly on other objects, on "a complexly-organized chain of other utterances" (Mikhail Bakhtin) or on "social conflicts operating within the writer's society and culture" (Paul Lauter).[8] The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu even understands all

4. Helen Vendler, *Soul Says* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 5.

5. Terry Eagleton has recently identified "portability" not with lyric but with the more general "high culture" to which lyric poems like Thoreau's now belong: "Indeed to claim that a work belongs to high culture is to claim among other things that it has an inherent portability, a sort of built-in detachability from its context, as bus tickets and political leaflets do not" (*The Idea of Culture* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2001], p. 53). My thanks to Steve Monte for the citation.

6. John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 384.

7. Martin Gloege, "The American Origins of the Postmodern Self," in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 59–80, quote on p. 59. Altieri describes "the shift that took place from envisioning works of art as fundamentally self-interpreting and self-sustaining to treating them as relational structures that become complete only . . . in concrete situations" as "the most important" aspect of what he calls "early postmodernism" (*Postmodernisms Now* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998], p. 286). On similar shifts in other disciplines, see esp. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

8. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 68; Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture, and American Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 248.

"change in works [of art]" as "struggles among agents and institutions whose strategies depend on the interest they have . . . in the distribution of capital."[9]

A text, or a person, understood as an effect of such struggles, or as a node in a "field of force relations" (as Michel Foucault put it), cannot be called portable: it can be studied, explained, and even admired but not picked up and meaningfully separated from its component discourses, causes, or situation of origin.[10] Note, here, how well a metaphor from physics fits all these styles of explanation: entities which used to be thought solid objects are now explained by circulating energies (in language or in economic and social life). Unease inside and outside the academy about such explanations can be understood as anxiety about the fate of the human subject and also as anxiety about portability: if the works we study are nothing like parcels, what can we give our students to take away?[11]

Many critics are now trying to answer such questions. Some ambitious recent criticism, such as John Guillory's book *Cultural Capital* (1993), can be understood as attempts to reconcile portable and nonportable, integral and context-dependent, versions of art works, objects, statements, and persons.[12] Writers like Iain Chambers have examined the international trajectories of postcolonial, postimperial people and things and, in particular, their travel across what Paul Gilroy has called the "Black Atlantic": Chambers even suggests that "reason itself" depends on portability, since it "involves the transport,

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Such demonstrations may be almost all that the deconstructive criticism of the 1980s, the most influential recent criticism focused on gender and sexuality, the new historicist movement, and neo-Marxist readings have in common.

9. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 234.

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 102.

11. About our "many narratives of the 'end of the subject'" (Agnes Heller's phrase), see Heller, "Death of the Subject?" (quotation on p. 284); Dennis K. Mumby, "Two Discourses on Communication, Power, and the Subject: Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault"; and Irving Howe, "The Self in Literature," all in Levine, ed., pp. 269–84, 81–104, and 249–67, respectively. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

12. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (University of Chicago Press, 1993). Guillory's work also represents one of the first large-scale attempts to apply Bourdieu's insights to Anglo-American letters. Simon Frith's powerful *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) attempts to reconcile sociological-structural and aesthetic responses to popular music in ways that recall Guillory's approach to literature and literary studies.

transformation, and translation of some 'thing' in language."[13] Recent studies of high modern thought have examined other ways in which Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound and their contemporaries regarded objects, movement, and space.[14]

Poets' attention to questions of portability speaks to current concerns, this article suggests, in ways which extend beyond one movement or moment and into a necessarily heterogeneous group of poems. The article begins by examining long-available poetic tropes of portability, tropes about objects, utterances, and persons that move from place to place. Portability in things, utterances, and persons drives key passages from Walt Whitman; later, more skeptical poets, among them Elizabeth Bishop, Paul Muldoon, and Lyn Hejinian, explore the limits of all three kinds of portability and the consequences for selfhood when they fail. More recent poets seek models through which to reconcile portable and nonportable concepts of things and selves. Adrienne Rich, I argue, learns to do so through her projects of political solidarity; August Kleinzahler instead finds conceptual resources in modern physics. These models, in turn, illuminate the efforts of recent critics to account both for the portable and for the context-dependent features of literary reading. Considering what and who can safely move from place to place, poets who take up matters of portability hint at answers to questions about objects and agency, and about how we make sense of what we read.

I

Whitman sometimes imagined that his poems could convey intact his modes of thought, or his body and soul, across space and time. One of his "Calamus" poems exhorts a future reader, "Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)"[15] In "Crossing

13. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 32; and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993). See also Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. the chapters on Joseph Conrad and on Claude McKay.

14. See, for example, Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Lisa Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); and Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). For some of the cultural history that supports these studies, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

15. Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 167.

Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman famously declares, "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence. . . . Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not."[16] As Whitman's lines stretch farther and farther away, 'avails' recurs, its sense unchanged, as if to prove his point about how far his poem and his persona could travel: to read Whitman rightly means in that poem (as elsewhere in Whitman) to understand and greet the man himself.[17]

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" seems to predict its own travels through time and space to a reader who will appreciate it. Elsewhere, however, Whitman suspected that his poems might be incomprehensible from outside his own personal history, his time and place. "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" warns readers who carry *Leaves of Grass* "when you go forth over land or sea" that

> these leaves conning you con at peril,
> For these leaves and me you will not understand,
> They will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you,
> Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!
> Already you see I have escaped from you.[18]

Because we so often take modern poems to represent single or singular psyches, questions about portability can develop easily (as they do in those lines) into questions about the status of the self. Is it robust, integral, and portable, or dependent on contexts, liable to break down or to change utterly when moved? How far can we take a poem—and a person—before they cease to be what they were?

Some poets consider these questions by examining the portability of objects. Writers have long imagined readers who transform, misinterpret, or misuse the material objects poems can send them. John Donne's future readers "in a time, or land, / Where mis-devotion doth command," might misinterpret his famous "bracelet of bright haire about the bone," taking it for a Catholic devotional object (rather than a love token) unless Donne writes "The Relique" to explain it.[19] We might expect mute objects transported from place to place, from time to time, to gather different meanings for different viewers. Other

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16. Ibid., p. 191.

17. Altieri has examined these lines as keys to Whitman's ideas about reading. See Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 307, and, more recently, "Spectacular Antispectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and His Heirs," *American Literary History* 11 (1999): 34–66, esp. 54–55.

18. Whitman, pp. 149–50.

19. John Donne, *The Complete Poetry*, ed. John Shawcross (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1968), p. 142.

poems ask where, whether, and why symbolic objects change their meaning for one viewer when she picks up and moves.

Elizabeth Bishop found herself well situated to explore just such questions. Bishop herself lived (among other places) in Nova Scotia; Worcester, Massachusetts; New York; Paris; Key West; and Brazil: her residence in several regions and nations, and her sometimes uneasy movement among them, helped her think about what she, and her poems, could take with her. Adrienne Rich—in perhaps the single most influential essay on Bishop—connects her "experience of outsiderhood" to "the way she locates herself in the world."[20] Bishop recorded her own changing locations in part by becoming a poet of moving, cathected, and frangible objects: think of the souvenir wasps' nest in her late poem "Santarém," or of Uncle George's handed-down painting in "Poem." These moving objects chart the ways in which Bishop's characters maintain, or cannot maintain, their senses of self as they move.

"Jéronimo's House" offers a clear example. Bishop's Jéronimo, a Cuban required by periodic hurricanes to move from one shack to another, transports an assortment of homely craft objects with him each time he has to flee. Bishop's poem describes "left-over Christmas / decorations," "four blue chairs / and an affair / for the smallest baby / with a tray," "two palm leaf fans," "an old French horn," and a radio. We might think these objects define a permanent settlement, until Jéronimo adds:

> When I move
> I take these things,
>   not much more, from
> my shelter from
>   the hurricane.[21]

Brought from shelter to shelter, "these things" become guarantors of a psychic stability which houses themselves can't provide, and they keep their meanings for Jéronimo each time he moves house. The fragile, balanced dimeters of Bishop's stanzas suggest the precarious status of Jéronimo's inventory: his selfhood seems only as portable, and as durable, as his French horn. Bishop's emphasis on their pathetic fragility makes her poem, among other things, a social protest: shouldn't Jéronimo have more to keep than that?

20. Adrienne Rich, "Elizabeth Bishop: The Eye of the Outsider," *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986), pp. 124–36, quotation on p. 127.

21. Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 34.

Bishop's "Crusoe in England," though, cannot even keep what Jéronimo keeps: his deprivation is existential rather than socioeconomic, and his travels have destroyed for him precisely the value-in-objects Jéronimo preserves. Crusoe has taken his sacred objects with him from his island to England, where, deprived of their functions, they lose their auratic meanings. Exhibit A is Crusoe's famous knife, which on his nameless island

> reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?
> I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
> the bluish blade, the broken tip,
> the lines of wood-grain on the handle. . . .
> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul has dribbled away.

"Crusoe" suggests that the meanings such personal sacred objects acquire depend on their nonsymbolic functions: the knife no longer means what it used to mean when Crusoe no longer uses it for cutting. That knife in England, destined for a museum, has become the original knife's memorial, even its corpse—like a body without a soul, or like a literary work we no longer know how to enjoy. The knife, the "shedding goatskin trousers," and the "parasol that took me such a time" which Crusoe contemplates in England are all described in tones of mourning or grief because they commemorate the life Crusoe shared with Friday and the resourceful, creative Crusoe who lived on the island. The objects' changed meanings, in other words, show that something has changed about Crusoe himself: they have not traveled well, but neither has he. Worse yet—as we learn at the end of the poem—"Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March."[22] Off his island, without his beloved companion, Crusoe feels no longer quite himself. If the objects have not proved entirely portable, neither has Crusoe's sense of who he is.

II

To say that Crusoe's knife lacked portability is to say that its meaning depended on its context and on its place. Many depictions of context dependence focus on whole historical or ideological systems: Bourdieu and Foucault make obvious examples. Other sorts of context dependence emphasize rootedness in a locale: "Maybe you have to be from there to hear it sing," the poet C. D. Wright declares in her

22. Ibid., p. 166.

"Ozark Odes."[23] Poets can use the context dependence created by a phrase's place among other phrases to stand for both these other sorts of context dependence, showing how things and people also change meaning or use as they change their place. Recurring words, phrases, and sentences may change their sense as they move from place to place in a poem, or they may remain semantically constant—an effect we might dub portability of utterance. James Cummins writes that the teleutons in a sestina (the six words repeated as line endings in each stanza) stay "the 'same' but only in the sense [that] a human being is the same at different ages."[24] Changes in the effects and meanings of those end words can thus figure time passing or failing to pass, people as they change or stay the same. Not all sestinas involve this effect (nor do all villanelles). Bishop's poems in these forms, however, do.

Bishop's poem called "Sestina" depicts a child in a "grandmother's house" as "September rain falls on the stove"; the grandmother tries to comfort the child, who insists on drawing pictures of houses.[25] "The house" of the first, second, third, and fourth stanzas is the grandmother's, but when the child draws "a rigid house" and then "another inscrutable house," readers infer that the child remembers another house, her mother's. "Sestina" thus uses its repeated words as signs of attempted reassurance but also as signs of pathos and displacement: the almanac and the Marvel Stove with their stoic pronouncements—"*It was to be*," "*I know what I know*"—allude to the events that brought the child to this house, away from her mother's.

The words in "Sestina," like the child's drawings, thus seem, if not more durable, more portable than the shelters they represent. For Bonnie Costello, "Sestina" implies "an analogy between the condition of the traveler and that of the child," both of whom "find themselves in situations where the codes and frames of reference which have given them security break down."[26] Despite the grandmother's real effort, nothing in the world of people and things provides adequate continuity, warmth, or shelter for the child, who keeps on drawing houses (and who refuses to utter any words herself). Children's selves (the poem suggests), by contrast to words, are only partly portable: they depend on stable environments. Bishop's repetition of words might even represent the child's (mute, internal) attempt to master

23. C. D. Wright, *String Light* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), p. 54.

24. James Cummins, "Calliope Music: Notes on the Sestina," *Antioch Review* 55 (1997): 148–59, quotation on 158.

25. Bishop, p. 123.

26. Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 200.

the loss of the persons and places which once told her where and who she was.

Adults in Bishop also discover that words are more portable than the things and persons they represent: her definitive poem of that discovery is the villanelle "One Art."[27] Since Brett Millier's biography, we have known how closely the set of losses in "One Art" tracks those of Bishop's life: she advises her reader, like herself, to lose "places and names, and where it was you meant / to travel. None of these will bring disaster."[28] A mother's watch (and a mother), "three loved houses," "two rivers, a continent" go, but the cycle of end phrases ("master," "disaster") remains. When Bishop fears losing the "you" she addresses—as Crusoe lost Friday—what is threatened seems really to be loss of self, and Bishop has to urge herself, in a famous piece of hesitant exhortation, to lug the now heavier, brittler end words to their last destination, the end of the poem: "the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster." That repeated 'like' would be out of place, a copy editor's error, in printed prose. "The whole stanza," J. D. McClatchy observes, "is in danger of breaking down," which is to say that Bishop sounds closer than ever to "losing it."[29] When not just the objects but the repeated utterances in the villanelle almost defy portability, the self the poem wishes to mend almost falls apart.

Bishop knew how questions about selfhood, integrity, and volition could become questions of travel: she represented such questions in forms which relied on traveling, recurring words. Paul Muldoon's poems about traveling, changing persons and things, deploy similar devices. Muldoon, who grew up in Northern Ireland, now teaches at Princeton University; his sestina "Cauliflowers" juxtaposes his own life-path—from rural Ulster to Belfast to the United States—with his father's traversals of fields in Country Armagh:

> More often than not he stops at the headrig to light
> his pipe
> and try to regain
> his composure. The price of cauliflowers
> has gone down
> two weeks in a row on the Belfast market.[30]

27. Bishop, p. 178.

28. Brett Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 506–14.

29. J. D. McClatchy, *White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 145.

30. Paul Muldoon, *Madoc: A Mystery* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), p. 10.

Within a few lines, the poet and his father have glimpsed "a platoon of Light / Infantry" and "a pipe- / band." Subsequent stanzas manipulate the end words 'pipe', 'light', and 'market' to suggest the code shift-ings, the sudden changes in expectation, that alter one's sense of one-self from place to place, and from generation to generation, within Northern Ireland and between Ireland and America:

> All this as I listened to lovers
> repeatedly going down
> on each other in the next room . . . 'light
> of my life . . . ' in a motel in Oregon.
> All this. Magritte's
> pipe
>
> and the pipe-
> bomb. White Annetts. Gillyflowers.
> Margaret,
> are you grieving? My father going down
> the primrose path with Patrick Regan.
> All gone out of the world of light.

Move from 1960 to 1970, and 'pipe-' suggests not "pipe-/band" but "pipe-/bomb." Cross the educational boundary between Muldoon and his farmer father, and 'pipe' suggests Magritte; cross a national or a generational boundary, and 'going down' refers not to the price of farm goods but to what "lovers . . . in a motel" might do. The overt al-lusions to Gerard Manley Hopkins, Shakespeare, and Henry Vaughan mark the distance between Muldoon (who thinks of those poets' laments as he mourns his father) and the father himself (who never read them). And the moving words, unsettling Muldoon's readers, imagine Muldoon's unsettled self: they lament, too, the lost local world of his "father going down / the primrose path," now "All gone down / the original pipe."

Other kinds of verbal repetition can leave readers even less settled. Probably the most widely admired result of the recent movement called "language writing," Lyn Hejinian's book-length prose poem *My Life* presents her autobiography out of sequence, as a set of thoughts and impressions. Structure is provided by a mathematical armature (for the second edition, forty-five sections of forty-five lines because she was forty-five when she finished it) and by many sentences or sen-tence fragments that recur from section to section. Readers of *My Life* encounter over and over, for example, "What were Caesar's battles but Caesar's prose," "As for we who 'love to be astonished,'" and "I wrote my name in every one of his books."[31]

31. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, 2d ed. (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987), passim.

"The 'personal,'" Hejinian has written, "is already a plural condi-
tion," "a set of incipiencies, incomplete"—a proposition *My Life* seems
designed to support.[32] Bob Perelman suggests that the jumps in *My
Life* from sentence to sentence, context to context, indicate differ-
ences between the five- or twenty-year-old Hejinian that chapter 5 or
20 examines and the forty-five-year-old writer who does the examin-
ing.[33] Just as the same memory acquires different meanings for one
person at different times, so the same sentences take on different
connotations as they occur and recur in Hejinian's book. The reap-
pearance of these phrases and sentences indicates the continuity of
Hejinian's identity; against them, the author has set the techniques
of fragmentation and repetition with which she dissolves what would
otherwise be a life story. And the way each instance of the same sen-
tence, each token of the same type, means something different indi-
cates the context dependence of a self emergent from shifting
linguistic systems and situations, a contingency on which this poet of
portable, moving sentences insists.

III

From all these examples, a careful reader might derive this tentative
principle: *when things, words, and utterances can move around, recur, and
retain their meanings, the poem that includes them can use them to stand for
the portability, hence the continuity, of identity. Contrariwise, when things or
utterances in poems lose or change their meanings from place to place, they can
threaten, or stand for, a discontinuity of personal identity.* These sorts of
portability, then, show how "poetic reading" can be (as Allen Gross-
man has claimed) "a case of . . . the willing of the presence of a per-
son": "discourse about poetry," for Grossman, is therefore "displaced
discourse about persons."[34] In the poems I have been describing, the
portability of objects and utterances inside a lyric poem comes to
stand for the portability of the person the poem represents, the ability
of a speaking self to be recognizably the same as she grows older or
moves from place to place.[35]

32. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2000), p. 207.

33. Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1996),
pp. 71–73.

34. Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer* (Baltimore: Johns Hop-
kins University Press, 1992), pp. 344, 235.

35. Such problems have long fascinated analytic philosophers. A good recent treat-
ment is Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University
Press, 1996).

Muldoon's example aside, one might well identify concerns—like Whitman's, like Bishop's—with portability, transmissibility, and the survival of singular, movable selves as especially American. Auden even thought it a peculiar goal of Americans "to be able at any time . . . to move and keep on moving" and a peculiarly American belief "that all things, good or bad, will change."[36] We could also read concerns about personal portability as peculiarly modern. The philosopher Charles Taylor (citing Ricardo Quiñones) finds in high modern writing "a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question." This drive to dissolve unitary psyches, for Taylor, extends from D. H. Lawrence all the way to Foucault: Lawrence declares, in a passage Taylor quotes, "Our ready-made individuality, our identity, is no more than an accidental cohesion in the flux of time"—a far cry from Donne's bracelet and Thoreau's parcel.[37]

Truly nonportable, context-dependent versions of the subject (whether produced by Lawrentian visions of nature or by what Taylor calls a "disengaged anthropology") have certain attractions, among them freedom from various demands about autonomy and mastery.[38] However, such a subject cannot expect, or be expected, to keep its promises. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes that "holding oneself responsible is . . . accepting to be held to be the same today as the one who acted yesterday."[39] Similarly, William Kerrigan explains, "By sending out, through promises, ties of obligation, we try to bind the future and reduce its uncertainty by rendering ourselves or others constant, trustworthy, reliable, predictable."[40] These matters of philosophical ethics are also, in many poems, matters of love and sex: tonight you're mine, but will you still love me tomorrow? And how could you, if you may not still be "you"? Thus Donne asks a lover whom he expects to betray him, "Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow? / Or say that now / We are not just those persons, which we were?" The same poem ("Womans constancy") ends when Donne considers that he may be just as changeable as his lover: "by to morrow, I may thinke so too."[41]

36. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 360–61.

37. Taylor (n. 11 above), pp. 462–63.

38. Ibid., p. 514.

39. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 295. For more on self-constancy, continuity, and promising, see pp. 148 ("In everyday experience . . . counting on someone is both relying on the stability of a character and expecting that the other will keep his or her word"), 165, and 268.

40. William Kerrigan, "An Anatomy of Promising," *Raritan* 14 (1999): 27–41, quotation on 28.

41. Donne (n. 19 above), pp. 91–92.

Frank O'Hara (like Donne) sometimes made vaulting promises in his love poems but at other times (again like Donne) considered himself and others creatures of circumstance, entirely alterable according to time, place, companion, or occasion. Both poets sometimes found, in this lack of integrity, grounds for paradoxical solidarity, since we and our lovers and the different people we will turn into (tomorrow or elsewhere) all remain in the same constructivist boat. O'Hara's 1960 poem "How to Get There" begins with the disconsolate poet waiting in the cold for a lover who has broken a date: "it is already too late / the snow will go away, but nobody will be there." The poem ends by imagining that nobody has the integrity to be portable, or to keep promises; people change too fast and too involuntarily:

all can confess to be home and waiting, all is the same
and we drift into the clear sky enthralled by our disappointment
    never to be alone again
                                                    never to be loved
sailing through space: didn't I once have you for my self?
                                                    West Side?
    for a couple of hours, but I am not that person[42]

O'Hara's knowledge of other persons' internal states, he suggests, may be no more and no less reliable than his memories of his own.[43] Anxiety about other people's commitments can thus follow or lead to anxiety about the continuity of one's own person. Both can be anxieties about the portability of persons—about how much you and I stay the same when we move.

Some provocative recent thinkers cherish a special fluidity of selfhood in gay desire, or in gay male sexual practice. For Leo Bersani, "gay desire" can "require a provisional withdrawal from relationality," in which "the person disappears in his or her desire," making "a radical break with the social itself."[44] Such hypotheses merit mention here because some of O'Hara's love poems—this one, for example—use ideas about portability to contradict them. Bersani imagines a specifically gay empowerment, and a specifically gay sexual pleasure, associated with the dissolving self. O'Hara's gay *amours*, however, would retain

42. Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 370.
43. William Hazlitt's *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) pursued this (post-Humean) point at length. See David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 46–57.
44. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 7, 149, 176.

their pleasures only if O'Hara's lover kept his promises by keeping their rendezvous: in the wind-sifted half lines of "How to Get There," the collapse of personal portability, continuity, and reliability gives rise not to novel enjoyments but to a vertiginous, chilled dejection.

Bishop, Muldoon, Hejinian, O'Hara, and even Donne ask implicitly whether, or how far, objects, words, poems, and persons can be durable, integral, portable. Such questions become explicit in a recent, epigrammatic poem by Kay Ryan, serendipitously (for my purposes) entitled "The Self is Not Portable":

> The self is not
> portable. It
> cannot be packed.
> It comes sneaking
> back to any place
> from which it's
> been extracted,
> for it is nothing alone.
> It is not an entity.
> The ratio of self
> to home: one part
> in seventy.[45]

The formal components that stand out here include syncopated two- and three-beat lines, short declarative sentences, and prominent rhymes in irregular sequence, with some of the rhyming internal (p*acke*d/b*ack*/extr*acte*d). As in most of Ryan's poems, these features work to produce strong closure and to make the poem seem one unified, compact entity, itself closely "packed" with phonic echoes. The poem, and its general argument, thus seem exceptionally portable, a witty statement of a truth applicable anywhere—precisely the properties Ryan denies to "the self."

Part of the poem's surprise, then, lies in the way that its argument denies the homologies among "entity," speech, and speaker, among object, poem, and poet (or person), which its formal properties make plausible. Like Bishop's "Crusoe in England," Ryan's poem about loss and change becomes a poem about nostalgia in its etymological sense—pain (*algia*) about a journey home (*nostos*). "Extracted" from its origins, the self seems to make a furtive return, or else (as Ryan's metaphor changes) dissolves into "nothing." Her closing lines suggest that the self is "not an entity" with solid boundaries but instead the sort of thing measurable by "ratio"—a mathematical abstraction, a

45. Kay Ryan, "The Self Is Not Portable," *Parnassus* 25 (2001): 478.

gas or a fluid; against this counterintuitive figure, Ryan furnishes the parodic precision that ends the poem. By suggesting with deliberate implausibility that Ryan knows exactly how much of the self inheres in its surroundings (and exactly how little of it does not), the poem suggests by contrast that we cannot know how much of the self survives the loss of its home—though we do know that "home" must matter a lot. Ryan, then, draws her tentative conclusion from the same dilemma that informed each one of the poems discussed above. We know that what we call "the self" seems to be represented in language, in poems, and we know that those representations do cross time and space; we cannot, however, know in advance just how much of the poem, or the self, gets changed en route.

IV

We have seen why poets might want to envision consistent and lasting objects, selves, and poems, and how ideas about portability can help them do so. Though the idea, and the trope, of portability as a figure for poems' lasting powers may be as old as antiquity, it seems also more important to modern poets than to their Romantic or early modern predecessors. If one reason has to do with the modern (or American) concerns described above by Taylor, Lawrence, and Auden, another has to do with the declining credibility of other models for poems' and poets' survival. One such model involves the language of permanence. Poets in Latin and English, and in many other languages, have liked to claim simply that their poems or their books of poetry would last forever—think of Horace's *Odes* 3.30 ("Exigi monumentum aere perennius") or Shakespeare's sonnet 55 ("Not marble, nor the gilded monuments") or Spenser's declaration, citing Horace directly, that "works of learned wits and monuments of Poetry abide for ever."[46]

Another venerable model of poetic work across time and space involves transcendence: a poem might endure not because individual human beings, in some place at some time, will go on reading it but because it has its essential being apart from any actual human society. Robert Herrick's much-anthologized poem of advice to himself, "To live merrily, and to trust to Good Verses," ends by declaring meritorious poetry both permanent and transcendent, able to survive the world's destruction:

46. Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 155.

> Trust to good Verses then;
>   They onely will aspire,
> When Pyramids, as men,
>   Are lost, i'th'funerall fire.
>
> And when all Bodies meet
>   In Lethe to be drown'd;
> Then only Numbers sweet,
>   With endless life are crown'd.[47]

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1821) famously claims that true poets and poetry are by nature transcendent: "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not."[48] Shelley goes on to claim for his "divine" art at once the virtues of permanence (resistance to physical destruction), transcendence (existence outside the historical world of time and change), and portability: "Poetry," Shelley writes, "*makes immortal* all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it *arrests the vanishing apparitions* which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them in language or in form *sends them forth among mankind*, bearing sweet news of kindred joy."[49]

Why would there be less of this—and more concern with portability as against transcendence—in the poetry of the last 150 years? Shelley's idea of transcendence (and even Herrick's, if we take it seriously enough) implies a metaphysical sanction or a metaphysical realm outside history. It is hence incompatible with poets who are, or want to be, philosophical nominalists, historical materialists, or (like Bishop) thoroughgoing agnostics.[50] Recent insistences that poems live and move and have their being only when seen in historical, local contexts often configure themselves specifically as attacks on transcendence. Jerome McGann, for example, claims that "the locus of what is unique in a poem, so far as criticism is concerned, is to be found and studied in . . . all those elements of the work which seem most historically particular and least transcendent."[51] Contemporary poets, responding to

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47. Robert Herrick, *The Poetical Works*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), p. 81.

48. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in his *Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck (New York: Gordian, 1965), pp. 107–41, quotation on p. 112.

49. Ibid., p. 137; emphasis added.

50. Vendler calls Bishop's oeuvre "one of the attempts made in our era to write a poetry no longer dependent on religious or nationalist feeling" (Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988], p. 295).

51. Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 66; see also pp. 68–71.

those attacks, can seek other, less metaphysical figures for poems' continued powers.

Moreover, claims about poetic transcendence are by nature absolute (a work of art either rises above realms of matter and culture or it does not); claims about portability, as we have seen, may be absolute, relative, or carefully qualified. Claims about poetic portability (since they liken poems to objects) also recall the old binary of *vates* and *poeta*, the poet as prophet against the poet as maker of things. Models of poetry as transcendent obviously appeal to the former, while models of poetry as potentially, partially, or debatably portable comport with the latter—as the examples from Bishop might suggest. For all these reasons, ideas and figures of portability—though available for centuries—seem, perhaps now more than ever, attractive to poets who want to imagine how their work might (or might not) persist through time and space.

Modern anxieties about portability and mutability find resonance not just in a few older poems (like Donne's) but also in older poetic subgenres. Modern poets' use of those subgenres can move, too, from models of permanence and transcendence to models of portability. Poets since Horace have imagined their verses, or their books, journeying into the wider world apart from the scene of their making: a recognized verse subgenre features poets telling their work to get ready to go. Sometimes, as in Chaucer's "Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedye," such instructions appear as long poems end; sometimes they comprise freestanding poems.[52] Spenser's advice to his book at the end of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) combines promises of permanence and transcendence with advice to a humble traveler. In the first mode, his "Calender for every year . . . shall continewe till the worlds dissolution"; in the second mode, he tells his "lyttle Calender" to seek "a lowly gate emongste the meaner sorte," rather than contending with Virgil and others.[53] Herrick's several poems "To his Booke" can anticipate the degrading uses to which his verse may be put ("Torn for the use of Pasterie," for example) or else suggest that it circulates without his consent: "when I saw thee wantonly to roame / From house to house . . . I . . . bad thee goe, / Regardless whether well thou sped'st or noe."[54] Such comic poems, strewn lightly throughout *Hesperides* (1648), complement the more earnest lyrics and epigrams (also called "To his Booke") in which Herrick imagines that his verses

52. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 584.
53. Spenser, p. 154.
54. Herrick, pp. 275, 6.

will never die: "Thou art a plant sprung up to wither never / But like
a Laurell, to grow green for ever."[55] Another poem promises not tran-
scendence but near-permanent endurance: telling his book to "goe
forth," Herrick declares that it will last as long as human life—"thy
Stars have destin'd Thee to see / The whole world die, and turn to
dust with thee."[56]

Modern poets' self-conscious revisions of this "To his Booke" sub-
genre tend to conflate poems (or books of poems) sent forth into the
world with other sorts of meaning-bearing objects; many express far
greater skepticism about these objects' ability to keep their meanings
in a chaotic or challenging world. In doing so they shift from promises
of transcendence to arguments about portability. Ezra Pound's early
feuilletons to and about his own verses would seem to be exceptions:
"go to practical people," he tells his own books in "Salutation the Sec-
ond," "go! jangle their doorbells! / Say that you do no work / and that
you will live forever."[57] The combative tone, however, suggests a poet
working very hard to make himself and his readers believe what he is
saying. More credible are the young Pound of the ironically titled "Fa-
mam Librosque Cano" or the slightly older poet who asks, "Will
people accept them? (i.e. these songs)."[58] Pound famously draws both
on Edmund Waller's "Go, lovely rose" and on the tradition of poems
to one's book in the "Envoi (1919)" to *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920).[59]
Pound there instructs his "dumb-born book" to inform a singer that
Pound means to immortalize her "graces":

> *I would bid them live*
> *As roses might, in magic amber laid,*
> *Red overwrought with orange and all made*
> *One substance and one colour*
> *Braving time.*[60]

Here, Pound wants or hopes to ("would") make a beautiful singer's
performances last indefinitely, conveying her art to other times and
other readers through poetry's preserving "amber." Hugh Kenner and

55. Ibid., p. 98.
56. Ibid., p. 155. On Herrick's poems "To his Booke," see esp. Gerald Hammond,
Fleeting Things: English Poets and Poems, 1616–1660 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univer-
sity Press, 1990), pp. 287–92.
57. Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz
(New York: New Directions, 1990), p. 87.
58. Ibid., pp. 14, 83.
59. On Pound's Provençal materials generally (one source for the envoi form), see
Stuart Y. McDougal, *Ezra Pound and the Troubadour Tradition* (Princeton University Press,
1972).
60. Pound, p. 195.

others assume Pound's hopes succeed: in Kenner's foundational 1951 book on Pound, this lyric "transcend[s] for a single page" the historical wreckage strewn about the sequence, "asserting the survival of at least this song."[61]

By the end of the poem, however, Pound, or Mauberley, takes a more nuanced position about what lasts and what does not. Combining Waller's rose with the addresses to books from other old poems, Pound's poem ends up suggesting that though ideas and ideals (like Beauty) will last forever, their manifestations (like poems or roses) may not:

> *some other mouth*
> *May be as fair as hers,*
> *Might, in new ages, gain her worshippers,*
> *When our two dusts with Waller's shall be laid,*
> *Siftings on siftings in oblivion,*
> *Till change hath broken down*
> *All things save Beauty alone.*[62]

Pound's "Envoi," like the rest of his sequence, has occasioned controversy: How much of its apparent aestheticist outlook may be attributed to a discredited character named Mauberley and how much to Pound himself?[63] One need not answer that vexed question to see how hard it is for this poem—compared to the predecessors it invokes—to promise itself or its lady that it will last: the poem's promise that Beauty, in general, will reach other times and readerships ("new ages") seems more important the more Pound's sense that his words or her beauty might last forever breaks down. Pound may even remember here not only Waller's "Go, lovely rose" but the same poet's less famous lyric about the supposed obsolescence of English: "We write in sand, our language grows / And like the tide, our work

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61. Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 176.

62. Pound, p. 195.

63. John Espey, who wrote an entire book on *Mauberley*, began by noting "the continuing disagreement on . . . the relationship between Ezra Pound himself and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (*Ezra Pound's Mauberley: A Study in Composition* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955], p. 13). Donald Davie found "the Mauberley persona . . . a distracting nuisance" (*Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1964], p. 101). For Christine Froula, "Critics persist in projecting upon Pound the aestheticism to which *Mauberley* pays farewell" (*A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems* [New York: New Directions, 1982], pp. 96, 103). Yet for Hugh Witemeyer, "The voice . . . is the flexible voice of Pound himself," and the "Envoi" a "moment . . . of lyric affirmation" ("Early Poetry, 1908–1920," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira Nadel [Cambridge University Press, 1999], pp. 43–58, quotation on pp. 56–57).

o'erflows."[64] The poet's conventional proposal of permanence (for his poem, his lady, his book) gives way in Pound's "Envoi"—as in both of those poems by Waller—to a competing proposal about portability; that proposal itself ends up (by contrast with earlier poems in the same tradition) perhaps surprisingly humble about its own chances.

V

Most of the modern poems examined thus far explore or lament some limits to the apparent portability of objects, utterances, and persons as such. More recent poets try very consciously to reconcile portable and nonportable concepts of self or subject. This project may be central to American poetry of the 1980s and 1990s; each poet who undertakes it brings a differing sense of what an ideally portable self would look like and of what kind of structural or contextual dependency competes with it. A. R. Ammons's poems insist on his agency as epiphenomenal but efficacious, praising "facts of action" over facts about persons and things.[65] Jorie Graham and John Ashbery in different ways consider the self as an aspect of some shifting, and far larger, cognitive or linguistic system: the self, like the world, Ashbery writes in "A Wave" (1984), "can neither stand wholly apart nor disappear."[66] Rather than examining those poets—both of whose notions of self have been studied elsewhere—I conclude with the limited portability of selves and things in Adrienne Rich and in the younger poet August Kleinzahler.[67] These poets make appropriate places to stop, not just because they use portability in fresh ways but because they do not (as Graham does) draw directly on poststructuralist or continental philosophy: the poems examined here instead show how portability as such gives poets ways to deal with questions about identity and fixity, questions important to readers now.

64. Edmund Waller, *Poems*, ed. G. Thorn-Drury (New York: Greenwood, 1968), p. 198.

65. A. R. Ammons, *Garbage* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 54.

66. John Ashbery, *Three Books* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 210. A recent poem by Graham imagines moving a vase of flowers as an attempt to find a metaphysical fixture for the movable self: "Shall I put them further to the left / into the light? / Will that fix it, will that arrange the / thing?" (Jorie Graham, *The Errancy* [Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco, 1997], p. 1). (The flowers never get moved.)

67. On Ashbery's versions of subjectivity, see, e.g., Altieri, "Ashbery as Love Poet," in his *Postmodernisms* (n. 7 above), pp. 152–61; Vendler, *Music* (n. 50 above), pp. 224–41; and John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Relevant treatments of Graham include those in Thomas Gardner, *Regions of Unlikeness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), which includes an interview; and James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Rich's fixities are (like Bourdieu's) socioeconomic rather than (like Graham's) epistemological. Her late poetry attempts to imagine both socially constructed subject positions and individual, ethically responsible selves. Rich seeks to empower, to mobilize, readers, even while tying down actions, dispositions, emotions, and beliefs to their broad socioeconomic causes. It is thus no coincidence that Rich as much as Bishop is a poet of place: both remain concerned, Margaret Dickie observes, "with geographical details and the value they communicate."[68] "I need to understand," Rich herself has written, "how a place on the map is also a place in history."[69] Her 1983 "North American Time" admonished readers not to try to understand anyone, or anything, outside of its place and time—a poet's version of "always historicize":

> Suppose you want to write
> of a woman braiding
> another woman's hair—
> straight down, or with beads and shells
> in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
> you had better know the thickness
> the length   the pattern
> why she decides to braid her hair
> how it is done to her
> what country it happens in
> what else happens in that country
>
> You have to know these things[70]

Rich's more recent "An Atlas of the Difficult World" insists on the constancy of Rich's own self as her location and age have changed: it does so, in large part, to insist on her moral personhood, on her, and her poems', abilities to keep promises. The Pacific Coast, Rich tells her reader,

> is where I live now. If you had known me
> once, you'd still know me now though in a different
> light and life. This is no place you ever knew me.[71]

Rich's explorations of other landscapes affirm her integrity over time. "I drive inland over roads / closed in wet weather, past shacks hunched in the canyons," she writes. "These are not the roads / you

68. Margaret Dickie, *Stein, Bishop, Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, and Peace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 186.

69. Rich, *Blood* (n. 20 above), p. 212.

70. Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: Norton, 1983), p. 326.

71. Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 4.

knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching / for life and death, is the same."[72] Remembering Whitman, Rich invokes far-flung readers; the close of "An Atlas" emulates Whitman's anaphora, his sequences of pronominal invocations, and his trick of compressing for emphatic closure the last line following a set of long lines. Yet where Whitman imagined readers dispersing his work all over the globe, Rich imagines her poems as the minimal baggage permitted to refugees and insists that their transportable integrity stand for that of the readers she hopes to create:

> I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
> warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand
> because life is short and you too are thirsty.
> I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
> guessing at some words while others keep you reading
> and I want to know which words they are. . . .
>
> I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read
> there where you have landed, stripped as you are.[73]

"An Atlas" understands how people's actions and desires, including their desires to read poems, emanate from local circumstances: its consolation is partly that it understands. At the same time the poem's asserted portability suggests the migrants' aspirations to personal power and agency. It is for this reason that Rich now strives to make her poems as verbally accessible as she can: since they are bearers of solidarity and integrity, she wants them to be able to go almost anywhere.

An odder mode of reconciling parcel with force field, portable with epiphenomenal self, animates the work of Kleinzahler. Born in New Jersey, Kleinzahler lived in Quebec, British Columbia, Alaska, and Portugal before settling in San Francisco. Kleinzahler's poems often set drifting percepts beside a nearly inchoate consciousness. In the title poem from Kleinzahler's *Green Sees Things in Waves*, a man named

> Green first thing each day sees waves—
> the chair, armoire, overhead fixtures, you name it,
> waves—which, you might say, things really are,
> but Green just lies there awhile breathing. . . .

This is a joke about the fate of the 1960s, since Green is an LSD casualty; until the objects around him seem to solidify, Green can barely move. Once they do, Green

72. Ibid., p. 5.
73. Ibid., p. 26.

> starts to think of washing up, breakfast even
> with everything still moving around, colors, trails
> and sounds, from the street and plumbing next door,
> vibrating—of course you might say that's what
> sound really is, after all, vibrations, but Green,
> he's not thinking physics at this stage, nuh-uh . . . [74]

Green is not thinking physics, but Kleinzahler is: Green's LSD damage duplicates one of the central assumptions of modern physics—things are made of elementary particles, but those particles are also waves. These traveling waveforms, which sometimes—but only sometimes—resolve into solid (thus portable) persons and things, have become one of Kleinzahler's signatures. Where physicists see wave-particle duality at the quantum level, Kleinzahler evokes it in everyday sights, turning normally integral, solid, separable, and portable objects and persons into waveforms inseparable from their substrates—that is, into actions as well as objects and actors.

The ancient Chinese physicians Kleinzahler admires in another poem "explore . . . the character of the pulse / first through its resemblance to things in nature, / then through its resemblance to actions in nature."[75] We normally see a flock of blackbirds as discrete creatures, each headed somewhere. To Kleinzahler, however, "the flock of blackbirds"

> folds and unfolds as one,
> changing planes across the wind
> the way parallelograms move
> across computer screens, cooling the points
> as they turn through themselves
> driven by an algorithm
> into new shapes that bend and dissolve. . . . [76]

To describe a flock of blackbirds as a screen saver is to describe a semiportable, semisolid, wavelike, shifting thing—one which like any wave depends on its substrate (in this case, the screen, and the screen saver program). Whether it remains apparently solid or whether it dissolves into whatever gave rise to it—independent birds, wind currents, pixels—depends on the perceiver, or on chance. Kleinzahler therefore enjambs a line on 'move', where the birds are one action, then pauses on 'themselves', letting the birds multiply, separate, and stop.

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74. August Kleinzahler, *Green Sees Things in Waves* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), p. 3.

75. August Kleinzahler, "What the Science of the Ancients Told," in his *Green*, p. 54.

76. August Kleinzahler, "The Flock of Blackbirds," in his *Green*, p. 38.

The semisolid, moving flock of blackbirds and the things in Green's room which Green sees as waves model a semiportable self. This self sometimes approaches us in lyric as a thing, a coherent psyche which (in Grossman's phrase) we greet. At other times, it seems to be a formation or a position we can occupy, what Altieri dubs a "sharable psychological structure."[77] Kleinzahler uses the wave-particle duality (somewhat as Ammons uses "motion" and "action") to show how self can be sometimes a thing, movable and with integrity, and sometimes an effect, tied (as a waveform would be) to its substrate—a substrate which for Kleinzahler's character Green is sometimes his San Francisco, sometimes his damaged neurology, and sometimes his room. Harriet Davidson has suggested that Rich's "politics of location" "return . . . agency to a subject both situated and contradictory"; Rich and Kleinzahler draw (respectively) on political thought and on physics to show how things, ideas, people, and poems can be altered over space and time and yet retain their identity and integrity.[78]

These poetic models in turn anticipate, and might illustrate, contemporary theorists' responses to similar problems. Paul Jay recommends that contemporary critics turn, as Rich does, to "the space between cultural and geographic borders" in order to "find a methodological . . . space between conventional discursive borders like 'essentialist/anti-essentialist,'" and Edward Said has famously asked present-day readers to imitate "the migrant or traveler."[79] Wai Chee Dimock attempts a broader comparison among literary works, international border crossings, and the wave-particles of modern physics. For her, the works we read as literature are—like Kleinzahler's blackbirds or Green's armoire—"neither fully formed in space nor fully articulated over time"; they constitute "a class of objects that . . . fail to restrict their resonance over time," instead "moving continuously."[80] Against the sort of historicist critic whose "task . . . is to lock [one original] context into place," Dimock proposes that literary works "be seen as objects that do a lot of travelling."[81] These effects of resonance—we might call them mutable or partial portability—save literary works

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77. Altieri, "Spectacular Antispectacle" (n. 17 above), p. 46.

78. Harriet Davidson, "'In the Wake of Home': Adrienne Rich's Politics and Poetics of Location," in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. A. Easthope and J. O. Thompson (University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 166–76, quotation on p. 167.

79. Paul Jay, *Contingency Blues* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 174; Edward Said, "Identity, Authority, and Freedom," in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 214–28, quotation on p. 227.

80. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1060–71, quotations on 1065, 1066, 1068.

81. Ibid., p. 1061.

from imaginative confinement to the time, space, and cultural matrix where they originated.

As long ago as 1966, Frank Kermode suggested that literary and cultural thinkers had grown overfond of wave-particle complementarity: "In the end," he speculated, "one can imagine [that] Principle being used to establish a consonance between what is so and what is not so."[82] Globalization and its metaphors now seem inescapable, in literary studies as much as anywhere else; that term, too, can raise more problems than it solves.[83] Yet the analogies Dimock draws, the analogies which give Rich and Kleinzahler material for their poetry, may withstand these strictures, because they present themselves as analogies (rather than as philosophical explanations), and because they address, quite specifically, matters of movement through space and time—that is, of portability. The quantum analogy shows Kleinzahler, as analogies to political action show Rich, how we can live with apparently contradictory models of poems' and persons' movements in time and in social and physical space: how poems and persons both change and travel, experiencing and enduring, in Dimock's words, "duration and extension."[84]

Randall Jarrell quipped forty years ago that poetry and theory made bad partners: "The last demand we make of a philosophy (that it be interesting) is the first we make of a poem."[85] It may be wrong to ask that poets solve, analytically or discursively, the intellectual problems of their era. Poets may, however, portray those problems, providing figures, tropes, and analogies which suggest what those problems' solutions might look like or how we might recognize them. Such portrayals, for modern problems about integrity, context dependence, and agency, can take the shape of figures of portability. Notions of

82. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p 62. Daniel Albright has claimed that "Modernist poetics and Modernist physics" both use quantum concepts to reconcile "contradictory models" of things and ideas; W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Pound "teach themselves how to conceive the poem according to the wave model and the particle model *at the same time*" (*Quantum Poetics* [see n. 14 above], p. 25). For hints of quantum theory in William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, see Steinman (n. 14 above), pp. 66–67, 157–65. For a recent, valuable attack on literary thinkers' use and misuse of quantum theory, see Elizabeth Leane, "Knowing Quanta: The Ambiguous Metaphors of Popular Physics," *Review of English Studies* 52 (2001): 411–31.

83. See, e.g., Giles Gunn's introduction to the *PMLA* special issue on globalization (*PMLA* 116 [2001]: 16–31).

84. Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116 (2001): 173–88, quotation on 182.

85. Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p. 129.

mutable or partial portability—drawn from politics and from phys-
ics—allow Rich and Kleinzahler, as they allow Dimock, to say what
solutions to such problems might be. Returning to Jay's interest in
"liminal spaces" and "border zones," we might say that Rich's poems
about people in motion allow her to imagine who and what is doing
the crossing, who lives and acts in these culturally freighted zones.[86]
Altieri finds in contemporary lyric "a constant interplay between the
effort to perform or represent the self and the manifestation of . . .
dependencies and slippages"; Altieri's phrase seems to describe both
Rich's work in her Pacific Coast poetry and Green's efforts to get him-
self out of bed.[87]

"For Poetry the Immigrant," Rich has recently written, "surrounded
by her hastily-crammed baskets and bags, there is no final haven."[88] If
analogies to portable things have long found space in poems, anal-
ogies to other, and peculiarly modern, sorts of portability—from
global refugee flows in Rich's "Atlas" to electron displacements in
Kleinzahler's "Blackbirds"—now help poets think about how poems
and selves persist across time and space. The poems and parts of
poems examined here thus work alongside, and may be said to sup-
port, the efforts of recent thinkers—among them Taylor, Altieri, and
Dimock—who have tried to reimagine literary objects, individual per-
sons, and personal, ethical agency in ways which both acknowledge
and withstand the theoretical critiques to which the start of this article
alluded.[89] Rich's metaphors about global travel and Kleinzahler's
(and Dimock's) metaphor of resonant wave-particles help explain
how lyric poems still seem to offer what the poems I have been dis-
cussing describe: subjects who remain subject to change, mutable par-
cels of comprehensible strivings, constructed and partly portable
persons who manage to keep up with us as they, and we, stay on the
move.

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86. Jay, pp. 172–73.

87. Altieri, *Postmodernisms* (n. 7 above), p. 114.

88. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 233.

89. The portable person Kleinzahler and Rich, in different ways, imagine thus bears
analogies to the contingent, responsive, alterable agent Linda Marie Brooks and David
Roberts have named "the weak self," whose agency grows out of and responds to a his-
torical frame. See Linda Marie Brooks, "Alternative Identities: Stating the Problem,"
and David Roberts, "Suffocation and Vocation: History, Anti-History and the Self," in
Alternative Identities: The Self in Literature, History, and Theory, ed. Linda Marie Brooks
(New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 3–35 and 109–38, respectively.