“My Life Is Only One Life”: Turning to Other People in American Lyric Poetry After New Criticism

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citable link</th>
<th><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:40046402">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:40046402</a></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“My Life is Only One Life”:
Turning to Other People in American Lyric Poetry After New Criticism

A dissertation presented
by
Adam Nathaniel Scheffler
to
The Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
English

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
May, 2017
Abstract

Lyric poetry has the reputation of being solitary, hermetic, and focused exclusively on the experiences of the poet or first-person speaker. This reputation can make lyric poems seem self-involved and even solipsistic – uninterested in pressing social, historical, and ethical concerns. I contest this notion, and argue for lyric poetry’s social relevance, by drawing attention to the many poems written about other people. I argue that inherited New Critical ideas have guided the common false assumption that lyric poems must be solitary, and I make the case for an alternative non-New Critical kind of ‘lyric reading’ in which we pay more attention and attribute more significance to the myriad people and characters who appear in poems. I also provide a few general theoretical categories for thinking about others in lyric. In particular, I distinguish between ‘closed’ characters who don’t seem to resemble real people or to refer to real situations beyond the poems in which they appear, and ‘open’ characters who aren’t props or masks for the poet, but seem full of independent vitality, and to refer us to realistic, external lives outside the text. Finally, I argue that a generation of American poets in the 1950s and 60s broke from New Critical well-wrought solitude and autonomy by writing poems full of open characters. My dissertation examines four such poets – Thom Gunn, James Wright, Adrienne Rich, and Frank O’Hara. I explore these poets’ works in depth, taking them as rich case studies in lyric representations of others and in the complex roles others can play in lyric poems.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: That they are there!</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Lyric Character</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Thom Gunn I: Closed and Open</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Thom Gunn II: Mean Streets</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: James Wright I: The Mill</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: James Wright II: Only One Life</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Adrienne Rich: Flawed Heroines</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Frank O’Hara: A Party Full of Friends</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost I’d like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. Peter Sacks guided me through this long process with patience, warmth, and wisdom. His deeply humane scholarship inspired this project and made me believe it was possible. Stephen Burt greatly expanded my understanding of contemporary poetry. Their incredible generosity and energy have also given me a model to aspire to in my own teaching. Philip Fisher showed me the range, subtly, and power of good aesthetically-oriented scholarship; he also showed me that labels and categories, when they are used well, can help one to survey and appreciate the sheer abundance of literary treasures. Elisa New’s suggestions about how to be a better, more engaging writer have been invaluable, and I’m still learning from them. Lisa was also the first professor to show me that humor is an essential part of intelligence, and that one should never lose sight of the people who write the texts we analyze. I am incredibly grateful to have had such a brilliant and bighearted committee.

I’d also like to thank all of the family members and friends without whose support finishing graduate school and writing this dissertation simply wouldn’t have been possible: Lindsay Mitchell; Kathryn, Gabe, Samuel, Laurie, and Roz Scheffler; Dan, Dave, and Miki Donoho; Leo, Sarah, Peter, and Deborah Goldberg; Darlene Mitchell, Sherry Reames, Sue Wilson, Dave Weimer, Stephen Tardif, Tom Roberts, Jim Pautz, Gabriel Houck, Emily Adams, Jay Deshpande, Alison Chapman, Daniel Williams, Kevin Holden, David Nee, Case Kerns, Jorie Graham, Kathryn Roberts, Mande Zecca, Gabe Katsh, Hannah Waight, Rafi Rosen, Brenden Millstein, Eric Idsvoog, Ori Fienberg, Yen Pham, Jess Lucey, Adrienne Raphel, Charlie Maule, Christopher Le Coney, Rebecca Graff, Martin Reames, Julia Bruce, and Christian Carrick. Thank you all for being in my life and helping me to make it this far!
But what, without the social thought of thee,
Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?

–John Keats
Introduction: That they are there!

Lyric poetry has the reputation of being solitary, even hermetic: frequently, when new readers and students want to learn about the social world through literature they turn to plays and fiction. Poets and poems can seem aloof—so invested in private imaginative visions and uninterested in broader social phenomena that it’s unclear why non-specialists should care to read them. Many critics have amplified this impression by leaving ideas about the social out of discussions of poetry, while other scholars have directly attacked lyric for its isolation, which they often see as suggestive of a troubling disregard for historical and ethical concerns. As lyric poetry more than these other genres has become increasingly marginalized over the last century, and has come to seem increasingly difficult for even casual readers of good will to understand and appreciate, I think it’s more important than ever that we revisit the question of lyric’s aloofness. Contesting such aloofness might make poetry seem more welcoming and hospitable to readers, as well as of greater interest to contextually-oriented scholars. Since the many attempts thus far to re-examine the question of lyric’s sociality have overlooked the role of specific people in poems, this project begins by asking how interested modern American poets are not in lyric isolationism, in personas or in masks for the self, or even in riddling philosophical issues about society or about Otherness at large, but actually in portraying and describing encounters with specific tangible others.

To answer this question, four poets have come to mind who were all born between 1926 and 1929 and came of age at the end of The Second World War. Where the New Critics championed impersonality and well-wrought autonomy, these poets stressed greater personality, and struggled to open up their poems to the outside world. Where modernists such as Eliot and Stevens turned away from others—Eliot from tormented cityscapes to isolated religious poems, and Stevens from marriage to interior paramour—these poets filled their poems with outsiders from depression era Ohio, New York artists and passers-by, counter-cultural San Franciscans, and women, ordinary and famous, struggling against the prescriptions of gender. Moreover, these four poets—James Wright, Frank O’Hara, Thom Gunn, and Adrienne Rich—frequently wrote poems based on real people as if to ensure that their poems would not just have characters in
them, but would actually bear the impress of other minds. This book will focus on these four poets as emblematic of a social shift within mid-to-late 20th century American poetry away from modernism, and especially away from the aloof, simplified version of modernist poetry found in the New Criticism of the 1940s and ‘50s. In contrast to these earlier periods, this new poetry has a serious and sustained interest in portraying particular others.

This social turn doesn’t only involve writing poems with some named characters: there are, after all, people in Eliot and Stevens. But not all of these characters are equally lively or resistant to becoming mere masks and props. There is a world of difference between “De Baillhache, Fresca and Mrs Cammel, whirled/ Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear/ In fractured atoms” – or Ramon Fernandez appearing and vanishing through a single appeal – and the nuanced psychological portraits we find in Thom Gunn, or the surprisingly vital depictions of beleaguered family members in James Wright’s poems.¹ Lyric characters need not be, as James Merrill says at one point, “figures like poor Fräulein von Kulp, frozen forever in a single telling gesture” (Eliot) or “John Adams wound like a mummy in a thousand ticker tape statistics” (Pound).² They can also surprise, inspire, overtake: they can adopt a child when you aren’t looking (Gunn); make the history of art seem boring and inadequate by eating yoghurt (O’Hara); inspire regret decades after the fact by taking you on a date in a wheelchair (Rich); hold sixty-five cents in a hook and place it gently into your freezing hand (Wright). Exploring the work of my four main poets will not only help us recognize a historical turn away from more aloof forms of lyric poetry, it will also help us think about what lyric is like at its most other-directed.

Yet before I can move on to discuss period or aesthetics I need briefly to describe our method of reading and thinking about lyric poems. Although a diverse array of critics have wished to open up lyric and find social importance in it, attention to others in lyric has remained scarce indeed. Hence, we must begin by looking quickly at the reasons for this neglect and at the recent history of the common presupposition that poems are fundamentally solitary. After thinking succinctly about these questions, I will discuss the sociable, generational resistance to


both New Criticism and modernism; then, finally, I will make some observations about what characters are like in poems once they are read socially. In subsequent chapters, this book will focus on detailed readings of the role of others in Gunn, Wright, Rich, and O’Hara; what follows here is meant to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, and to set the scene for the social readings of individual poets that will follow. However, all of what follows is undertaken in the hope that it will show that lyric poetry can be as deeply interested in others as other literary genres, and that, despite its marginal status, this is especially true of the contemporary American lyric.

** Lyric Reading: A Theoretical Sketch **

“Lyric is even today the most fugitive of genres when it comes to a theory of its identity,” says Roland Greene. Daniel Albright takes it further: “a lyric is that which resists definition. A lyric is a poem in which one notices a certain shiftiness or instability, a certain slipping and sliding of things, a certain tendency to equate a thing with its antiself, a certain evasiveness of being.”

Lyric poetry has been so tricky to define that this elusiveness has in some cases become its only definition. Some critics have suggested that we should use a different term or category entirely: Mark Jeffreys, for instance, points out that the epigram is as much behind our modern understanding of lyric as the ‘song.’ Virginia Jackson has taken a different approach, eschewing definitions in favor of historicizing lyric’s elusiveness – though only while expressing decided dissatisfaction with what that history has left us. To Jackson lyric is “a persistent confusion – among verse genres, between historical genres and natural ‘forms,’ between adjective and noun, between cognitive and affective registers, between grammar and rhetoric, between privacy and

---


4 Daniel Albright, Lyricality in English Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), viii.

publicity....”⁶ Even critics supportive of the term lyric, such as Werner Wolf, describe how lyric amounts to the “inclusion of ever more forms of literary texts under one umbrella term,” so that it now stands for “most versified literature (except for the epic and verse drama) and has thus become a synonym of ‘poetry.’”⁷

Yet despite all this slipperiness and inclusiveness, the idea that lyric poetry is solitary and interested primarily in the self (not in others) is clear-cut and widespread. “The person who speaks in lyric is always alone,” says Allen Grossman.⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin famously described all poetry as asocial because “monologic, single-voiced, suppressing half of a dialogue,” and argued that “in particular, lyric poetry was non-narrative, less able therefore to bring in a thick reference to social fact....”⁹ In a similar vein, Dorothy Nielsen writes that “ideally, lyric is monologic”:

> Since it purports to encapsulate the experience of an ‘I,’ it relies on the repression of the ‘not-I.’ In other words, like the subject of language, the lyric subject arises from the difference between itself and the object... whereas narrative and drama “present the self in interaction with other characters and events... lyric, as a purely subjective form, is marked by the exclusion of the other...” The ideal lyric’s monologism suggests the self is a discrete entity that transcends the interconnections that are basic to the material realm. Furthermore, lyric’s atemporality... reinforces this drive to exclude the material realm by suggesting that the self is independent of history.¹⁰

The lyric here is “discrete”: free of others, purged of the material, historical realm, and immersed utterly in a single subjectivity. When defenders of lyric present approving versions of this view these tend to be more nuanced: Theodor Adorno, for instance, famously argues that lyric poetry is social only negatively: it is social in the very way it turns from the world to become “a protest against a social condition,” constituting “itself purely according to its own particular laws.”¹¹ Or

---


Sharon Cameron uses the notion of lyric solitude as a prerequisite for her complex account of how lyric poems fight against time: unlike “the drama, whose province is conflict, and unlike the novel or narrative, which connects isolated moments of time to create a story multiply peopled and framed by social context, the lyric voice is solitary and generally speaks out of a single moment in time.”\textsuperscript{12} And Jonathan Culler argues that apostrophe is central to lyric, but that rather than indicating an attempt to reach out toward others, apostrophe is actually about “dramatizing or making up an image of the self” as a solitary, quasi-solipsistic poetic visionary.\textsuperscript{13,14}

It would be easy to go on citing critics and scholars who take up different versions of this view. Nor is this just a recent American production: the view of poetry as isolated and single-voiced has been a recurring specter from the myth of Caedmon’s escape from the participatory monastery to the visionary barnyard, all the way to Dickinson’s “columnar self” and Rilke’s “solitude, vast inner solitude.” Yet American modernists such as Eliot took up this view by espousing that most lyrics are what he called the ‘first voice’ of poetry – the poet talking to himself or nobody.\textsuperscript{15} And aided by some of Eliot’s writings (particularly on impersonality and the metaphysical poets),\textsuperscript{16} the view of the lyric as solitary continued to grow during the New Criticism. Ideas of autonomy, irony, complexity, and unified craftsmanship ultimately compounded and solidified a view of lyric as monologic and free from contexts – such as other people. As we’ll see more clearly in the following section, in the ‘40s and early ‘50s lyric became absolute and aloof, not social and participatory.

\textsuperscript{12} Sharon Cameron, \textit{Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre} (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 22-23.


\textsuperscript{14} Harold Bloom has been seen as advancing a view of lyric as having “a secure poetic infrastructure for a transcendent self of lyric solitude” (Anne Janowitz, \textit{Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition} [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005], 7-8). Bloom has also described American poetry in particular as demonstrating the necessity for isolation by making equations between “freedom and solitude...in its best poems” (Harold Bloom, “On Solitude in America,” \textit{New York Times}, 4 Aug. 1977, 19).

\textsuperscript{15} Scott Brewster, \textit{Lyric} (New York: Routledge, 2009), 36.

I am arguing that autonomy and solitude are conflated in much of our recent thinking about lyric – that having a unified impersonal voice is a lot like having only one voice and being alone. New Criticism then helped both solidify and disseminate a notion of lyric’s solitude because of the movement’s insistence that poems are detached, well-crafted objects. To a certain extent this is how we still read: despite the generalized skepticism with which New Critical principles of intricate autonomy are treated today, poems are still often read and discussed as though they occupied an entirely separate realm – a rose garden or shadow-world where what matters most is to be found squarely within the poem itself.

Despite the weakening of New Critical stock in the decades after the ‘50s, views of lyric’s aloofness – of lyric being both otherworldly and antsocial – have persevered. Virginia Jackson cites Mark Jeffreys in describing how “lyric became a metonymy for New Critical ideology’ in the literary critical eras that emerged as New Criticism began to loosen its hold... [and that] It would be more accurate to say that lyric became a metaphor for the New Criticism, in the sense that both the genre and the critical perspective on that genre came to stand for one another – so much so that the ahistoricism attributed to New Critical close reading became

---

17 The notion that New Criticism insisted on “literature’s autonomy” and thought literature could be analyzed without remarking upon “the life of the author, the history of his times, or the social and economic implications of the literary work” is now a commonplace (Wilfred L. Guerin, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 72). As the 2001 *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* puts it, “The literary work is (pre) conceived as autonomous, highly coherent, dramatic artifact (a ‘well wrought urn’) separate from and above the life of the author and reader as separate from its social context and from everyday language” (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch [New York: Norton, 2001] 3). The New Critical approach to literature then, “rules out a great deal, including personal response, authorial intention, propositional meaning, social and historical context, and ideology” (ibid., 3). Put another way, the New Criticism “advocated ‘intrinsic’ criticism – an impersonal concern for the literary work as an independent object – and opposed ‘extrinsic’ critical approaches, which concerned themselves with such matters as authorial intention, historical, moral or political considerations, and audience response” (*Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, ed. K.M. Newton [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997], 19)). I am arguing that such a view of poetry assumes that poetry is as separate from other lives as it is from biography, history, etc. At the very least, intrinsic criticism becomes more difficult to practice on poems when they contain (often real) people who belong to a world of historical, moral, and political considerations (and of course social ones).

Admittedly, there has been some recent resistance to the idea that New Criticism prized autonomy. The recent (2012) collection *Rereading the New Criticism* followed in the wake of an MLA panel of the same title and Garrick Davis’s (2008) *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism* as part of a new effort to reconsider the New Critical legacy. *Rereading the New Criticism* looks at the movement’s unacknowledged influences on today’s critical practices, its complexities that are often overlooked by boilerplate dismissals, and the ways that it might still be of use to us today. The book also resists the idea that the movement was purely “ahistorical, apolitical, and acontextual” or even unified, and points out, for instance, that the New Critics thought autonomy was of cultural use since it was intended to encourage certain attitudes toward tradition and culture, as well as certain ethical and epistemological stances (Miranda Hickman, “Introduction,” *Rereading the New Criticism*, ed. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre [Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012], 1-21, 5, 14). Others have pointed out that New Criticism became more rigid and dogmatic as it progressed, but did not begin as a series of dogmas (Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism since the 1930s*, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2010], 33. Nevertheless, it would be hard to dispute that the New Critics sometimes emphasized autonomy, and often wanted to focus on a literary work at the expense of its ‘extrinsic’ contexts.
confused and identified with an inherent ahistoricism of the lyric genre itself.”18 Ahistoricism here has much in common with autonomy and aloofness. For instance, Dorothy Nielsen above describes lyric’s atemporality as a means of reinforcing its overall solitude and monologism. While monologism “suggests the self is a discrete entity” and excludes “other characters and events,” atemporality merely “reinforces this drive to exclude the material realm by suggesting that the self is independent of history.” Thus, even as the New Criticism began to loosen its hold, not just ahistoricism but also isolation continued to seem ‘inherent’ to lyric in a way that perhaps then influenced critics like Nielsen (and some of the others discussed above).19

And this inherited view of lyric’s automatic isolation can be seen in the way Nielsen concludes the paragraph from which I’ve been quoting: the “transcendent self of ideal lyric turns its back” on “interdependency, interconnection with others, and immersion in the material, temporalized universe,” she writes, adding that for “this reason lyric has lent itself to New Critical rather than postmodern interpretive strategies.”20 Nielsen, therefore, misses the way her understanding of “ideal lyric” might itself have been created by the New Critical interpretive strategies that then ‘happen’ to suit lyric so well.

The continued importance of solitude to contemporary lyric reading can be seen particularly in the work of Helen Vendler, an especially important bearer of the New Critical


19 Many critics have noticed that though the New Criticism has disappeared it has remained a strong influence on literary studies (Miranda Hickman, *Rereading the New Criticism*, 19). For instance, it remains important in the introductory literature classroom (*Norton Anthology of Theory*, 3), and most critics who reject New Critical assumptions still rely on close reading (Stephen Schryer, “New Criticism,” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Green et al., 4th ed. [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012] 936-37, 937). The New Critics may also have been a stronger influence on the scholars who followed them (such as the deconstructionists) then these scholars admitted (*Norton Anthology of Theory*, 1352). Close reading has been seen as perhaps the most important enduring legacy of New Criticism (Garrick Davis, “Introduction,” *Praising It New* [Athens: Swallow Press, 2008], xxx-xxviii, xxvi; Miranda Hickman, *Rereading the New Criticism*, 3). And nowhere has close reading been more often employed than in the interpretation of lyric poems. When Robert Langbaum argues that New Criticism died of its very success, so that “We are all New Critics nowadays, whether we like it or not” the very first example he uses of how we can’t avoid this legacy is that “we cannot avoid discerning and appreciating wit in poetry...” (qtd. in Guerin, *Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 115). After all, New Criticism focused on “poetic language” in particular as “semantically different from non-poetic language since it does not refer beyond itself but only functions contextually within the structure of the poem...” (*Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, 19). The poet William Logan has argued that most “contemporary poetry is written in a tradition... more susceptible to New Critical readings than to any criticism that has followed...[and that] New Criticism remains our basic critical language” (William Logan, “Foreward,” *Praising It New* [Athens: Swallow Press, 2008], ix-xvi, xv). Hence, New Criticism has remained alive in the continued tendency to read lyric poems as though they were self-enclosed and isolated from the external world. I am suggesting that reading with assumptions about social and historical isolation has also caused us to continue to read poems as though they were primarily solitary.

20 Dorothy Nielsen, “Ecology, Feminism, and Postmodern Lyric Subjects,” 130.
legacy. Vendler “introduced her 1997 book on Shakespeare’s sonnets by explaining that ‘lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its mimesis toward the performance of the mind in solitary speech. Because lyric is intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it... The act of the lyric is to offer its reader a script to say...The lyric... gives us the mind alone with itself. Lyric can present no ‘other’ as alive and listening or responding in the same room as the solitary speaker’” (Vendler’s emphases). Others in Vendler’s lyric are present only indirectly, while the thrust of lyric representation goes into the creation of solitary speech inhabitable by a solitary reader. Not only are others kept at a distance, but even the interpersonal contact between reader and poet is minimized as the reader takes up the poet’s words as if they were the reader’s own. Hence, in her own way, Vendler powerfully extends the reach of an intensified and officialized New Critical lyric solitude.

Though today this isolated, quasi-ahistorical view of lyric can be found everywhere, dissatisfactions with it are nearly as common as the view itself. First of all, it’s not always clear how to make sense of a tradition that includes Sappho’s jealousy and love triangle, Catullus’s cursing an acquaintance over stealing his table napkins, the troubadours, Sir Patrick Spens’ troubling relationship to feudal power, the love affairs and political intrigue of the poetry of the court, the Lyrical Ballads, Walt Whitman and Frank O’Hara as solitary and monologic. Even Vendler’s accounts of lyric characters sometimes feel uneasy. For example, when she argues that the true “actors” in Shakespeare’s sonnets are not “dramatic persons” but the entrances, exits, and clashes of new sets of words and stylistic arrangements, she profitably returns our attention from biographical speculations to the text at hand; however, the dark lady and young gentleman persist in their interest, and one might continue to wonder about their status within the poems.

In fact, Vendler provides an important example of the strain inherent to minimizing the importance of others in lyric. For despite providing the important caveat that lyric’s mimesis of the solitary mind can still refer to the social world, she continues to tinker with her notions about sociality and solitude as though they are not quite satisfying. Six years after her book on the sonnets, Vendler publishes Invisible Listeners, in which she worries that what she calls the

21 qtd. in Jackson, Dickinson’s Misery, 132.

“necessary solitude of the lyric speaker” has “caused socially oriented critics to conclude that the lyric lacks information about their fields of interest.” Vendler then responds by arguing that lyric can provide models of the ideal social relations to which we might aspire, and that it can do so by projecting these ideal relations onto the heavens or into another era: “In actual worldly relations... there occur countless obstacles to intimacy: age, circumstance, illness, overwork... [but an] invisible addressee or listener, by contrast, makes the poem resemble one of those ‘pure’ problems posed by mathematics, where one assumes the absence of friction, or postulates an absolute vacuum, or inscribes a dimensionless point...” Such perfected ‘mathematical’ relationships, though, don’t resemble those between recognizable humans; it seems as though this kind of social lyric still doesn’t include much of the flesh-and-blood social world. Thus, even the writings of one the strongest recent defenders of lyric solitude conveys dissatisfaction and a certain unease.

But views of solitude and autonomy often do more than merely make lyric seem to lack ‘information about [other] fields of interest’ – they are often seen as suspect, if not corrupt. It isn’t just that the lyric may be good at some things and not at others: it’s that what it’s good at may be a problem. I’ve already mentioned Bakhtin’s idea that monologic poetry, and especially lyric, represses otherness. One emphasis of the Language poetry movement of the 1980s was to attack “the autonomous, New Critical lyric” for its quality of portraying the “self as the central and final term of creative practice,” placing the poet “firmly in the driver’s seat...firmly in control of all the meaning.” This isn’t to my mind a particularly nuanced view: most poets don’t claim to be “firmly in control,” and the lyric I often seems more slippery than it’s given credit for here. As Roland Greene reminds us, “lyric subjectivity is not an achieved portrait, but an occasion for reflection on subjection at large, and lyric fiction always an oxymoron in


24 Ibid. 26.


action, tends to bring into question the very terms by which it is received and understood.” Nevertheless, I think this Language-view is only made possible by a widespread belief in lyric aloofness: as Scott Brewster puts it, the “emphasis on the self-communing, unfettered ‘I’ has laid lyric open to materialist critiques of its conservatism and ahistoricism.” Even though the lyric I may sometimes help to portray the “indeterminacy of actual language in operation” rather than establish a masterful autonomous self, the way that we approach lyric often tends to obscure or blot out the social world in which the poet was immersed and through which poem and I emerged.

The sheer number of recent attempts to make lyric poetry less isolated and exclusive help demonstrate the reality of the problem. In his recent book Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry (2003), Donald Wesling attempts to show how dialogistic Bakhtinian readings can be applied to poetry after all, allowing us to see “conflict in language, where speakers try to answer opposing viewpoints in their own statements, where our statements are never entirely our own, as we absorb and also resist influence that comes from outside.” There have also been many Levinasian-readings of modern lyric: drawing on the ‘80s and early ‘90s ‘ethical turn’ away from post-structuralism and pure abstracted linguistic play, a group of recent critics such as Mathew Jenkins, Tim Woods, and Peter Nicholls have located poetry’s social importance in the Objectivist and Language-poetry traditions. They see these traditions as charged with respect for alterity, and explore the overlaps between them and the work of Emmanuel Levinas. More recently, The New Lyric Studies has shifted the emphasis away from the Other to lyric’s relationship to communities. This shift was strongly reflected in the 2013 Princeton poetics

---


28 Brewster, Lyric, 32.


30 Wesling, Bakhtin, 11. However, this version of lyric is still solitary in an important sense: Wesling’s view is similar to Vendler’s and Cameron’s (Lyric Time 23) in that he treats the language of poetry itself as internalizing the conflict supplied by other characters in fiction.


colloquium entitled “Poetry and Social Life”: some of the colloquium’s suggested topics were: poetic communities or coteries, poetry and friendship, poetry and political solidarity, and poetry and cultural identity.\footnote{Kathryn Stergiopoulos, “When ‘I’ means ‘We’: Poetry and Social Life,” Princeton Comparative Poetics Colloquium, April 2013, Unpublished Conference Abstract.}

In fact, there has been a great deal of recent attention to the social contexts of lyric’s production and reception, and to the “question of whether the lyric is contiguous, or compatible, with other discourses.”\footnote{Hunter, “Lyric,” 80.} Jackson’s *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005) fights fiercely against the notion of Dickinson as a quintessentially lyric poet by demanding that more attention be given to the various types of poetry Dickinson produced (as well as to the social conditions and contexts in which that poetry was produced and for which it was intended). Joseph Harrington’s *Poetry and the Public* (2002) explores forgotten poets of the early 20th century whose importance we can understand only by turning away from modernist standards of judgment and looking at the ‘social form’ of poetry at that time. Harrington defines ‘social form’ here as “the historical meaning of the genre; the institutional production of the ‘poetic’ (by publishers or critics, for instance); the interpretations, reception, judgments, and uses to which readers subject poems; the identity of the poetry audience (whether represented statistically or rhetorically); the text’s physical context of presentation or publication; and the roles and meanings of different poems and types of poetry as points within larger social relationships.”\footnote{Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 2002), 4.}

Yet strangely, none of these many and varied approaches toward lyric poetry and sociality have looked at the actual people in poems – what they’re like, and what aesthetic roles they play.\footnote{We almost find this: David Baker argues that lyric should not apologize for its privacy because this “privacy is a social act” that we “share in” (David Baker, “‘I’m Nobody’: Lyric Poetry and the Problem of People,” *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2007), 197-205, 205). William Waters provides an account of how lyric power can depend on poetic address actually touching a reader, and Stanley Plumly argues that we should try to see how much other people stand behind poems (such as Tom Keats behind the description of illness in Keats’s “Nightingale”) (William Waters, *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003]. Stanley Plumly, “A Place for People in Lyric Poetry,” *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry* [Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2007], 219-224). Even Eric Murphy Selinger’s book about the American love poem (*What Is It Then Between Us? Traditions of Love in American Poetry*) sometimes focuses on poets’ ideas about love instead of on these poets relationships to their particular beloveds.} Overall, approaches to the people in lyric have been generalized or philosophical
(e.g. Oren Izenberg, Allen Grossman, Adela Pinch, Eric Selinger, *the ethical turn*); or highly contextual and more interested in the historical motivations behind artistic production than in aesthetics proper (e.g. Virginia Jackson, Rei Terada, Chris Harrington, Christopher Nealon, *The New Lyric Studies*); or more about the reader or the act of address itself than other characters (e.g. William Waters, W.R. Johnson, Jonathan Culler, Scott Brewster); or evasive, attempting to show how the privacy of the lyric is somehow ultimately social (e.g. Helen Vendler, Sharon Cameron, David Baker, Stanley Plumly).\(^{37}\) Despite the fact that so many critics have wanted to resist and contest the isolated, monologic lyric, there has been almost no attention to a fundamental way in which lyrics themselves might not be isolated or monologic. It is as if even the most anti-New Critical critics, the critics who most want to attack, historicize, or demystify lyric, have always already accepted the belief that lyric poems are still asocial in a fundamental sense: they don’t have other people in them.

As my four main poets will help us to see, this isn’t the case. Whether it’s O’Hara writing poems *while* in the presence of his friends *about* those friends *to be read later* to those friends; or whether it’s Gunn making sharply observed psychological portraits, or writing bodily poems that use “muscles and bones and fingertips to make himself a social poet”;\(^{38}\) or whether it’s Wright bearing witness to the difficult, stubbornly defiant lives of his fellow depression-era Ohioans; or whether it’s Rich addressing and communing with scientists, mountain climbers, and friends who’ve had double mastectomies, the poetry I will look at in this book is chock-full of others. Moreover, the presence of other people opens up these poets’ work to external realities: reading these poets with a special interest in their characters might demand learning about the Great Depression’s effects on rural Ohio, about queer culture and the art scene in New York City in the ‘50s and ‘60s, about the AIDS epidemic in the ‘80s in San Francisco, or about second-wave feminism and the Vietnam war.


\(^{38}\) Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2009), 208.
For in fact, these poets deliberately strove to open up lyric to external realities by writing about other people. Their very rejection of New Critical principles (and of some modernist poetry and ideas as we’ll see later on) involved writing more sociably. Therefore, these poets can be of help to us now not just because they can help us think about what lyric is like at its most other-directed, but because their own rejection of New Critical enclosure and their turn toward others, helps us see how we ourselves might re-read lyrics with more attention to the potential importance of character and less a priori assumption of isolation from all kinds of external realities. Ultimately, these poets suggest a more flexible method of reading wherein lyrics become permeable to the outside world in the very ways in which other people enter into (but are not contained by) them. Reading this way, then, gives us a powerful tool for seeing lyric as more satisfyingly porous and open to history and contingency; it also allows us to take fuller stock of the others who are present throughout the lyric tradition.

This social re-reading can also protect us from going too far in the other direction from autonomy. Social lyric reading can help us see how contexts sometimes play integral roles in the aesthetic successes of some poets’ best works, and prevent us from assuming that to focus on aesthetics rather than on history or culture or philosophy necessitates a view of lyric isolation or ‘apartness.’ For as things now stand, too often the alternative to lyric isolation is seen as a renunciation of aesthetics at large. In attempts to open up lyric to social and historical worlds and defend it against accusations of solipsism, critics have sometimes tended to turn away from looking at actual poems, looking instead almost entirely at contexts – coteries, reception histories, subgenres, surrounding ideologies. 39

---

39 Even when such attention is paid to (relatively) contextless philosophical accounts it can leave poetry in the background. Oren Izenberg’s well-known 2010 study Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life can be seen as an extreme, philosophical version of the tendency to find social relevance in poetry by withdrawing from poems. In Being Numerous, Izenberg describes and praises a tradition of Poetry (always with a capital P) interested in poems only insofar as they self-destruct to point us toward, and help us reground, a minimally-prescriptive maximally inclusive notion of Personhood. As Izenberg himself says, this tradition issues “to poetry a reconstructive philosophical imperative that is greater than any imperative to art; indeed, it is hostile to art as such” (Oren Izenberg, “Introduction: Poems, Poetry, Personhood,” nonsite.org, 22 Sept. 2011. Web. 15 June 2013. http://nonsite.org/the-tank/being-numerous). Certain poets, then, strive to “conceive of or even produce a ‘poetry’ without poems,” “sacrificing” poems “so that they can instead attest to the limitless value of the person” (Ibid.) This imperative, Izenberg argues, is an ethical response to the many 20th century threats to the individual – “above all, genocide and the specter of total annihilation” (Oren Izenberg, Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011], 2). 39 Behind Izenberg’s argument seems to lie a familiar logic: 1) poetry itself is not socially relevant 2) if we want poetry to be socially relevant we must dismiss poems themselves 3) the more thoroughly we dismiss poems themselves, the more
Those of us who love poems and yet do not want to insist on their autonomous, timeless genius, should be interested in ways of making lyric more flexible and inclusive without leaving aesthetics behind. This might include considering poems in relation to external histories, cultures, ideologies, changing ideas about poetry, coteries, philosophies, reception histories, but it should be possible sometimes to do these things while showing how they contribute to the power of the poems for which they are relevant. One powerful way we can open up lyric reading, I am arguing, is through attention to other people in poems – a method that, as we’ll see, is strongly suggested by a certain group of strong poets in the generation that broke from New Criticism. The fact that these poets depict others who were often real people makes it particularly hard to cordon off their poems from the outside world; however, even when these characters are fictional, they often point us to external realities and conditions, as well as to imagined existences, that seem bigger than the poems by which they are not engulfed or contained. This method of reading lyric poems, in other words, requires that we think of other people in poems as wild cards that can bring external social presence to bear that is fundamentally different from the mere intrusion of a new linguistic effect. Sometimes these characters will have surprising,

---

socially relevant poetry will be. But perversely, dismissing poems to defend poetry’s social importance actually grants the New Critical isolated lyric authority by overlooking the many social powers that actual poems possess.

Admittedly, some amount of the sidelining of aesthetic inquiry might be inevitable in an age where the developmental history “of social relations, of print, of edition, reception, and criticism...is taken for granted in definitions of the novel” (Jackson), and where “saying that lyric studies is a means to an end does not denigrate lyric, but only requires it to be like anything else” (Rei Terada, “After the Critique of Lyric,” PMLA 123 (1) [2008], 195-200, 195.). Yet that does not mean that the aesthetic power of poems has to disappear under the weight of historical contextualizations or philosophical abstractions. Virginia Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery seems to me an important book in its subtle attention to the historical processes underlying current prevalent notions about lyric, and in its insistence that we heed the particularities of sub-genres and the lived contexts through which particular poems became meaningful (such as, in Dickinson’s case, being included in letters that were actually intended to be read by real people). However, her emphasis on lyric as a set of readerly conventions, though useful, doesn’t provide us with a way of distinguishing between, say, the average poem we find in a literary journal and one by James Merrill. When Rei Terada praises Jackson for exposing how a lyric “is there to be read,” and then when Terada herself argues that, like Duchamp’s toilet, it’s beside the point “to narrate exactly how the particular instance [of lyric] acquires its power and quality... and closer to the truth to explain it reductively by the sheer fact of its nomination as a lyric” then I think we’ve gone too far (ibid., 197-8). It’s as though we’ve entered a circular realm where lyric isolationism and self-enclosure becomes an understandable defensive protection against the equally inflexible idea that if “lyric is a concept that will help us think it’s because it helps us think about something besides lyric” (ibid., 195) After all, the New Criticism was itself born out of a desire to protect poetry from the historical approaches that dominated the literary studies of its time by returning our attention to poems themselves (The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch [New York: Norton, 2001] 1106-7, 1351). One might ask how long the pendulum must swing back and forth between extremes before it settles down into more moderate positions. And to some extent to insist on either extreme is counterproductive: though one can see how in the turn from the linguistic to the ethical and historical, the ‘ahistorical’ lyric would seem like a particularly juicy and aggravating target, to insist on attacking it over and over is simultaneously to grant it power (as Jackson herself has pointed out). We are left with a mess: a kind of art that can neither be enjoyed nor dismissed.
interrupting, and important things to say, and sometimes they will lead a poem off course toward
a new aesthetic shape it would not have arrived at on its own.

Attention to such others (and externalities) does not mean that solitude has no place in
lyric, but rather that solitude need not be the last word. A speaker can be alone for much of a
poem only to have their solitude ruptured toward its end; sometimes the very loneliness of a lyric
is what allows the subsequent entrance of another to convey a radical sense of exteriority and
counterpressure. Attention to others also does not mean that such others are always welcome:
they are often painful, or nothing but trouble. Sometimes the very ways these others are rejected,
or fall away, die, or are transformed, will be beneficial to the poet and lead him or her to
newfound states of caution, wisdom, or sympathy. One thing that the utopian social criticism
interested in Otherness and Persons rarely takes an interest in is the way others in both life and
poetry can become doomed or cancerous. As we’ll see, others can be as important to poems
when they are harmful or already lost as when they are admirable or loved.

** Lyric Practice: A Historical Sketch **

Before we turn to a description of what others are like in lyric poems, we need to look
briefly at the 1950s to see what my four poets were resisting, and what aesthetic significance
their resistance held. How do these poets point us toward a different method of lyric reading;
how were they themselves trying to re-conceptualize poems?

By 1960, the revolt against academic, New Critical verse was in full force: the poetry
world was split into what Robert Lowell called the ‘cooked’ and the ‘raw’: “You were either
uptown like Lowell or downtown like Ginsberg; confessional or vatic; WASP or Jew.”\(^{40}\) Donald
Allen’s *New American Poetry* had just come out as a direct response to what Allen saw as the
“poetic conservatism of its Robert Frost-prefaced predecessor *New Poets of England and
America* (1957).”\(^{41}\) Movements in ‘open’ forms such as Black Mountain, the Beats, and the New

---


York school defined themselves in opposition to the formalists still writing in the New Critical style. And many poets who would never be considered avant-garde writers had or were about to switch from writing in traditional forms in rhyme and meter to free verse — often with ragged ends or in ongoing journalistic sequences.

Yet this revolt hardly happened overnight; New Criticism had been developing and gaining power since the 1920s, and after the Second World War, it had become the major arbiter of poetic taste. Some literary historians have argued that a particular American post-war zeitgeist underlay the movement’s success: for instance, James Breslin suggests that a feeling of helplessness in the new “splintered, chaotic world” led to a belief that it could all be managed by “the gentle imposition of timeless traditional forms.” America had emerged from the atrocities of the war in a far better position than ever, and there was a feeling that American capitalism regulated by New Deal reforms worked. Yet this only increased the desire for a careful, moderate art since wildness and extremity in the ideologies of both left and right had led to totalitarian rule. America’s success might be precarious, so perhaps an art that was careful, regulated, well-crafted, was what such uncertain times called for; perhaps what was needed was a “sealed enclosure... transcendent, safe....” Many would later come to view this kind of


43 For example, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, W.S. Merwin, Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, and John Berryman.

44 Ramazani, Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, xlvii.


46 Ibid., 46-7.

47 Ibid., 39.

48 There was also a practical and democratic reason for the New Criticism’s success: it provided a reading tool for students attending college on the GI bill and for the many new first-generation college students from middle and skilled working class backgrounds. These students hadn’t received the education they would have needed to have easily engaged with literary texts in other ways; New Critical close reading only required that the students think about what was on the page in front of them, to “concentrate on the text at hand without feeling that...[their] interpretive work needs the support of information about the author and the historical period when the text was composed” (Jonathan Arac, “Afterword: Lyric Poetry and the Bounds of New Criticism,” Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985], 345-355, 348; Miranda Hickman, Rereading the New Criticism, 13; Norton Anthology of Theory, 1372). A further reason for the success of the New Criticism was that it helped literary studies become a professional discipline, and allowed it to compete yet remain distinct from the sciences and social sciences (Schryer, “New Criticism,” 937).
poetry as complacent: the Allen anthology in particular would view itself not just as a rebellion against a style of poetry, but as one against the suburban and materialistic values produced by America’s post-war wealth. Such attacks may have been unfair, and too likely to conflate closed forms with conservatism, but it’s clear that the poetry encouraged by the New Criticism was not revolutionary: at least one reason for the movement’s popularity was that it gave modern poetry societal credibility, and helped defend it against conservative attacks.

By the 1950s the wildness and ambition of the formal experiments of high modernism had morphed into a single governing style, a “densely textured lyric, crammed with learned allusions, witty metaphors, startling changes of tone, verbal ambiguities – all packed tightly into the hermetically sealed space of the autonomous symbolist poem.” The “formal-fragmentation, cross cultural syncretism, polyglot assemblage, and ambitious mythmaking” of modernism were dropped. Instead of pursuing the modernist penchant for ellipsis, fragmentation, and density of symbolism and mythmaking, poetry now strived to attain economy, wit, irony, impersonality, and honed craftsmanship. David Antin quotes Delmore Schwartz’s description of how what was once “a battlefield has become a peaceful public park on a pleasant Sunday afternoon.” Antin himself speaks more acerbically of the transition from the “complex ‘hyperspace’ of modernist collage (Pound, Williams, Olson, Zukofsky) to the nearly trivial, single-dimensional ironic and moral space of Eliot, Tate, Lowell and so on.”

Most importantly, this simplified,


51 Breslin, Modern To Contemporary, 17.

52 Ramazani, Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, xlviii

53 Perkins, Modernism and After, 334.


56 As Breslin argues, the problems for young poets in the early or mid 50s were both the still-looming presence of the modernists and “that a particular phase of modernism – that identified with Eliot and the New Criticism in America – had achieved a powerful hegemony which successfully domesticated modernism” (Breslin, Modern To Contemporary, 13).
codified, New Critical poetry was on some level fundamentally solitary: essential to the dilution of initial modernist experimentation was a view of poetry as detached and aloof – hermetically sealed, autonomous, and impersonal.

Eliot himself bore some responsibility for this increase in lyric isolationism. His celebration of the ‘first voice’ of poetry, and his ideas about impersonality, irony, paradox, and metaphysical wit set the stage for the New Critics’ autonomous lyric. And Eliot would live well into the 60s, his presence obscuring that of many other modernist figures. Randall Jarrell speaks of having to contend both with Eliot’s powerful pronouncements, and with New Criticism’s exaggeration and codification of his same values. Moreover, the titanic poetry the modernists left behind and the New Critics valorized was often solitary itself. Though some modernists such as Frost and Williams wrote about others, Eliot increasingly turned away from writing about people as his career went on. Meanwhile, Stevens, Moore, and H.D. seemed more interested respectively in solitary imagination, allegorical animals and virtues, and cross-cultural mythmaking than in writing poems about particular others. I’ve already quoted James Merrill’s dismissive description of Pound’s social writing as “John Adams wound like a mummy in a thousand ticker tape statistics.”

Ultimately, the omnipresence, control, and limited range of the New Critical lyric eventually made it an easy target for a rebellion. As David Perkins writes, as “this state of affairs continued into the 1950s, the New Criticism established itself more firmly as an academic orthodoxy, and the desire to break with it became more intense.” Richard Howard called this postwar generation the children of Midas in that they would strive to lose the golden touch. But

57 Breslin, Modern to Contemporary, 14.
58 Ramazani, Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, xlviii; Wilfred Guerin, Handbook of Critical Approaches, 72; Miranda Hickman, Rereading the New Criticism, 12.
60 Of course, modernist poetry (and even the version of modernist poetry promoted by the New Critics) is infinitely more various than I can suggest here. And ultimately, the solitary nature of some modernist poems might have been less confining than the simple, prevalent idea that lyric should be aloof and self-contained.
61 Perkins, Modernism and After, 81.
what’s particularly significant for our purposes is that the resistances to the New Critical lyric mode of the 1950s sought out and embodied a more flexible aesthetic that ultimately suggests another way of reading lyric. To help expand our own method of reading and combat the still prevalent view of lyric solitude we can look again at this time – for the very thing many of the poets of this period envisioned themselves as reclaiming was a more vital and porous relationship between poetry and the outside world. As Charles Altieri indicates, after 1960 poets rebelled against impersonality and used an intensely personal voice to deal with topical materials with something like direct statement.\(^{63}\) In a famous statement, Robert Lowell claimed that poetry had become divorced from culture, had turned into pure craft, so that there now must be “some breakthrough back into life.”\(^{64}\)

In *Modern Poetry After Modernism*, James Longenbach urges us to cast a skeptical eye on this ‘breakthrough narrative’ since it cannot account for the subtleties of the careers of the best poets of the period – such as, say, Richard Wilbur who never had a ‘breakthrough.’ The narrative is also dependent upon the New Critical reading of the modernists as impersonal and hermetic (the *Waste Land*, as Longenbach points out, is not really a unified and impersonal poem). Longenbach adds that we should not simply heroize breakthroughs, and we should especially not attribute inherent conservatism to poets who write in closed forms.\(^{65}\)

All this can be true and yet the story of the breakthrough can retain a kind of generalized descriptive usefulness for a period in which so many poets switched to free verse and open forms. Moreover, the idea of the breakthrough can point us toward many poets considering the benefits of leaving lyric enclosure and isolation behind. For instance, James Breslin argues that the external world, in a sense, came to the rescue of the rebels of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s by prying the lid off the ‘hermetically sealed’ New Critical poem. Breslin speaks of “a breaking open,” “a return to the existential freshness of the world,” “the physical moment – the literal, the


\(^{64}\) Qtd. in Breslin, *Modern To Contemporary*, xiii.


19
temporal, the immediate....” He adds that the rebel poets of this period allowed “the real world to retain its independence, its life, rather than being enclosed within some metaphoric circle” and goes on:

Ginsberg’s catalogs of urban torment in ‘Howl,’ the autobiographical realism of Lowell’s Life Studies, the quotidien detail of O’Hara’s lunch hour poems, the domestic particularity of Levertov’s lyrics, the specificity of Wright’s urban and natural landscapes – all of these attest to a poetic imagination willing to acknowledge an immediate external reality that remains stubbornly other... [these poets began a] search for ways of ordering poetry that would not stifle the very movement of consciousness and independence of objects with which they were trying to revitalize poetry.

David Perkins puts it more simply: the New Criticism emphasizes the ways that poetry is a kind of artifice, “fabricated, fictitious, and illusionistic – and thus distances poetry from ‘life’...[and for] this reason contemporary American poets have rejected it.” What we have here then is a group of poets experimenting with how writing about more real world particulars – urban torments, natural landscape, lunch hours, etc. – can rejuvenate and revitalize a poetry that they have come to think of as half-dead.

Art, of course, can remain in closed forms, and yet not seal itself away: think of Ben Jonson inviting a friend to supper and lying so his friend will come, or of Catullus telling Egnatius his nice teeth are a sign he washes them with urine. Nor, again, is there any intrinsic link between closed forms and closed minds. Yet, it was important to many mid-Twentieth Century American poets to move away from rhyme and meter in order to emphasize new openness and raggedness, and therefore new continuity and dialogue with the external: “Contemporary poems create cracks, even fissures, they are heterogeneous,” Breslin writes; they remain open to “contingency, colorful bits of actual matter that resist metaphorization.” Jahan Ramazani describes how contemporary poetry’s trend has “been toward looser, more discrete, more organic kinds of aesthetic structure...[forms] more responsive to accident, flux, and history, less inwardly molded and self-enclosed...[tending to] end raggedly, in irresolution or

66 Breslin, Modern To Contemporary, 59.
67 Ibid., 60.
68 Perkins, Modernism and After, 342.
69 Breslin, Modern To Contemporary, 61.
distraction.”

The emphasis in both Breslin and Ramazani’s accounts is on how such open forms allow the external to become more than just new exciting subject matter to manipulate: all this material from the outside world – urban torment, autobiographical realism, history – actually participates in the shaping of a poem by exerting its own counter-pressures, by ‘resisting metaphorization’ and demanding ‘responsiveness.’ But, as we’ll see, no external matter demands responsiveness so strongly as another imagined person; these poets will often find their most exciting and energizing external subjects to be other people.

The poets who attend to the stubborn particularity of the outside world, however, do not simply break from the New Critics by returning to the experiments of the high modernists. O’Hara, Rich, Gunn, and Wright in particular looked beyond and around American and English modernism to alternative traditions and movements such as Dada, French and Latin American surrealism, Arabic poetry, and in particular, the social poetry of Robinson, Hardy, Whitman, Jonson, Shakespeare – and of poets writing in other languages. A well-known story claims that the strong poets of the late ‘50s returned to the principles of radical modernism before it was diluted by the New Critics; yet many members of this generation of poets were looking at models other than the major English-language modernist figures because they were engaged in something fundamentally different.

In *Enlarging the Temple* Charles Altieri describes the modernists as possessing a *symbolist*, totalizing imagination that strives to reforge culture and transform nature into

---


71 We can see this trend in Wright’s landscape sequences, Rich’s poems as journal entries or as ghazals yoking disparate fragments, Lowell’s notebooks and unrhymed sonnets, Ashbery’s emphasis on practice over product, and Gunn and O’Hara’s poems of occasion.

72 Correspondingly, we also find in the generation of the 50s and early 60s a “frequent politicizing and historicizing of art” (Ramazani, *Norton Anthology*, xlvii.). Rather than turning from politics, these poets wants to make sure their art was a responsible and responding citizen of its surrounding world.

73 I should note that not all reactions against the New Critical orthodoxy involved a turn to others. For instance, some poets rebelled by turning to the oneiric and the Deep Image, a tendency we’ll see in some of James Wright’s work. There are other stories of rebellion that co-exist and overlap with the one I’m telling here; I’m not arguing that the turn to others was the only form of anti-New Critical rebelliousness, but that it’s an important one that hasn’t yet been sufficiently recognized.

“satisfying human structures.”\textsuperscript{75} He contrasts the symbolists with the innovative poets of the 1950s and 1960s’ \textit{immanentist} desire to observe and engage with (instead of structure) common and casual experiences in their everyday surrounding worlds. Altieri’s view does not quite coincide with my own: pointing to Robert Bly’s Jungian notions about the deep image, Altieri also sees the immanentist poets as determinedly seeking out the latent numinous structures these poets perceived as being already present outside them in which the “universal – be it Being or energy or the collective unconscious – manifests itself in the concrete moment.”\textsuperscript{76} Though this description may be true of Bly, I think for other ‘immanentist’ poets and poems, the turn to casual experiences in the external world often requires no ultimate structures; instead, for these poets what is immanent actually helps relieve the need for collectivity, universality, and truth altogether.

If my four poets and others of their ilk broke from the New Criticism, then, because they saw it as demanding a dry, involuted autonomy, I think we can understand their resistance to the modernists as at least in part due to a rejection of the Brahmin, nostalgic wish for universal myths and cultures for which the poet could be priest.\textsuperscript{77} Of course, individual modernist poets and poems are invariably more complicated than this – as are any individual midcentury poet’s resistances to modernism. Nevertheless, the move away from universality helps explain the overall midcentury transition I’m describing. Altieri portrays the modernists as working “in the heroic humanist tradition,” wherein the poet is mythmaker and the imagination becomes responsible for (re)forging the cornerstones of culture.\textsuperscript{78} It is up to the modernist poet, using

\textsuperscript{75} Altieri, \textit{Enlarging the Temple}, 17.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 42-3.
\textsuperscript{77} Admittedly, these midcentury social poets did draw on Frost and Williams. Also, again, it should be noted that the modernists were not entirely free from blame in what the New Criticism made of them. James Breslin talks at length about the difficulty not only of resisting New Critical imperatives, but also about the way many of the great modernists ‘refused to die’ lingering on, and sometimes supporting those imperatives (Breslin, \textit{Modern to Contemporary}, 1-2, 13-14). Eliot obviously played a particularly strong role in this regard even though this led to weaker readings of some of his poems (Longenbach, \textit{Modern Poetry After Modernism}, 10). And both Eliot and Pound have been seen as inspiring the New Critics and becoming involved in a “cultural symbiosis” with them wherein the New Critics gained authority by using modernist ideas and in turn strengthened the caché of those ideas by spreading them across the nation’s classrooms (Miranda Hickman, \textit{Rereading the New Criticism}, 14). Hence, the resistance to modernism – or at least to some of its most famous figures – overlaps with the resistance to New Criticism.

\textsuperscript{78} Altieri, \textit{Enlarging the Temple}, 48.
anthropologists like Frazer, to find universal spiritual dramas underlying any cultural multiplicity, and thereby to create “a unified structure of images and ideas, derived primarily from the traditions of ‘civilized’ reflective societies.” Altieri, thus, is describing a modernism still in love with the dream of a unified, often Euro-centered culture: “To be preserved, culture requires men of sufficient learning and imagination to master the contradictions unearthed by the rationalist tradition and resolve them in postlogical poetic myths and values...[the] modernists’ ideal society will preserve humane aristocratic values and allow political authority to those who understand and represent those values.”

Instead of letting culture fracture and fragment, it is up to the poet to remake it and bind it together; it is no wonder, Altieri says, that so many modernist poets end up being politically conservative as their vision places “the burden on the individual to reconcile himself to collective myths and authorities.”

Altieri is not the only scholar to view English-language poetic modernism as invested in the dream of a unified culture. Jahan Ramazani describes how “Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and H.D. see the poet as playing an almost priestly role in society, amalgamating and creating myths.”

Ramazani also points out that “Eliot and Pound often satirize less cultured genres and uses of language,” a fact that implies that for these poets ‘culture’ is still something attainable, desirable, and cohesive. David Antin puts it more satirically, in his description of a through-line that runs from Eliot to Lowell: “For Eliot and for Tate, as for their last disciple, Lowell, the loss of meter is equivalent to the loss of a whole moral order. It is a ‘domino theory’ of culture – first meter, then Latin composition, then In’ja.”

---

79 Ibid., 47.
80 Ibid., 48.
81 Ibid., 42.
82 Ramazani, Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, xlvi.
83 Ibid., xlvi.
84 Antin, “Approaching the Present,” 180. Antin, though, is interested in other aspects of modernism that he sees as being more radical.
85 Again, there’s some overlap here between the Modernists and New Critics.
But whereas a poetry interested in collective myths might bemoan such a collapse of order, a poetry interested in others in-and-of themselves could benefit from it. Such a poetry might find invigorating the opposing view that though individuals may participate in shared myths, no myths are or should be truly ‘collective,’ and that on some level one’s meanings and values will be one’s own. And indeed, part of what’s new about the poets of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s is that though they are often pessimistic, even apocalyptic, about government, they are less likely to pine after some golden era, and more likely to celebrate the sheer heterogeneity of peoples and pleasures around them than were their predecessors – as we’ll see especially in the case of Frank O’Hara and his love of parties, Hollywood movies, laborers eating sandwiches, record shops, yoghurt, and modern art. David Kalstone points out that O’Hara’s colloquial range and inclusiveness were unprecedented and totally free of the ‘style of modernism represented by Pound and Eliot.’ But O’Hara was not the only representative of this celebratory, democratic presentism: “Contemporary poets [at large] seem to feel little of Yeats’s or Eliot’s revulsion toward the urban, the popular, the utterly heterogeneous,” Ramazani claims. Kalstone argues that unlike Pound and Eliot, Adrienne Rich, James Merrill, “other poets of her [Rich’s] generation,” and many “younger writers” are suddenly “no longer elegiac about history.” Instead of focusing on history and a wish for universal culture these poets turned their attention to their surrounding, multifaceted present world. Breslin, for instance, argues that the new poetry, anchored in the “sharply observed physical present,” has a “dense materiality implicitly mocking the transcendent, totalizing imagination of symbolism.”

Though in a different way from New Criticism, modernism is also a believer in totalizing systems (or is at least haunted by their bugaboo as we see in modernism’s never-ending cantos, supreme fictions, fragments shored against ruins). Both New Criticism and modernist poetry to some extent deny the ‘outside’ by trying to think in terms of self-contained fictions, whereas the

86 Kalstone, Five Temperaments, 8.
87 Ramazani, Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, xlvii.
88 Kalstone, Five Temperaments, 131. Kalstone adds that Lowell does still feel elegiac about history, which is one of the reasons I don’t devote a chapter to him here.
89 Breslin, Modern To Contemporary, 60.
rebellious poets of the ‘60s are less driven to control the meanings that they make and uncover. They are freer then to find their poetry refreshed and recharged, say, by O’Hara’s laborers feeding “their dirty/ glistening torsos sandwiches/ and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets/ on” or by his “lady in/ foxes on such a [hot] day” – freer for the very reason that these characters represent a discordant, motley crew of pleasures and concerns. The post-midcentury poets resistance to modernism then becomes an essential component of their turn to others: these others are finally allowed to bring their independent, surprising energies to bear on poems instead of being fitted into procrustean, fictional systems that precede them.

Yet when these rebellious poets opened themselves up to diverse, fractured external realities, and particularly to the others who inhabited them, they found the situation to be dire. The fearful, careful, quietest post-war years were replaced by something entirely different: by the sudden implausibility of a just, centralized culture, and by the sense that the individual had never been under greater threat. In the later 1950s America would start to seem less heroic than it had immediately after the war. Many American poets served in Second World War (as they did not in its predecessor) and wrote about it – and this would come to have a large negative effect on their perception of Vietnam. Both the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war would eventually come to make the United States look (to many poets) like a mirror image of the Soviet Union: an aggressive imperialist empire oppressing its own lower classes at home and underdeveloped nations abroad.

Yet alongside these negatives, there was also the new feeling that individuals had never been so diverse and that poets have never before had access to such diversity. More, the fact that ‘the system’ would come to seem deeply corrupt ended up making individuals and minority groups seem more important than ever. MacGowan describes how the very “trends that contribute[d] to what for many poets is the oppressive power of that [mainstream] culture, including the global reach of its multi-national corporations, technology, rhetoric, and media

---

have heightened such poets’ awareness of the distinctive features of their own origins” and has made them want to protect “a rich diversity” of cultures and traditions.\(^93\) Or as Ramazani writes, “perhaps fearing the quashing of individuality by massive organizations, bureaucracies, laboratories, and businesses spawned by the war and postwar prosperity, these writers made poetry not a space for ‘the extinction of personality,’ as Eliot put it, but for its passionate expression.”\(^94\)

In sum, the presentist embrace of the external social world coincided with an explosion of diversity and an increased awareness of the threats now amassed against the individual. The self-expressive and protective functions of lyric have already often been described: Ramazani, for instance, writes of the changes brought about by postwar demographic trends “such as globalization, ethnicization, and feminization”:

> Writers who identified with national, ethnic, or sexual groups not formerly parts of the literary mainstream were inspired by identity-centered political movements, such as in the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement and, in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement for women’s rights, gay rights, and political rights and cultural recognition for Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.\(^95\)

MacGowan also writes of how the scrapping of immigration laws that favored northern Europeans led to an explosion of writing by immigrant groups by the end of the century.\(^96\) By that time, as MacGowan and many others have noted, American poetry was anything but monolithic.\(^97\) And yet lyric did more than protect individuals and minority groups by helping them to express and consolidate their identities; what has been less noticed is the way that lyric provided a means for approaching particular others in a threatening, unstable, yet excitingly diverse contemporary world. Mathew Jenkins has described how the atrocities of the 20\(^{th}\) century

---


\(^95\) Ibid., xlvii.


\(^97\) Ibid., 29.
led to the ethical turn in poems and to exploring philosophical questions about the Other.\textsuperscript{98} However, American poetry since 1960 has also been deeply concerned with and adept at describing encounters with particular others.

This will not be primarily a historical book, and my description of this trend will have to remain general and hypothetical; moreover, my evidence for the explosion of social writing after midcentury – the actual poems – will largely have to wait for my chapters on individual poets. Yet hypothetical and preliminary as these remarks may be, we can begin to see why this period might have been well suited for an outward social turn: and this is not just because poets were trying to break through the New Critical bubble and found new invigorating yet precarious diversity all around them. This social turn also occurs because as these poets took stock of their new world – a world drastically different from the one inhabited by earlier poets in the tradition – they came to recognize that other people were a good portion of what was left.

In \textit{Enlarging the Temple}, Altieri defines \textit{nausea} as the feeling of the world’s external self-sufficiency, which mocks man’s need to project meanings onto it. We can conceive of the poets of late 50s and early 60s as breaking away from both universality and autonomy and entering a radically ungrounded world wherein perceptions of numinousness often recoil on the poet as his or her own narcissistic and unjustified projections.\textsuperscript{99} In older incarnations of lyric, Nature could be seen as alive and responsive;\textsuperscript{100} or one could address or try to attune oneself to the will of a God or gods; or one could rely on the timeless value of one’s culture; or, as we’ve seen with the modernists, one could aspire to remake such a culture. Yet for many poets in the ‘50s and ‘60s these were no longer real possibilities. Altieri also writes that “when the poet resists the norms of popular culture and finds no alternatives in its traditions, he has no referent, no norm for the validity of his visions except their effects on his own life and on the relationships his poetry can establish to others and to Being....”\textsuperscript{101} Yet if poets no longer want to remain

\begin{footnotes}
\item[99] Altieri, \textit{Enlarging the Temple}, 32.
\item[100] Or at least not unfeeling and threatened.
\item[101] Ibid., 44.
\end{footnotes}
focused on the self, and if some idea of numinous Being is also not so readily available, then one clear and dependable remaining source of value and energy becomes the others surrounding them – the people whose ways of making meaning have never seemed so different from their own, so pleasurable, exciting, threatening, and fragile. Whereas Modernism wanted individuals to fall in line with communal myths, and the New Criticism wanted to turn others into words and to discuss even plays and fiction in terms of language patterns, the generation of poets born in the late 1920s turned to others as revitalizing bearers of interior lives, vitalities, and stories that could be important as their own. This social turn was not just another instance of the outward turn that Breslin describes: more than just turning outward to the physical world, it requires turning to the minds and lives that conceive of that world differently.

It is no coincidence, then, that in the 1950s American poetry took over some of the functions of fiction – and of the short story in particular. For instance, Robert Lowell famously drew on Chekhov and Flaubert in order to write *Life Studies*. And Thom Gunn, making the case that poetry at midcentury had become too self-absorbed, and had lost ground to fiction, argued passionately that poetry needed to wed lyric intensity to a quasi-novelistic analysis of human character. Yet despite the fact that David Kalstone and others have drawn attention to this turn to fiction, there has been as little attention paid to the turn toward particular others as there has been to the role of others in lyric at large. Robert Von Hallberg has pointed out that the shift “away from the modernists as models” involved poems being written about family subjects, but this observation is unusual. Yet in the midst of traditional poets bearing forward

---


104 Ibid., 41.

105 The reason that ‘Confessional poetry’ as a category is not of special interest to this project despite the Confessional penchant for sometimes writing about others (e.g. *Life Studies*, or Plath’s “Daddy,” or Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*) is that such poetry can foreground the act of confessing itself over its subjects. Charles Altieri has even described confessional poetry as solipsistic (*Altieri, Enlarging the Temple*, 60); in a confessional the emphasis is, after all, on the sinner not the priest. That said, some of the poetry considered Confessional is obviously important for my topic and will be discussed here.

the standard of New Critical autonomy, and avant-garde and Language-poets concerned with eschewing traditional representation altogether, more and more important poets were leaving solitude behind. In the midst of Confessional self-interestedness, Neo-confessional affirmation of minority identities, and ethical attention to The Other and to Poetry in general, we find a golden age of poems about particular others, often real people. We will see this in the work of my four main poets. And we also glimpse this in the work of many contemporaries and inheritors: in the work of Robert Hayden, James Merrill, Richard Wilbur, Randall Jarrell, Allen Ginsberg, Louise Gluck, Robert Hass, Sharon Olds, Frank Bidart, C.K. Williams, Denis Johnson, Rita Dove, Larry Levis, Tony Hoagland, Bernadette Mayer, Albert Goldbarth, Henri Cole, Ted Kooser, Ellen Bass, Yusef Komunyakaa, Sharon Olds, Stephen Dunn, Ellen Bass, Dorianne Laux, Jeffrey Harrison, and Robin Becker – and in younger poets such as Bob Hicok, Terrance Hayes, Todd Boss, Ross Gay, Mathew Dickman, and Moira Egan.

As we saw in Breslin’s description of the need for a revitalized lyric, and glimpsed in the idea that other people can become both resistant and unusually invigorating subjects, what is at stake in this social turn can be thought of in aesthetic terms and not just ethical or socially-responsible ones.\(^\text{108}\) In *The Idea of Lyric* (1982) W.R. Johnson describes a Romantic and post-Romantic drift away from lyrics that address a “you,” or concern themselves directly with their audience. Instead, Johnson argues that increasingly we find that “the audience has vanished,” and that it has been replaced by “the isolation, the self-sufficiency of the lyric I.”\(^\text{109}\) This transition, according to Johnson, culminates in modernism; Johnson suggests that T.S. Eliot’s promotion of his ‘first-voice of poetry’ – the poet talking to himself or no one – helps cement it.

Johnson does not make my argument exactly; focusing on poetry’s need for an audience, he describes how other addressees in poems become metaphors for readers or listeners. However, his criticisms of the self-sufficient lyric suggest that one need not be a literary historian or Language-poet in order in order to object to it. Johnson argues that the

---


\(^{108}\) Though obviously to some degree the aesthetic is inextricable from the ethical.

“impersonality [re: Eliot] that has increasingly become the characteristic” of lyric in modernity ultimately leads to less-satisfying poetry.\(^{110}\) He begins with the example of what he calls Mallarmé’s “tortured gnosticism... a litany of impotence, futility, isolation, despair.”\(^{111}\) Of course on some level everyone is alone, Johnson says, but what “is terrifying here [in Mallarmé] is that the dynamism and the dialectic, the rhythms, of identity and of living have ceased utterly to function, and the effort to know one’s self and to live one’s life, the effort to try for joy and communion with others, is totally rejected.”\(^{112}\) Despite this, Johnson admires some of Mallarmé, and he moves on to attack Gottfried Benn as more purely representative of the undesirable, self-obsessed lyric he’s describing:

In this fraudulent pure poetry (wandering monads muttering to themselves), it is very seldom that we meet a You of any kind, nor are we likely ever to encounter an authentic I. And that means, almost inevitably, that these epigonic poems are possessed and feed on an intellectual sentimentality; they are sorry, in a way, for alienation, for being alone. So, they look for genuine emotion, for the content of their discourse, and what they find is their feelings about writing poetry or, rather, about not being able to write poetry. Now no one is talking to no one about nothing.\(^{113}\)

When lyric completely closes itself off to the outside world it becomes a pale, unpleasant and unhealthy proposition for all involved. Johnson concludes that this modern lyric “remains an essentially unsatisfactory genre... [as the] absence of a real audience and the failure of performance engender an anxiety, a kind of bad conscience, a sense of the poet’s irrelevance, impotence, and unreality....”\(^{114}\)

Though Johnson’s main suggested remedy is that lyric should again focus on audience and address, he also briefly suggests that poetry should turn toward immediate external realities other than the reader. For instance, Johnson describes how Baudelaire and Cavafy resist sinking into the morass of lyric self-obsession through their “concern for, their obsession with, their love

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{112}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{113}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 16.
for, realities outside them.”\textsuperscript{115} This concern doesn’t prevent them from being lonely or from writing poems about loneliness, but ultimately “safeguards them against the bad solitude...for unreal transcendencies, unreal beauties...Solitary though they are, loners through they are, Baudelaire and Cavafy are ‘capable of entering into partnerships’...with the worlds outside them.”\textsuperscript{116} In a similar vein, Johnson argues that Yeats escapes from the “crystal bondage” of the isolated lyric through an insistence on the reality of his experience (e.g. by emphasizing energy and action – saying I run, I pace, I stalk).\textsuperscript{117}

Johnson’s briefly suggested course of action here is, in other words, reminiscent of James Breslin’s description of what the rebellious post-midcentury generation was up to. And Johnson even pauses to take notice of an outward turn in late Williams, and many of his followers:

[Williams] was shifting back, in his final volumes, from pictures to pronouns and identity and to their discourses...the poet is, again and again, an I speaking, singing to a You... In the most vital of his followers, most especially in Allen Ginsberg [b.1926], this trend continues, and in the work of such diverse poets as Etheridge Knight [b.1931] and Adrienne Rich [b.1929], attains something of the passion and precision that is normal for classical lyric. (By \textit{classical} here, I mean not only the lyric of Greece and Rome, but of T’ang China, of Persia, of Arabia, of Provence...) (My bracketed insertions).\textsuperscript{118}

All the poets Johnson is speaking of here, with the exception of Williams, are from the post-New Critical generation; Johnson is noting a transition “back” to a healthier, passionate lyric that is outwardly directed. And this outward direction is not just toward readers (\textit{Yous}): immediately following the above passage, Johnson goes on to laud poet and critic Josephine Miles for her dismissal of the “poetry of the snapshot.” Miles, Johnson continues enthusiastically, has called for more poems about people, and complained that there are not yet “a great variety of complicated live characters” in contemporary American poetry.\textsuperscript{119} Johnson concludes by saying that Miles’ words are further evidence of a “thaw” in the postwar generation, one “of melting

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 11.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 16.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 22.
\item \textsuperscript{119} This is a notion I want to resist, for I think it’s more accurate to say that there hasn’t yet been enough attention paid to such poetry for it to be easily visible.
\end{thebibliography}
snowmen [Stevens] and of swans [Mallarmé] released from their crystal bondage” (my brackets). 120

Breslin and Johnson, then, both describe the revitalizing aesthetic importance of the late ‘50s turn outward. Nor is Miles the only American poet-critic of the postwar period who views the lack of characters in lyric as an aesthetic problem, a problem with poetry’s ability to satisfy as an art form. Randall Jarrell’s 1951 review of late Wallace Stevens is an unusually eloquent, yet emblematic example of its period’s resistance to isolated lyricism. I have thus far focused mostly on T.S. Eliot as my avatar of solitary modernism since Eliot initiated the New Critical focus on impersonality, and also since Eliot’s vision of the poet as mythmaker sometimes led him away from considering other people in-and-of themselves (instead these people often become emblematic of the failures of modern culture or the need for its renewal). Yet nevertheless, for at least the first half of his career – from “Portrait of a Lady” to the Cockney story of Lil and Albert in “The Waste Land” – Eliot sometimes portrayed tangible flesh-and-blood characters – whereas Wallace Stevens’ poetry often seems utterly private, as though it were written by his solitary snow man. Indeed, Stevens’ solitude is extreme enough that an entire book has been written in criticism of it: Mark Halliday’s 1991 monograph, Stevens and the Interpersonal. Nor was Halliday the first person to remark negatively on Stevens’ solitude: Thom Gunn anticipated much of Halliday’s critique by writing that “Stevens lives in an inanimate universe where only he is human.” 121 In fact, just a quick look at Stevens – with his interior paramour, and his famous dismissal of the importance of the reader 122 – again suggests that it isn’t always a New Critical projection to find isolationism and impersonality in the modernists.

It is this penchant for self-isolation that Jarrell draws our attention to in his review of some of the late poems: “It is the lack of immediate contact with lives that hurts his [Stevens’]

120 Johnson, The Idea of Lyric, 22.

121 Qtd. in Joshua Weiner, “Ladd’s Hill to Land’s End,” At The Barriers, 126.

122 For instance, Stevens famously said to a colleague that it doesn’t “matter if that colleague understands “my poetry or any poetry...It’s only necessary that the writer understand it” (Qtd. in Helen Vendler, Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984], 3.)
poetry more than anything else, that has made it easier and easier for him to abstract, to philosophize, to treat the living dog that wags its tails and bites you as the ‘canoid patch’ of the epistemologist analyzing the world... it is fatally easy for the scale to become too small, the distance too great, and us poor, dishonest people no more than data to be manipulated...”

Jarrell’s remedy, like Johnson’s, and like Breslin’s, is to start allowing the external to remain so: to let it revitalize in its resistance to incorporation rather than striving to abstract and control it. The consequences of failing to do here are similar to ending up with a stultifying art (Breslin) or being trapped in a depressive void (Johnson): they are to pursue an art that lacks essential vitality – that is beautiful but inanimate:

[Stevens needs to be] possessed by subjects, to be shaken out of himself, to have his subject individualize his poem.... [He has] only faintly and intermittently the dramatic insight, the capacity to be obsessed by lives, actions, subject-matter that could have broken up the habit and order of age... [late Stevens is] disastrously set in his own ways, a fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself – the best marble but, still, marble.

Again, as in Breslin and Johnson, we find the idea that the specificity and reality of subjects can resist the poet, and can perhaps lend their own essential, counter-shaping energies to the making of poems. Perhaps turning to other people in particular (“It is the lack of immediate contact with lives that hurts his [Stevens’] poetry more than anything else”) can provide the ‘shaking out,’ ‘breaking up,’ and ‘freeing’ that are so badly needed.

We can glimpse in Jarrell’s conclusion to this 1951 article, the fervor of the poet-critic’s struggle not only with Stevens’ modernist-legacy, but with New Critical autonomy as well: “there is nothing a successful artist needs to pray so much as ‘Lord don’t let me keep on believing only this; let me have the courage of something besides my own convictions; let me escape at last from the maze of myself, from the hardening quicksilver womb of my own characteristicalness.”

I don’t believe it’s coincidence that several years later Jarrell will

---


124 Stevens’ poems often do have characters, but, as Halliday and Jarrell both point out, these characters often seem like abstract propositions, data, straw men, or masks for the poet himself. In essential ways, Stevens is most often alone.


126 Ibid., 146.

write his famous “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” that describes animals being “trapped/
As I am trapped, but not, themselves, the trap,” and that ends with a prayer, “You know what I
was,/ You see what I am: change me, change me!”128

Lyric Character

In their vivid demonstrations that lyrics need not be aloof, and in the satisfying, even healthy antidotes to excessive self-involvement they provide, the post-New Critical poets point us toward a method of reading that is in turn healthier and more satisfying. This is a method in which we regard others in poems as potentially of radical importance in their abilities to gesture beyond their poem to the external world and participate in the shaping of poems alongside the poet or speaker. But I have not yet shown how characters perform such gesturing and participating. Nor have I yet articulated what ‘character’ in lyric might amount to: once we do start paying greater attention to the people in poems, we might ask, what do these people turn out to be like? What kinds of people make their way into lyric poems? Only after answering these questions can we see whether these others really bring enough independent presence or externality to bear so as to counteract the solitude and autonomy so many readers have found in lyric. We also need to ask these questions to see if such poetic characters are importantly different from ones in fiction: after all, we’ve seen that many post-New Critical poets turned to prose fiction. Is it possible for poetry to have characters without becoming like prose; can we read poetry for character without reading it in the same ways as we read short stories or novels? Ultimately, the detailed readings of poets in the following chapters will make my best case for a kind of ‘dialogic’ lyric in which the characters participate in a poem’s emerging shape even if they don’t participate in a literal dialogue. However, my hope is that the following remarks will set the stage for us, and provide us with some ideas and terms for the readings that will follow.

In *Poetry’s Touch*, William Waters writes that “my interest is not in asserting, much less proving, that all the diverse texts I examine are members of a single generic class, but rather in asking what reading is like if we take them that way – take all poems as, in a broadly intuited way, instances of something called ‘poetry.’”¹ In a similar vein, I want to assert that if we read those poems now considered lyrics with a newfound attention to the people who turn up in them,

---
¹ William Waters, *Poetry’s Touch*, 16.
and with a new open-mindedness about their potential importance, we end up with a kind of ‘character’ categorically different from what we find in fiction.  

Granted that we’ve been trained to call certain poems lyrics, and that the idea of lyric has a history, we can still notice some important patterns in what that history has left us. While acknowledging the reality of hybrid genres, lyric essays, and every other kind of exception, I think that the loose definition of a lyric poem as ‘a shortish, musical poem where narrative isn’t the main point’ is still crucial here. For it is the musicality or lyricism of lyric that produces a unique sort of character wherein it is freed up somewhat from the reliance on sequential time (as in fiction) without being freed from time altogether (as in portraiture).

Lyrics, as we frequently understand them today, may often contain narrative and discursive elements, but can still be usefully understood via song or Stevens’ notion of the poem as the cry of its occasion. We often find in lyrics some idea of aboutness, some intensity of compression, overflowing, or summing up that enacts meaning as pleasure even if it’s very painful (e.g. Celan’s “black milk of daybreak”). This intensity, of course, requires careful thought and skepticism, as we are constantly asking ourselves – consciously or unconsciously – on what terms we will accept a poem and permit ourselves to be moved by it. It is this skeptical, even deconstructive impulse just as much as the absence of instruments and singing that separates lyric poems from pop songs, just as a comparable skeptical impulse directed toward stories separates Alice Munro from the plot of Grey’s Anatomy.

One can certainly find other impulses than careful singing in lyric poems, and our understanding need not be hard and fast: Mark Jeffreys, as I’ve mentioned, has demonstrated lyric’s debt to the epigram; some lyric poems might be hard to distinguish from narrative ones; and some short stories or flash fiction hard to distinguish from poems. Nevertheless, the emphasis on song is useful in helping us to perceive a unique set of rules – a different physics – at work on character. Admittedly, this physics overlaps with the one at work on minor characters

---

2 The discussion that follows will be theoretical, and will attempt to describe some important facets of such ‘character’: the post-New Critical generation points us toward the importance of others in lyric reading, but now we must examine and think through what this might involve.

3 That this character will in turn refer us beyond the poem to the contexts that may alter our ideas about the poem’s characters is an invigorating rather than hindering paradox.
in novels and on characters in short fiction; all characters in lyric are minor in the sense that they are abbreviated – reduced to a few strokes, appearing and quickly vanishing. And both lyric characters and truncated fictional ones often tend toward distortion; one can make profitable comparisons between people in poems and the grotesques of Sherwood Anderson’s short stories in *Winesburg Ohio*, or even between poetic characters and the Kasbeam barber in *Lolita* who appears for one sentence only, talking of his thirty-year-dead son’s skill at baseball while spitting into the back of Humbert Humbert’s neck. Yet though there is serious and important overlap between compact characters in prose and in poetry, the morphings and transformations of characters in poems tend to be of a different order.

Daniel Albright, a crucial thinker on this topic, describes these transformations in detail. Distinguishing lyricality from realist prose, Albright defines the former as a mode “through which the reader becomes aware of the illusion of music beyond the sense of language.” Albright then looks carefully at different types of poems about others and in each case discovers dramatic transformations. Examining biographical poems such as Auden’s sonnet on A.E. Housman, Albright argues that these “tend to present not a clear portrait but a shrunken oblique thing, or a corpse, or a cloud.” Looking at odes – such as Ben Jonson’s ode to Cary and Morison – he notes that “one can learn little of Cary and Morison except that they were friends, and noble,

---


5 There is particularly significant and interesting overlap in America between closed lyric characters and the ‘grotesque’ characters of the stories of Sherwood Anderson, Denis Johnson, Flannery O’Connor, and others. Frank O’Connor in his 1963 book *The Lonely Voice* argues that the short story, unlike the novel, is often about isolation and missed connections, and thrives off of describing what he describes as disconnected, “submerged population groups”: “tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, spoiled priests...” (Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* [Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2004] 16, 20). O’Connor goes on to claim that the short story in the United States has been so successful because this country is “largely populated by submerged population groups...[and full of the] American sweetness toward the stranger, which exists side by side with American brutality toward everyone” (ibid., 39). Thus, it might be worth asking if lyrics and short stories are more like each other in America than they are in other countries. This and other questions about the overlaps between characters in short fiction and lyric poems are beyond the scope of this introduction, but certainly worth keeping in mind as this book proceeds.

6 Albright is one of the few critics I could find who theorizes about lyric character in any detail.

7 Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, ix. Albright looks mainly at lyric poems, but is interested in lyric primarily as an adjective, and so discusses some prose as well; I will discuss the consequences of this for my argument shortly.

and that one of them is dead.”

9 Or considering epitaphs, Albright quotes Wordsworth’s idea that the epitaphic subject must be seen as “a tree through a tender haze or a luminous mist, that spiritualises and beautifies it”; or, as Albright puts it, the epitaphic subject must be “indistinct, oceanic, half-absorbed into the final receptacle of the human race.”

10 Finally, looking at love poems Albright argues that the image of the beloved “perfects itself by becoming blander, more polished and artificial, less memorable, until it is at last only a celestial vapidity, a Chlorinda or Phyllis whose feet have never touched the earth.”

11 Throughout, Albright suggests that the musicality of lyric is the source of these transformations. For Albright, lyricality is kind of a non-referential musicality that has “only internal relations...[and] tends to treat the objective world as something inherently unstable... not especially real...[so that] many lyrics describe processes of metamorphosis comparable to chord progressions in music.”

12 Albright goes on to argue that the mutations and transformations of character in poems are so essential that they can be divided into two types. They are either governed by ‘Ariel’ or ‘Proteus’: that is, they tend either toward permanent once-and-for-all crystalline transformations, or toward continual mutation, continual slidings and shiftings. In his discussion of love poems he remarks:

The beloved who turns into a palace or orchard is exactly equivalent to the dead poet who turns into a flower or star; either transformation is governed by Ariel. The poet who mutates his beloved in Proteus fashion does not assign to her a single fixed image but instead celebrates her resistance to fixity, the waywardness of charm that is ungraspable as cloud... Corinna, as Herrick imagines her, is but a shimmer of dew....

13 Yet whether a character is a flower or a star or a cloud or a shimmer of dew, it seems that he or she is hardly a person. Albright concludes, that inhumanity is the “model for the presentation of people in lyric poems: people distend into featureless spheres, contract into stars, are brought to a fever of intensity, become governed by the rules of prosody and metaphor, not of biography and

---


10 Ibid., 179.

11 Ibid., 210.

12 Ibid., x.

13 Ibid., 212.
chronology.”

For Albright, lyric society ends up consisting “not of responsible workmen and farmers but of kings, fools, freaks, fetuses, idle shepherds, and the mighty dead.”

But how can such morbid and ethereal figures – zombies, stars, and spheres – hope to counteract solitude and self-involvement? To answer this, I think we have to see Albright’s account as representing only one of two poles of lyric character: what I will call closed character. Here character is enclosed, swallowed up by art, and barred from keeping up any correspondence with the world beyond it. At its extreme, and as Albright’s description suggests, closed characters become nonreferential creatures of pure music, pure verbality: “Insofar as the embodied lyric manages to constitute its own world instead of referring to our world, it is proper for this domain to be populated not with human beings like ourselves, but with technical figments, half-personifications of its structural attributes, King Rhyme, Queen Meter, various attendant vowels and consonants.”

In other words, the extreme of the closed pole of character in lyric poetry returns us to something like New Critical autonomy (“its own world”) in which characters eke out a meager existence as props or figures of speech. Wallace Stevens’ characters, for example, can be seen as quite closed for though his poems are full of names, the speaker mostly appears to be alone.

Here is Albright again:

Because the personages found in lyric poems tend to be few in category and only weakly individuated, we may inquire whether these personages may not all reduce to a single being, possibly to be identified with the poet himself. We have already seen that the elegist and the elegized at times become consubstantial, and in Spenser’s Astrophel the poet and his beloved are conflated into one flower, attain union in death; so there is reason to speculate whether the characters in the ideal lyric would consist only of nebulous drifting manifestations of a single poet.

---

14 Ibid., 164.
15 Ibid., x.
16 Ibid., 26.
17 In Stevens and the Interpersonal, in fact, Mark Halliday describes the various techniques that Stevens uses for distancing himself from the people who do appear in his poems. According to Halliday, these characters merge with others, or blur so much as to lose individuality, or are dwarfed and viewed from a great distance, or are fatalistically foreseen as already dead. These techniques sound a lot like Albright’s closed lyrical transformations (Mark Halliday, Stevens and the Interpersonal [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991], 23).
18 Ibid., 219-220.
A poetry made up only of very closed characters is a “nebulous” and solitary poetry: we have almost in fact returned to the conditions of Johnson’s solipsistic nihilism since Albright’s lyrical society exists within “a half-world or metaworld where there exists no author, no reader, no commonplace earth, only a writhe of feelings and notions, sensations attributable to no one in particular.” As in Johnson, the disappearance of all vital others even makes the lyric “I” seem to vanish. And as in Jarrell’s depiction of Stevens, closed others lead us to a world of death, where instead of meeting another person we meet a “shrunk oblique thing, or a corpse, or a cloud.” And Albright admits that his lyrical transformations are deathly, harmful: “Every lyrical movement toward stones and statues is, of course a movement toward death...[has] a whiff of the grave.” It is only the sheer diversity and pyrotechnics of Albright’s transforming magics, and the verbal relish he takes in describing them, that keeps his ‘lyrical society’ from seeming like a kind of hell. A poetic oeuvre composed only of very closed characters ends up emulating the disappointing, problematically isolated lyric we were trying to avoid.

Yet closed character is no straw man; Albright’s depiction captures something crucial about lyrical society. In addition to the plentiful examples he provides of characters mutating within poems, we might think of copious poems where the figures seem as though they were selected because they were never quite solid, present, or whole: these are strangers, children, the unborn, the dead, people in dreams, the mad, the deformed. And yet, Albright begs the question by determining that the lyrical is deathly and solipsistic only after having already defined the lyrical as non-referential and discrete. Focusing on lyricality as a mode leads Albright to try to

---

19 Ibid., ix.
20 Ibid., 171.
21 For instance, Wordsworth’s poetry is full of both kinds of such figures. Just a cursory look leads us to Lucy turning into a violet half-hidden from the eye, then into a flower nature takes back into herself, then into a spirit reclaimed by nature to run alongside it, then into a floating cloud. Or we find Mary Hutchinson in “She Was a Phantom of Delight” remaining a woman “yet [becoming] a Spirit still,” “A dancing shape, an Image gay” (William Wordsworth, William Wordsworth: The Major Works, ed. Stephen Gill [New York: Oxford UP, 2000], 292-3). We also meet a deaf man, an idiot boy, other dead children, and a leech gatherer like a “huge Stone” (ibid., 262). Albright describes Wordsworth’s poems as made up of characters “half reasborbed into the imagination’s mist... [for example, the] many children in his poems, all trailing clouds of glory, [who] have of course not quite congealed into humanity...” (Albright, Lyricality, 183). As the leech gatherer’s head and feet bend together through extreme old age, he also becomes transparent: “the reader can see through him mountains and pools and streams; and so lyrical society shows itself to consist of characters who flatten and heave themselves into all manner of inhuman shapes” (ibid., 184). Speaking more generally, Albright insists that “If we examine the personages found in English lyrics over the course of the language, we find that most of them are indeed dead, or infantile, or frigidly rural, or anonymous, or nothing but names” (ibid., 171).
extract the most intense moments from poems, and to claim implicitly that only these parts of lyric poems are actually lyrical. He goes out of his way to say that the conversations at close of day “among grey/ Eighteenth-century houses” in Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” Shakespeare’s “small Latin and less Greek” in Jonson’s poem on Shakespeare,22 Keats’ sensitivity to bad reviews in Shelley’s elegy, and Yeats’ being silly like us and living in a parish of rich women are not lyrical descriptions. He writes, “as we have seen, dead people are appropriate subjects in lyric poems...It is only the wide middle-ground of personae – agreeable, convincing representations of recognizable human beings – that we find unlyrical.”23

Yet we could also imagine a version of the lyrical, or at least of lyric poems, wherein convincing representations form an essential part of what is aesthetically successful about these poems’ closed transformations. That is, we could imagine that the humdrum encounters and “polite meaningless words” in Yeats’s poem are part of what make the later hardening to stones moving; that Shakespeare’s transformation into a constellation in Jonson and Keats’s into a star-soul in Shelley gain strength because of their earlier glimpsed humanity; and that Yeats’ gift would have been less convincingly extraordinary if he weren’t also silly and vulnerable to “physical decay.”24 Songs are not always separable from the ‘prosaic’ and referential – and nor are lyric poems if we take them in their entirety. So what if those characters who undergo closed lyric transformations in fact still refer outside themselves, and gesture toward imagined lives? What if most closed characters are not at the extreme end of the closed pole? What if such purely closed characters are in fact quite rare?

I will go on to argue that at the other end of the spectrum from the closed we find the open pole of character, which amounts to sheer externality: independent lives glimpsed through, but by no means contained by, the page. I am riffing here on E.M. Forster’s notions of round and flat, but also thinking of the appeal of open forms to my post-New Critical generation, which often saw these forms as being fissured, incomplete, and continuous (rather than masterful and


23 Albright, Lyricality, 235.

enclosing) and as thereby permitting their objects independence. When lyric characters move toward the closed end of the spectrum, they drift toward alienation, encapsulation, and mutation – they become as faint as the dead, abstract as beams of light, “rich and strange” as King Alonso in Ariel’s song. But when they proceed toward the open end of the spectrum the compression and intensity of lyric makes them more like lightning glimpses of lives and vitalities that lie beyond the page, whose radical fullness, and difference from the poet, can provide a shock of wisdom or ecstasy – a displacement, a driving out from the self. It’s easier for a character to resist enclosure when we view them as a real person, since we are accustomed to taking real people seriously, and since they may often allude to stories we already know (as does, say, Robert Hayden’s version of Frederick Douglass). Yet open characters need not be real: fictional characters can still point us toward actual realities, and also, as several scholars have shown, on some basic level our brains don’t distinguish between real and fictional persons. Such fictional characters can open up by gently courting our interest and lingering in mind after we turn the page, or by demanding a reckoning with their imagined being, filled with “the spirit of mutiny” (Forster).

Put simply, at their extreme, closed characters lose the ability to refer outwards – they seem to have little to do with actual people, and to have no life outside the literary work in which they emerge. They often appear deathly (if not dead), and are so mutated and unrealistic that we treat them as allegories, fantasies, or the personifications of principles. And I think that even those theorists of lyric who disagree about a lot of things – say, Virginia Jackson, Helen Vendler, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Perloff, and Oren Izenberg – tend to treat the people in poems, when they are discussed at all, as what I call “closed.” But open characters are the converse of closed


26 Of course, even when characters refer to real people they are still fictionalized productions – but so, to some degree, are all of our perceptions of others. When I say that open characters gesture outward toward real lives and vitalities I don’t mean to suggest that this gesturing is somehow truly ‘authentic’ or separate from the poem’s artifice; however, I do believe that the poem’s artifice can sometimes lead to more satisfying and substantive perception of others than the more ‘natural’ perceptions we have of those others in day-to-day life.
ones: they aren’t allegories or masks, but are full of independent vitality, and seem to refer us to realistic, external lives outside the text.

Yet this doesn’t mean that half of the characters in poems – the closed characters – all participate blindly in lyric isolationism. I’ll discuss the open pole of character in more detail shortly, but again it’s important to notice that purely closed characters – characters at the extreme of the closed pole who do not depend on any external reference – are fairly rare. For instance, when characters are based on real people, it becomes particularly hard not to see them as bringing referential specificity to bear on their poem’s aesthetic effects, and as becoming irreducible to mere words no matter how distorted they become. The drama of hearts turning into stones in “Easter 1916” depends heavily on the cast of characters’ real doomed uprising.

In fact, Yeats’s poem works hard to cultivate an interest in its cast as flawed, real people – with their ‘polite meaningless words,’ ‘ignorant good will,’ ‘daring sweetness,’ and ‘drunken vaingloriousness.’ It is this tangibility, this gesturing outward toward specific lives, that makes their ultimate transformation seem moving and important. Characters, in other words, often vacillate between closed and open poles; sometimes their closed transformations only matter because they refer us to lost openness (lost independence and vitality) and thereby to realms outside the poem itself. Albright repeatedly uses Ariel’s famous song about Alonso as an example of lyric mutation. Yet Albright himself admits that this has a practical function:

What is a man to feel when he hears in the course of a song that his father has turned to coral and pearls? No simple response is possible; the image is at once grisly and consoling: grisly because one’s father seems to have entered into a marine parody of a living man, consoling because something of him seems to have survived, achieved a sort of transfiguration.

Of course this lyric occurs in the middle of a play, and so its effect is somewhat different than that of a poem encountered in the midst of a volume of poems. Yet the rest of the play can stand

---

27 Robert Hayden’s 4-line poem “Crispus Attucks” is an extreme test-case. In the poem the eponymous character (the mixed-race man believed to be the first person killed in the Boston Massacre) becomes extremely closed, yet still is attached to a particular incident in history. He is both surreally “proped up/ by bayonets, falling forever” and an undeniable “Name in a footnote. Faceless name” (Robert Hayden, Collected Poems, ed. Frederick Glaysher [New York: Liveright, 1985] 143). In fact, his very closed erasure is what allows him to become suggestive of historically-contingent racial oppression and suppression.

28 Yeats, Selected Poems, 84.

29 Albright, Lyricality, 40.
in for the ‘realms outside of the poem’ that I’m discussing here: Alonso’s closed transformation, his mutation from King and father to “marine parody,” allows Ariel to convey the awfulness of his (false) bad news while simultaneously providing a kind of magical consolation. Though the lyric can stand on its own, it also gains power when we read it as a way of breaking bad news gently to a particular grief-stricken son. In sum, closed characters are not evidence of failed poems or anything of the sort: though too much emphasis on purely closed characters risks leading a poet back to solitude and even solipsism, there are also all sorts of non-isolated reasons—such as providing consolation—that a poet might want to close a character down.\footnote{Closed characters can do practical work; though they are engulfed and transformed in ways that seem deathly, these transformations do not always prevent them from referring to external situations and lives.}{30} Closed characters can do practical work; though they are engulfed and transformed in ways that seem deathly, these transformations do not always prevent them from referring to external situations and lives.

We might pause here to sketch a few of the many pragmatic, externally-directed functions of closing character down. As already stated, one of these functions involves using the sad magic of closed transformations to help mourn or soothe. In my first chapter on James Wright, for instance, we will encounter Wright’s dead grandmother skimming “the yellow water like a moth” and “beat[ing] her wings ever so lightly” (Wright). Or we might think here of Yehuda Amichai’s poem, “My Father in a White Space Suit,” in which the poet’s father gives some considerate advice,\footnote{“Learn to play the violin, my son. When you are/grown-up, music will help you/ in difficult moments of loneliness and pain” (Yehuda Amichai, The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 100).}{31} before dying and turning into a lost astronaut: “And then he floats, how he floats, into the grief/ of his endless white death” (Amichai). Or we might look to William Carlos Williams’s springtime widow who after “Thirty-five years” of living with her husband temporarily gives shape to her own grief by dissolving: “I feel that I would like/ to go there/ and fall into those flowers/ and sink into the marsh near them” (Williams); or to Randall Jarrell’s “The Black Swan” where a girl loses her sister who then turns into a swan “And stroked all

\footnote{Characters in fiction too sometimes provide important effects through their very limitations and the ways we don’t always read them as mysterious or endlessly valuable. Catherine Gallagher, for instance, discusses how characters’ “incompleteness makes us feel whole, also makes us feel uncanny desire to be that which we already are... We need in characters the contradictory sensation of not being a character” (Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” The Novel, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 336-363, 361).}
night, with a black wing, my wings” (Jarrell). These poems don’t seem purely internally directed, but point us toward particular losses, whether of a grandmother, father, husband, or sister.

Closing character down can have many other externally-directed functions. For instance, a poet might want to create an ideal model of conduct: think of the whiting out of identity in Jonson’s poem for Cary and Morrison. Poets can also use closed characters to provide warnings; or attain new wisdom; or reject a particular lifestyle; or bear empathetic and unflinching witness. These latter kinds of goals make sense only when one thinks of poems more flexibly and in relation to their contexts – as becomes clear when we see that many closed characters are not so much transformed as selected by lyrics. Such characters have made choices or had things done to them that have transformed them already, so that lyric simply becomes a frame for what has already transpired. Such characters are at least somewhat closed, yet they can never close down entirely because their transformation is the work of the external world and not the poem. Though Jarrell’s ball turret gunner’s “wet fur” freezing is a transformation occasioned at least in part by language, the fact that they have to ‘wash him out of the turret with a hose’ is decidedly not something that lyric has done. And though it is Heaney’s writing and imagination that lets him see the Grauballe Man as one who “seems to weep/ the black river of himself,” it is the earth itself that has transformed him (as it has Heaney’s other bog corpses) and made him into a likely candidate for such description. And the case need not be simply one or the other: often lyric transformations augment or dramatize the transformations that have already occurred (such as the movement from hearts to stones in Yeats’ “Easter 1916”).


33 The many example-poems I will use for the rest of this chapter are meant to gesture toward 1) the importance of characters in a variety of places and times in lyric history, but also toward 2) the richness of such examples starting after midcentury in America. Thus I will select examples either for the sake of their far-flung diversity or because they are taken from and build my case about the American poetry of the past 60 years.

34 Think of the children and madmen I mentioned earlier.


36 Shelley’s “Ozymandius” is an interesting example in that its transformations are multiple and layered. Ozymandius’s monomaniacal lust for empire, presumably is what 1) twisted his face into a “frown” with a “wrinkled lip” and “sneer of cold
In his article “Lyrical Antibiography,” Albright discusses Auden’s depiction of A.E. Housman as one who “Deliberately... chose the dry-as-dust./ Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer....” Albright argues that “Housman fits inside a lyric because his life was uneventful, suppressed, involuted, tremulous, like the lyric mode itself.” Put in my own terms, Auden’s Housman has already transformed himself, closed himself down through his obsessive adherence to a narrow calling. And narrowness, obsessiveness, inflexibility, and monomania, as we will see, are key forms of self-selected closed transformations: these traits lead to the circumscribing or delimiting, and thereby to the mutating of one’s life in the same way that living in a cage can turn a person into an animal. We might think here of the self-governed mutation in Thom Gunn’s poem “Enough” wherein its elderly woman adheres so rigidly to her habits that, after her death, her body’s “obstinate impress” is found bored into the mattress she won’t share or turn over. Similarly, Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Miniver Cheevy” makes himself a likely subject for a closed lyric because he can’t outgrow his fantasy of chivalric adventure, and so “born too late,” doesn’t adapt but “[keeps] on drinking.” In turning to open characters in the next section, we’ll see just the opposite: vitality, flexibility and energy will be essential to self-selected openness.

One can begin to see how some closed characters draw their significance from the ways they refer outwards: either in warning as negative examples (Cheevy, Gunn’s old woman); or as evidence of the horrors of war (ball turret gunner); or as representing life-choices we might be somewhat sympathetic to but not want for ourselves (Housman); or as a means of reckoning with history (Grauballe man). One can also see how self-selected closed characters have some

command....” He himself also presumably 2) ordered that a statue be made of him. Time then 3) erased the original and transformed the statue to a “shattered visage” and “trunkless legs of stone” – but it becomes the work of lyric to 4) highlight time’s transformations as a means of expressing something about the original Ozymandius, exposing the ultimately ineffectual nature of his “colossal,” pychopathic madness. It is lyric that ultimately releases the final twisted depiction of him from the marble and serves it up on the platter of the time’s bare desert, which “lone and level” stretches “far away” (Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson et al., fifth ed. (New York: Norton, 2005), 870).


similarity to Sherwood Anderson’s grotesques who all choose “truths” for themselves instead of remaining flexible like the writer with “the young thing” inside him.40

This is not to say it that all closed characters serve such practical, outwardly directed functions, or that such functions can always be clearly known or simply described. For instance, Donald Justice’s attraction to his drifter whose “name is all names, or none/ the used-car salesman,/ The tourist from Syracuse,/ The hired assassin, waiting” seems quite slippery and ambivalent.42 And to further complicate things, often a character must be understood in relation to other characters: Cesare Pavese’s obsessive drunk who walks past his fellow townspeople and would “keep right on” walking under the sea, “Lurching his way along the bottom,” must be read in terms of all the other characters in *Hard Labor*.43 Yet though the ‘practical function’ of closed characters may seem murky that doesn’t necessarily mean that a poem is aloof; Justice and Pavese’s American drifters and Italian riffraff should still be thought of in relation to the world that created them – to the circumstances and choices that produced transformations compatible with becoming closed lyric characters.

Sometimes, though, the practical externally-directed function of closing characters down is obvious: we might think of Ben Jonson’s satiric cartoons of bad behavior (e.g. “On Gut”), or of Adrienne Rich’s ambivalence toward the kindness and compromises of the generation that preceded her (“The Middle Aged”). When people become plural – such as in Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool,” Zbigniew Herbert’s “Regicides,” or Denis Johnson’s “White, White Collars” – it becomes easy for them to serve as cultural indictments of the societies and lifestyles

40 Self-enclosure can also become a means of survival. Donald Justice’s “Pantoum of the Great Depression” could be read as a poem wherein the speakers close themselves down in order to bear the indigent, numbing possibilities of life during the Great Depression: “Simply by going on an on/ We managed. No need for the heroic... There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows./ I don’t remember all the particulars.” Here the first person plural speakers deliberately court the effaced vagueness of identity that allows these speakers to bear their lots; they implicitly critique a more precise form self-representation in poetry in the same way that they critique having more grandiose expectations: “People like us simply go on...We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues...” “Thank god no one said anything in verse” (Donald Justice, *Collected Poems* [New York: Knopf, 2006], 260-1).


that produced, say, short-lived pool players, or young assassins, or miserable workers. And, though he is not pluralized, the way Auden’s Unknown Citizen is stripped of individual identity also transforms him from man to phenomenon, so he may serve as a clear societal warning. “The Unknown Citizen,” likes music but is hardly a creature of pure non-referential music himself: “He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan/ And had everything necessary to Modern Man./ A phonograph, a radio, a car, and a frigidaire.”

We should note that whereas philosophical investigations usually lead to a discussion of Otherness or Personhood as infinitely valuable, it’s sometimes important to poets to be able to satirize or dismiss actual others. In this way lyric is similar to, say, the 19th century British novel where part of the protagonist’s task may be to steer clear of the many characters who are silly, severe, harmful, or tiresome. Yet the act of closing down character can retain elements of satire or reproach while simultaneously enacting painful acts of empathy for real predicaments – such as we see in Jarrell’s ball turret gunner, or in Auden’s “Miss Gee” (who lives a prim and repressed lifestyle that, it is suggested, leads to her death by cancer and her dissection by callous medical students).

Moreover, sometimes closed empathy involves no satire whatsoever: we might think of Richard Wilbur’s version of Sylvia Plath as a girl who “far from shore, has been immensely drowned/ And stares through water now with eyes of pearl”; or Wilfred Owen’s legless “Disabled” who people touch “like some queer disease”; or his “Mental Cases, “purgatorial shadows/ Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish...”; or Frank Bidart’s anorexic “Ellen West” who tells us that “The ideal of being thin/ conceals the ideal/ not to have a body” and that

44 The pluralized identity of the initially individual figures in “Easter 1916” once they join the same cause is actually as dismaying as their transformation into stones and terrible beauty; it is perhaps for this reason that Yeats takes such pains to re-individuate them by listing their names at the end of the poem (“our part/ [Is] To murmur name upon name...” (Yeats, Selected Poems, 85)).

45 W.H. Auden, Selected Poems, 93.

46 A corollary phenomenon to the narrowness or monomania of many closed lyric characters is their quality of being generalized, abstracted, or effaced. Whereas the former leads to bizarre and eccentric forms, the latter leads to the dissolution of form and effacement of perceptibility. Why certain kinds of characters and pragmatic functions lend themselves to these different outcomes might be worth exploring elsewhere.
“when they/ weigh me, I wear weights secretly sewn into my belt.”\textsuperscript{47} Closed lyric transformations here become vehicles for careful sympathy and witness; even when these characters are severely mutated, they demand a reckoning that is more solid and historically grounded than what one can have with purely closed characters, those “familiar compound ghost[s],” “Meager of dimension as the gray people/On a movie screen” (Eliot, Plath).\textsuperscript{4849} Such reckonings reveal that characters can be both closed and challenging: rather than surrendering a character to a poet’s whims and control, a character’s enclosure and distortion can demand careful and difficult attention.

** Lyric Character: Open Character **

As we’ve seen, closed characters can help poets accomplish a variety of pragmatic functions that often point us beyond the page toward the tragedy of another life (Bidart’s anorexic Ellen West), or to a historical or cultural situation (Heaney’s Northern Ireland), or to a poet’s own ongoing struggles (Rich’s “Middle Aged”). On its own then, closed character can make lyric poetry seem less isolated, but it represents only one pole of character. Lyric can also convey a radical sense of another’s presence and provide a sudden glimpse of another life in its


\textsuperscript{49} And when characters are at least somewhat generous of dimension, ‘real’ as well as ghostly, then they can prompt two of the strongest reactions to watching someone mutate and fall apart: weeping and laughter. I should note, though, that there are transformations and stylized displays that lyric wants to celebrate and not mock or mourn. “They are like those crazy women/ who tore Orpheus/ when he refused to sing,/ these men grinding/ in the strobe & black lights/ of Pegasus” (Terrance Hayes, “At Pegasus,” poets.org, Web. 15 June 2013, \url{http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16207}), begins Terrance Hayes’ praise-poem about a gay club. But I would argue that drag, in the sense of trying on costumes or elaborate and colorful styles, involves a celebration of vitality and flexibility in defiance of fixed roles. In this way, it is inherently different from closed transformations that mutate someone permanently, often through that person’s very \textit{rigidity}. In my discussion of character-types I’ll mention how various types seem like they should be closed, but in fact are not: essential characters, for instance, are those encapsulated by a single skill in a zestful, energetic way, so that they are locked down, but remain very much alive. In the same way gaudy transformations can sometimes be flaunted as signs of open energy – they can even vibrantly contest essentialized assumptions about what ‘unshapely’ or ‘undesirable’ forms might look like. This has limits: a poet would be hard pressed to convert Ellen West’s extreme anorexia, let alone the ball turret gunner’s death, into a sign of admirable liveliness. However, though many transformations in lyric are closed – satirical or elegiac – we should always look to the particular poem to tell us whether an individual transformation might in fact be a sign of flexibility or vitality.
full power and strangeness. In fact, the concentrated interiority that the lyric mode sometimes falls into is exactly what permits its inverse: a sudden waking up and coming to attention in the presence of another as the intensity of interior song is temporarily supplanted by another life replete with its own meanings. This is what I meant earlier by saying that very open characters can provide lightning-glimpses of other lives and vitalities that lie beyond the page: the glimpses are like lightning because of their quickness, but also because of the extremity of their interruptive vision allies them with a kind of violence: “A Bird came down the Walk —/ He did not know I saw—/ He bit an Angleworm in halves/ And ate the fellow raw...” writes Emily Dickinson. Or here we have Dickinson describing the appearance of a snake: “But never met this fellow/ Attended or alone,/ Without a tighter breathing,/ And zero at the bone.” George Oppen cries out with a similar surprise at the appearance of deer: “That they are there!/ Their eyes/ Effortless, the soft lips/ Nuzzle and the alien small teeth/ Tear at the grass...”

Though the above examples describe animals, open human characters also convey a sense of startling and singular presence alongside the suggestion of violence: “My father once broke a man’s hand/ Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor” (lines 1-2) begins Larry Levis’s poem “Winter Stars.” “He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight/ And slashed the wind,” writes James Wright of a Sioux Indian. Or here is Terrance Hayes describing the dance-floor of a gay nightclub: “A young man slips his thumb/ into the mouth of an old one,/ & I am not that far away./ The whole scene raw & delicate/ as Curtis’s foot gashed/ on a sunken bottle

50 In Being Numerous, as part of his effort to describe a maximally inclusive and important form of Personhood, and in support of George Oppen, Oren Izenberg suggests that the value of others should not be dependent on our attention to them. He uses Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Fish” as an example of how precarious one’s treatment of another can be when that other’s value is dependent on someone’s perception – what Izenberg dubs “phenomenal luck” (Izenberg, Being Numerous, 103-4). I can accept this point, and yet still argue that poetry is doing something important when it models how we as tired, imperfect human beings (who do not want to value everyone equally even if we could) might go about opening ourselves up to others’ vitalities and particular presences. In their depictions of sensory perceptions, poems can provide psychological and phenomenological models of coming to perceive others in their particular fullness, and even in their ugliness, strangeness, or threateningness. That actual human beings learn to perceive each other in these ways is surely as important as the establishment of a blanket philosophical notion of the importance of Personhood. I would add also that there is also something to be said for a model of perception wherein an individual can overturn such blanket systems that might claim, for instance, that a fish is not a person and that its life is ours to do with as we want. Personhood seems to me to be a risky category for the attribution of maximal value even if that category is “minimal – placing as few restriction as possible upon the legitimate forms a person can take” (Izenberg, “Introduction,” nonsite.org) – since thinking in these terms we are forced to draw the line somewhere: are fetuses then people no matter what? What about coma victims on life support, or animals, or trees?

shard.” Or here is Richard Wilbur writing about a beautiful woman: “[she leaves] the stations of her body there/ As a whip maps the countries of the air” (Richard Wilbur).52

Of the above passages, perhaps Hayes’ most embodies what I am describing for in it the men appear in a manner that is delicate and intimate, but also full of violence, struggle, and power-saturated forms of Eros. The poet’s startled perception of the young man slipping his thumb into the old man’s mouth we might describe as the shock of lyric encounter – the zero at the bone, the exclamatory that they are there! – that in Hayes’ case immediately prompts a memory of a friend’s gashed foot, as if the very perception of the men’s erotic exchange entailed a kind of smarting. And though shock means something very different here than it does in Walter Benjamin’s famous description of Baudelaire, the French poet provides us with another important example in his account of a beautiful stranger surfacing momentarily in a crowd – “Lightning... then darkness... Of me you know nothing, I nothing of you – you/ whom I might have loved and who knew that too!”53

This ability to convey the particular strangeness and difference of another’s intruding presence is a social power unique to lyric: in the force and speed of the collision of the speaker with another, we intuit the mass of the life behind it. While in everyday life we grow acclimated to the opacity and strangeness of others, imagining nothing of the histories or fears behind telltale winces or turns of phrase, lyric can help us reclaim and re-experience the sheer strangeness and layered intricacy of the presence others bring to bear. This is why three of the above examples are of animals: lyric character at its most open can help us feel about another person walking into the room the way we would if they were a horse or bear.54 It’s also why it’s violent: to transition so swiftly from the default of self-centeredness to utter focus on another enacts the kind of whiplash that we literally find in Wilbur (as well as in Dickinson’s “narrow


54 In Aspects of the Novel E.M. Forster describes how novels can compensate for the usual unavailability of others’ minds: “But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life” (E.M. Foster, Aspects of the Novel [Boston: Mariner Books, 1956], 64). Similarly, in life we fall out of touch with the intense strangeness and particularity of others, and this is something that poems can help us to reclaim.
fellow” poem wherein the snake’s “whip lash/ Unbraiding in the sun” suggests that Dickinson’s startled perception is itself being struck).

At the extreme open end of character, then, we are given powerful glimpses of others, yet these glimpses are limited: they must remain mere glimpses since these characters are imagined as existing almost completely outside of the poem into which they momentarily stray. However, when characters retreat a little from the farthest edge of the open pole and poems are allowed to do more of the work of representation, we find that open character is still able to convey the electrifying vitality of others while also letting those others coalesce into recognizable traits and actions. The beginning of the following Catullus poem, for instance, retreats just a little from the open extreme in order to describe a day pleasurably spent with Catullus’s friend Licinius:

At leisure, Licinius, yesterday
We’d much fun with my writing-tablets
As we’d agreed to be frivolous.
Each of us writing light verses
Played now with this metre, now that,
Capping each other’s jokes and toasts.
Yes, and I left there fired by wit,
Your charm, Licinius, and wit,
So food gave poor me no pleasure
Nor could I rest my eyes in sleep
But wildly excited turned and tossed
Over the bed, longing for daylight
That I might be with you and talk...55

This a poem more concerned with giddy shared presence and the pang of its subsequent loss than in giving an in depth description of Catullus’s friend; yet we do learn that Licinius is a fellow poet who is unusually charismatic and witty, and that the two poets spent time together playing with meters, joking and toasting. This small amount of description, in fact, turns out to be crucial: it anchors Licinius’s presence so that it can become more like a continuous electrical current than a brief, mystifying shock (this is also why Licinius can take up more lines). The poem still courts an imagining of Catullus’s friend as existing primarily outside it, yet Licinius is allowed to do and be more within the poem. The small particularizing description of him also allows the poem to gesture toward the history and depth of the two poets’ relationship. Rather

---

than becoming a means of encapsulating a person or a relationship, lyric here can be read as a kind of supplementary social tool: a vehicle for affirming and prolonging the excitement of shared presence and for deeply feeling the loss of it.\(^{56,57}\)

The poem also reveals something else about open character: just as narrow, delimited, and mutated persons often make good closed characters, persons who are vital, flexible, and energetic often make good open ones. It is not just that poets must take care not to engulf open characters in the poem that represents them; it’s also that poets often select those others whose impressively healthy vitalities seem naturally to overflow such confinement – like Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi slipping from his monastic cell to go to carnival. And, as we’ll see, one can learn a lot from noticing where a poet locates openness; for Catullus, it is in Licinius’s literary wit, spontaneity, and playfulness.

The above examples are of solitude broken in on for an instant and of companionship recalled in solitude, but open others can also become present-tense participants in lyric. Sometimes, for instance, these others can speak: “Learn to play the violin, my son... When you are/grown-up, music will help you/ in difficult moments of loneliness and pain,” says Yehuda Amichai’s father before dying and floating off into the ‘grief of his endless white death’ in the elegy mentioned above.\(^{58}\) Or sometimes poems become about capturing moments of exceptional company: Bob Hicok’s playful, recent “Poem to the Life Force,” describes an orgy where people shout out arcane historical factoids that then end up reinforcing the poem’s overall feeling of interconnectedness. The poem ends “how could she tell where anyone began or ended, and why, why would she want to?”\(^{59}\) Or take this well-known poem by Galway Kinnell:

“After Making Love We Hear Footsteps”

\(^{56}\) Even if Catullus speaks from a solitary position, the poem is still buzzing with the excitement of companionship. Though many poets, like fiction writers, are alone when they write, poems of open presence are often about contesting or counterbalancing the fundamental solitude that is the predicament of persons and not just of poems.

\(^{57}\) We’ll see something similar in looking at Adrienne Rich’s Twenty-One Love Poems where what occurs off-stage, or off-poem – the evolution and eventual end of the gestured toward love affair – becomes as important to the poems as what’s included in them. The poems then gain significance in the way they become intensifiers or supplements for joy and mourning.

\(^{58}\) Amichai, Selected Poetry, 100.

For I can snore like a bullhorn
or play loud music
or sit up talking with any reasonably sober Irishman
and Fergus will only sink deeper
into his dreamless sleep, which goes by all in one flash,
but let there be that heavy breathing
or a stifled come-cry anywhere in the house
and he will wrench himself awake
and make for it on the run—as now, we lie together,
after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodies,
familiar touch of the long-married,
and he appears—in his baseball pajamas, it happens,
the neck opening so small he has to screw them on—
and flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep,
his face gleaming with satisfaction at being this very child.

In the half darkness we look at each other
and smile
and touch arms across this little, startlingly muscled body—
this one whom habit of memory propels to the ground of his making,
sleeper only the mortal sounds can sing awake,
this blessing love gives again into our arms.  

Again, just a little description gives the son a more continuous charge. But now that charge occurs in the present-tense: the poem conjures up its “now” as the poet and wife’s “familiar” post-coital touching in bed. This touching sets the stage for the interruption and excess of presence as Fergus then intrudes, and love is given “again into our arms.” And Kinnell’s poem here becomes like his shared marriage bed: it becomes a ‘ground of making’ into which a real, independent child enters as if by his own volition, “startlingly muscled,” and individuating before our very eyes: after all, it is only at the end of the first-stanza and its fifteen line-long sentence that Fergus becomes, emphatically, “this very child.” What begins then as a long, snaking hypotactic tall-tale or boast of parental complaint, morphs into an expression of gratitude for the sudden, temporary shared presence that neither bed nor poem can contain or own. The poem becomes a place that can welcome others into it, but need not lure or trap them there.

Yet though its current is more continuous than instantaneous, presence here isn’t entirely a stable thing. Though we begin with the shared marriage bed, poet and wife are quickly

---

sided and pried apart, only later to be expanded as they become a three-person creature, touching arms across the body nestled in between them. Put differently, as their familiar touching grumblingly gives way to the child’s “gleaming...satisfaction,” unwanted extra company becomes a kind of blessing. And the boy’s presence isn’t stable either, but rather is made up of a series of surprises: though his charge is continuous, his sudden appearance provides a kind of shock – especially in his gently taboo attraction to the “come-cry” of his parents and his intrusion upon their privacy. After the words “he appears” we also get the hyphenated interruption and description of the already outgrown baseball pajamas, which provides another small jolt of startled perception. And unlike the extreme version of open character, the boy does not vanish after this glimpse: instead he flops, hugs, snuggles, and gleams. Yet he isn’t fastened down either; instead he seems to increase, to evade encapsulation even as we watch. The “baseball pajamas” and evocative use of screw (referring both to sex and to the boy’s vigor) give us a child rapidly outgrowing his clothes as well as the very tags (e.g. baseball lover) by which the poet knows him. And this growth continues to surprise: only after the boy finally settles down do Kinnell and his wife notice the “startlingly muscled body” through a recognition which triggers the interruptive of another hyphen.

Examining Kinnell’s poem we see that lyrics need be neither solitary cells nor prison-houses full of sad mutants. Instead we find here that deforming closed lyric transformation has been reversed into the healthy sprouting up of the independent, yet nostalgic, child. And the blessing that this child’s presence ultimately provides can be viewed formally: the poem begins with a snaking, expanding, and conjunction-littered sentence, but it ends with two decisive lists of threes: three actions (looking, smiling, touching), followed by three definitions (this one whom, sleeper, blessing). In other words, interruption, digression, and nascence lead to repetition and the casting of charms: as in many other poems with open characters, the aesthetic success

---

61 And underlying that, there is also the mild taboo-breaking of the reader being imaginatively invited into bed as well.

62 The child’s name, mentioned only once at the beginning of the poem, can be read as another such outgrown tag.

63 As we’ll see, this interest in children recurs in many poems with open characters because it underscores the idea that the person being depicted is nascent and only stopping into a poem on their way somewhere else. Hence, poems about dead children (such as Wordsworth’s) can be among the most closed as they suggest vital potentiality only then to take it away.
and life of this poem depends on the admirable, crucially interruptive and ultimately shaping and shapely energies that the independent other comes to wield.

Admittedly, whether providing a moment’s shock or a more continuous electrical current, the presence that open others bear in lyric is often in dialogue with absence and distance – with the growing child leaving the marriage bed behind, or Licinius and Catullus parting ways, or Baudelaire’s stranger-beloved vanishing. And again and again we find lyric poets chasing after another’s fleeting presence – whether it’s Constantine Cavafy kissing the bloody rag his lover has discarded, or Sharon Olds’ zooming in on her dying father’s cup of mucus, or Yusef Komunyakaa reminiscing about soldiers in Vietnam touching “the same lovers/ minutes apart, tasting/ each other’s breath,” or Henri Cole “spooning mechanically soft pears” into the dying body of his mother “whose tissue once dissolved to create breast milk for me.” In each case, the speaker approaches the fundamental boundary that separates the poet from someone else, and tries to peek over it; put differently, it’s as though lyric both acknowledges that everything in life conspires to pull us apart, and yet itself sometimes becomes a force that can sometimes joyfully, powerfully, give us back other people. Perhaps lyric has been seen as solitary so often because of its hyper-consciousness of the inevitability of separation and drift; yet it is also often engaged with resisting and minimizing such separation.

This is why one dream of lyric is to morph closed characters into open ones over the course of a poem – for to have statues come to life or figures step out of paintings is temporarily to cancel loneliness, and to reverse, as James Merrill puts it, “the dim wish of lives to drift apart.” This is the dream with which Rita Dove concludes her 2009 book-length poem on the little-known 19th century West Indian violinist George Bridgetower, asking: “Ah Master B, little great man, tell me/ How does a shadow shine?” In the context of the preceding verse, Dove’s question is a wish for Bridgetower to cross over the centuries and emerge from racialized obscurity as a kind of heroic guide. Yet behind her concluding words lies a fundamental question

---


65 Qtd. in Kalstone, Five Temperaments, 123.

that lyric continues to ask: how does a shadow shine, what in Eurydice is summoned by Orpheus, to what degree can lyric contest death and individuation?

Less dramatically, the dream of opening closed characters is also a dream of refreshing our perceptions of others, so that they can at least surprise us and cease seeming like tiresome automatons or known-quantities. I’ve encountered at least a half-a-dozen scholarly references to George Eliot’s “keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life” as the “roar which lies on the other side of silence” that then omit Eliot’s description of how we don’t hear this roar because we “walk about well wadded with stupidity.” Lyric, though, can sometimes remove that wadding and help us notice others at their most vital and surprising: think of the shock of another’s presence in Levis, Wright, Hayes, and Wilbur – such purely open characters certainly reinvigorate our dulled social perceptions. However, by presenting characters as initially closed and only then opening them up, lyric may stage the very overcoming of such dullness. For instance, one might think of Robinson’s butcher “Reuben Bright” who turns out to be sensitive despite his bloody profession; in the very last line of the sonnet, after Bright’s wife dies, and almost as an afterthought, he tears “down the slaughter-house.”

Or one might think of the worker in Theodore Roethke’s “Pickle Belt”: the worker begins the poem as part of a plural “They” who watch the fruit roll “by all day” and look forward only to “Saturday pay,/ And Sunday sleep.” However, Roethke then describes the worker’s crush on a female employee, and by the end of the poem the worker becomes a singular third-person he with all thought of mechanical labor forgotten, standing “in his shrunken britches,/ Eyes rimmed with pickle dust,/ Prickling with all the itches/ Of sixteen-year-old lust.” The character may have shrunken, rimmed, and distorted aspects to him, but he’s suddenly no defeated wage-slave. Each such example also shows us a poet struggling to identify those open others – or moments of openness in others – whose overflowing of circumscription might be instructive. Such characters not only

67 This provides a potential overlap between open poetic characters and round prose ones: “The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way... If it never surprises it is flat...” (Forster, Aspects, 78).


69 Robinson, Three American Poets, 152.

tell us about what a poet admires, but they give us a poet turning to others in order to think about how to live.

However, the dream of opening what is closed is only one approach to character, and, as I’ve suggested, it can be just as important to poets to close characters down. Robinson’s “Richard Cory” is, in this way, the opposite of “Reuben Bright” – whereas Bright’s crass occupation is not defining, Cory’s perfect success becomes a form of automatism that leads to his self-destruction. And we might imagine all sorts of other movements and arrangements within the closed and open poles: characters, for instance, might hover directly between the two. For example, Gwendolyn Brooks’ “The Bean Eaters” describes a “yellow pair,” who “eat beans mostly,” and whose back room is full of junk-memorabilia suggestive of their reduced but not yet helpless circumstances.71 Or we find poems where a character almost opens up but finally can’t: in Yusef Komunyakaa’s “My Father’s Love Letters” the poet’s abusive, illiterate father labors over dictations addressed to the wife who has left him; he thereby almost changes his ways and is “almost/Redeemed by what he tried to say.”72 73

Bearing the open-closed poles in mind, we might even concoct a brief taxonomy of common character types.74 For instance, anti-tragic characters could be those whose circumstances seem like they would entail circumscription and deformation, but actually end up bringing them to life e.g. Roethke’s “Old Florist,” Hardy’s “The Ruined Maid,” Williams’ “To A Poor Old Woman” and “Dedication for a Plot of Ground.” Essential characters could be those who are encapsulated by a single skill in a zestful, energetic way, so that though they are locked down they remain very much alive e.g. Whitman’s butcher-boy and blacksmith in “Song of Myself,”75 Heaney’s thatcher in his poem of that title, and Wilbur’s church-keeper in “A Plain

73 One could think of Jarrell’s “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” as a longish poem that takes its full length to open up a closed character.
74 The following list is by no means meant to be comprehensive, but to suggest the variousness of lyric character and the malleability of my main terms.
75 In “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” Whitman explains that he wishes to endow his American characters with the “heroism and loftiness with which Greek and feudal poets endow’d their god-like or lordly characters” (Walt Whitman, Walt

58
Song for Comadre.” *Floating* characters could be those who emphasize how they are partly invented by the poet and yet partly independent. A strong example is Cavafy’s “Caesarion” (“In history only a few/ lines are found about you,/ and so I molded you more freely in my mind”\(^{76}\)); Thom Gunn’s “The Reassurance” is another example. *Representative* characters could be those whose ethical claim on us as individuals is enhanced by seeing them as members of larger communities e.g. James Wright’s “young Sioux” in “Hook” or Terrance Hayes’ gay dancers in “At Pegasus.” Finally, *haunting* characters could be those whose inability to become open gives them a terrible hypnotic power over the poet that threatens to draw the poet in and make her into a sort of closed character herself e.g. Rilke’s “Washing the Dead,” Baudelaire’s “Seven Old Men,” and Hardy’s “Beyond the Last Lamp.”\(^{77}\)

I want to describe a few more types, but first I need to add to our idea of openness, which should not be conceived of solely in terms of electricity. Since what is open is uncontained and uncircumscribed, the better part of an open character is not to be found on the page itself. The art of opening characters up, then, often depends not just on *shock* but on a poet’s ability to make us wonder at and about another’s mysteriousness; on encouraging our guesswork and our penchant for daydream and for inferring information; and on intriguing us with the ways that characters elude us, with the lives we imagine them as living elsewhere. One might think, for example, of the way many readers have grown intrigued by the social world behind Catullus’s poems, or by the events that transpire between and around Shakespeare’s sonnets (or Adrienne Rich’s *Twenty-One Love Poems*). And though in individual poems we sometimes find portraits that seem encapsulating such as Auden’s of Housman, we often also find *suggestive* portraits that intrigue without necessarily seeming complete. One might think here of Robert Lowell’s description of

---


his grandfather in “Dunbarton”; or of Cesare Pavese’s description of the prostitute Deola at a
morning café in “Deola Thinking”; or of Merwin’s description of John Berryman in his elegy:

...just one time he suggested
changing the usual order
of the same words in a line of verse
why point out a thing twice

he suggested I pray to the Muse
get down on my knees and pray
right there in the corner and he
said he meant it literally...”

These are anecdotes suggestive of Berryman’s intense devotion to poetry, but they don’t make us
feel that some ‘Berryman-essence’ is being nailed down. Similarly, Louise Gluck’s speaker in
“In the Cafe” describes the psychology of a man who is both a chronically false lover and an
unusually faithful friend. Yet Glück doesn’t make her thesis or insight in this poem seem
comprehensive; instead the thesis becomes a way of wondering about her character. Snapshots of
characters can also court openness by creating an aura of mystery or intrigue: in Melville’s civil
war poem, “The College Colonel” William Francis Bartlett marches home with an “Indian
aloofness, [that] lones his brow”– and the speaker proclaims enigmatically that “all through the
Seven Days’ Fight,/ And deep in the Wilderness grim... there came –/ Ah heaven! – what truth to
him!”

In cultivating such wondering, guesswork, and intrigue open lyric characters overlap
somewhat with minor narrative ones. James Wood has argued that in fiction, “lacunae and
omissions tease us, provoke us to wade in their [minor characters’] deep shallows” and that
“absence in characterization can be a form of knowing as profound as presence....” In The One

78 W.S. Merwin, “Berryman,” The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor, 30 Sep. 2003, Web 1 June 2013,

79 Herman Melville, Three American Poets, 24. Snapshots of characters at single moments can also evade enclosure simply by
claiming to represent no more than that moment, such as Melville’s “The Released Rebel Prisoner.” The poem depicts a
dismayed southerner in the north after the war who wants to return home, but feels that he has no home to return to; though we
have the sensation that a representative predicament is being expressed, we don’t have the sense that the poem is saying what the
rest of the character’s life will be like (though it may not be interested in having us imagine it).

vs. *The Many*, Alex Woloch describes how the very exits of minor characters from the stage often disrupt narrative attention, so that we sometimes become more interested in these characters than in a novel’s protagonists.  

Since all characters in lyric are in some sense minor it’s unsurprising that lyric would be especially adept at such finding just the right omissions and tantalizing bits of description to make others stay with us.

So we might add *encapsulated vs. suggestive* portraits and snapshots to our list of character types. *Evasive* characters – a corollary type – could be those who draw explicit attention to the ways that they elude us. We could think here of Wordsworth’s highland lass singing in another language in “The Solitary Reaper”; or of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s wife whose dead husband has become as strange to her as a man speaking before a crowd: “for once, not hers, unclassified.” We could even think of Frost’s neighbor in “Mending Wall”: the neighbor keeps repeating that ‘good fences make good neighbors,’ and in this way he might seem rigid and closed; however, he (and his cliché) ultimately turn out to be mysterious after all: “Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/ In each hand, like an old stone-savage armed.../ He moves in darkness as it seems to me/ Not of woods only and the shade of trees....” Another type, *missed* characters, could provide a more frustrating version of such mystery and irresolution: these could be characters who are encountered tangentially, and withhold a dangled and much desired offer of satisfying presence or exchange. We might think of Ashbery as a master of portraying such figures; we could also think of Robert Lowell’s sonnets on Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot in which Lowell describes his miscommunications with those two famous older poets.

Open character does not require that we accept mysteriousness or lacunae as absolute limits. Rather, open character often leads us beyond the poem, enticing us to fill in blanks imaginatively or to learn more a poet’s biography or time-period. Characters are often open in the very ways they make us look for them beyond the frame of the poem. As I suggested briefly

---


above, part of the fun of reading Catullus, can be in tracking his different mentioned 
acquaintances, reading a little about his biography, and picturing his social scene— or, as Peter 
Green puts it, in the gossipy ways the poet makes “his reader, almost without realizing it, an 
invisible eavesdropper on this intently alive social picture of a mere two millenia ago.”

Some open character types in particular strongly lead us to look beyond the poem: a 
*returning* character appears in several poems, thereby giving us the sense of a single poem as 
their haunt rather than their home. (And if the character does not live in a single poem then we 
are encouraged to imagine them as living somewhere else.) Recurrence also draws our attention 
to a character’s ongoing place in a poet’s imagination: why, we may ask, does Robert Lowell 
require three takes to discuss Randall Jarrell after his death, or several takes to write about his 
daughter Harriet? Why does the murderer George Doty appear in a second James Wright poem? 
If we encounter a poet continuing to think about a particular character it can make that character 
seem more intriguing, and become more likely to take on a life of their own. In this sense maybe 
even Wordsworth’s Lucy has some openness: even though Lucy mainly appears through her 
recurrent deaths and transformations her very recurrence makes us wonder about who she was 
(and so has prompted numerous debates about whether she is fictional or someone Wordsworth 
knew).

The last type I’ll mention, *continuous* character, also firmly guides us beyond the poem 
proper. In fact, *continuous* characters are those who are nearly inexplicable unless we look 
elsewhere: to other poems; or to a poet’s biography; or to a historical situation; or to the 
circumstances in which a poem was written. We might think of Keats’s sonnet “To my Brothers” 
in which Keats writes of being glad that his brother Tom’s birthday passes “smoothly, quietly” –

---

inquire as to how open characters in Catullus’s poems in fact are since so many of them are portrayed through invectives – we 
often only see others as they are being cursed or dispatched with. (This of course, is a very superficial description of Catullus and 
he writes many other kinds of poems – of erotic love, praise, and mourning.) Yet the fervor of those invectives are profitably read 
as inspired by flesh-and-blood people. Moreover, even when castigating another, Catullus often ends up with psychological 
insights that treat others as being of interest as people and not as ghosts or as thin parodies to manipulate. For instance, in XXII 
Catullus explores the question of why Suffenus – who is otherwise charming and urbane – writes such terrible poetry, and yet is 
happier about it than he is about his other more substantial accomplishments. Catullus goes on to speculate about the ways in 
which we’re all vulnerable to this kind of mistaken self-evaluation. Or in LXXXIII Catullus warns Lesbia’s husband not to be so 
happy about her mistreating Catullus in front of her husband since this shows that she still cares about the poet. People can 
behave as parodies, but they are only interesting or worthy of hatred here because they aren’t parodies alone.
a fact that is significant only if we know about Tom’s tuberculosis. Since *continuous* characters only make sense via some external knowledge, they often also suggest that their poem is only one way among many of relating to them – as in Keats’s portrayal of Tom, or, say, Robert Hayden’s of Frederick Douglass who shall be remembered “not with statues’ rhetoric,/ not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone....” Of course, every character who is not completely closed is continuous to some degree, but not every poem points us toward this fact with the same urgency.

** A Dialogic Lyric? **

We have been examining what characters in lyric are like on their own, but most lyric characters exist in relation to a speaker, and, as we’ll see, the relationship between speaker and characters can be as important to social lyrics as the characters themselves. I described earlier how poets often close characters down to achieve something pragmatic – to console, to reject, to warn – yet these pragmatic enclosures always play out in relation to a speaker or implied authorial presence. How characters change types and move between open and closed poles can be in part due to the nature of these characters’ lives and the results of their choices; however, these changes *always* occur through their relation to a speaker who is drawn to imagine them for a reason, and who can him or herself become knowing, or sentimental, impatient, or desperate, or afraid – who often, in fact, feels different ways and notices different things that we can track about the character(s) as the poem unfolds.

Characters can also resist being enclosed or misunderstood: they can push back on the shaping of poems and the thinking in them. Sometimes the individual energy of open characters

---


87 Even fictional characters may be continuous in that, say, Louise Glück’s Gretel can’t be understood without the Grimm’s fairy-tale.

88 I should note, though, that there need not be a literal “I” in a poem for that poem to convey an implied author’s attitudes toward a character.
is palpable not only as a kind of pleasant electricity or mystery, but in the various ways these characters resist, contest, aid, or guide the speaker. As I noted earlier, E.M. Forster once wrote that fictional characters are “full of the spirit of mutiny,” and narratologist Alex Woloch’s thinking about minor characters has led him to ask, how a human being can “enter into a narrative world and not disrupt the distribution of attention?” We might ask the corollary question: how can a human being enter into a lyric and not alter the poem’s direction, the speaker’s song?

But we can think of these speaker-character dynamics not just as contests or struggles for control, but as exchanges. Exchange can be thought of abstractly as what the poet gives a character through their depiction and what that character gives back to the poet. Does the poet highlight a success or shortcoming? Does he or she empathize with a character or satirize them? And what feedback does the character provide: does the character surprise, instruct, perplex, hurt, or inspire the poet? One can also conceive of exchange in less abstract terms: exchanges can be the actual interactions between a speaker and character within the short space of the lyric – for example, by talking, touching, or giving and receiving gifts. Exchange can be painful in either case, but it usually implies a kind of fulfillment since something passes both ways here unlike Baudelaire’s missed connection with the beautiful stranger in the crowd. In other words, exchange gives us lyrics not simply becoming hospitable to the presence of others, but actually becoming sites for pivotal moments in relationships to be carried out.

For instance, we might use the notion of exchange to take another look at Wordsworth’s leech-gatherer. The leech-gatherer might initially seem like the prototypical closed character in his mutations: he is like “a huge Stone”; his body is “bent double, feet and head / Coming together in their pilgrimage.” However, the gatherer continually corrects Wordsworth’s impressions of him, his hardy and enduring presence providing “strong admonishment” to the

---

89 We might recall the way Kinnell’s son interrupts and sidelines his parents only to ultimately expand and bless them.

90 Woloch, The One vs. the Many, 26. Catherine Gallagher has also noted the way that even mere names in novels, though initially empty of content, are read as vital “promise[s] of characters” (Gallagher, “Rise of Fictionality,” 353).

91 Focusing on a poet’s description of others can help show that poems need not be isolated and hermetic, and that they can make others part of their thinking. However, focusing on speaker-character dynamics can reveal how dialogic and collaborative lyric can in fact become despite usually remaining anchored in a single perspective.
poet. This correction happens via a literal interaction – a meeting and conversation in which Wordsworth listens and asks twice about the gatherer’s occupation. By interacting close up with the old man, Wordsworth is able to modify his initial impression of the gatherer’s ‘feebleness’ with a new additional impression of his surprising, stoical ‘loftiness,’ and thereby gain some hope of escaping or at least learning to bear his own gloom: “I could have laughed myself to scorn, to find/ In that decrepit Man so firm a mind./ “God,” said I, “be my help and stay secure;/ I’ll think of the Leech-Gatherer on the lonely moor!”92 And the leech-gatherer gains something too: through exchange, he is seen as noble and a kind of unlikely stoic hero. Ultimately, the gatherer’s value is recognized – not in some abstract or general way – but through the help he is actually able to provide a specific person.

Exchange isn’t rare. We find it in Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse” in which Maud Gonne reinforces the speaker’s mood of luxurious sadness; we find it in Heaney’s “Digging” in which the poet’s father’s and grandfather’s skills (watching the former, bringing the latter milk) help Heaney to identify his own unique, but related talent. We might also think of the missed characters of Lowell’s poems on Eliot and Frost as holding imperfect exchanges with Lowell that bring only disappointment.93 Again, exchange can be quite painful. Think of Roethke’s abusive father in “My Papa’s Waltz,” or even of Robert Hayden’s belated realization about the nature of his father’s love in “Those Winter Sundays.” (Hayden’s poem enacts belated exchange: the father performs the “austere and lonely” offices of love, warming the house in the early morning, and decades later the son writes a poem confessing his naive culpable ignorance and wrongheaded dislike of his father). Exchange can also be ambivalent: Sharon Olds’ “The Moment” ends with the speaker’s first period causing her mother to “break open and/ glow with joy.” In the scene, the mother abandons the dirty dishes she was washing, her “hands [held out toward her daughter] and/ covered with tiny delicate bubbles like seeds.” What brings the mother pleasure in the poem is, we imagine, more complicated for the child whose ominous “red


93 Again, not all exchanges imply harmonious social relations. Disappointment and misunderstanding clarified and articulated can provide their own kinds of aesthetic fulfillment.
Egyptian stain” leads her to seek out her ‘one week divorced’ and “haggard” parent in the poem’s pointedly-described subterranean basement.\footnote{Sharon Olds, \textit{Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980-2002} (New York: Knopf., 2004), 21.}

In Seamus Heaney’s late elegiac sequence “Clearances,” the poet’s mother becomes a \textit{missed} character who takes part in a series of close but frustrated exchanges. These include peeling potatoes together while others are away at Mass (“Never closer the whole rest of our lives”); disagreeing about the importance of Heaney continuing to speak in a less educated dialect (“Grammar which kept us allied and at bay); and folding laundry together (“Coming close again by holding back/ In moves where I was x and she was o/ Inscribed in sheets she’d sewn from ripped-out flour sacks”).\footnote{Seamus Heaney, \textit{Selected Poems}, 248-50.} These poems are elegies and a kind of enclosure lingers over the mother’s character throughout, yet that doesn’t prevent Heaney from depicting careful, painful exchanges where what passes between mother and son is a kind ravishing, intimate disappointment.

Exchange does not ensure harmonious social relations, nor does it require that characters be open (think of Wilfred Owen’s exchange with the enemy he killed in “Strange Meeting,” or of Heaney’s with the ghosts of “Station Island,” or of Eliot’s with his “familiar compound ghost” in \textit{Four Quartets}). The character that a speaker encounters also may be troublesome, and the speaker may choose to resist the character’s influence entirely. For instance, in Millay’s “Oh, Oh you will be sorry for that word” the speaker’s misogynist lover mocks her for reading (“What a big book for such a little head!”), and the speaker retaliates by announcing that she’ll leave her lover one day without warning. In Gwendolyn Brooks’ “a song in the front yard” the mother’s stern and sneering morality may be just what prompts the speaker to run off and become “a bad woman” with the “charity children.”\footnote{Edna St. Vincent Millay, \textit{Selected Poems}, 54; Gwendolyn Brooks, \textit{Selected Poems}, 6. In Brooks’ poem the exchange is actually between a main character who happens to be the speaker and a secondary character; nevertheless, a similar dynamics of exchange applies. Of course, in such poems the authorial presence and its relationship to its characters seem more slippery; any poem without an acknowledged speaker provides less direct evidence about the relationship of poet to characters (though, of course, this relationship is always slippery even when there is a strong autobiographical \textit{I}). My observations about characters in this chapter are not meant to be comprehensive, and I want related questions – about, say, the slippery interactions between implied authors and characters, or the exchanges between characters with each other – to be open questions, open sites of investigation. But these issues do make a couple things clear: lyric poems need not be solitary, and they need not be firmly of one mind since poems can become places where living interactions between persons play out. These interactions are usually anchored}
Despite the fact that many exchanges between speakers and characters are rife with frustration or even animosity, exchange involves fulfillment in that something is worked out or clarified – even if it is only the muddled, layered misunderstandings that constitute many relationships. In Hardy’s “The Face at the Casement,” for instance, the speaker torments his lover’s dying suitor by putting his arm around his lover while the suitor watches; the poem ends with the speaker learning that love is not only ‘brave and sweet,’ but also “Cruel as the grave.”

In Robinson’s “Cliff Klingenhagen,” the speaker remains perplexed about why Klingenhagen would offer the speaker the glass of wine and take the glass of wormwood for himself – but he knows that this riddle is important. In both cases, these discoveries are surprises; exchange allows a poem’s speaker to approach another closely enough so as to learn something (think again of “Resolution and Independence” or of Heaney’s depiction of how “I was X and she was o”).

Yet there are poems where exchange functions more harmoniously, and lyric becomes a place to affirm or consolidate satisfying relationships. James Merrill is a poet from the midcentury generation to whom I could have devoted a full chapter: his poem “Investiture at Cecconi’s” – written about and dedicated to his dying friend and supporter, the critic David Kalstone – provides an example of such an affirmative exchange.

**Investiture at Cecconi’s**

*for David Kalstone*

Caro, that dream (after the diagnosis)
found me losing patience outside the door of
"our" Venetian tailor. I wanted evening
clothes for the new year.

---


98 Recognizing such poems can help us see how lyric sometimes become a means of greeting and listening to (rather than shunning) others.

99 Merrill is also a poet who reminds us that closed forms need not imply isolated lyrics. Open forms were useful to many midcentury poets trying to break out toward others, but writing in open forms is not a prerequisite of writing compelling poems about other people. For instance, Merrill’s poem here is in loose Sapphic meter.
Then a bulb went on. The old woman, she who stitches dawn to dusk in his back room, opened one suspicious inch, all the while exclaiming over the late hour—

Fabrics? patterns? those the proprietor must show by day, not now — till a lightning insight cracks her face wide: *Ma! the Signore’s here to try on his new robe!*

Robe? She nods me onward. The mirror triptych summons three bent crones she diffracted into back from no known space. They converge by magic, arms full of moonlight.

Up my own arms glistening sleeves are drawn. Cool silk in grave, white folds—Oriental mourning—sheathes me, throat to ankles. I turn to face her, uncomprehending.

*Thank your friend, she cackles, the Professore!* 
Wonderstruck I sway, like a tree of tears. You—miles away, sick, fearful—have yet arranged this heartstopping present.\(^{100}\)

Despite the old woman featuring far more prominently in the action of the poem than Kalstone does, the poem seems most interested in the critic who becomes its principal character. Kalstone transforms himself from a closed “sick, fearful” and dying man whose script is already written, to an open, still vital, giver of surprise gifts. In fact, Kalstone is also a magician whose “crone” becomes his familiar, drawing the “glistening” sleeves up Merrill’s arm. The open pole of character swings out to address Merrill too through this magic as the poet goes from impatiently dealing with a tedious errand and a suspicious woman, to being suddenly sheathed in silk, “wonderstruck” in a room of “lightning insight[s].” The tailor meanwhile becomes a sort of closed, specialist intermediary who transmits openness from critic to poet.\(^{101}\)

Ultimately, the poem is about the relationship between Merrill and Kalstone (more than it is about individual characters or any transformations thereof), and it attempts to summarize that

---


\(^{101}\) Of course, one might read the poem with a greater interest in the tailor, but I don’t think that’s what Merrill is encouraging, nor would such a reading help us learn about exchange.
relationship by highlighting a single, particularly meaningful exchange. After all, Kalstone here is not just giving a terrific gift, but doing so while mortally ill: in the very next poem in *The Inner Room*, the critic has died, and thus his thoughtfulness (even if only dreamed) seems all the more impressive. As I suggested before, just as creating a closed character can involve framing a life that has distorted itself, creating an open one can involve selecting the precise moment or instance of a vitality that overflows its circumstances. And the framing of this particular instance of gift giving is itself a central component of the poem’s exchange: for though Kalstone’s gift governs the transformations in the poem, the poem itself can be read as a thank-you note and pre-elegy given in surprise and gratitude. And the gratitude, we may imagine, is for more than the robe: we are invited to see the poem as the culmination of Merrill’s friendship with a man who was also an astute reader and important supporter of the poet. The transformations in the poem, in other words, are governed by compressed, representative exchanges of love and gratitude in the last moments before loss.

The poem again demonstrates that a little concrete description of a character can bring external presence and vitality into a poem and invite our interest in knowing something about that character. Merely supplying an Italian endearment (Caro), a real name in a dedication, an inside reference to a shared tailor and part of Italy, and a brief mentioning of diagnosis and disease, gives Kalstone’s presence palpable authority. Poems can provide rich portraits, but they can also give us bright glimpses of another’s life and energies – say as givers of tasteful, lavish, and unlikely gifts – before the landscape again goes dark.102

However, the exchange in the poem is not purely triumphant. Though in the main, the poem expresses triumph and gratitude, a deathly struggle also underlies it like background music or the predecessor image found under a painting. After all, much of Kalstone’s gift suggests mortality as *though his magic is being tapped from his own death*: the old woman who does his bidding, stitching “dawn to dusk” and turning into three “bent crones” recalls the Parcae; the silk

---

102 Admittedly, description of another and physical exchanges between poet and character usually can’t occur at the same time. In poems invested in dramatizing exchanges between a poet and an open character, we may often find that the open other lingers somewhere near the far end of the open pole, and that the particulars we learn about the character are fairly limited. Yet this is not a hard-and-fast rule: a poet can also, say, describe an open character at length only to then have an important interaction with them.
is compared to “Oriental mourning”; and there is the gentle suggestion that the old woman is dressing Merrill in funeral clothes as he’s ‘sheathed’ in “grave, white fold” from “throat to ankles.”

Ultimately, I think Merrill partakes of Kalstone’s openness since the poet is transported from the realm of tiresome errands into one of errant unpredictable magic and gratitude. And yet, underlying that change, Merrill momentarily undergoes closed transformations as well, morphing in his ‘sheath,’ into something “like a tree of tears.” Being dressed in the “heartstopping present” makes it for an instant as though Merrill were dying instead of Kalstone; or were swallowing Kalstone’s dying, taking Kalstone’s closed and artificial lyric contortions into himself. This can be read in different ways: is this something Kalstone is doing to him? Could there be a small echo of aggression in giving a lavish gift to someone who, unlike you, is permitted to live? Should these transformations be read in terms of self-recrimination, survivor’s guilt? Could Merrill be directing the enclosing magic of lyric toward himself as an act of sympathy and mourning? I don’t think we need to pick a single option; rather, I want to suggest that the unresolved deathly exchanges taking place underneath the poem’s exchange of gift and gratitude lend “Investiture” some of its pathos, and demonstrate how subtly and intimately involved with another’s life lyric exchange can be – even “after the diagnosis,” during that life’s last moments.103

I should add that the notion that the poem takes place in a dream strengthens both types of exchange – satisfying and deathly. It strengthens satisfying exchange because the dream’s added level of mediation and distance makes its overcoming all the more impressive. After all, though the poem is set within a dream, it is one that reaches outwards by dedicating itself to Kalstone, by addressing the critic directly, and by evoking Kalstone’s real illness and making two inside-references to a shared tailor. Moreover, the poem mentions the “dream” only once in the first-line and then moves from surreal transforming magics to the resolution of the gift in the last stanza that provides a literal explanation for what has been occurring. It is thus as though the exchange breaks through the enclosures of both dream and poem, as it does across the obstacles of distance and sickness: real or not the gift then becomes a consummating symbol for the poet’s love and gratitude for Kalstone’s real support that allows Merrill to pay tribute to his relationship to the critic in spite of the forces arrayed against them.

However, framing the poem as taking place within a dream can also be read as strengthening deathly exchange. The ambiguity of this is part of its strength: the distance from Kalstone implied by (the single-mention of) the dream’s added level of mediation suggests Kalstone’s deathliness, but without insisting on it. The deathly transformations Merrill undergoes then likewise gain in significance (in their suggestions of self-recrimination and mourning) as Merrill starts to relate to Kalstone as a crone/ghost who is haunting him and not just as a living person who can still give gifts and be thanked. There may be some ‘selfish’ fear here too: after all Merrill was concerned for his own health at this point in his life, and would eventually die of a heart attack (the “heartstopping present”), his body weakened by the AIDS that would kill Kalstone (Timothy Materer, “James Merrill’s Late Poetry: AIDS and the ‘Stripping Process,” Arizona Quarterly 64, no.2 [Summer 2008], 123-145, 127-8). However, the dreamy unreality of the situation and Kalstone as corpse or deadly emissary are not what end up being emphasized. The glad, “wonderstruck” tone of the ending with its emphasis on Kalstone’s gift being giving in spite of distance, fear, and sickness, to me suggests that this deathliness remains secondary to the poem’s triumphant gratitude directed toward a living person, though the deathliness remains essential to the poem’s pathos as felt in the sharp double-edge of its final two words. The two types of
The bulk of this book will not attempt to persuade by focusing on arguments about literary history or genre per se, but by providing rich case-studies that dive into the work of my exemplary four poets and their contemporaries and successors. Correspondingly, the following chapters also won’t be scrupulously concerned with character-terms, though my hope is that these terms will prove helpful when looking at individual poets whose poetry exemplifies, complicates, and exceeds them. For now, I will be quite content if these terms help demonstrate that specific others can be powerful participants in the making of a social lyric poetry.

In light of that goal, though, it may be useful to consider one last character-term, that of a poet’s *town*, which can be defined as the sum total of the characters we encounter over the course of a poet’s career. My notion has its origin in Robinson’s Tilbury Town, and Masters’ Spoon River;¹⁰⁵ these poets both organize their characters by anchoring them in a single location, not too densely populated. Since characters are imagined as living in the same place, added figures exchange allow the consummation of a friendship to take place, bolded and shadowed by the void that will be left by that friendship after it is over.

¹⁰⁴ My interest in exchange may help suggest why the dramatic monologue doesn’t figure prominently in my account of lyric character: I am most interested in poems where there is a separation between speaker/authorial presence and character, so that there is the possibility for an interaction between the two. Since dramatic monologues speak from the position of the fictional character, it’s harder for such interaction to take place (though it might take place, say, between the speaker and a secondary character). In fact, some critics have seen the dramatic monologue as concerning only inwardness. Robert Langbaum has written of speakers in dramatic monologues as only superficially gesturing outwards, while actually being interested in their Song, “their life’s own meaning” (Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 189). Langbaum adds that in the dramatic monologue “the speaker does not develop outward toward an external ideal, he does not change moral direction as a result of the circumstances; he rather makes the circumstances a part of himself as he develops inward towards an intenser manifestation of his own nature” (Ibid., 200). Langbaum thus presents the dramatic monologue as turning toward the external only in the pursuit of more thorough inwardness. Herbert Tucker has seen the outer world as more important to the dramatic monologue, but principally in how it helps contest, undermine, and ‘jockey for authority’ with the essential inwardness or “charmed circle” of the lyric (Herbert F. Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985], 226-243, 228-30).

I do think many dramatic monologues construct compelling characters who should not be dismissed as mere masks for the author; yet since they are usually written in the first-person, it becomes easier to read these dramatic monologues as masks, and not as serious attempts to portray another (although, of course, distinguishing between a mask and a character can rapidly become tricky). This doesn’t mean I won’t include any characters who emerge via first-person speakers or even via dramatic monologues in this book, only that these are less promising categories for my purposes.

One final note on dramatic monologues: Browning’s characters, I think, can easily be seen in terms of closed and open. Browning’s characters, after all, tend to be either grotesque, contained, rigid, monomaniacal and monstrous (the mad house cell speakers, the Duke, the Bishop, Andrea Del Sarto), or flexible, energetic, spontaneous, and full of lust for life (like Fra Lippo Lippi or even Caliban). Rather than see these characters in Tucker’s terms as satires on isolated lyricism, we might see them as extensions of lyric’s social interest in how people deform themselves or surprise us with unpredictable and unimprisonable energies.

¹⁰⁵ There are older examples, too: consider George Crabbe’s *The Village*. 

71
come to exist only in relation to preceding ones upon whom they in turn shed new light. In the case of Masters, these characters even tell secrets about each other, contradicting each other and deepening our sense of ‘community.’

The organizing-space of the town has continued to be useful even in an urbanized age. Not only has it been used by recent rural poets such as James Wright and Richard Hugo, but it’s also been taken up by poets with no particular connection to rural life: one of the first poems in Louise Glück’s 2010 volume A Village Life, for instance, begins by gathering different kinds of people (young, old, men, women) around a fountain in a town square and then, in subsequent poems, focusing on single characters or groups. The notion of the coterie as reproducing the town within the city, even allows us to think about Frank O’Hara’s poet and painter friends in New York and the regulars of the countercultural San Francisco scene in Thom Gunn’s work in terms of poetic towns.

The notion of the town has several practical advantages: it provides a way of tracking poets’ careers synchronically and diachronically. We can ask synchronic questions about the town overall: is it inhuman – made up of zombies, gods, stones, heavenly auras, and the mighty dead? Or are its inhabitants more often formed of willful flesh-and-blood? Is the town located far from our world, or does it exist under particular historical conditions that we can learn about (and which ones)? What does the makeup of its denizens suggest about its poet’s relationship to others through art? What is the population’s combined force: how do the townspeople speak to or across each other; how do they exist together? Moreover, since each character in the town has a role and place, characters that might seem merely eccentric such as the Pavese’s village drunk gain added weight because they must be related back to the whole.

The town can also point us toward diachronic issues to do with the evolution of a career:

---

106 Glück in fact drew on Cesare Pavese’s portrayals of country life in Italy, and Pavese in turn drew on Masters and Anderson (William Arrowsmith, “Introduction,” Hard Labor, xv). Again, we find some overlap between the short story collection and the volume of social lyrics, and can also see that Masters’ social poetry has played a more important role in the formation of contemporary poetry than is sometimes imagined.

107 Perhaps what remains attractive to poets about the town is that it provides a complete social scene: in the archetypal sense that we see in Glück, a town gives the illusion of showcasing all human types. But the actual limitations on its types is important: a town’s population, like the sum of characters in a Collected Poems, is small enough in number that we can come to know everyone, but not necessarily know everyone well. The town is then small enough to suggest a particular aesthetic while remaining diverse enough to suggest a world.
do the character-types change over time, is the town significantly different from book to book? Do the characters become less ghostly, more psychologically nuanced? Do they become less like strangers and more like family members? And how do these characters change their poet cumulatively; to what degree do they play a role in shuttling a career forward? In my fourth chapter we will see how James Wright’s determined empathy for his fellow haggard Ohioans leads him to seek out whatever open energies they retain – and these energies in turn put pressure on Wright not only to change his depiction of their bearers, but to keep on changing poetic styles and forms. Wright’s case is extreme, but most poets are influenced to some degree by the variety of external pressures their characters wield. In other words, a poet’s town can help us see how the external and social enter into a poet’s work and participate in the making of different kinds of lyrics over time. Though the idea of the town is not required to notice such changes, it can encourage us to read with holistic attention to the arrangements of characters (and not just of types of poems) across time.

A poet’s town can reveal the vital role that others play in the development of a career, but I want to conclude this section by gesturing toward the interruptive, reorienting power that another can come to possess even within an individual poem. In such poems the “but I” of lyric self-determination and identity construction is replaced by the “but he/she” of another’s crucially interruptive presence and voice. In the former case, we find Sappho controversially declaring her beloved more beautiful than armies, and Archilochus iconoclastically throwing away his shield and choosing life instead of honor; in the latter, it is not society, but the confused or self-immersed poet who is in need of correction. Yet to call it ‘correction’ is inadequate. It is rather that an open character can provide crucial reorientation by working in tandem with the receptive poet who remains anchored in his own subjectivity while opening himself to the character’s influence and desires. The exchanges that then take place are negotiations between the anchoring lyric “I” and the character’s own guiding, shaping impulses.

We’ve seen a version of such negotiations already in Kinnell’s poem, but the ‘shaping

---


impulses’ of the character in the following poem are literal: poet and character are pursuing separate artistic projects. The example is from Richard Wilbur (b.1921) who was, like James Merrill, a poet who came of age at midcentury and wrote powerfully about others while continuing to write in closed forms:

“The Writer”

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash
And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark
And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.
It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.\textsuperscript{10}

This is most obviously a poem about how Wilbur comes to perceive his daughter’s openness,\textsuperscript{111} but it’s also a poem about how lyric thinking itself can become a shared social process. The poem enacts Wilbur’s sympathetic reaching out toward his daughter’s struggles, yet this endeavor becomes not so much a product of will, as of intuition and opening oneself up to the right kinds of influences. We first see Wilbur stopped suddenly in the midst of transit between floors, arrested by the sounds of the typewriter: he is being caught off guard, reminded of something that he already knew (since he knows she’s writing a story in particular). This is not an intriguing encounter with a stranger, but a sudden opportunity to re-attune himself to someone deeply known.

Thus, after being caught off guard, Wilbur surrenders to having his too-easy blessing rejected; he then begins carefully tracking his daughter’s vital independence: her silences and clatterings, her unpredictable stops and starts. Yet it is only “as if” she rejects his thought. Also, the daughter’s thinking and presence is delocalized as it comes to possess the house, and the repetition of \textit{again} indicates the ongoingness of the surprising movements of the daughter’s mind and fingers as they follow their own rhythm. Wilbur therefore strives not only to be receptive to his daughter’s task and presence, but also to the ways in which she slips through his own fingers and continues eluding him.\textsuperscript{112}

The form of the poem is itself born out of this respectful parental listening and imagining, and its openness to continual correction and alteration. Wilbur’s pause in the stairwell becomes secondary to the daughter’s pause (“But now it is she who pauses/ As if to reject my thought...”), the interruption of the “But... she” subordinating Wilbur’s arrest to the daughter’s own act of stopping, thinking, and listening. It is no coincidence then that Wilbur sets aside his usual

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{111} We can see right away how the poem serves as a repost to those utopian and philosophically oriented poetics interested only in establishing the value of generalized Otherness, but not in exploring how we might come to value particular others.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{112} Again, lyric here helps to remove the ‘wadding of stupidity,’ so that Wilbur can perceive his daughter’s surprising strangeness.
\end{flushright}
rhymes and iambs for a form that alternates between smooth anapestic gallops and ‘bunched clamors,’ three and five beat lines. This is a form that models itself upon and struggles to be responsive to the daughter’s creative rhythms.

The following iambic and anapestic lines, for instance, proceed easily and smoothly: the first one’s three stresses enact the daughter’s pause in the way we hear their brevity against the subsequent five-beat line; that five-beat line then expresses both the ease of Wilbur’s thought’s figure and the totality with which it is rejected as the daughter’s silence sweeps away Wilbur’s initials reckonings:

But NOW it is SHE who PAUSes,
As IF to rejECT my THOUGHT and its EASy FIgure.

Throughout the poem form is a product of imitation, of listening carefully and then of adapting and recalibrating. In the lines which follow those above, the poem is suddenly brought up short again by the contraction to three beats and by the dangled prepositional “in which” followed by a stanza break. A pause is thereby created in which the greatening stillness of the daughter’s thinking can gather resonance:

A stillness greatens, in which
The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

The dangled meditative pause in turn gives way to a line whose spondaic energies carry a fourth stress (The WHOLE HOUSE SEEMS to be THINKing), and which thereby seems to strain and punch its way through to the subsequent line’s achieved thought and clamor of keys. The extension of the middle line even allows for the prepositional phrase “with a bunched clamor” to occur as a kind of excess that spills over onto the third line of the stanza where a caesural comma brings it up short. Again, Wilbur is creating a form responsive to his daughter’s improvisations – her glidings and stutterings – through which he may attune himself to her ongoing unpredictability.

Form here is unpredictable: it requires social ‘luck,’ a kind of ‘sleek, iridescent’ magic
made possible only by releasing control, and by letting the ship of the poem be hijacked first by the daughter, and then by the sudden memory of the starling who both speaker and daughter helped to save. In both cases, part of what is at risk is ‘right movement,’ navigation – first the lucky passage of the ship-like writing room with its “great cargo,” and then the starling’s trial-and-error struggle to escape. Musically, navigation is crucial as well, as in order to return to the poem’s initial, easy anapestic lyricism (In her ROOM at the PROW of the HOUSE), we must navigate through the various contractions to three beat lines, and all the slowings and digressions of the poem’s lists, extra prepositional phrases, qualifiers, and caesuras (I count thirteen caesuras in the last sixteen lines of the poem). It is these deferrals and side-paths that make it possible for the poem’s ultimate return to an anapestic “smooth course” (And CLEARing the SILL of the WORLD) to mean something – in the same way that Wilbur is able to return to his initially rejected wish and have it matter. In order to uncover ‘right movement,’ Wilbur must first let his daughter lead him astray.

While his daughter struggles to write, Wilbur struggles to be open to her influence and presence in the right ways. Ultimately, he succeeds: by opening himself up to the seriousness of his daughter’s endeavor to her, by letting that seriousness take its time to be understood and processed via a resort to a third creature – the stakes of whose movements are even clearer and perhaps even more easily dismissible – Wilbur can temporarily rediscover the importance underlying all attempts at writing. Perversely, it is the very acknowledgment that potentially insignificant things like starlings and girls’ stories can matter as much as the concerns of a ‘serious adult poet,’ that expands the speaker and allows his poetry to matter.114

Being taken off course and led astray here means that Wilbur must temporarily lose himself. By letting himself be shunted aside to the stairwell, putting his daughter and then the starling into the lyric cell of the shut room (and we should see how the translation of stanza as room hovers behind this poem); by letting his daughter and not himself animate the whole house


114 Lyric being sidelined by external realities can perversely make it matter more: it is not sacrificed (ala Izenberg) but expanded by addressing worlds beyond itself.
with her thinking; and by letting his love for his daughter make him into not a leading but a supporting character; Wilbur is able temporarily to expand the stakes of lyric, and to see that “It is always a matter... Of life or death.” There is even a faint echo here of Wyatt’s “Galley” in the way the nautical metaphor governs the speaker’s passage “‘Tween rock and rock.” However, whereas Wyatt’s master (i.e. Love) steers him “with cruelness,” Wilbur places his daughter in the ship, makes her the protagonist, and wishes for the success of her independent journey. This is a far cry from the view of lyric as governed by an autonomous “I” “firmly in the driver’s seat...firmly in control of all the meaning” (Bob Perelman).

In fact, the idea of the lyric cell is both undermined and transformed: it is undermined because the solitary struggles and risky maneuvers within the shut room are observed and taken up by the poet and then later by both poet and daughter. The last image in the poem is of the starling escaping that room and clearing the sill of the world; it is this suggestion of boundaries crossed that provides half of the poem’s sense of triumph.

The other half is that the lyric cell is transformed: it becomes a means of respecting another’s boundaries and a form of love rather than an isolation chamber. After all, it is Wilbur’s careful respect for and openness to his daughter’s difference, which allows him to enter into an improved relation to her. He has allowed her to become the uninterrupted heroic navigator/writer; he has let her door remain closed and allowed just his thinking about her – and his attention to her sounds through the door – to guide him.

This care is perhaps what allows Wilbur to join his daughter in memory in the poem’s second half, and for them to become partners outside the room. As they carefully move the sash aside, and watch for “a helpless hour” through the now cracked-open door, father and daughter become parent-figures and reader-interpreters together, surrendering mastery and risking their feelings on someone else’s efforts (it is no coincidence that the starling rises triumphantly from the writerly “chair-back”). Wilbur, in other words, is rewarded with companionship and a kind of mutual understanding. Ultimately, though, he must return to the initial predicament of separation


116 Again, much of the solitude here is just the ubiquitous solitude of having separate minds; rather than turning away company, lyric challenges company’s normally accepted limits. To see lyric as aloof then is as mistaken as thinking that someone who skips a party, and chooses to stay home and read a novel, is not interested in other people.
wherein the daughter is alone with the door firmly shut, and he is ignorant of whether or not she will win an equivalent of the starling’s success. In this way, Wilbur is able to strike the right balance between being present with his daughter, and keeping his distance from her as he ultimately still lets her risk failure and even closed transformations into a “dark,/ And iridescent creature,” a glove, or a humped thing.

Perhaps, the ‘loneliness’ of lyric that keeps that door shut has some usefulness, but has been misread; perhaps it need not represent ‘loneliness’ at all, but can amount to a form of being more intimately and carefully together. Admittedly, as in Kinnell’s and Catullus’s poems, we remain solidly in the speaker’s perspective: “The Writer” is not a dialogue in the sense of two people speaking back and forth, nor is it a collage wherein different voices are each given space to speak. Instead, the poem places us firmly inside a single point of view as it carefully approaches and is deeply contested by another; the poem thereby demonstrates that a singly voiced lyric need not imply writerly control, solitude, or interest only in the self. It may even involve less self-interest than works that are multiply voiced: we can project ourselves onto the ‘other’ people in novels – or onto the Is of lyric – but it is harder to project oneself onto the character in an other-directed lyric, the daughter who must live her own life behind her closed door. “The Writer” then is a poem that suggests that the most powerful lyricism, the ability to sing or celebrate, can depend on our ability to notice, listen to, and then risk it all on another’s struggle, another’s story.117

** Open Questions **

The poems we’ve looked at by Richard Wilbur (b.1921), James Merrill (b.1926), and Galway Kinnell (b.1927) are representative of the post-midcentury social trend I’ve been describing. These poets’ work – and the work of the four poets that the following chapters will be examining – point us toward the aesthetic benefits of looking closely at the role of others in lyric poems. Yet how far do such benefits extend? In some poems the slightness of the

---

117 The fact that she’s writing a story and not a poem both signals her difference from her father, and provides a gentle reminder that we need not have stories to have characters.
representation of other people may make them seem insignificant; sometimes even the most generous social reading will not convince us that the other or addressee is actually that important to a poem; and sometimes a mind thinking abstractly of another will prove insufficient, and we will want a little more of that other to coalesce for them to merit consideration as a character.

Social lyric reading should not be applied to the same degree in all cases: we should look to the individual poet and poem, as well as to the tradition the poet is working in, the poet’s biography, and their social and cultural context, to tell us something about how important their characters might be (and to what degree these characters should be treated as different from the general mass of a poem’s words, ideas, and images). We might also just ask ourselves in each case what will be lost if we refuse to take, say, Sappho’s radiant beloved (Fragment 31) or her brother in trouble with a woman (Fragment 15) – or Shakespeare’s ethereal young gentleman or his dark lady – as seriously as each poet seems to. And to some degree these should be open questions. Even for poets who clearly refer us to particular others and historical situations – say Wilfred Owen or Yusef Komunyakaa in their war poems; or Frost in his poems of rural life in New Hampshire; or Hardy in his poems about his dead wife – there are no set rules for how much these others should be read into, researched, or wondered about.

Sometimes, though, it will seem that we need not read into a poem’s characters at all: I have talked about characters who are reducible to words as ‘very closed characters,’ but to do

---

118 For instance, if we take the sonnets as being purely about language, we miss the way that in Sonnet 138 (“When my love swears that she is made of truth/ I do believe her, though I know she lies”) or Sonnet 144 (“Two loves I have of comfort and despair...The better angel is a man right fair,/ The worser spirit a woman coloured ill”) the poem’s knots of language are formed and tightened by the speaker’s entanglements in tricky social predicaments. In both sonnets the speaker’s single vantage opens into a cat’s cradle of cross-purposed desires (“Therefore I lie with her and she with me,/ And in our faults by lies we flatt...” “To win me soon to hell, my female evil/ Tempteth my better angel from my side,/ And would corrupt my saint to be a devil”) (William Shakespeare, The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 268-9). The intricacies of language here are driven by the byzantine intricacies of human relationships, their paradoxes and perversities.

119 Ben Jonson’s poems provide another means of considering the benefits and limits of my social model of lyric reading. Many of Jonson’s poems are closed epitaphs, satiric epigrams, and poems of idealizing praise. It might seem more convincing then, to think of these poems as interested in exploring standards of behavior, or in elegantly expressing appropriate courtly stances, than as deeply interested in particular others. Nevertheless, many of Jonson’s poems have a practical everyday wisdom that keeps their ideals from seeming too otherworldly or detached. In “To Penshurst” for instance, we meet farmers who are allowed into the eponymous country house to bring food to sell as well as daughters in search of husbands; we find the lady of the house readying the rooms for chance drop ins; we find the lord determining a course of education for his children, and thinking about what he owes to commoners. In other words, we see ideals and codes of conduct only in relation to what is possible for tangible, culturally-specific beings (Jonson, Complete Poems, 95-8). Reading Jonson’s poems as containing only a series of closed characters, or as not being about people at all, would cause us to miss how his ideals are born out of an intense interest in others – an awareness of how they go awry and misbehave, and of what practical measures they might adopt to better conduct themselves.
so is still to ascribe significance to character – and it’s true that to do so with some poets is to read them against the grain. Undeniably, some poets are simply not very interested in others; what I’ve been arguing, though, is that we should not be too quick to dismiss the characters in poems as mere excuses for writing, dramatic props, or metaphors for an audience. Instead, we should keep them in mind as wild cards that can behave unpredictably, come to life when we least expect it, and charge lyrics with crucial external energies that can help us see them as being porous and flexible. There are, for instance, times when even the vous of lyric address that are attached only to very slight descriptions of their addressees can indicate serious interest in another; at such times, we find that a poem’s offered pleasures depend on its palpable bending and reaching out toward that other person.120

My wish has not been to provide a complete description of the possibilities of social lyric reading anymore than it has been to provide a full history of lyric and its discontents or of the transition from modernism to postmodernism in American poetry. Rather, I’ve wished to be suggestive rather than comprehensive; I will be pleased if my reader is convinced that there might be something important to be gained by taking another look at others in lyric, and that American poetry starting at the end of the 1950s might be a good place to begin. Before closing, though, I want to acknowledge some unanswered questions that this chapter might have raised. Some of these questions will be addressed to greater or lesser degrees in the following pages, and some will not; since my hope is that this book will draw attention to the social possibilities of lyric, I hope that these questions will serve as prompts and enticements for further inquiry. They are as follows:

120 For instance, in Keats’s epistolary poem “To Charles Cowden Clarke,” the poet recalls an evening well spent
with Clarke. Though some of Clarke’s attributes (such as his learning) are implied, we don’t learn a lot about him, and he’s present only in an abstract way throughout much of the poem. Nevertheless, much of the palpable energy of the poem is to be found in Keats’s desire to please and impress his mentor – and in the way his uncertainty at his ability to do so is overcome by his pleasure in improvising imperfect couplets addressed to Clarke (“yet should these rhymings please,/ I shall roll on the grass with two-fold ease” (Keats, Complete Poems, 70)). In other words, we feel that Keats here has someone quite specific in mind.

William Waters’ book Poetry’s Touch provides a nuanced account of how the ‘yous’ in many lyrics seem to address the reader even while supposedly addressing a particular other. Waters, though points out that attributions of address “can be resolved in any of several, perhaps equally plausible ways” (Waters, Poetry’s Touch, 14). I do not mean to refute the idea that second-person address can reach out toward a reader in subtle and slippery ways (e.g. John Ashbery’s “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”); however, my view is that much attention has already been paid to the reader as object of address, and that this sometimes prevents us from noticing the importance of particular addressed others.
Where is the reader in all of this? Can we really think of character in isolation from the reader (William Waters makes a compelling case that we can’t). Might it be useful to see the two as interacting, perhaps in some of the ways that speaker and character interact? And what do we make of poems that contain a threadbare you or provide only the smallest glimpse of another? What, in other words, happens when the speaker seems genuinely interested in someone who isn’t the reader, yet where that someone is so vague and inchoate that they hardly seem to qualify as a character, open or closed?

What about the dramatic monologue? I’ve mostly been focusing on poems where speaker and character are separate because such poems seem more likely to make us treat their character as an other and not simply as a mask for the speaker. But surely some dramatic monologues should not just be seen as masks. How do we tell when a character is meant to be read as a mask vs. a character; does it alter the nature of lyric character when both of these possibilities are maintained? And does it alter a character when they are only encountered via an I who is a character him or herself?

Is there a moral valence to closed character? Can you be open and be a murderer? How closely is selection of open character tied to a poet’s sense of ethics?

What about animals? I mentioned earlier that animals in lyric can shock with open presence – a “zero at the bone” – but is that the whole story? What about the extended takes on animals that we find in Clare, Rilke, Bishop, or Ted Hughes?

Why are three of my four main poets gay, and why is so much recent social poetry written by men? How much is this due to a wish to subvert gender paradigms (that might expect women to be socially oriented and sentimental while expecting men to be independently oriented and aloof)?

How exceptional is the midcentury American lyric in its focus on others? I’ve suggested reasons why this period might have an unusually high social orientation, but how common or uncommon are such socially oriented periods?

Hopefully these questions will linger productively in the background as this book turns to the careers of my four main poets. These poets are all strong examples of the social turn I’ve been discussing, and in the following chapters I’ll provide some description of the ways that each conceived of and reacted to modernism and New Criticism. As we’ll see, these poets all exhibited a deep and lasting commitment to writing about more than just themselves, yet each also conceived of his or her own nuanced versions of the social possibilities of lyric. The main focus of each subsequent chapter, then, will be on exploring the uniquely rich social poetry each has left us. The way these four poets exemplify this chapter’s claims should be apparent, and our
task now is the pleasurable one of seeing how they complicate and exceed them. We’ll begin with Thom Gunn’s move to America in 1954 – a move that we can see as beginning his long journey out of isolation.
Thom Gunn I: Closed and Open

It may seem odd to begin my study of post-New Critical American poets with a British poet first associated with The Movement in England. Yet, of my four poets, Thom Gunn perhaps provides the most dramatic embodiment of the historical narrative that I’ve been telling. His multi-decade personal attraction to the confining, isolated lyric and to lyrics that turn outward toward others, make his career more compellingly emblematic of the social turn around 1960 than do the careers of Adrienne Rich (whose formal rebellions after her second book make a sheerer break), James Wright (who manages to write powerfully of others even in his first books written in traditional forms), and Frank O’Hara (over whose published career the New Critical style never holds much sway).

It’s true that like both Wright and Rich, Gunn’s style and temperament relaxes over time: starting in the 1960s and ‘70s, he begins writing in free verse as well as meter and a “humane impulse” to write sympathetically about contemporary others begins to fill his poems. Yet, unlike these other poets, Gunn continues to write in meter just as often as in free verse, and, more importantly, as I will argue, he retains his early penchant for controlling severity and (en)closed isolationism alongside his new sociability. I’ll begin then first by looking at all the remarkable ways in which Gunn’s aesthetic does change dramatically mid-career, and I’ll show how this change provides a compelling example of my overall historical narrative. Then, for the rest of my discussion, I’ll show how Gunn’s continuing penchant for controlling isolation works in combination with his wish for new sociable openness to create a unique sort of open character.

**

In many ways Gunn fits my narrative of a social turn around 1960 very well – so well, in fact, that some aspects of Gunn’s turn have already been described: “Once aloof, moated, ‘condemned to be an individual,’” writes Blake Morrison, “Gunn now embarks on a thrilling mission to dissolve, melt, commune, share, belong.”1 Or Martin Dodsworth: “As the ‘patina of

---

1 Blake Morrison, “Thom Gunn,” Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography Volume 8: Contemporary Writers, 1960 to
“self” gives way to consciousness of the other person’s living, physical presence, so the speaker’s world opens up to include the domain of others... It has already been suggested that this is a characteristic move in Gunn’s poetry particularly in the books succeeding *The Sense of Movement*. Gunn even fits my timeline well: the first book in which Gunn’s meter loosens to syllabics, and in which he starts writing more humanely about the external world – *My Sad Captains* – comes out in 1961. And importantly, Gunn writes all of the books where he ‘opens up to include the domain of others’ in America. Even though Gunn is born in England and writes his first book there, and even though he is in many ways an idiosyncratic maverick, the setting of his ‘thaw’ and his opening up to the domain of others plays an important role in them. In fact, I think we can understand Thom Gunn’s journey to the U.S. in 1954 – just as the New Critical hegemony is beginning to incite rebellion – as triggering the slow, but profound shift in Gunn’s poetry from his early harsh, formal involution to the “later, better” “social” poetry (Stephen Burt).

For Gunn’s early experience first with the Movement in England and then with Yvor Winters at Stanford is actually quite similar to the experience of many American poets in the 1950s living under New Criticism. The Movement is now often understood as a reactionary effort to calm poetry and tamp it down after the perceived excesses of Modernism. In fact, in his introduction to *New Lines*, an anthology of Movement poetry, Robert Conquest describes the Movement through a series of negatives: it submits “to no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands... free from both mystical and logical compulsions...[having] a refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language...[and] a negative determination to avoid bad principles.” When taken together we can see in these qualities a wish for a more controllable, delimited poetry with clearer rules. And in many ways Gunn’s early work could qualify as such a poetry: like the Movement at large,

---


Gunn’s early work ignored modernism, returned to plain-style rhyme and meter, and embraced “rational structure and comprehensible language.” Gunn might not have shared all the Movement characteristics outlined above, and he may even have been correct in claiming that the Movement was merely a period style and not a true literary movement, but it was most likely still a powerful influence on him.

Above all, the Movement must have encouraged and heightened Gunn’s insularity. Formal care, rejection of modernism, the return to a traditional past, and a strict set of don’ts to rival Ezra Pound’s all can be seen as forces of conservatism and recuperation – forces that turn from the new back to the known. Correspondingly, Gunn’s first book Fighting Terms (1954) contains very formal, accomplished, and literary poetry that can sometimes seem like a denial of its own time. For instance, the book is chock-full of literary allusions and personas such as Achilles, Lazarus, Helen of Troy, Shelley, Paphlagonian Kings, hawking, etc. Even the soldiers taken from Gunn’s contemporary world have something deathly and mildewed about them (I’ll expand on this shortly). America will change Gunn’s interests dramatically: for instance, during his mid-career shift, Gunn will write an ebullient essay on Gary Snyder praising his poems for their sharp attention to the particulars of the external world. But if Snyder and America represent new externally-directed attentiveness, the Movement represents just the opposite. Donald Davie, for instance, directly criticizes “the striking absence from Movement poetry of outward and non-human things apprehended crisply for their own sakes.” Whether the Movement was a true literary movement or just a period style, we can see it as a force similar to New Criticism that acts upon Gunn to write insular poetry that treats poetic tradition as a kind of refuge from a disorienting modernism and contemporary world rather than as a series of tools for facing them.

And if Gunn’s contemporary England makes him want to withdraw into a tradition that he can privately control – a tradition of rigorous meter and copious literary references free of ‘mystical compulsions,’ ‘irrational’ language, and externality – then initially America is not

---


86
much better. In 1954, Gunn emigrates to the U.S., settles in Stanford, and begins studying with the poet-critic Yvor Winters who had close, if fraught, ties to the New Critics. Winters believed strongly in the moral importance of poetry and its corresponding need for clarity in articulating moral positions, and these views ran counter to New Critical beliefs in autonomy and the heresy of paraphrase. Hence, Winters did not completely believe in confining poetry to a purely aesthetic realm. Winters would also insist that Gunn read Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, and in some ways, then, was a mentor who did encourage Gunn to loosen up and turn outwards.

Yet Winters also created a rigidly parochial and even claustrophobic climate in which to write poetry. His views were extreme and thorough enough that they created a kind of closed system unto themselves. Though Winters began as a modernist-disciple, by the time he taught Gunn, his tastes had narrowed. Like the Movement he was “in reaction against residual Romanticism and the excesses of Modernism” and “preached a return to orthodox meter and the value to poetry of rational argument” (Clive Wilmer). But Winters did more than turn his back on modernism: by the time Gunn met him, Winters had begun to advocate for an eccentric and increasingly narrow version of the canon tied to his somewhat severe sense of morality.

Winters’ version of poetry, then, fits James Breslin’s description of the escapist mid-century lyric. As we’ve seen, Breslin argues that this lyric was meant to be an antidote to precarious times, an escape from the “splintered, chaotic world” into a belief that it could all be managed by “the gentle imposition of timeless traditional forms” that could be “sealed... transcendent, safe....” Even if Winters’ emphasis on the morality of poetry could seem to require

---

7 Once when he mentioned the New Critics, Winters added “of whom I am sometimes reputed to be one” (Yvor Winters, The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1957), 81).


9 Clive Wilmer, In and Out of the Movement, 209.

10 Robert Archambeau, Laureates and Heretics, 5.
some responsiveness to the world, the strictness of his rules could make poetry seem like an insular, closed system. Here’s Gunn on Winters in a 1981-essay:

For some of his students his formulations provided a refuge, a harmonious world where everything had already been decided in accordance with certain rules. It became a temporary or lifelong asylum for those who might otherwise have fallen into the arms of a church or a political party. The attraction lay in the logical completeness with which he had worked out his ideas, and such students became disciples in a literal sense, limiting themselves to another man’s world.

(Gunn’s emphasis)

Gunn himself suggests here that Winters’ exclusive rules created a “refuge” of “harmonious” insularity. And this insularity comes at the cost not only of “limiting” one’s own world, but also of turning away from the contemporary one. In another late essay, Gunn adds that Winters “conception of a poem was too rigid, excluding in practice much of what I could not but consider good poetry, let us say ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’ and ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower’...[and that the] rigidity seemed to be the result of what I can only call an increasing distaste for the particulars of existence.”

Perhaps this distaste is the reason why Winters never brought the “language of his time” into his poetry, preferring to use that of another age (Robert Hass). Hence, Winters rejects modernism, and also much of the world around him; a Thom Gunn who already had a penchant for writing hyper-literary, formal poetry about the existentialist and heroic struggles of an isolated self would then have found in Winters a source of powerful affirmation and encouragement.

In sum, despite being British, Gunn’s formative poetic experiences were actually quite compatible with those of a contemporary American attending Kenyon College in the 1950s. “I grew up when the New Criticism was at its height,” Gunn says in a 1995 interview, “and I took

---

11 I think we can apply Breslin’s description to the Movement’s blanket rejection of Modernism in addition to the New Critical dilution of it: in both cases there is a desire to return to something tamer that can be more easily controlled – and we’ve already seen that the Movement and New Criticism have certain strong overlaps. And though Winters is a unique case who doesn’t fit perfectly into either group, he does fit James Breslin’s escapist lyric in his own way.


some of the things the New Critics said very literally.”\textsuperscript{15} Admittedly, Gunn’s early books are not totally isolated: they do contain characters. But in the same way that Winters’ disciples were ‘limited to another man’s world’ where ‘everything had already been decided for them’ so too are Gunn’s early characters limited and ordered about: these characters are mostly closed and lacking in both agency and independent life. In many ways, the rest of Gunn’s career is taken up with loosening that control, and making room for an independent world – and the others who reside within it. James Campbell puts it as follows:

> Attentiveness to the sound and smell of the external world – light, nature, friends, household pets, neighborhood hustlers – is what most distinguishes the later poetry from the hard, shining metres that made Gunn such a powerful presence at the beginning of his career. It is more than an aesthetic shift. It is, as he said of Gary Snyder, attentiveness as ‘a form of moral discipline’, a gradual and entirely personal adaptation to a new world order.\textsuperscript{16}

The poetry of the rigidly closed system – whether it’s a version of New Criticism, the Movement, or Winters-ism – is not a poetry that’s responsive to another’s radical freedom and independent forms of meaning-making.

I don’t mean suggest that the Movement and Winters entirely account for Gunn’s early rigid control, severity, and involution. For instance, Gunn’s sexuality certainly had something to do with it: as other critics have discussed, Gunn was a gay poet whose poetry was deeply in the closet in his first books, and the soldiers and bikers of his early poems can be read as complex figures of desire and its containment.\textsuperscript{17} What I am arguing, though, is that Gunn’s early “unhappy” poetry (as he’ll later characterize it\textsuperscript{18}) has some of the same sources and problems as the New Critical lyric, and that it also puts him in a position where he can turn outward and discover the more fulfilling social poetry that is characteristic of the generation that comes of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{16} James Campbell, “Thom Gunn, Anglo-American Poet.” \textit{Agenda} 27, no. 2-3 [1999], 70-74, 74.

\textsuperscript{17} A complete account of Gunn’s origins would have to include the climate of postwar Britain, Gunn’s upbringing and the effect of his beloved mother’s suicide when he was 15, and his experiences with F.R. Leavis at Cambridge, among other things.


\textsuperscript{19} Paul Giles makes Gunn sound almost exactly like one of Breslin’s breakthrough poets with the caveat that Gunn’s meters loosen instead of fall away: “Whereas his earlier poetry of the 1950s strove to define objects and ideas within the boundaries of a
Before examining this turn, though, it might be helpful to take more of a look at the early Gunn’s version of the closed character. As one might expect of an insular poetry, Gunn’s characters lack independent life: his bored demobbed soldiers and his existentialist bikers may be drawn from the world, but once they enter into an early Gunn poem it’s hard to imagine them ever leaving it again. Instead, they become mere props or exemplars of Gunn’s gray emotional climate; of his feelings of rigidity and boredom; of his own existentialist (at times quasi-fascistic) reckonings about how to live in the modern world; and of his unacceptable sexual desires and wishes for self-containment. Meanwhile, the fact that so many of Gunn’s characters are not taken from his surrounding world, but were already famous religious, literary, or historical figures only enhances the general climate of deathliness in the early work. Since most of Gunn’s early characters exist only in books or artworks (e.g. Achilles, Lazarus, Helen, the figures in a painting by Carl Timner, Adolphe and Fabrice, Julian the Apostate, Jesus and Mary, St. Martin, Merlin), they can seem artificial or what I called ‘mildewy’ earlier. For if most of Gunn’s characters are already known, tagged, and weaned away from independence, then Gunn’s art in general starts to seem like a realm that appropriates people rather than listens to them.

The early characters are more than mildewy, though: they are both hyper-delineated and weirdly obscured; a kind of obscuring, poisonous fog pours over Gunn’s rigid meters and through each character’s individuality. The brutally ‘realistic’ soldier in “Lofty in the Palais de Danse,” for instance, speaks of pursuing glimpses of his dead beloved in each new, tiresome sexual conquest – and in the midst of this process he becomes a grim, disembodied voice that ‘sways’ “in the shadowed street” (CP 10).20 Similarly, the bikers of Gunn’s famous poem “On the Move” are at once clearly defined and blurry (“In goggles, donned impersonality” (39)). Though made of thunder, muscle, and noise they remain plural, ghostly, and abstract: we get few clear images or direct descriptions but instead are told that “Reaching no absolute, in which to

---

20 Thom Gunn, Collected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994). Most quotations from Gunn’s poems are taken from this book and will be made parenthetically with the acronym CP appended when required. Poems from Boss Cupid (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000) will also be made parenthetically with the acronym BC appended.
rest,” they ride around “self-defined, astride the created will” (40). In these early poems, which describe love with vague partners as a series of wartime stratagems, or tell placeless stories of scheming courts, revolts, and exiles, the meters and the world’s harshness are clear, but the world itself and its inhabitants are often hard to make out.

The extreme foregrounding of Gunn’s themes sometimes even seems to drown out his characters and simply return us to Gunn – and it’s no coincidence that these themes are often ones of harsh control over the self and others. Again and again in the early poems we find Gunn meditating on the existentialist heroes and “overdogs” (56) of history like Lord Byron, Alexander, and Coriolanus whose power, Gunn suggests, comes from their ruthlessness and disciplined will. One possible reading of Gunn’s early poems is that they are about how to embrace containment and control and turn them into sources of power; Alfred Corn, for instance, has written on how Gunn’s readings of Sartre helped him to believe that his sexual orientation was heroically willed or chosen.21 Yet Gunn isn’t just struggling to control himself, he’s forcing his characters into molds that he thinks will help him: in a poem actually entitled “A Plan of Self-Subjection,” Gunn writes, “As Alexander or Mark Antony/ Or Coriolanus, whom I most admire,/ I mask self flattery./ And yet however much I may aspire/ I stay myself” (46). He adds, “before very long/ From poem back to original I twist”; the same, though, can’t be said for his characters who must remain forever stuck in his pages as Gunn’s twisted, self-flattering masks. Ironically, a poem that’s an exception to this kind of controlling mask-making is the poem “To Yvor Winters, 1955,” in which Gunn praises Winters’ expert training of Airedale Terriers, which Winters raises with “poet’s rigour” and controlling, “deliberate human will” (69). Winters here is treated as something like a real person from whom Gunn can learn; yet Gunn meanwhile is also using him to flesh out an aesthetic that has already been immensely attractive to him and that involves treating poems and the people within them as leashed dogs (or quite closed characters).

Yet leashing and mastering his characters ultimately backfires. The twisted masks, the shadowy, obscured literary figures, and the hard meters all contribute to a kind of spiritual emptiness. For at the heart of Gunn’s early poetry we find a version of the predicament described

---

by W.R. Johnson and Randall Jarrell in my introduction: these early characters are so dominated by their author that they frequently risk just turning back into Thom Gunn meditating on his painful entrapment in his own head and life. And, *entrapment* is key here; if Gunn gains any power through focusing on toughs and the will, then it’s a power that’s a little bit monstrous in the ways it leads him to containment and isolation: “Now I will shut you in a box/ With massive sides and a lid that locks,” says the speaker of “La Prisonnière” (14). The poem ends up imagining that the ‘you’ will stay trapped and wither away to “a heap of bones –/ Too dry to simper, too dry to whine....” Gunn will remain interested in prisoners, jailers, torturers, and executioners throughout his career, and as late as the mid-60s will write a poem about an endless loop of entrapment: “The jail contained a tank, the tank contained/ A box, a mere suspension, at the centre,/ Where there was nothing left to understand,/ And where he must re-enter and re-enter” (173). The critic Michael Vince describes how in Gunn’s early poems one often “feels that there is no escape in fact from the self, which is trapped in a solipsistic world of self-reference.”22 In sum, the end result of controlling others and writing poetry of closed characters, is to become oneself a prisoner or creature of twisted masks.

Perhaps more even than the box, though, the loop or circle becomes the figure for entrapment in early Gunn. Writing about *Fighting Terms* Charles Leftwich points out, “An inescapable circularity is the greatest menace, and its frustrating and ultimately enervating effects are conveyed by the constantly repeated refrains in so many of the poems, usually at stanza beginnings and ends... In the first stanza of ‘Round and Round’, the first and last line are ‘The lighthouse keeper’s world is round’, and the reader is enclosed in a circular verbal prison.”23 In fact, confining circles turn up in a surprising number of poems, including “A Plan of Self-Subjection” (“I circle because I have found/ That tracing circles is a useful spell...I end my circle where I had begun” (46)). And the same circularity threatens Gunn’s Merlin who starts his poem in a loop, saying “This was the end and yet, another start” (81). The poem then concludes with Merlin telling us about the “terrible cave in which I live, the absolute prison... [that] I built...round me” (my emphasis 83); roundness and circularity again become a kind of

22 Michael Vince, “Helping us see: A View of ‘From the Wave,'” *Agenda* 27, no. 2-3 [1999], 98-101, 98.

oubliette, which is a kind of torture device that itself shows up in a later Gunn poem. And we also find painfully isolated circularity in “Carnal Knowledge” whose lover’s unhappy refrain is “You know I know you know I know you know,” and in “High Fidelity” whose speaker is trapped in “tuneless circles...without distinction, passion, rage...” (15, 76).

Gunn’s career here then can be read emblematically as standing in for the isolated lyric of a particular historical moment: Peter King writes in 1979 that early Gunn is “imprisoned within his individual self, unable to know himself through any inherited system and unable to lay hold of authentic life except by self-control and conscious exploration of his sense of apartness from nature and his fellow beings.”

Hence, Gunn’s early poetry resembles Johnson’s inchoate self-immersed lyric and Jarrell’s petrified lifeless one, and also can be seen as being stuck in the very transition between modern and contemporary. Gunn is cut-off from previous systems without yet having replaced this difficult freedom with sociality; in the meantime he replaces those previous systems with a rigidly policed one of his own.

Though my approach here has been in line with the arguments of this book, I haven’t yet been making radical arguments about Gunn: other critics have made related observations about his early career. However, it’s important that we set these arguments out not just because they demonstrate how Gunn corresponds to the historical narrative I’ve been telling, but because I’ll be arguing that Gunn’s penchant for damaging control and containment – for severity, austerity,

---


“He sees flowers, landscapes, birds animals, and even human beings as figures to be arranged in his emblematic universe, rather than as creatures existing in their own right” (Ibid., 200).

“Gunn’s admiration of the will, of rigidity, and of pose is both personal and poetic. His poems seem to possess the hardness he admires and to reflect the fierce isolation of the poet” (Robert K. Martin, The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979], 182).

“The early poems could often be spoken of, not inappropriately, as objects, as things made rather than words spoken. If one were to use the analogy of space, one would call them places where the walls seem to press in – cells or prisons. A kind of cheerless order has been imposed” (Martin Dodsworth “Thom Gunn: poetry as Action and Submission,” 204).

“In his first books – up through My Sad Captains (1961) – control became a grim end in itself: allegories of exiles and prisoners, in stiff, boxy stanzas with end words like pistons, spelled out Gunn’s early dogmas...” (Stephen Burt, Close Calls with Nonsense, 206).
closed forms and closure – remain essential to his success in depicting open characters later on in his career. This latter argument will take up the bulk of these two chapters; however, before turning to it we still need to look briefly at Gunn’s transition in the 1960s and his evolving ideas about the goals of modern lyric poetry. For if Gunn’s early career provides an evocative example of something like the isolated New Critical lyric, then his transformation and later poetry provide just as vivid of an example of the deliberate turn toward new openness and sociality in American poetry at the end of the 1950s.

Gunn’s increasing openness and interest in others as his career moves forward, of course, has many sources, but his emigration to America is a crucial one. Much of this American influence is historical and regional: hippie and drug culture in the 1960s, gay liberation in the 1970s, and San Franciscan counterculture in all eras all help Gunn to imagine a happier alternative social world to the “gray towns and dark horizons” of his England with its “island weather and sexual claustrophobia” (Eavan Boland). 26 Much of the American influence on Gunn is also literary: after emigrating, Gunn begins reading American poets whom he had ignored or had not had access to while in England. He reads and writes about older poets like Whitman and Williams – the latter of whom, according to Gunn, “altered everything” for him. 27 But Gunn also reads and writes essays about near-contemporaries like Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, Donald Hall, and Robert Duncan. 28 Just from looking at these names we can see that it’s the most inclusive and empathetic of American poets who appeal to Gunn. As Alan Jenkins writes, “the American poetry that later made such an impact on Gunn was a poetry of the outward gaze, a poetry of perception and engagement with the external world.” 29 And in Whitman, Williams, Ginsberg, Snyder, Merrill, and Hall (although perhaps not Duncan) “perception and engagement with external world” entails writing about other people.


28 In fact, Duncan – poet of open form and inclusiveness – becomes a personal friend about whom Gunn will eventually write several essays.

29 Alan Jenkins, “‘I Thought I Was So Tough’: Thom Gunn’s Postures for Combat,” 200.
Hence, Gunn seeks out sociable American poetry that can provide relief from his initial controlling and isolating tendencies. And no poet is more helpful to Gunn here than Williams. Gunn’s praise of Williams in a 1965 essay, for instance, can be read as the inverse of Jarrell’s reading of late-Stevens as “a fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself”:

...he [Williams] came more and more to realize that his subject-matter lay in the present, and had to be defined without the help of other than what it is...His love for the external world led him to search for ways of incorporating more and more of it into his poetry. This search is the preoccupation of any good writer, particularly when he is starting to write, and moreover it is fully in accord with an American literary tradition....

“Any good writer” would surely include Gunn, and we can see how Gunn is using Williams here to set up new ideals for Gunn’s own poetry. Correspondingly, we can also see how “an American literary tradition” is something that Gunn is also partially creating for himself in order to strengthen his new influences. And he continues on in this same essay to insist that Williams’ ‘external world’ must also be the living world:

Williams has a habitual sympathy, by which he recognizes his own energy in that of the young housewife, the boys at the street corner, the half-wit girl who helps in the house, the sparrow, or the buds alternating down a bough. His stylistic qualities are governed, moreover, by a tenderness and generosity of feeling, which make them fully humane. For it is a humane action to attempt the rendering of a thing, person, or experience in the exact terms of its existence.

Gunn’s newfound enthusiasm for this kind of writing is on display here through the colorful menagerie he summons in order to describe it. Yet the appeal of this kind of humane writing is not simply that it’s pleasurable and enriching: ‘humane habitual sympathy’ can also provide much needed relief from the self. As Gunn writes in an essay on his friend and fellow expatriate Christopher Isherwood, a camera-like faithfulness to the particulars of the external world can help “us to escape from the singleness of our own minds which, if lived in exclusively, become prisons.” Or as Gunn puts it more simply in a 1981 interview, “Getting outside oneself was one of the things I learned from Williams, who’s been very important to me for a long time. I knew I


31 Ibid., 25.

had a lot to learn.” As we’ve seen, though, Gunn doesn’t learn from Williams alone, but also from the various figures who Gunn assembles into a sociable American literary tradition. This tradition begins with Whitman’s “ideally generous democracy,” continues on with Williams “habitual sympathy,” but then finds widespread embodiment in the sudden explosion of social poetry within his own generation (that of Snyder, Merrill, Ginsberg, etc.).

Though Gunn clearly becomes a devotee of Williams, and becomes far more open and wide-ranging in his readings of American poetry in general, he retains something of his Movement-skepticism regarding Modernism. Gunn begins reading and writing about Eliot, Pound, Bunting, H.D., Moore, and Loy (as well as Williams), but they are rarely greeted with whole-hearted approbation. Modernism was and remains monolithic in the 20th century, and it perhaps makes more sense as a foil for Gunn to define himself in opposition to than did his personal chimera assembled from the Movement, New Criticism, and Winters. Moreover, we’ve already seen how some Modernist practitioners’ wish for a universal culture lead them to create their own closed systems; hence, even after Gunn’s Movement allegiances fade, he might still want to resist Modernism out of his newfound desire to stop being cloistered and to turn outwards. In any case, it’s in relation to Modernism – rather than to the New Criticism, the Movement, or Winters – that Gunn’s explicit thoughts about lyric isolationism and sociality play out.

The 1960s is the decade during which Gunn’s sensibility changes the most, and during this decade Gunn become frustrated with all of the major Modernist poets but Williams. During this period, Gunn argues that failing to take external particulars seriously leads poetic Modernism and poetry at large into harmful silliness and causes poetry to lose ground to twentieth-century narrative art forms. He writes the following in his journal in 1963:


34 Thom Gunn, Shelf Life, 19.


36 Although he’s a poet of a younger generation, August Kleinzahler is another such influence on Gunn.
I read the great poets of this century who wrote in English, and I find many qualities in them, but it is from the novelists and dramatists of the 20th century that I really learn, it is they who have modified and adjusted my understanding, perception, & finally actions as Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Pope, or even Crabbe have done. The great modern poets have certainly as intense a preoccupation with particulars as any of these [modern] novelists, but they do not seem inclined to learn from them, to derive from them any body of ideas [or] put them together in an attitude that one can take seriously. Pound is probably still the most influential poet of our time. His ideas are not only few but ridiculous... Eliot defines a world of Conradian emptiness... Eliot suddenly shifts the terms from psychological-moral to religious-moral and finds an answer in the fixities of dogma. Yeats constructs a set of beliefs which his greatest admirers cannot take seriously, behind which is nostalgia for feudalism... Stevens goes farther than the others, but finally he takes refuge in a kind of Church, what he calls Imagination... In each of these writers, serious men dedicating themselves to poetry, there is a central lack.

In sum, Gunn is denouncing these poets’ attempts to fix, control, define, or avoid the world rather than open themselves to it. In Gunn’s irritability and dismissiveness, and in his choice of verbs, we can see how tired he has becomes of closed, cloistered systems that forestall serious reckonings with independent external particulars. And in mentioning Stevens as a culminating figure here, Gunn suggests that all of these poets are interested in using poetry as a kind of sanctuary or refuge.

In the passage quoted above, Gunn clearly suggests that there’s a need to turn outwards and spend more energy engaging with and learning from particulars. But he also suggests that novelists and dramatists are already doing this – and obviously the particulars that novelists and dramatists are best known for writing about are other people. Hence, a year later in 1964, Gunn directly says that the problem with modernism and much of the British poetry that follows it is its lack of interest in others:

I wonder if what makes a man decide to be a novelist or a poet is the knowledge that he wants to write of others or of himself? I say this because I see that I want to write a kind of poetry that hasn’t been written much this century... ‘Eliot’s [poetry] is all about himself; Yeats’ is even more concerned than Milton’s with striking the pose of the Great Poet; Stevens lives in an inanimate universe where he is the only human. Larkin’s poetry is all about how he shrinks from other people; Ted Hughes writes of animals; Geoffrey Hill of Subjects. But Pound, for an instant

Qtd. in Joshua Weiner, “From Ladd’s Hill to Land’s End (and Back Again): Narrative, Rhythm, and the Transatlantic Occasions of ‘Misanthropos,’” At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn, ed. Joshua Weiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 105-32, 107-8. This and other quotations from Gunn’s journals are taken from Weiner’s essay.

This denunciation fits with Gunn’s Movement-roots. The Movement after all rejected not only modernism’s perceived obscurantism, but also its wish to create “great systems of theoretical constructs” (Robert Conquest qtd. in Alan Jenkins, ‘I Thought I Was So Tough,’ 188). From the beginning, Gunn is a poet free of any belief in universal culture – his initial insularity is one of a cut-off self rather than one that insists that the self’s values be absolute.

97
(1919-20) writes of others, Hardy writes of relationship, and William Carlos Williams of all the living world, so some have done it.\textsuperscript{39}

In sum, all of the poets castigated here are ones who ‘shrink from other people,’ and though this shrinking begins with modernism (with Eliot, Yeats and Stevens), it continues on with Gunn’s British contemporaries (Larkin, Hughes, Hill). Yet in turning away from these two groups, Gunn doesn’t just turn toward non-modernist American poetry plus Williams. First of all the fact that Gunn includes Pound in the above list means that he’s willing to continue to consider Modernism’s virtues, and is evidence of Gunn’s new open-mindedness even while he’s trying to carve out his new aesthetic.

Second, and more importantly, the fact that he mentions Hardy points us toward one of the great achievements of Gunn’s later poetry, which is to use his discovered sociable American literary tradition to turn back to the pre-modernist British poetic tradition and notice its social achievements. Gunn has always been devoted to such pre-modernist poetry, but he will now turn his attention to how Ben Jonson, Thomas Hardy, Shakespeare, Lord Rochester, and other British poets write about particular others. In sum, America instigates and drives Gunn’s social turn, but also provides him with a lens through which to notice the social writing present throughout English-language poetry’s history.\textsuperscript{40} When Gunn asks whether or not people decide to become poets in order to write exclusively about themselves this is meant to be a serious and open question that he will set out to answer for himself. And though the kind of poetry Gunn wants to write may not have been written much in his century (he might have felt differently if asked about this in 1990), he will come to believe that it has, without a doubt, been written in other centuries.

In fact, Gunn comes to feel that the isolationism of poetry is a new, modern problem largely responsible for poetry’s dwindling cultural currency. And this is where lyric comes in: Gunn argues that that 20\textsuperscript{th} century poetry has lost ground to plays and novels in part because

\textsuperscript{39} Qtd. in Joshua Weiner, “From Ladd’s Hill,” 126.

\textsuperscript{40} I use “social” here and throughout the chapter simply to mean ‘concerning particular others.’
lyric “has superseded” the other verse genres – “the epistle, the narrative, the satire, the epic,” which, Gunn implies, were better at addressing the social world.\textsuperscript{41} Joshua Weiner writes:

Modern poetry in English at mid-century, in Gunn’s view, no longer addressed the complexity of social being; it was too self-absorbed, too riddled with bad ideas. One solution, for Gunn, was to reach outside of lyric conventions of self-revelation to capture human character with the objective analysis of the novel, yet to do so without giving up on the formal virtues of lyric intensity. He kept at it his whole career.\textsuperscript{42}

Weiner also goes on to suggest that Gunn struggles to fuse the modes of novelist and lyric poet in order “to be through with the Lonely Man” himself.\textsuperscript{43} Of course, I don’t agree that only non-lyric poetic genres can be about other people, or that “lyric conventions” necessarily restrict poets to writing about the self (and in fact Gunn’s interest in Hardy, Shakespeare, Jonson and other social lyrics belies this view). I would argue, instead, that ultimately Gunn is calling for a shift in the subject matter and techniques of lyric writing and reading, rather than reinventing the genre in a radical way or combining it with another genre. Nevertheless, we can see in Gunn’s very act of reconceptualizing lyric here, an attempt to think about how lyric can become compatible with writing about others. And ultimately it’s clear that Gunn envisions lyric not as hopelessly solitary, but actually as the best means available to him for shedding his solitude.

What Gunn discusses in prose he accomplishes in his poems: as we’ll see, starting in the late 1960s, Gunn writes a social lyric poetry full of the world he inhabits and of open characters who are often based on real people. Though he continues to write in meter alongside free verse, and though his poems continue to contain literary allusions, his poems’ quota of flesh-and-blood characters taken from his contemporary world grows exponentially. Moreover, we enter a new poetic town that looks a lot like Gunn’s countercultural San Francisco: a town composed of barflies, homeless people, skateboarders, drug dealers, nudists, and gay lovers. When in 1990 he writes an essay praising Christopher Isherwood for blending his characters with real people and

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 126, 110-1.

99
‘interpenetrating’ fiction with literal experience Gunn could be describing his own realized practice.\(^{44}\) For by 1990 Gunn had achieved what he first began to imagine in 1964:

> What do I want? Well, I want the new vision...the new vision fastened in the material world by the style. The vision must be of the strength, variety, validity of life, implying the ethically good. The good must be in commerce with other people, in that delight at their freedom which also make’s one’s own freedom more precise – and the style must tie it all down to ‘this’ & ‘this’ & ‘this’.\(^{45}\)

**Continued Severity**

So far the picture I have given of Gunn’s career provides a strong (albeit unique) version of the historical narrative of this book – however, it doesn’t yet differ strongly from a commonly told story about Gunn.\(^{46}\) The rest of my discussion of Gunn now will be taken up with arguing that his transformation during the 1960s and 1970s isn’t as thorough as it is sometimes represented as being. I will argue that Gunn’s later mode of characterization is actually not so much relaxed as counterbalanced: it is often noted that Gunn remains a poet of closed forms, even of closure;\(^ {47}\) it is less often remarked that closure remains a threatening aspect of his temperament and aesthetic throughout his career, a force always in danger of strangling the life from his characters and returning Gunn to himself and his own dour solipsism. Contrary to how

\(^{44}\) Thom Gunn, *Shelf Life*, 180.

\(^{45}\) Qtd in Weiner, “From Ladd’s Hill,” 125.

\(^{46}\) One can find other descriptions of Gunn’s movement from isolation to sociality in P.R. King’s *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*, Stephen Burt’s “Thom Gunn: Kinesthetic Aesthetics” (2000); Brian Tere’s “Our Dionysian Experiment: Three Theses on the Poetry of Thom Gunn” (2009); or Joshua Weiner’s Introduction to *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn* (2009).

Also of interest is the letter Gunn writes his friend Oliver Sacks in the 1960s about the need for sympathy in observing others, which is something “frequently delayed until one’s thirties” and which can become the determiner of style (Oliver Sacks, “Remembering Thom Gunn,” *Brick* 76 [Winter 2005], 55-62, 60).

\(^{47}\) For instance, Keith Tuma writes of how Gunn’s poems “are meant, for the most part, to stand alone” and of how “even in verse sequences the emphasis is on closure for the individual poem or section” (Keith Tuma, “Thom Gunn and Anglo-American Modernism,” *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 85-103, 99). August Kleinzahler writes, “He is still preeminently a poet of closure, intelligence, and will. There’s not an aleatory bone in his body” (August Kleinzahler, “Thom Gunn: The Plain Style and the City,” *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 71-83, 81). And Alan Jenkins observes the following of Gunn’s later poems: “even as they bear witness to romantic immersion in experience, in the life of the senses, [they] stand back from that experience the better...to describe it” (Alan Jenkins, “I Thought I Was So Tough,” 200). This observation then suggests that Gunn’s will to control endures even in the later work. What I am going to argue, though, is that Gunn’s emphasis on closure not only continues in his later career, but that it remains an unstable, even painful aspect of his personality and aesthetic whose very danger and volatility make Gunn’s most dynamic social poems possible.
he is sometimes depicted, Gunn retains a temperamental desire for severe control, and for imprisoning others and himself in hard, tightly woven forms and imaginings; by learning to write about real particular others Gunn doesn’t ever evolve past this temperament, but only learns to counterbalance it.

Before looking at how such counterbalancing works, and what it means for Gunn’s open characters, we need to look briefly at exactly how and in what ways controlling entrapment and (en)closure continue to be live threats in Gunn’s poems. For I certainly don’t mean to deny that in his later work Gunn becomes “more Californian, more pacific, more hedonist.” Instead, what I’m suggesting is that the relief many have felt when reading Gunn and coming to his poetic loosening in the ‘60s, has caused them to overlook the way the poet’s ongoing desire for control and mastery continues to be a powerful source of internal tension. Ultimately, Gunn’s attempts to learn from Williams, his attempts ‘to incorporate more of the external world,’ and to achieve a ‘habitual sympathy’ where he might ‘humanely render each thing, person, or experience in the exact terms of its existence’ is a wise labor undertaken against the grain of his own temperament. And this labor is so powerful in part because it never concludes: Gunn continues to wrestle against his own impulse to order and enclose until the very end of his career. This labor has high stakes for Gunn: when it fails his poems can plunge right back into the austerity and murky grimness of the early books with their solitude reminiscent of Johnson’s “crystal bondage” or Jarrell’s “fossil imprisoned in the rock of himself.”

48 I will refer to this aspect of Gunn’s temperament as controlling entrapment, or closure, or enclosure. These terms are all meant to indicate the same phenomenon of the brutal imprisoning of others and the self that we found in Gunn’s early poems.


50 The relief many also felt in comparing the still rigorous later Gunn to the slack countercultural poems many poets were writing at that same time (August Kleinzahler, “Thom Gunn: The Plain Style and the City,” At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn, ed. Joshua Weiner [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 71-83, 81) may have bolstered this critical oversight.

51 Gunn writes the following of Gary Snyder: his poems have a “crisp bare presentation [of the world that] carries its own implication of values.... Again and again the experience of waking occurs in his poetry; and he wakes with a sensation of wonder into a place filling up with light” (Gunn, Occasions of Poetry, 43). He adds, “Attentiveness becomes in him as it does in Williams a form of moral discipline. The act of attentiveness is, too, one in which you can fully live, and its analogues are to be found in the deer running, the mussels sucking, the man and woman making love, and the labourer at his job.” In writing such essays and creating his own version of the American literary tradition, Gunn is not just supporting his own agenda, but is actively trying to convince himself; like Snyder, Gunn must awake again and again.
Correspondingly, ghosts, shadows, and monstrous tormentors appear throughout Gunn’s later career alongside his happier flesh-and-blood characters. These closed characters range from the Charles Manson and Medusa who haunt the “boudoir and oubliette” of *Jack Straw’s Castle* (1976) – where the people had “looked convincing, yet...[had] too much of the phantom to them” (271) – all the way to the gay, necrophiliac cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer in Gunn’s last volume *Boss Cupid* (2000) whose desire to possess his beloveds leads him back to a solitude where “only myself remained/ in which I wandered lost/ by my monotonous coast” (*BC* 91). One possible reading of Gunn’s long poem “The Menace” from his happiest book, *The Passages of Joy* (1982), is as an extended attempt to turn this kind of figure – the composite “guard/ father/ executioner/ angel of death/ delivering doctor/ judge/ cop/ castrator” – back into a literal, sexy S & M partner instead of an internal demon (337). Such an attempt invites a kind of psychoanalytic and sexual theorizing that I can’t provide here, but we can clearly see that Gunn continues to be drawn back into a tormented isolation even in his later career. And we can also see that when Gunn is drawn inwards in this way, his characters close down to the point where, utterly controlled and consumed, they mutate and become psychological or existential furies: ghosts, tormentors, accusers.52

But if Gunn ‘relapses’ he also recuperates: he stages the escape from the self again and again throughout his later career. We find this escape in Gunn’s book-length poem *Misanthropos* (1965), which details the wanderings of the last man on earth who, at the poem’s end, discovers that he’s actually not alone; we find it “Jack Straw’s Castle” (1976) in which Charles Manson and the medusa finally morph into a “real man” and sex partner who “Comes from outside the castle” (278); and we find it in “The Menace” (1982) where the threatening other ultimately changes from a “mannequin in a store window” and “exemplary figure...In a theatre of reflection” into a real man playing-acting with Gunn (“we sleep at the end/ as a couple...I cup/ the fine warm back,/ broad fleshed shoulder blades”) (338, 339, 342). However, these escapes work alongside Gunn’s ‘relapses,’ and the very recurrence of such escapes shows that they are never final.

52 Finally, we can see how erotic love in particular – with its occasional frightening desire to possess its object – can tempt Gunn to imprison and rigidly enclose others.
Gunn also frequently depicts others characters being drawn into states of rigid isolation; he does so not simply because he continues himself to be drawn to these states himself (and hence wants to imagine them), but because these characters can warn Gunn, brace him with their examples, and thereby keep him on course (recall that when characters close down they can function as warnings). Perhaps because at the point of writing it many of the poet’s friends have died and left him alone, Gunn’s last book Boss Cupid (2001) is the one in which the poet most intensely reverts to his early severity. And correspondingly the book is full of characters shutting themselves down and becoming trapped and closed. For instance in “A System,” a poem from Boss Cupid about PCP addiction, Gunn even uses that term. We meet a man who “closed his life down...[and] dreams at the center of a closed system,/ Like the prison system, or a system of love/ Where folktale, recipe, and household custom/ Refer back to the maze that they are of...his closed system, maze/ Of solitary cell... the tightening heart/ That knots the tangles in ten kinds of string” (BC 33-4). Closed systems are again linked to unhappy solitude: such systems incorporate all seemingly extraneous details (folktales, recipes) into the solipsistic “prison” or “maze” of the self. Once internalized, these details can then be bound and knotted to an actively “tightening heart” itself reminiscent of the monomaniacal quality of closed characters.53

The closed portraits in Boss Cupid serve as ways of warning or bracing Gunn; however, since characters that are too closed risk simply turning back into the poet, these closed portraits also risk merely returning Gunn to his own brutal solipsism. In the poem “Enough” (mentioned in my introduction) we meet an “aging” woman whose refusal to change her “unexacting habit” bores her shape into the mattress that she won’t share or turn over (29). And the poem “Shit” depicts a Rimbaud whose brutal, unflinching quest for meaning, “cool as a vivisectionist,” ultimately causes him to lose “a leg here, there a life” (37, 38). The grimness and brutality of these poems with their woman “sour...like an aging rabbit/ On stale straw” (29) and their poet with his “Hair crawling with lice” and smoking “a foul pipe” (37) places them somewhere in between bracing warnings to the poet and haunting characters who threaten to drag Gunn toward the closed pole through his very process of imagining them. And when these kinds of poems predominate (over poems with open characters) they reflect against each other and their harsh,

53 There’s even room for a controlling, solipsistic “system” of love here that’s no different from a “prison system.”
obsessive resonance multiplies exponentially. Appropriately then, the title of “Enough” is repeated twice as the poem’s last words as if to stop Gunn from going too far in imagining the woman’s dour rigidity.

Gunn’s continued penchant for control, severity, and enclosure is something critics have touched on in their biographical comments. For instance, in a remembrance written in 2006, Clive Wilmer describes his first impression of Gunn as “happy and fulfilled” but with “an air of solitude that seemed to hang about him.” Wilmer continues, “Despite his hedonism and despite appearances, Thom was rather an austere man and poetry a somewhat monastic calling.”

We also glimpse something of Gunn’s controlling, ingrown severity in Brian Teare’s description of Gunn’s “immense dedication to craft,” of how his notebooks contain “an astoundingly large number of drafts for almost every poem” and “fairly reel with ideas for scansion and/or stanzaic forms.”

Gunn himself says in 1999 that he couldn’t “conceive of doing without revision,” and adds the following in the same interview:

I’m never in danger of personal anarchy – I’m terribly well-controlled. I don’t like that aspect of myself very much. I’m not a very spontaneous kind of person: I’m cautious and deliberate, and I usually know what I’m doing, except when I’m just being stupid.

In other words, we are about as far as possible here from Allen Ginsberg’s free-wheeling ‘first thought, best thought.’ Gunn may write humanely in looser forms about tangible others in the books after and including Moly (1971), but he retains a monkish desire to control and perfect that, unchecked, can become a desire to isolate and imprison. Keith Tuma seems to concur in

---


57 Ibid., 40-1. Gunn’s dissatisfaction with his personal control relates to other dissatisfaction. In a 2005 interview, when his poems are characterized as dispassionate and even “cold,” Gunn doesn’t disagree, but says, “I don’t want to be cold, but I think I am. I don’t get emotional like Hart Crane or Dylan Thomas... I’m not a romantic” (Thom Gunn, interviewed by C.Q. Forester, “Re-Experiencing Thom Gunn,” Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide 12, no. 5 [Sept-Oct 2005], 14-19, 19). Yet in an earlier interview in 2000, Gunn speaks both of the same dissatisfaction and the relief he feels in another poet finding tenderness in his poetry: “Yes, I’m a cold poet, aren’t I... Ted Hughes once said, ‘Thom Gunn’s is the poetry of tenderness, not violence.’ I greatly appreciate that, because I think it’s true” (Thom Gunn, Campbell 26). What Gunn appreciates so strongly here is that someone has noticed how Gunn’s caring for others, his tenderness, can mitigate his coldness – a coldness we should associate with a man full of self-control who doesn’t “get emotional like Hart Crane or Dylan Thomas.”
writing that “finally there is not all that much that distinguishes ‘La Prisonnière’ in Gunn’s first book from the songs of Jeffrey Dahmer in his last.”58 Again, I don’t at all mean to minimize the accomplishment of the happier social poems that Gunn writes starting in the 1960s, but only to point out that enclosure and severe controllingness are very much live agents in Gunn’s temperament, whose potential energy can and will be put to interesting use. As Gunn puts it, “in my world Christian does not shed his burden, only his attitude to it alters.”59

In all likelihood, the origins of Gunn’s need to enclose and control were probably multiple. They probably included spending time in the army in postwar Britain (“a moment of disillusion – a step down from the grandiosity of war” (Boland));60 early alienation from his father and the suicide of his mother whose body he himself found;61 the strongly homophobic period in which Gunn came of age; his attraction to the hypermasculine partially as a means of discrediting the stereotype of gay men as effeminate;62 and the death of his dear friend Tony White in a freak accident during their twenties.63 It’s not hard to imagine how taken together these incidents and phenomena might have prompted a hardening of the self, a desire for self-control and ‘self subjection’ in order make the self less vulnerable, and place Gunn in command of his brutal, disappointing world. San Francisco will help him imagine a happier social world, but it too will have its disappointments – such as bad drug experiences,64 the failures of 1960s utopian ideals, and the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Whatever the sources of Gunn’s controlling temperament, his good instinct starting in the ‘60s is to challenge his own inclination towards


60 Boland, “All That You Praise I Take,” 13.

61 Alan Jenkins, “I Thought I Was So Tough,” 203.

62 Corn, “Existentialism and Homosexuality,” 43.


control and enclosure without denying himself. One major way he will do this is by writing about others who can put his enclosing poems to independent use.\textsuperscript{65}

By focusing in particular on \textit{The Passages of Joy} (1982), but also on \textit{Moly} (1971) and \textit{The Man with Night Sweats} (1992), I’ll show that many of Gunn’s most successful social poems tend to depict others who, rather than rupture or overturn Gunn’s (en)closure,\textsuperscript{66} are able to make it ‘work for them.’ In so doing, these characters help Gunn counterbalance his temperament, granting him, as he says of Williams, the “delight at their freedom which also make’s one’s own freedom more precise.” For the very reason that control and enclosure continue to be ‘live threats’ throughout Gunn’s career, we can feel both poet and character’s joyful relief when that enclosure is appropriated and transmuted.\textsuperscript{67} For Gunn’s most open characters are able to treat bounded rules as a sort of obstacle course that challenges and draws out their vitality, rather than as bars that imprison and smother it.

Correspondingly, the Gunn poems with the clearest set of rules – those in traditional forms – are the ones where this joyful relief is most keenly felt. Yet though rhyme and meter can form part of the jungle gym on which Gunn’s open characters play and keep in shape, free verse and syllabic poems can also speak to issues of entrapment, and draw out Gunn’s characters vitalities (for instance, by challenging them to keep a single movement energized over many enjambed lines). And in both meter and free verse, the exchange taking place between Gunn and his open characters is one of Gunn’s shapely control for his characters’ looser, but more vital energies. Gunn is greatly relieved by how his characters’ free-wheeling energies enable them to put his constricting poems to vigorous use; these characters then enable Gunn to do justice to his

\textsuperscript{65} Throughout his career Gunn is a poet torn between constricting enclosure and sympathetic openness to another’s vital, independent energy. He a poet who wants to write about love as the desire to possess and squeeze the life out of others – as he does in his Jeffrey Dahmer poems – but he’s also a poet who can, three poems after the Dahmer ones, write of his romantic partner of over five decades with whom he had a permissive, sexually-open relationship, “Nothing is, or will ever be,/ Mine I suppose. No one can hold a heart...” (\textit{BC} 97).

\textsuperscript{66} I’ll drop the parentheses at this point and just refer to this phenomenon as ‘enclosure.’

\textsuperscript{67} Thom Gunn remains a poet of austerity and at times frightening closure, but in his later career these qualities can often become submerged. Gunn’s post-1965 openness isn’t only a matter of character portraits balancing open energies against his enclosing tendencies. After all, Gunn writes many poems that take pleasure in animals or natural particulars; love poems that address a you about whom we learn only a little; poems about euphoria in crowds and queer parades. I don’t mean to suggest that Gunn is always on the brink of reverting to the speaker of “La Prisonnière,” or that the only way out for him is to provide character portraits of others’ resisting passive enclosure. However, I do think such poems represent many of Gunn’s best for the very reason that they get to the heart of his continued internal struggle.
own temperament while also taking his poems beyond his control, and letting them temporarily belong to another. Finally, in an important sense these characters then also come to depend on Gunn’s constriction and control in order to demonstrate their vigor. To my mind, Gunn’s best social poems often end up finding a counterbalance between his own enclosing tendencies and another’s vitality where the former ends up drawing out and giving expression to the latter.68

I’ll begin the remainder of these chapters by showing how Gunn’s threatening enclosures sometimes become the means through which his characters’ express their robustness. I’ll then show how this tendency toward entrapping his characters and himself ends up making Gunn incredibly perceptive about external traps in his contemporary world such as homophobia, bad jobs, homelessness, and illness. Gunn will become quite adept at depicting the way his characters’ suffer from such real-world enclosures, but, at the same time, he’ll also become attuned to the ways these others marshal vitality despite and through their circumstances. We’ll find this surprising vitality in Gunn’s depiction of an old man enjoying the prayers of those who think he’s doomed; of a taxi driver who finds a conqueror’s freedom in his repetitive service; and even of an AIDS patient who finds some room for improvisation and pleasure while dying in his hospital bed. These poems won’t be about characters escaping from confining situations, but about the energies – and even pleasures – that the characters are able to muster when they can treat their enclosures as challenges rather than just as dooms.69

Finally, I will conclude these chapters by arguing that Gunn is sometimes able to transform his poems from forces of constriction into ones of intercession. Since it is in traditional forms that Gunn is best able to mimic the bad enclosures imposed on others by circumstances in the external world, it is also in these kinds of poems that Gunn is most directly able to intercede on his character’s behalf. In the previous kinds of poems I’ve been describing, Gunn mainly relies on his characters’ own energies to put their enclosures to use – his main job as a poet is then just to notice and describe their actions. However, by closely mimicking external traps

---

68 There are poets who are able to use closed character suggestively – to say, bear witness (Wilfred Owen) or be challenged by another (Frank Bidart) – but Thom Gunn’s later closed portraits are perhaps less interesting because they don’t involve such challenge or real reckoning with another; they lie too close to Gunn’s default mode.

69 In doing so, these figures again instruct Gunn about how to live with the burden of his own temperament. And they also show Gunn how to make his own temperament and struggle into tools for understanding and honoring other people (and thereby getting outside of himself).
through rhyme and meter, Gunn is able gain a little sway over how these traps work in order to help their victims. Gunn can’t liberate his characters, but he can offer a gentler secondary aesthetic shape or enclosure within a poem’s primary mimicry of a character’s trapped situation. These intercessions then help Gunn convert his own painful inwardness and desire for control into the humane rendering of an external predicament. Though this predicament may itself be painful to imagine, Gunn is kept from returning to closed severity by his love for these characters’ lives and choices, and by using his own temperament to help rather than indict or harm.

**Open Characters in Confinement**

The surfers in Gunn’s famous poem “From the Wave” from Moly (1971) provide a clear demonstration of what it means to ‘put enclosure to work.’ Moreover, in the process of doing so, the surfers showcase almost all of strategies that Gunn’s open characters will rely on throughout his later career. Here’s the poem:

```
It mounts at sea, a concave wall
   Down ribbed with shine.
And pushes forward, building tall
   Its steep incline.

Then from their hiding rise to sight
   Black shapes on boards
Bearing before the fringe of white
   It mottles towards.

Their pale feet curl, they poise their weight
   With a learn’d skill.
It is the wave they imitate
   Keeps them so still.

The marbling bodies have become
   Half wave, half men,
Grafted it seems by feet of foam
   Some seconds, then,
```
Late as they can, they slice the face
In timed procession
Balance is triumph in this place
Triumph possession.

The mindless heave of which they rode
A fluid shelf
Breaks as they leave it, falls and, slowed,
Loses itself.

Clear, the sheathed bodies slick as seals
Loosen and tingle;
And by the board the bare foot feels
The suck of shingle.

They paddle in the shallows still;
Two splash each other;
Then all swim out to wait until
The right waves gather. (198-9)

First of all, enclosure is important here because the scene is enclosed, circular: it starts with a wave forming, then develops to the surfers slicing the face of it, and finally ends with the surfers waiting for another wave. We could even read the poem as creating a kind of infinite loop where its end leads directly back to its beginning. Moreover, our knowledge about the surfers is clearly limited: they’re plural and we learn nothing about them except that they are alternately serious and playful – able to splash each other as well as become quasi-artistic ‘masters’ who have “a learn’d skill.” In a sense then, though the surfers’ are impressive in various ways, their traits are enclosed within the described circular activity of the poem.

Yet in another sense the poem does not limit its characters to surfing – there is nothing telling us that surfing is all these characters might amount to. Rather, the poem presents them in the integrity of a single admirable activity with which Gunn tries not to tamper too much. This is actually a common strategy in Gunn’s work: as we’ll see, many of his open characters appear only through a single motion or activity while Gunn keeps his own presence to a minimum (appearing only tangentially or not at all). By telling us only a little about these characters Gunn is actually being respectful of them – he’s not claiming to know too much about their lives. It is only their activity that is enclosed, not them per se. Yet that activity itself is bracing and full of
skillful energy: the surfers in fact strike Gunn with some of the openness of my introduction, the “sudden waking up and coming to attention in the presence of another as the intensity of interior song is temporarily supplanted by another life replete with its own meanings.” And as in my introduction, this awakening is brief and limited: we get a vivid, memorable portrayal of the men surfing, but we don’t get to know more about them than that.

In addition, unlike Gunn’s lighthouse keeper or his bikers it’s easy to imagine the surfers walking up the beach and back to the lives they have outside the poem. And part of the reason for this is that they display open energy that’s clearly admired here in its difference from the poet’s own. \(^\text{71}\) Admiration is a key aspect of writing about open characters that I have not yet discussed, but it fits with what I’ve said about why poets want to ‘select those others whose impressively healthy vitalities seem naturally to overflow confinement.’ Open characters trigger admiration, they impress poets, and defy poetic control (as I said earlier, open characters can “surprise us and cease seeming like tiresome automatons or known-quantities”). In the same way, a crucial quality of Gunn’s poems about open characters is that the love we feel in them for their subjects overrides the poet’s previous desire to own and contain, and thereby ends up providing Gunn with a kind of healthy company. But the surfers have to earn that admiration: and they do so here through the vital energy and skill they bring to bear on a tangible, realistically depicted activity – by becoming something like Whitman’s essential characters who are reduced to an action without being locked down at all. We might also think of Wilbur’s daughter in her adjacent lyric chamber: lyric is being used here to take another’s skilled activity seriously – to show how another claims their activity for him or herself. Hence, Gunn’s poem foregrounds a moment in which surfers take triumphant ownership over their activity: they find a “triumph in this place” and that “Triumph [is] possession.”

The surfers, then, are being represented via a single essential skill that seems to bring the whole force of their lives to bear on their activity, and simultaneously to affirm the reality of those broader lives even as their details remain mysterious. This technique is not only repeated in other Gunn poems, but in “The Release” (from Gunn’s subsequent book, Jack Straw’s Castle

\(^{71}\) By open energy I mean something like ‘the visible expression of being an open character.’ ‘Open energy’ in a poem is a kind of vitality that’s not fully under the poet’s control and that’s seen as coming from a life most of which exists beyond the page.
it is explicitly portrayed as a means for Gunn to hold himself back and prevent himself from tampering too much with his characters. In that poem, Gunn describes another character in motion: a man with “forward leaning walk... beautiful, eager – maybe speeding a little.” After following the man and watching him for awhile, Gunn reproaches himself, asking “What am I doing to this man... Reading him...thinking I can master what is self-contained...[for really] I know only his outer demeanor,” “a shimmering planet sheathed in its own air” (301). Gunn then explicitly acknowledges that the man has a life that Gunn and his poetry aren’t privy to (“He eases to and fro in my consciousness,/ he moves in and out of the poem”) and the poem ends with the man “suddenly” slouching “back to the street where he came from,” “unpredictable, clean of me” (302). Though this man gets to leave the poem while the surfers don’t, in both poems what is really known about the character is that “outer demeanor” or “shimmering sheathe.”

Without violating others’ ‘self-containment,’ we can still know something about how their bodies move through a street or an ocean. Stephen Burt has written about the unusual extent to which Gunn is able to get kinesthesia and the body into his poems, and this is a particularly useful skill for depicting and imagining the lives of admired strangers without too much presumption. In a sense, the surfers are also ‘clean of’ Gunn, and their presence can thus be admired and suggestive without us ‘reading them’ or getting to know anything about their broader lives. Enclosing the surfers in a particular activity thereby becomes a means of respectful portrayal.

---

72 This “shimmering sheathe” is perhaps something like what John Ashbery calls the “visible core.”


74 Some poets are comfortable giving us a lot of information about an open character and trusting that the information will remain suggestive rather than encapsulating. But since Gunn is so concerned and aware of his tendency to trap and enclose, he’d rather restrict his poem to being about a single activity a character undertakes that can then suggest that character’s full vitality without feeling like an encapsulating summary of them. I should also note here, though, that it’s Gunn’s very self-control, severity, and sense of closure that makes this possible both by giving Gunn the discipline to limit himself to portraying a single activity, and by giving him the discipline to keep himself mostly out of each poem. The latter kind of discipline is necessary to make room for his characters’ lives. As I’ve said, Gunn is often present only on the margins of his poems or as a cameo in them. He needs to remove himself in this way, so that he doesn’t obstruct a clear vision of his characters who can then be presented ‘in the exact terms of their existences.’

Gunn’s controlling severity, then, in one sense actually also sets the stage for his clear perceptions of others. Gunn’s temperament is such that self-dramatizing or giving too much away about himself seems unpalatable to him: he embraces Eliot’s comment about “escape from personality” (Thom Gunn, “My Life Up to Now,” 25); praises the Elizabethans not for having their own voices but for sounding like each other (Gunn, Occasions of Poetry, 56); describes himself at the time when he found his mother’s body as having a “tough couple of years... in the middle of my teens, as everybody does” (Thom Gunn,
Yet the surfers still only seem compelling (essential, open) because of the way their skill transforms enclosure, and that transformation here is a formal as well as a thematic accomplishment. It would have been easy for the verse form of “From the Wave” to have become deadening and repetitious: the abab stanzas with lines alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic dimeter call for a rhyme every twelve syllables, and this could have created a clunky, insistent jingle. Moreover, Gunn rarely settles for half-rhymes; in fact, seven of the poem’s rhymes work just by bringing simple, monosyllabic words together. Such a strong and demanding formal pattern could easily have created a dull poem that trapped its the surfers in its rules and squeezed the life out of them.

Yet the surfers can be seen as inscribing their own patterns on top of the poem’s overt form in a way that keeps the poem surprising and vital. For example, for the first three stanzas of their activity, the surfers are content to have only have two verbs per stanza, each verb corresponding to two lines (stanza 2: rise/bearing; stanza 3: poise/imitate; stanza 4: have become/grafted). Each two line-bundle contains a strong pause at its end that becomes the full stop of a period at each stanza end. But as the surfers become half-wave, half-men, the two verbs shift from the preceding present tense to past-tense – as though the poem’s volume is being dialed down in order to signal that something is about to happen. Appropriately, the stanza then ends not with a period, but a comma that stretches its action into the next stanza where, after dragging things out with another clause that describes that delay (“Late as they can”), the surfers finally perform their key present-tense action (“they slice the face”). The power of this slicing

———

interviewed by David Gewanter, AGNI 36, 289-99, 292); praises Hardy for his impersonal lyric “concerned with its subject to the extent of excluding the speaker’s personality” (Gunn, Occasions of Poetry 101); notes in a review that a novelist “has to ‘become unborn’, if only for a short spell, to participate in the lives of his characters” (Gunn, Occasions of Poetry, 136); and says that he doesn’t like dramatizing himself and that Sylvia Plath is the “last person I want to be” (Thom Gunn, interviewed by James Campbell, Thom Gunn in conversation with James Campbell (London: Waywiser Press, 2000). His sense of tight, muted control is in fact has the advantage of allowing him to make room for others. Of course, this self-withholding functions only up to a point. Gunn still does appear in some of his poems, and he also engages in meaningful exchanges with his characters where he’s rewarded for portraying them accurately.

75 Gunn’s open characters, though, are frequently suggestive of the particular world into which we might imagine them returning. We’ll look at this more when we consider Gunn’s town – and in particular his San Francisco street life – but it’s easy to see how the surfers might be associated with a Californian scene or lifestyle that is mildly countercultural, youth-oriented, and happily unproductive. Gunn’s character portraits tend to add to this larger world, so once we get a lot of them we start to imagine a scene that’s both aesthetically coherent and appealing to Gunn, but also a real site in space and time where certain kinds of people might conduct their lives. And fleshing out this world in turn helps us to imagine the kinds of lives his characters might have after the end of their poem – without anything about them as individuals needing to be nailed down.
comes both from this delaying extension and from the fact that the line begins with a trochaic substitution (LATE as they CAN), so that the action of slicing can become a powerful return to the iambic. Finally, after the surfers slice the face instead of getting the usual surfer-verb in the subsequent pair of lines, we find what is almost a chiasmus: balance–triumph–triumph–possession (and we find no verbs corresponding to the surfers).

In sum, it’s as though the surfers are finding unexpected ways to fulfill the poem’s formal requirements while also adding their own rules and flourishes of pattern on top of them. They’re obeying the stanza-rhymes and line lengths while also finding room for extra movement and emphasis within and between them; they’re inverting the iambic meter while adhering to it overall; and they’re setting up their own pattern of verb-use and then varying from it while also adding the extra pattern of a chiasmus. In sum, we have a feeling of rules (of rhyme, stanza formation, etc.) being fulfilled but also joyfully surpassed.

In other words, the surfers don’t break any major rules to express their vitality (as characters will in James Wright’s poetry), so much as find wiggle-room within rules, fulfilling their basic requirements, while adding their own improvisatory flair. The surfers’ taking formal possession of the poem is then highlighted by the wave’s immediate decline in power right after they bend the rules the most in the fourth and fifth stanzas. The surfers slice in the first line of the fifth stanza, but the wave doesn’t get to perform its action of breaking until the third line of the sixth: this is because the first two lines of that stanza are mostly composed of a subordinate clause (“of which they rode/ A fluid shelf”). More, when that action does arrive it turns out to be merely a self-destructive one (it falls and “Loses itself”). And not only are we told explicitly that the wave is now “mindless” and defined in terms of the surfers’ activity (it’s the wave “of which they rode”), but the wave’s very breaking seems to occur on the surfers’ schedule, almost as though it breaks because they leave it behind. After all, the break happens not at the natural place for it in the sixth stanza – at the end of its second line with its usual abrupt contraction to dimeter – but immediately after that at the start of the third line. It’s as if the surfers have their own ideas about when the wave is supposed to break (“as they leave it,” naturally), so that the syntactic

---

76 Of course, the surfers themselves are not literally doing these things, but we can see their skill and energy as guiding Gunn’s description of them here.
suspension of the stanza’s first two lines almost becomes like a charm that keeps the wave alive only until the surfers dissolve it behind them. This is quite a reversal, as the poem began with the wave decisively ‘mounting at sea’ and ‘pushing forwards’ as the men followed behind it.

The surfers’ open energy then is not just a literal sportsman’s skill, it also saturates the formal nuts and bolts of the poem and converts its strict form from a potentially calcifying trap into a challenging structure meant to draw out playful, vital athleticism. And it’s important to notice how the surfers’ open energy is felt as a convergence of the literal and formal. It’s no coincidence that the surfers’ taking of formal ownership in the fourth and fifth stanzas occurs in tandem with their physical triumph over the wave in riding it successfully: constraints of form and constraints of physical laws (of gravity, hydrodynamics, etc.) are meant to blur into and map onto each other here. The surfers’ openness is then felt in how they simultaneously transform a repetitive, rule-bound natural phenomenon into a source of lively sport and how they transform the rules of closed form in a circumscribed scene into an expression of living energies. We’ve now arrived at the exchange described in my previous section of the poet’s formality for the characters’ free-wheeling vitalities: Gunn’s structure, like the waves, helps the surfers’ express their robustness, and they in turn help prevent Gunn’s formality from becoming deadening.

We’ve now seen how the surfers’ skill manifests itself literally, formally, and as part

77 In fact, the feeling of riding the wave is built into the very stanzaic form of the poem with its alternating lines. One can quickly see how pairing long and short lines that extend and withdraw could enact the circularity of the tide. However, these lines also enact the act of surfing as the second and fourth line of each stanza become places of emergence (even if what emerges is a wave falling apart): what builds tall? The steep incline. What rises to sight? The black shapes. What do the bodies become, what do the surfers wait for? What happens when the wave breaks? These questions are all answered in the second and fourth lines whose contractions to four syllables serve to pause, highlight, and clarify. The stanzaic paired alterations between four and two stress lines then not only enact energy dying down, but also enact two kinds of energy, the latter emerging out of the former, riding the energy of the former and requiring only half of its effort (two beats instead of four). “It is the wave they imitate/ Keeps them so still,” writes Gunn, and we see in this quotation how the wave takes a longer time to emerge, while the surfers emerge more quickly through their very stillness (their minimal movement). And because the four and two stress lines occur twice per stanza where they are rhymed with each other (four and four, two and two) it’s like we’re being asked to distinguish between two different categories, being asked to look back and forth between two types of energy balanced against each other – the wave and the repose of riding it. Hence, the surfers transform the potentially dull inevitability of rise and fall of both waves and stanzas into a robust enactment of riding and balancing. And we should read this enactment as a two-way exchange: Gunn is using his verse to imitate the surfers’ activity, thereby giving the surfers a robust depiction and tribute. But Gunn is also being guided and instructed, inspired even, by the vital way that his characters make use of the constraining rules of gravity, hydrodynamics, etc. through their surfing.

78 Constricting rules then can draw out Gunn’s characters open energies so that we can perceive the intensity, vitality, and strangeness of a whole life brought to bear on a single situation – yet without us coming to think we can know too much about that life.
of an exchange; however, the surfers still have some specific open qualities that I need to identify as they recur in poem after poem, and give us more information about how Gunn’s open characters ‘make use’ of their enclosed situations. To begin with, the surfers have what I will call tricksterishness, which involves a kind of flirting with closed mutation or distortion and a temporary willingness to stop seeming like flesh-and-blood people. In the fourth stanza, for instance, they become “Half wave, half men”; their bodies are described as “marbling” like they’re turning into statues; and it seems like they’ve traded their human feet for ones of foam. However, this stanza arrives just before the surfers master the wave by slicing across its face. We are meant, I think, to hear some violence in this slicing: it’s like the surfers have become hunters, camouflaging themselves and perfectly imitating the wave in order to put it to their own uses. Put differently, they flirt with enclosure – with being reduced to the inanimate, cyclical build and fall of the waves – in order to master it. For after they slice the face, experience “triumph” and “possession,” and see the wave fall apart, they paddle around and splash each other: in other words, they ultimately grow more tangible. If the wave hides them, it also becomes the curtain through which they emerge.

As we’ll see, there is in fact often something shapeshifty, tricksterish, mythic, or superimposed about Gunn’s open characters; you often think you know them, but they can always turn out to be somebody else. The Daniel Albright of my introduction might even say that Proteus governs these characters. However, I think they’re closer to my evasive characters: the surfers’ aren’t locked in ‘continual slidings and shiftings’ but use their mutations strategically as illusions or decoys. In fact, rather than camouflaged hunters, one might compare them to squids shooting out their ink: they temporarily obscure themselves so that they can escape confinement, and so we can retain a sense of their potential for solidity and real personhood. As Robert Wells writes, “Gunn’s poems sway between the everyday and the mythical without their firm particularity being in the slightest compromised... ‘Old Meg’, for example, as she reappears (after Scott and Keats) in The Man with Night Sweats could be on the very edge of revealing herself as a goddess, just as an old woman in Homer could turn out to be Pallas Athene.”79 This tricksterishness or superimposition fits with Gunn’s allusiveness and his love of imitating

---

English Renaissance poets; since there are often other sources behind his poems it follows that there would also be other sources behind his people. In Gunn’s early poems this could create a hall of mirrors effect where it could seem like allusion is all there is to a person; however, in his later poems allusiveness becomes elusiveness, so that his open characters become less controllable, less easily summarized and dominated. And of course becoming like Athene temporarily and on one’s own terms is to muster great power and charge. A unique pleasure of Gunn’s open characters, then, is found in the way are at once powerful, literal, and slippery.

In addition to being essential and tricksterish, the surfers have a particular attitude toward their activity that will be repeated by Gunn’s open characters again and again. We’ve already seen that though his surfers are engaged in a repetitive activity, they are hardly trapped in the ‘circular verbal prison’ of Gunn’s lighthouse keeper or his Merlin. Instead the surfers turn a potentially repetitive activity into a physically pleasurable sport that requires effort and skill but has room for playfulness and ‘loosening.’ The idea that skill and loosening can work together recurs throughout Gunn’s later career: “My dance was play and yet my play was work,” writes Gunn in the persona of King David (BC 107) in one of his last poems. “If only they [men]/ Would free themselves in play./ As we do even in this confining tank,” say the dolphins in “Three for Children” from Gunn’s penultimate book (CP 431). In both cases, playfulness and rigor (of work, or of the confining tank) are necessary. Similarly, in a poem from the 1970s, Gunn portrays a John Keats whose receptive passivity works in conjunction with the vigor born from constraint: “some insight [was always] swelling the mind’s flow/ That banks made swift” (CP 350). Keats’s genius in the poem comes to depend on the banks of sonnet-rhyme and the more passive flow within long sentences working together and achieving a movement neither too constraining nor too loose.

In other words, enclosing banks, tank, and work are prerequisites for Gunn’s open

80 Cf. “We are no longer dealing so much allegories or notions of the city or character: the poems are now trained on actual people and places. If earlier on in the poetry it seemed as if there was no there there, now the there there is very much in evidence” (August Kleinzahler, “Introduction,” Thom Gunn: Poems Selected by August Kleinzahler (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), xviii).

81 Even some of the ‘purely’ mythic characters in later Gunn often seem to suggest real people. For instance “Philemon and Baucis” can be read as being about Mike Kitay and Gunn, and “Odysseus on Hermes” can be read as being about Gunn and Robert Duncan.
characters yet are also all incomplete without a counteracting playfulness or receptive passivity. And Gunn also conceives of this necessary counteracting as a balance between movement and stasis. In a late elegy for his friend Robert Duncan, Gunn admiringly describes Duncan’s habitual activity of writing poems on the San Francisco Bay Area ferry while his pen moves back and forth between the constraining “notebook-margins” “while the Ferry turned/ From San Francisco, back from Berkeley too,/ And back again, and back again....” (BC 3). Like Duncan, or the dolphins, or the dancing David, the surfers of “From the Wave” are in one sense going nowhere – just back and forth. Yet nevertheless the surfers’ speedy movements become the means through which they attain a kind of harmonious happiness within their confinement. And this balance between speed and stasis is also absolutely necessary to their activity: “It is the wave they imitate/ Keeps them so still.” In order to achieve their triumph and mastery over the wave they need to find a way for speedy transit and stillness to happen at once.

At stake in this search for such balances and harmonies is whether or not Gunn and his characters can find peace within limitations and remain alive within them. The existentialist bikers in Gunn’s famous early poem “On the Move” relentlessly forced the landscape to ‘yield’ to their ‘will,’ so as to move “always toward, toward” (CP 39-40). However, Gunn’s surfers don’t feel any such need to master, get anywhere new, or leave anything behind. Instead of dourly and portentously riding “self-defined, astride the created will,” Gunn’s surfers compromise between seriousness and play, and between movement and stasis, as they accept and work within the looping motion of the waves and stanzas. And their achieved balance reaches its crowning moment in the action of riding the wave itself, an activity that depends on exchanging total mastery or “created will” for an earned passivity, a yoking together of movement and stasis in an inspired way. Gunn will later call this phenomenon “repose.” For instance, in “The Life of the Otter,” the titular animal within a museum is compared to a figureskater making “wide parabolas,/ figures of eight/ Long loops”; we’re later told that the otter/figure-skater’s play is “Functional but as if gratuitous,” and that when it plunges its “speed contains its own repose” (CP 430). Repose then stands for a harmonious state of merged work and play, active effort and
passive acceptance. Most importantly, repose makes loops and enclosures freeing just as the figures of eight here become a kind of gracefully drawn infinity sign: it’s as though confined space expands here to contain all one might need.

Repose leads us to another important way in which Gunn’s open characters make use of constraint: attaining an active skillfulness that’s not overly controlling requires that one remain open to instinct, inspiration, and interruption. In mimicking the waves the surfers must search intuitively for the right moment in which “Late as they can, they [may] slice the face.” We’ve already seen how the surfers’ improvisatory delay is felt here in the way the sentence runs on between the fourth and fifth stanzas (“then./ Late as they can”). This is the only instance of such an overflow between stanzas in the poem, and it’s no coincidence that the surfers’ energy and skill is described just as they improvise or swerve into new patterns within the poem’s rigid rules (then still rhymes with men). We’ve already looked at several examples of how the surfers add improvisatory flourishes of pattern on top of the poem’s overall form, or fulfill that form’s rules in surprising ways. Hence, it should be easy to envision how skillful improvisation and a flexible willingness to adapt and yet not utterly relinquish agency might lead to making forms and constraints work for them. In fact, the uniting characteristic of tricksterishness, repose, and

82 Gunn admires animals like dolphins and otters and thinks we can learn from them, but his human characters are usually in more danger of succumbing to imprisonment or becoming detached from pleasurable movement, and so human repose often feels more triumphant. For instance, in “To a Friend in Time of Trouble” Gunn describes a man seeking recuperation in the country who engages in hard labor (moving stones to build a wall) and then “feels the healing start... Riding its own repose, and learns, and learns” (CP 409). The man gets his repose here only through suffering in his past and working hard in his present.

Lack of repose can also point us toward closed characters: in “Looks” Gunn describes a cold Don Juan who, after sex, barks “Get off me bitch” to each “one who thought she had an equal right/ To her desires.” The worst condemnation Gunn can give the man is to point out that this desire for conquest has become a kind of rigid monomania: he’s trapped inside his own selfish desires (which are “clenched like hands/ Pale at the knuckle,” and “The bony city he is trapped inside”), and knows “nothing of repose/ Except within his kindled gaze, his gift” (CP 443-4). Only his seducers’ gaze has any kind of skill to it, and this gaze becomes a parody of the more far-reaching kind of repose we see in Gunn’s open characters.

83 Gunn’s poems often hold an action (Burt 201), but often that action is itself an interruption, an extended swerving off course. For instance, the couple in “The Discovery of the Pacific” and the attractive man in “San Francisco Streets” run away to California. The former travels “Emptier of the things they knew” and “improvised new habits” on their cross-country roadtrip. The latter rises up to “middle class” “How, you’re not sure.” And there are many other such examples of extended swerves in Gunn: the plane in “Small Plane in Kansas” spends the poem being bucked by the wind, “Mastered by mastering... a gust that flows”; the couple in “The Miracle” stops off for impromptu sex at a McDonald’s; in “Three Songs” Gunn describes hitchhiking (one of his favorite activities to write about) as being like “improvisation/ Inside a tune you know” (CP 248).

These swerves, though, must work within constraints, within the known tune. These constraints can be thematic: in “Selves” a painting of a road “adapts to the rigid/ rocky folds of the mountain’s skirt” (CP 323); in “Night Taxi” the driver knows “I have to be loose,/ like my light-embrace of the wheel,/ loose but in control...” (CP 387). But they can also be formal: Gunn’s free verse poems often involve trying to keep a single action or activity going as long as possible. For example, the goal of the pinball game in “Bally Power Play” is just to keep the game going as long as you can through all of the ball’s surprising ricochets. However, I think it’s in Gunn’s poems in traditional forms that we most feel the vital power of a character’s potential
improvisation is that they all involve accepting and working within limitations, imitating and accepting the waves’ rules while waiting for moments in which those rules can be bent, put to use, or expanded upon.

Yet improvisation and the ideal of repose carry risks with them: rather than ever seeing them as already triumphant, we should see Gunn’s open characters as engaged in _active and ongoing_ struggles to find repose and re-appropriate enclosure. Hence, there’s often something off-kilter about Gunn’s characters. The fast moving man in the “The Release,” for instance, has something “odd and off-balance about him” (301). And though the surfers in “From the Wave” seem perfectly balanced (their weight poised with a learn’d skill), this balance is only a means to skim over the wave in a rapid, yet inspired _fall_ forward, sideways, backward, and forward until the wave breaks and “Loses itself.” In general, we often encounter Gunn’s later characters – whether they are skateboarders or hitchhikers or pinball players or lovers stopping off suddenly to have sex in a public bathroom – somewhere between balance and free-fall. Repose necessitates risk because it requires giving up some control; navigating the potentially stifling thematic and formal constraints of a poem can be a tricky and uncertain business. Even when these constraints are successfully put to use, it’s always in an ongoing, active manner so that Gunn’s characters precarious living energies become palpable.

These risky living energies lead us to a final important quality of Gunn’s open characters, which is that they’re meant to be sexy. We’d be missing a key component of Gunn’s surfers openness and charge if we didn’t notice how they’re sexualized with their suggestively “sheathed bodies slick as seals”; their potentially flirtatious splashing of each other; and their “marbling” torsos. This eroticizing of the surfers ultimately draws our attention to their relationship to Gunn and helps to clarify it. This relationship is not a distant one: though Gunn’s presence as an actor in his poems is always limited, he frequently has brief cameos in his poems: in “Sweet Things”

---

84 An excess of free-wheeling energy in the absence of constraint can also become its own kind of trap. In the free-verse poem “Improvisation,” for instance, we meet a man who lives on the street doing whatever he wants – which means that he is “wholly employed/ with scrounging for cigarettes, drugs, drink/ or the price of Ding Dongs, with dodging knife-fights/ with ducking cops and lunatics...” (CP 437).
and “Duncan,” for example, Gunn enters far enough into the poems to be corrected, instructed, and surprised by his characters. This willingness to appear tangentially in his poems about others implicates Gunn in them, and demonstrates that Gunn doesn’t have or want the kind of masterful authorial aloofness that we find, for instance, in some third-person narrators in fiction or in Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Eros, then, becomes another means through which Gunn implicates himself: eros is important not just because it confers a kind of edgy charge on his characters, but because we can feel it magnetically drawing Gunn in from his margins. His muted authorial presence then signifies not scientific detachment, but a respectful refusal to tamper with energies and lives to which he’s very much attracted. Gunn’s attraction and simultaneous self-withholding then allows those lives to emerge throbbing with containment in the sexualized integrity of their activity and “sheathed bodies slick as seals.” As we’ll see more in looking at some other poems, the vital integrity of Gunn’s characters becomes palpable in the very ways they simultaneously draw Gunn in and holds him at bay. Hence, in his later books Gunn isn’t a museum guide taking us to look at wax sculptures or passive simulacrums; rather he becomes something like a self-employed tour guide taking us through a local scene of which he’s very much a part.

Once we enter that scene, the edginess of Gunn’s characters becomes key. This edginess is found in how their ability to re-appropriate rules – to slice the face, or ride the wave’s edge – can become suggestive of alternative social orders. For a characters’ flourishes and re-appropriations of enclosure are usually born out of that character’s countercultural skill, and can sometimes seem to suggest a better set of rules for how society might exist. Though the surfers of “From the Wave” are more gently beatific than stridently countercultural, even they have a kind of edge to them in their sexual power. Gunn’s open characters are often young or have unexpected moments of youthfulness because the young make for good open characters (as we saw in Wilbur and Kinnell); and because young people are more likely to buck authority and convention (especially in the 1960s); but also because young men are associated with beauty and sexual power, which in Gunn always carry revolutionary potential. In 1991, for instance, Gunn describes how the “gay male desire” of the 1970s amounted to “a visionary carnal politics” that was heir to “the hippies, drug-visionaries also.” He also writes about the “gay revolution’s
“essential subversiveness,” and about how gay men in particular strove each night to build another block of a “Holy City – a City of Eros.”\(^{85}\) In an essay that appeared the year prior, Gunn writes with amusing insight about how Whitman’s vision of an “ideally generous democracy” begins with his sexuality: “it is clear ultimately that he loves humanity so much because he loves hunky working men.”\(^{86}\) Eros, then, is essential to the edge of many of Gunn’s characters (who in turn are mostly male) – to their version of shock, which allows many of them to become representative characters of the “gay revolution” without ever being confined to just that. And both eros and edge are in turn are related to our issue of form and containment: if characters can find a way to transform what is harsh and entrapping into something that allows for robust, yet gentle happiness, then perhaps we can glimpse through them a better organization for persons at large. Gunn’s surfers are beatific partly because their erotic edge suggests how one set of rules might be re-appropriated to suggest a healthier, even paradisal system.

** The Street **

Gunn’s open characters, though, don’t exist in a void or in isolated vignettes; they tend to belong to Gunn’s adopted town of San Francisco, and in particular, to the drama of its streets and neighborhoods known for being hospitable to gay life and liberal counterculture more generally. Though his new home’s influence seeps into Gunn’s verse slowly (especially due to Winters’ cloistering influence), it’s difficult to underestimate how important San Francisco is to Gunn’s later work. Gunn first experienced the city as a revelation. Though he was not one to provide many self-dramatizing anecdotes in his interviews, Gunn gives a rather dramatic account of his migration: first, he tells us that he spent his twenty-fifth birthday in 1954 in the middle of a storm while on a boat crossing the Atlantic;\(^{87}\) then, he adds that he “crossed the country by train, getting off in Oakland, and arriving in San Francisco by ferry, which is a wonderful way of


\(^{86}\) Thom Gunn, *Shelf Life*, 19.

\(^{87}\) Thom Gunn, “My Life Up to Now,” 16.
entering the city, a spectacular way of entering it.”

That Gunn emphasizes the distances and perils of this journey, as well as the three separate modes of transportation it required, makes San Francisco’s discovery seem like the end of a quest. As Robert Pinsky puts it, it’s “Absurd to think of Thom Gunn as an expatriate: San Francisco is his home city as few people find homes.”

For Gunn the Bay Area would offer a happier alternative social world to those on offer anywhere else. Even while studying at Stanford, he visited San Francisco and found it to be “an open city, with whore-houses flourishing for anybody to see,” and tells us “A straight couple took me to my first gay bar, the [famous] Black Cat.”

Hence, even at the beginning of Gunn’s acquaintance with San Francisco, the city seems to grant him access to unprecedented personal and sexual freedom. A few years later Gunn moves into the city from Stanford, and in 1972 purchases a house in the middle of the Haight-Ashbury district where he will live until his death in 2004. This house then becomes a kind of “gay commune” with four or five other men all living together and dividing household chores; as Gunn tells us in “An Invitation,” “Each cooks one night, and each cooks well” (412).

All told, Gunn lives in San Francisco for almost fifty rather dramatic years: he’s there for acid rock and the Summer of Love in 1967; the huge immigration of gay men and women and the transformation of San Francisco into a “gay mecca” in the 1970s; the Haight suddenly turning seedy and dangerous and then partially recovering; growing homelessness in the Reagan era; and the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s – and all of these topics turn up at least tangentially in his poems. And though San Francisco certainly has its problems – as the aforementioned list


90 Thom Gunn, “My Life Up to Now,” 16.


suggests – the city immediately connects Gunn to an exciting, dangerous and at times utopic vision of sociality that provides a crucial counterbalance to his lonely, rigorously controlled sensibility. But nowhere does it accomplish this feat so powerfully as it does through the people it allows Gunn to encounter.

These people often have an edginess that’s less gentle than that of the surfers in “From the Wave.” In general, a prerequisite of San Francisco’s paradisal and utopian qualities is its true counterculture – its lives “marginal to the grid” and “at the postcard’s edge” (CP 436, 193). And indeed, many of Gunn’s San Franciscan characters have sharp edges or odd angles to them suggestive of alternative orders tangent to American norms as well as to Gunn’s own careful sensibility. Gunn then thrives off the way these edgy characters take over that sensibility. And he comes to love literal edges and slopes too: the later poems hold not only the “steep incline” of his surfers’ waves, but also the lover on one knee at a sheer angle to his partner in “The Miracle”; the recurring meeting point of “sharp [street]corners” where people suddenly collide (as in “Tenderloin,” “Sweet Things” and “At An Intersection”); and, of course, the sheer inclines of the famously hilly San Francisco streets (such as the steep “Masonic Avenue” that Gunn’s cabbie “zip[s] down” in “Night Taxi”) (443, 388). Edge and edginess is Thom Gunn’s version of the shock of open characters, which we associated with the whiplash’s violence in my introductory chapter – it’s also the vehicle by which we feel a preliminary order or enclosure being disrupted and taken over by something else.94

Edge in Gunn’s poetry depends on having San Francisco’s streets, neighborhoods, and hills as its backdrop, and in general we miss something of Gunn’s characters’ energies if we fail to recognize how important their home is to their portrayal. Though we usually only meet an open Gunn character when they are engaged in a particular activity – and therefore don’t learn too much about them per se – the poet encourages us to imagine that character’s life as entwined in the world they inhabit, in its very particular location in space and time. In a review of an anthology of 16th century verse, Gunn writes enthusiastically of how the anthologist recognizes the “enmeshment” of poetry with historical circumstances, and maintains a ‘healthy’ disregard of

94 Gunn’s love of upsetting the status quo and of being shocking is born out of his dissatisfaction with closed systems, and his desire to imagine a paradisal structure capacious and flexible enough to give everyone want they want. Dante’s Paradise, after all, has an incredibly involved, but quite specific structure.
“large notions of universality and narrow ones of poetic autonomy” as well as of the distinction between the “documentary and the literary.”"95 Correspondingly, as we’ll see, Gunn’s characters are often representative of a world, but are also enriched by our imagining of that world. For once we get a lot of such edgy characters we start to imagine a San Franciscan scene that’s both aesthetically coherent and also a real site in space and time where these characters might conduct their lives. Fleshing out this world then in turn helps us imagine the kinds of lives his characters might lead after the end of each poem – without anything about these characters as individuals needing to be nailed down.

However, Gunn is tempted to control and possess his town instead of merely using it as way for his characters to keep hold of their independent, external lives. Gunn quickly embraces his city with its counterculture and cast of characters – he at one point describes himself as a type of seaweed that floats to a new place and puts down new roots.96 Ultimately, he becomes a transplanted regional poet who, starting in the 1960s, fills his books with San Francisco places and street names:

there are bits of San Francisco in Touch: you know, “Pierce Street,” “Taylor Street,” “The Produce District.” And probably more with each book. It thrilled me to write a litany of names in ‘Night Taxi,’ the last poem in The Passages of Joy. There are two lines where I take four extreme points in the city: China Basin to Twin Peaks./ Harrison Street to the Ocean. I loved doing that. It’s pure litany, it’s not meaningful. But it gave me a feeling of possession or achievement – to have found a place for those names.97 (Gunn’s emphases)

We see Gunn in the above quote not merely wanting to anchor his poems in particular districts and on definite streets, but actually wanting to ‘gather up’ all four corners of the city like a bundle as if to pick it up and carry it away with him. The very attractiveness of San Francisco as an improved alternative social world creates in Gunn a desire to own it, and thus leads us back to his old struggle between crushing containment (“Now I will shut you in a box/ With massive sides and a lid that locks”) and admiration for the independent vitality of others; it leads us back,

95 Thom Gunn, Shelf Life, 4-5.
96 Gunn, Paris Review, 184.
97 Ibid., 184.
in other words, to the grim a-sociality with which he began. Here’s Gunn describing that same possessive instinct a little earlier on in the same interview:

I liked the idea of a populated book. I’ve always liked the idea of a book of poems as a kind of... if not a world, a country in a world. One of my impulses in writing is the desire to possess my experience and to possess all my experiences – my funny and trivial experiences too. I like to bring in people on the street. I was thinking that, if the romantics had ‘effusions’ and certain of the modernists had ‘observations’ – Prufrock and Other Observations, Marianne Moore’s book Observations – what I’m trying to do is record. I’m recording the past, I’m also recording the present and I’m recording the world around me and the things that go through my mind. One of the things I want to record is the street, because the streets that I move through are part of my life that I enjoy and want to possess. I don’t any longer think of a poem as ‘loot,’ but I do think of it as in some sense possessing something. (my emphases)98

We glimpse Gunn’s adamancy in his repetition: he says he wants “possess” and then clarifies that he wants to “possess all.” More, possession is linked to recording speedy thoughts and people as they ‘go through’ his mind and ‘move through’ his streets. It’s also linked to recording street people in particular: the speed and ephemerality of street-life becomes Gunn’s main example of what he wants to keep as it passes.

I’ll return to the topic of fast-moving streets shortly, but first we should see how the impulse to possess and record might have its virtues as well as its dangers. In a late essay I’ve already mentioned, Gunn praises his friend Christopher Isherwood’s clear, simple style as being almost camera-like: “a camera is not a bad thing to emulate... its faithfulness of attention to physical imagery is valuable because through it we may learn about the appearance of the world outside of us...Doing so helps us to escape from the singleness of our own minds which, if lived in exclusively, become prisons.”99 Hence, we can understand Gunn’s wish to record his San Francisco streets accurately as part of a healthy desire to open up his poems and mind to a richer, freer external world.

In fact the camera becomes a totemic figure throughout Gunn’s later career: for instance, during his mid-career transition, he writes poem-like captions for his brother’s book of photographs of people (Positives, pub. 1967), and later writes a poem in the voice of a camera that’s included in The Passages of Joy. Gunn’s love of photography is linked to his desire to

98 Ibid., 183.

99 Thom Gunn, Shelf Life. 182.
escape from his mind into the external world that is his new home. For the camera returns us to Gunn’s tour-guide impulse, which we can now see as Gunn’s desire to show off his beloved discovered city to visitors and to readers of his poems alike, thereby affirming and shoring up the reality of his own discovery of that city. One of Gunn’s happiest poems, “An Invitation,” is a Ben Jonson-like epistolary poem in rhyming couplets that addresses his brother Ander and asks him to come visit. The poem is entirely made up of descriptions of the things they’ll do during the visit; in particular, Gunn mentions introducing Ander to the poet’s household, going to see the Pacific, taking the ferry to Sausalito, and climbing up Telegraph Hill to look at the murals on Coit Tower. Gunn also includes poor street life in his ‘tour,’ and says that they’ll go look at the bread-lines of “Reagan’s proletariat” that he describes as “Gangling around two sides of city block” (412). Unlike your average tour-guide, Gunn wants Ander and his reader to fully inhabit the actual world they are moving through, and the poet’s faithful camera-like vision isn’t going to exclude poor life at the “postcard’s edge.” Even so, we can imagine that if naming the four corners of his city in “Night Taxi” thrilled Gunn, then displaying the best and worst of San Francisco to his brother must have made him feel positively giddy.

Of course, Gunn doesn’t fully evade the camera’s potential for violence as it slows down the rush of unfamiliar landscapes and people and converts them into portable souvenirs (or poems). For instance, we might think here of Susan Sontag’s famous observation that the tourist’s camera replaces the colonialist hunter’s rifle. Gunn himself certainly recognizes the camera’s potential for violence for in “Song of a Camera,” the camera becomes a kind of blade: “I cut the sentence/ out of a life/ out of the story/ with my little knife” (348). “Song of a Camera” is a rather ambivalent poem, and in general, the camera or tour’s potential for violence is an uneasy subject in Gunn: as late as 1991 we find the poet arguing that the metaphor of a writer exploring his subject matter, and moving deeper into its interior, should not upset us with its “colonial, imperial, military, and sexual connotations which are certainly present, for, though I have no right to exploit others, I have every right to take full possession of my own mind’s interior.”101 This is a particularly odd comment to make for a man who argues so persuasively


101 Ibid., 152.
that mind and subject matter are enmeshed with the actual world and its inhabitants. I think we have to read this comment as indicative of Gunn’s continued desire to possess and enclose (he’s making an excuse for this desire here because he’s still powerfully drawn toward it). In any case, we can see how San Francisco and its streets lead us right back to Gunn’s ongoing personal struggles and divided inclinations.  

And the poet’s desire to possess his streets only increases when he starts to feel that the utopic counterculture that he loves is beginning to disappear. During the AIDS epidemic, for instance, Gunn writes in a notebook that “it is up to me to record it [San Franciscan utopian counterculture], as well as I can.” But even before the AIDS-crisis Gunn has the historical sense that recording and possessing are important tools against vanishing. Wendy Lesser, for instance, uses Gunn’s Isherwood essay to make something like this point:

Thom was the kind of writer who particularly valued in other writers their connection to the details of time and place. As he said in his deeply appreciative essay about Christopher Isherwood’s novels, ‘It is surely of permanent interest that reading them we may imagine exactly what it was like to live in the Berlin of the early 1930s or the Los Angeles of the early 1960s.’ Thom’s poems do much the same thing for the Bay Area of the 1950s through the 1990s....

To have this historical sense is to see the place one inhabits as on the border of vanishing, and thus to have a greater imperative to record it than just a desire to hoard one’s own personal treasures. Yet, as I’ve already suggested, the main way in which Gunn records his new home is through focusing on specific characters. And Gunn also praises Isherwood for the way his characters are not just “casually representative of a time and place” but “are at once sharply

102 Admittedly, Gunn’s desire to possess can have a gentler side to it. For instance, we might sometimes think of it as treasuring. In response to an interviewer asking Gunn about how he likes to populate a book with local types and local streets Gunn says the following: “Yes, yes, I like to tell stories, I like to record a scene, things that I come across in my life. I hide them away sometimes, like little secrets that other people might not recognize” (Campbell 41). In this quotation at least, Gunn uses his poems to treasure his scenes and loved characters, not displaying them like a hunter’s stuffed trophies, but forcing the reader to be more attentive in order to recognize their “secrets” – and thereby inviting the reader in to a richer world that rewards prolonged attention.


105 Tom Sleigh recalls a Gunn who was keenly aware of changes in his neighborhood: “the last time I visited Thom Gunn at his house on Cole Street. We talked for a long time about how the Haight had changed and was changing ever more rapidly into a well-to-do neighborhood, and about how he himself was changing, taking long naps, finding it difficult to write. And later, when we walked to get lunch, he told me little spicy stories about people whom he knew that certain houses or shops reminded him of back in the day, before the neighborhood had gone upscale” (Tom Sleigh, “Thom Gunn’s New Jerusalem,” 256).
Despite all of his desire to record and possess, Gunn doesn’t want his characters to be empty symbols. Rather, he wants them to be what I called representative characters in my introduction: he wants characters who suggest a world but who become more, not less, individual through that suggestion. Summoning up these characters in poems will depend on Gunn maintaining camera-like fidelity to the contours of a character’s particular presence, while also showing us that this character’s whole life cannot be contained within a single poem.

The street, then, provides the ultimate means of balancing enclosing, accurate possession with suggestive vitality. Gunn’s friend, the famous neurologist Oliver Sacks recalls that “Thom was always a tremendous walker, striding with his long legs up and down the hills of San Francisco... He never had a car or bicycle – he was quintessentially a walker, incessantly in motion, and a walker like Dickens, who observed everything, took it in, and used it, sooner or later, in what he wrote.” Sacks portrays Gunn here as a kind of San Franciscan flâneur or roving literary hunter who, striding up and down hills, runs into others by chance and then ‘takes them in’ to his writing later. The nature of Gunn’s chance ‘run ins’ lets him do so: unlike biking or driving, walking allows for significant, if still brief, face-to-face encounters with others. Yet recall that Gunn’s street characters often possess the edginess I discussed above – they carry with them the energy of shock, speed, steep incline, and sharp angle. Hence, they are perfectly suited for resisting photographic encapsulation or poetic embalming. We’ve also seen that Gunn’s edge is connected to eros, and sexual promiscuity becomes another means through which street characters evade bad enclosure or possession: “There is the promiscuity of the streets, which can hold promise of a sexual promiscuity as well, which is exciting,” writes Gunn. Such promiscuity is a kind of freedom: Gunn’s streets become places of multiple fleeting encounters.

---

106 Thom Gunn, Shelf Life, 185.


108 In “The Release,” for instance, Gunn describes returning the attractive druggie with “the forward leaning walk” (CP 301) as he found him: an autonomous “planet sheathed in its own air.” I don’t think it’s coincidence that the poem in which Gunn most explicitly describes his own ideal practice of representing open others is one in which the described other is a street-figure who is walking athletically and speedily about.

109 He adds, “I love streets... I could stand on the street and look at people all day” (Thom Gunn, Paris Review, 187).
whose very multiplicity carries a sexual charge and implies a lack of ownership – no one on the street is yours, but you can enjoy everyone.

Gunn then is really neither a hunter who possesses experiences and people, nor a tour-guide with a predetermined spiel and set of stops. What Gunn loves most about the streets is the way their abundant, risky, surprise encounters, and their speedy movements, energies, and freedoms, make for the kinds of characters who can engage in the exchanges Gunn needs and make his enclosing poems work for them. Gunn’s street characters are those best able to re-appropriate Gunn’s enclosing snapshots or portraits, while simultaneously reminding us that the rest of their lives exist elsewhere – within the historical city that they also help us to imagine.\(^{110}\)

In fact, the very composition of these street poems helps Gunn find his needed counterbalance. The lines that precede the encounter with the speeding man in “The Release” are these: “And I assemble it as it was when I walked on it,/ the street, it’s unstable, that’s what keeps me going/ the sense of mild but constant risk” (301). Hence, the actual streets Gunn walks through bring him others in charged, fleeting, chance encounters,\(^{111}\) which Gunn then struggles to possess at home, laboring over his usual endless drafts. However, Gunn labors to possess the encounters \textit{in their instability}: “I assemble it [the street] as it was when I walked on it.” Gunn’s brief cameos in many poems then not only implicate the poet in his depicted world while holding himself back to make room for a character’s accurate depiction – they also help us to imagine each character as \textit{actually encountered} by chance on the street. Gunn’s cameos help ensure that a poem’s finish and polish doesn’t obscure its simultaneous qualities of instability and hazard.

At their best, then, Gunn’s street-character poems manage to make enclosure and speedy vitality work in tandem, each enabling the other. Gunn’s enclosure is uniquely well suited to slowing down the energies of the street and preserving them from their usual instantaneous disappearances. Meanwhile, the street, with its haunts, slopes, and intersections brings Gunn his

\(^{110}\) Gunn’s streets have a freedom and charge that is something like what Gunn associated with Duncan’s open form poems full of “accident or chance... inadvertence and error” (Gunn, \textit{Shelf Life}, 132). As Clive Wilmer says, Gunn “is rightly thought of as a poet of modern cities, but it was not for their rational order that he loved them: it was rather for their openness to the transient and unpredictable” (Clive Wilmer, “Gunn, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans,” \textit{At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn}, ed. Joshua Weiner [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 45-65, 46). Or here’s Charles Leftwich: “The street is the quintessential symbol of freedom, adventure and, ultimately, life in Gunn” (Leftwich, “Thom Gunn: From Poet of the Will, to Poet of Being,” 51).

\(^{111}\) These encounters have much in common with those in Baudelaire, and Gunn loved “Tableaux Parisiens” in particular.
kind of speedy, edgy, countercultural people who can put his closure to use, converting what
could be dour traps into something vital. And this depiction leads to satisfying exchange. Gunn
says the following of his interest in tramps:

    I’ve always been interested in the life of the street. I supposed it’s always seemed to me like a
    kind of recklessness, a freedom after the confinement of the home or the family.\footnote{112}

The exchange we find taking place between Gunn and his street people is comparable to the one
I described earlier: Gunn calls forth, demonstrates, and preserves these figures’ marvelous
energies via his controlling formality, and they in turn provide him with a relief from his own
nature – from “the confinement of the home or the family” – or of the army or closet or island
nation or circular verbal prison. We’ll look at some of those characters next.

** Street Songs **

Gunn’s poetic town is a version of San Francisco, and that city’s streets are where Gunn
encounters many of his most striking open characters. Though these characters frequently
display the open character qualities we found in “From the Wave,” they often have more edge to
them than do Gunn’s surfers, and lend themselves even more intensely to risk, youthfulness,
improvisation, interruption, swerving, strange angles of encounter, and tricksterishness (the way
someone you think you recognize standing on the corner can turn out to be someone else). This
is especially true of the drug-dealer protagonist of the late 1960s poem “Street Song,” which is a
poem with some literal fine edges to it (with its ‘sharpness,’ ‘scraping,’ and ‘cutting out’).

“Street Song”

    I am too young to grow a beard
    But yes man it was me you heard
    In dirty denim and dark glasses.
    I look through everyone who passes
    But ask him clear, I do not plead,
    \textit{Keys lids acid and speed}.

    My grass is not oregano.
    Some of it grew in Mexico.

\footnote{112} Thom Gunn, \textit{Paris Review}, 186. 130
You cannot guess the weed I hold,  
Clara Green, Acapulco Gold,  
Panama Red, you name it man,  
Best on the street since I began.

My methedrine, my double-sun,  
Will give you two lives in your one,  
Five days of power before you crash.  
At which time use these lumps of hash  
– They burn so sweet, they smoke so smooth,  
They make you sharper while they soothe.

Now here, the best I’ve got to show,  
Made by a righteous cat I know.  
Pure acid – it will scrape your brain,  
And make it something else again.  
Call it heaven, call it hell,  
Join me and see the world I sell.

Join me, and I will take you there,  
Your head will cut out from your hair  
Into whichever self you choose.  
With Midday Mick you can’t lose,  
I’ll get you anything you need.  
*Keys lids acid and speed.* (CP 207-8)

Midday Mick is a superimposed, tricksterish figure in several respects: to begin with, he’s a modern incarnation of John Dowland’s peddler.\(^{113}\) As salesman of highs and hallucinogens, Mick’s also related to Circe and Hermes, the mythical drug dealers who inaugurate *Moly*.\(^{114}\) He also sports dark glasses, thereby warding off too much intimacy, and looks not *at* but *through* everyone; we might wonder from the get-go then whether Mick knows more about us then we do about him.\(^{115}\) Finally, even Mick’s historical original(s) seems to inhabit two ages simultaneously. In *The Haight-Ashbury: A History*, Charles Perry writes that the Haight in 1967 was part “Middle Ages... with a husband and wife evangelist team haranguing the crowds, and

\(^{113}\) This is the peddler from Dowland’s poem “A Pedlar” published in the year 1600 – Gunn’s main poetic model here.

\(^{114}\) Also, like the Hermes of *Night Sweats* (as well as Gunn’s surfers) Mick is young. Youth and tricksterishness go together with openness in Gunn’s poetics.

\(^{115}\) Mick’s dark glasses might also add to his slippery multiplicity by reminding us of the isolated protagonist of Gunn’s earlier poem *Misanthropos* or the famous threatening cop from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960).
street dealers muttering their traditional streety cry: ‘Acid, speed, lids?’”116 Hence, even in Perry’s description Mick is superimposed on evangelists and Middle Age street markets. The dealer’s tricksterishness then is not just Gunn’s creation, but rather is a quality that’s being directly observed and studied.

More, the fact that Mick’s tricksterishness is something observed in the real world suggests that Mick’s evasiveness and external (open) reality are connected. Though Mick’s shiftiness helps him to evade rigid encapsulation, he’s still, at bottom, an open human being we can imagine as living a life outside the poem: as Clive Wilmer puts it, Mick “is also quite literally a dealer and a Californian street boy, circa 1970.”117 Gunn himself draws attention to this porousness between world and poem in his interview with James Campbell: “Yes, I’d been struck by all the people, mainly young men, rambling around the streets of San Francisco at that time, advertising drugs and selling them... ‘Street Song’ was about the street cries of San Francisco.” Gunn even goes on to tell us that “Keys, incidentally, were kilos of marijuana, and lids were ounces”; hence, it’s as though Gunn even wants the drugs in the poem to keep their specific real-world referents.118

Yet both Perry and Gunn’s quotations speak of salesmen, plural. Hence, we might initially think that Mick is merely a composite figure representative of the kinds of dealers we’d find in San Francisco in the late 1960s all uttering the same advertising cry. Perhaps he is more of a general representative of the “world I sell” who can lead us imaginatively ‘take us there’ into his streets than he is a truly individual character. Of course, even if this were the case, he would still be more open than closed since his character would still refer outward to real people in a particular, historical scene. Yet, looking more closely at Mick we see that he isn’t such a general figure: he is named, after all, and has a very particular kind of chutzpah and skill that Gunn clearly admires.119 He also makes an elaborate pitch that goes well beyond his refrain and shows

---


119 So I don’t think Clive Wilmer is quite right when he says the following: “[the poem] is neither a warning against drug-taking nor an apologia for it... Like all of Gunn’s poems, ‘Street Song,’ undoubtedly moral, is far from moralistic, part of its morality
that he’s quite good at his job, despite being too young to grow a beard. Moreover, he possesses a vital bravado that’s fleshted out by his stylized dark glasses, his self-respect (“I do not plead”), his boast (“Best on the street since I began”), and his turns of phrase (man, a righteous cat, scrape your brain).

In fact, the very restrictions on our knowledge of Mick’s life that might at first make him seem like a composite figure, ultimately contribute to his openness. Though Mick might remind us of various open-character types from my introduction (representative, continuous, evasive, anti-tragic), he’s perhaps most like an essential character. Like Gunn’s surfers and so many of his other open characters, Mick is represented ‘by a single skill in a zestful, energetic way, so that though he is locked down he remains very much alive.’ Again, rather than enclose an entire person in a poem, Gunn presents Mick in the integrity of a single activity or skill: we meet Mick only through his drug pitch, and through the edgy, shock-bearing energy he brings to bear on it. Put differently, the poet’s understanding of Mick is carefully limited to what Gunn might know from running into those like Mick on the streets; this limited knowledge then allows Gunn to imagine Mick well enough to give him individual presence without intruding into his larger life. Mick’s tricksterishness then can be seen as adding to his edge and helping him to escape from any reductionist views of him – from either being locked into a totally known life or abstracted into a composite.

We can also quickly see how Mick uses his edgy skill to re-appropriate and transmute the potential traps of the poem. First of all, like the surfers in “From the Wave” Mick turns his potentially circular or repetitive activity of yelling his refrain at passers-by into a demonstration of skill. After all, he doesn’t repeat his call and turn it into a refrain until the whole pitch has been made, at which point the refrain can become a maximally effective call-to-purchase.

Second, Mick’s pitch is all about becoming far-ranging, supercharged, and slippery while still remaining within constraints. His cash of pot for instance is itemized in a kind rainbow of exoticized locales: he offers us little bits of Santa Clara, Acapulco, and Panama, as though we’re being allowed to travel all over while simultaneously standing still. Similarly, he doesn’t promise

residing in its refusal to make moral judgements” (49). The poem may not be a direct apologia for drug-taking, but Gunn clearly admires the energy he finds in dealer’s edgy, seductive spiel.
immortality, but rather to give his customers two lives in one – to help them be doubled while remaining the same size. Finally, while taking his drugs you don’t actually travel to heaven or hell, but you get to have your brain be filled with both at once. The normal rules and constraints of the body are thus kept intact but also surpassed: it can seem like your head is leaving your hair behind, and that your very selfhood is being altered (into “whichever self you choose”), but ultimately you remain in your body just as Mick remains in his stanzas. Mick’s point is that such constraints need not be constraining: though Mick speaks in strict, six-line aabbcc iambic tetrameter stanzas with a refrain modeled on a four hundred year old poem, his pitch envisions exotic distances and new-fangled transformations.\footnote{We might think here of Richard Wilbur’s famous comment that the power of the genie comes from his containment inside a bottle.}

In addition to finding thematic slipperiness and power within enclosure, Mick also manages to take over the poem’s tight form. And ultimately, he does so not to advertise drugs but language, which then in turn can be used to advertise the person who is imagined as standing behind it. Mick, in other words, seduces us in a similar way to how a poem seduces us, and he does this by making poetic constraint an integral part of his pitch. For instance, the stanzas organize that pitch. Each has a particular function: in the first Mick assails the reader/interlocutor, in the second he introduces a drug, in the third and fourth he introduces different drugs, and in fifth he offers all of the drugs at once. Alternatively, one can read the first stanza as Mick’s initial self-introduction; the second as describing the quality and lineage of his drugs; the third as describing the experience of taking them; the fourth as performing a faux-favor to the customer by exhibiting his ‘secret,’ best drug; and the fifth as building from the ‘join me’ that ends the penultimate stanza in order to make a final crowning appeal that is also an incantation and promise.

If stanzaic organization is co-opted by Mick to increase the power of his pitch, so is rhyme. Couplets can be constraining as they demand a rhyme every other line and tie lines together; yet here they enact the mesmerizing, enlarging doubleness within constraint that pervades the poem. Like the “double-sun” and “two lives in your one,” rhyme transforms mere repetition into power, and enclosure into electricity. And doubleness is woven into how Mick
speaks, not just in the abstract senses of manipulation and double-talk, but in how he literally tends to speak in pairs (they burn/they smoke; head/hair; Clara/Acapulco) as well as in alliterated doubles (heaven/hell; dirty denim; dirty denim/dark glasses; and even Midday Mick). It’s possible to read this poem as simply combining Gunn’s classicism with his romantic love of the street. But what makes the poem so successful is that Mick makes that classicism fit his own purposes: he shows us how Gunn’s rigorous couplets can actually be quite compatible with the language and the energy of the late 1960’s San Francisco streets, serving in fact to heighten that energy. After all the “Keys lids acid and speed” refrain, the one ‘found-line’ of the poem, is itself comprised of the four beats required for Gunn’s tetrameter line as well as of musically compacted double-sounds strung through the line like vertebrae: Keys, lids --> lids, acid --> acid, speed --> speed, keys. Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit” came out four years before Moly and is another one of the sources for “Street Song”121; and it too begins with its a form of hallucinatory doubling: “One pill makes you larger/ And one pill makes you small.” Fittingly, “White Rabbit” also combines the literary (Alice) and the druggie. In other words, the literary in “Street Song” is not arbitrarily soldered to Mick’s language; rather, the literary becomes something that the visionary consciousness of the 1960s street can put to use. The literary might even heighten that visionary consciousness, or at least help portray it in such a form that it can be preserved. Instead of demanding conformity or enclosing Mick in a set of stultifying rules, literary tradition provides useful tools to give lasting shape and form to Mick’s free-wheeling energies.

Rhyme, repetition, refrains, and enclosure bring Mick’s language but also his character to edgy, visionary life. The language of “Street Song” has a kind of entrancing magic that’s connected personally to its wielder in a way that drug experience isn’t usually connected to its dealer. For example, we don’t learn Mick’s name until the poem’s last stanza; thus, it’s as if the sales-pitch has actually been for a person all along, or as if Mick giving his speech well enough has produced that person.

But Mick’s re-appropriation of constraint does more than bring him to life: it also makes

121 Gunn’s head/hair line can be seen as an echo of Jefferson Airplane’s famous advice to “feed your head.”
him a seducer who forces us to admire him. For example, the pleasures inherent in Mick’s verbal skill and rhetoric make us feel that we’re not being encroached upon and assailed so much as catered to in a way that makes us want to celebrate Mick’s energies alongside Gunn. For example, at the same time as Mick is giving us advice about what to smoke after coming down from methedrine in the third stanza, the poem simultaneously ‘catches’ our crash with the hash-rhyme that follows it (“Five days of power before you crash./ At which time use these lumps of hash...”). The third stanza in general creates pleasurable shifts between tightly-wound exciting energy and its gentle release by alternating back and forth between heavily spondaic chanted lines and more relaxed iambic ones. And this sense of being catered to and cared for recurs throughout the poem: however far our head ‘cuts out from our hair,’ or a sentence runs on, a couplet rhyme is always waiting to catch us and provide a soft landing. As Mick himself boasts in the last stanza “With Midday Mick you can’t lose”: he’s there to take us where we want to go, provide for any needs we might have, and give us whatever self we choose. Of course it’s a calculated trick, but one that does it’s job so well that it becomes fulfilling in of itself like a commercial that’s so entertaining that you forget what it was advertising. In sum, we get what we need from Mick merely by listening to his shifty, mesmerizing language and rhetoric, which in turn make his edgy energy and living presence palpable. We feel in the end that Mick is more than a mask for Gunn: we feel Gunn’s love for a character that he’s both observed and imagined becoming our own love for that character.

Of course, Mick re-appropriates enclosures other than that of his restriction to a single activity in a tight form. After all, being a street dealer is not everyone’s top choice as a profession, and even in the late 1960s the job must have had its repetitive, seedy, or wearisome aspects. Moreover, as the quote from Perry suggests, people would often typecast ‘60s Haight street dealers, seeing them as plural or interchangeable. Gunn’s streets then not only provide him with characters likely to counterbalance his own tendency toward severe enclosure, they also

---

122 One might also notice that Mick’s recommendation about how best to manage drug-pleasure is reminiscent of one of Ben Jonson’s descriptions (say, from “Inviting a Friend to Supper”) about how to best satisfy an appetite.

123 Even if Gunn is going to use his limited knowledge about Mick not to intrude too much upon him, others might use this same knowledge to reduce him to a stereotype.
help Gunn attend to the painful enclosures his characters are subjected to by those streets. Yet Mick, at least, thrives despite these difficulties.

I’ll look at some more serious examples of ‘real world’ enclosures in my next chapter, but I’ll conclude here by looking briefly at one more example of an open character in Gunn’s poetry who seems to be thriving within both poetic and worldly constraints. Gunn’s poem “Bally Power Play” from The Passages of Joy was written about ten years after “Street Song,” and takes place not on the streets, but in one of their way-stations: a bar (315-6). Even though the poem is in free verse, its topic is still enclosure: it’s almost entirely about a man playing pinball, which is itself a game with a limited set of rules that takes place inside a glass case. Admittedly, though, while most of the poem is again taken up with describing a single skilled activity (pinball playing), we do learn a little more about its character here: its final section describes Gunn’s chat with the player: “he tells me about broken promises/ with a comic rueful smile/ at his need for reassurance.” He also tells Gunn that he always waits until right before closing time to find “the night’s partner.”

The player’s skill, though, is the central feature of the poem, and is taken just as seriously as Gunn’s surfers’ athletic skill or Mick’s verbal one. Like these other characters, the pinball-player turns a confined, repetitive activity into a celebration of his life-force. Here’s the opening of the poem:

Everybody looks at him playing 
the machine hour after hour, 
but he hardly raises his gold lashes. 
Two fingers move, his hips 
lean in almost imperceptibly. 
He seldom takes his eyes 
from the abstract drama of the ball, 
the descent and the reverses 
of its brief fortunes. He is 
the cool source of all that hurry 
and desperate activity, in control, 
legs apart, braced arms apart, 
seeming alive only at the ends.

In sum, the player is in possession of a kind of repose of his own. The game itself is filled with a flurry of movement and “desperate activity”: we learn later that the ball “frantically dashes from
side to side/ and up and down... it is trapped, it is released.” However, Gunn’s “cool” player hardly moves, and has achieved a quasi-athletic balance.

Meanwhile, the poem’s form is guided by player as it too strikes a balance between cool control and rapid movement. The poem is in free verse, and its long-sentences are split up across many lines, most of which describe motion; hence, it would be easy for the poem to imitate the pell-mell rush of the pinball. However, the lines are not too heavily enjambed: Gunn ends his lines at places where it’s easy to pause and take a breath, and the effect of this is that each sentence moves incrementally and deliberately forward (e.g. “He seldom takes his eyes/[breath] from the abstract drama of the ball, /[breath] the descent and reverse/[breath] of its brief fortune”). Admittedly, when the ball is at its most frantic, the lines do start to imitate its movements: they shorten, enjamb more strongly, and become generally unpredictable. The ball “frantically dashes from side to side [inverted, heavily trochaic line]/ and up and down, it is [strong enjambment]/ trapped, it is released, [very short line]/ it springs to the top again [enjambment]/ back to where it entered.” However, shortly thereafter, control is restored as the poem returns to having evenly distributed lines with decorous pauses that even have a kind of resignation to them as they describe the ball’s inevitable fate (“but in the end it must disappear/ down the hole at the bottom/ – and the fifth act is over...”). Control in the poem then isn’t rigid but has room within it for something like disorder. It becomes more like repose: something that involves risk and allows for variation and improvisation; something that remains connected to more dramatic forms of movement while maintaining equanimity; and something that seems guided more by a character’s autonomous skill than by Gunn’s poetic control.

And once again, we encounter Gunn’s unique combination of the essential and the representative in this poem. The pinball player is excellent in his single activity, but also stands in for and leads us to imagine the erotic San Franciscan world of youth culture and gay bars that the player will move off into after the closing time mentioned toward the poem’s end. In an essay published in 1974 (eight years before The Passages of Joy’s publication) Gunn writes, “I had for a while a theory of poetry as ‘loot’, a prize grabbed from the outside world and taken permanently into the poet’s possession... But of course it isn’t taken, it continues out there in the world living its own independent existence, stepping from the tube-train at a later stop, and
coolly unaware of all the furor it is causing.”

Keeping this quote in mind, we can see how the player can be represented in the integrity of his skilled play (transforming an enclosed game into a vital skill), and can be imagined as moving off afterwards into the world that his presence, and Gunn’s town, helps us to imagine – a town that now includes dealers on its streets and surfers on its beaches.

The player’s edginess and power over his enclosure also have to do with his erotic status. Mick and the surfers were also erotic subjects, but the player’s attractiveness commands a more central role in his poem. After all, the poem begins with ‘everybody looking’ at the player: the player is ‘absorbed’ in the repose of his skill, but he also has an externally-directed erotic edge to him, for instance, in his stylized, hardly moving “gold lashes.” And though the poem begins with everybody looking at the player, we can soon detect Gunn’s individual attraction. We see this first in the poet’s sensitive, kinesthetic attention to the man’s game-playing stance: “his hips/ lean in almost imperceptibly... legs apart, braced arms apart.” Two lines later we are told that the player’s “haunches are up against the wood now,/ the hard edge which he presses/ or which presses him/ just where the pelvis begins,/ above what in the skeleton/ would be no more than a hole.” We can feel Gunn ‘leaning in almost imperceptibly’ too from the margins of the poem through the erotic, bodily imagination at work here. Yet just like the surfers mimicked their waves, the man – who seems “alive only at the ends” – seems almost to unite with the wood of

---

124 Gunn, Occasions of Poetry, 156.

125 The street limits what Gunn can know about a person, and makes them representative of a place and time without being reduced to a symbol for that place. They gain power from their scene and activity, but in so doing remind us that there’s a world beyond the poem that they will return to. Gunn says of a minor character in Ginsberg who spooning coffee reveals arms covered in needle tracks, that “She is there in herself...one who in her very helpless brevity has a representative weight – in the total experience, in the memory, in the America Ginsberg tries to comprehend” (SL, 105); he also speaks of how specifics in Jack Sharpless’s poems can be “both sharply themselves and at the same time suggestive of wider contexts without turning into mere impoverished emblems” (SL, 124). In both reviews we get the sense that these things go together for Gunn: that individual presence and “representative weight” are mutually reinforcing.

More, for Gunn, the larger world a character inhabits is the place they lead us to while they themselves leave us behind. In the quotation about the ‘loot’ on the tube train, the ‘loot’ doesn’t just disappear, it keeps riding the tube, leading us into the world even as it takes its leave of us. Gunn’s street characters are fully present in the activities in which he encounters them – cursing, skating, cruising, begging, etc. – but their presence depends on our sense that they’ve arrived fresh into the poem from a world they’re going to return to shortly. All we know about them is what we see, but since they belong to a full world that they give us glimpses of, they also presumably have lives in that world. If Gunn has a bit of the tour-guide about him – a tour guide who loves to shock and play tricks – his characters often feel as though they’re local figures being called upon to make an impression, to bring their personality to bear and represent their city briefly before they return to their own business. As Clive Wilmer puts it, “Thom’s poems include emotion, but do not attempt to contain it. They evoke sensations, but never pretend to have captured them. He is the most modest of poets: he never allows you to forget that ‘there is a world elsewhere” (Qtd. in John Peck, “Summation and Chthonic Power,” 143).
his game like an urban dryad as he presses against it. This tricksterishness is not just a means of mastering his activity: it’s also a way of dodging Gunn’s pressure and of camouflaging himself as Gunn presses in toward him.

Ultimately, Gunn’s attraction to the player causes the poet to reckon with him more carefully rather than master or trap him. We can see this reckoning begin in the intensity of the poet’s perception, which seems to involve a kind of X-raying of the player’s insides (his pelvis, the hole in his skeleton). This perception is reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop’s famous descriptive poem “The Fish” (pub. 1946), in which Bishop first considers the fish’s surface and then says, “I thought of the coarse white flesh/ packed in like feathers,/ the big bones and the little bones... and the pink swim-bladder/ like a big peony.”

The analogy between poets is useful because description in Bishop’s poem triggers an acknowledgment of and reckoning with her subject that makes Bishop ultimately let the fish go free. Similarly, Gunn’s description ends up leading to respectful exchange not to complete encapsulation or sexual conquest – for Gunn’s intense sexualized description pulls him in from the margins to the point where he literally enters the poem. His ensuing actual conversation with the player then makes the poet’s relationship to his subject less Olympian and more reciprocal and horizontal. Yet even as the relationship becomes horizontal Gunn doesn’t take up too much space – at no point does Gunn play more of a role in the poem than that of a passing interlocutor. Interest in the player’s independent energies thus leads both to a ‘leaning in’ and a ‘pressing back’ that’s instructed by the player’s own leaning and pressing – “in control” and up against “the hard edge which he presses or which presses him.” In sum, the player’s erotic firmness and skill draw in Gunn’s potentially enclosing and mastering erotic gaze, but ultimately convert it into a respectful reckoning with the player’s imagined life – a life, that, like Gunn’s surfers, ‘throbs with self-containment.’ Gunn is then rewarded by getting to experience some of the man’s panache, and by finding his own penchant for severe constraint transfigured into something livelier and happier.

---


127 Gunn’s oeuvre, then, has some direct literal exchanges in it. However, Gunn prefers for such exchanges to be tangential, and for the truly important exchanges (of formality for freeing energy) to remain implicit.

128 Gunn’s presence and attraction also further connect the player to Gunn and his poetic town by more explicitly showing us how Gunn encountered him.
Gunn’s conversations with the man (his literal exchanges with him) also revise our perceptions of the player and show us how much is at stake in his game. It turns out that the player is doing more than turning a repetitive, enclosed game into a carrier of life-force, or converting sexualized display into a demand to be carefully imagined. For through Gunn’s conversation we learn that the player has “a comic rueful smile/ at his need for reassurance” while talking about his “broken promises.” We also learn that the player has a routine: he comes into the bar, becomes absorbed in his game, and then doesn’t look for somebody to go home with until half an hour before closing time. The suggestion here, then, is that the man’s life might be more like the ‘frantic’ pinball than it’s like his “cool,” skilled gameplay. For his gameplay almost seems like a way to defer a messy life: after all, the player waits as long as possible to find “the night’s partner” just as he strives to keep his pinball going for as long as possible before it “disappear[s]/down the hole” in the “fifth act.” And this “hole” at the game’s end should in turn remind us of the hole under the pelvis from Gunn’s X-ray description. It’s as though finding the night’s partner entails a kind of loss or descent from skilled play back into the messy life beyond the closing time of the poem’s end; and it’s like the inevitability of this loss is something the player wears in his bones.129

I’m not saying that we’re meant to see the player as a tragic figure – far from it. Instead, I’m suggesting that in playing pinball the man is able to take both his messy, vital risk-taking and the repetitive, enclosed routines that this risk-taking is bound up in (say, looking for a partner each night), and sum them up in a kind of stylish, sexy performance of improvisatory skill and energy. The poem’s last line (“The rest is foreplay”) not only solidifies the eroticization of the man’s gameplay, but also loops us back from “closing time” to the poem’s beginning in a manner reminiscent of the waves gathering once more at the end of Gunn’s surfer poem. There’s a way, then, that the enclosed loops of poem and game become the means of triumphantly re-expressing the player’s life – which is messy, after all, because it is really being lived and in general doesn’t shy away from risk and mess. Hence, through his gameplay, the player can

129 One could read the man’s delay in finding the night’s fling as merely signaling his love of his game, or his love of risk and spontaneity, or even as evidence of his sexual power. But Gunn’s focus on the man’s broken promises, ruefulness, and need for assurance suggests that the life after the game ends is an untidy one.
express his life in a way that – without giving away too much about that life – lets Gunn and his reader admire it.

In sum, the exchange taking place here is one that’s deeply needed by both parties. The player clearly benefits from entering Gunn’s controlling structures and circumscribed scene, in which he’s given a chance to re-express his messy life through a compact, triumphant performance. Meanwhile, by considering the player’s social boldness and energetic, risky skill, Gunn is able to find a happy counterbalance to his own controlling temperament. We’ve now truly entered Gunn’s San Francisco streets, which lies far from the lonely, dour, and shadowy British town with which Gunn’s career began.

---

130 In appropriating his enclosed situation the player doesn’t just take charge of his enclosed situation within a poem; or of his worldly enclosure within his circular routines; or of his worldly enclosure as a known character, stereotype, or sex object.
Thom Gunn II: Mean Streets

As we’ve seen, Thom Gunn’s San Francisco streets are full of edgy, revitalizing energy. By walking through those streets in reality and then by writing about them later, Gunn is able to encounter and reckon with characters who can transform his controllingness into a means of expressing their excellence and skill. And Gunn’s street figures have this ability partly because they really were full of countercultural energy, at time suggestive of the utopic. Bob Weir, the founding member of the Grateful Dead, describes the Haight in the late 1960s as being “just a half tick in some grand time continuum from that impending moment we all could feel coming, when the gate would swing open and the town would transcend for good... It would be the spark for an anarchist Digger revolution... In any case, it would certainly be a model for the world.”

And the utopic counterculture of Gunn’s San Francisco streets also has a strong gay component. Gunn not only dropped acid and went to concerts and be-ins in the 1960s, he also saw himself as part of the “gay revolution” of the 1970s that tried each night to build an “apocalyptic Holy City – a City of Eros.” Gunn’s interest in the freedom and reckless energy of the streets is never restricted just to gay male life, but that life is crucial to the streets’ appeal for Gunn. Hence, many of the streets and neighborhoods that appear in Gunn’s poems are associated with it (Polk Street, Haight-Ashbury, the Tenderloin, South of Market, the Castro). And gay life is completely compatible with the streets’ charge and swiftness. For example, cruising could have only added to the excitement and fun of Gunn’s walks around town; and chance sexual encounters (“the promiscuity of the streets”) do turn up in several poems such as “Talbot Road,”

---


2 Qtd. in Brian Tere, “Three Theses on the Poetry of Thom Gunn,” 234; Thom Gunn, Shelf Life, 215, 216.

3 Gunn usually finished writing his books a few years before publishing them, and so if Moly (1971) is very much a book about the 1960s, The Passages of Joy (1982) is Gunn’s book about the 1970s.

4 Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 64.
“Sweet Things,” and “Saturday Night.” Correspondingly, many of Gunn’s characters – such as the pinball player in “Bally” – can be read as representative figures of gay liberation.56

Yet despite their ideals of sexual and psychic liberation, Gunn’s San Francisco streets also frequently become sites of disillusion, seediness, and despair. The failures of the streets and their ideals are in part matters of history. For instance, consider the fate of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, which was at the epicenter of San Franciscan hippie culture: after the famous Summer of Love in 1967, the Haight became dangerously seedy. Heroin-use replaced the comparatively harmless use of LSD, and an influx of poorer citizens forced out from the Fillmore district and into the Haight caused a dramatic increase in crime.7 One particularly vivid anecdote being told about the Haight in 1969 was that “house cats did not dare to walk on the street that year; they hid behind bushes because needle freaks – speeders and junkies – were hunting them for food.”8 And this is the neighborhood into which Gunn moves just two years

---

5 After all, the pinball player appears near the beginning of Gunn’s first book that thoroughly describes gay life, The Passages of Joy, which was written in the 1970s. When read in this context, we can see that the player’s transmutation of enclosure has another aspect to it: the player is transforming the enclosure of the closet into that of the gay bar. Though the poem makes no direct political statements, it ultimately still has political resonances as a celebration of bar and pickup-life.

6 Gunn’s vision of the street as a place of swiftly enlivening encounters corresponds to an important facet of gay male culture in 1970s San Francisco. Frances Fitzgerald writes that by “1978 the Castro had become the most active cruising strip in the city – and perhaps in the country.” She adds,

Even in the daytime there were hundreds of young men out cruising in the bars, the bookshops, the restaurants and the stores – even in the vast supermarket some distance down Market Street. At night the bars were jammed – there were lines out on the sidewalks – and cars had trouble getting through the crowds of men. The scene was mind-boggling to newcomers: the openness of it and the sheer turnover (Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 120).

Op refinery and turnover – what Gunn called “the promiscuity of the streets” – draw to them the kinds of characters who can bring incredible energy to chance encounters without being encapsulated by them.

San Francisco in the 1970s also again leads Gunn to indulge in his dream of a utopian system that might hold everyone without damaging them. Through “Bally” we glimpse a landscape of new, exciting sexual freedom, and in “At the Barriers,” Gunn describes a quasi-paradisal situation where “all are welcome./ for it is an open place.” That poem describes the Dore Alley Street Fair, a leather and fetish event, in which Folsom and Dore Street temporarily form “an Arcady of tarmac” (CP 400). Gunn does not draw a hard and fast line between the way San Francisco becomes “a symbol of dissent and a haven for alternative lifestyles” in general (“San Francisco,” Michael Van Dyke, American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformist, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History, ed. Gina Misiroglu, vol. 3 [Armonk, New York: Sharpe, 2009], 636-7, 637), and how in 1970s it becomes a “gay mecca,” because both involve imagining a better, juster social system. However, it’s clear that as in Gunn’s description of Whitman’s love of “hunky working men,” gay sexuality is a place Gunn goes to ‘vivify his sympathies’ for the life of the street (Gunn, Shelf Life, 19).

In my opening chapter, I asked why gay men have so often written the poetry of others in 20th Century America. Gunn’s poetry suggests that part of the answer has to do with the importance of discovering of a gay scene and community at long last – with what Christopher Nealon describes as the move from ‘isolation to peoplehood’ and from inversion to ethnicity (ATB 193). One might feel more compelled to write about others if the writing accompanies and affirms the creation of a community after previous isolation.


144
after that in 1971. At this point, the neighborhood does begin to recover slowly, but it never comes close to regaining its original beatific aura: it “survived... a slightly volatile mix of druggies, politicos, punks, gays, artists, and bohemian-minded yuppies, united by a kind of contentious neighborhood patriotism.” In other words, the Haight retains its edgy charms, but these are shadows of what it once possessed.

Gunn’s house then, the building in which he’ll live in longer than any other, is located in middle of a neighborhood emblematic of the failed promise of the 1960s. This failed promise clearly pained Gunn deeply. He writes the following of 1970:

> It was the time of numerous bombings – I saw a rather famous townhouse go up in smoke – and of the invasion of Cambodia. The feeling of the country was changing, and one didn’t know into what. I went back to England for a few months of the summer, and when I returned to San Francisco I felt something strange there too: there was a certain strain in attempting to preserve the euphoria of the sixties, one’s anxieties seemed obstructive. I had a couple of rather bad trips on LSD that taught me no end of unpalatable facts about myself, to my great edification.  

Gunn goes on to insist that “everything that we glimpsed [in the ‘60s]...is still a possibility and will continue to be so.” However, the collapse of 1960s idealism and the Haight’s palpable reminder of this collapse take their toll, and Gunn’s first book written after the ‘60s are over – *Jack Straw’s Castle* (1976) – is a much unhappier one than its predecessor.

San Franciscan counterculture does rebound with the start of gay liberation, a movement that, according to Gunn, was the “direct heir” of the hippies. And Gunn too rebounds after *Jack Straw* and writes his happiest, and – hardly coincidentally – his most openly gay book, *The Passages of Joy* (1982). Yet, again, countercultural success is accompanied by disappointment: the most cursory glance at the important events for Gay Lib in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1970s would have to include Anita Bryant’s successful 1977 campaign to repeal the gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida; the 1978 Briggs Initiative to prevent gay men and women

---

8 Ibid., 276.
11 Ibid., 184.
from teaching in California public schools;\textsuperscript{12} and the assassination of Harvey Milk three weeks after the Briggs Initiative’s defeat. And of course the 1980s brings the AIDS epidemic with it, which in turn triggers strong homophobic reactions such as the closing down of the San Francisco bathhouses, the tendency to villainize instead of sympathize with AIDS victims, and the painfully “elephantine” pace of treatment research.\textsuperscript{13} Except for his AIDS elegies, Gunn doesn’t write directly about most of these events, but for a man as deeply invested in gay and countercultural life as he was, these must have been powerful blows. In the poem “Saturday Night” for instance, Gunn directly memorializes the San Franciscan gay community of 1975’s ultimate failure to produce “a city never dared before” – while still affirming the importance of the attempt. In the poem, Gunn lists some of the causes of the community’s failure, describing how “Some lose conviction in mid-arc of play...Dealers move, in, and murmuring advertise/Drugs from each doorway with a business frown...” (\textit{BC} 44-5). We can glimpse Gunn’s ongoing disappointment with the failure of his utopian community in this poem even if he chooses to focus on internal rather than external factors responsible for this failure.

Since Gunn’s town and streets are so closely based on San Francisco, and since the open free-wheeling energy of his street characters depends to a certain degree on their countercultural lifestyle thriving, it’s hardly surprising that when San Francisco counterculture struggles Gunn’s characters fare less well too. It’s also no coincidence that in “Saturday Night” Gunn chooses to focus on his city and community’s internal failures rather than on the deeds of their external political assailants. Gunn is not a poet who is primed to write nakedly political poems denouncing, say, Anita Bryant, but he is a poet who can make use of his own tendency toward severe enclosure to look unflinchingly at the ways the streets, and the ideals for a utopic counterculture that they represent, let individuals down, and often end up hurting them. In fact, many of the closed characters in Gunn’s later career are ones who succumb to the risks of street life – to drug use, penury, disease – and we come to see that the edgy charge that Gunn’s open


characters possess is always bound up in real dangers. Not infrequently, the freedom and energy of the streets are actually inverted and become petrifying traps; Gunn’s own tendency towards such enclosure and petrification in combination with his love of his street-figures and of the utopian promises they represent, make him hyper-attuned to such cases.

Yet Gunn never entirely loses his optimism, and what is startling about his darker street portraits is that they frequently involve noticing the degree to which his characters are still able to put their painfully enclosed circumstances to work. Through such portraits, Gunn is then able to provide a clear-eyed, unsentimental vision of the street and its promises, while also focusing on the excellent individual energies that made those visions seem credible in the first place. His streets and their figures then become a little like the Haight post-1971: run down and troubled, but not without its utopian glimmers.

Gunn’s imagination goes in several different directions when attending to those suffering from the street’s bad enclosures; perhaps the most unsurprising of these directions is toward the homeless, those for whom the freedom and edgy energy of the street has soured, reversed itself, and become a trap. Here’s Gunn in an interview with James Campbell in 1999:

Well, the homeless I’m sorry for. They’re a reproach on every corner, here, and in most big cities, I guess. It’s terrible, and such a contrast with my childhood. There was the occasional tramp (or hobo as they’re called here), but there were no homeless on the streets then, as there are now. Now they’re on every street.

---

14 Gunn himself died of a drug overdose, and took other serious risks with his life. For instance, Wendy Lesser recalls that when she met Gunn in the late 1970s (when Gunn would have been approaching fifty) he “was eking out a living as a part-time lecturer in UC Berkeley’s English Department, having given up a tenured position there because he couldn’t stand being on committees.” (Gunn himself says he turned down tenure in order to have more time to drop acid in Golden Gate Park (Thom Gunn, Interviewed by James Campbell, 38). Lesser adds, “He had no health insurance, no retirement plan, not even a single credit card” (Wendy Lesser, “Thom Gunn,” Agenda 27, no. 2-3 [1999] 118-22, 119). Fellow Movement poet Philip Larkin writes mock-wistfully of his lack of courage in his poem “Toads”: “Ah, were I courageous enough! To shout, Stuff your pension!” But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff! That dreams are made on.” But Gunn actually did it.

15 Bryant’s campaign, the Briggs Initiative, and other events must have limited Gunn’s optimism about what the streets could accomplish while also heightening his sense of their importance.

16 When considering the victims of the street, Gunn always risks lapsing back into being a poet of grim closed characters and austere, painful enclosures (and this does happen sometimes, especially in Gunn’s final volume Boss Cupid). However, in some of his best poems Gunn’s penchant for and simultaneous resistance to dour enclosure enables him to be both sensitive to the harsh ways enclosure works on the street people him, and generous to whatever forces these street people are able to muster to put that enclosure to work.

17 Thom Gunn, Interviewed by James Campbell, 32.
As Governor of California and then President of the United States, Ronald Reagan played a crucial role in deinstitutionalizing state hospitals, many of whose patients were then sent to board-and-care homes run by for profit chains with business ties to Reagan. Many of these patients then ended up leaving these homes either due to poor living conditions or because they were evicted. As a result, starting in the 1970s the numbers of mentally ill homeless persons across the country increased astronomically. Gunn mentions this phenomenon in an interview: “As soon as Reagan pushed the nutcases out on to the street in California, turning them back to the ‘community,’ which means turning them out on the streets in fact, the composition of the people on the streets began to change a good deal.” As some activist posters put up around San Francisco in 1989 put it: “You are now walking through America’s newest mental institution.” Gunn even feels strongly enough about this issue that he makes an exception from his usual policy of not mentioning politicians in his poems in order to implicate Reagan: in “An Invitation” Gunn describes the homeless, hungry, jobless, and “crazies” as “Reagan’s proletariat” (412).

Again, though, Gunn is not usually a poet who feels comfortable speaking in political generalities, but rather one who prefers to speak implicitly about social and political issues by focusing on scenes and individuals that he knows. Hence, Gunn writes poems throughout his career about the mentally-ill homeless people he’s encountered – from the ‘Sand Man’ in Moly, to Mongoloid Don and the scary wrathful woman from “At an Intersection” in The Passages of Joy, to ‘Old Meg’ in The Man with Night Sweats. What’s remarkable about these poems is the extent to which their characters are able convincingly to turn their bad enclosures – their dire trapped situations – to their own uses. For instance, “The Sand Man” is a poem about a local street figure who has brain damage from a severe beating, and rolls “round and round [in the sand]/ In patient reperformed routine” (193). Despite being painfully reduced to a single repetitive action, the Sand Man finds pleasure in that repetition, playing with the sand and

---


20 Torrey, “Ronald Reagan.”
feeling “a dry cool multiplicity,/ Gilding his body feet and hands.” The Sand Man’s tactile pleasure, his gilded self-transformation, and his ability to turn entrapping circles into pleasurable cycles make him almost like Gunn’s surfers. Of course, Gunn is far from suggesting that the Sand Man leads an enviable life, but he’s careful to show us that this life isn’t purely tragic either.

This is true as well of Mongoloid Don, the panhandler Gunn encounters “coming down the street” in the poem “Sweet Things” (326-8). Like the Sand Man, Don also has an “unripened mind,” and he too leads a life that seems narrow and enclosed. Despite living on the unpredictable, liberated street his life has been reduced to the pursuit of a single juvenile interest: with his panhandled money he “buys sweet things, one after another... goes from store to store.” At first Gunn is unsympathetic to Don, irritated by how Don never recognizes “me for myself” in his repetitive, “unending/ quest for the palate’s pleasure.” But then Gunn runs into an attractive young man whose name Gunn keeps mixing up, and the poet’s appetite for the young man is equated to Don’s appetite for sweets. The poem ends up implying that though Don is in some ways grotesque – licking “the last chocolate ice cream/ from the scabbed corners of his mouth” – he also may also be onto something. After all, Gunn and his open characters believe deeply in the importance of bodily pleasure, which usually accompanies their play and kinesthetic skill. And additionally, over the course of the poem Don is associated with tricksterishness, interruption, chance encounters, the rapid transit of the streets, edge, and eros. Hence, we see again how painfully trapped or monomaniacal others can marshal some of the resources of Gunn’s open characters. Or put differently, even Gunn’s street characters who don’t totally thrive within enclosure often manage not to become totally closed and distorted: there’s often something anti-tragic about them.

In a similar vein, in an “At an Intersection” we meet an old woman who at first seems purely like a monomaniacal closed character, trapped by her mental illness and homelessness. As Gunn puts it, she’s “tethered to crisis/like a mobbed witch” (my emphasis, 369-71). She too undergoes closed mutations: she’s witch-like, has “apple cheeks, and a long nose”; she’s also obsessed with her own anger, even becoming an allegorical figure for it (Gunn tells us her nose is “bright and sharp as Anger”) as she ‘dances in front of traffic,’ smashing empty bottles. And
her mutations seem linked to her confinement: we meet her “raging about an intersection/ where the red light is jammed/ and the traffic stopped,/ the drivers gazing in discomfort/ at an anger/ unspent, unspendable.” Notice how the freedom of the street has again been reversed here as the intersection ceases being a place of turns and transit and instead becomes one where people are “tethered,” “jammed,” and halted.

Yet despite being tethered to a crisis, narrowed to the sharp point of allegory, and placed at a red-light, the woman has power. Her anger is legendary: it’s almost as though she’s caused the red light and plugged up the traffic herself. Unlike the man with the “black skull” for a face in “A Cafeteria in Boston” who is ignored by everyone in the poem except Gunn, the old woman of “At an Intersection” forces the drivers to see her and feel discomfort (452). Moreover, her unspent, unspendable anger, enacted by the long sentences and overflowing short-lined free verse, gives her, if hardly repose, at least a kind surging, frightening energy. After all, her nose is “sharp as Anger” and embodies edge just as she inhabits the fraught boundary “at the intersection/ where worldly Market Street/ meets the slum of Sixth.” And she even finds a kind of scary balance between movement and stasis in the way she goes “raging about” the intersection where she’s stuck, ‘discovering’ “an empty pop-bottle” in improvisatory fashion that she then uses as a prop for her rage. She still seems closed and painfully trapped, but she’s hardly passive, and her closed transformations can even be read as a bit tricksterish or mythic (and so as helping her to soften the pressure of her confinement the way changing color and shape can be a means of defense).

Finally, we encounter another version of this woman a book later in the figure of “Old Meg” who is “dark as a gypsy” from all the dirt sticking to her, and who smells like something between ‘dog and mold’ (438). Like “Mongoloid Don,” Old Meg is a character Gunn has run into enough that he can describe her routines (going to Laundromats when it’s cold out, etc.). Yet, like the woman of “At an Intersection,” Meg insists on her autonomy. The third stanza of the poem relays an anecdote about her “beaming at concrete,” and talking to “Extraterrestrial friends no doubt.” But in the very next lines Gunn tries to approach her, and she repels him with a curse (‘Blood on you!’). Since Gunn ends the poem here we can sense his approval and even admiration for Meg in this moment. It’s as though Gunn has been assuming too much about her,
enclosing her not only in his summary of her routines – her habitual dirtiness and smell, how she always “sticks to the laundromats/ in cold weather” – but also in his assumptions about her interior life (that “no doubt” she thinks she’s talking to aliens). Perhaps he’s even been falsely assuming that she’ll have some kind of affinity for him because he likes street-life. In ending his poem with her curse, Gunn insists that what is poetic here is the way that Meg repels that overfamiliarity, and actively transforms her ‘known situation’ into present tense hostility and threat.21 As in “Bally Power Play” Gunn’s minimal presence is used to deepen our sense of a character’s integrity within their enclosed scene without taking emphasis away from that character.

Yet despite his presumption, Gunn exhibits an uncommon sensitivity to Meg’s routines. To many people she would just be a type: another mentally ill homeless person, or perhaps an eccentric figure known for a trait or two the way some of Gunn’s other characters are – such as Mongoloid Don and the Sand Man. Street figures, in fact, lend themselves to this kind of typecasting: the man in “Bally,” for instance could easily just become the ‘guy who is always playing pinball.’ Gunn himself uses the limited knowledge of others that the street and its brief encounters supply (as well as the edge that the street helps its denizens bring to bear) in order to reckon carefully with and limit his claims about each depicted character.22 However, the transience of street encounters can lead people who are not Gunn to encapsulate each other within constricting – even painful – generic types. Hence another form of the street’s bad enclosures that Gunn attends to is that of shallow or dismissive knowingness.

Perhaps because this knowingness is so similar to Gunn’s own poetic tendency to enclose, imprison, and possess he takes it quite seriously and treats it as a kind of violence. For instance, in the poem “As Expected” some mental patients are given unusual freedom by a man

---

21 In “Sweet Things” Gunn himself helps Don across the street, in “At an Intersection” Gunn compares the old woman to a lover of his, and in “Old Meg” Gunn enters the poem just enough to be repelled by Meg. Gunn again is both tour guide and complicit fellow citizen.

22 For instance, in the poem “Selves” even a personal friend of Gunn’s is able to outgrow the known, “imaginary son” that Gunn has made him into through reference to a road and movement. The man, a painter, “improvises his route” by painting a road that “adapts to the rigid/ rocky folds of the mountain’s skirt...slips between/ – agile and tactful! -- a flexile sinewy unchecked/ curving line...it steals at last/ right off the top of the paper’ (323-4). In other words, the friend uses the freedom and speed but also the constraint of roads to become athletic and skillful, and even to possess hints of the tricksterish (slipping/stealing). He then is able to display fantastic independent energy within Gunn’s enclosed imaginings of him, and use his own painting to disappear off the top of the paper and go off into his life (where Gunn’s knowledge about him ends).
named Larry who has opted to care for them instead of fighting “as expected” in Vietnam with his friends (335-6). Hence, right away in the poem preconceptions about others are seen as enablers of wartime violence. And these preconceptions turn out to have deleterious effects on Larry’s patients as well: when the men are treated as being “Burdens-on-society,” they act as such. But when Larry allows them to grow their hair, ‘visit’ each others’ beds, and play games, the patients suddenly start “to look/ as if they had different names...like humans.” Finally, when Larry eventually has to leave at the end of the poem, the patients again become “retarded, unteachable,/ as expected.” Gunn thus suggests that it’s at least partially the shallow institutional assumption about the patients’ nature that has transformed them from “humans” into “ninepins.” And the poem equates such assumptions with the institution’s physical and literal entrapments and regulations.

We find another example of the violence inherent in shallow and knowing representations of others in “The Victim,” a poem about the life and murder of Nancy Spungen. Spungen is still best known as the girlfriend of the Sex Pistols’ lead singer Sid Vicious – who was also most likely her murderer. The poem then works both to imitate and surpass the concise, tabloid-style depictions of Spungen’s life and death that predominate to this day. To summarize, the poem devotes its first tercet to Spungen’s edgy style (her quality of “looking fierce in pins and black” (358)); its second to her attachment to Vicious’s “shooting star” whose style was compatible with hers (he was “famous and bizarre”); its third to the Sex Pistols breaking up and Vicious turning mean; and its fourth, fifth, and sixth tercets to Nancy’s stabbing and protracted death. The seventh and final stanza reads:

The news was full of his fresh fame.
He O.D.’d, ending up the same.
Poor girl, poor girl, what was your name?

As we can glimpse here, the pounding triple rhymes and compactness of the poem confer a kind of repetitive, merciless inevitability on Spungen’s story (“...not understanding why/ He watched out with a heavy eye/ The several hours you took to die”). And though the poem of course

---

23 Larry’s patients are still ‘pre-street,’ though, in that they are at least still in a sanatorium. From the makeup of Gunn’s town and of the actual historical San Francisco, though, we know that may not last; they may soon exchange the prison of the institution for a parody of freedom on the streets.
describes a literal act of violence, this quality of compact, repetitive inevitability also mimics how celebrity and tabloid culture can reduce a life to an unflattering footnote in the scandal of a more famous person. After all, the poem doesn’t tell us much about Spungen: she’s merely a “dead punk lady with the knack/ Of looking fierce...” whose name is forgotten, and who, we’re told, isn’t greatly missed (“The suburbs wouldn’t want you back”).

Nevertheless, Gunn’s street characters are adept at making harsh enclosure work for them at least a little – and Spungen definitely qualifies as such a street figure with her edgy style and the countercultural risk she took in wishing upon her utopic shooting star. Her resistance to being “The Victim” turns up in the way she inspires a lament that takes her more seriously than any tabloid would. We can perceive this quality of serious lament in the poem’s ending question about her name, which is then answered in the appendix to Gunn’s *Collected Poems* (“Her name was Nancy Spungen” (491)). In fact, the poem’s enclosing, overdetermined lines and triple rhymes do three things at once: they enact the ruthless, stabbing violence of the appropriately named Vicious; of the similarly dire if ultimately more abstract compacting violence of common tabloid knowledge about Spungen; and of the transformation of this violence into the chest-beating repetition of lament (“Poor girl, poor girl, what was your name”). Moreover, the appendix’s answer to the poem’s final question can then be read as kind of a reproof: lament need not be the end of the story since Spungen actually had a life that existed outside these narrow representations of it. Spungen’s edge, style, and tragedy should make us see that she’s worthy of serious lament, and yet the typecasting involved in this lament makes it too inadequate.

The street’s version of harmful knowingness, though, doesn’t always succeed in hurting let alone killing its characters. As we saw in Gunn’s poems about homelessness, and even in Spungen’s refusal to remain a tabloid detail, Gunn is interested in the ways his characters are able to make the most of their painful traps – even if their victories are relatively small. We find a fairly happy case of such re-appropriation of enclosure in the not-coincidentally name-inclusive poem, “Well, Dennis O’Grady.”24 The poem begins with an encounter at a bus stop where a

---

24 The fact that we have a real name here rather than a street-tag like Sand Man or Mongoloid Don already suggests greater openness.
“smiling old woman” tells O’Grady, somewhat condescendingly that “they are still praying for you/ I read it in the Bulletin” (434). O’Grady, we see, has been written off: his age, frailty, and decline have become public knowledge and property to the point where they’ve generated the ambiguous sympathy of the smiling woman. More, the fact that the Bulletin-people are ‘still’ praying for O’Grady suggests that this is a redundant, almost posthumous action. In a sense, the old woman is smiling because she thinks O’Grady would want to know that “they” are grac ing him with a favor: “they” are praying for him in spite of the hopelessness of the situation. In fact, it’s almost as though “they” are keeping him alive – at least in the public imagination – only through their continued attention and prayers.

O’Grady, however, isn’t flustered by the woman’s comment, but reconfigures its meaning, so as to make it more pleasing to him. The second and final stanza reads:

His wattle throat sagged
above his careful tie and clean brown suit.
I didn’t hear his answer
but though bent a bit
over his stick
he was delighted to be out
in the slight December sunshine
– having a good walk, pleased
it seems at all the prayers
and walking pretty straight
on his own.

O’Grady here becomes another anti-tragic character: though he has a “wattle throat” and “bent” posture, and is frail and publically written off, it turns out he is perfectly capable of enjoying the energy of the streets and the “slight” December sunshine. Meanwhile, O’Grady reinterprets the prayers being said for him and puts them to his own use: instead of focusing on the fact that others think he’s doomed, O’Grady seems to enjoy the idea that he’s briefly the center of attention (he’s “pleased/ it seems at all the prayers”). The significance of the prayers themselves is also minimized: they become just another component of the day’s overall good fortune, which includes being outside, having a little sunshine, and enjoying an unusually “good walk.” The “Bulletin,” the smiling woman, and the “they” who are praying all treat O’Grady’s condition with a trivializing knowingness. However, O’Grady trivializes them in return by treating their prayers as a nice little pleasure sandwiched in between O’Grady’s other enjoyments. The fact
that at the end of the poem he attains a surprising, improvisatory moment of youthful ‘straightness’ can then be read as almost the product of his triumphant ability to reconceive the Bulletin’s shallow, encapsulating news.

We should also note that Gunn is the Bulletin’s foil here. The poet again appears peripherally in order to carefully limit what we can know about O’Grady: he says, for instance, that he can’t hear O’Grady’s reply to the old woman. Hence, Gunn’s presence again personalizes the scene and implicates Gunn in it – it shows us how Gunn encounters O’Grady and shows the poet literally attending and listening to the old man. And Gunn’s presence also demonstrates how to avoid the sin of the Bulletin: it shows us how to limit our assumptions, think respectfully about O’Grady, and perceive him in the integrity and independence of his skilled movement (his “good walk”).

We’ve now seen how Gunn’s interest in the streets leads him to attend to the entrapments of homelessness and knowingness, but there are at least two other major categories of painful real-world entrapments to which Gunn is particularly sensitive: the closet and bad jobs. Again, in considering both cases, Gunn describes what these conditions are like and describes their ‘victims’ attempts to improve their lots by employing the techniques we first saw wielded by Gunn’s surfers.

The freedom of Gunn’s San Francisco streets with their gay pride parades, street fairs, bar-life, and cruising culture can seem to invoke the closet negatively in the very ways these activities defy stultifying enclosure. But Gunn’s “The Miracle” seeks a kind of synthesis between freedom and enclosure, where instead of release from sexual confinement, the confined space itself can become freeing. Correspondingly, the poem describes gay male sex taking place not in a liberated bathhouse or open-air park, but in a McDonald’s bathroom:

‘Right to the end, that man, he was so hot
That driving to the airport we stopped off
At some McDonald’s and do you know what,
We did it there. He couldn’t get enough.’
‘There at the counter?’ – ‘No, that’s public stuff:

25 After all, the gay liberation movement initially involves essentializing ‘the closet’ as a means of understanding gay history, and also in order to have something in opposition to which to form and define gay culture (“Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” The Norton Anthology of Theory And Criticism, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al., 2nd ed. [New York: Norton, 2010], 2464-2477, 2465).
‘There in the rest room...’ (357)

In other words, the poem begins with a moment of improvisatory erotic swerve followed by a full-stop on the way out of San Francisco: the poem takes the speeding energy and eros of the streets on the way to the airport into an enclosed, isolated space that ultimately becomes a parody of closetedness (it’s not “public stuff,” but it is a public bathroom). In fact, there’s a sense in which this is always what’s happening with Gunn’s open character portraits as a street character’s energy collides with and transforms the potentially dour enclosing space of a Gunn poem.  

To return to “The Miracle,” though, we should recognize that its version of ‘the closet’ is Gunn’s own: more than just representing a space of repressed sexuality in general, the closet here represents large cultural traditions – like Catholicism or English-language poetry – which themselves have often struggled to repress the transgressive or sexually ‘deviant.’ And Gunn’s lovers re-appropriate this secondary kind of closet too. For instance, the titular miracle of the poem is that his lover ejaculates on the speaker’s boot, and that this “snail-track” remains there for six months: “I make it shine again, I love him so,/ Like they renew a saint’s blood out of sight./ But we’re not Catholic, see, so it’s all right.” These lines equate the snail-track with a Catholic relic (while poking fun at Catholicism), and allude to John Donne’s ‘Catholic’ erotic poems like “The Relic” in which two lovers are dug up, and the digger beholds a “bracelet of bright hair about the bone.” Moreover, “The Miracle” was in part inspired by a Thomas Hardy poem about a woman who accidentally kills her husband in an attempt to prevent marital rape. Gunn will then use the final line from that same poem –“Well, it’s a cool, queer tale” – as the epigraph to his final volume, Boss Cupid.

In sum, Gunn’s lovers appropriate the ostensibly heterosexual poetic tradition of Hardy

---

26 And this might remind us in turn of my description of how the speaker of a poem encounters an open character briefly but powerfully: “in the force and speed of the collision of the speaker with another, we intuit the mass of the life behind it.”


28 It was also inspired by a real anecdote, a fact which again refers us to a San Franciscan world beyond the poem.

29 Thom Gunn, interviewed by Christopher Hennessy, Outside the Lines, Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), 7-20, 11.
and Donne, and the very closed Catholic tradition, for their own purposes; but they also suggest that these traditions might be more open to ‘queer’ practices than their practitioners might think. After all, John Donne’s poetry flirts with the blasphemous in its erotic appropriation of the religious, and Hardy’s poem is itself quite transgressive in its ‘queer,’ but hardly moralizing tale of accidental murder (the poem largely sides with the murderous wife). And if Catholicism’s miracles lend themselves so well to the erotic in both Donne and Gunn, we might start looking at Catholicism in a different light too. Both literary and religious traditions can then be ‘reread’ as precedents and examples for the lovers rather than purely as antagonists.30

In fact, the poem goes so far as to suggest that literary tradition (if not Catholicism) depends on imitation and alteration in order to attain new life. While another poem about miraculous love might remain dull and slack, a poem insisting in 1982 that gay sex in a McDonald’s bathroom can be sexy and romantic might shake us from our stupor (waking things up is, after all, one of the things that shock and edge do). Yet the poem is also written in rhymed stanzas, and its interest in updating tradition goes hand in hand with its desire to show us what has always been great about it. We can see this in how the poem’s form imitates the off-kilter stanza of Hardy’s “Her Second Husband Hears Her Story.” Hardy adds an extra short rhyming line in the midst of his more standard abab quatrains, and in a similar vein Gunn adds an extra rhyming line to the end of his quatrains, thereby throwing off what otherwise would be perfectly symmetrical stanzas. Yet Gunn also ends his poem, just as he’s describing his miracle, with three of the poem’s simplest and clearest rhymes: night/sight/right. It’s therefore as though Gunn is pointing us toward English language poetry’s capacity for a formal eccentricity hospitable to his own subject matter, and simultaneously affirming poetic tradition at large by using one of poetry’s oldest tricks (very simple rhymes). Even as Gunn mocks overly reverent relationships to tradition (“we’re not Catholic, see, so it’s all right”), he insists on a more complex relationship to

---

30 The poem does have a pure antagonist in it, though, which it also co-opts: McDonald’s famously conservative politics and gaudy, clownish ‘family values’ can be seen as a powerful forces that keeps gay men closeted (especially pre-1982 when The Passages of Joy was published). Moreover, the chain can be seen as an icon of American culture at large, and hence the fact that the chain becomes the venue for ecstatic gay sex becomes particularly satisfying. Cf. Amanda Terkel, “Voter Intimidation At McDonald’s: Employees Told That, Unless Republicans Win, They Won’t Get Raises or Benefits,” The Huffington Post, 29 Oct 2010, Accessed 18 Mar 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/29/voter-intimidation-mcdonalds-republican_n_776187.html.
English-language poetry that requires recognizing its fundamental capacity for strangeness, divergence, and renewal. This time, not only do Gunn and his characters’ benefit from the transmutation of enclosure, art does as well.31

The final category of painful real-world traps to which Gunn’s simultaneous controllingness and love of the streets attune him is that of repetitive, stifling jobs. We find a vivid example of this in “Night Taxi,” the final poem in The Passages of Joy, which is written in the voice of a cabbie. The poem at first seems like one of pure celebration: the cabbie describes his taxi as singing “a song to the bare city,” and he boasts that his cab “is/ my instrument, I woo with it;/ bridegroom and conqueror” (CP 386-8). Moreover, the streets and districts that the cabbie ‘zips’ around and names are the ones that Gunn told us in his Paris Review interview ‘thrilled’ him to mention (“China Basin to Twin Peaks,/ Harrison Street to the Ocean”).

However, Gunn wants the poem’s protagonist to seem like someone who really could drive a cab for a living in 1970s San Francisco – and being paid to drive a cab is obviously not the same thing as being a bridegroom or conqueror or musician. Hence, in the middle of the poem, we learn that the speaker’s freedom is earned only by working within the potentially deadening constraints that come along with his repetitive, service-industry job. In fact, the cabbie admits that these constraints will ultimately win out: “I know I have to be loose,/ like my light embrace of the wheel,/ loose but in control/ – though hour by hour I tighten/ minutely in the routine,/ smoking my palate to ash,/ till the last hour of all/ will be drudgery, nothing else.” These lines suggest that however skilled the repose (loose but controlled) of the cabbie might be, and however much driving through the streets might initially engender pleasurable speed and

31 Part of the pleasure of the poem is the way it shows how its edgy and ‘shocking’ re-appropriations of closed traditions and spaces are compatible with everything ‘shining’ and working out ‘all right’ in the end. Even the akilter, charged, and sexual encounter (where we again have people at sheer angles from each other as one lover kneels and ‘smiles up’) ultimately unites the suggestion of violence (“I squeezed his nipples”) with tenderness (“and began to cry”) just as the off-balance stanzaic form (with the extra b rhyme in each fifth line) renews the ballad stanza instead of discarding it. Hence, part of the pleasure of the poem is its discovery that the overturning of the past and of tradition actually end up making them “shine again.” Stefan Hawlin makes a similar argument about different Gunn poems in his excellent article “Epistemes and Imitations: Thom Gunn on Ben Jonson.” According to Hawlin, “Gunn’s rewriting of 1980s California over Jacobean England creates a breathtaking, wholly unlikely alliance, which allows us a shock of difference at the same time as we experience a profounder affinity... This conversion belongs to the true tradition of imitatio because it surprises with its seeming incongruity... Gunn carries a seventeenth-century subgenre over into a lively modern context... Gunn may partly critique the social and religious attitudes of Jacobean England, but partly he lives within the terms with which they provide him” (Stefan Hawlin, “Epistemes and Imitations: Thom Gunn on Ben Jonson,” PMLA 122, no. 5 [Oct 2007] 1516-30, 1521, 22, 29). The conversion or alliance is breathtaking because it’s unlikely and incongruous, but additionally because it shows how Jacobean England comes alive again through its’ very correction and updating.
freedom, his routine will inevitably ‘tighten’ – turning his job into a trap, and his joy into “ash” and boredom. We never make it this far into the cabbie’s night, though, and one of the character’s triumphs is that he doesn’t let his clear-eyed knowledge of his ultimate fate stop him from feeling his preliminary joy.

More, that initial joy is itself earned against the odds. In fact, stuck within his bounded car and ordered circuits, the cabbie has to employ an incredible amount of skill and open energy to claim his happiness. Hence, most of the open character-traits that Gunn’s surfers and Midday Mick use in order to take charge of their enclosed situations are also put to use here. Just as Mick ‘refused to plead,’ the driver possesses a kind of integrity and self-respect. Gunn doesn’t tell us anything about the cabbie’s life beyond his professional role, but that role is taken seriously: he is “obliging but not subservient,” and “can make friendly small talk... [but does] not go on about Niggers,/ women drivers or the Chinese.”

But if there’s integrity and decorum (or at least a lack of hatefulfulness) here there’s also tricksterishness and room for some slipperiness within the cabbie’s role beyond even his imaginative transformation into bridegroom and conqueror. “I jump out to open the door,” the cabbie tells us, “fixing the cap on my head/ to, you know, firm up my role.” Without the interjection of “you know” this sentence might suggest that the cabbie simply feels beholden to his professional persona. But the interjection changes this and shows us that there’s room for playfulness or lightness within his professionalism: though the cabbie clearly takes both job and uniform seriously, he also clearly sees them as being an act. He even displays a kind of irreverence about his job when he describes his fares as being like “tricks to turn,” and of course the word ‘tricks’ points us toward his playfulness and slipperiness in addition to his erotic quality.

The cabbie also possesses various other qualities of Gunn’s open characters. He has a kind of youthful incipience (“My shift/ is only beginning and I am fresh...”). He has repose, moving quickly while sitting still, and taking pleasure in his skilled driving (“master of the taxi/ I relish my alert reflexes...”). For a while at least he’s able to turn enclosing circles round the city into fulfilling cycles and to enjoy the dispatcher’s “litany of addresses” (appropriately litany can mean both a tedious list and a ceremonial invocation). He has a kind of edge and erotic presence.
both in his likening of his job to ‘turning tricks’ and in the sheer sensory power of his presence (“I lean back/ against the hood, my headlights/ scalding a garage door, my engine/ drumming in the driveway”). He improvises, taking shortcuts, concocting his own spontaneous philosophy (“I am thinking tonight...), and relying on chance (the rain at the end of the poem, we are told in the appendix, will bring more customers). And he’s associated with physical slopes and edges as he zips down San Francisco’s notoriously steep Masonic avenue. Again Gunn attunes himself both to the painful real-world enclosures of the streets around him and to his street character’s vital energies. Whether he’s writing of homelessness, knowingness, the closet, or bad jobs, Gunn zeroes in on the ways his characters strive to make these painful forces and situations work for them.

** Intercession **

Gunn’s streets can become traps, but they are always initially associated with freedom; in the opposite way, his traditional forms are always initially associated with entrapment. The way Gunn himself talks about metrical verse as opposed to free verse suggests that this is so. For instance, in various interviews, Gunn says that free verse is relaxed, invites improvisation,\(^\text{32}\) is connected to his mid-career transition and his reading of Williams, and, above all, creates “room for the more unexpected life, the unexpected emotion, maybe for greater sympathy.”\(^\text{33}\) Free verse’s danger is only sometimes to become too relaxed\(^\text{34}\) “too lacking in controlling energy.”\(^\text{35}\) But it ultimately also seems to Gunn to be humane: “Free verse deals with the impromptu and the improvised...it lets its subjects be themselves.”\(^\text{36}\) The implication then is that meter is a bit inhumane: it controls, locks down, and determines subjects who aren’t allowed to be themselves.

\(^{33}\) Thom Gunn, Interviewed by John Haffenden, 42.
\(^{34}\) Thom Gunn, *Paris Review*, 165.
\(^{35}\) Thom Gunn, “My Life Up to Now,” 19.
“Metrical verse,” Gunn says, “has the greater finish, because in a sense it deals with events or experience or thinking that are more finished... there is the idea of the completed thought; there is what we nowadays call the idea of closure.” And though it’s not necessarily problematic to think of a thought or experience as finished, it’s more clearly problematic to think of a person in such terms. Meter “is poetry making great use of the conscious intelligence, but its danger is bombast – the controlling music drowning out everything else.” If the ‘everything else’ is a person – especially a person Gunn turns to in order to help him relax from his own controlling, solitary temperament – then both that person and Gunn are in trouble.

As we’ve seen, Gunn is perfectly capable of writing poems about enclosure in free verse, and I’m not arguing that using rhyme and meter necessarily leads him to write unhappier poems. Instead, I think that traditional forms often ratchet up the stakes when their subject is confinement and a character’s life within it, increasing the potential pressure of that confinement, and thereby also increasing the significance of any liberty or open energy achieved within it. Perhaps the poem in which we’ve seen this phenomenon most clearly thus far is “The Victim.” We can begin to perceive the harmful potential of Gunn’s traditional forms in the way the pounding repetitions of that poem’s triple rhymes lend themselves to compressing a person’s full life and death into a single overdetermined page. Or consider these lines from the poem “Meat” in *The Man with Night Sweats*:

> ...this degraded meat – this meal  
> Of something, was it chicken, pork, or veal?  
> It tasted of the half-life that we raise  
> In high bright tombs which, days, and nights like days,


39 However, it’s no coincidence that many of Gunn’s most relaxed, happiest poems are those written in free verse (“Bally’s Power Play,” “Night Taxi,” etc.). Even though some of these free verse characters deal with thematic constraints, or with the worry that free verse will grow slack, they are less in danger of being stifled and controlled. This is because Gunn’s use of free verse lends itself to enacting improvisatory movement and “unexpected life” struggling to keep itself animated (as in the pinball game or the cab driver’s circuits or Dennis O’Grady’s walk or the woman of “At an Intersection’s” rage). The formal threat here is that such ongoingness will become a trap, will become tiring or stultifying, say, in the way that the cab driver’s loops make him “tighten/ minutely in the routine.” But this threat of enclosure emerges only eventually out of freed energy, whereas rhyme and meter starts with this threat.

40 More, when the poem manages to communicate lament – and not just violence and inevitability – it’s a great triumph partially because Spungen’s has re-appropriated the brutality of the form in which she’s enclosed.
Murmur with nervous sounds from cubicles
Where fed on slop the living cells
Expand within each creature forced to sit
Cramped with its boredom and its pile of shit
Till it is standard weight for roast or bacon
And terminated and its place is taken. (451)

This poem was written in the late 1980s and shows the extent to which Gunn’s imagination is still drawn toward envisioning traps and grim enclosures (this is where his imagination goes of its own accord). But we can also quickly recognize the confining pressure traditional form is bringing to bear here. Note, for instance, how the couplets tighten the knots binding the pig, yoking *sit* is to *shit*, and turning *cubicles* into *cells*. Meanwhile, the metrical counting of stresses and syllables implicitly becomes another procrustean quota like the “standard weight” needed to make pigs into a uniform meat-substance (chicken, pork, or veal). Even the more improvisatory or varying music of the stanza seems to worsen the situation: the repetition of “days” just helps to show that all time for the pigs is an undifferentiated wasteland. The enjambments of cells/Expand and sit/Cramped enact a lively energy that draws attention away from the tightening end rhymes, but ultimately demonstrate how the pig’s vital growth makes its cage even tighter and more cramped.41

But if traditional forms are those best able to suggest threatening enclosure in Gunn’s poetics, then they’re also those most capable of imitating the real-world enclosing pressures affecting the inhabitants of Gunn’s streets and town. And paradoxically, it’s this imitative ability that allows Gunn to intercede most directly on his characters behalves. Up to this point, Gunn’s job has been to notice and represent the way his characters’ help themselves by co-opting their enclosures and putting them to work. But Gunn can also help his characters more directly: his ability to mimic painful enclosing situations in the outside world means that he’s at least partially able to convert those situations into pieces of artifice, and thereby to have some sway over how

---

41 This disturbing single-sentence stanza is in fact guided by and contrasted with the poem’s preceding description that admiringly describes a free pig healthily rooting through a field, “wriggling through the mud and weed...[in] one athletic joy.” The stanza quoted above then becomes a dark parody of this freedom, and it may be that having the freedom in mind is what keeps Gunn’s outrageous reveling in that freedom’s perversion from leading back to the poet’s grim solitude. Perhaps, in other words, something of the pig’s healthy athleticism remains in the very vigor of Gunn’s indictment of its situation. But whether or not this is the case, we see here how adept Gunn still is in 1992 at imagining a life of endless confinement and enclosure – of undifferentiated 24 hour cycles where all food is “slop,” and each pig is “cramped” and ‘bored’ until it fulfills its weight quota, is killed, and replaced.
they work. Gunn is not a poet of rupture and this sway is not salvific: instead it involves imagining a more hopeful but still plausible way of understanding a character’s situation. By mimicking entrapment and interceding in this limited way, Gunn is able to be true to his temperament and the severity of another’s situation, while also finding relief from it through becoming an understanding and benign force in another’s life.

This benign force manifests itself formally: Gunn uses a poem’s primary form to imitate the trap in which a character struggles. However, he builds a second, happier closed pattern within or on top of the first one that then helps us to imagine a gentler way of understanding the character’s situation. We’ve seen versions of this duality before: for instance, “The Victim”’s triplet rhymes manage to enact both the trap of tabloid representation and the more humane shape of lament. And we’ve also seen situations in which a secondary form triumphs over a primary one. For instance, by adding their own rules and flourishes on top of the wave/stanzas Gunn’s surfers appear to vanquish those primary constraining forms. And perhaps in general, the very transformation of circles into cycles – or bad enclosure into re-appropriated enclosure – can be understood as an act of inscribing a secondary form onto a primary one since, even when it’s put to work, bad enclosure leaves a trace of its original possibility.

However, in the cases to which I’ll now be turning, both primary and secondary forms will remain strongly visible and distinct, and the primary form will sometimes remain the more powerful of the two. In addition, the creation of the secondary form here will more closely depend on Gunn’s visible struggle to make us recognize it – it won’t only have the illusion of seeming like something his characters are creating for themselves. For instance, Gunn will often directly appear as a narrative voice in these poems in order to correct a misapprehension, and will often do so just at the moment when we most clearly see the secondary form being forged. I’ll begin then by looking briefly at some happier poems in which the secondary form seems to triumph or at least to hold its own against the primary entrapping one. I’ll then turn to some direr

---

42 I will refer to this secondary form alternatively as a secondary pattern, shape, enclosure, or closed pattern. The pattern is ‘closed’ in the sense that it doesn’t offer an escape from its poem’s overall entrapment, but rather represents a reconfiguration of that trap.
poems and situations where the relief the secondary, mitigating form provides remains quite limited, but where its very existence is a significant achievement.

Let’s begin by looking at “Keats at Highgate,” a poem in which the protagonist doesn’t require too much help. For though the John Keats of the poem lives in England in the early 19th century, and not San Francisco in the late 20th, he still possesses the energy of Gunn’s street people (CP 350). Like them he’s “not well-dressed” according to conventional standards, and like them his open energy is connected to his movement – his ‘sauntering’ walk. Appropriately then, we can see Keats himself as doing much to re-appropriate the closed situation he’s in: in the octave he meets Coleridge who dismisses Keats as “Loose...slack, and not well-dressed.” However, in the sestet we enter Keats’s mind and are shown how he notices and “put[s] to use” every detail of the world around him, so that he’s “Perhaps not well-dressed but oh no not loose.”

“Keats at Highgate”

A cheerful youth joined Coleridge on his walk
(‘Loose,’ noted Coleridge, ‘slack, and not well-dressed’)  
Listening respectfully to the talk talk talk
Of First and Second Consciousness, then pressed
The famous hand with warmth and sauntered back
Homeward in his own state of less dispersed
More passive consciousness – passive, not slack,
Whether of Secondary type or First.
He made his way toward Hampstead so alert
He hardly passed the small grey ponds below
Or watched a sparrow pecking in the dirt
Without some insight swelling the mind’s flow
That banks made swift. Everything put to use.
Perhaps not well-dressed but oh no not loose.

However, the poem isn’t simply an anti-tragic one like “Dennis O’Grady” in which a character re-appropriates a knowing snap-judgment for their own purposes. For the form of the poem here creates two distinct patterns or types of enclosures. The primary form of the poem is quite constraining: Keats, after all, is being judged and any worth he has must be demonstrated within the sonnet’s fourteen lines and rigid set of rules. Form is directly equated with a kind of

43 In fact, Keats’s ‘saunter’ might remind us of Gunn’s long-time partner Mike Kitay’s “sturdy swaggering gait” (CP 413) in the poem “The Differences” from The Man with Night Sweats.
painful pressure: not only is Keats quickly judged as “slack, and not well-dressed,” but dressed then rhymes with the hand pressed in farewell – as though Coleridge’s judgment is physically compacting Keats. Moreover, the walk that Keats joins Coleridge on rhymes three times with “[Keats] Listening respectfully to the talk talk talk” as though the rules governing rhyme are being increased and intensified as Keats is made to listen. And what Coleridge talks about is “First and Second Consciousness”: hence Keats is, in a sense, being formally pressed in on by the same classifying instinct that’s at work in Coleridge’s unflattering, dismissive, and probably classist snap judgment about Keats. The sonnet’s primary shape ultimately seems to be that of a harmfully reductionist, organizing system.

It’s possible then to read the sestet as simply enacting the defiant energy of Keats’s walk and improvisatory receptiveness, which is like a perceptual version of the surfer’s repose. Indeed, we should see this energy as helping to guide the sonnet’s tensile lines. Yet Gunn also directly intervenes in the poem by contradicting Coleridge twice (“passive, not slack”... “Perhaps not well dressed but oh no not loose”) and by mocking his classifying instincts (“Whether of Secondary type or First”). More, these direct corrections accompany the appearance of a secondary form that’s actually a tighter version of Coleridge’s form rather than a rejection of it. It turns out that the problem isn’t Coleridge’s classifying instinct per se, it’s that we’ve been using the wrong terms here (*First and Second Consciousness* or *slack*) or that the terms require slight modifications (Keats is “not loose,” but “alert,” and “passive, not slack”). In fact, the shorter sestet in which we enter Keats’s mind seems like an improved, “less dispersed” version of Coleridge’s longer octave. The octave, for instance, is not only longer, but is also full of parentheticals, hyphens, abstractions, and repetitiveness (talk talk talk/First and Second, passive/passive, Secondary/First). And whereas the octave talked discursively *about* ideas, the sestet gets at them more quickly by embodying them in images. Lastly, the poem’s final

---

44 Like “everything” else, closed form is “put to use.” Just as the rules of banks lend power (swiftness) to the mind’s insights rather than dominating them, Keats works within the sonnet’s constraints without slavish adherence to them. The sestet begins, after all, with a single sentence that extends for four and half-lines and then spills over the closing end-rhyme (“flow”) to end abruptly in a caesura (“banks made swift”) as if concocting a bank of its own. Keats’ energy helps guide the form here and put it to athletic use.

45 The idea of Keats’s attentiveness, for instance, is embodied in the example of the ponds and sparrows he observes, and the idea of necessary constraint is embodied in the image of a river’s flow “That banks made swift.”
couplet rhyme, which is the only couplet rhyme in the poem, gives the sestet a sense of closure that’s stronger than anything that preceded it.

Thus, though the open energy of the sestet is Keats’s own, Gunn is able to help Keats by correcting Coleridge and drawing our attention toward the poem’s secondary, tighter shape that draws on and improves the characteristics of the poem’s initial harmful one. The secondary form then becomes about capturing both the integrity of Keats on a walk, and the flexible, passive, but utterly tight perceptual apparatus of his mind when immersed in a particular scene. We can read this as making a secondary reading possible: in addition to being a poem that tells the story of Coleridge’s failure to recognize Keats’ worth, it becomes a poem about the way Coleridge’s failure demonstrates that worth. Ultimately, Gunn gets at Keats here not through helping him escape from Coleridge’s enclosure, but by insisting that Keats can actually do it better. However, the poem’s primary form still remains intact: unlike “From the Wave” where the form is totally put to work by Gunn’s open character, “Keats at Highgate” relies on two different forms existing side by side and Gunn drawing our attention to the latter one in his support of it.

Yet despite Gunn’s direct narratorial interventions in “Keats at Highgate,” Keats largely helps himself, and it’s a bit hard to disentangle what we’re meant to see as Gunn’s help from what Keats is already doing for himself. However, four poems after “Keats at Highgate” in The Passages of Joy we come to the poem “San Francisco Streets,” in which Gunn helps by offering the poem’s protagonist something he has not yet attained. In that poem, Gunn addresses an unnamed ‘you’ who has escaped from a series of confining situations, but who has no confidence that his good luck will last (CP 355-6). The poem enacts the uneven, off-kilter movement of the character by splitting pentameter lines into three and two beat ones, and thereby splitting aabb rhyming quatrains into octaves that alternate between rhyming and unrhyming lines. This creates an ongoing sense of moving freely forward and then coming up short while rocking back into a rhyme. In other words, this is a form perfectly suited for enacting its protagonist’s spurting escapes and pauses within each new temporary home.

And the poem contains many such homes: we learn that the young man left the “Peach country [that] was your home...Intimate, gross,/ Itching like family/ And far too close.” Next we learn about how he arrived in San Francisco and initially had a hard time making a living on
Market Street; we’re told he “by degrees... rose... Hustler to towel boy...Tried being kept awhile–
/ But felt confined/ One brass bed driving you/ Out of your mind.” By the end of the poem the
young man has “attained/ To middle class” as a sales clerk, and we see him gazing out from his
store window in “Half-veiled uncertainty” at good looking men passing by on the street. Hence,
it’s as though the young man is still tempted by the street’s possibilities for escape and
adventure, and has become unable to stop wanting to run away (from too intimate family, from
poverty on Market street, from being “confined” as a kept man, etc.). Running away, which was
initially a means of avoiding ‘confining’ traps, has now become a kind of unbreakable habit and
a trap in of itself. The poem’s form with its risky, spurting movements repeated across seven
stanzas enacts this habit both in its pleasures and in its exhausting repetitiveness, which
continues even as the man has arrived at a good situation. More, as Gunn points out at the end of
the poem, the young man’s position is still risky: there’s still no guarantee that his good luck will
last and if he keeps on in the same way he might end up “being kept a while” in a situation worse
than any yet described.46

Hence, Gunn directly intervenes at the end of the poem to give some advice and to help
the young man imagine a more peaceful secondary form for both poem and life than one of
constant anxious movement. The last stanza of the poem reads:

You’ve risen up this high –  
   How, you’re not sure.
Better remember what  
   Makes you secure.
Fuzz is still on the peach,  
   Peach on the stem.
Your looks looked after you.  
   Look after them.

Gunn’s intervening advice emphasizes the true precariousness and uncertainty of the man’s
situation: the man doesn’t know he got there, and maybe wouldn’t be able to get back; he also
needs to take care of himself (his looks) if he’s going to keep taking risks or the risks won’t
continue to pay off. Moreover, the form of the poem suggests that heeding this advice will allow
the man to settle down. Gunn builds a secondary kinder enclosure into the poem’s ending as

46 And the poem at one point suggested that the young man had to become a prostitute to support himself earlier on.
though to catch the man: the poem ends with a series of careful balancing acts and chiasmi (fuzz-peach-peach-stem, looks-looked after you-you look after-looks). It’s as though Gunn is trying to offset and stabilize the off kilter movement of the protagonist, his rocking back-and-forth extensions and chiming quick stops: the enclosed verse form, which has been squeezing the young man forward from stanza to stanza, and from to Georgia to Market Street, finally provides him with at least the option of a soft landing in balanced chiasmi. This option remains only an option, however, a secondary form built into the poem’s primary one. The poem both leaves the man staring out the window confusedly, unable to make sense of his life, and imagines a way for him to settle down happily (by taking better care of himself). Gunn is careful to remain true to the precariousness of the man’s situation, which the poem so skillfully represents: the man ultimately must live his own life, and Gunn’s help here is just to imagine a healthy alteration to the way he’s been living it.

Let’s look at one final example in which Gunn is able to use traditional forms to imitate and intercede against bad enclosure in a situation that’s not too dire. The poem “All Do Not All Things Well,” from The Man with Night Sweats, takes place on the streets and describes “two/auto freaks” who have some of the deformation typical of closed characters: “One, hurt in jungle war/ Had a false leg, the other/raised a huge beard above/ A huge Hell’s Angel belly.” These are not tricksterish evasive mutations, but permanent disfigurements (CP 456-7). And the men’s story doesn’t have a happy ending: the poem describes how the two men are eventually evicted “For brashly operating/ A business [fixing cars] on the street” by a woman who “Wanted the neighborhood neat/ To sell it.”

We know by now that Gunn’s sympathy will lie with the auto freaks rather than with the woman who wants a neat neighborhood, but the poet’s defense of the men is nuanced. Gunn admits that the men have few virtues (they don’t do all things well), but argues that their skill in fixing cars amounts to “a disinterest/ And passionate expertise/ To which they gave their best/ Desires and energies.” He adds, “Such oily-handed zest/ By-passed the self like love.” Despite and even through their deformities and limitations (their huge beards and beer bellies, their

---

47 After all, in referencing peach fuzz the poem also loops back to its beginning in peach country and thus provides a formal way for the man’s movement to keep going forever.
‘unintelligence’ and brutishness) the men become like anti-tragic characters and Whitmanian essential characters in how they undertake “One thing... Because it has enthralled them.” They have enough open energy to turn thrall, unhealthy lives, and painful memories of Vietnam into something suggestive of the utopic in its quasi-spiritual ‘bypassing of the self.’ In a way, their thrall makes them into more successful versions of the woman “tethered to crisis” in “At an Intersection” since they have a hobby other than anger.\footnote{There’s also something mythic and erotic about the pair. For instance, the Homeric epithet “stiff-legged boy” at once suggests an erection, Cupid, and Hephaestus (the ‘bow-legged’ god).}

I don’t have room to do justice to this very rich poem here, but I should point out that we’re again given two views of a character, and that again one view is formally built on top of the other. The poem as a whole is written in trimeter just like Thomas Campion’s “Now Winter Nights Enlarge” from which Gunn’s title is taken. However, we find the unflattering descriptions of the men largely in the unrhymed portions of the trimeter lines. In these sections we learn that the men are “auto freaks”; that they live on “corn chips from the deli”; and that they threaten to firebomb the car of the woman who threatens them with eviction. Despite the glimpses of Gunn’s admiration for the men that lie throughout the poem, we can largely read the unrhymed trimeter sections as jauntily and somewhat unsympathetically laying out the case for what might make the men ‘undesirables.’\footnote{It’s also interesting to note the similarity between the men and Gunn’s pinball player: they both transform messy lives into something we can admire. There’s another way, then, to understand Gunn’s carefully delimited picture of others, which strive not to represent too much about them and to give them to us engaged in a single activity. This other way is that Gunn wants us to see these others’ summing up their own lives on their own best terms. If we saw too many of the details of these lives, we might miss how they can come to mean something powerful; perhaps that ‘something powerful’ can be best communicated by the men’s single admirable skill and power to engage. Lyric poetry here, then, is perfectly suited to representing the intensity of another’s engaged life force (an intensity which might be lost in a more diffused literary genre).}

But when Gunn intervenes directly by making explicit cases for the men’s virtues in the first and final stanzas of the poem, suddenly the number of rhymes increases hugely. The poem in fact ends with a rhyming couplet that’s also a blanket declaration of authorial support: “I thought that they were good/ For any neighborhood.” Again, instead of breaking the form that accompanies the shallow, dismissive judgments of the men (and that accompanies their trapped situation of only being good at a single job that they’re no longer allowed to do) Gunn tightens

\footnote{This is the title of the chapbook in which this poem was first published.}
that form. The poet builds intricate patterns of rhyme on top of the blank trimeter in order to highlight the men’s own intricate skill and “And passionate expertise” in repairing cars. This increase in rhyme offers us a secondary aesthetic closure or shape: again, instead of just being a poem that tells the story of two street people who break the law, threaten violence, and are ultimately and somewhat tragically evicted, it becomes a poem about two flawed men whose eviction helps us see what’s terrific about them. Gunn doesn’t break or undo closure, but he intercedes so that his characters can at least get something out of it.

** Difficult, Tedious, Painful Enterprises **

Gunn is realistic about what his intercessions can accomplish and he carefully limits them: as we’ve seen, his characters still have to do most of the work. Using his secondary forms and closed shapes to show how Keats was underrated by Coleridge; or how a man might who has already succeeded in pulling himself up by his bootstraps might take better care of himself; or how two men who also have already acquired considerable skill with cars might have something admirable about them – are not, after all, huge interventions. Yet the strength of these interventions is that they depend on Gunn first mimicking bad enclosure and bringing the experiential crush of it into his art. Since Gunn never loses sight of the painfulness this entails, he also never makes up unbelievably happy endings, but offers us convincingly moderate alternative enclosures that take a fuller and more generous account of whatever open street-wise energies his characters are able to muster within their traps.

I’ll conclude now by looking at two particularly dire examples of the world’s enclosures in respect to which Gunn’s intercessions must remain woefully incomplete. In fact, the strength of Gunn’s intercessions’ here is that they find any convincing room to maneuver whatsoever within excruciatingly realized traps. I’ll look first at the more concise example of the poem “Waitress” from The Passages of Joy, and then I’ll conclude with a reading of the long, famous AIDS elegy “Lament” from The Man with Night Sweats. In both cases Gunn’s temperamental affinity with dour entrapment is what allows him to mimic it so well in all of its painfulness, while his resistance to accepting that temperamental affinity is what enables him to intervene. In
this way Gunn’s divided allegiance both to a poetry that wants to lock people away in boxes and to a poetry that’s open to others’ freedom and independent modes of meaning-making, yields poems that are uniquely capable of understanding how admirable people try their best to live within cramped, inhuman circumstances.

“Waitress” is not a particularly well-known Gunn poem, but it provides a vivid example of the principles I’ve been discussing and its severe situation makes it a useful antechamber to the “Lament.”

At one they hurry in to eat.
Loosed from their office jobs they sit
But somehow emptied out by it
And eager to fill up with meat.

*Salisbury Steak with Garden Peas.*

The boss who orders them about
Lunches elsewhere and they are free
To take a turn at ordering me.
I watch them hot and heavy shout:

*Waitress I want the Special please.*

My little breasts, my face, my hips,
My legs they study while they feed
Are not found on the list they read
While wiping gravy off their lips.

*Here Honey gimme one more scoop.*

I dream that while they belch and munch
And talk of Pussy, Ass, and Tits,
And sweat into their double knits,
I serve them up their Special Lunch:

*Bone Hash, Grease Pie, and Leather Soup.* (349)

The poem begins by ‘hurrying us in’ in from Gunn’s streets to the diner where the poem’s protagonist is stuck waiting on her abusive customers. The waitress, though, still possesses the open energy of Gunn’s street figures in her edge (she tells things like they are, and doesn’t mince her words e.g. “Pussy, Ass, and Tits”). She also resembles Gunn’s open characters in her trickterish and improvised revenge-dream of swapping out the office workers’ food for something less pleasant, as well as in her attempt to turn the circle of abuse she describes into something over which she might have more agency. Moreover, the very form of the poem with
its abba rhyme and refrain is reminiscent of “Street Song” (of its own refrain and carefully rhymed, similarly sized stanzas); the poem also ends with the kind of street curse we saw in “Old Meg” (“blood on you!”).  
 Yet if the waitress retains some of the open energy of the street, her customers are almost a sinister parody of Gunn’s street people. Though the workers have been “loosed” from their confining office jobs, they don’t enjoy their newfound freedom, but move into a secondary confining space where they can play the role of boss instead of employee. And in so doing they become a lot like distorted, closed characters: they’re distorted and “emptied out” of all but a rapacious, carnivorous desire to ‘fill up.’ They’re also fixated, almost obsessed with this crass rapaciousness: as is true of the protagonist of “Looks” in The Man with Night Sweats, the men ultimately become defined by their desire and lack of sympathy. Ultimately, they even become like pigs in Circe’s sty (from Moly), belching and sweating. And they also become agent of distorting enclosure themselves: the waitress must face their leering, predatory enjoyment instead of Gunn’s more careful relationship to his subjects and gentle leaning in from the margins that we witnessed in “Bally Power Play.” And this leering enjoyment involves imaginatively transforming the waitress into a set of increasingly lurid parts (from breasts, face, and hips, to “Pussy, Ass and Tits”).  
 The waitress is able to exhibit some open street-wise energy, but her options are limited and there is ultimately no escape here. Hence, the poem’s primary form is a kind of seedy trap. We can see this in its circling, chiasmic abba rhymes, and in its refrains that are made up of different orders barked out by the customers at the end of each stanza (except the last). Hence in addition to being trapped in a circularity of rhyme and repetitive (yet worsening) stanzas, the waitress is fenced in by her customers’ very language. We also find a kind of syntactic inevitability trapping the waitress here in the second stanza’s since X therefore Y formula: since “The boss who orders them about/ Lunches elsewhere,” therefore “they are free/ To take a turn at ordering me.” Put differently, the phenomenon of men who are rendered powerless encroaching

50 The street curse also turns up in “Sparrow” in Gunn’s preceding book, Jack Straw’s Castle. “Sparrow” is poem about a beggar asking for wine that ends with the following lines: “The bastard passed me by/ fuck you asshole that’s what I say/ I hope I see you cry/ like Sparrow one day” (249).  

51 When the refrain is taken away the stanzas become “In Memoriam” ones.
on another person’s sexual boundaries in order to feel better is seen as a simple matter of cause and effect with little room for maneuvering within it.

And the very structure of each stanza reinforces this feeling of inevitability. Each stanza sets up a background scene in its first three lines (often in which we see the waitress studying or laying out a clear understanding of what’s going on) that then builds to a decisive present-tense action in its fourth line, and then finally returns to the men’s refrain in the fifth line. Thus, the form of each stanza seems to say X is the case, so I give you Y: they’re emptied by their jobs so they’re eager for meat; they want to order someone about so they shout at me; they study my body so their desire becomes insatiable, etc. The organization of each stanza, in other words, imitates the repetitive, overdetermined seediness of the situation – again leaving little wiggle-room. Ultimately, it’s the poem’s tight form that really helps us to imagine how grotesque and powerless the waitress’s situation is (so that ultimately, even her revenge must remain a dream).

Yet within the poem’s primary enclosed circular form Gunn builds in an alternative linear one that lends more weight to the waitress’s open energies as they build steadily toward a crisis point. At first, it might just seem as though the linear progression here is toward things worsening: as the poem goes on, the men settle more comfortably and deeply into their abuse. But though the poem’s first two stanzas contain only descriptions of trapped circularity, the waitress begins to gain agency in the third stanza. In that stanza, the poem’s rhythm shifts as the waitress lists her ogled body parts, thereby drawing attention away from the poem’s end-rhymes. Hence, even as she’s being objectified in a seedy blazon, she’s also shifting attention away from the poem’s entrapping form and taking over the stanza’s rhythm by putting the emphasis on herself (“My little breasts/ My legs”). Moreover, at the end of third stanza she corrects the men by pointing out that she’s not on the menu right before she describes them in a way that seems less flattering than ever (wiping gravy off their lips). In other words, it’s as though by putting more of the focus on herself she’s able to fight back and condemn her tormentors.

Building from her growing agency in the third stanza, the waitress finally becomes the foremost actor of the poem in the final one. In this concluding stanza, the men’s action occurs only within a subordinate clause, while the waitress’s action takes place in the main one (I dream). And though the fourth line of each stanza usually describes the office workers’ actions,
here the waitress acts instead (I serve them up). The waitress also takes over the workers’ speech and moves their “talk” into the stanza’s second line, thereby incorporating it into her description. The poem can then reach its final and crowning moment when she speaks the final refrain herself at the same moment as she imagines her revenge. In sum, the waitress is able to reconfigure the poem’s entrapping form to express her own wrath and disgust, and thereby to end the poem as a more lively character than she was at its beginning. Even the increasing crudity of her mistreatment as the poem goes on can be read as contributing to this secondary form of increasing empowerment and vitality because, the more she’s mistreated, the more her distaste can also increase (to the point where it triggers her curse in the final line). If the bouncing tetrameter and chiasmic rhyme scheme lend themselves to the men’s increasingly grotesque celebration, they also lend themselves to the waitress’s increasingly merry, sneering disgust and (albeit only imaginary) revenge.

Since the poem is in the first-person Gunn can’t comment directly as a narratorial voice and his intercession must be muted. However, he can at least intercede by struggling to make us notice the poem’s secondary form. He does so, for instance, by choosing to end the poem with the waitress’s dream of revenge instead of looping us back to the poem’s start. He also chooses to use the particularly artificial (because less common) device of the refrain to emphasize the waitress’s small re-appropriation of her situation. Unlike, say, “Dennis O’Grady,” the poem’s

We might also note how “Special Lunch” itself parodies the men’s desire for “the Special” as well as their false niceness more generally (“please” and “Honey”).

Without the poem’s rhyme and meter the waitress might seem less trapped, but her ferociously unflinching description and curse would also have less power.

We can also read the waitress as turning her intensifying mistreatment back on itself as the poem goes forward. Like Circe in Gunn’s earlier volume Moly, the waitress can be seen turning the men into swine – into creatures of pure, grotesque appetite – belching, munching, sweating, and talking crudely. Since the mistreatment of the waitress incrementally increases in each stanza (from ordering her about, to ogling her body, to belching and talking brazenly that body), the men’s grotesqueness also seems to increase. Hence, it’s as though the waitress reverses the men’s unsympathetic study of her and turns it right back on them. There’s a way to read her revenge then as actually a climactic fulfillment of the men’s swinish desires: though they wouldn’t be able to admit it, the unappetizing foodstuffs she’ll be serving are exactly what the men want. As their appetite confuses meat and sex more and more, and as their blazon moves from looking at breasts, to munching and discussing the waitress’s “Pussy, Ass, and Tits,” the men set up a progression whose disturbing end point is to want dead parts. Taken to an extreme, their desire stops being for a living sex partner, and starts being for carrion that can utterly surrender to them and be consumed. Gunn, who later writes a poem about the cannibal necrophiliac, Jeffrey Dahmer, is especially sensitive to the way unsympathetic desire’s endgame contradicts its illusions about itself and leads to the horrific. The workers might be dismayed to encounter themselves as seen through the waitress’s eyes as little different from cannibals. In giving the men a version of what they want the waitress then exposes them in the grotesque egocentric extremity of their desires. Hence, on top of the poem’s primary structure of circular abuse, the poem contains an incremental build to a crisis-point of condemnatory revelation.
form both closely mimics the waitress’s predicament, and provides her with a formal weapon to use in her defense. Gunn’s intercession here is not just that he’s noticing the waitress’s resistance: by bringing the maximum amount of confining pressure to bear, Gunn can represent the full seediness of her unpleasant situation while also maximally highlighting her resistance. In the end, the power of the poem’s secondary linear form must remain limited: the waitress’s revenge remains imaginary, and she’s still stuck in the diner at the end of the poem. Moreover, despite taking over the language of the final refrain, the overall circular form of the poem remains unbroken. Yet that secondary form does at least help us notice how the waitress’s open street-wise energies keep her from becoming a passive victim and allow her to retain some of her integrity via her justified vitriol.

No closure or entrapment in Gunn’s poetry, though, is so dire or matters so much to him as the death of a close friend, and unsurprisingly Gunn’s elegiac poems also provide us with primary and secondary shapes.55 These poems imitate the ugly circle that death can draw around a life, leaving us with a reduced and impoverished picture of it. But they can also provide us with an expanded circle and a more detailed (though still limited) picture. Hence, it’s no coincidence that some of the richest and most suggestive character portraits that we find in Gunn’s work turn up in his elegies. When writing about living people, Gunn doesn’t want to say too much for fear that his poems might harm or trap those others rather than represent their essential, open energies. But once death has already perpetrated its ultimate harm and inscribed final limits on his characters’ lives, broader representation can become a means of intercession – a means of expanding those final limits and widening the circle.

We find a concise example of this phenomenon in Gunn’s brief poem “To the Dead Owner of a Gym,” which is a poem about his friend Norm Rathweg’s premature death from AIDS. At the end of that poem we learn that death “Is rigid and,/ Finally as it may define,/ An absence with its cutting line,/ Alas,/ lacks class” (478). In other words, death imposes a kind of impoverished, tasteless pattern along with its irremediable closure. Yet prior to the description of Norm’s death, we learn about his admirable creativity and knack for pattern-making: he used his

55 Gunn is perhaps most famous for his AIDS elegies, and what follows will be far from a thorough treatment of them. However, our look at Gunn thus far can help us at least imagine some of the unique capabilities of these elegiac poems.
life to gain “muscle every week/ With sharper definition” and made the “elegant decision” to place a “red line of tile/ As margin round the showers” (CP 478). The gym owner’s life is reduced to two activities neither of which is dwelt on, and neither of which is particularly charged or mysterious. And it’s no coincidence that both activities have to do with firm boundaries (sharp definitions and margins): together these two activities give us a relatively clear and limited portrait of a life. Despite their limited nature though, we’re meant to admire these activities, and, overall, this reduction to two traits seems gentle and flattering in comparison to death’s class-less, final, cutting line. The most obvious form of the poem then is that of the life rigidly defined and harshly cut off. However, studying the poem more closely we can recognize the way its abrupt ending also makes possible a secondary vision of (albeit limited) shapeliness: a vision of bodybuilding and aesthetic taste.\(^56\)

Gunn’s long AIDS-elegy “Lament,” though, is not cleanly divided into stages that lie before and after its protagonist’s death (CP 465-8). This is because “Lament” is entirely taken up with describing the ugly process of Gunn’s friend Allen Noseworthy’s dying. Any life-force that Noseworthy might possess, then, must be found within that dying process, and the poem’s labor is to try to find some imitative, believable shape to take other than that of the disease’s relentless progression. But overall the growth and development of the disease seem to dominate the poem. Like Gunn’s waitress, Noseworthy leaves the outdoors and the street’s energies and is “wheeled... through the swinging door,” away from “Those normal pleasures of the sun’s kingdom.” Afterwards, Noseworthy’s very life force is sapped away as his painful death threatens to become defining of his whole person (not just his life’s end). However, by focusing on Noseworthy’s prolonged dying, Gunn is able to see how this process might include something a little like the movement of Gunn’s surfers and other open characters. Gunn’s task then is not

---

\(^56\) The poem concludes with the rhymed description of death’s cutting line quoted above, and then dangles a tiny couplet (“Alas/ lack class”) off the end the death’s “cutting line.” Hence it may seem as though death gets the final word on form here. And to a certain this sharp ending emotionally enacts the way Norm’s activities – bodybuilding and inscribing tasteful margins round the gym showers – are all cut off by the ‘final’ line of death. Gunn’s poem’s primary shape then has to do with a full life’s violently abrupt end and Gunn’s grief about it. Yet we can also read backwards into the poem and glimpse a life that, while it existed, was filled with ‘elegance,’ ‘sharp definition,’ and tasteful lines – a portrait and shape that probably wouldn’t have been formed if it weren’t for the initial death.
just to make us feel how hard the end of Noseworthy’s life was, but also to show us how that “difficult, tedious, painful” death might include a beloved life within it.\textsuperscript{57}

First and foremost, though, the poem devotes itself to mimicking the extreme painfulness of Noseworthy’s entrapped and impoverished situation. And in the deftness of this mimicry we can see the benefit of Gunn’s skill at enacting severe, rigid entrapment through traditional forms: many people might think shallowly or in a kind of cursory way about a friend’s hospitalization and death – and then grow weary and think about something else. But Gunn is able to imagine his way through the whole process over the course of his three-page long poem. Gunn cared for Noseworthy during much of this process,\textsuperscript{58} so admittedly he had first-hand material to draw on, but nevertheless the unflinching fullness with which the poet is able to enter into Noseworthy’s cramped and severely painful last days is striking. Gunn’s temperament here then becomes a boon rather than a hindrance: it may be Gunn’s discovered love for others’ open energies that prevents the poem from becoming grimly nihilistic, but it’s Gunn’s affinity for and understanding of control and enclosure that allows him to do justice to Noseworthy’s suffering here.

Hence, the poem begins by making a kind of contract with its addressed subject and the reader to cleave to the hard, unembroidered facts about Noseworthy’s last days. The poem’s very first line (“Your dying was a difficult enterprise”) is both a one-line summary of the poem as a whole and a commitment from which it won’t swerve: the entire rest of it will be taken up with fleshing out this statement with particulars as they unfold linearly across time. Indeed, the very next line starts by telling us that “\textit{First}, petty things took up your energies...” (my emphasis), and thereby suggests that we’re going to move in a systematic, thorough way through all of Noseworthy’s tribulations. There is from the poem’s beginning then a sense of inevitability – of the overdetermined nature of the disease’s tightening trap, whose direction is not only easily surmised and medically predictable, but has already finished happening in reality and will now be repeated.

\textsuperscript{57} Since I don’t have room to quote the poem in full here I hope my reader will follow along either in the \textit{Collected Poems}.

As we move forward into the poem, this sense of inevitability grows stronger. In line seven we learn that the second line’s ‘petty things’ have “Already” taken their toll; it seems then that we’re still in a preliminary stage of the illness, and that there’s much more and much worse to come. Even the more hopeful statement in line nine that Noseworthy is “in hope still, courteous still” implies, though the repetition of *still*, that such qualities won’t last long. Indeed, one of the overall ways that the poem moves is by dwelling on some of the “holds and rests” Noseworthy is able to find along his way only to undercut them by moving on to even more severe symptoms. In this way, these holds and rests thicken our sense of grim inevitability rather than provide any real hope.

The heroic couplet form also increases this sense of inevitable crushing enclosure by creating a firm set of rules that remain largely unwavering throughout the poem. In other words, the poem makes a metrical contract just as it makes a contract to tell hard truths about the difficult enterprise of Noseworthy’s dying. And this metrical contract – to go on in iambic pentameter and rhyme each line with its successor – then thickens our sense that the dying process will remain unsurprisingly hard and relentless until the end. The couplet rhymes in particular are key to creating this domino-like sense of being trapped inside an unstoppable chain of events. They do so first of all by converting each painful step of Noseworthy’s journey into a little closed epigram e.g. “Once there, you entered fully the distress/ And long pale rigours of the wilderness...On which you lay, bed restful as a knife,/ You tried, tried hard to make of it a life.” In each of these cases the second line expands on and sums up its predecessor, interpreting and tightening it. These epigrams then become little inflexible nodes each of which, in the lock-down of its immediate rhyme, represents another point on Noseworthy’s forced journey.

The couplets have other functions, which also heighten this sense of being strapped into an overdetermined process. For instance, they can sometimes enact the movement between nodes, which can make points of the journey seem to lock into each other: “No respite followed: though the nightmare ceased./ Your cough grew thick and rich, its strength increased.” There’s no respite: when one bad symptom ends, another rhymes with it and begins. In addition, rhyme can also function as one of the poem’s main tools for undermining the small hopeful “holds and rests” that Noseworthy *is* able to discover: “You tried to stay the man you had been./ Treating
each symptom as a mere mishap/ Without import. But then the spinal tap.” Rhyme makes mere “Mere mishap” seem to lead directly to “spinal tap” as though the strategy of treating things as being less serious than they are is being punished by directly triggering a brutal procedure that dispels any such pleasant illusions. And by occurring as a jingle near the poem’s beginning, the spinal tap rhyme sets us up to expect subsequent undercuts. For example, we see Noseworthy taking some pleasure in his nurse’s Philippine folk song just before we’re told that he’s “Grabbing at detail” on his detail-free “bare ledge toured by the gale.” Again, rhyme responds to holds and rests by subverting them.59

The poem traps Noseworthy within circularity as well as within relentless linear progression. This circularity can be seen in the way the poem’s heroic couplets move us forward while simultaneously repeating sounds, as well as in how their pattern of immediate rhyme is repeated over and over. And the poem itself also makes a circle: we move through increasingly painful symptoms until finally we arrive at a last line (“This difficult, tedious, painful enterprise”) which is a repetition of and expansion on the poem’s first line. In other words, we’re back to where we started, but more so, and we might recall at this point that the poem is itself a repetition of what’s already occurred in reality.

Taken together, these various forms of entrapment do more than make the end of Noseworthy’s life seem enclosed and painful; it’s as though the entirety of Noseworthy’s lived experience is being impoverished, as if the process of his dying is threatening to squeeze all the meaning out of his life. The most obvious reason why this happens is that Noseworthy’s death is premature. In Gunn’s great elegy for his friend, the poet Robert Duncan, Gunn writes of Duncan being “In sight of a conclusion, whose great dread/ Was closure,/ his life soon to be enclosed.” In these lines Gunn depicts Duncan’s unusually strong aversion to closure as a poet of all-inclusive, free verse and sprawling process-oriented writing. Yet Duncan at least lives until late middle age and dies as an accomplished poet, whereas Noseworthy never shows “the world what you could do/ In some ambitious role” and dies “Feeling as uncompleted as a child.” It’s as though

59 Moreover, Gunn uses the temporal markers “Now” and “Meanwhile” in the second ‘completion lines’ of couplets to work with rhyme’s undercutting effect: the rhymes and immediate moment work in tandem to yank us away from the preceding rests of memory and reflection and plunge us back into the immediate, worsening symptoms at hand.
Noseworthy’s lack of conventional success means that nothing can protect him from his approaching death; death then can use the ‘classless’ shaping force we saw it wield in “To the Dead Owner of a Gym,” to circumscribe and distort Noseworthy’s life into a grim parody of shapeliness: “And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey/ Achieving your completeness, in a way.” Appropriately enough, Noseworthy’s name is only included in the appendix of the Collected Poems, whereas Duncan’s is given in the title of the elegy for him; since Noseworthy hasn’t yet ‘made a name for himself,’ in death he becomes almost literally nameless.

The other reason Noseworthy’s larger worth seems to disappear into his death is that the poem strips away his open character qualities until he becomes almost like one of the closed characters in Gunn’s first book. First, Noseworthy isn’t able to turn entrapping circles into fulfilling cycles: as we’ve seen, the poem begins and ends as a “difficult enterprise.” In fact, even individual symptoms and stages of the disease create hellish loops: “I heard you wake up from the same bad dream/ Every half-hour with the same short cry/ Of mild outrage, before immediately/ Slipping into nightmare once again.” One might compare these lines to the following ones from “Round and Round” in Gunn’s first book: “The lighthouse keeper’s world is round,/ Belongings skipping in a ring...Where thoughts dance round what will not shift –/His secret inarticulate grief” (11). To my mind, only the fact that the lines from “Lament” correspond to a realistically depicted person and situation keep these two descriptions from becoming indistinguishable.

Next, the forward movements in “Lament,” and even the moments in the poem where movement and stasis unite, seem like perversions of the skilled bodily activity of Gunn’s pinball player, surfers, or cab driver. For instance, we’re told that it’s as “if your body sought out martyrdom/ In the far Canada of a hospital room.” Hence the body’s explorer-like journey to a “far Canada” simultaneously involves the lockdown of the hospital room – and it’s as though we’ve arrived at a hellish version of the surfers holding still while on their rapidly cresting wave.60 Moreover, the overall progression of the disease is depicted as a kind of forced march with many stages: these include leaving “the sun’s kingdom,” entering the “rigours of the

---

60 We can also glimpse a little of the overlap between Gunn’s own severity and Noseworthy’s situation in that it’s though the body is choosing to martyr itself or is being helplessly drawn on toward its own imprisonment and withering away.
wilderness,” looking around like a rock climber for “holds and rests,” and lying along “A bare ledge.” The journey ends with a dark version of Wordsworth: instead of Wordsworth’s journey of life where though “inland far we be,/ Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea/ Which brought us thither,”61 we find Noseworthy at his life’s end “drowning on an inland sea/ Of your own fluids.” And, again, all of these stages on the journey have some passivity or arrestedness to them: they entail being wheeled away, becoming lost, studying a situation or wall but not climbing it, lying down, and, finally, drowning. In sum, Noseworthy’s journey involves traveling far but getting nowhere. The poem is relentless enough on its own, so I don’t want to belabor the point too much by providing a full list here – but one by one Noseworthy’s other open qualities are also parodied or taken away.62

This stripping away of open qualities is linked to Noseworthy’s incompletion. Since his life ends abruptly, death can give it an undesirable shape. The removal of open qualities, then, can be seen as the process that creates such a misshapen figure as death draws closer. However, the removal of open qualities has other effects as well: for instance, it makes it harder for the reader to imagine Noseworthy as anything more than just a dying, suffering person; as we’ve


62 Noseworthy also loses sensory detail and pleasure: we learn that he has to ‘grab’ at any “detail/ To furnish this bare ledge toured by the gale.” When Gunn is “ejected with some violence” back into the outside world after his friend’s death, we learn that Gunn “was numb” while in the “white and distant spot” of the hospital room, but that now he’s back outside, “variations” and natural sensory detail resume. Hence, not only does Noseworthy lose much of his capacity for pleasure and youthful incipience so necessary to Mick or the pinball player, he also returns to a bare, cramped, and unfurnished self that has something in common with the spartan isolation of Gunn’s early poems: “In your cheek/ One day, appeared the true shape of your bone/ No longer padded.” It’s no coincidence that bone here rhymes with “alone”: Noseworthy becomes more closed, distorted, “thin,” and skeletal as the ‘padding’ of detail is lifted, and his circumstances are reduced back to an impoverished, isolated self. Noseworthy in fact almost returns to the isolation of the early poems, as well as to their simultaneous rigidity and ghostliness. As Stephen Burt puts it, the early poems had “stiff, boxy stanzas with end words like pistons...[that spelled] out Gunn’s early dogmas,” while in the later Gunn used “his muscles and bones and fingertips to make himself a social poet” (Burt, Close Calls with Nonsense, 206-8). Before the later poems the body, like Noseworthy here, is usually a cramped, inchoate thing living in a bare world. And Noseworthy loses or inverts other qualities associated with Gunn’s open characters: he’s hardly suggestive of the utopian; in fact he’s more suggestive of its breakdown via AIDS. Instead of possessing youthfulness or incipience himself, his disease seems to possess it as, for instance, his cough grows “thick and rich.” It’s the disease that develops and has power: there’s a kind of awful robustness to the “TUBE, FAT, WHITE/JAMMED DOWN your THROAT” in its piling up of stresses and evocation of something worm or grub-like – as if the tube is feeding on him rather than helping him. Moreover, instead of Thom Gunn leaning in from the margins with his admiring eros, Gunn leans in as a caretaker and unhappy witness. And even the mythic or tricksterish energy of Gunn’s characters seems to let Noseworthy down. He becomes a martyr; he enters the “distress/And long pale rigours of the wilderness” like he’s in a captivity narrative. After he disappears (“A gust of morphine hid” him) he reappears with a tube “Jammed down” his throat and stopping up the voice that’s so important to tricksters from Odysseus to Coyote. In sum, what tricksterish magic there is here just replicates Noseworthy’s condition of suffering and powerlessness.
seen, the more closed someone becomes the less of life they seem to have outside the poem in which they appear. And this limited vision of Noseworthy in turn suggests Gunn’s predicament in writing the poem in the weeks immediately following his friend’s death. The stripping away of vital qualities might well correspond to the deathly image of Noseworthy dominating Gunn’s mind and blotting out any preceding memories. The poem then can be read as Gunn’s reckoning with this deathly vision and his attempt to find something of his original healthy friend within and through it.

And Gunn in fact is able to do so: so far we have seen how Gunn’s poem does a formidable and at times terrifying job of enacting Noseworthy’s bodily and existential predicament, but the poem is also able to give us glimpses of Noseworthy’s vital energy, and suggest that the ‘holds and rests’ that he finds might be more significant than I have suggested thus far. Ultimately, as we’ll see, Noseworthy’s open energy manifests itself as a kind of improvisatory spirited movement – not too dissimilar from the surfing that began my discussion – which bypasses the inevitable-march of the epigrammatic couplets, and converts them into something else, thereby allowing us to see them as a different, secondary kind of form.

The poem starts preparing us for this alternative form in its sixth line in which we learn that while going to doctor’s appointments and getting X-rays “(you read two novels a day)” (465). This bit information occurs parenthetically in a way that works against the epigrammatic will to lock down instead of digress. Next, within the very sentence that describes the painful cyclical movement between tormented sleep and tormented waking (“the same bad dream...with the same short cry”) a kind of loosening occurs since the sentence expands across six lines. The sentence becomes the longest one we’ve seen up to this point, and thereby pits unprecedented syntactic momentum against the couplet-enclosures. More, this loosening corresponds to the sudden, partial revitalization of the poem’s protagonist. We learn that Noseworthy wakes from the dream with a “short cry/ Of mild outrage.” A few lines later, this anger increases. “I’d never seen such rage in you before,” says Gunn about Noseworthy as the latter is wheeled off into the

63 Thom Gunn, interviewed by Christopher Hennessy, 13.
Emergency Room. Here we find something of the famous trope of AIDS-patient as warrior, but we should also think of Old Meg’s curse, the Waitress’s revenge, and the unspendable anger of the woman at the intersection. We should, in other words, find in these lines the wrath that gives a trapped character back his edge (notice too how the first syllable of “outrage” defies enclosure).

And this revitalization again corresponds to a formal shift: the sentence describing the rage Gunn has never seen before occurs immediately before a six-line sentence, which enacts the wheeling motion of entering “through the swinging door” via the sentence’s momentum. This same sentence also contains several enjambments as well as a hyphen and other caesuras. In other words, the long sentence is again particularly free of epigrammatic lockdown because its movements and pauses draw attention away from its end-rhymes. So again, Noseworthy’s moments of vitality are associated with a new freer kind of movement and experience of the poem’s form. The six-line sentence also lists all the pleasures Noseworthy will be missing now that he’s being wheeled away (“summer on the skin,/ Sleep without break, the moderate taste of tea/ In a dry mouth”). Even though these sensory pleasures are invoked negatively, they are the first ones mentioned in the poem, and provide a kind of relief from the descriptions of spinal taps and thick coughs that have dominated the poem’s lists thus far. And sensory pleasure has been one of the major features of Gunn’s open characters (think of the cabbie, or the pinball player, or Dennis O’Grady). In sum, we get a glimpse here of a character’s love of life and not just of his struggle against disease.

Ultimately, what I’m describing is a kind of feedback loop: Gunn’s scrupulous fidelity to documenting Noseworthy’s final days leads him also to notice and include whatever small energetic resistances Noseworthy is able to muster. This life-force then is plugged back into the poem and occurs as a kind of freer, vital movement within Gunn’s couplets – a movement that at times even borders on something like repose. For Noseworthy doesn’t just stop at anger: once he

---

64 Ross Chambers, “Attending to AIDS: Elegy’s Rendez-Vous with Testimonial,” The Oxford Handbook of The Elegy, ed. Karen Weisman (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 382-396, 386-7. A common strategy of AIDS literature is to portray the patient’s struggle with the disease through a “metaphorics of heroism and battle” against the “slow erosion of dailiness” (Chambers 387), and this kind of reading is certainly possible for “Lament.” However, I think it’s actually the way that Gunn’s couplets are co-opted and put to use as vehicles of athleticism and pleasure – the way they’re not purely defined by the disease – that’s at the heart of Noseworthy’s open resistance here.
enters the hospital, his next moment of true vitality occurs after he becomes unable to speak and takes up writing in order to communicate. He writes on a pad about being, as Gunn describes it, “amused/ At one time that you had your nurse confused/ Who, seeing you reconciled after four years/ With your grey father, both of you in tears,/ Asked if this was at last your ‘special friend’/ (The one you waited for until the end).” Again we encounter a stretching out and unfurling of syntax as this sentence extends to six-lines; and again those six lines draw attention away from their end rhymes both through their velocity and momentum and through enjambment and the digression of a parenthetical.

And this loosened syntax corresponds to Noseworthy’s amplified energy in the scene described: after all, the sentence portrays Noseworthy enjoying something – something which happens to be very much like a Tricksterish mix-up of identities. We also glimpse in this sentence a broader, fuller life beyond the hospital room (that includes family members and lovers) that yet can continue its business inside it (either by reconciling or betraying). Moreover, it’s no coincidence that Noseworthy starts communicating in writing just as his personality and the poem’s secondary form increase in strength; it’s as though he now gets to be a contributing author to his own elegy. And fittingly, we then get a direct quotation from Noseworthy, which also includes the first description of positive sensory pleasure in the poem. Gunn quotes directly from Noseworthy’s pad-writing to describe how the nurse sings “a Philippine folk song/ To wake me in the morning... It is long/ And very pretty.” Though this sentence isn’t itself that long, it switches between voices (Noseworthy’s and Gunn’s) and contains three caesuras. Hence, again the enclosing form is loosened and converted into something else; it seems for a moment in these lines as though Noseworthy really is able to “make of it a life.”

Finally, toward the end of the first stanza (whose 67 lines take up the first two-thirds of the poem) we’re given a crucial anecdote that explains the nature of the less constricting secondary form that we’ve been glimpsing thus far. We learn that Noseworthy’s ‘amused’ writings on the pad about the identity mix-up and his focus on the Philippine folk song are

65 I’m referring to this reposeful movement through the poem’s couplets as a ‘secondary form’ for a couple of reasons. First, it makes the couplets seem less like epigrammatic nodes and more like obstacles that help enact a kind of flowing, robust energy. Second, this movement is beginning to give us a wider, gentler overall picture of Noseworthy’s life than that granted by the poem’s primary form.
continuous with his old personality from before he was sick: “It had been chance/ Always till now that had filled up the moment/ With live specifics your hilarious comment/ Discovered as it went along; and fed./ Laconic, quick, wherever it was led.” Gunn here recalls Noseworthy’s improvisatory knack for making jokes and observations with a “quick” speed before he became sick. In sum, Gunn’s observations about Noseworthy’s dying, once they are prolonged, lead to recognizing little resistances that over time lead Gunn to recall Noseworthy’s larger character.

More, as we’ve seen the recognitions of these little resistances usually occur in tandem with a different (secondary) version of the poem’s form; and we now find that that secondary form is itself modeled off the traits Gunn most admired about Noseworthy. Notice how my previous quoted sentence is again full of caesuras and enjambments, and how even its rhyme takes on greater flexibility (moment/comment doesn’t chime as strongly as bone/alone). And this loosening of epigrammatic lockdown occurs just as Gunn describes Noseworthy’s love of chance, improvisation, wit, and speed. In the following line, as if improvising himself, Gunn adds a one-line sentence as a kind of pivot point: “You improvised upon your own delight.” And this is followed by another six-line sentence where we travel even farther from the hospital room as we enter the sensory realm of memory’s “scented summer night” where Gunn and Noseworthy “talked between our sleeping bags, below/ A molten field of stars five years ago....” Hence we’ve gone from observed scene, to a general description of character, to an open-air memory. Describing that memory, Gunn adds, “I was so tickled by your mind’s light touch/ I couldn’t sleep, you made me laugh too much./ Though I was tired and begged you to leave off.” And once more the epigrammatic couplets are loosened: we find enjambments (below/ A molten field), weaker rhymes (below/ago), and colons instead of end-stops (“ago:”). Moreover, the entire stanza ends on a first-rhyme word (“off”), which then has to wait for the start of the next stanza for the second line where its rhyme will be completed.

In sum, we can now see Noseworthy’s remembered skillful light-touch and social knack for witty improvisation as guiding the energetic, flowing, yet robust movement of the poem’s secondary form. Instead of Noseworthy’s dying just obscuring his worth from Gunn it ends up revealing it. Just as Gunn learned about his friend’s capacity for rage (“I’d never seen such rage in you before”) through his death, that death also causes Gunn to recognize what he admired
most about his friend’s personality: his robust spontaneous inventiveness, and his lifelong knack for relying on chance, improvising delight, flirting, tickling, and joking around. In particular, Gunn comes to see the operation of his friend’s wit as itself a kind of robust skilled movement. Indeed that wit is often described in terms of physical movement: it involves ‘discovering’ “as it went along,” making the most of “wherever it was led,” and even going camping. In other words, the journey toward death is temporarily co-opted by the discovery (or recovery) of Noseworthy’s habitual, vital turns of mind. These movements of mind and personality even seem like a kind of repose since they balance passive and active, and are capable of accepting the constraints of chance and of ‘being led’ places passively while also insisting on their own ‘discoveries.’ While Gunn’s surfers ride waves, Noseworthy rides the moment’s “live specifics” with his own adaptive, “hilarious comment.” Of course, Noseworthy is only occasionally able to enter into this reposeful movement while in the hospital. Yet now that Gunn has noticed, remembered, and articulated this movement, he can do justice to the way his friend’s life has been painfully enclosed, while simultaneously using the poem’s secondary form to show us why he was loved.

But there’s also an important exchange taking place here: Gunn gets something too, and that something is more than just finding a way to mourn his friend or finding a way to transform his own personal controllingness into a tool for recovering and honoring Noseworthy. Through writing the poem Gunn learns something about his own capacity to balance freedom and enclosure. For instance, Gunn’s account of writing the poem suggests that the composition had something atypically spontaneous about it:

I started working on the poem a day or two after [my friend’s] death. And I wrote it to serve my thoughts for a few weeks while I was writing it. If I couldn’t go to sleep, I’d think of the next few lines or some revision. So it was written very much in the heat of the event, which is not always true.

Since Gunn writes the poem a few lines at a time in this spontaneous way he needs a form that isn’t too intricate; and since couplets don’t require that you hold a rhyme in mind for very long before completing it (perhaps why they’re so common in hip hop and spoken word poetry), it’s

---

66 Like Gunn’s “auto freaks,” Noseworthy has a single essential skill in which we can feel the whole of a life being brought to bear.

67 Thom Gunn, interviewed by Christopher Hennessy, 13.
possible to write them a few at a time in the way Gunn describes. Hence, Gunn is not just
imitating Noseworthy within the poem, he’s also imitating him in his very writing practice.
Noseworthy’s predicament suggests heroic couplets since they have a capacity to snap shut and
therefore to represent the determinism of Noseworthy’s situation – but it also suggests them
because they require a quick, witty, responsive inventiveness as “chance” fills “up the moment”
with an end-word that requires the next line to rhyme and “comment” on it right away. In other
words, couplets can snap shut, but they can also ‘improvise on their own delight’ just like
Gunn’s friend.

Undergoing and inhabiting this formal duality must then have required attaining a kind of
internal harmony between spontaneity and control during the writing process – and doing so may
have had effects on Gunn’s career beyond the writing of “Lament.” While in the earlier
interviews cited above Gunn discusses the differences between free verse and meter, in an
interview a few years before his death in 2004 he says the following: “Free verse has a tendency
to suggest the improvisatory... Perhaps, but I’d say that what makes any poem good is what’s
been improvised while you’ve been working on it, as opposed to what you had already planned,
if anything.”68 I certainly can’t prove that Gunn learns this lesson solely from writing “Lament,”
yet Gunn does say in another interview that “Lament” was the first AIDS-elegy he wrote, and
that its couplets established the form for the rest of the elegies.69 Hence, clearly the poem did
represent a kind of formal breakthrough for Gunn, and we can easily imagine how the poem’s
success in representing both his friends’ deathly enclosure and his beloved open energies might
have made Gunn want to reuse its form in his other elegies. In sum, Gunn and Noseworthy work
together in an exchange that helps Gunn better envision his friend, instructs Gunn about how to
write about other similar deaths, and potentially even offers him a more harmonious kind of
balance within himself.

“Lament”’s intercession, though, doesn’t end with the discovery of Noseworthy’s open
energy. The poem’s secondary form includes a secondary ending, and this ending completes a
larger, gentler circle drawn around Noseworthy’s life than the one made by the poem’s primary

68 Thom Gunn, interviewed by James Campbell, 46.
69 Thom Gunn, Paris Review, 175.
hellish loop. As we’ve seen, part of the reason that Noseworthy’s life feels depleted of meaning is that, as the second stanza tells us, he’s “not ready and not reconciled...[and feels] uncompleted as a child.” However, this same stanza will offer an alternative. After all, the stanza (lines 68-86) begins by completing the rhyme left dangling from the scene of Noseworthy and Gunn joking around in their sleeping bags (leave off/ tired enough). The beginning of the second stanza can be read as a way of undercutting that pleasant memory since it moves abruptly from it to the “Now” of dying. However, it also can be read as a means of bridging the two scenes (past and present) and importing Gunn’s new understanding of Noseworthy’s energies into the second stanza in order to pit them against the rapidly enclosing death that the stanza describes.

And this time, instead of that deathly enclosure clearly dominating over those energies we (temporarily) arrive at something closer to a balance. The section begins by describing Noseworthy as “tired, and yet not tired enough/ – Still hungry for the great world you were losing/ Steadily in no season of your choosing.” In other words, the balance here seems to be what is literally keeping Noseworthy alive: his disease has made him weary, but his hunger for the world prevents him from giving up. And crucial to this balance is the word “Still,” which pits such energies as Noseworthy retains against his exhaustion. “Still” has been a key word in the poem: it was first associated with the brief pause before the onslaught of additional symptoms (“In hope still, courteous still, but tired and thin”); it then became the preface to the longer happy interlude of Noseworthy’s interaction with his nurse (“Still your mind, alone,/ Explored”); and it now stands for all the open energy that the poem has enacted and that Noseworthy retains. The way the word has evolved points us toward how the poem’s secondary form has gained in strength, so that we can now arrive at something closer to a balance between the two forms.

And this balancing continues in the next lines as we learn that after the drugs fail, and after “Two weeks of an abominable constraint,/ You faced it equably, without complaint,/ Unwhimpering/ but not at peace with it.” The balancing is in fact doubled within these lines: we move from one balancing act to another as first privation, constraint, and pain are set up against equability, and then the acceptance and resignation of equability are set up against defiance. Balancing then becomes a kind of ongoing active process that strives to become increasingly precise (A but B --> B but C). It’s as though Gunn is trying to figure out once and for all what
about Noseworthy’s life might resist its bad ending. Meanwhile, the stanza at large seems to find a balance between open movement and epigrammatic closure as the lines quoted above are followed immediately by a seven-line sentence that enacts flowing movement while its individual couplets remain relatively intact in of themselves (they are missing the usual enjambments and disruptions that we’ve come to associate with the poem’s secondary form).

Gunn’s careful balancing of painful enclosure against Noseworthy’s personal life-force leads him and us to the lines about Noseworthy’s incompletion. But we can now see that these lines become part of Gunn’s most significant and direct intercession:

You were not ready and not reconciled
Feeling as uncompleted as a child
Till you had shown the world what you could do
In some ambitious role to be worked through
A role your need for it had half-defined,
But never wholly, even in your mind.
You lacked the necessary ruthlessness,
The soaring meanness that pinpoints success
We loved that lack of self-love, and your smile.
Rueful at your own silliness.
Meanwhile...

Up to this point, Gunn’s primary intercession in Noseworthy’s story and death has been to make us perceive Noseworthy’s admirable open energies via Gunn’s scrupulous attention to his friend’s painful ordeal. But just as we were able to perceive Noseworthy’s loved personality only by looking closely at that trapped, enclosed ordeal, so too are we able to perceive Noseworthy’s overall worth and importance only by examining his ‘enclosed unfulfillment.’ For perversely, it’s Noseworthy’s very lack of a shapely life or career that gives his life a kind of shapeliness once it’s over.

The logic here works in the following way: first, Gunn gives us a psychologically-astute account of how Noseworthy feels unready to die because he hasn’t yet ‘shown the world what he can do’ in “some ambitious role.” Yet, Gunn continues, Noseworthy doesn’t have any specific worldly ambition, and so that “ambitious role” only has a kind of half-existence in Noseworthy’s felt need for it – which is really a need for his life to have a clearly defined and admirable shape. Gunn’s intercession, then, is to expand the idea of a good or shapely life from
conventional, narrow parameters. Gunn does this by pointing out that conventional accomplishment can entail its own vices such as ruthlessness, soaring meanness, and narcissism – none of which Noseworthy possessed. Hence, though on the one hand the bad enclosure of his early death reveals that Noseworthy hasn’t accomplished anything that the world at large would see as significant, on the other hand it reveals what’s always been great about him: his quick humor, his flair for improvisation, his genuine lack of meanness, his interest in treating others as ends not means (lack of “ruthlessness”), and his true humbleness (“your smile,/ Rueful, at your own silliness”).

Noseworthy isn’t able to hone his ambitions because his true talent doesn’t have to do with conventional ambition or success. Rather, his talent lies in the delightful companionship he is able to provide, and in his accomplished personality, which hasn’t ever been diffused or corrupted by obsession with some clearer material accomplishment. And we should notice that the lines I quoted above are the only ones in which Gunn takes a clear stand. Gunn doesn’t just reinterpret Noseworthy’s lack of success, he directly insists that “We loved that lack of self-love and your smile,/ Rueful, at your own silliness.” The only direct act of valuing in the poem, then, is one that focuses on Noseworthy’s lack of mean, conventional ambition. In sum, the secondary form of the poem first amounts to a kind of reposeful, athletic movement between rhyming stanzas, and then ultimately closes up its circle by touting Noseworthy’s lack of accomplishment, thereby giving us a much richer vision of a life than that of a man who merely died unfulfilled. Noseworthy’s life is still delimited and encircled, but in a far wider and more generous way.  

As if to reinforce this secondary shape, the end of second stanza is followed by two other moments of alternative closure. The first is formal: the second stanza terminates in the middle of a line whose ending is needed to complete the rhyme from the preceding line. We then have to wait until the first word of the third stanza to get that completion: “your smile,/ Rueful, at your own silliness./ Meanwhile/ Your lungs collapsed....” Ultimately the rhyme is still fulfilled, but the terms on which that fulfillment occurs are new (it’s spread out over three lines), and it’s thus as though the second stanza gets to choose its own ending. These lines prepare us for the second

70 And Gunn’s direct intercession at this pivotal moment points us toward the poet’s crucial role in forging the gentler, secondary form here. Though that form is guided and instructed by Noseworthy, Noseworthy requires more help from Gunn than do Gunn’s more purely open characters.
far more dramatic type of alternative closure here: Noseworthy is euthanized to spare him more pain, and so his death itself is a kind of alternate ending undertaken by the “us” who are Noseworthy’s friends and family. Love for Noseworthy again ultimately keeps harsher closures at bay.

Noseworthy’s death is still quite painful; we never totally escape the sense that his death has ruined the life that preceded it. Despite the second and third stanzas’ intercessions and alternative endings the third stanza concludes with the most painful epigrammatic line-pair in the poem: “And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey/ Achieving your completeness, in a way.” Gunn, then, isn’t offering us a way out of bad closure, so much as offering an alternative closure to go with it that allows us to perceive more of the poem’s beloved, valued person.

For by the poem’s end Gunn has managed to fit a surprising amount of life into the wider yet still encapsulating circle he’s drawn around Noseworthy. For instead of merely using Noseworthy’s witty, humble, improvisatory energy as an essential skill, Gunn has used it like a lodestone to draw in all sorts of information. By the end of the poem, we have had glimpses of a person who was a voracious reader; who enjoyed the daily pleasures of the sensory world; who was mischievous and flirtatious; who had an emotional reconciliation with his estranged father; who was ultimately betrayed by his lover; who was able to make a joke out of both of these things to entertain Gunn; who loved staying up late and bantering; and who (we learn in the fourth stanza) thought his body wasn’t attractive, but enjoyed having it anyway. And these facts in turn enrich our view of Noseworthy’s social skill, which (like Gunn’s pinball player) seems all the more important as a triumphant expression of his full, messy life – painful ending included. Ultimately, that life emerges despite the poem’s relentless, grim primary form. In fact, the poem’s great triumph is to render the awful grief and trauma of the abrupt full stop of Noseworthy’s death – enacted by the four strong pumps on the brake of the trochaic litany of

---

71 Some of these facts are quite suggestive and might cause us to wonder about the stories behind the betraying lover or returning father. In this way, Noseworthy perhaps contains some openness that defies any closure – that lets us wonder about him in a way that can’t be cleanly contained. Yet, even if Noseworthy does become a suggestive character in this way, the poem still takes place in the past tense and imagines him as being already dead. (Even the relationships he conducts in the poem are ending – whether in reconciliation or betrayal.) If the portrait has some suggestive aspects, Gunn also implies that these aspects are going to be parts of Noseworthy’s final portrait, and hence enclosure returns as Gunn emphasizes the finite number and finality of such suggestive details.
“This difficult, tedious, painful, enterprise” at the poem’s end – yet within that grief, trauma, and abrupt, empty full stop, to bring to light a view of a beloved, vivid person.

In “A Wood Near Athens,” from the final section of Gunn’s last book *Boss Cupid*, the poet envisions a Dante-esque system with “A thousand angels making festival,” in which each person might be allowed to seek love in his or her own way.72 This poem might in turn remind us of the way Gunn’s happier street characters are at times able to suggest the utopic through their appropriations of closure – as though we can glimpse an ideally humane system through their actions. Yet Gunn’s presiding sense throughout his career is that enclosure is a threat or problem – and one that his temperament is all too drawn to replicating. It is this sense of enclosure’s threat that lies behind Gunn’s desire for counterculture and for characters whose unruly energies can convert prison-houses into gymnasiums. And it’s this same sense of threat that makes Gunn attend to the various ways the people who live throughout his town become trapped. In poems like “Waitress” and “Lament” Gunn takes this vision of the cruelty of enclosure and its need for redress to its direst extreme. And in so doing, he is able both to attain a remarkable understanding of his characters predicaments, and to intercede so that we are able to find people within these predicaments who can still move to the rhythms of Gunn’s waves and streets

---

72 In fact, Dante’s circles provide Gunn with visions of utopic order as early on in his career as *Moly*. For instance, the poem “Sunlight” in that book imagines life forming a circle of petals around a flower-sun and entering into the sun’s “passionless love, impartial but intense” (224).
James Wright I: The Mill

I devote two chapters to James Wright since the resistance to his work in some ways mirrors the larger overlooking of the importance of others in the American poetry of the last sixty years. For, unfortunately, focusing on Wright requires a defense of Wright whose intense emotionality, desire to have his subjects seem more important than his style, extended interest in social outsiders, and “mind hellishly bent on stripping away all self-protective devices” leave him, unsurprisingly, open to charges of sentimentality from poets, and apathy from scholars. In the contemporary poetry world, and in the world of fiction to a certain extent, it’s unpopular to distrust language that draws too much attention to itself, and to believe strongly that certain subjects are real, and sometimes lie beyond the page, and others merely fiddle.

Yet in many ways James Wright epitomizes the kind of continuing resistance to modernist solitude and impersonality that I have been describing. Wright looked beyond and around modernism for models: he wrote his college thesis on Thomas Hardy, and his first book claimed Robinson and Frost as influences. Critics have also recognized the importance of Masters and Anderson to his work; the great Roman poets, especially Catullus, became increasingly important as his career progressed. Wright, however, by no means remained a ‘traditional’ poet in the style of the 19th century: his 1963 volume The Branch Will Not Break


2 The word ‘sentimental’ is often used to attack Wright, yet it is rarely defined. Wright at one point gives us two definitions. The first is not uncommon: sentimentality is “the expression of what pretends to be feeling where no true feeling exists”; the second is provocative: “the pretense of feeling for the purpose of concealing anger or indifference” (Jeanne Foster, “The First Workshop: A Memoir of James Wright,” American Poetry Review 30, no. 4 [July-August 2001], 15-16). I have the sense that critics often mean a third thing – a form of emotionality that they, for whatever reason, find distasteful. Raymond Williams, for instance, discusses in the 19th century it came to refer to excessive emotion (what is “too much,” ‘indulgent’). Yet he also describe how the term originally had the positive connotation of a “conscious openness to feelings” (Raymond Williams, Keywords [New York: Oxford UP, 1985] 281-2). As a friend once said to me, it sometimes seems like a word just used to emotionally cripple poets. We could certainly use a clearer exploration of what critics mean when they use the term today.

3 And, if one is trying to write about ‘real subjects,’ it doesn’t help if these are poor white people.


switched to the open, Spanish-influenced forms associated with Robert Bly and the Deep Image school. Some have seen this transition, moreover, as part of the larger contemporary movement away from the ‘orthodoxy’ “derived from Eliot and the New Critics” toward a “‘new kind of imagination’ seeking to establish itself preeminent in contemporary poetics.” As we’ve seen, many mid-career poets in the 60s were suddenly seeking new, open forms, in what Robert Lowell called “the drift of the age” (they include Rich, Gunn to some extent, W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, and Louis Simpson). Wright also wanted to ‘make it new’ – just in a very different way from Pound and Eliot.

The importance of this formal shift for Wright, however, can be overstated: Wright is from the beginning, and consistently, a poet who feels both that there is a world beyond the page, and that this world is almost unbearable. The impress of reality can be felt in the fleshly characters integral to his mechanics and effects. His childhood in depression-era Ohio with its steel mills, strip mines, and sewer-drenched rivers, its bums, prostitutes, lunatics, murderers, police informers, and drowned children does not lend itself to impersonal fragmentation and distance. William Mathews writes, in a review of Shall We Gather at the River, “Wright’s poems seem literary or overblown only if we forget he is talking about real rivers, real corpses on the bottom, lives that have chosen to lose themselves.” The atrocity that has been and still is much of poor middle America, an America that has largely escaped today’s sympathetic, liberal, political categories, has continued to impress its nightmarish realities on the imaginations of an array of recent poets – with James Wright as a tutelary spirit. I’m thinking here of Philip Levine, Denis Johnson, Richard Hugo, C.K. Williams, and Larry Levis.

6 He also began to draw on the classical Chinese poets of the T’ang Dynasty (David Young, “Location, Location, Location,” Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics 69 [2003], 16-17).


I have suggested that Wright doesn’t receive nearly as much attention as he deserves because his work is unfashionable: in 1983 Alan Williamson wrote that Wright’s emotional excess appeals so strongly to readers as to rule out purely aesthetic judgment, and Williamson’s opinion still seems representative thirty years later. Poets and scholars I know who dislike Wright say instantly that he’s sentimental; many I know who do like him side with Marvin Bell at the other extreme and say that “those who damned these books for their emotions must... have the pulses of the dead.” A third, more politic party acknowledges Wright’s decade-long influence on American poetry, but ultimately dismisses him as the Deep Image poet represented by the same few epiphanic lyrics that turn up again and again in anthologies (“Lying in a Hammock,” “A Blessing,” “Small Frogs,” etc.).

What I think has been lacking here, and what I intend to explore in this chapter, is the way empathy, as the key to Wright’s emotionality, can be critically explored. For Wright, empathy in fact is a radical formal and aesthetic device, a persistent openness to transgression and change that can be seen first of all on the macro-level of the ongoing process of his writing, its continued stylistic changes. This can help us stop thinking of Wright’s works solely in terms of the ‘deep image,’ as my chapters will explore these restless and empathy guided shifts from traditional forms, to the German influenced, Spanish-surrealist mode, to experiments with narrative, to prose poems, to the limpid, thoughtful, and utterly startling lyrics of his final years. When one looks closely one notices poems in which empathy directed toward unstable, difficult subjects causes formal breaks, or watershed moments, where the subject presses back on and ruptures style, leading it somewhere new. And one can then look for and start noticing the

---


buildup of pressure in the preceding poems, a formal restlessness that hints that something is about to happen.

Hence, no one period represents the best of James Wright: one must judge him both by his best poems of all periods, and by attending to the ongoing process of his writing. This writing never stops discarding itself and opening itself up to the characters and insights beyond it; the process is a struggle that requires painful breaks and individual failures because other people for Wright are both necessary and excruciating: as James Seay puts it, Wright’s work alerts us to “the possibility of diminishment” as well as “the hope of increase through participation in an existence outside its [our] own.”

Empathy here is something new; it is not something that we should know what to do with according to whether we like or are distrustful of the idea of a compassionate art. For, moreover, what makes the empathy original is not just the way it maintains Wright’s permeability to surprising, reforming otherness (on view both on the level of formal shifts from book to book and in individual poems such as “To the Muse,” “Redwings,” “The Old WPA Swimming Pool,”), but also in the ways in which this empathy overturns all systems that would guide it and, for instance, say who is and isn’t worthy of our attention and consideration. This is why James Wright can make Judas a saint, make a dog take the place of Milton’s Lycidas (“On the Skeleton of a Hound”), and write, of the murderer and rapist George Doty, “I mourn no soul but his,/ Not even the bums who die,/ Nor the homely girl whose cry/ Crumbled his pleading kiss” (26). Empathy even defies its own accustomed expression and modulates easily into irritation and wrath (“Come back, be damned of me, your aftermath”; “Ah you bastards,/ How I hate you”); transforms violence into communion (“Did you ever feel a man hold/ Sixty-five cents/ In a

---


15 James Wright, Above the River: The Complete Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990). All further quotations from Wright’s poems are taken from this book and will be made parenthetically with the acronym ATR appended only when required.

16 It’s also why he can mourn “the anonymous and nameless populations of the modern city” and resist the “active forgetting which constitutes modern urban societies in which the death of the one I do not know (and bear no interest in) does not concern me” (Greg Lambert, “Shall We Gather at the River? On the Contemporary Eulogy of James Wright,” Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture 14, no. 2 [June 2000], 218, 233).
hook, And place it/Gently/In your freezing hand?”); exacerbates, providing no consolation (“I flinched. Both terrified,/ We slunk away,/ Each in his own way dodging/ The cruel darts of the cold); and decen- ters the self so that Wright can really believe in the world after his death (“It is all right with me to know that my life is only one life”) (ATR 82, 225, 316, 317, 302). In this chapter I will investigate Wright’s empathy as the key to his best poems; and, turning back to the categories of my introduction, I will look at his ever surprising exchanges with other people who can, in an instant, shift from closed lives of warped alienation to open, quickening, momentary fullness – as does the poet himself. If empathy surprises, stuns, overturns, then there can be no telling what kind of presence another will come to wield.

One final note of introduction: the lack of careful recent critical attention to Wright’s formal processes has gone hand-in-hand with a more general decline in writing about him. An MLA search on “James Wright” and “Poetry” over the last ten years yields about 25 hits compared to 94 for a comparable search under “Frank O’Hara.” Most of these 25 hits are short magazine articles: there hasn’t been a book length work on Wright since 1991. In order to show that one can judge Wright’s poetry on formal (not just intuitive) grounds I might have approached his work through a variety of categories: I might have thought about him as a religious poet, or as a nature poet, or as an elegiac poet. He is all these things, but others have already written about them copiously and mostly more than twenty years ago, and I believe they don’t quite get to the heart of what attracts many people to Wright. I am hoping to fill this lack by describing Wright’s aesthetic successes in terms of his poems relationships to other people. I am hoping as well that describing the formal workings of Wright’s very emotional empathy will help us to see why and how his poems about others succeed, and thereby help us to arrive at a clearer vision of many of his best poems as intricate, painful, dynamic exchanges between himself and the people he grew up with, the people who wouldn’t stay ghosts.

** A Biographical Opening **

The specific, often real lives of others are of great importance to James Wright, but they emerge, in his poems, only through their settings – and for most of his career these are the
Midwestern landscapes where he grew up. When critics view Wright’s sympathy for outsiders as a kind of problematic exceptionalism, they miss how Wright sees almost everyone in the Midwest as already marginal relative to the coasts. As David Young puts it, “New England and New York had been written about... But who had ever located a poem in Fargo, North Dakota, or Martins Ferry, Ohio, or Moundsville, West Virginia.”

Wright must have felt that it was both frustrating and exciting how much of the bulk of his contemporary America remained on the outside of power and poetic attention. He says of his students at Hunter College: “Most have grown up in New York and know the East Coast. Or some of them have flown to California and back. I tell them they can’t get a sense of how incredibly huge and varied this country is by flying; I tell them that after they graduate they might travel by bus straight across the United States, and stop off sometimes. I tell them to go and see what it is like to have a cup of coffee in Zanesville, Ohio. It is as far from New York to Pittsburgh as it is from Paris to Vienna, but when you’ve reached Pittsburgh you’re not really yet at the beginning of the Middle West.” According to Google Maps, Pittsburgh is only sixty miles – or an hour and ten minute’s drive – from James Wright’s hometown of Martins Ferry, Ohio; Martins Ferry then is also “not really yet” at the beginning of the Midwest. In Wright’s poems, as well as geographically, Martins Ferry can be thought of as a gateway westward from the East Coast to a region both marginal and central.

As Wright would go on to be a Pulitzer Prize winning poet sponsored at times by coastal universities, the marginality of the Midwest to the literary and academic scene would become especially grating. In an essay on Gary Snyder, Wright says that the “Western Writer” (Snyder, Twain, Hemingway, Dreiser) writes about people with an imagination free from abstract ideas, and that “one major sign of these writers intellectual power is their ability to penetrate and explore the lives of people who are invisible to the academies.” And though Wright says that

---


the exact term ‘western writer’ doesn’t matter much, it can’t help but suggest that this invisibility problem is, again, regional. As Wright says sarcastically of his home in a short autobiographical piece, “we are not exactly dealing with Henry James country.” One doesn’t have to read far between the lines to see that the sarcasm here, as well as the dismissive suggestion that Eastern writers only write about people via abstract ideas, are less considered indictments of East coast writing (Wright after all, loved Robinson and Frost) than a class-defensiveness about the people who he grew up with and remained connected to. These people, Wright suggests, may not be generative of abstract ideas worthy of Waste Lands and Cantos, and they may escape the notice of baroque Eastern writers (James), but they have something else to offer.

Not Henry James country – so what are we dealing with? To pass from Pittsburgh to Martins Ferry today one must cross the Ohio from West Virginia at Steubenville. The Ohio River, with all its accompanying commerce and industry, is another gateway into the Midwest, and one that is central to Wright’s poems (his complete poems is called Above the River). Wright recalled that in Martins Ferry, the water “was beautiful in its rawness and wildness, though something was forever drifting past to remind us of the factories that lined the banks to the north.” He adds that the factories “were always there, just as the Martins Ferry Cemetery overlooked the entire town [and] seemed, wherever one stood, to hang in the sky above the Laughlin Steel Mill.” The polluted river, the cemetery, and the mills are everywhere in the poems – but they are terrible only in proportion to landscape’s natural beauty. As David Dougherty puts it: “Natural beauty is everywhere. Steep hills rise from the river valley, and the bright green of hardwood and pine trees shimmers in the sun. Fertile, productive farmlands punctuate the hillsides. [But] In the midst of this beauty.... Strip mines, relatively shallow cuts in the ground to extract minerals, usually coal, mar the landscape... Steel mills, belching out dirty smoke and oxidizing themselves and everything near them... The river itself... polluted with

20 Ibid., 114.
21 Ibid., 317.
22 Ibid., 333.
industrial and residential waste.” 23 Alan Williamson adds that the sacred and the profane, the heights and troughs of Western and native civilizations become indistinguishable in this landscape where “the fatality and exhaustion of Europe repeat themselves in towns named for the supercorporations, beside the river that is at once Indian sacred place and ‘tar and chemical strangled tomb.’” 24 Ohio even means ‘beautiful river’ in Winnebago as James Wright reminds us – not even ironically – in a poem in his penultimate book.

It’s easy, then, to imagine how Wright could have become a poet of landscape, and in many of his poems – especially the short, haunted lyrics in his famous The Branch Will Not Break – he is. In these poems in Branch the “moon falls into the freight yards,” (123) and “The unwashed shadows/ Of blast furnaces from Moundsville, West Virginia,/ Are sneaking across the pits of strip mines/ To steal grapes/ In heaven (124).” The smallness of these poems, the quietness and slightness of much of the movement of them – as “The wheat leans back toward its own darkness” and “Silos creep away toward the west” – is like a hand gently tracing the surface of a grotesque scar (135, 130). The poems often read like a delicate inquiry that has come too late as, searching for drowned bodies, “Below the chemical riffles of the Ohio river,/ Grappling hooks/ Drag delicately about” (130). And, of course, loneliness and alienation are everywhere too: one often has a sense in these poems of an isolated man looking out a Greyhound bus window for hours as “Far off, the shopping centers empty and darken” (131). These poems and their haunted, burned, delicate, elliptical, and sometimes even suddenly and paradoxically joyous portrayals of landscape have caused many critics to identify Wright as a nature poet; Bonnie Costello, for instance, in her excellent article “James Wright: Returning to the Heartland,” argues that Wright is at his best when he becomes a poet of the “spirit of place.” 25

But the spirits of place in Wright’s poems often start looking like real people. Wright himself is explicitly open to the possibility of such transformation and exchange between the symbolic (spiritual) and the literal (others): he describes how the “spirit of place” by the


Coosawatte River in his friend James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance* takes the form of a specific person, “a country person, a redneck I guess you’d call him.”\(^{26}\) Wright later says admiringly of Dickey’s poems that they have no “vague ‘Humanity’” in them, but “only particular men and women and children, often named and always deeply felt in their solid physical beings.”\(^{27}\) Again this isn’t to say that the people in Wright’s poems have no symbolic or talismanic power to them. If Wright’s Ohio had to be represented by a single character, a single place-spirit, he might have chosen John Skunk, the diver for drowned bodies who used “those awesome hooks that James Dickey [also] has described” in *Deliverance*. (These are also the grappling hooks Wright described in the passage I quoted above). Wright recalled that Skunk seemed to “carry a kind of solitary holiness about him” and that his “very name in the local newspaper hinted at the abiding presence of some hopeless and everlasting grief that waited for us all as we looked at one another and wondered about ourselves.”\(^{28}\) Skunk turns up again in the late poem “A Flower Passage” dragging those “hooks/ All over the rubble sludge” before, lines later, he himself is “dead and turned over/ To the appropriate authorities” (355). “Shepherd of the dead, one of the tall men” (355), Wright invokes and mourns him, “I did not know your face.” In other words, Skunk is blurry yet singular, dead and deathly yet redeemed somewhat by his strange Charon-like skill.

Wright in fact is a poet deeply invested in how people can become lyrical creatures without contracting into stars or becoming zombies, gods, or ghosts. Rather, symbolic or lyrical power is often inextricably linked in Wright to the way his figures don’t fully surrender their integrity as individuals. In a 1978 letter, discussing his late Italian poem “How Spring Arrives,” he realizes that the three girls in the poem must have in part emerged from reading Horace’s spring poem about the three graces (“Diffugere Nives”). Wright adds, “but the odd thing is that the three Italian girls were actually there, no less vivacious and no less themselves for being, all unknowing, that lovely old Roman poet’s dream come true again.”\(^{29}\) Wright’s imagining of

---

\(^{26}\) James Wright, interview with Dave Smith, 5.

\(^{27}\) James Wright, *Collected Prose*, 263.

\(^{28}\) James Wright, *Collected Prose*, 332.

others, like Madeleine’s in Keats’ “Eve of St. Agnes,” is bound up in their reality: “She still beheld, / Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep.”30 Or, as James Wright says of René Char, “I cannot express fully enough my pleasure in the poet’s strategy, his showing us the real woman, and how she emerged after the poem was written... Here again is the discovery... how the wildest imaginings turn out to be true.”32 No wonder then that Wright admired Chinese Poetry for its ability to express both archetype and “vivid human personality”:33 the border between reality and art is not hard and fast for Wright.

And this is most true for him when it comes to people: this is why he is often eager to tell the real stories behind his poems – whether of the real Mr. Bluehart (from “An Offering for Mr. Bluehart”) whose orchard sign read, Wright tells us in an interview, ‘pray as you enter – shotgun law’;34 or of the real ‘defeated savior’ from his poem of that title (153) – his twelve-year old brother – who tried and failed to use his fishing pole to save a boy from being dragged down into a ‘suck hole.’35 When others view Wright’s characters as merely masks or personas, Wright contradicts them in a way that says his poems should not be treated as New Critical well-wrought urns, but must be seen as caught up in real damaged lives. When an interviewer suggests that the Sioux Indian in Wright’s fourth book is a funny character, Wright answers: “He wasn’t so humorous. It really happened. You go back to Minneapolis and somebody will come up to you and say... ‘I am a Sioux brave, can you let me have $2.50 for a cup of coffee?’”36

So the characters in these poems are people who lived in a particular region and landscape often ignored by both political power and poetic attention, and they are people who

---


31 Or as Keats says of Adam’s dream of the creation of Eve: “The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth” (John Keats, *John Keats Selected Letters* [New York: Oxford UP, 2002], 36).


33 Ibid., 123.

34 Ibid., 16.

35 A suck hole is a kind of “whirlpool [that] started where people had been dredging mud out of the river” and is another one of Wright’s landscape totems along with river, cemetery, and factory (ibid., 153).

36 Ibid., 145.
gain their textual, lyrical power in the way their biographical lives overlap with their symbolic resonances. But we still have left a common confusion about Wright’s characters, the idea that you can’t really have a region composed of outsiders, that not everyone can be a drunk, beggar, or lunatic. Wright doesn’t think you can; rather, he asks us to imagine that there’s something fundamentally corrosive about his region, something that disfigures or mars individuals in a way not too dissimilar from how the more depersonalizing closed lyrics (such as Baudelaire’s “The Seven Old Men” or Tennyson’s “Lotus-Eaters”) transform characters. For instance, the examples of others in Wright I’ve already given include people begging for money, failing to save drowning victims, threatening to shoot trespassers, and grappling up corpses.\(^{37}\) And in *Branch* people do seem to be collapsing back into the landscape both physically (as corpses) and metaphorically (as leaves, pumpkins, and single scenic gestures):

Miners paused here on the way up to Alaska.
Angry, they spaded their broken women’s bodies
Into ditches of crab grass. (125)

Somewhere in a vein of Bridgeport, Ohio;
[a coal miner]
Stumbles upon the outside locks of a grave, whispering
Oh let me in. (126)

My grandmother’s face is a small maple leaf
Pressed in a secret box. (131)

A pumpkin
Lies on its side
Turning yellow as the face
Of a discharged general. (129)

Flashlights drift over dark trees,
Girls kneel,
An owl’s eyelids fall. (141)

Though the ‘doomedness’ in *Branch* can sometimes feel amorphous, it has a very literal source that is crucial even to this very scenic book. Reading enough Wright we come to see that his figures – even those who are partially decomposed, or reduced to a single gesture – are better understood and experienced with the literal historical predicament of Martins Ferry (and poor

\(^{37}\) The one happier example above with the three girls is from one of Wright’s late poems set in Italy not America.
rural America) in mind. The people in these poems are closed characters because of what the town did to its citizens with its looming graveyard and smokestacks, its inadequate social systems and public services, and, lastly, with its dangled, tantalizingly rare instances of the success of the American dream.

Wright grew up during the Great Depression and under the sign of omnipresent poverty, but a few people always made it out. This is part of the reason why Wright comes to see football “as an emblem of the larger competitiveness of capitalism, a system that, particularly in the mill and factory town of Martins Ferry, necessarily produces more losers than winners” (Stein); in “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio” Wright famously describes the football players “galloping terribly against each other’s bodies” (ATR 121). Perhaps the sheer will to compete, to escape, is what has caused “Martins Ferry, and its neighboring towns along the Upper Ohio River Valley” to “have produced [such] an astounding number of accomplished athletes.” But of course, most people don’t make it out, and, in lyric terms, these people tend toward closed characters, as they are held, hardened, and twisted into place (dissolving into and under place) by the twin evils of joblessness and repetitive manual labor. Education was another way out – the one Wright would take through the G.I. bill – but one that was even more infrequent. What Wright says of his father in “Youth” is true of most of the population: they “never heard how Sherwood Anderson/ Got out of it, and fled to Chicago, furious to be free/ From his hatred of factories.” Instead most citizens “toiled” like his father who was stuck for “fifty years/ At Hazel-Atlas Glass,/ Caught among girders that smash the kneecaps/ Of dumb honyaks” (ATR 161-2).

And so the distortions and transformations wrought on people by the Depression and the poverty of the region create a kind of natural overlap between real people and closed lyric characters. The region in other words produces huge numbers of ‘poetic’ figures, the types of closed character that we’ve seen so often in the history of poetry since Romanticism: the idiot, the deformed person, the beggar, the prostitute, the madman (think Wordsworth or Baudelaire –

---


39 Ibid.
or Hardy or Frost or Whitman). And there is certainly a late-Romantic quality to Wright: he, for
instance, claims in a letter from his early twenties challenging his own introversion that “The
true poet is not secluded... [but] a man of enormous vitality and vision, a man, as Wordsworth
said, speaking to men.” But unlike Wordsworth, Wright lives in a landscape and culture that he
sees as almost entirely broken. Being beyond East Coast power and in the midst of the
Depression means that beggar and solid citizen become at times indistinguishable. He recalls
how fired men would make a living in “unaccustomed ways” like emptying people’s garbage
cans, hauling garbage to the dump, or becoming con men (like his uncles) and trading useless
soap door-to-door for undernourished chickens. Wright’s father himself was only, technically
speaking, ‘laid off’; that is, he was told to go home without pay until called upon. This is which
is why Wright can say truthfully in the poem “Youth” that his father worked at Hazel-Atlas
Glass for fifty years. Again, the difference between a bum and a solid citizen blurs. Work comes
to mean looking for work and the ‘absent minded’ refrain of Wright’s childhood was “I ain’t got
a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.” Wright’s pleasure in the lovely vulgarity of this
phrase is the only redeeming thing about it.

W.H. Auden, in his note on Wright’s first book The Green Wall, which Auden selected
for the Yale Younger Poets’ Prize in 1957, is the first to point out how many social outsiders
there are in Wright. Wright’s poems contain, in addition to the Romantic types mentioned above,
con men, drunks, hobos, thieves, and murderers. And once one realizes how many of these
marginal figures actually populated Wright’s literal biographical landscape, and once one

---

40 Wright, Wild Perfection, 29. He also prided himself, like Whitman, on coming to know all the various characters in Martins
Ferry: “I cherished the friends I had made in distant places...from Kuccuck lane in the north of town, just above Wheeling Steel... all the way down south along the river... below the La Belle Lumber Company and its yards of sawdust... down to the old empty mill fields, the cherry lanes and hobo jungles... the junction where the travelling carnivals camped during the summer” (William S. Saunders, James Wright: An Introduction [Columbus: State Library of Ohio, 1979], 4).

41 James Wright, Collected Prose, 315-156.

42 Ibid., 317.

43 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, xxviii.

44 Lambert writes about how these terms themselves are often clichés or social stereotypes produced as part of “an active
forgetting on the part of the city’s other population,” and that Wright’s poetry “forms a kind of ethical resistance to [this]... active
forgetting which constitutes modern urban societies, in which the death [or deathly suffering] of the one I do not know (and bear
no interest in) does not concern me” (Lambert, “Eulogy,” 218, 233).
includes all of Wright’s other characters – the wageslaves, the violent children at loose ends, the beleaguered and persevering family members, the “insane Jesus Jumpers,” as well as the shamed, the literally scarred, the dead, and the grief-stricken – one begins to realize that Wright’s interest is not in exceptions, except insofar as his Midwest was an exception (ATR 234).

The same corrosive Midwestern spirit is at work on everyone. It’s no wonder then that Wright’s poetry reveals that “the suffering of other people, particularly the lost and the derelict, is actually a part of his own emotional life”; no wonder that “every now and then” he grew paranoid and convinced “they wanted him to go back to the mills,” and would rant about how “he would never go back to the mills, no matter how much they tried to push him there.” There were exceptional people who defied their circumstances like his teachers and his grandmother, and there was the sometimes-redeeming spunk of the gestures and language of individual people, but overall Martins Ferry itself was a mill, a mill that produced broken people and, in many of his poems, closed characters. James Wright wrote, “I knew musicians and possible poets and even ordinary loveable human beings, and I saw them with brutal regularity going into Wheeling Steel, turning stupid and resigned slobs with beer bellies and glassy eyes.” Wright has written some beautiful nature poetry and poetry of place, but often the subjects that seem most pressing, most difficult and vital to him, and the ones that yield his most important poems, are other people. Here is Wright again on René Char: “For this poet, nature, so richly presented, is yet incomplete without man. Char has called himself a humanist. But the meaning of the poem is not to be found in the prose commentary. It is somehow to be found in the lightning’s weeping face.”

** The Early Poems **


48 James Wright, Collected Prose, 64.
Yet people don’t always become closed or broken in these poems. Nor is James Wright interested in all Ohioans equally and in the same ways (George Doty the rapist and murderer does not equal Wright’s Uncle Willy Lyons who is buried “with nothing except a jacket/ Stitched on his shoulder bones” (ATR 166)). In Wright’s later books more proper names appear, and the ‘town’ of the poems starts to be more composed of Wright’s family members and those well known to him. It is through considering these vacillations between poems and books that we can begin to discuss Wright’s empathy. We should begin to see right away that his empathy is not a form of blanket charity, but is always made up of change and movement. As will become clear, it consists in a radical subversion of received systems of directed attention and sympathy, a series of dynamic exchanges between Wright and his subjects in which both can be surprisingly transformed, and an overturning of Wright’s own poetic techniques which must be continually discarded as the poems respond and react to his real-life subjects.

We can see the foundation of all three of these characteristics in Wright’s early work as he struggles against the very temptation to make these poems a straightforward gallery of closed portraits. Some critics have viewed Wright’s formally traditional early work as merely a series of self-protections against the hell of his childhood, and I think they are responding to the felt temptation in these poems to transform Ohio into Wright’s own Waste Land of shades bleached and made vague by the cribbed styles of earlier eras (critics cite Romanticism and the Elizabethans in addition to 19th century American poetry). Here are the people of Wright’s Ohio abstracted into a second-hand easily tolerable beauty, or so the argument goes, into the highly literary photonegative that is Wright’s hermetic, interior Ohio. So then in breaking from traditional forms Wright’s poems become less made up of fuzzy 19th century diction (“The yellow arms, the hips of gold,/ The supple outline fading black,” (12)), and start to contain more of the hurtful, scary, actual world – the world of strip mines, blast furnaces, suck holes, and steel mills.4950

49 For a concise summary of this critical viewpoint see Peter Campion’s article, “‘I Have a Secret with Myself’ James Wright’s Classicism,” Parannassus: Poetry in Review 29 no. 1-2 [2006], 272-91.

50 Those who dislike the early work say he is too much under the spell of Ransom, Penn Warren, Tate, Blackmur, Richards, et al. who ignore the strangeness of some of Eliot’s work to focus on the extinction of personality and controlled use of irony, paradox,
This criticism is accurate in speaking of the lesser moments in the first two books, but it misses a lot. It misses, for instance, the high points of Wright’s 19th-century ‘poeticality’ – the way his empathy can sometimes make becoming a closed character into a gentle and comforting spell. Becoming ‘closed’ can be its own sort of poetic triumph just as Ariel transmutes Ferdinand’s grief over Alonso into something “rich and strange.” In lines from Wright’s elegy for a dog, for instance, the poet’s job becomes to disfigure (scatter) the animal’s skeleton in a kind of deathly blazon or chant that disperses the dog’s spirit peacefully:

I alone
Scatter this hulk about the dampened ground;
And while the moon rises beyond me, throw
The ribs and spine out of their perfect shape.
For a last charm to the dead, I lift the skull
And toss it over the maples like a ball.
Strewn to the woods, now may that spirit sleep
That flamed over the ground a year ago... (“On the Skeleton of a Hound,” 14)

Or here is Wright giving his grandmother a moth’s ‘careless’ death:

She skimmed the yellow water like a moth
Trailing her feet across the shallow stream...
And then, forgetting what she wanted there,
Too full of blossom and green light to care,
She hurried to the ground and slipped below. (My Grandmother’s Ghost, 45-46)

The successful closed lyrics are, admittedly, mostly about the dead. The poems about living people tend to be more open or else not as good. If a poet wishes to do a kindness to a living subject, as Wright often does, then the extreme-closed poem is not a well-suited mode since it is so much about encapsulation, transformation, and sealing in bronze (hammered gold and gold enameling, the artifice of eternity).

and tension between opposites (Kevin Stein, James Wright: The Poetry of a Grown Man [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989], 5). Ignoring that Wright thought that Ransom and Warren were filled with emotion, detractors of this style think of it as “insular” and “safe” (ibid., 7). Despite Wright’s declared focus on external subjects and his early rejection of art for art’s sake, these critics argue that he does not live up to his goals and portray convincing characters (James Breslin, From Modern to Contemporary [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984], 185). These critics sometimes say that his portraits end up being mere “shadow people” who just stand for ideas while Wright himself is the only real person around (Andrew Elkins, The Poetry of James Wright [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991], 123). And despite the fact that these poems work against the well-wrought poem of the 50s by writing about the ‘hot’ subjects of murderers and prostitutes (Stein, Grown Man, 16), detractors have found these poems to be insufficiently radical; they argue that this style generates not merely competent poems but bad ones, poems overly poeticized or with awkward combinations of poetic and colloquial registers (Stein, Grown Man 24, 25; Costello, Pure Clear Word, 226).
However, even in these early books Wright is already growing weary of shadowy persons and poeticisms:

You turned to me, long, long before
The ghost was gone,

If ghost it was, or melon rind,
Or stag’s skeleton hung to dry,
Lover, or song, or only wind
     Sighing your sigh. (my emphases, “Erinna to Sappho,” 44)

The second stanza intrudes here like a second exasperated voice mocking the first and enumerating more ghostly possibilities all equally trivial. Or the following are lines Wordsworth might have written against Coleridge:

He stood on the hard earth,
Like one who understands
Fairy and ghost – but less
Our human loneliness. (“Evening,” 56)\(^\text{51}\)

Critics who see Wright’s early books as purely self-protective miss his frequent impatience with poetic shadows. This impatience even infects some of his closed poems so that their subjects can end up bringing surprising vitality to bear. Below is an important moment of a closed lyric opening up suddenly at its end:

**Father**

In paradise I poised my foot above the boat and said:
Who prayed for me?
     But only the dip of an oar
In water sounded; slowly fog from some cold shore
Circled in wreaths around my head.

But who is waiting?

\(^{51}\) Stones and the hard earth are as important to Wright as they were to Wordsworth, but Wright wants them to be sexual as well; he is always a desiring poet:

Bodiless yearnings make no music fall...
Only the living body calls up love,
That shadow risen casually from stone
To clothe the nakedness of bare desire. (“In a Viennese Cemetery,” 65)

Since bodiless yearnings “make no music fall,” the ghostly person here has to become a living sexual body composed in equal parts of shadow, stone, and bare desire.
And the wind began,
Transfiguring my face from nothingness
To tiny weeping eyes. And when my voice
Grew real, there was a place
Far, far below on earth. There was a tiny man –

It was my father wandering round the waters at the wharf.
Irritably he circled and he called
Out to the marine currents up and down,
But heard only a cold unmeaning cough,
And saw the oarsman in the mist enshawled.

He drew me from the boat. I was asleep.
And we went home together. (15)

“Perhaps it’s like that” Wright says of this poem, “We get the fog apart for a moment, and we rush through the opening, and find them.”52 The speaker who has managed to shrink down into tiny weeping eyes and a voice, the tiny father who is wandering and circling like the ‘wreaths’ of deathly fog, and the two seemingly failed attempts at communication – questioning and calling – all abruptly ‘grow real’ at the end of the poem via a moment physical intimacy and parental tenderness. The poem creates a purgatorial, imprisoned feeling with its series of onlys cutting off all attempts to take charge or escape, and with its purgatorial actions of circling, waiting, calling, questioning, unmeaning, winding (enshawling), and washing (of the currents up and down). These devices all serve to obscure the slow steady progress that is being made, as, for instance, the father’s call at the start of the penultimate stanza is in fact being answered by the appearance of the son. And perhaps the father is never fully a shade here: his earthly energy, the short declarative sentences that end the poem, is prepared for by his living ‘irritability’ in the stanza that precedes them. So much of the pathos and gloom in the second-to-last stanza in fact depends on that living irritability.

Wright said that the poem arose from feeling cut off from his father; at the time he wrote it he was studying at Kenyon College, well on his way out of Martins Ferry forever. Nevertheless, one day he came home to spend pleasant hours reading and talking with his

52 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, 60.
The poem, correspondingly, is able to be both a closed lyric of mutual sadness about Wright and his father’s estrangement and, at its end, an open lyric where he and his father suddenly grow real together – and in relation to each other – despite feeling as though they’re still dead shades – the father a “slave/ To Hazel-Atlas glass” (*ATR* 82) and the son a confused, almost posthumous student at Kenyon. And the fact that the poem hides the progress and amends that are being made within it suggests that human relationships can move in ways as fundamental and secret as tectonic plates. From the beginning Wright’s empathy implies both a drive toward making gently chiseled death masks and a capacity toward vital surprise, rupture, and tenderness.

We can also see Wright’s dissatisfaction with rote enclosedness in his impatience with set forms. In “Father” the short declarative sentences at the end break from the poem’s slow, “wandering” funerary music as though the poem grows tired of it. And we can see a similar restlessness in Wright’s drafts. Below, for instance, are some lines from an elegy for Wright’s teacher Philip Timberlake:

> All afternoon, I take my time to mourn.  
> I am too old to cry against the snow  
> Of roots and stars, drifting above your face. (“A Winter Day in Ohio,” 68)

Though the end result here is another gently closed death-mask, looking at Wright’s letters shows us that the poem changed a lot in the course of its writing. It began a sonnet; Wright then considered dividing it up by natural syntactic pauses instead of by number of beats; finally he ended up making it into an unrhymed truncated sonnet in blank verse.⁵⁴ Even in his early poems there is something restless about Wright’s empathy, something unsettled and prompting new drafts. Timberlake is dead but his poem-vessel isn’t.

While I don’t think there’s any fundamental connection between traditional forms and closed characters, Wright will come to feel that for him open vitality best emerges through resistance to those forms most readily at hand. The following poem from Wright’s second book ultimately feels more closed than open, but one can feel the pressure of the openness the wife brings to bear pushing against its starting form and leading it toward a new equilibrium. Often Wright’s best poems will find such new equilibriums through adapting to their characters’

---


energies and resistances; this does not mean that their characters end up being open, only that they end up seeming more alive and recognizably human than the dead, moth-like grandmother or the people dissolving across the landscape in *Branch*. Though the following poem is elegiac, it doesn’t feel like a death mask, and this in large part due to the balance achieved here between life’s crucial vulgarities and death’s magic transformations. It certainly evades the criticisms of Wright’s early work as airy and insubstantial:

**Complaint**

She’s gone. She was my moon, my love or more.
She chased the chickens out and swept the floor,
Emptied the bones and nut-shells after feasts,
And smacked the kids for leaping up like beasts.
Now morbid boys have grown past awkwardness;
The girls let stitches out, dress after dress,
To free some swinging body’s riding space
And form the new child’s unimagined face.
Yet, while vague nephews, spitting on their curls,
Amble to pester winds and blowsy girls,
What arm will sweep the room, what hand will hold
New snow against the milk to keep it cold?
And who will dump the garbage, feed the hogs,
And pitch the chickens’ heads to hungry dogs?
Not my lost hag who dumbly bore such pain:
Childbirth and midnight sassafras and rain.
New snow against her face and hands she bore,
And now lies down, who was my moon or more. (49)

There is much to admire about this poem. First, there is the fact that the anti-systemic thinking of Wright’s empathy allows him to portray and imagine lower-class grief as powerful without airbrushing any of the poem’s gender problems – not every imagination could conceive of a lost wife as both “hag” and “moon or more,” servant and hero. To me the poem is far more moving because his flaws make the speaker seem believable, and because the poem suggests that lower-class relationships that don’t live up to our ideals may still prompt strong emotion.\(^{55}\) Next, there is the successful merging of the poetic and the unpoetic: smacking, spitting, chicken heads, pitching, garbage, and hogs emerge alongside words like “blowsy,” “curls,” “sassafras,” and

---

\(^{55}\) This is especially impressive as the poem is about Wright’s grandmother (*Wright, Wild Perfection*, 90) who Wright idealized and would certainly not usually think of as a hag. I think Elkins misreads the poem when he claims that the speaker refuses to mourn after the first line and is only sad because he’ll miss his domestic servant (*Elkins, James Wright*, 38).
“amble.” The lines can switch very rapidly between the two registers; see, for instance, lines nine to ten: “vague nephews, spitting on their curls/ Amble to pester winds and blowsy girls.” These lines are perhaps most vulnerable to the charge of using poeticized filler words, but they manage to do a lot of work. The lines suggest 1) sympathy for the burdens of women who have to put up with this ‘pestering,’ ‘spitting’ treatment as well as (implied) the far from perfect treatment of the speaker and 2) the pettiness of the nephews – inchoate children who spend their time dickering in the cruelty and easy romanticism of youth – compared to the speaker’s mature love and loss. One should recall that the lines are also part of the subordinate clause (Yet X), so the main thrust of the sentence is on the speaker’s question, his specific, powerful tactile memory: “what hand will hold/ New snow against the milk to keep it cold?” The dead wife’s holding of snow against milk provides a moment of tender domestic shock far more convincingly felt than the nephews’ love of curls and pestering; the ‘vague poetic language’ of the preceding lines are actually an imitation, and ultimately a dismissal, of youth’s naïve and shallow cruelty. In sum, just in this short poem Wright manages to give us youth, age, imperfect love, crudeness, cruelty, tenderness, and well-observed domestic details: we are no longer in the realm of ghosts or passive victims but of specific, flawed, and emotional people.

The pressure these people bring to bear ultimately leads to a series of balancing acts between cruelty and love, real love and corrupt love, vulgarity and sensory ecstasy, and, above all, vitality and death. The wife, despite her death, and through this problematic (though loving) description of her, emerges as a sometimes open character whose remembered individual energy helps counteract her life’s privations and her husband’s loss. The wife who “dumbly bore” and now lies down we also see smack, sweep, hold, dump, pitch, and chase. It might be useful to recall the ‘anti-tragic’ character of my introduction where a character’s recalled herculean energies make them seem less dead. Moreover, thanks to the balancing acts mentioned above, the wife’s vitalities seem appealing: the balancing of vulgarity against both sensory intensity and gentleness – of smacking, spitting, pitching, and childbirth against the child’s unimagined face, sassafras and rain, and snow on milk – keeps the poem from becoming either grotesque or saccharine.
Ultimately, the poem also succeeds in reaching a *sonic* equilibrium between its enclosing deathly form and the disorderly, remembered vitality of its described character. This can be best seen in how the heroic couplets are disrupted by, yet ultimately contain, the poem’s active, sometimes vulgar living energies. It is the pressure of other people and particularly the dead wife that makes the meter so lively: metrical inversions crop up everywhere (e.g. Emptied the bones) and at least seven of the eighteen lines to begin with either a trochee (Childbirth) or a spondee (New snow). The sounds of domestic life are harsh enough to jar the elsewhere clear and controlled meter; to my ear, “chickens out,” “smacked the kids,” and “dump the garbage” all sound harsher than the music of the rest of the poem. The following line, with its extra stresses and trochaic words, jumps like salmon against the current: To FREE SOME SWINGing BODys RIDing SPACE. Against these vital jumping and smacking disruptions the couplet rhymes and the meter provide soothing regularity and even moments of sonic gentleness as, for example, four syllables are mellifluously combined in the word *unimagined*. Equilibrium is reached: traditional form balances and enhances chaotic vitality.

Wright’s best poems disrupt form in order to find a form strong or capacious enough to incorporate that disruption. So, for instance, in “Complaint” the most shocking and vital sensory image associated with the dead wife becomes part of the poem’s most important instance of patterning. Not only is the refrain of the poem (“moon or more”) repeated, but also the memory of pressing snow against the milk is jarring enough to the speaker that he is compelled to return to it in the penultimate line and rhyme it off of the refrain. As a result, the repetition at the poem’s end feels not merely preplanned (formally pre-decided) but compelled organically by grief (like a surprise, a discovery). Yet the strength of the ending of course still depends on that preplanning and formal regularity: it is the mix of the discovered and the predestined that gives grief a convincing shape, so that the vision of the “brutal regularity” of privation making people into “stupid and resigned slobs” can be, for a moment, subverted. Wright can’t help these people, but he can sometimes help us to see them as neither utterly destroyed, nor utterly defined by their circumstances.

One might object that successful poems in traditional forms always require the measuring of variation and discord against their formal ideals. We will see shortly how Wright’s discord
causes him to break from metered forms entirely and seek out new ones that he will in turn discard (deep image lyric, catalogue poem, prose poem, balanced free verse lyric). But in considering Wright’s first two books it is useful to note just how skilled he is at measuring ‘traditional’ formal discord against concord, and how such moments of discord often help him (and us) locate the many vital energies that are present in these books despite their ubiquitous ghostliness.

A few more examples may be of help. The following elegy, which I have referred to as closed, ends by escaping as far as from formal (syntactic) expectations while still completing the rhyme scheme:

I know the mole will heave a shinbone over,
The earthworm snuggle for a nap on paws,
The honest bees build honey in the head;
The earth knows how to handle the great dead
Who lived the body out, and broke its laws,
Knocked down a fence, tore up a field of clover. (“On the Skeleton of a Hound,” 14)

After four lines that start with their subject move to their verbs and end with their objects we hear the final lines as enacting the flight and escape they describe: the subject “the great dead” refuses to yield to a single verb and object and instead keeps iterating them. The poem thereby enacts its final opening out as the dog changes from scattered bones to law-breaker making new tracks and tearing up those ‘pastures new’ which Milton turned to at the end of “Lycidas.” It is as though the high poetic tradition is being rent apart by the poem’s (albeit inhuman) subject; yet, as far as the dog runs it cannot escape its death – and the rhyme that meanwhile has waited patiently five full lines to be completed.

Wright’s exploration of discord can also be thought of in terms of how many forms he switches between. One can hear it in the distance between the iambic pentameter quoted above and the ballad meter below:

Now first of all he means the night
You beat the crib and cried
And brought me spinning out of bed
To powder your backside. (“A Song for the Middle of the Night,” 22)
One should also notice how the vitality here depends on the off-note: how the fourth line wants to be read with two stresses instead of the form’s three (POWder your BACKside – not POWder YOUR backSIDE). Resisting form can also involve human Ohioan characters more typical than Wright’s son. In the following example such resistance means being ungrammatical as the final line scans only because it is colloquially Ohioan:

how could she love so many,
Then turn away to die as though for none?
I saw the last [john] offer the a child a penny
To creep outside and see the cops were gone.
(“A Gesture by a Lady with an Assumed Name,” 36)

Ohioan speech, especially the speech spoken by johns, prostitutes, and beggar children, is often at odds with conventional forms and rules. This of course can be true metrically as well; just try reading the second line below iambically:

Beany went home, and I got sick and ran,
You old son of a bitch.
You better hurry down to Minnegan;
He’s drunk or dying now, I don’t know which,
Rolled in the roots and garbage like a fish,
The poor old man. (“A Note Left in Jimmy Leonard’s Shack,” 53)

Yet the dissonance above is also one of content and diction as violent drunks and phrases like “old son of a bitch” might seem at odds with the perfectly shaped stanza (just as vulgarity of spitting on people and pitching chicken heads to dogs, works against, and finally with, the rhyming couplets of “Complaint”).

Some critics have found these confusions of poetic and colloquial dictions and meters to be awkward. However, awkward or not, they provide us with another way of seeing the vitality of some of Wright’s forms whose internal discord is the start of something new rather than just part and parcel of the poet’s formal mastery. For another way of looking at many of Wright’s best poems about others is as contests between ‘formality’ and ‘informality.’ In an interview, Wright praises Robert Hayden’s famous poem about his father, “Those Winter Sundays” for its use of the word “offices” (“love’s austere and lonely offices”) at its end. Wright says that the word’s “formality, its combination of distance and immediacy, is appropriate.” He continues: “In
my experience undereducated people and people who are driven by brute circumstance to work terribly hard for a living, the living of their families, are very big on formality” (PCW 10). And this is the same Wright who loves the inventive coarseness of his Ohioans’ language and also praises expressions like, in answer to where someone has gone, “Oh he went to shit and the hogs eat him.”56 This is the Wright who praises high school football’s ‘ritualized violence’ as “very formal and graceful,”57 as having a far lower percentage of “hollow technicians, of really empty human beings” than the poetry world.58 Poems such as “Gesture By A Lady” or “A Note in Jimmy Leonard’s Shack” or “Devotions” require a tuning of the ear to a language that can see their joint formality and informality not as awkward combinations of the poetic and the real, but as imaginatively accurate, as true to Wright’s subjects. (Horace and Catullus are Wright’s Roman models starting with his discovery of poetry in his Latin class in high school.) Wright’s characters do not exist in spite of his poem’s forms; rather, they find ways to make those forms their own, full of garbage and curse words, not squeamishness.

In the early traditional work then we find Wright’s empathy already functioning in the ways it will throughout his career: we see this in its agitation against portraying everyone as closed and in its moments of suddenly opening up. We see it as well in the ways its formal dissonance and restlessness allow for the inclusion of crude or tender living energies alongside the drive to create newly and accurately Ohioan formalities. I want to conclude our look at the early work by examining how Wright’s empathy also has already been overturning the inherited systems that would direct compassion. From the beginning it includes but extends beyond ‘conventional’ social outsiders (like prostitutes and outlaws) to include Wright’s brothers – brutalized by manual labor and failing to save drowning victims – as well as shotgun toting farmers, drunk fathers, girls duped and taken advantage of, the dead, Wright’s father, a girl with

---


an ugly scar, kids bearing bad news, a deaf infant, Wright’s own infant son, and “A Little Girl on Her Way to School.”

Just as importantly, it vacillates and makes unpredictable and unpopular discriminations. In my introduction I mentioned a few such examples from Wright’s first two books: I mentioned how Wright’s empathy focuses on George Doty and not on his victim or on the bums in the poem; I also cited “On the Skeleton of a Hound” in which a dead dog is treated as worthy of a high elegy, and “Devotions” in which empathy is withheld and not even death can end Wright’s hatred; finally in “Saint Judas” not only is Judas made a saint, but he himself becomes an agent of empathy who, when he has absolutely nothing to gain, risks his life to save a stranger. Wright is interested in this last example in the way caring and empathy can blindside, emerging from nowhere rather than as rote, expected responses. And he’s interested in the way even the most well-known ‘stock characters,’ such as Judas, can contain hidden motivations and behave unpredictably. He says in a letter that it always moved him that Judas would commit suicide: “Why did he do it? You would think he’d be a completely cold person.”

In any case, we have in the above examples what our culture might consider different shades of excessive empathy (for a dog, for the betrayer of mankind) and insufficient empathy (for bums, a victim, a hated but punished other). These kinds of examples recur: we could add to the above list Wright’s ‘overly empathetic’ portrayal of the fugitive criminal Maguire who we

---

59 Elkins then is mistaken in saying that Wright is sympathetic only to those outside of the dominant culture (unless he means outside the East Coast); he is mistaken to think Wright only writes of angels and demons and ignores the majority of people (he does not ignore the majority of the kinds of people one finds in Martins Ferry) (Elkins, Poetry of James Wright, 29, 156). (Saunders too is mistaken in describing Wright’s tendency to view things in the black-and-white terms of devils and saints (Saunders, James Wright, 1)). Wright’s empathy even occasionally switches over into a collective mourning for his Ohio; in the following passage, for instance, he reprises Keats’ vision of perennial suffering in “Ode to a Nightingale”: “men grew old./Grew old. And shrivelled. Asked the time of day./And then forgot...” (ATR 76).

60 Robert Hass has suggested that Wright’s list of people who could be inhabiting the abandoned shack in “On Minding One’s Own Business” — hunted criminals, hoboes, girls with rumpled hair and so on — is one where all the possibilities are equated with each other and made to be representative of the dark of the imagination and the inner life (Robert Hass, Pure Clear Word, 200). There is certainly something to what Hass says and I will return to it later. For now it might be useful just to note that one can also read these lines not as a reductionist anti-Puritanical embrace of the criminal inner life, but as a menagerie — like the lists in Marianne Moore except that here made up of those ‘collected’ by Wright’s empathy: the list can be seen as pleasurable because its creatures are eclectic.

61 James Wright, Collected Prose, 166.

62 Wright: “the highest love I can think of... is given without reserve, whether the beloved ‘deserve’ it or not” (James Wright, Wild Perfection, 90).
are given no clear reason to support,\textsuperscript{63} or Wright’s ‘unempathetic’ portrayal of old fishermen (of the poem “The Fishermen”) as purely grotesque.\textsuperscript{64}\textsuperscript{65} These choices get Wright into trouble: I’ve never understood how critics could consistently accuse Wright of sentimentally siding with outsiders and the down-and-out, and, at the same time, accuse him of not siding with them enough.\textsuperscript{66} Empathy would not have any true subversive potential, let alone be convincing or moving, if it were always directed toward those we were ‘supposed’ to feel bad for. Wright refuses empathetic scripts; he says in his letters: “Somehow, every absolute command that my imagination hears is almost immediately turned into an insistence on its opposite – and this takes place not only as an assertion of the imagination’s freedom; but also as a desire to subversively overthrow all the critical absolutes.”\textsuperscript{67}

That Wright can withhold or deny his empathy makes its appearances often feel truly surprising. Wright can, for instance, change his mind and switch, in a few lines, from calling shotgun-toting Mr. Bluehart a “lean satanic owner” to feeling “Sorry for him” (“An Offering for Mr. Bluehart,” 51). He can also reveal what would otherwise go missing as in “Old Man Drunk” where he empathizes not with the daughter who has lost her lover, but with the father who has to tell her the bad news: “He stood behind her chair,/ he bowed his head,/ Knowing that even death cannot prolong/ The quick hysteric angers of the young” (51). Empathy can even emerge out of resistance to it and become wisdom: in “The Revelation” Wright goes from damning his father to “suddenly” seeing in the moonlight “The strong arm begging me for love,/ Loneliness I knew

\textsuperscript{63} Dougherty says that since we don’t know Maguire’s original offense, Wright’s siding with him seems unconvincing and arbitrary (Dougherty, \textit{James Wright}, 24). Hass suggests the same thing by describing the poem as “melodramatic,” and reminiscent of Warner Brothers; Hass quotes the passage as another example of Wright really describing his own fugitive inner life (Robert Hass, \textit{Pure Clear Word}, 203).

\textsuperscript{64} Elkins calls this passage jejune: he thinks Wright is selfishly and unsympathetically using the fishermen’s ‘infirmities’ to make interesting images (Elkins, \textit{James Wright}, 17).

\textsuperscript{65} We also might take note of his complete and amusing lack of sympathy for chickens: “Its ecstasy is dead...that dull fowl... [on the chopping block]... The flop of wings, the jerk of the red comb/ Were a dumb agony” (\textit{ATR} 24).

\textsuperscript{66} Even critics who admire Wright make these mistakes. Dougherty speaks of Wright’s “overstated empathy” (for, say, George Doty) “at the expense of even the victim” (Dougherty, \textit{James Wright}, 44); Elkins casts Wright’s view of society as being between “us” and “them” (Elkins, \textit{James Wright}, 28), and describes Wright’s sympathy for outsiders as excessive (ibid., 29); I have already mentioned Elkins’ criticism of Wright’s unsympathetic treatment of the fishermen.

\textsuperscript{67} James Wright, \textit{Wild Perfection}, 235.
nothing of” (67). A quick reversal of perspectives in “The Revelation” brings with it a convincing glimpse of another life. I’ve already suggested how Wright’s Judas involves a series of sudden shifts in perspectives (from Judas’s preoccupation to his consideration for a man being beaten, and from our typecasting of Judas to a greater imagining of his character).

From the very beginning of his career, then, other people are the live wire of Wright’s subject matter; they are what allow him to be new in the American poetry of his era. Dave Smith argues that Wright is at least in part “a representative man whose poetics demonstrate what we mean by contemporary as both an extension of and a rebellion against modernism.”68 According to Smith, Wright rebels mainly “against passionless modernism and the art about nothing,” adding that Wright’s “obligation to man and being... displaces the modernist obligation only to art.”69 Part of Wright’s turn away from modernism is to be found in his belief that his obligation to his art is not fundamentally different from his obligation to others (in his letters he frequently equates being a good poet with a good person), and that the latter obligation actually can become a driving force in the making and shaping of his poems. He writes to Philip Timberlake that he doesn’t “dislike fooling around with language – far from it... but the fooling has sooner or later got to expose itself to the judgment of that larger and more generous common humanity which is more important than poetry, and in vital relation to which the final importance of poetry ought to be defined.”70

Admirable as these beliefs might be, they only come to mean something through the empathy, whose capacity for instability and surprise, and whose will to break through old forms into new ones, is able to portray characters who can behave as dynamically as the empathy that guides Wright in his selections and treatments of them. This does not mean that the characters in his poems always are so dynamic, but it does mean one should never be absolutely sure what they’re doing when one looks away: “I have never, thank God, regarded a poem as an absolutely


69 Ibid., xv, xvi.

finished thing...” says Wright, “I think critics who think a poem is absolutely finished once it appears in print are morticians.”71 Correspondingly, poems sometimes have the potential to lead people back from death: this is Wright’s gloss of Neruda’s *Heights of Macchu Picchu*, and we can see why he goes on to praise Gary Snyder’s poems not just for ‘enabling Snyder to see ghosts’ but ghosts “who once lived and worked in real places that have names.”72 It is the same reason Wright quotes George Bernard Shaw saying that the art that lasts will have “the journalists’ vulgar obsession with the ephemeral.”73 Wright’s early poems contain a ghoulish Lazarus, ghosts, and “bodiless yearnings” (*ATR* 64), but often at their best even they – as Wright says of Hugo – do something “to catch his time and place alive.”74 It is the potential for resistance, the swift, sometimes ugly surfacing of vitality in Wright that is one of the most powerful features of his empathy. Wright’s poems do not merely bear sympathetic witness to the plights of his fellow Ohioans; they often find what is alive about them, pitted against privation. *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas* show us the foundation of his empathy, his art.

**

After Wright’s first two books his empathy’s will to break and reinvent becomes far more dramatic. We come to see in it a raggedness, a possibility for backfire, and a frequent risk-taking. If, to take up a simile I used earlier, human relationships to Wright are like the shifting of tectonic plates, some of his poems can be as messy (and as powerful) as earthquakes. In his early books, Wright himself thematizes empathy’s messiness explicitly by showing how it can either greedily demand too much of its subjects who would rather be left alone (such as the girl with the “disgusting” birth defect in “The Accusation”), or recoil on Wright, doing “no good, no good to me” (72, 77). This messiness means, more generally I think, that Wright does not always

---


74 James Wright, *Wild Perfection*, 118.
publish good poems, but also that even in his most ragged moments suddenly a great poem or
great lines can emerge as though from a ripped cocoon. Wright praised Hardy’s poetry for its
“charity” that “touches even the clumsiest of his phrases,” as well as its “decency,” and its
“homemade quality.”\textsuperscript{75} Dave Smith points out that though Wright is “devoted to Horace and the
demands of Horatian craft, restraint, distance, humility, [and] elegance” he is also devoted to
“the anger, humor, indignation, love, and ragged passion of Dickens” on whom he wrote his
doctoral dissertation.\textsuperscript{76} Again we have formality and informality, and even where Wright’s
intense feeling for the suffering of others causes the informality, the messiness, to win out, we
can find charity, decency, and ragged passion.

More generally, though, this informality is necessary: if something living, something
open is to be captured about Wright’s Ohioans, it will not be through their submitting meekly to
his pre-packaged containers. We see, for instance, in “Emerson Buchanan” how the names of
Wright’s Ohioan relatives won’t scan (“Franklin Pierce will scan./ Nobody else will scan”) so
that just the most basic facts about these others – their names – are breaking his meters (253). In
“Speak” Wright cries out, “And Jenny, oh my Jenny/ Whom I love, rhyme be damned,” then
refuses to complete the b rhyme for damned (157). He does slant-rhyme ‘Jenny’ with ‘beauty’
and return to the poems pattern of full, half, and slight rhymes: “so the complaint is not against
rhyme, but against the type of decorum that requires poets to uphold convention and respectable
people to despise whores [like Jenny] who abandon their offspring.”\textsuperscript{77} Put differently, in order to
side with or be adequate to Wright’s painful characters his form must continually discover itself
anew; the forms Wright starts out with no longer suffice very often after his second book, and
when they do appear (as in the examples above) they often do so only to be subverted by the
people they describe.

In order to describe what the destabilizing, messy, tectonic quality of Wright’s empathy
means in terms of his career at large, I will glance over the stages of that career and look at
poems where form is strained just past the breaking point. Wright’s watershed poems (Elkins)

\textsuperscript{75} James Wright, \textit{Collected Prose}, 258, 260.


\textsuperscript{77} Dougherty, \textit{Wright}, 77.
are those in which his destructiveness, irascibility, and impatience with his world’s horrors feel like they outweigh the poem’s ultimate form, but only just outweigh it, giving the feeling that form has just been broken so that it may go somewhere new. In Wright’s fast-moving poetics, we often can catch his best poems in the midst of this process as form strains with the empathetic pressures on it, sometimes emerging with new equilibriums from this struggle. I have already described at length the way life’s vulgar energies destabilize “Complaint” so that it must incorporate them into the poem’s smooth meter and overall prettifying elegiac tendencies; however, shortly we’ll look at poems where the balance doesn’t follow nearly as easily. And sometimes, though a poem successfully contains and shapes its ragged energies, it discards enough constraints in the process that it ends up opening the door to sloppiness and poems whose threadbare formal constraints will prove inadequate. “To the Muse,” for example, a strong poem that ends *Shall We Gather at the River*, leads to the volume of *New Poems* that is often regarded as Wright’s slackest period.

Though they will not be to everyone’s tastes, and though a little out-of-control and disorganized, the watershed poems are essential in helping us witness Wright’s poetry in motion. The poems are also broken up by their subjects in ways that allow lots of real poetry to the surface. “Many of Our Waters,” for example, is one of Wright’s first full-fledged attempts at a poem that is narrative as well as lyric. The poem contains lots of found language and long numbered sections – and it has many real people in it: Jack, Garnie, Kinny, Annie, baby Gemela. The poem is a bit of a mess: the lines vacillate wildly in length, and we find such excessive lines as “This is not an apology to the Muse... This is the cold-blooded plea of a homesick vampire” (211-2). Yet strangely, the poem also contains some of Wright’s best-known and most important lines:

> The kind of poetry I want to write is
> The poetry of a grown man.
> The young poets of New York come to me with
> Their mangled figures of speech,
> But they have little pity
> For the pure clear word. (212-3)

78 Again we have the complaint against the East: Wright might have felt that enough is already mangled and meaningless in a Midwest where, as he says in “Many of Our Waters,” “The grown man... works slowly day by long day... gets up in the morning and curses himself/ Into black silence” (213).
One of the challenges of reading Wright is identifying the poems where empathy succeeds in rupturing and restoring, where its destructive will leads Wright to find new forms that will suffice. But another challenge is not to simply dismiss the poems where the drive to sufficiency does not lead to complete shapeliness, and instead to see them as on their way somewhere and to remain open to their great moments and overarching virtues. These poems, like Wright’s characters, can surprise and delight if one doesn’t dismiss them too quickly.

I would nominate “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” “The Minneapolis Poem,” and “Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism” as the most important watershed poems in Wright. All of these poems are closer to aesthetic wholeness then not; however, it is clear that their power emerges in the ways they are all a bit off-kilter, courting chaos or breakdown, as they lead in and out of their respective books. Wright was fond of Frost’s expression that if a book has twenty-four poems then the twenty-fifth poem is the organization of the book itself, and he often places the poems that lead into new styles or out of old ones at the beginning and ends of his volumes.

Since Wright withdrew the intermediary book Amenities of Stone that would have shown his more gradual movement from traditional forms toward the deep image lyrics, the leap from Saint Judas to Branch feels like a shock. Reading through either of his Collected Poems (the 1971 edition or the posthumous 1990 edition) means leaping from “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” and “Saint Judas” through some of Wright’s translations straight into his deep image period. If we are to give Wright credit for the forms the books (and not just the poems) make

---

79 Stanley Plumly: “His poems are among the most generous we have because they risk again and again not finding what will suffice” (Stanley Plumly, “Sentimental Forms,” James Wright: The Heart of Light, ed. Peter Stitt and Frank Graziano [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1990], 373-380, 380).

80 Peter Campion then is right when he insists that “If there ever was a poet who needed a judicious selection it’s James Wright,” but not quite right when he says that it’s because “Taken as a whole, his [Wright’s] work cans seem muddled” (Peter Campion, “‘I Have a Secret with Myself,’ James Wright’s Classicism”). Again, we must attend to Wright’s best poems and the virtues of its overall ongoing process.

81 I borrow the term “watershed” from Elkins who identified both “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” and “Many of Our Waters” as watershed poems (Elkins, James Wright, 149). Brian Green uses a similar term, stating how “Wright’s career sustains the notion of a rite-of-passage poem” (Brian Green, “Wright’s A Blessing,” Explicator 58, no. 3 [Spring 2000], 166-69). However, beyond using it to indicate a breakthrough, the ways I will use the term watershed here are my own.

82 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, 238.
when placed together, then it’s fitting that “Murderer’s Grave” comes near the end of “Saint Judas.” The title-poem is itself a coda, but “Murderer’s Grave” is a fit of rhyme against rhyme, a renunciation of the style that has preceded it and, ironically, one of Wright’s best formal poems. It is also Wright’s second poem about the Ohioan murderer George Doty who was already associated, in his first book, with the subversive empathy that pitied him and not his victims. Again, though, Wright’s empathy often changes. Here is Wright on Doty a book later:

Doty you make me sick. I am not dead.
I croon my tears at fifty cents per line...

I waste no pity on the dead that stink
And no love’s lost between me and the crying
Drunks of Belaire, Ohio, where police
Kick at their kidneys till they die of drink...

[they] Can do without my widely printed sighing... (82-4)

I don’t have room to do adequate justice to the poem, but we can already see how empathy here means articulating disgust: disgust with Doty and his crime, with the Ohioan justice system that thinks killing Doty (or kicking drunks) will solve anything, and above all, with himself for thinking that his “widely printing sighing” is any better than either. The poem’s ending vision of universal guilt (“they will not mark my face,/ From any murderer’s, buried in this place”) shows Wright coming to feel that the photonegative landscape he has created in his poems is no less festering, no less awful and pointless, than the world outside of it. But the dark pleasure here, the poetry, is in the eloquence of the self-disgust, vitriol, and (self) accusation that thinking about Doty’s crime and execution generates. We see this even in Wright’s prose descriptions of the poem in an interview: George Doty was “just a dumb guy who suddenly was thrust into the middle of the problem of evil and... was not able to handle it.” In “Murderer’s Grave” this blunt angry eloquence is tearing things apart even as it’s the mode by which Wright’s imagination is thriving. Rhyme and meter are not ruptured here, but the kind of colloquial Ohioan diction found in earlier poems like “Devotions” or “A Note Left in Jimmy Leonard’s Shack” returns with a vengeance:

---

83 James Wright, interview with Dave Smith, Pure Clear Word, 20.
Now sick of lies, I turn to face the past...

...giggling muckers who
Saddled my nightmares thirty years ago
Can do without my widely printed sighing
Over their pains with paid sincerity...

Nature-lovers are gone. To hell with them...

His diction now is refusing to compromise with the civility of his inherited forms. Wright is done with his own poetic past as well as the nature-loving poetic past of the tradition he has adopted. Both pasts when unfaced have led to more repetitions and enumerations of what he has come to feel are a set of untruthful and staid relationships (“my widely printed sighing,” “paid sincerity”) to others. And these others have not, anyway, been assuaged: they are still awful, still giggled up as old nightmares. It is clear Wright’s poetry is headed somewhere new.8485

84 I do not spend much time on this first watershed poem because its status as such has already been so repeatedly noticed and described. And as, Kevin Stein says, “so much has been made of this one (albeit significant) alteration in style that the transformations which occur after Branch have been largely ignored – or rejected” (Stein, Grown Man, 93). Henry Taylor writes that though “it [“Murderer’s Grave”] sometimes skirts the edges of self-indulgence, the flexibility and unpredictability of this poem mark it not only as a recognizable precursor of Wright’s later style, but also as one of his best poems in either style” (Henry Taylor, “In the Mode of Robinson and Frost,” James Wright: The Heart of Light, ed. Peter Stitt and Frank Graziano [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1990], 77-93, 88). Elkins, as I’ve already mentioned, uses the term watershed to describe the poem. Dougherty also says, “The long struggle to acknowledge his human ties with Doty was a watershed in the development of Wright’s poetry” (Dougherty, James Wright, 45). He discusses the role revision plays in making the poem less formal and traditional (Wright published two previous versions of the poem), and claims that Wright ends up with no single empathetic stance toward Doty: “In the seven sections [of the poem], Wright moves through an astonishing variety of attitudes toward Doty” (ibid., 46). Stein also thinks of Doty as a means of arriving at a formal break, although he focuses too much in my view on thinking of this break as occasioned by Doty as tool and metaphor rather than by Doty as another extremely painful piece of reality pushing back on Wright. Doty’s isolation “offers him [Wright], also, a means of breaking out from his own wall of formal and ironic containment, for in “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” his mode of containment begins to give way...Structurally, though the poem still carries the universalist feel of New Critical statement, its manner is personal and direct. Often set in iambic pentameter, and laced with an occasional rhymed couplet, the language of the poem is rather spare and rough compared with much of Wright’s early work, and it is consistent” (Stein, Grown Man, 37). Stein goes on to show how the poem is suggestive of an impatience with previous forms and a desire for new ones. Wright himself seems to be describing “Murderer’s Grave” while ostensibly reviewing Robert Penn Warren’s Promises: “I propose the hypothesis that one can hear in the poem two movements of language: a strong formal regularity, which can be identified with a little struggle, but which is driven so fiercely by the poet that one starts to hear beyond it the approach of an unpredictable and hence discomforting second movement, which can be identified as something chaotic, something very powerful but unorganized. It is the halting, stammering movement of an ordinarily articulate man who has been shocked” (Wright, Collected Prose, 244). The shock for Wright comes from ‘turning to face’ the often horrible realities of others; “strict” and “careful” form had “seemed to leave out so much of life” (Breslin, Modern to Contemporary, 189).

85 Dave Smith argues that we can find in Wright’s first two books the “nuclei for Wright’s more innovative work: the flashing personal voice, the semisurreal imagery, the epiphany, the accruing myth of Christ-Everyman in the Hell of Ohio, and especially the plain idiomatic speech woven among tones of Frost, Eliot, and Robinson” (Dave Smith, “That Halting, Stammering Movement,” The Pure Clear Word: Essays on the Poetry of James Wright, ed. Dave Smith [Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1982], 175-195, 177). All of these qualities can be found in “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave.”
At first the new solution seems to be to evade the social world entirely as, after some years of exploration, Wright ends up with the deep-image lyric of Branch. This style yields some important lyrics about others (“Beginning,” “As I Step over a Puddle at the End of Winter,” the famous “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry Ohio”), but in general it tends to dissolve others – and Wright’s personality – more than ever before across the shadow landscapes of Wright’s inner life: “Look: I am nothing/ I do not even have ashes to rub into my eyes” (120). This poetry has more of the landscape of Ohio in it than the preceding volumes: just thumbing through the pages at random now I find silos, stadiums, creosote and waste water, strip mines, hayrakes, slag heaps, whorehouses, black water, honey locust trees, shopping centers, and steel mills. But character here is usually closed to the point of inhumanity: a “great harvest of convicts” has “shaken loose and hurried across the wall of your eyes”; “girls [are] the color of butterflies”; women dance around a fire where “They are dead” and “I am alone here” (122, 131, 123-4).

It is in this volume, as I mentioned earlier, that people are literally spaded back into the landscape and metaphorically changed into pumpkins and maple leaves. Branch contains some beautiful poems, some of Wright’s most celebrated, but it is the volume most susceptible to Robert Hass’s criticism that, when too detached, the fugitive dark of Wright’s inner life becomes sterile, decadent, and ultimately inadequate to face wide-scale societal corruption or political issues such as “The Undermining of the Defense Economy” (the title of one of Branch’s poems). Put more simply, the volume risks escapism. And, as Bonnie Costello admits even while defending these poems as the best of Wright, “one gets tired of visionary dreariness.”

Though it is beyond the scope of these chapters, an excellent exploration of Wright’s cancelled intermediary books can be found in Kevin Stein’s monograph.

Bonnie Costello writes, “Out of the lifeless repetition of the lives he imagines, and the vast horizontal of the Midwest, Wright creates a vertical, ritual impression, building up a symbolic vocabulary of moons, rivers, snow, from a descriptive pretext... The Ohio or Minneapolis rivers recall the River Styx, George Doty becomes a figuration for Saint Judas, three dead swans are clipped Phoenixes.” (Costello, Pure Clear Word, 230) The lifelessness of the privation everywhere already present is easily absorbed into a “symbolic vocabulary.” The mere “pretext” of the real becomes a mere starting point for the symbolic; they are by no means equal partners. Branch is filled with such extremes of closed character that these characters again start looking just like parts of the poet. James Breslin may be right that Branch is more visionary, and contains more overt social and political subjects than Wright’s early work, but it is less clear that the work is “more firmly grounded in external experience” (Breslin, Modern to Contemporary, 209).

Robert Hass, “James Wright,” Pure Clear Word, 196-220. I would cast the problem in slightly different terms: the inner life’s extreme lyricality, unbalanced by the weight of other specific lives, here actually participates, in the world of Wright’s poetry
Yet even though it is largely made up of beautiful, dreary, visionary poems, the book is also a kind of reboot for Wright’s empathy. *Branch* can be seen as turning away from the unbearable social world of “Murderer’s Grave” into the echo chamber or haunted fun house of Wright’s internalized Midwest – yet, it is clearly still interested in addressing societal and political issues. The painful social world is always lurking in the background and, upon closer inspection, we can see how the volume begins looking for others even as it evades them. For example, in its second half, it turns toward animals and starts treating them as independent creatures: “I was afraid of dying...But now/ All day long I have been walking among damp fields,/ Trying to keep still, listening/ To insects that move patiently” (142). A change is made mid-volume: these animals start coming “down from the green mountains... [because] they know/ The open meadows are safe” (142). In “Arriving in the Country Again” Wright admits that “My friends can’t hear me yet” (137), but suggests that other creatures in the poem can (a flicker who lives in a bare tree, a horse grazing). Animals are usually easier for Wright than people, and here they suggest a movement back toward external minds and lives, back toward the friends who can’t hear him. Meanwhile, pieces of people are starting to seem emergent, rather than like relics of a finished process: it is after, all, the pumpkins that look like discharged generals not the other way around; we also find locusts changing to unmarried women; the yellow winter of the depression becoming an old man (132). Starting in the book’s second half there are also optimistic, though still disembodied, images of eros (“the good darkness/ Of women’s hands that touch loaves”) (136).

Even earlier on in the volume we can find attempts to search for others, and this search will eventually bear fruit. In the poem “Miners” John Skunk’s grappling hooks “Drag delicately about” until they “clasp/ Fingers” (126). “Miners” is made up of disparate images and scenes linked together by numbered sections, and this form is repeated in “Stages on a Journey

Westward,” and “Two Poems about President Harding.” All of these poems attempt to locate or relocate people, and Wright will remember their sectioned form in writing “The Minneapolis Poem,” the watershed poem that begins his next volume *Shall We Gather at the River*. “The Minneapolis Poem” is another breakthrough: an inverted and horrific Whitmanian catalogue of all the external human suffering that Wright was avoiding in the dreamy, lovely, post-traumatic *Branch*. In it the Ohio river which gave back only parts (fingers) becomes a version of the Mississippi that is a gathering place for whole tribes of victims.

We turn then from Martins Ferry to Minneapolis, Wright’s other important Midwestern city, where he was unhappily employed at the University of Minnesota: not a town, Wright says in a letter, “to commit suicide in, at any rate (the waterways are frozen over).” “The Minneapolis Poem” in its seven sections lists others not as bits of interiority or half-visible spirits of place, but as concrete, though still surreal or symbolic, victims and victimizers:

Split-lipped homosexuals limp in terror of assault.
High school backfields search under benches
Near the Post Office. Their faces are the rich
Raw bacon without eyes...

Tall Negro girls from Chicago
Listen to light songs.
They know when the supposed patron
Is a plainclothesman. (147-9)

Even those victims he can’t find he is now determined to imagine:

I wonder how many old men last winter
Hungry and frightened by namelessness prowled
The Mississippi shore
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river.
The police remove their cadavers by daybreak
And turn them in somewhere.
Where?

---


91 James Wright, *Wild Perfection*, 82.
These men are triply lost: they are lost to society and to themselves even before their cadavers are hidden away. Nevertheless, Wright imagines them; the hooks that found only fingers “Miners” in Branch here drag up whole stunned creatures:

I think of poor men astonished to waken
Exposed in broad daylight by the blade
Of a strange plough.

Finally, Wright invokes Whitman in order to show how much America has changed for the worse: “The old man Walt Whitman our countryman/ Is now in America our country/ Dead./ But he was not buried in Minneapolis/ At least./ And no more may I be/ Please God.” Though the Whitmanian catalogue can no longer bind the country together, it can help Wright return to face America’s citizens and take stock of the damage.

Though there is much to admire about “The Minneapolis Poem,” its sometimes recklessly vacillating line lengths (between long lines and lines made up of single words), its tendency to fall into more predictable divisions of victim and victimizer than is usual in Wright, and its perhaps overly wishful, self-protective ending (“I want to be lifted up/ by some great white bird unknown to the police”) all have the hallmark of Wright’s empathy pushing forward a lot at once. Wright is starting out again, in search of forms different from those of his first two books, but capable of including all that was missing from Branch. In some ways, Shall We Gather at the River picks up where “Murderer’s Grave” left off: almost all of the poems that follow “The Minneapolis Poem” now contain suffering, broken others. But these others appear through an array of different forms and techniques as though Wright is returning to the social world determined to try everything he can come up with. He tries, for example, using poems with numbered sections to describe a single character (his father, a dead swan); returning to rhyme and meter; writing extended free-verse lyrics in long single sections; writing poems containing lots of people, as well as poems that are portraits of single individuals (of Sioux Indians, of Wright’s father in his youth, of his uncle Willy Lyons); and he tries using an authoritative “flat voice” and a kind of persuasive homeliness untempered by meter and rhyme or by the “willful

---

92 Although even here there are complications as sometimes the victims and victimizers become the same: “The Chippewa young men/ Stab one another shrieking/ Jesus Christ.”
beauty” of *Branch*. It’s in this volume as well that we find Wright’s first serious attempts to include others’ found language heard or read; he is also now embedding himself in some of these poems as an “I” who does things and interacts with people. He is more exposed now, more frequently explicitly putting himself at risk through making himself a character who interacts with suffering others – and Wright does suffer more here.

As a result, there are occasional glimpses of hope that the social may not always remain the nightmare world of “Murderer’s Grave.” For instance, both “Inscription for the Tank” and “In Terror of Hospital Bills” contain the surprising refrain “My life was never so precious/ To me as now” (149). It is not only a matter of his characters opening up: now that the poetic speakers are embedded more often and autobiographically in the poems, we see those speakers being more directly changed by and occasionally even rewarded for their empathy. However, the “New Poems” that follow are the low point of Wright’s career for in them the transgressive push of empathy is often not balanced by its will to form: though full of people, these poems have lost the shapeliness of the shorter forms and lists, and many of them unroll in a sprawling free verse both aggressive and uncertain. Wright as a first-person character is now sometimes too much in the poems and starts bogging them down. Most of the deep-image distortions are also absent here, and though Wright tries to make up for their loss by incorporating narrative he doesn’t yet know quite how to use it. He is still trying all sorts of new things to find others: we have prolonged addresses (“to Little Crow”), and intimate, exclusive ones (“Jenny... Nobody else will follow/ This poem but you./ But I don’t care”) (179). He also writes poems about history for the first time (the Civil War, the Dakota War). There are exceptions and real high moments (e.g. “A Poem About Breasts,” “Trouble,” “Northern Pike”), but for a period the informality of empathy is dominant.

Yet by his next book, *Two Citizens*, empathy has come out on the other side and has started assembling tighter forms. The volume opens with “Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism,” Wright’s first real success in hybridizing narrative and lyric modes (222-5). Made up of numbered sections that harken back to “Murderer’s Grave” in their focus on a single character,

---


94 As Elkins puts it: more than in the previous books here the poet is exposed and “fears for himself” (Elkins, *James Wright*, 113).
this watershed poem differs in that its numbered sections tell a story. This is the tale of Wright’s Aunt Agnes who, though a foul-smelling and mentally unbalanced “slob,” both “fat and stupid,” is able to win the love of Uncle Sherman, fight back Uncle Emerson’s mockery, and defend a goat from being stoned to death by a gang of boys: “my Aunt Agnes,/ Who stank and lied,/ Threw stones back at the boys/ And gathered the goats/ Nuts as she was,/ Into her sloppy arms.”

Alan Williamson has observed how rhetorically “tricky” Wright is in this book.\(^95\) The potential excess of Wright’s empathy for unlovable Aunt Agnes is moderated here by his clear-eyed pessimism; he is willing to describe Agnes in all her flaws and claim that her own empathy for the goat changes little about the ruined promise of America:

6.

Reader,
We had a lovely language.
We would not listen.

I don’t believe in your god.
I don’t believe my Aunt Agnes is a saint.
I don’t believe the little boys
Who stoned the poor
Son of a bitch goat
Are charming Tom Sawyers

I don’t believe in the goat either.

The anger and frustration of “Murderer’s Grave” return too as Wright rails against his disappointing family, country, and religion.\(^96\) This anger’s anaphoric renunciations make lyric what might otherwise seem like a mainly narrative poem as they lead to a clear, carefully ordered emotional crescendo. It’s no coincidence that the most ‘innocent’ creature, the scapegoat, gets renounced as well; it is renounced last, after a pause, and so with the most force. As Saunders writes: “Far from being... ‘whimpers’ and ‘growls,’ this, to me, almost achieves the *terribilita* and nobility of Dante’s outrage against Florence....”\(^97\)

---

\(^95\) Williamson, *Introspection*, 87.

\(^96\) They are also directed against the critics of the title who misread him.

But this poem is by no means just a reprise of “Murderer’s Grave” or of the more pessimistic free-verse takes on others from “Shall We Gather” or “New Poems.” For one thing, Agnes is in little danger of becoming a passive closed character. Wright draws his anger from her own: “She didn’t weep./ She got mad./ Mad means something.” His empathy’s raggedness allows him to depict Agnes’s anger and hone it, throwing stones back and cursing the whole country. After the sixth section’s exclamations we find what seems like a calmer, softer, and more final damning tone; it is as though we have reached the most important moment in a speech, an effect heightened by Wright’s quoting of the Latin motto about seeking peace under liberty by the sword. But then Wright shatters this calm and poise for a throwing up of hands and a curse. The poem begins: “I loved my country,/ When I was a little boy.” It ends:

7
When I was a boy
I loved my country.

Ense petit placidam
Sub libertate quietem.

Hell, I ain’t got nothing.
Ah, you bastards,

How I hate you.

Yet even while appropriating and intensifying Agnes’s anger, Wright is also shaping a delicately tricky portrait of his aunt. The fact is that all of Wright’s renunciations only serve to make Agnes’s position, power, and symbolism more uncertain, even mysterious – and it’s here that the slipperiness of Wright’s rhetoric which Williamson refers to comes into play. The poem ends with a gesture so bald it can be seen as a dashing open of the poem on the rocks. But despite ending in this wild way, the poem has used Wright’s new narrative form, as well as plain-speech, found language, sharp digressions, and aggressive rhetoric, to become a masterpiece of shifting empathies. It’s hard to say in the end where we end up with Aunt Agnes, how closed or open she

98 Cf. the fairy prostitutes in “Shall We Gather” who “drown every evening” and every dawn “climb up on the other shore,/ Drying their wings” (ATR 173).

99 Earlier in the poem Wright says that “the nut house in Cambridge/ Where Agnes is dying/ Is no more Harvard, Than you could ever be” (223). He is using Cambridge, Ohio – which is only an hour’s drive from Martins Ferry – to represent another negative transformation of the American dream (Dave Smith, Pure Clear Word, 189). So if we’ve been reading the poem very carefully we know that quoting the Latin seal of Massachusetts is a set up.
may be, or what to make of an America where “Emerson Buchanan” makes crass jokes about her; where Uncle Sherman “must have been/ One of the heroes/ Of love, because he lay down” with her “Twice at least”; where little boys giggle and throw stones; where Aunt Agnes throws them back and then dies eyes blackened in the “nut house” in Cambridge, Ohio; and where an enraged present day James Wright “gather[s]” her “Into my veins.” The poem in this way is a breakthrough, as well as an exemplary case of Wright’s empathy moving in transgressive and surprising ways (denying any sympathy to Emerson Buchanan, praising and insulting Aunt Agnes). And the poem is a watershed: though his future poems will often use devices other than this poem’s equivocation between destructive anger and careful, slippery rhetoric, many successful poems with narrative elements will follow this one.

Two Citizens, which Wright considered a failure, and Alan Williamson considered Wright’s greatest success, contains more consistently shapely poems. It is the turnaround book in Wright’s career, the book where humor and play start to return in a real way (cf. “Love in a Warm Room in Winter”), and the book where Wright improves at finding the little but solid resistances, virtues, and successes of his Ohioans (cf. “Ars Poetica,” “Prayer to the Good Poet,” “Well, What Are You Going to Do?). In Two Citizens Wright starts to think that others may not only provide truthful visions of suffering, but may actually provide for Wright real ways out of it (cf. “The Old WPA Swimming Pool in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” “Voices Between Waking and Sleeping in the Mountains”). Wright’s personal life is also improving as he writes these poems, and he is about to start spending summers in Italy with his new wife Annie where he will discover his version of the prose poem. This new form will allow him to siphon off many of the digressive, inclusive impulses which weighed down the “New Poems” and write what he thought of as his most successful book: a book that is made up of both those prose poems and of lucid, startling lyrics.

**

100 Williamson, Introspection, 86.

101 Dougherty, James Wright, 116.
I’ve been focusing on Wright’s watershed poems as poems that can provide microcosms of the movements of his career and help us to see his empathy as a destabilizer of old forms and a generator of new ones. However, before ending this chapter, I want to look at two of Wright’s best poems to show how they reach a true equilibrium between formal and informal, struggle and ease (and in the two cases I’ve picked, open and closed character). In looking at “Complaint” I began to describe how metrical disruption can lead to greater aesthetic integrity; however, many of Wright’s strongest poems find such a balance outside of traditional meter. Though it’s important to see Wright’s poems as on their way from and to other poems and books, it’s also important to notice how such movement sometimes generates still points where the raggedness of Wright’s empathy generates forms thrumming with containment. More, some of these poems involve real encounters and exchanges between Wright and his subjects; the new embedded first-person “I” can provide tension with a poem’s character that helps to replace the tension between meter and resistance to meter.

In my first example in which we’ll temporarily jump ahead to Wright’s penultimate book, the encounter between the poet and the old man is a kind of electric failure as both end up moving quickly from a place of surprise and potential back towards the closed pole of character. The poem takes place not in Martins Ferry but in Minneapolis and again manages to blend narrative and lyric impulses:

**To a Blossoming Pear Tree**

Beautiful natural blossoms,  
Pure delicate body,  
You stand without trembling.  
Little mist of fallen starlight,  
Perfect, beyond my reach,  
How I envy you.  
For if you could only listen,  
I would tell you something,  
Something human.

An old man  
Appeared to me once  
In the unendurable snow.  
He had a singe of white  
Beard on his face.  
He paused on a street in Minneapolis.
And stroked my face. 
Give it to me, he begged
I’ll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of the cold.

Beautiful natural blossoms,
How could you possibly
Worry or bother or care
About the ashamed, hopeless
Old man? He was so near death
He was willing to take
Any love he could get,
Even at the risk
Of some mocking policeman
Or some cute young wiseacre
Smashing his dentures
Perhaps leading him on
To a dark place and there
Kicking him in his dead groin
Just for the fun of it.

Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother. (316-317)

In this poem Wright commits himself, to say the least, to embedding himself in the “I” of the poem. And though the described encounter is taken from memory, it occurs in the poem as a shock and a surprise. Look how delicately and painfully Wright renders the old man’s appearance. We hear about a pear tree; then there is a stanza break and an old man suddenly appears outlined against a desolate wintry landscape; Wright then zooms in and we see a tiny bit of beard whose singe of white echoes and parodies the little mist of the opening stanza. Notice also how we first see the tiny detail (the singe) floating for a second in suspension, and then have a line break before having it interpreted for us as a beard – things are being slowed down and parsed into tiny increments of time. There is the pausing (“He paused on a street”); the unwanted intimacy – the stroking whose very gentleness negatively foreshadows the violence to come; the
man speaking and Wright reacting through his mirroring of the past participle of “stroked” with “flinched”; finally we arrive at the painfully incremental separation where we are given 1) their emotion (terror) 2) their exit (slinking then dodging) and 3) the interpretation (dodging the cold, but really just continuing to dodge the demons of their failed encounter).

This is painful, but very controlled. And the first stanza is more controlled, even stately. In it, the three heavy stresses in each of the first two lines (beAUTiful NATural BLOSsoms/PURE DElicate BODy), the use of the present tense, the repetition of words with falling rhythms (by my count there are nine such words in the first four lines), the repetition of “you” (four times) and “something” (twice), and the incremental addition of each new stand-alone line describing the tree all create a sense of gravitas, of mournful fatalism and inevitability. But against carefully chiseled stateliness and the incremental description of the encounter proper is set the wildness and rupturing of Wright’s reaction to his encounter in the fourth stanza. The formal and emotional gamble of the poem is to be found in the way that stanza extends, even drags out Wright’s response to the old man: “the fourth stanza is rightly heard as awkward and gratuitous, for by being so it presents Wright’s dilemma: he cannot simply turn off his empathy, even when it is more than enough, even when he would genuinely rather have some peace” (Saunders).¹⁰²

I would add that this gratuitousness sounds right (not awkward) when heard against the stateliness of the first (and last) stanza, and against the carefully controlled incremental movement of stanzas two and three. The fourth stanza, launched again by the falling rhythm of BEAUtiful NATural BLOSSoms transfers that rhythm over into the third line (WORRy or BOTHer or CARE) whose rhythm now loses syllables and becomes blunter, harsher, and heavier before it starts to fall apart in the fourth line and then completely dissolves in the fifth. The stanza then veers away into a single sentence whose winding corridors of syntax – of qualifiers and conjunctions (even, or, perhaps, to, and) continue to elaborate and stretch out Wright’s painfulimaginings of the old man’s fate. Finally, the stanza ends, Wright draws a breath, and then starts over for a third time with the tree and its beautiful natural blossoms. But now the tree’s stateliness, its beauty, can only remind him of death – of the dark place and dead groin –

not the transcendence of natural beauty, and the stateliness quickly becomes a sculpted death mask; we end with the formality of the balanced sounds of subject (the dew, the dark blood in my body) against predicate (drags me/ Down with my brother). Here two ds in the subject match two ds in the predicate, and the b of body matches the b of brother. ‘Blood in my body’ also forms a kind of loose rhyme with ‘Down with my brother’ as both phrases follow three single syllable words with a single trochaic one. To be monumental, to be balanced and controlled here is to be dragged down. Wright and the old man both become closed characters (cf. the ‘haunting character’ of my introduction); the old man becomes more so in Wright’s imagination and Wright becomes more so because of that imagination. Both are contained in an art where they sink down toward death.

But the fact that the fourth stanza pulls away from monumentality to cry out makes the poem elegiac as well as deathly; it makes the final stanza’s deathliness at least partially a gentle escape and a drawing over of the shroud – which is in this case made of pear petals. In contrast to being kicked in the dead groin, this sort of deathliness is a mercy. So it is not only, as is so often remarked, the beauty of the tree in opposition to human suffering that provides the emotional form of the poem, it is also the balancing of release and control, howl and mantra.

And the final stanza does more than balance out and restore control; it also advances and unites. The end that cinches its speaker and encountered character (“my brother”) closed together, also serves to blur, or at least to bring closer together, the elements of the poem’s opening dichotomy. Wright for a second becomes the tree as we can read dew as part of the dark blood of his body. The final sentence addresses the tree, qualifies what the tree is, and then says what is happening to the speaker; however, the syntax easily allows one to read dew as a description of the dark blood. Moreover, prior to this stanza only the tree existed in a timeless present tense (“You stand” its only verb aside from the implied, but unstated, verb ‘to be’) while Wright and the old man moved through many tenses (past, imperative, conditional, subjunctive, progressive, future – almost every tense but the present). But in the final stanza Wright joins the tree in the present tense (the dark blood in my body drags me/ Down with my brother). In other words, the blossoms are no longer “beyond my [Wright’s] reach”; he has entered their realm as their dew has entered his body. The disruption of the fourth stanza has led to a new synthesizing
form – the ultimate form of the poem – where the deathly and monumental incorporate and make room for human suffering and the gentle transcendence of the blossoming natural world. Funerary though the poem’s ending may be, natural beauty as well as human struggle and grief – blood, bodies, dragging, and brothers – are now all parts of it. The wildness of Wright’s empathy blurs with its control, and we are both lifted (unburdened) and dragged down. The poem blurs ‘immortal’ nature with human suffering into a timeless present both heavenly and chthonic, shapely and ragged.

“To a Blossoming Pear Tree” contains its empathetic rupture and finds new equilibrium, yet it is still a poem with a non-human anchor; it doesn’t have rhyme and meter, but it does have the patterning and formality of the pear tree to return to when human relationships fail. “To The Muse” is a poem without such a third party, a poem that has no recourse beyond the exchange between embedded first-person speaker and subject; moreover, it is a poem where the addressed person is a beloved not a stranger, and where the issue of what use artifice and artistic guile can be with a loved one in imminent crisis is explicitly and centrally what is at stake. Perhaps, the poem suggests, in times of real crisis it’s time to drop the charade and just say the few plain things we can ever really mean. Yet despite all of this, the poem finds an organizing form and contains all of its emotional vacillations and impulses toward washing its hands of art (of Allen Ginsberg’s “whole boatload of sensitive bullshit”). The poem is one of Wright’s best, but only because Wright’s relationship to the suicidal character of Jenny feels so dangerous, and radioactively unstable. If there were ever a poem of Wright’s whose success went hand-in-hand with the possibility of failure then it’s this one.

To arrive at the poem we have to turn from the Minneapolis of Wright’s days teaching at the University of Minnesota back to the Martins Ferry of Wright’s childhood and learn something about Jenny. Jenny turns up several times in Wright’s work and her identity is always mysterious: in one poem she’s a prostitute; in another she’s married to a strip miner and has five children; in still another she “left her new baby/ In a bus station-can,/ And sprightly danced


away/ Through Jacksontown” (ATR 157). One critic identifies her in “To the Muse” as a real girl
who Wright loved and who apparently committed suicide; Costello considers her an embodiment
of the heartland and a casualty of it;\textsuperscript{105} Saunders sees her as another Eurydice-figure out Wright’s
intensive study of Rilke and German poetry;\textsuperscript{106} Hass argues that several poems that contain
unidentified female pronouns are actually about Jenny.\textsuperscript{107} She is \textit{supposed} to be slippery and
have many resonances: it’s helpful to know that Wright was delighted by the moment in
\textit{Tristram Shandy} where Sterne introduces a coyly unidentified “my dear \textit{Jenny}!” Wright said of
\textit{Shall We Gather at the River}, the book in which Jenny appears, that “I was trying to write about
a girl who I was in love with who has been dead a long time.”\textsuperscript{108} Jenny is what I have called a
‘floating character’: a character who draws attention to how she is partly being made up by
Wright, and partly deadly real. In “To the Muse,” anyway, the feeling that she’s more than a
spirit or abstraction is created through the range of personal tones directed toward her, as well as
through the specific shared memory that the poem invokes almost right away. Again, as in the
three female graces I mentioned toward the beginning of this chapter, it is the melding of the
symbolic and the literal that gives Jenny her power. Such melding is matched by her
predicament, by the operation she must undergo which is part mythic and biblical (we have the
three fates, the serpent, the divided rib, the Osiris-myth) and part factually Ohioan (we have the
river, the Powhatan pit, Wheeling, suck holes) and graphically bodily (as Robert Hass says, it is
“as wrenching as anything in Plath”).\textsuperscript{109} Here is the poem:

\textbf{To the Muse}

\begin{quote}
It is all right. All they do
Is go in by dividing
One rib from another. I wouldn’t
Lie to you. It hurts
Like nothing I know. All they do
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{105} qtd. in Dougherty, \textit{James Wright}, 75.

\textsuperscript{106} Saunders, \textit{James Wright: An Introduction}, 74.


\textsuperscript{108} qtd. in Dougherty, \textit{James Wright}, 76, 75.

Is burn their way in with a wire.
It forks in and out a little like the tongue
Of that frightened garter snake we caught
At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny
So long ago.

I would lie to you
If I could.
But the only way I can get you to come up
Out of the suckhole, the south face
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.

Three lady doctors in Wheeling open
Their offices at night.
I don’t have to call them, they are always there.
But they only have to put the knife once
Under your breast.
Then they hang their contraption.
And you bear it.

It’s awkward a while. Still, it lets you
Walk about on tiptoe if you don’t
Jiggle the needle.
It might stab your heart, you see.
The blade hangs in your lung and the tube
Keeps it draining.
That way they only have to stab you
Once. Oh Jenny.

I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy
And disastrous place. I
Didn’t, I can’t bear it
Either, I don’t blame you, sleeping down there
Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring,
Muse of black sand,
Alone.

I don’t blame you. I know
The place where you lie.
I admit everything. But look at me.
How can I live without you?
Come up to me, love,
Out of the river, or I will
Come down to you. (175-6)

Like the old man of “Pear Tree,” Jenny could be seen as a ‘haunting character’ for, in the end, the speaker may “come down” to drown with her. But that *may* is balanced by the other possibility, and the poem’s exchange is really a form of impasse. In “Pear Tree” Wright suddenly encounters a stranger, takes on some of that stranger’s sufferings, and gives the old man a serious form of elegiac attention. In order to do so he relies on the third party, the triangulation of the pear tree to give something to them both: let’s call it a vision of order, a both distant and cold but also, by the end of the poem, pathos and petal-laden kind of beauty and patterning. In “To the Muse,” the exchange feels less mediated; the third party of the “lady doctors” is more of a dramatization of Jenny’s predicament and less of a true third party. Moreover, the fact that the scene is a melding of memory and fantasy, but is not describing a single temporally unfolding encounter, makes it harder to come to any conclusion or way out. Instead exchange here becomes the carefully balanced impasse of the final lines (do X or I’ll do Y): “Come up to me, love,/ Out of the river, or I will/ Come down to you.” Put differently, the poem ends with exchange as an imaginative proposition – the possibility of Wright’s own death given in exchange for the possibility of Jenny’s return to life. Despite all the fantastic props here and their way of blurring prosaic details (garter snakes, the mundane horrors of medicine) with lyrical, surreal ones (the purposefully vague “contraption,” the dividing of ribs, the unbelievable silk of spring), despite the river that is both ideal getaway and “suckhole,” James and Jenny are pretty much alone on the stage. The poem ends poised between two lives and two deaths, and empathy provides no easy answers.

Yet arriving at this final difficult balance is like skiing down a black diamond slope: each turn must be executed correctly or the energy behind the poem – the empathy for Jenny’s suffering – will throw everything off course. There is no pear tree here, no natural non-human example of patterning and beauty against which Wright’s art may lean to steady itself. There are only his feelings about Jenny, Jenny’s predicament, and whatever improvisatory gestures Wright is able to invent on the fly. In this way the poem is deeply about personal skill, about the quality of the *rhetoric* Wright is able to invent. To say so is not to deny the poem’s emotionality: this is
the rhetoric used to talk the suicide down from the ledge where one wrong move might send them over. Here, as in many of Wright’s poems, intense emotionality is inseparable from control, formality from informality, and, as we’ll see, ‘walking naked’ and telling the bald truth from the ‘craftiness’ of art.

But to return to the poem itself we should see that there are two impulses here: an impulse toward persuasive rhetoric (so Jenny and by extension Wright might live) and an impulse to tell the quite bald, emotional truth. We see these two impulses thread in and out of each other quickly in the first stanza as false consolation (“all they do”) becomes painful divulging (“it hurts like nothing I know”) becomes the attempt to distract Jenny from the wire-tongue of the surgery with a pleasant shared memory of the tongue of a garter snake.

Yet these impulses do more than thread: they blend. Even as the poem opens, the tendency toward rhetoric leads naturally towards a view of truth as the best rhetoric e.g. “I wouldn’t lie to you,” *this is how it is*. It’s not just in *Two Citizens* that Wright is more slippery than he’s often given credit for. By the end of the second stanza we find Wright saying that the only way to convince is “to tell you/What you know”: rhetoric becomes the potential catharsis of an honest voicing of horrors. Yet telling the truth here, telling Jenny what she knows, is, again, a deeply emotional proposition. The elaboration of the “contraption” is excessive in a way that should remind us of the fourth stanza of *Pear Tree*. Does Jenny really need to know that she has to walk on tiptoe for fear of her heart being stabbed? Does she need to know about the draining tube? Where they have to put the knife? The very rhetoric of truth as persuasion becomes again an excessive (emotional) treatment of truth – where understatements and false encouragements (“it’s awkward a while,” “Still,” “they only have to”) give the lie to the idea that this is anything approaching an objective, controlled description of what she’ll have to suffer. The danger of this is both that Wright will make things seem too awful and that the formal counterbalance provided by rhetoric will disappear. The potential advantage is that we (and she) might imagine that this is no artificial manipulation.

---

110 He is certainly more slippery than he is given credit for by Adam Kirsch who wrote in the *New Yorker* in 2005 that Wright’s quest for authenticity made him often lack the “cunning” necessary to the artist and to write poems that have more “authenticity than artistry” (Adam Kirsch, “Primal Fear: Roethke, Wright and the Cult of Authenticity,” *New Yorker* 81, no. 23 [August 2005], 89-92).
In order to preserve rhetoric’s formality and the poem’s control Wright quickly tries a second reciprocal kind of ‘rhetoric of truth’; it is the juxtaposition of these two kinds that makes the poem so persuasive (if not to Jenny then to the reader who must be convinced to care). For so far Wright has only told Jenny about the horrors of the surgery, and he has still to tell her about his love for her and make explicit the meaning to him of their joint predicament. In other words we get by the end of the poem the truth of the horror of the described procedure flipped into the truth of his love and his own direct voicing of emotions: he just makes this turn and these two truths together make the poem’s rhetoric stronger. This rhetorical shaping can be seen in how the poem measures these two truths against each other formally. While the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas dole out their horrors carefully with lots of lines end-stopped with periods, the fifth stanza explodes with speed, enjambment, and vacillating line length. While the fourth stanza claims that you “bear it” the fifth stanza admits that it’s unbearable. While the fourth stanza focuses on Jenny’s suffering, saying ‘you’ or ‘your’ exactly five times, the fifth stanza focuses on Wright’s love and despair, saying “I” exactly five times. In some ways Wright is at risk here of becoming as unstable as Jenny: the fifth is the wildest stanza and it is only through how it carefully inverts what has preceded it that it keeps the poem’s shape and keeps the skier on course. But this second ‘rhetoric of truth’ is also in danger of losing its rhetorical function and becoming mere self-indulgence.

The final stanza avoids this danger by again carefully measuring these two rhetorical but emotional truths against each other: living will be terrible but I want you to live, “I admit everything. But look at me. How can I live without you?” The stanza starts out flying with the wild energy of the fifth stanza continuing to ‘admit everything,’ but it’s already beginning to tame that energy by switching from enjambments to end-stops and by employing shorter and more uniform line-lengths. When Wright asks, in the fourth line “How can I live without you?” it is like the single well-timed question that holds its own against a rant, and the poem pivots back on course. Of course, “How can I live without you?” is also an intensely rhetorical and emotional thing to say. In reality, one form of emotional rhetoric is again being balanced by another inside a form large enough to contain enjambment and wild statement as well as carefulness and calm. This balance is reprised in the final lines whose command the poem has been building up to all
along; this is a command so limpid as to be that event horizon where rhetoric and reality finally join: “Come up to me love,/ Out of the river, or I will/ Come down to you.” We have in these final three lines the care of uniform line-lengths and obvious parallelisms measured against the enjambment, caesuras, and emotionality of Wright’s own threat of suicide. Wright has made his best case and now Jenny has to choose.

The poem then should not be seen as merely ending in impasse, but additionally as calling past itself and past the reader. In the last stanzas the will to form that is rhetorical argument here merges with the view that the formed means nothing in the ‘unbearable’ “disastrous place” of the world of Martins Ferry. “I admit everything” Wright says, it’s all just words, and none of this matters if Jenny doesn’t come out of the river. Of course, only those words have made that choice seem important, and have made Jenny imaginable as an agent who can make this choice; we see again how the poem finds its equilibrium and how the most powerful forms are able to include and imagine their own destruction. Wright did make this poem but he didn’t make the conditions of the ‘disastrous world’ that the poem describes and that Jenny has to live in. If the poem is like talking a suicide down from the ledge, its power can’t come from its virtuosity and making alone – it has to gesture to a world beyond the page, a world where Jenny has opened up, not only because she chases garter snakes, won’t be lied to, and suffers in ways that are completely non-abstract and vividly terrible, but also because she has not decided what to do next. She is not like the old man in “Pear Tree” whose fate is imaginatively sealed: she might come up out of the river.

**

Viewed together, the series of poems in Wright’s middle books shows us how many things his empathy can do. It can be viewed generally as breaking open old forms in order to seek out new character-driven equilibriums, but it can also be viewed eclectically as a diverse group of tendencies that repeat and expand on those we saw in Wright’s first two books. It still can seem excessive, bringing unusual amounts of consideration to figures who normally do not receive such (the propositioning old man in “Pear Tree”); or seem insufficient, denying certain
people their due (the cops in “The Minneapolis Poem”); or even violent, transforming itself from a form of compassion into anger or disgust as thinking about Aunt Agnes leads Wright to make his itemized curse. But it can do more: it can embed itself in the first-person; it can fail (“I try and try to hear them, and all I get/ Is a blind dial tone” (ATR 254)) or offer no easy catharsis (Jenny); or it can be ambivalent as in “Ars Poetica,” or as in “Two Poems for President Harding”111 which shows consideration for the President’s ‘shame’ while suggesting that he was a “ridiculous” “fool” (128); it can also sometimes seek out those in the shadows who might otherwise be ignored like the mother calf instead of her newborn baby in “Well, What Are You Going to Do?”112; and it can sometimes find the ways its subjects resist their circumstances and push back against the desire to view them merely as victims, such as the aging woman from “A Poem About Breasts”: “It’s not hunching, it’s only/ That children have been reaching/ Upward for years to gather/ Sweetness of her face” (182).

Wright’s empathy is so many things because, as I’ve argued, it is vehemently anti-systematic, it suggests a belief that to get at others we cannot rely on pre-formulated policies or morals but must keep attending to others, thinking in the moment, and changing our minds.113

111 Alan Williamson writes about importance of ambivalence to these two poems (Williamson, Introspection, 86-7).

112 In this vein, he said of his second wife Annie in a letter: “I don’t know that people would look twice at her on the street. But she is a luminous person, a revelation” (Wright, Wild Perfection, 355).

113 Some have misread the empathy as falling too frequently into unsophisticated divisions between innocent outsiders and cruel authority figures. In doing so these critics miss how much Wright changes his mind. Wright often 1) refuses to see outsiders as innocent or 2) meets a new person who defies his prejudices or triggers his empathy unexpectedly. In the following examples beggars and children are sinister and cruel, and cops generate surprising thankfulness or sympathy:

an arthritic man
Takes coins at the parking lot.
He smiles with the sinister grief
Of old age. (ATR 160)

dark little boys in Ohio...
Who sneak out of graveyards in summer twilights
And lay crossties across rails. (159)

[a place] where I got picked up...
By a good cop
Believe it, Lord, or not. (158)

Goodbye to the glum cop across the canal,
Goodbye to the flat face and empty eyes
Made human one more time. That uniform
Shivers and dulls against the pier, is stone. (30)
And so Wright’s empathy can quickly decide to disregard a strong cultural directive: in his letters Wright cites the moment in George Orwell’s writing when a man was “unable to shoot an enemy simply because the man was running along the top of a trench as the dawn broke, and the man was holding up his trousers with one hand.”

Empathy is the driving force behind Wright’s career, it is what leads him to be so on guard against his own “glibness” and “facility,” so quick to doubt a past poem’s worth, so eager to learn that ‘traditional’ English-language is not the only poetic tradition, that “poetry is a possibility... [and that] although all poetry is formal, there are many forms, just as there are many forms of feeling.” Empathy brings Wright’s poetry up close to different, specific others and these others make different demands, they call for different forms of embodiment and presence. What I have described so far as empathy’s informality, its deconstructive move toward new forms, should also be thought of as driven by and adapting to the pressure exerted by his subjects. His characters, seen in this way, want to be more than lovely closed portraits or detached, post-traumatic limbs. This is why characters in Wright’s poems (Jenny, Annie, George Doty, Wright’s father and grandmother, the Sioux Brave, President Harding, Minnegan, and John Skunk) so often turn up in more than one poem: they want to make sure they have their say. It is this series of portraits and exchanges that drives Wright’s poetry forwards, and in this his poetry remains remarkably consistent. As he says in a 1972 interview: “I think I knew pretty well what I was going to do from the beginning. I was just trying to find out ways to do it. As for the different kinds of forms, I call it just a continuous exploration.”

For this kind of change compare also the “insane Jesus Jumpers” from “Ohio Valley Swains” (234) to the amorous, comical, even sympathetic evangelists in “The Wheeling Gospel Tabernacle” (286).

14 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, 140.
15 James Wright, interview with Dave Smith, Pure Clear Word, 16.
16 He, for instance, rejected six possible manuscripts between Saint Judas and Branch (Stein, Grown Man, 45).
17 Ibid., 44.
18 Ibid., 52.
19 James Wright, Collected Prose, 145. Donald Hall writes that it’s difficult for people to love both sides of Wright, “Neruda and Robinson, Trakl and Hardy” (Hall, Above the River, xxxiii). Though I am emphasizing Wright’s felt obligation to people, and deemphasizing Branch, I do not think Wright’s empathy involves downplaying the importance of Neruda and Trakl to Wright.
Many of Wright’s best poems about people – like “To the Muse” or “Beginning” – manage to fuse these two sides. One does not need to write in a naturalist or realist mode in order to bring the pressure of others to bear.
James Wright II: Only One Life

I turn in this second chapter to Wright’s late work in which the fundamental nature of his empathy changes. Though we found varied types in the first books, the people in these late books are better known to Wright: they are more often named, we start to hear more anecdotes about them, and the town of the poems starts looking more like a real town – with its Uncle Shorty, Uncle Willy Lyons, Garnie, Aunt Agnes, Uncle Sherman, Emerson Buchanan, Ralph Neal, Homer Rhodeheaver, and Billy Sunday. And some of these characters seem to be suffering less.1 Wright will continue to find compassion for others by disregarding scripts and systems, but will now more consistently locate strong, redemptive individual energies in others and their similar transgressions. Here is an example from a letter written near the end of Wright’s life:

The Florentines are still pretty arrogant, but I found out a marvelous fact about them in the past: in 1369 they excommunicated the Pope. Talk about chutzpah.2

The goal will not be to subvert systemic thinking for its own sake, but to use that subversion to illuminate individuals so that they can be imagined, pitied, and maybe even redeemed.3 In the late prose poem, “The Wheeling Gospel Tabernacle” Wright describes how a philandering psalmodist finds not God but carnal love through his singing: “maybe Jehovah was drowsing, and Eros heard the prayer and figured that love after all was love... so what the hell.”4 Escaping from Christianity to Roman polytheism here is rewarded: by breaking the rules people can escape from damned generalized types like the philandering holy man (or the beggar). And the most common of these anti-systematic moves will be nothing more radical than refusing to succumb to and be generalized by one’s circumstances, whether of depression-era Ohio or

1 Now he is better able to “see those who provided comfort and solace during vulnerable times, rather than just those who piled up the slag heaps while the boy watched his beloved Ohio and Ohio River befouled” (Elkins, James Wright, 200).

2 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, 541.

3 He, for instance, applies this kind of thinking to the category of the ‘minor poet,’ which he refuses to view as meaning ‘less worthwhile.’ He speaks in an interview about his, at the time, favorite poet Edward Thomas: “He’s not Aeschylus, he’s not Shakespeare, he’s not Neruda. Well, neither am I. Who is? And there’s a sense in which one ought to be able to say, who has to be? We should be able to listen to people’s music for is own sake” (CP 140). He applies this thinking to himself as well in a 1974 letter where he embraces the idea of being a “minor poet” (WP 407).

4 James Wright, Collected Prose, 287.
homelessness in Minneapolis. As Wright says in a letter: “The harrowing of hell has always moved me very much, perhaps even more than the story of the resurrection” (WP 446).5

In the later books, Wright’s empathy spends less time representing horrors and suffering (cf. “The Minneapolis Poem”) because it often becomes a form of loving or valuing that seeks out whatever good there is to find in his relationship to others. And in his typical anti-systematic fashion Wright is most interested in unexpected acts of valuing, in love given by those who have no clear incentive to give it to those who don’t seem very loveable. Wright’s childhood scoutmaster Ralph Neal, for instance, in “The Flying Eagles of Troop 62” loves Wright and his fellows “for our scrawniness, our acne, our fear; but mostly for his knowledge of what would probably become of us” (290)). This valuing is no more blanket or predictable, though, than was Wright’s previous tendency toward mourning. We may think abstractly that everyone is valuable, but Wright is interested in how valuing is tangibly embodied in actual messy relationships to others, and how such relationships always rely on unpredictable personal discriminations and the freedom to value some over others – and to change our minds.

In any case, it is all very well to say that Wright is more optimistic in his poems about others at the end of his career. Other critics have said similar things about his late poems “synthesis of affirmation and negation,” his “reconciliation of the possibility of epiphany with the reality of despair” (Stiffler).6 But how does Wright accomplish this, and how does he make it aesthetically convincing? The answer has to do with the surfacing of a new kind of empathetic formal control in To A Blossoming Pear Tree7 that struggles less to find its equilibriums. It takes a very precise blow to strike the exact point between where, say, Aunt Agnes is unlovable and where she is impressive. The figures for this new empathetic poise will be the skilled laborer, the

---

5 He adds that Hemingway has coded references to the harrowing in “The Killers,” which is the story from which Wright took his epigraph for Two Citizens.

6 Qtd. in Elkins, James Wright, 174. Stein refers to Wright’s final books as a poetry of “affirmation and integration...a personal and wholly revivifying acceptance of the dual realities of human possibility and human limitation” (Stein, Grown Man, 141). Dougherty finds in this new work a “tone of patient acceptance and wisdom... [an] impression further supported by the mood of the poems about the home country” (Dougherty, James Wright, 133). James Seay observes that “up until the new poems most of the expressions of joy in Wright’s work involved private experiences of communion with some nonhuman part of the natural world... Rarely did those experiences center on another person [but in]... the new work there are some notable exceptions to that pattern” (James Seay, Heart of Light, 252).

7 He considered this collection his best (James Wright, interview with Dave Smith, Pure Clear Word, 39).

250
saw, the chisel, the wedge, the diamond, and the mid-air balancing act. The point will be not to sugarcoat or give in to easy pessimism, but to find the exact strikes, the exact cuts that reveal where privation and failure become resistance and hope – the opened site that reveals that a poem’s subject isn’t dead.8

**

Wright first theorizes about this new kind of empathy, which we might for now call the empathy of skilled labor, after he writes Two Citizens. By this point in his career he is spending a lot of time in Italy with his new wife Annie and is, on the whole, happier than he has ever been. In addition to standing for the improvement of his personal life, Italy is a revelation to Wright in how its (non-Ohioan) rural life can seem pleasant, even idyllic, and in how it mingles long periods of history with the present moment through well-built things sticking around.

We see Wright’s Italian-derived empathy first in the letters. Here is one from 1973, the year Two Citizens comes out:

*Adige* is the name of the river. It runs around the fairly small town of Verona. I want to tell you about the color of the water. It is a slow and milky green, like the water that comes down from the Alps. The river is called the *Adige*, and it curls around the city very like the setting of a gem. And the gem is the city itself.9

The gem or diamond, and the method of bringing forth these stones (their “setting[s]”), will soon become formal ideals.10 As we’ll see, it’s no coincidence that when Wright sees his wife’s friend, the dancer and choreographer Carolyn Bilderback, dance something called “The Diamond Cutters,” he sends her a letter of praise.11 But more generally, we hear Wright’s new obsession with manual craft in the figurative language he uses in the next few years of the letters “every

---

8 I have been emphasizing how empathy often means raggedness and struggle (in Wright’s early and middle career) partially in order to show how these qualities drive Wright’s work forwards. However, there are many poems amidst that process that are not presided over by formal struggle, but rather look with lucid ease at their subjects (some of the best such poems are the short lyrics “Trouble” and “In Response to a Rumor”). However, Wright as a character is hardly present in these poems.


10 And notice how the aestheticizing of the river here is not an end in itself: it points toward the city.

11 Ibid., 419-20.
page has got to ring true, the words have got to be shaped, formed” (my emphasis). He starts describing form as emerging through skilled labor (it can no longer come about through floating visions of the dark of the inner life): “Very, very few human beings, in my experience, have had the strength of mind and feeling to balance and, finally, to fuse force and kindness into one new thing; very few human beings, and certainly fewer poets.”

Force and kindness: the Italian prose pieces in the chapbooks written after Two Citizens help us to see that this new formal ideal is social. In the poem “The Secret of Light,” for instance, the idea of the right cut that releases the diamond from the rough is shown to be an idea about how to find others:

Directly in front of my bench, perhaps thirty yards away from me, there is a startling woman. Her hair is black as the inmost secret of light in a perfectly cut diamond, a perilous black, a secret light that must have been studied for many years before the anxious and disciplined craftsman could achieve the necessary balance between courage and skill to stroke the strange stone and take the one chance he would ever have to bring that secret to light. (ATR 302)

What better model for the lyric poem, then, the quick perfectly balanced action that requires “many years” of anxiety and study and peril? But here that model also involves bringing the secret of another to light, making another into what Wright will call later in the poem an “open secret.” This other must be treated with 1) tenderness (stroking) and 2) the good violence of craft, the opposite of what Jenny found with her three doctors in “To the Muse” or even what the old men of “The Minneapolis Poem” found “Exposed in broad daylight by the blade/ Of a strange plough” (149). Maybe the violence inherent in representation when managed correctly, tenderly, can provide some respite against the crueler violence perpetrated by the external world.

---

12 Ibid., 417.

13 I should say something brief about gender: this new phase of Wright’s empathy does not entail favoring some idea of ‘manly’ action over ‘feminine’ passivity. Passivity is retained but its escapism – that led Robert Hass to argue that Wright is sometimes a poet of fugitive decadent darkness (Robert Hass, Pure Clear Word, 200) – has now been converted into patience and discipline. In other words, passivity has become a superior means to arrive at responsible action. Hass felt that, at least in the poem “On Minding One’s Own Business,” all fugitive creatures in Wright become the same: “Hunted criminal... equals hobo equals bird equals girl.” His new empathy in “The Secret of Light,” however, involves finding the precarious, “necessary balance” between passive and active artistic impulses to find a person of darkness – a stranger with “perilous” black hair – and bring their secret to light. It’s true, though, that many of Wright’s working class models here are men (though not all – see p. 519 of the letters), and that it’s important to Wright to figure out how to ‘be a man’ (“The kind of poetry I want to write is/ The poetry of a grown man”). I’ll explore issues of gender and poetry more in my Rich chapter, but for now, it’s worth noting that Wright’s ideal of masculinity is at least partially his own: it involves incorporating various ‘feminine’ attributes: sensitivity, emotionality, expressivity, receptivity. There is a book to be written just about how Wright reinvents the masculinity with which he grew up.
Maybe a certain ideal of craft can allow Wright “to balance and, finally, to fuse force and kindness” as he looks at others.

Wright describes how the diamond cutter must “stroke the strange stone.” We’ve seen that word “stroke” before in the title poem of the volume: “He paused on a street in Minneapolis/ And stroked my face.” The stroking of “The Secret of Light” is then in fact taken and parodied in the title poem, which comes almost at the end of the volume. Wright is ever aware of how meddling with others can go awry; it is part of why his empathy is so restless and remains so even after he comes upon the skilled labor ideal of craft (part of why this ideal can be convincing). A poem from the same volume describes being part of a childhood game that beat up two black boys. The poem begins with the bad craft of “a long shattering of jackhammers that stripped/ Away the whole one side of one foothill of one/ Appalachian mountain” (300).

Minneapolis, Appalachia, Martins Ferry – these are places where it’s hard for Wright to believe that violence or agency can be careful, where it’s easier for him to retreat into the photonegative Ohio of his head and “sway like one fainting strand/ Of spiderweb, glittering and vanishing and frail/ Above the river” (301).

This is why Italy is a particularly useful model; unlike America, everywhere Wright looks in Italy he finds the fruits of good labor:

How pretty it would be, the sweet faces of the boy Giotto’s lambs gouged, with infinite and still uncertain and painful care, on the side of a boulder at the edge of a country field. (ATR 271)

He contrasts these careful scratches with the ‘oozing’ Mall in Albany, New York, but this is not to say that there is a simple binary, and that Italy represents effortless poise and accuracy after six books of formal restlessness and raggedness. The lambs are “gouged”: even the apprenticeship of Giotto must be “still uncertain and painful”; craft must always be in dialogue with hardship. But the hardship involved in crafting and carving is what can yield lasting communal sweetness:

Here in Verona the Romans built an ampitheatre of pink marble nearly a thousand years before Amerigo Vespucci was born. Yet today the Arena stands still, nearly flawless. Its shape holds so fine a balance between the ground and the sky that its very stones are a meeting and an intermingling of light and shadow. (my emphasis, ATR 279)
Here is a way of sanely managing the hardship and damage of labor that he saw enslaving people in Martins Ferry with “brutal regularity.” Here, through craft, the heaviness of stones becomes a mingling of light and shadow, part of a lasting delicate “balance.” Wright goes on to say that the shapeliness of the arena is the product of Roman engineers who were “Disciplined, intelligent” and “dreamed by molding and lifting... this new Arena, a comely body whose very stones give a new shape to the air that people breathe, hush, whisper, and listen to” (280). Again the floating weight: dreams and lifting stones, stones and shapes traced in air. This craft can be idealized, though, only because it has others in mind and bequeaths a public place – so different from the isolated nature of Branch – here people can come together and be ennobled. Earlier on in the poem Wright praises the social norms engendered by the ampitheatere. The Veronese will hush the person “foolish enough to applaud the musicians... while they are still singing” (279) with an of indrawn breath, “as though silence itself had spoken.”

Yet part of what makes this craft hard, heavy, and durable as well as dreamed, lifted, light, and whispered is how it necessitates feeling the smallness of your own life, the smallness even of art. In the lines quoted above the ampitheatre’s “flawless” beauty is linked to its agedness. Later in the poem, Wright imagines how even as the engineers and builders were first at work “minerals hard enough to cut perfect diamonds had already been crumbling [from the Alps,] a handful of grains every thousand years or so, and flowing downhill as the ice melted into the river Adige” (my emphasis). Feeling this smallness is difficult but important. It is to feel oneself expanded in relation to other suddenly open, gestured toward real lives – the lives of the dead Roman engineers, the lives of the present day Veronese who hush others with “a kind of indrawn breath,” and even the lives of known others. At the end of the poem Wright’s wife Annie appears standing at the opposite side of the arena, “her wide-brimmed straw hat fluttering, one feather of one wing....”

Yet even the hard diamond-cutting minerals have been crumbling. This difficult expansion involves feeling oneself connected to these others under the sign of geologic time and nature’s craftless and inevitable destruction of more than just the self: the ampitheatre is an exception in how long it lasts, but its shaping, and Wright’s own diamond cutting and illuminations of character, will also crumble. We might think here of those two famous quotes
from *Howard's End*: “Death destroys a man: the idea of Death saves him” and “Only connect.” Wright describes Annie and then ends the poem saying, “I do not want to waste time” (280).

The shapely Italian scene that brings us other people is everywhere in the prose poems. Here is one more example from the ending of “A Letter to Franz Wright,” where Annie and James have awakened in a town that they entered in the dark of night:

> I thought I heard her gasp... San Gimignano is hundreds of feet in the air. The city is comparatively small, and it is perfectly formed. We felt ourselves strange in that presence, that city glittering there in the lucid Tuscan morning, like a perfectly cut little brilliant sparkling on the pinnacle of a stalagmite. Far below us we could look almost straight down into vineyards and fields where people, whole families, even small children, had evidently been at work for hours. In all directions below us were valleys whose villages were just beginning to appear out of the mist, a splinter of a church here, an olive grove there. It was a life in itself. (ATR 268)

We have here again the floating weight and the sudden gem alongside an emergent sense of presence and life: the town was there all along; the working people have been there for hours. The ‘splinters’ of others that were dissolving in *Branch* here are moving in the opposite direction as the shapeliness of Italy provides a series of frames for the kind of sudden connection Wright described in “Father”: “Perhaps it’s like that...We get the fog apart for a moment, and we rush through the opening, and find them.” And so perhaps poems too can bring us other people; maybe they, like well-made buildings, can become places in which to gather.14

Italy’s shapeliness, its formal ideals, will eventually provide Wright with a way of looking back at America and Ohio and finding what is worthwhile about the lives of others in these places. The balancing act that this requires in *To A Blossoming Pear Tree*’s American poems will be even more precarious than in the Italian poems:

---

14 Of course, again, Wright is never single-minded and is perfectly capable of finding ugliness in Italy. In “Bari, Old and Young,” for instance, he finds vicious young men ‘swaggering’ and ‘smirking’ “as though no one had ever lived before, as though no one had ever died” (273). Their insistence on their uniqueness means that they will never be ennobled by form and “will leave no churches behind them in the fullness of their age, but only the blind scars of motorcycle tires, the wrinkles of panic on women’s faces, and an echo of brutal laughter at the edge of the sea.” If you want your life to be small and ugly, treat it as if it’s the only one, and apprentice yourself to nothing that will outlast you. Conversely though, even edifices raised for cruelty like the Roman Colosseum may ameliorate that cruelty if they are well built:

> The floor is a careful revelation. It is an intricate and intelligent series of ditches, and the sun cannot reach them. They are the shadows of starved people who did not even want to die... Even the noon sunlight in the Colosseum is the golden shadow of a starved lion, the most beautiful of God’s creatures except maybe horses (270).

Because they are in a “careful” and “intelligent” place, the shadows of the dead lead Wright to beauty not horror; thinking about the Colosseum even allows Wright to forgive, for a moment, the local politics of Martins Ferry where the hiring of a corrupt chairman for the Committee for Liquor Control during prohibition results in the building of a symphony orchestra and “two spacious football stadiums” (269).
The very name of America often makes me sick, and yet Ralph Neal was an American. The country is enough to drive you crazy. (290)

Did you ever feel a man hold
Sixty-five cents
In a hook,
And place it
Gently
In your freezing hand? (316)

The second example, from Wright’s poem “Hook,” should be read with slight pauses at the end of each line, as they enact the riskiness and surprise of the first appearance of the gift, then its threatening means of transport, then its arrival, and then finally that surprising recognition of gentleness, that ‘your hand’ – not the hook or coins – is what was cold. “New snow against her face and hands she bore,” says Wright in “Complaint.” Now the shock of encounter, of hands and touching, provides a means of transaction with the living. I’ll return to this poem, and to poems about America, in depth in a few pages. For now, it’s enough to notice how the lyric’s skinny lines emerge incrementally: the way the strike, the moment of contact, depends on formal balance.

*To A Blossoming Pear Tree* intersperses a selection of prose poems taken from Wright’s two Italian chapbooks with longish skinny lyrics that have stanza breaks but, unlike “The Minneapolis Poem,” are each comprised of single unnumbered sections. Placed next to the sometimes several page-long blocks of the prose poems these slender lyrics emphasize the vertical over the horizontal, and look sharper by contrast. When Wright starts making the free-verse lyrics of *Pear Tree* the discursive themes of diamond-cutting and floating weight become enacted formal principles. Balance and poise too become key: “to balance and, finally, to fuse force and kindness” Wright says in his letters. “The necessary balance between courage and skill,” he says in “The Secret of Light.” Here is a lined poem set in Florence where the balanced strikes of the lyric feel as gentle, sharp, and precise as one could wish:

A red-tailed hawk paused
Long enough to look me over
Halfway down the air.
He held still, and plainly
Said, go.
It was no time
I love the way these lines are tentative, hovering, cautious, and yet decisive – all the stillness here building toward a firm command against staying (or writing a pretty nature poem). And such balancing can be strung out over many more lines as we see in “The Best Days,” a poem which adds the wedge to our list of new formal figures (chisel, saw, gem, floating weight, balancing act). Here we see how liberating the diamond from the rough can be thought of as finding the exact right spot between easy escapist pessimism and wishful thinking in imagining another; this is a new vision of the transgressiveness of empathy. Here is the poem:

First, the two men stand pondering
The square stone block sunk in the earth.
It must weigh five hundred pounds. The best
Days are the first
To flee. The taller man has gray hair
And long thin arms, the other
Squat with young shoulders, his legs
Slightly bowed already, a laborer
With the years, like a tree.

One works the edge
Of his steel claw subtly
Between the stones.
The other waits for the right instant,
A dazzle of balance, and slips the blade
Of his cold chisel into the crack.

Balancing the great weight of this enormous
And beautiful floorstone laid by the Romans,
Holding a quarter ton of stone lightly
Between earth and air,
The tall man with the gray hair reaches
Around the corner of the stone
And most delicately eases
A steel pipe beneath.
The best days are the first
To flee. Now both men
Can stand upright, then gradually,
Their fine hands sure, they can ease
The stone from its place.

---

15 Kinzie isn’t looking carefully enough when she speaks of Wright’s late ‘anecdotal’ work as undertaking “a studious avoidance of standard poetic means – prosody, controlled diction, conventional checks on the behavior of metaphors” (Mary Kinzie, The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 10).
I look beneath.
It does not look like a grave
Of anybody, anybody at all,
Not even a Roman
Legionary or slave.
It is just under the stone.
The earth smells fresh, like the breath
Of a calf just born in Ohio
With me.

When I look up,
The tall old man with the slender arms, the young man
With the frail bulging shoulders
Are gone for some wine. Work hard, and give
The body its due of rest, even at noon.
The best days are the first to flee,
And the underside of the stone
Is pink marble
From Verona. The poet found, in Verona,
The friendship of daylight,
And a little peace. (310-12)

This poem enacts much of what I have been claiming: here Wright gets at the two men, one old and one already “bowed” by his labor, and gets at the transience and precarious balance of his own happy moments through “pondering” followed by “the right instant” of craft. Energy, patience, and care are mustered to lift the quarter-ton floorstone into a kind of floating weightlessness, and this is enacted through Wright’s use of enjambments, his varied line lengths, and his varying of each line’s pacing and energy. The first sentence of the second stanza, for instance, begins with careful enjambments that try, like its subject, to wedge its way between lines (“One works the edge/ Of his steel claw subtly/ Between the stones”). Though the second stanza then begins with waiting, it has longer lines and more syllables; the tongue, released from the control of the shorter lines, rushes forward to say the longer ones making the second man seem to bring great psychic energy to his waiting “for the right instant.” The man’s actual action then is tonally indistinguishable from the heightened energy of anticipation that preceded it as the passive and the active blur. This second sentence is also wound tightly and made more tense by its dual actions of waiting and slipping, and by its interceding descriptive phrase (“a dazzle of balance,”) with its accompanying caesura. But after such tense measuring and pivoting (waiting -
balancing --> slipping) the third stanza achieves a kind of relief and ease by contrast: its first two lines describe a single uninterrupted dominant action, and each line begins with thematically matching b-words (balancing/beautiful). The poem waits and waits for the right moment then acts and finally reveals with a gracefulness and a false appearance of effortless simplicity as the quarter ton of stone rises “lightly/ Between earth and air.” The men too are exposed as at least temporarily mastering and becoming ennobled by the careful craft they bring to their difficult labor; this is a far cry from the black diamond skiing of “To The Muse.”

“The Best Days” is a lucid poem, a poem that deemphasizes its own artistry to capture the artistry of its subject. Yet the poem’s artistry is real, and is made up of more than just carefully demarcated lines and incremental actions. The artistry also can be seen through how it digresses from its main subject through the negative invocations of graves, slaves, and history (Legionaries), thereby raising the stakes of the poem, before matching all that death with Wright’s own memory of a calf-birth in Ohio (described in a previous poem in Two Citizens). One should also notice the way Wright’s subtly harsh and violent diction contributes to the miracle of the lightly lifted stone: one tool is a “claw,” the other is “the blade of a cold chisel.” In fact, much in the diction offsets and highlights the poem’s described miracle. The phrase “dazzle of balance” itself makes the balance shimmer and blur, as though a ‘dazzle of balance’ is a balance that is forever coming into and falling out of itself. The “young shoulders” of the tree-like laborer from the second stanza become “frail bulging shoulders” in the fifth stanza and so suggest the cost of such effortful precision. Also, of great formal importance is the way the translated epigraph from Virgil is shifted about by the poem like the squares of a Rubik’s cube: it takes up three lines, then two, then a single one, as if it is coming into greater focus, something

---

16 This is what Wright must have wanted. In an article he wrote about ten years before Pear Tree he quotes Whitman: “The rhythm and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges.” Wright comments: “Does Whitman mean that ‘free growth’ is aimless? No, he speaks of ‘metrical laws’” (Wright, Collected Prose, 8).

17 The poem is “Well, What Are You Going to Do?”: it is a poem that treats the uncertainty, pain, and vulgarity of birth with freshness and delicacy. This is not the only self-referential moment in the poem: the non-grave of the hole in the earth recalls the swimming hole, which in another earlier poem, Wright’s uncle and father dug in the ground so that the family would not have to swim in the polluted Ohio. Wright also contrasts that pleasant swimming hole with graves: “I had seen by that time two or three/ Holes in the ground./ And you know what they were” (236).
the poet is slowly coming to face. Each appearance of the refrain also marks a ‘chapter’ of the poem as it goes from pondering (refrain) to balancing (refrain) to resting (refrain) to accepting.

In other words, the job of the workers corresponds to the job of the poet balancing his own vision of his real present happiness – an essential part of which is a vision of these workers – against its ephemerality. And, speaking of the laborers, one should also notice how as Wright zooms in on the underside of the stone, stepping closer into the poem for a better look, he loses track of them. This is one of the great pieces of artifice in the poem: “When I look up” the laborers are gone. That they are gone with “For some wine” with shoulders now “frail” and bulging,” I think is an assumption – not something actually seen, just as Keats invents the little town on the Grecian urn. Studying the workers difficult task allows Wright to imagine them taking their “due” rest; again these others are exposed, brought to light, as no victims but workers making the best of their labor. And ultimately, once brought to light these workers can teach and instruct: Wright’s new empathy lets these workers instruct him about how to come to terms with happiness as something given only with the promise that it will soon be taken away. Wright could not have known it at the time, but three years after Pear Tree’s publication he would be dead.

**

The hidden formal intricacy of “The Best Days” suggests that there’s still another essential component of Wright’s prose poems and of Pear Tree: if the chisel is at one pole of the new empathy in these poems, secrets are at the other. The prose poems, for instance, are not only lucid but also slippery, full of tongue-in-cheek digressions (into historical anecdotes or back to memories of Ohio), and the lyrics are full of sudden reversals and surprises. In both, there is a

---

18 Though Wright gets to the honed lyrics of Pear Tree by siphoning off much of his digressive impulse into his prose poems I have not been meaning to suggest that the prose poems are less formed; in fact they are part of empathy’s movement back toward more shapely forms, which I described as taking place after the New Poems. In fact, part of what makes the prose poems aesthetically coherent is their ability to wander: after all, many of these poems emerge from Wright’s travel-journal. Stephen Yenser explains that “Wright’s version of the prose poem, with its evident tolerance for loose ends, its appetite for digression, its fugitive unity, seems exactly the form to contain [the journal passages] without warping them” (qtd. in Robert Bly, “Introduction: James Wright’s Clarity and Extravagance,” James Wright Selected Poems [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005], xxviii). He adds, “[the prose poems] are as transparent as anything he has written, though they are shot through with whimsy... in the best of them, extravagance provides coherence and sophistication alike.” Stein writes that though “the outer form is prose... [the] inner
heightened slippery quality to the embedded first-person, or a kind of preternatural moment-to-moment attentiveness like a dog hearing what no human can. Wright announces in “A Letter to Franz Wright” that we can make things together out of the very limitations of speech and craft:

“never... [have I] seen anything so appallingly beyond accounting for as a place in Tuscany in late autumn. I have come, and not for the first time, to the limits of my own language... There are these fragments of words I picked up on the hither side of my limits. I am sending them to you...you will know to piece them together into a vision of your own design. Your imagination is not mine. How could it be? Who would want it to be? I wouldn’t...Here are some fragments of my hammer that broke against a wall of jewels. (268)

What can’t be communicated with hammer and jewel may be compensated for by fragments, hither sides, and unknown imaginations, by the secret ways we imagine, misunderstand, and appropriate bits of each other. As we’ll see, an “open secret,” is not the same thing as a secret that’s been told.

Secrets can help compensate for the limitations on our lives, but only if we first realize how much people don’t want to give them up. Even as Wright celebrates the good violence of craft’s bringing to light, he simultaneously writes about the necessity of hiding: he speaks, for instance, “In a Field near Motepanto” from his last book, This Journey, about poppies who don’t hide and suffer the consequences, “lean[ing] upwards and lay[ing]/The secrets of their bodies bare to this light,/ Till they die” (ATR 369). Other poems from this period seem sympathetic to concealment as well: in one poem from This Journey we hear about “The blue veins that girls do their best to hide on the backs of their hands for fear some body will catch their blood in the act and remind them that they too will grow old” (276). In another poem, we encounter a personified thistle who “all alone, elegant in its taters, [is] too proud to name itself, too aloof to accept any name I might give” (276). It’s interesting that two of these examples are of vegetation (poppies and thistles); it is as though the landscape is no longer consuming its inhabitants, but instead, like a Greek God, turning them into plants to provide camouflage.19

19 Secrets can even help moderate bad craft. In another plant prose-poem, “Camomilla” Wright uses the eponymous flower to meditate on civilians hiding during wartime: “They silently wish they were anonymous, but they know that sooner or later...
Wright has written about secrets before these late books, but they were not treated as components of real exchanges with real others. In “The Jewel” from Branch, for instance, Wright is alone: “There is this cave/ In the air behind my body/ That nobody is going to touch” (122). But even others’ secrets can amount to a kind of solitude: in “On Minding One’s Own Business” Wright leaves the “darkening shack” in the poem to its hoboers and girls with rumpled hair a bit too easily (59). We don’t learn anything about who actually wants to be left alone, or about what struggle Wright might have had with himself in his temptation to invade that privacy. The secrets of “Jewel” and “Minding” are to be protected because they are, as Hass argues, the same secret of Wright’s fugitive inner life.

In the new poems, though, there is more treatment of the imperfect, fraught, and sometimes loving exchanges between self and other, which allow the other to really be viewed as such (as another, not as Wright himself). In “A Letter to Franz Wright,” it is the acknowledgement of Wright’s failure – of the fragmentary nature of his communication and the way Wright ultimately is stuck with his own experience – that allows him to imagine his son making something unimaginable of it. In “Voices Between Waking and Sleeping in the Mountains” from Two Citizens Wright describes the failings of communication and the acceptances of limitations necessary to imagining and living with domestic secrets (245-6). In that poem, Wright has a nightmare while taking a nap as his wife goes for a walk on a snowy mountain. The recognition that he will never know what Annie experienced on her walk triggers a realization:

Annie, it has taken me a long time to live.
And to take a long time to live is to take a long time
To understand that your life is your own life.
Seeing mirrors for one’s own interiority everywhere and insisting on knowing everyone you encounter are ways of diffusing the self so that one’s life cannot really be lived. In this way, Wright is the least postmodern of writers\(^\text{20}\) (another source of his unpopularity): he insists on the virtues of acknowledging and living with difficult boundaries, and accepting your own ultimate aloofness. In the above poem, Wright then tries to tell Annie about Jenny and fails, imagining that he might do a better job some day. In the meanwhile, he asks, “What did you find in your long wandering in the snow?” Then: “I love your secret...By God I will never violate the wings/Of the snow you found rising in the wind.” Really digging into and imagining the situation in which one is tempted to learn about another, but where one must leave the other open, unimagined, and secretive, can, instead of diffusing the self, rebound back on the self with a renewed belief in the fullness of others – whose quotidian walks can be mysterious – and in the importance and separateness of one’s own limited life.

And so, though these secrets can seem conceptually at the other pole from carefully exposing craft, both end up emphasizing the limits of the self and its agency, and both end up perversely enlarging the self by putting it in relation to others beyond it. And Wright has, as I’ve suggested about his prose poems, a way of making diamond-cutting craft and secrets work together. Wright tells Mark Strand in a letter that “[your father’s] life is alive in your poem, precisely because his life and the life of your poem are so formally strange.”\(^\text{21}\) Italy itself is full of craft becoming secrets as its many ruins call up unknown people and stories: “One thing I love about the stones here, even beyond their tottering and ramshackle balance, is their namelessness... I am delighted to leave the tower alone... alive and at peace with the purposes of men’s names I bless and will never know, names I will never have to be sorry that I knew” (ATR 278). In this last example secrets even make flawed others more bearable.

Towards the end of his career empathy’s new seeking out of others’ redeeming energies and its new restraint toward understanding them sometimes condense into moments of singular reward: sometimes Wright’s characters give gifts. Before this late period exchanges were often

\(^{20}\) In “Written on a Big Cheap Postcard from Verona” he moves through all the reproductions and dilutions of Romeo and Juliet to say: “Just mention the names to anyone,/ A stranger on the street: Romeo, Juliet./ And all that stranger will remember/ Is a radiance in the dusk/ A light fluttering in a vine,/ Hands shocked by touching...” (304).

more metaphorical and less redemptive or reciprocal. Wright often seemed to be putting himself in relation to another’s suffering, but not really creating a literal back-and-forth, let alone finding a way out of that suffering. In “Executed Murder’s Grave” Wright croons his useless “tears at fifty cents per line”; in “Ars Poetica” Wright wants to believe in his Aunt Agnes but ends up damning everyone; in “To a Blossoming Pear Tree” Wright and the old man slink off in their separate directions; even in “To The Muse” Wright ends at an impasse with Jenny unsure if she’ll come up to him or if he’ll descend to death. In some of his late poems, the exchange works: Wright gives his characters poems shaped just right, composed of just the right portions of clarity and restraint, and, on rare occasions, his characters give him objects of their own.2223

Gifts in Wright take some explaining: they are less important as independent objects then as objects that allow a certain kind of movement between persons. We can see in the letters that gifts have always been of talismanic importance to Wright – and that letters and gifts, as well as poems, are not completely separate categories. In a 1976 letter Wright tells the story of Toshitada Iketani who fought in the Japanese army at the end of World War II just as Wright was sent to occupy Japan. As Wright points out, they never fought each other. Instead, coincidentally both men carried copies of Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet, and decades later Iketani went on to translate some of Wright’s poems into Japanese.24 Wright tells this story and sends a copy of the Rilke along to a student to make amends for being unable to meet her to discuss her poems. The thought behind the gift is that gifts mitigate separation and conflict just as the objecthood of the Rilke book connected Iketani and Wright and led to the crossing over that is translation.

In a letter sixteen years prior, Wright tells James Dickey about “one of those mysterious secrets I found in William James years ago – namely the importance of making actual physical gestures, of maintaining the actual rhythm of a living thing – friendship, poetry, love, boxing, or

22 Gifts do play a role in earlier poems, but they are rarely given successfully. In the first of the New Poems Wright tells Jenny that he has given her a book; he asks desperately to be given, in exchange, “A little life back... Or at least... the owl’s feather” (179). “To a Friendly Dun” describes a man manipulating Wright into giving him a large gift of cash that the man has no intention of paying back (206).

23 Of course, as I noted earlier the title poem of Pear Tree is no such poem; Wright’s empathy continues to return to the awful, and it is typical of Wright that his most successful volume would take its name from a poem of failure and struggle.

24 James Wright, A Wild Perfection, 463.
whatever....” He adds, “I write this note literally for the same reason Dempsey trained regularly: to keep in shape” (Wright’s emphasis).25 Wright’s boxing metaphor should not distract us from the fact that he’s talking about writing; craft and secrets may give us others, but gift giving (and writing as gift giving) actually crosses boundaries in order to maintain them – to simultaneously bind one to others and maintain the integrity and shape of one’s life.26

Keeping in shape, crossing boundaries while mysteriously confirming them – these are forms of healing. Wright speaks gratefully of how when he was in the hospital John Logan wrote him a “long letter, enclosing a new poem of his” though they had never met.27 On another occasion, Wright sends his ex-wife a letter to discuss buying some baseball spikes for his son, recalling how his father surprised him “by strolling some unpredictable afternoon from the Hazel-Atlas factory uptown to a sporting-goods store in Wheeling and, just for the sheer idiotic, extravagant hell of it, buying me a dazzlingly expensive new leather football, which he would proceed to hide on my chair so I wouldn’t even suspect its existence till I tried to sit down for supper.”28 Wright also speaks proudly of how, after receiving a note from the poet Bill Knott talking about his loneliness (“I am so lonely I can’t stand it... Solitude is a richness of spirit... But loneliness rots the soul”), Wright showed up on Knott’s doorstep with “(1) two vivacious and pretty girls and (2) a large bag of bananas.” He adds, “the thought of cheering up the lonely Chicago poet by visiting him with two pretty girls was merely conventional, though of course

25 Ibid., 249.

26 Wright sometimes wants poems to take on the properties of gifts, or at least to become cherished physical objects. He writes to Willis Barnstone: “Perhaps the most wonderful thing that happened to me during my whole trip to the east in April was your writing down those two lines by Hernández on that little slip of paper and giving the poem to me. It was a very deep and magical thing to do, and it made the poem somehow more solemn and solid than merely quoting it would have done” (Wright, Wild Perfection, 243). Gifts may also accompany letters and poems: “I received another letter from you today, a beautiful one, containing your startling maple leaf...[and] you send me your good poem about the Northern Lights” (ibid., 459). Or here we have Wright treating and imagining an inanimate poem as a living thing, a fragrant keepsake: “Your poem is beautiful, and I am going to carry it in my wallet, an herb of healing, a balsam, and sign” (ibid., 342). Wright’s attachment to physicality in his pre-internet age also takes on a special sadness now; as Saundra Rose Maley, one of the compilers of his letters, points out: his generation may be among the last whose letters we will have (Maley, Wild Perfection, xxii).

27 Ibid., 257.

28 Ibid., 320.
pleasant... But the bananas still fill me with... total delight.” To the list of the important properties of gifts we will have to add inventiveness and surprise, and in the poems these correspond to craft and secrecy. Gifts will sometimes serve as codas or ways of binding together the other properties of Wright’s empathy after Two Citizens; they are sometimes communal healing rituals that only Wright’s characters (not Wright himself) can perform.

There are several important poems of gift in Wright’s work, but I will confine myself to the three from Pear Tree that best combine secret, craft, and gift before concluding with what I consider to be Wright’s self-elegy from his final book. As I will show, these poems are some of the strongest from Wright’s career, and they could not have been written without his new empathy. I will look first at “Redwings,” the opening poem of Pear Tree, which imports the formal lessons Wright has learned in Italy back to his Ohio. It opens on his nephew and younger brother plotting to exterminate the title-bird; Wright eventually sides with the bird and the kind of outsider perspective it comes to represent, but the poem is self-implicating from the start:

**Redwings**

It turns out

---

29 Ibid., 425. And of course, because he’s James Wright, he then undermines himself: “God knows how much second-rate bilge I have written in my many books. But a bag of bananas!” (ibid., 425)

30 In a letter to Leslie Marmon Silko Wright includes a gift of lace that seems to embody craft and secrecy. He writes, “Sometimes I wonder about things like lace things that human beings make with their own hands, things that aren’t much help as shelter from the elements or against war and other kinds of brutality...Nevertheless, the art continues to survive, the craftsmen weaving away with the finest precision over their woofs and spoools” (ibid., 520).

31 Wright’s last poems in This Journey are filled with gifts—a chive flower, an ophi shell, an alabaster tortoise—but they do not always feel aesthetically significant because they do not always carry all these properties (and often the wound that they are supposed to healing feels less severe).

32 Other important poems of gift are “The Old WPA Swimming Pool,” “The Ice House,” and “With the Gift of a Fresh Notebook.” The first of these shows craft becoming gift as Wright’s family digs a swimming pool for others – “no grave for once” – and ends up causing Wright to have a surprising vision: “when I rose from that water,/ A little girl who belonged to someone else,/ A face thin and haunted appeared/ Over my left shoulder, and whispered, Take care now/ Be patient, and live” (236). “The Ice House,” a mostly overlooked poem, shows how crafted items can exist only in order to be given away: the ice-man, whose hands tremble “with exquisite care” gives “a fifty-pound diamond” – reminiscent of the 500 pound stone from “The Best Days” – to Wright’s father and chips “a jagged little chunk” for Wright and his brother (337). The diamond of art, of others, becomes something to be exchanged – as well as something to be made subject to time. The diamond is safe only in the “amazing winter” of the ice house; outside, we are told, “the sun blistered the paint on the corrugated roofs.” In the last of these three poems, the blankness of the notebook-gift becomes a way for Wright to approach the end of his last volume, proffering the pages he doesn’t imagine to his reader: “I would rather leave them alone, even/ In my imagination, or, better still,/ Leave them to you” (374). In sum, in the first two of these poems craft leads into gift, and in the third gifts and secrets go hand-in-hand. In all of them gifts are celebrated as meaningfully connecting us to others, healing us and them; however, they do so only by sacrificing our claim on the gifts themselves and by accepting a view of art as something that connects us by accepting our transience, boundaries, and limitations.
You can kill them.
It turns out
You can make the earth absolutely clean.

My nephew has given my younger brother
A scientific report while they both flew
In my older brother’s airplane
Over the Kokosing River, that looks

Secret, it looks like the open
Scar turning gray on the small
Of your spine.

Can you hear me?

It was only in the evening I saw a few redwings
Come out and dip their brilliant yellow
Bills in their scarlet shoulders.
Ohio was already going to hell.
But sometimes they would sit on the creosote
Soaked pasture fence posts.
They used to be few, they used to be willowy and thin.

One afternoon, along the Ohio, where the sewer
Poured out, I found a nest,
The way they built their nests in the reeds,
So beautiful,
Redwings and solitaries.
The skinny girl I fell in love with down home
In late autumn married
A strip miner in late autumn.
Her five children are still alive,
Floating near the river.

Somebody is on the wing, somebody
Is wondering right at this moment
How to get rid of us, while we sleep.

Together among the dead gorges
Of highway construction, we flare
Across highways and drive
Motorists crazy, we fly
Down home to the river.

There, one summer evening, a dirty man
Gave me a nickel and a potato
And fell asleep by a fire. (283-4)
Thematically here craft and secrets culminate in gift. The damaging forms of knowing and making (the scientific reports, airplanes, and poisons used against the redwings) are countered by the redwings own nest-building and careening flight, and by the secretiveness and slipperiness of the poem in its many shifting perspectives and scenes. Though the poem’s diction is relatively simple (‘‘willowy’’ and ‘‘creosote’’ is about as esoteric as the diction becomes) and the content usually un-abstract (made up instead of tangible scenes and actions) the poem manages to balance lucid diamond-cutting exposure with coy evasion.

Here are some of the poem’s tricks and secrets: on first reading it takes a second to identify “them” as the title birds; one has to adjust and realize that the opening statement is meant to sound a bit psychotic; we never find out whose spine Wright is addressing; and the “it” of “it was only” never takes a clear referent. Then there are all the tricks involving the poem’s characters: the “skinny girl” is probably Jenny, but we’ve told in previous books that she was a prostitute and that she died in childhood; the word “floating” reverses or at least seems to undermine the idea that Jenny’s children “are still alive”; we never learn how we move (in two lines) from the late autumn of the speaker’s love to the late autumn of Jenny’s marriage – or if they are different autumns; and we never learn the story of the “dirty man” from the end of the poem – not why he was generous, and not what Wright was doing by his fire. And though the poem seems clear and lucid, and the diction simple, every new stanza brings us a new scene or perspective or form of address: we are meant to see as clearly and be as lost as one can be looking out of a large bus window onto a new city.

The poem is both fragmented and fluid, but not broken or obvious. The harm of the external world’s crafts (airplanes, poison, etc.) is countered by a more moderate artistic craft that maintains the exact right balance between exposure and mystery, so that the poem “looks/Secret” (becomes an open secret). In the later poem “Camomilla,” the invaded plant-people wish the speaker away so that “everything secret to them” won’t “become commonplace to an army of invading strangers” (369). But in “Redwings” Wright’s tactfully precise portions of laying bear (“I found a nest”) and holding back (“looks/ Secret”) lead him to change over the course of the

---

33 Since Wright’s artistry is so often missed I hope my own telling of secrets will seem permissible.

268
poem from invader (“It turns out/ You can kill them”) to resisting local (“we flare/ Across highways and drive/Motorists crazy”). And, then, finally, the success of the poem is consummated with an odd, humble gift from the “dirty man” who is akin both to the redwings and to Jenny; the old man’s gift is a gesture of healing for Wright and his Ohioans.

Wright’s craft then is not really so different from his secretiveness: striking the right blows, or finding the right place to bring the wedge to bear, involves not just finding the exact line between what’s broken and what resists breaking, but also between what should be revealed and what should be left hidden. I have mentioned some of the secrets of the poem, but I want now to suggest just how much formal subtlety and slipperiness lurks just underneath the lucid-surface of this poem, how much craftiness guides the emotionality here. The poem has nine-scenes: psychotic perspective --> plane view --> secret view/intimate address --> redwing memory 1 (beauty but fragility and delicacy of redwings) --> redwing memory 2 (redwing nest but ugliness of sewer) --> Jenny and five children floating as if dead-in-life --> ‘somebody’s’ plot --> redwing resistance --> surprise/gift. These scenes have a kind of intrinsic logic that tells of the threat to the redwings, that connects the redwings to intimacy and lyric address as well as to the victims of Ohio, that provides memories of the redwings/Ohioans’ beauty even in their ugly and endangered place, that builds the threat to the redwings and their connections to other Ohioans, that shows their ability to resist, and that provides a gift as a kind of consummating, though minor, triumph. Yet one has to look closely and attentively to notice this logic, which is hidden by the way the way the nine scenes flow together in a single extension: Wright has found a way to bring his desire to catalogue with numbers into a smooth sequence; he has developed the technical skill to make many scenes flow as one.3435

34 This poem is quite unlike the modish fragmented poems found everywhere in poetry magazines today – it is so concerned with making its parts run together that we might overlook how separate they in fact are.

35 Scene-order is one aspect of this crafty skill, but there are others. For instance, doubled phrases and repetitions play a key role in stitching the poem together. The following words and phrases are all repeated: “turns out,” “looks,” “they used to be,” “late autumn,” “somebody.” The anecdotal narrative gesture of ‘one afternoon’ that begins stanza six also echoes the earlier gesture of “It was only” that began stanza 5. There is also the way one scene contains the creatures of the scene that follow: “Redwings and solitaries” both hide by the sewer, and it’s as if the camera zooms in on the redwings finds the solitaries and pans over. Then there is the fact that the poem, despite its short and medium length lines, actually reads quite quickly with line and stanza breaks that measure out precise, tiny pauses in speech: “I found a nest,/ The way they build their nests in the reeds,/ So beautiful,/ Redwings and solitaries.” These slight pauses mark the expanding shifts from specific memory to general memory to feeling something about that general memory to extrapolating to all solitaries. Meanwhile, the few short sentences and lines (Ohio was already going to hell and Can you hear me?) actually make the poem seem to move faster by holding back for a
A look at the ending of the poem in particular shows how much ‘craftiness’ goes into maintaining the birds and the Ohioans – Jenny’s, Wright’s, the old man’s – secret integrities. The poem starts in the present tense with the opening threat, and the present tense also quickly becomes the tense of risk and intimacy (“Can you hear me?”). Returning to the redwings and the damages of the Ohio, the poem dances among several forms of the past-tense (has given/ was already going/fell in love/poured out) and through various pseudo-presents (I saw a few redwings come out – present in past-tense context – and are still alive/floating – present becoming present progressive) that try to restore the damaged past to a present-tense vitality equal to that of the opening threat and precarious intimacy. Yet in the third to last stanza the threat itself loses energy as it turns from simple-present (“is on the wing”) to present-progressive (“is wondering”), and in the penultimate stanza the redwings gain vitality with three strong present-tense verbs (flare/drive/fly), before, in a concluding gesture, the poem switches back to simple past.36

The resistance of the birds here is then built from things as small as a careful (crafty) manipulation of tenses – and where the verbs are placed in each line. The stanzas that describe the redwings usually have verbs at the beginnings and middles of their lines until the penultimate stanza in which all the verbs switch over to the line-ends, driving them forward over their edges as the redwings flare, drive, and fly. “Together” the birds, the speaker, Jenny, and solitaries like the dirty man shoot through a ravaged Ohio of dead gorges and bad construction projects, cross over artificial boundaries such as highways pestering those who would stamp them out, in order to reclaim the river as a site of healing. In a concluding gesture in the final stanza, the verbs

36 We may see now how the idea that ‘they used to be’ few actually sets the stage for the future spread and success of the redwings.
switch back to the beginning of the lines and we get the feeling of a tossed off brilliance appropriate to the humble, surprising gift of the potato casually given away before falling asleep. The final lines can be read as a final bit of breathless digressive extension that is also a summation. As the verbs switch back to the beginning of the line a list of nouns moves to the ends (nickel, potato, fire); the emphasis ends up being placed on predicates, on the actions of verbs being completed, and on the momentary healing of Ohio. This may seem like excessive attention to minutiae, but the point is that Wright is not being given nearly enough credit: whoever claims that Wright’s poetry is too emotional to be shapely, must reckon with how carefully the secret (character-driven) craft of this poem gives its own answer to the ubiquitous, careless, and violent action of his Ohio.

And though the poem’s main character is not a person but an animal, that animal becomes a means of uniting all the poems human characters who include Wright, Jenny, the old man, and even the nephew and younger brother of the poem’s beginning (who though implicated are ultimately victims too, destroying their own home). Part of the secretiveness of character here is the way it appears in brief but memorable glimpses that are bound together through the redwings which, though symbols, are still stubbornly themselves. I already mentioned how the characters’ backstories are removed and, in the case of Jenny, altered and made contradictory. Instead of approaching character through portraiture Wright is harnessing his character-images to the redwings’ flight where they can “flare” without being illuminated or exposed. Wright is in some ways experimenting here with how little he can reveal about others while still making them matter in-and-of themselves.

But if, as I’m arguing, Wright’s nephew and brother are not the ultimate villains of the poem, if all the characters in the poem, though not always innocent, are also given empathetic attention, then who doesn’t receive that empathy, who is the villain? Who is the “somebody” so unlike the benevolent creator-figure behind Bishop’s “Filling Station” who wants to destroy instead of love us all? One critic found the third-to-last stanza paranoid and Wright did indeed suffer from bouts of paranoia as part of his occasional mental illness.37 However, the fear in the

poem feels justified since the poem begins with a specific instance of Wright and his family participating in the destruction of their surrounding environment, and then provides many references to widespread Ohioan social problems. There really is a tangible, specific plan to get rid of the birds just as the companies of Wright’s depression era Ohio really are laying off employees (dirty men by fires) and looking for ways to get more out of them for less (strip mining); women certainly are getting trapped in marriages and back-breaking domestic situations (having five children).

Yet I think that the poem has a still broader resonance in how it bypasses Robert Hass’s criticism about Wright’s fugitive inner life in the earlier books. Here the fugitives respond not by darkly passive and isolated acceptance but, while keeping their secrets, by finding brilliant ‘flaring’ community. And, of course, the inner life and imaginative life, the possibility for intimacy, and the mere existence of quiet presence and attentiveness are more under threat than ever today. Wright’s poem can be seen as speaking both to the Ohio of his past and prophetically to our own America of apathy, noise, and reckless production where the NEA’s funding is constantly in danger of being cut, where the natural world may already be broken beyond repair, and where the poor are often still deeply cut off from any real means of advancement or satisfying culture.

This is a political poem, and one that seems just as important now. Mary Kinzie criticizes the poem for not telling us decisively who is to blame: “The members of the rifle club? Industrial pollution? The silly bird’s themselves? Man’s resinous heart?” But I think it is part of the enduring political strength of the poem that it doesn’t identify specific targets – except of course for Wright himself and his own family. The reasons for the precarious and embattled states of nature, art, and the lower-classes in America are of course multiple and complex. The poem models for us not those reasons, and not any policies or solutions, but careful empathy: how, not ignoring our own complicity, we can pay just the right kinds of attention to those under threat, thereby coming to see them in their suffering, in their individuality and resistance, and in their secretiveness. Such attention – let’s call it caring or tenderness – I would argue is itself ethical. And of course for Wright himself and his career the poem is a major breakthrough: without

---

38 Kinzie, The Cure of Poetry, 11.
denying the horrors of his Ohio, or even his own guilt, he is able to use his new Italian-derived empathy to turn memories of rapaciousness and squalor into gift.

Wright sometimes is able to do this even in poems that contain much more of a sustained focus on a single Midwestern character, and in which he himself is much more present as an embedded first-person. In “Hook” (315-6) I have already shown how Wright’s lines precisely breakdown and suspend the moment of the Sioux Indian’s gift giving (“Did you ever feel a man hold/ Sixty-five cents/ In a hook,/ And place it/ Gently/ In your freezing hand”). But the buildup to these lines is equally important as, in them, Wright and the Sioux are made into foils: they are both men who got “in trouble/ With a woman,” and are both victims of the Midwest and its “God damned/ Bitter” cold. The poem also asks us to recall that the two men have already been connected in the earlier poem “In Terror of Hospital Bills” from Shall We Gather at the River where another Sioux repeats words Wright’s speaker wrote down on the walls of a drunk-tank. So in one sense, Wright and the Sioux are brought to a point where they are primed for an exchange; after all, “his scars/ Were just my age.”

In a much more important way, though, Wright knows little of the Sioux’s own suffering both as someone whose personal troubles have cost him a hand, and as a member and representative of a culture that has been exploited and exterminated long before Wright’s own troubles began in Martins Ferry: the hanging of Little Crow’s rebels in the Minnesota where the poem is set remains to this day the largest mass execution in US history.39 Though he is the “young Sioux,” he knows more than Wright; at the very least – and not insignificantly in the Minneapolis winter – he knows that there’s no bus coming. He is marked by his hook, his ethnicity, and his speech (“Ain’t got no bus here/ A long time”), but he remains aloof: he appears from nowhere ‘looming’ into the third stanza of the poem and then, more surprisingly, takes over the language of the poem in the fourth by speaking up. When Wright asks for his story, he says just enough to link himself to Wright, but not so much really to explain himself. Again, though the poem seems transparent, it’s not; in fact, the craftiness of the poem is to be found in how it makes room for the Sioux to speak without turning him into an otherized cipher or presuming

really to know him – and craft and craftiness here (the exposures and evasions and careful line breaks) very rapidly become surprise (the gift).

For the Sioux could easily have been more than just aloof. His first and non-verbal answer to Wright’s question – which is also the moment when we first learn what the title is referring to – is a moment of frightening violence: “He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight/ And slashed the wind.” This description is what makes the gift two stanzas later powerful. What is in fact primed for violence, for the slashing hook of all that’s standing between him and Wright, both biographical (their own individual scars) and historical – what is primed as well for the violence that is an inherent danger in representation, as well as the violence inherent in a barren Minneapolis of terrible starlight, dead snow, and inadequate public social provisions (buses), is transmuted into the gentleness, even tenderness, of a small, delicately balanced gift. This is the gentle and secret diamond-cutting of form and it suddenly makes the poem’s main character terribly open – open enough to be the one who has empathy for Wright instead of the other way round, and who chooses to focus on the commonalities between them rather than on their obvious differences. Those who view the poem as sentimental view the poem as too completely an artistic creation and are in danger of continuing not to let the Sioux speak for himself. They also miss just how precarious the poem’s ending is as coins are balanced somehow on hook, as hook meets hand, as Wright doesn’t give us too much or too little of the Sioux, and as the Sioux gives Wright a symbolic way to leave his purgatory of wind and dead snow and go somewhere.

Gifts in “Redwings” and “Hook” both allow Wright to find some good in Ohio; for the third poem of craft, secret, and gifts let’s turn back to Italy and “The Secret of Light” to see how gift allows Wright to find some good in his own mortality (302-3). Like “Hook,” the poem is spoken by an embedded first-person and focuses on a single encountered character, but it’s different from both “Hook” and “Redwings” not only because it’s an Italian poem, but because the poem’s diamond-strike never occurs: it is a poem about a missed encounter, which is perhaps why it’s a prose poem. It’s also unlike “Redwings” and “Hook” in that the speaker himself

---

40 It’s also primed for violence and failure in terms of the pre-existing pattern of Wright’s career at large: this kind of encounter would have gone another way in many other Wright poems including the one which follows it (“Pear Tree”).
becomes the gift giver and thereby loses his centrality to become something like a minor character in relation to the beloved of the poem and her imagined lover. Like “Epistle from the Ampitheatre” Wright will be enlarged by his smallness and put in relation to lives and mortalities beyond his own, but personal loss and the threat of mortality in “Secret” feel more imminent, and thus the challenge and rewards of accepting one’s contingency signify more strongly.

The poem begins with Wright sitting on a park bench writing; he observes a stranger, a “startling woman,” and has his reverie about how her “hair is black as the inmost secret of light in a perfectly cut diamond.” During this reverie (“While I was trying to compose the preceding sentence”), she gets up and walks away. If “Hook” enacted immediacy and presence through its carefully measured lines, “The Secret of Light” does so through its premise of being written and read in ‘real time’ where even as writing rushes to greet the world, it loses it. In the end though, the woman ends up gaining more presence by that very loss.

Her loss, in fact, expands the world beyond the purview of the lyric speaker. Looking up and seeing her absence triggers a realization: “I am afraid her secret will never come to light in my lifetime. But my lifetime is not the only one.” She has concluded her brief (one paragraph long) encroachment into Wright’s life, but she has also enabled him to imagine and believe in the powerful encounters that happen beyond the boundaries of the self. The simultaneous diminishment and enlargement of this moment wherein the stranger-beloved is viewed not in the abstract but as a real woman who Wright will never know, implies the enormity of the ‘beyond-one’s-life,’ and like Balaam in the bible, turns his curse at her escape into the blessing which is the first gift of the poem: “I am free to give a blessing out of my silence into that woman’s black hair. I trust her to go on living. I believe in her black hair, her diamond that is still asleep... The very emptiness of the park bench just in front of mine is what makes me happy.” He can then go on to imagine her future romantic encounter, not jealously, but as way of feeling and believing that his own life isn’t all there is: “Surely two careful and accurate hands, total strangers to me, measure the invisible idea of the secret vein in her hair.” It’s important that these hands approach the secret of another person with the ‘care and accuracy’ to show the compatibility between the poet’s artistry and the imagined lover’s right action as that lover takes Wright’s place. But it’s also important that Wright not imagine too far or assume the lover can be any simple surrogate
for the poet: “I don’t have any idea what his face will look like... The light still hidden inside his body is no business of mine.” Wright can then return to his own life, his present-tense station of writing alone and looking around.

It is here, though, that the poem has its subtle crowning moment. When Wright describes the woman’s hair being touched by “the hands” of her lover he also imagines how a “wind off the river Adige [which] will flutter past her.” Sitting alone by the Adige at the end of the poem, Wright again describes how a “little wind flutters off the water and brushes past me and returns.” This wind takes on gift’s property of keeping one in shape, and crossing boundaries while mysteriously confirming them: Wright is being given something back (the poem’s second gift). The hands which are in front of him while writing, and which became all that Wright is allowed to imagine about the woman’s lover as he gifts his longing to him – are linked to the fluttering of wind that “brushes past me and returns.” Thus Wright is able to put the emphasis not only on the importance of other lives, but on the importance of his own finitude ‘brushed’ with hints of others, of enormity and interconnection, something like what Whitman called “you dumb, beautiful ministers.” The ultimate gift of empathy here is that using his lost opportunity to imagine another’s life enables him to believe in the reality of such life after his own fairly imminent-seeming death; the poem is set in Autumn and in this way is his version of Keats’s ode. In the end, though Wright never speaks to the woman, his poem gives her a life beyond the page that illuminates Wright’s own as no more or less important than that that of one of his characters. After the wind brushes him the poem ends with Wright alone again beside a river: “It is all right with me to know that my life is only one life. I feel like the light of the river Adige. By this time, we are both an open secret.”


42 In a later poem, “On Having My Pocket Picked in Rome,” Wright takes up something like the stranger-beloved’s perspective and imagines “hands” that “grow cool and touch me lightly, lightly and accurately as a gypsy moth laying her larvae down in that foregone place where the tree is naked” (358). The other’s light and gentle attention to him leaves him robbed and with the fairly benign ‘infestation’ of the awareness that another knew him intimately but stealthily: “It is only when the hands are gone, I will step out of this crowd... dimly aware of the dark infant strangers I carry in my body... They spin their nests and live on me in their sleep” (my emphasis). An odd and mysterious impression is left, evidence of a brief, intimate, and mostly unidirectional crossover between separate lives that will never again take place.
In his last book, the posthumously published *This Journey*, Wright mostly turns away from people and toward animals: one critic points out that over thirty species turn up there. I have been mostly interested in Wright’s empathy as directed toward other human beings because I think that he has an easier time loving and enjoying the presences of animals, and that, correspondingly, animals tend not to be at the center of his poems’ struggles. In *This Journey*, though, Wright seems preternaturally aware of his own upcoming death, and his turn toward animals provides a consoling, even religious vision. The title poem of the volume, for instance, is about a totem-spider that bears a message about how to move lightly through a world of ruins, dust, and death. However, in a short prose poem he turns back again to other people and Ohio to think posthumously about what his life has meant.

It is typical of Wright that his self-elegy is about someone else, for though the poem can be read as a self-elegy it is most obviously an elegy for his father. It again combines craft, secrets, and gifts/blessings, but returns as well to the importance of ragged struggle. There is another important difference from the three poems discussed above: “Redwings” led to gift through a yoking of many brief glimpses of Ohioans to the title bird; “Hook” found it through portraying its main character with just the right amount of solidarity and distance; and “The Secret of Light” found it through letting the stranger-beloved drive home the limited but connected nature of Wright’s own secret, fleeting life. All three poems then deal with others whose mysteriousness and open, diamond-emergence are easier to preserve because they are not well known to the speaker, or because they appear and disappear very quickly from his life or from their poem. “Honey” provides a different sort of challenge since its principle characters are family members: they are both harder to encapsulate and harder to make mysterious. To confront this challenge, Wright selects a single biographical anecdote as a kind of lyric-hermeneutic opportunity. The will to exposing form involves selecting that incident and then listening well, clearing away the debris of misinterpretations and mishearings. The necessity

---

of secrets involves gesturing toward what lingers behind the scene described, the lives that cannot be heard or brought to light but only imagined:

**Honey**

My father died at the age of eighty. One of the last things he did in his life was to call his fifty-eight-year-old son-in-law “honey.” One afternoon in the early 1930’s, when I bloodied my head by pitching over a wall at the bottom of a hill and believed that the mere sight of my own blood was the tragic meaning of life, I heard my father offer to murder his future son-in-law. His son-in-law is my brother-in-law, whose name is Paul. These two grown men rose above me and knew that a human life is murder. They weren’t fighting about Paul’s love for my sister. They were fighting with each other because one strong man, a factory worker, was laid off from his work, and the other strong man, the driver of a coal truck, was laid off from his work. They were both determined to live their lives, and so they glared at each other and said they were going to live, come hell or high water. High water is not trite in southern Ohio. Nothing is trite along a river. My father died a good death. To die a good death means to live one’s life. I don’t say a good life. I say a life. (372)

Struggle is of obvious thematic importance in the poem as Dudley and Paul fight with each other in order to feel that they have not been entirely defeated by their joblessness; the poem’s interplay between very long and very short sentences again give us a sense of raggedness or wildness being reigned in. Similarly, the described reasons for the fighting, i.e. the sentences that should be most violent, resolve themselves into clear parallelisms: they weren’t fighting about X they were fighting about Y, one strong man was laid off/another strong man was laid off. The secondary fight in the poem is again between the formality and informality of the poor; the way that Dudley “offer[s]” to murder Paul is ironically polite and echoes the formality of Hayden’s “austere and lonely offices.” The two men struggle both violently for presence and formally for a kind of unlikely composure or integrity.

Wright struggles in the poem as well, but initially that struggle is introduced only in order to be corrected: this is a poem like “Hook” in which easy identification is cancelled and the characters teach Wright something. This teaching happens first through hypotaxis: the long subordinate clause that begins the third sentence introduces a young Wright who sees his own blood, thinks he knows how bad things are, and then has to learn in the main clause that the social world around him is even worse. The two men supplant Wright’s angst, ‘rising above’ him, and Wright then becomes very attentive. The repetitions (son-in-law/brother-in-law, laid off/laid off) and parallel sentences (“They weren’t fighting/ They were fighting”) are part of the formality of Dudley and Paul’s violence, but they also show Wright carefully laying out the
evidence and scene. He goes on to respond to one of their phrases and their culture’s clichés, by listening, repeating, and altering (hell or high water --> High water is not trite --> Nothing is trite along a river; died good death --> to die a good death means to live one’s life --> [not] a good life --> a life). Wright’s technique is reminiscent of that famous moment in Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” where he repeats his own words (in faery lands forlorn/ Forlorn! the very word is like a bell). Yet here that technique is applied to others as Wright’s father and brother-in-law teach him something only through his attention to and mulling over of their shared language.

In other words, the third struggle of the poem is to be found in Wright’s grown efforts to listen to language that would otherwise be deemed unremarkable and disappear. Wright liked gifts that made words seem like objects, and there is a similar desire here to make forgettable language substantive so a cliché (“hell or high water”) or an abstraction (“a good death”) or a common endearment (“Honey”) can help really get at others’ original energies. To do this

Wright first returns us to the cliché’s literal meaning, to its power in flood country, where even the citizens imitate the violence of the Ohio that John Skunk dragged for corpses (“[They] rose above me”). Second, Wright suggests that if “High water” can be a matter of life-and-death then there might still be some real meaning in a phrase like a ‘good death’ – but only if something is done to that phrase. Struggle, repetition, and listening become means of reshaping, of craft’s good exposing – from good death to one’s life to good life to life. Through the selection of the scene, the listening to it, and the clearing away of false interpretations Wright attempts to find just the right amount, the believable amount, of praise and celebration to bestow upon his father on the occasion of his death. Wright does not merely state that his father’s brutal, violent actions allowed him to remain present and awake, he exposes that present wakefulness to us. The poem ends with the diamond-strike of form revealing a new four-word paragraph and creating a feeling of release and unboundedness: we move from a ‘good death’ to ‘a life.’

But there is shape and closure to be found here too in the poem’s circularity: turning back to its beginning we can see how it suggests the strangeness of Dudley’s violent struggle when that struggle is extended over the course of a lifetime. It is here that the third forgettable bit of language becomes key. In “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio” ‘ashamed’ and ‘starved’ adults transferred their outrage to youths who galloped “terribly against each other’s bodies”
however, in “Honey” the two men curse each other directly and seek no such vicarious outlet. As a result, and as in “The Secret of Light,” this curse mysteriously becomes a blessing. The poem jumps from the time of Dudley’s death, to just before it, to the anecdote of 1930s, to a generalized time, and then back to the death. In the intervening lacunae somehow Dudley goes from cursing Paul to blessing him, and blood and floodwater become honey. In “Ars Poetica” Wright had lamented: “Reader,/ We had a lovely language,/ We would not listen” (224). However, here he models an ideal listening that requires all the techniques of his empathy old and new: it requires being corrected and taken off course by struggling others, and it requires exposing and imagining these others’ secret resistances and vitalities.

Ultimately, Dudley’s actions allow Wright to believe in the importance of the struggle for presence which for Dudley has meant fighting and formalizing and for Wright has meant listening and (re)writing. As I’ve said this poem is also a self-elegy. Wright’s listening, his empathy, has involved decades of ragged struggle that, though painful, have kept him awake through multiple styles and evolutions, and led him from seeing the social world as a nightmare to a way out from his desperate, haunted loneliness. Other people, in the end, are not simple ‘beneficiaries’ of his empathy; they provide hints about how to live and, at its end, help Wright make peace with what his life has been: “I don’t say a good life./ I say a life.”

**

The story that Wright began as one of the “cerebral,” “codified” poets of the 50s and wrote derivative poetry until he discovered his defining deep image forms of the 60s is, as we have seen, woefully inadequate. It is true that many poets in the 50s resisted modernism’s learning, obscurity, and strangeness while maintaining its desire for objectivity and intellectualism. It is also true that in the 60s many poets turned away from impersonality to write poems that were more romantic, intuitive, and emotional. However, Wright wrote the

44 Williamson, Introspection, 67.
45 Dougherty, James Wright, 20-1.
46 Stein, Grown Man, 8.
poems he should be remembered by through both of these decades – and he continued to do so up until his death in 1980. During the 1950s he was more obviously influenced by modernism than he would be later, yet, at the same time, he was responding to older English-language models – not just the metaphysical ones championed by Eliot and the New Critics, but also Hardy, Robinson, Edward Thomas, and Frost. These poems were not always so derivative as some critics accused them of being, or as “square” and “safe” as Wright, ever impatient with his own past work, himself sometimes claimed.47

Wright was a poet able to soak up influences without ever being ruined by them. In the 1960s Wright managed to learn from Robert Bly and to immerse himself in non-English-language traditions (Spanish, German, Chinese) without ever ‘converting fully’ to Bly’s polemics (Breslin)48: in the ‘70s Wright would go on to try his hand at narrative poems, prose poems, and extended free verse lyrics while occasionally continuing to write poems in rhyme and meter. Kevin Stein shows that that Wright eventually comes to write a kind of poetry that has room for both intellect and intuition,49 and that he therefore should not be attacked as ‘merely’ a deep-image poet of beautiful and limited pictures. As Alan Williamson wrote in 1984, Wright was actually a “great innovator” who “changed the possibilities of American poetry more than once.”50

I have tried to show how we might take fuller stock of these many changes and periods, so that Wright won’t be merely defended or attacked through cursory labels (moving vs. sentimental), or be represented solely as the poet of a few deep image anthology pieces. Some of the virtues of these many periods are already known – some of the critics I cited in the paragraph above discuss them – and yet the mis-and-under representations of Wright continue. I think that an important reason for this, and for cursory takes on Wright more generally, is that defenders, detractors, and casual readers often still do not know quite what to make of or how to talk about

47 James Wright, Collected Prose, 142.

48 Breslin, Modern to Contemporary, 183.

49 Stein, Grown Man, 11-12.

50 Williamson, Introspection, 86. Williamson adds that what he calls Wright’s “trickiness” has been “less often noticed than his innovative simplicities” (87).
his socially directed emotionality. Thus, I think it’s important for those who believe that this emotionality was not limited or excessive, but integral to his best poems, to try to show how that emotionality works, so that we can look past our biases and see Wright’s art.

It is my view, and hardly an original one, that a little study can sometimes make artworks seem more mysterious, complex, and powerful. However, it seems particularly important to bring such study to the poetry of persons in order to clear away the blanket prejudices we may bring to them and see clearly which poems are unexciting (some obviously will be), and which are not. Such study can also help us better see that the lyric poem is not doomed to be solitary; that some of the most extraordinary lyric poems are about others; that such poems, by their very nature, can be more open to change and innovation than poems that lock the self down; and that America has a particularly rich tradition of this sort of poem which, though often overlooked or dismissed, continues to this day.

In this vein, Wright is an exemplary poet, and we can better perceive this American and lyric tradition through examining the formal intricacies of his constant struggles and changes, and the best work of all his periods. My hope is that looking at Wright’s empathy has proved useful in examining those struggles and successes. From the ragged push, the formality and informality of empathy to its more composed stage of craft and secrets, his empathy is premised on the notion that poetry is not the work of a single mind but a living, though often very painful, form of encounter between minds. A discussion of Wright’s relationship to the reader – who he often addresses directly – has been beyond the scope of these chapters. Wright, though, has this to say about it: “you think there is something called art, like poetry, and that art is something that gives us a chance to deny, with sublime skill, that you are alive and that I am alive.” Wright is alive in his poems and so is his Ohio.

---

51 The deep image poems are for others, just as they were for Wright, safer, more portable.

52 Qtd. in Stein, *Grown Man*, 143.
Adrienne Rich: Flawed Heroines

** Prologue **

In turning from James Wright to Adrienne Rich, we leave the Midwest for the coasts and, more importantly, we leave Wright’s world of male labor for one of female community. Women have been scarce so far in these chapters: the preceding chapters focused on male poets, and Gunn and Wright mostly wrote about men (with a few exceptions like Nancy Spungen and Jenny). In addition, many of the poets I mentioned in my introduction were male; it is my belief that male poets in 20th Century America have been more likely than female ones to write poems about others.

Adrienne Rich, as one of the pioneers of second-wave feminism, provides us with some clues about why this might be so. Rich won the *Yale Younger Poets Prize* in 1951 when she was only twenty-two, but then quickly married in 1953, and bore three children shortly thereafter. Despite her early poetic success, she was expected to subordinate her creative endeavors to her childrearing, and her years as a young mother in the ‘50s were tormented ones. For a time, Rich thought of male and female energies as being fundamentally split: “The choice... seemed to be between ‘love’ – womanly, maternal love, altruistic love – a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism – a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so.”¹ Her desire to continue to be a poet after having children, and to carve out time for herself and her writing, put her at odds with the “womanly, maternal, altruistic love” that would always place her children before herself, and made her feel both like a selfish, failed mother and terribly angry.

Rich’s competing desires suggest why it might be difficult for women to write about others as often as men have done. Since throughout much of recent history men have been encouraged to be “cold and egotistical,” and women to be selfless and other-oriented, male and female poets might both want to resist these roles by using their poetry to provide alternatively

---

gendered spaces wherein men can be more socially-inclined (as we’ve seen in James Wright and Thom Gunn; Whitman is another obvious example) and women can claim more independent, less-relational modes of existence. One of Helen Vendler’s reviews of Rich helps to support this idea: Vendler speaks of Dickinson, Moore, Bishop, Sexton, Plath, and Rich as using various strategies in their poems to try to reject the “female voice” of “sentimental motherhood.” The traits Vendler associates with the ‘female voice’ are all relational ones that define women in terms of others – “erotic pining, winsome coyness, religious submissiveness, and sentimental motherhood.” Hence, some degree of anti-sociality might be indispensable for a female poet seeking autonomy, and, indeed, most of the poets Vendler names (Dickinson, Moore, etc.) tend toward aloofness and solitariness. Vendler adds that Rich’s attempt to dismiss the ‘female voice’ by adopting a socially-directed voice is quite unusual.

Seen in this light, lyric becomes a tool by which modern American female poets might lay claim to themselves apart from others. Rich will struggle with the nature and extent of this apartness. She writes in 1971:

I am not saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker; and I do not accept it. But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.

This will not be a chapter about gender theory, and a full explanation of why there are more male social lyrics in 20th century America than female-ones (if this is indeed true) must await another author. Nevertheless, Rich’s comments are suggestive: if living as a traditionally gendered, other-oriented woman is in direct conflict with the imagination, then certainly writing a poetry primarily interested in others is too.

As we’ll see, Rich is determined to push beyond the split she describes: she devotes much of her career to finding ways that “the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united.” Yet in the multiple-stages of this push, and in the extremity of some of the stages, we

---


4 Ibid., 174.
can glimpse its difficulty. For instance, in the 1970s Rich not only writes poetry that focuses on
women, but cuts off contact with most men. Perhaps in writing and focusing exclusively on
women (who inhabit the same gender position and disadvantages as herself), Rich can make any
split between egotism and altruism in her life disappear. And perhaps this will lead to writing
social poetry sufficiently ‘subversive’ and ‘untraditional’ as to remain a true product of the
imagination.

Yet it’s unclear whether this strategy truly produces ‘subversive’ social poems: for
instance, several critics have faulted Rich for demonizing and stereotyping men while idealizing
women and the bonds between them. In this chapter I argue that Rich is most successful at
writing subversive social poetry when she writes poems in which she disagrees with other
women whom she also admires – poems in which she can neither forget the bonds that link her
to these women, nor overlook her separation and distance from them. Ultimately both her
separateness and her interest in community make Rich’s best social poems possible.

** Subversive Others? **

Let’s begin by looking more closely at the case against Rich’s social poems, and work
our way toward what can be said in favor of them. Formalist critics often castigate Rich for
subordinating art to feminist polemic. These critics write frequently about Rich’s poetry of
specific people for here her polemics become clearly visible and dramatic. More specifically,
such critics often claim that Rich’s characters are too neatly divided into the righteous (mostly
women) and the damned (mostly men). For instance, Robert von Hallberg writes in 1996 that
Rich’s poems are “corny and self-satisfied.” He goes on:

Rich’s adversaries are not taken seriously in intellectual or ethical terms. The policeman who
takes the report of a rape victim is indistinguishable from the rapist, or from other men on the
block. The bad guys are true to their type, and the choices offered in her poems are always
reassuringly easy.”

---


Marjorie Perloff is a critic whose experimental interests differ markedly from von Hallberg’s socio-historical ones. Yet she too concurs: “what is ‘true for us’ turns out to be, predictably enough, the commonplaces of male oppression and female victimization... Men, it would seem, are immune from suffering.” Though Helen Vendler is often placed in the opposite critical camp from Perloff, she too agrees: “Rich has a powerful Manichean conviction that the world exhibits a struggle to the death between structural Good and structural Evil... she never places herself among the reprobates (even in imagination), and never tarnishes the victims with evil qualities of their own.”

Though I would argue that these views undervalue the righteous and largely justified wrath of Rich’s more Manichean poems, these diverse critics agree so often because they’re right: some of Rich’s social poems border on becoming propaganda. In fact, I would claim that Rich’s social imagination itself is often weak or, rather, tends to see things in terms of general political predicaments and categories in a way that often leaves individual people behind too quickly. Though Rich is often compared to Whitman, she lacks Whitman’s interest in the particular quirks and energies of others (swinging a hammer, spinning a wheel, fantasizing about young male bathers) that can give us an open character in a very few lines. For instance, in 1978 Rich describes lesbian-feminist love as involving the “appreciation perhaps of some little


9 For instance, in the following prose passage from What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics she leaps fairly quickly from describing particular others to placing them into somewhat predictable Marxist and racial political categories:

I had lasagna, fries and salad, and a glass of ice-cold Chianti in a room otherwise occupied by a table of very young marines, teenagers, heads half shaved (close over the ears and necks, slightly longer on top). They had a bottle of wine, seemed out for a good time, but depressed, ill at ease with each other. I felt their physical strength – a terribly young, uninformed strength – were these kids descendants of European workers on the land, whose forefathers had been foot soldiers in war after war? Generations without education or control over the time and products of their labor?

The young recruits I saw that evening were all apparently white...Almost everyone I had seen hiking or rock climbing in the National Monument appeared to be white...More than ever in my life I had been taking in multivarious shadings of human life in the American landscape. Feeling how long whiteness had kept me from seeing that variety – or, in some places, noticing its lack – because whiteness – as a mindset – is bent only on distinguishing bands of color from itself.... (Adrienne Rich, What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics [New York: Norton, 2003], 204).

10 Frank O’Hara won’t have this problem.
detail,’’ yet the examples she gives us are somewhat bland: “how this old woman wears her hat or that girl takes off down a street.”

The failures of Rich’s social imagination are due in part, I think, to her deep-formed solitary inclinations – her continued sense after her initial mothering years that writing can be an escape from the enforced sociality of patriarchy and childrearing, a place to lay claim to the ‘self apart.’ And solitude never loses its allure for Rich: though she turns outward and risks much to confront a variety of fraught political issues and situations, one rarely senses that she turns outward due to a deep fascination with individuals themselves. This is also perhaps why much of Rich’s socially-oriented poetry doesn’t give us much description of particular others, and instead focuses on creating a community with its readership; or else on participating in ongoing conversations with other writers (such as Audre Lorde) who don’t appear directly in the poems; or else on taking on stock of general political climates and scenes: “I know you are reading this poem by the light/ of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide/ while you wait for the newscast from the intifada...I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the


12 Helen Vendler argues that Rich’s poems are “not broadly socially curious, as Whitman’s strove to be,” and that unlike Whitman her use of anecdote too often falls into stereotype: “she has to have classified under some allegorical rubric the person it [the anecdote] concerns” (Helen Vendler, Soul Says: On Recent Poetry [Cambridge: Belknap, 1995], 223).

13 Some of this hazy portrayal of others may be necessary at times in order to speak about political issues. If one were to examine each individual person carefully, and to try to do each such person justice as an individual, some broad issues would be hard to touch.

Miriam Marty Clark, for instance, praises the way the later Rich gets to shared political conditions through effacement of specific details: Rich overrides “distinctions of class, sex, race, and historical period, merging multiple voices in a single, powerful voice able to map its own difficult truth...press[ing] towards a vocabulary – and imagery – of indivisible pain, a ‘vivification of a shared constitutive burden’” (Miriam Marty Clark, “Human Rights and the Work of Lyric in Adrienne Rich,” Cambridge Quarterly 38, no.1 [2009], 45-65, 64-5). Clark goes on to explain that many of Rich’s later lyrics move “between private and public worlds; between the intimate speech commonly associated with lyric and muscular public speech; and between lyric’s single voice and the world’s many, diverse voice” (ibid., 46). In this way, Clark helps defend lyric against claims that it “turns away from social worlds; that it involves a suspension of ethical judgments; that it offers ‘pleasures, fascinations, and challenges’ that are not ‘easy to subsume under criteria compatible with moral discourse,’ that the genre itself – with its emphasis on individual subjectivity and self-expression – is inescapably linked to repressive ideologies” (ibid., 45-6). Clark continues: through “attentiveness to other voices and to histories other than her own Rich forces lyric to surrender its self-sufficiency and its asociality, to bridge what is internal – desire and frustrated desire – and what is external: history, human relationships, social worlds, the realities of repression, exploitation, violence” (ibid. 48).

I agree that Rich can focalize far-reaching public speech through herself in her writing, but as even Clark suggests this sometimes can end up blurring or “merging” those “multiple voices” of the public together. In other words, this public lyric speech can end up letting Rich retain a strong version of herself, but only a hazy vision of any particular other person. Again, this doesn’t mean that this strategy doesn’t allow for robust social poetry, but rather that there’s still another version of the social in Rich to be discussed– a version that never presumes that lyric has “self-sufficiency and...asociality,” and that instead shows how some of Rich’s strongest political convictions grow out of her encounters with single particular others.
stove/ warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand... I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language/ guessing at some words while others keep your reading” (246). To a certain extent, Rich is interested in politics more than people.

Yet this view misses a type of social poetry in Rich that evades such criticisms: it misses the degree to which her arguments, from the beginning, have been with other women. For many of the poems in which Rich addresses female contemporaries or women of previous generations – in order to find warnings or instructions – are in fact quite nuanced and ambivalent. Because they are women, and often pioneers in their own right, these characters cannot easily be dismissed; however, they also often infuriate Rich with their denials and compromises. How could Marie Curie have been so dauntless, yet so unwilling to face the way her research was leading to her death? How could the feminists of the 19th century have been so sensitive to their own victimhood, yet remained racist? And though Rich might initially interrogate these women in order to envision how gender and society might change, she often ends up caring about her relationship to them as individuals at least as much as she cares about the political situations they represent.

Rather than ignore these difficult female voices, or reduce them to the sum of their political situations, Rich imagines them and engages with them more and more as her career progresses, until she engages in a ‘peak-series of reckonings’ in her 1981 volume *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* with its poems “For Ethel Rosenberg,” “Mother-in-Law,” “Heroines,” “Grandmothers,” “The Spirit of Place,” and “Turning the Wheel.” In these poems, rather than invoking other women as closed models of dire warning or beatific inspiration, Rich summons and reckons with them as open characters who can transcend their political categories, and contest Rich with the full force of their slippery, unknowable lives. And such exchange-poems end up having a powerful effect on Rich’s work at large: they help shake Rich out of her stubborn certainties and force her to evolve. It’s no coincidence that Rich writes *Wild Patience* immediately after writing her greatest book of idealized female unity – *The Dream of a Common Language* – in which particular women remain inchoate or abstract. It’s also no coincidence that

---

she writes *Wild Patience* in the midst of her major ideological transition from an essentialist, sisterhood feminism into a more nuanced politics of location that takes into account factors other than gender (such as race and nationality).

Rich’s anti-sociality and political stubbornness are what make her poems of exchange powerful and moving. Rich’s political views are not lightly held, but are rather essential tools of survival – and they are not easily relinquished even for a moment. Yet in her exchange poems, Rich uses lyric to extend herself beyond her limits to greet and be contested by particular others who jostle her thinking loose and prevent her ideals from becoming complacencies. In these poems one can feel the extent to which the concessions she makes are hard for her; by extension, one glimpses the power she’s granted those whom she invokes and addresses. Yet she’s rewarded for this: perversely, it is the very way these summoned others open up and transcend the political reasons they are initially brought into Rich’s poems, the way they insist on being individuals beyond what Rich thinks she knows about them, that ends up complicating Rich’s sense of the world enough to heighten and refine her political thinking. Rich could have been describing this process when she writes of her first encounter with Rilke:

*Du musst dein Leben andern.* No poem had ever said it quite so directly. At twenty-two it called me out of a kind of sleepwalking. I knew, even then, that for me poetry wasn’t enough as something to be appreciated, finely fingered: it could be a fierce, destabilizing force, a wave pulling you further out than you thought you wanted to be. *You have to change your life.*

---

15 It’s partially for this reason that “there is more to the poetry than the politics or, rather, the poetry reveals an emotional vulnerability and turmoil that appears to be hidden in Rich’s political assurance.” Critic Margaret Dickie continues, “Rich has matured into tentativeness as she has acknowledged an emotional variety in her poetry, and, in crucial ways, her poetry is a much more complex statement than her political prose” (Margaret Dickie, *Stein, Bishop, and Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, and Place* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997], 148-9).


[in] the poems of *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* [1981], Rich turns away from abstract, romantic, and eternalized representations of the feminine and the female and toward a new emphasis on what she calls historical ‘particularity’ in her readings of women’s writing and women’s history... (Betsy Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters: Woman Poets, Literary History, and Discord* [New York: Oxford UP, 1992], 180)

In fact a whole group of critics – Alice Templeton, Nick Halpern, Eric Murphy Selinger, Miriam Marty Clark, etc.-- have argued that in the early 1980s Rich becomes less of an adamant ideologue and more of an observer of multi-faceted forms of particular difference.
Before turning to Rich’s ambivalent poems about women, though, we should briefly take note of how her break from New Criticism makes her writing about real, historical women possible. After her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), Rich switches from rhyme and meter to a variety of experimental, open forms. In fact, her next several books continuously repudiate the New Critical ideals of autonomy, shapeliness, and control through their use of ragged juxtapositions and impressionistic techniques, ghazals, fragments, and jump cuts. Albert Gelpi describes Rich in this period as leaving behind the “comfortable, weather-proof sanctuary” of closed forms in order to put an end to the “submission of experience to the artistic process.”

This ‘experience,’ of course, includes particularly female experience; for instance, Rich describes writing the fragmented poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” as a breakthrough during which she realized that the ‘universal’ male New Critical speaker must be replaced by a historically-particular female one. “I had been born a woman,” she says later, but the New

---


18 N.B.: Rich writes “Snapshots of a Daughter in Law” from 1958-60; the poem is “jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3:00AM after rising with a wakeful child... in a longer looser mode than I’d ever trusted myself with before. It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem...” (Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 175). In the same passage Rich adds, “I began to feel that

---

**

Before turning to Rich’s ambivalent poems about women, though, we should briefly take note of how her break from New Criticism makes her writing about real, historical women possible. After her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), Rich switches from rhyme and meter to a variety of experimental, open forms. In fact, her next several books continuously repudiate the New Critical ideals of autonomy, shapeliness, and control through their use of ragged juxtapositions and impressionistic techniques, ghazals, fragments, and jump cuts. Albert Gelpi describes Rich in this period as leaving behind the “comfortable, weather-proof sanctuary” of closed forms in order to put an end to the “submission of experience to the artistic process.”

This ‘experience,’ of course, includes particularly female experience; for instance, Rich describes writing the fragmented poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” as a breakthrough during which she realized that the ‘universal’ male New Critical speaker must be replaced by a historically-particular female one. “I had been born a woman,” she says later, but the New

---


18 N.B.: Rich writes “Snapshots of a Daughter in Law” from 1958-60; the poem is “jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3:00AM after rising with a wakeful child... in a longer looser mode than I’d ever trusted myself with before. It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem...” (Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 175). In the same passage Rich adds, “I began to feel that

---

**
Criticisms had led her “to think and act as if poetry – and the possibility of making poems – were a universal – a gender-neutral – realm... In the universe of the masculine paradigm...”

Rich sees her break from New Criticism and from writing in traditional forms as opening up her poetry up to a more historical, gendered realm in which she can write about particular female others. While I can’t claim that Rich’s break is principally driven by poems about other

my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be ‘universal,’ which meant, of course, nonfemale... Until then I had tried very much not to identify myself as a female poet” (ibid., 175). In sum, we can see here that the New Critical ideology of (male) universality is allied in Rich’s mind with its rigorous traditional forms, and that breaking out of controlled sonnets into wild “fragments and scraps” seems to her the way into a more truthful poetry of female particularity and history. As she says elsewhere, “I would never go back to writing the kind of formal poems that were in The Diamond Cutters, or in A Change of World. Experience itself had become too much for that” (Adrienne Rich, “Adrienne Rich: an Interview with David Montenegro,” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1993), 269). Also: “experience is always greater and more unclassifiable than we give it credit for being” in “queerly limited” formal poems that strive to have a “perfection of order” (Adrienne Rich, “Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading,” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1993), 165, 163). ‘Experience’ here means the world of politics and history, among other things, and the provisionality and roughness of open forms suggests to Rich a quasi-journalistic

poetry that can be more porous to the world: “By 1956, I had begun dating each of my poems by year. I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself.... It seems to me now that this was an oblique political statement – a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem’s text should be read as separate from the poet’s everyday life in the world. It was a declaration that placed poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history’ (Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 239-252, 247). Cf. “When I was an undergraduate in the 1950s, we were taught the New Criticism. The New Critical approach was to examine the poem strictly as a text, not to entertain anything from the poet’s biography or the historical or social context of the times. But for many of us who had been trained to read that way, and who were poets ourselves, it became more and more apparent that you couldn’t read that way: social and historical context were crucial” (Adrienne Rich, “The Genesis of ‘Yom Kippur 1984,’” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 252-8, 253).

"I had been born a woman, and I was trying to think and act as if poetry – and the possibility of making poems – were a universal – a gender-neutral – realm. In the universe of the masculine paradigm...” (Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” 244).

“In the fifties and early sixties there was much shaking of heads if an artist was found ‘meddling in politics’; art was mystical and universal, but the artist was also, apparently, irresponsible and emotionally and politically naïve” (Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” 246).


20 We should also note that Rich’s turn has several anti-modernist features. David Kalstone notes Rich’s preference for the present tense and points out that Rich and others of her generation “are no longer elegiac about history” (David Kalstone, Five Temperaments [New York: Oxford UP, 1977], 141). Jahan Ramazani describes how Rich refuses “the elegiac metahistory in which much poetry by her male counterparts is embedded, Rich distances herself from male modernist nostalgia: ‘For women, the ‘breakdown’ of Western ‘civilization’ between the wars and after the holocaust has never seemed as ultimate and consequential as it has for men... What the male poets were mourning and despairing over had never been ours...’” (Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 311). Rather, this breakdown finally opens up space where female community can become possible as women escape from a masculine tradition. Rich also believes she has more interest in people than does modernism: “Christianity aside, there was for me a repulsive quality to Eliot’s poetry: an aversion to ordinary life and people (ibid., 194).” We might also note that Albert Gelpi has written of the importance of Williams to Rich’s break from New Criticism, and of her discovery of “the need for relationships where there is no other transcendance” (Albert Gelpi, “Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change,” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 282-299, 291, 285).
people, as it was in James Wright’s case, such social poems clearly play an important role. After all, Rich’s break ultimately leads her from being an isolated housewife to being a member of a feminist community. Moreover, Rich often directly describes her ‘breakthrough’ in social terms: for instance, she says that in the ‘60s she “felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (my emphasis).\(^{21}\) In 1964 she explains why she can’t go back to writing in traditional forms as follows:

Like the novelist who finds that his characters begin to have a life of their own and to demand certain experiences, I find that I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan: the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses. Without for one moment turning my back on choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea.\(^{22}\)

Here we see Rich linking her new poetry’s anti-New Critical independence and evasions of authorial control to the behavior of characters in novels. And toward the end of her career characters cease merely to be similes for the otherness of poetry; instead, poems become places to greet characters. As she says at a poetry reading in 2005, “I think one of the great functions of art is to help us to imagine what it’s like to be not ourselves, what it is like to be someone or something else, what it is like to live in another skin, what it is like to live in another body, and in that sense to surpass ourselves, to go out beyond ourselves.”\(^{23}\) Or as she says in a 1999 interview,

I’ve been creating characters as the novelist or playwright might. The literature of the restricted “I” becomes too limiting after a while, too claustrophobic.\(^{24}\)

---


On some important level, Rich’s breakthrough is in fact a social one. Yet, as we’ll see, simply turning outward toward women isn’t enough: in order to describe particular others and avoid Manichean stereotyping, Rich will have to argue with those women, to let herself be challenged and changed by them over the course of her career.

**Flawed Heroines**

From the very start of her career, even before her break from New Criticism, Rich writes poems of great ambivalence about other women. Let’s look at a famous example from Rich’s formal, first volume:

“Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

N.B.: Rich’s rejection of the New Criticism has one other important feature: as Willard Spiegelman points out, and as I’ve already suggested, Rich’s poetry sometimes receives politically rigorous but aesthetically cursory readings (Willard Spiegelman, “Driving to the Limits of the City of Words”: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich,” Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 369-369, 369). It’s true that in her rejection of New Criticism, and in her opening up of her poems to history and politics, Rich asks for more than a ‘narrowly’ aesthetic reading of her work. Hence, David Kalstone writes that, “Leaflets, The Will to Change and Diving into the Wreck ask to be read less like books of detachable polished poems and more like journals – patient, laconic, eloquent but dating themselves, provisional instruments of passage in the present” (David Kalstone, Five Temperaments [New York: Oxford UP, 1977], 155). Rich’s poems are often read, though, as purely “provisional instruments” that are of interest only because of the evolution and adaptations of mind and ideology they display. But these poems are also “eloquent,” and often moving and pleasing in of themselves despite any roughness and provisionality. As Kalstone also says, “Distinctions fall away – Yeats’s choice between perfection of the life and perfection of the work, for example. These poems would like, however composed they are, to fight off the notion of finish and form, seeing them as the enemies of a candid engaged life” (David Kalstone, “Review of The Will to Change,” Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-81, ed. Jane Roberta Cooper [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1984], 221-5, 221). One useful riddle Rich’s post-New-Critical poems will pose for us is how to read in a way that is simultaneously historically and aesthetically rigorous, that can keep sight of both the “candid engaged life” and of formal “composure” – and see them as being productively reinforcing rather than merely at odds.

This is a particularly useful riddle for literary studies to hold in mind at the moment. In a well-known 2008 article in Representations, “An Aesthetics in All Things,” Samuel Otter describes the possibility that the New Historicism may finally be losing power, and that we may be tipping back toward a more formal mode of reading. “The resurgence of “form” and “aesthetics” might signal that the antiquated pendulum is swinging once more from the historical to the formal,” he says, and adds, “this would be a familiar and wearying motion” (Samuel Otter, “An Aesthetics in All Things,” Representations 104, no. 1 [Fall 2008], 116-125, 123.) Instead of surrendering to this swing, Otter calls for “less determined relationships between the formal and the historical and perspectives that might avoid the intoxicating cycle of antagonism or backlash in which “form” and “history” are pitted against another one” (ibid., 118). I think Adrienne Rich’s poetry is particularly well suited to instruct us in adopting such perspectives, and that we can see her move away from New Criticism as a desire to write a kind of poetry that is both formally and historically engaged. In particular, since this poetry is driven at least somewhat by reckonings with particular historical others – and since such others can both destabilize and invigorate aesthetic patterns as we saw in Wright and Gunn – Rich’s poetry will suggest modes of reading that make possible closer ties between the aesthetic and the historical, the shapely and the provisional, self and other.
Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (4)

This poem is often read as anticipating Rich’s feminist themes, but as keeping them at a distance from herself. Betsy Erkkila writes:

In accord with the modernist emphasis on the impersonality of the artist, Rich’s personal historical experience as a woman was contained and controlled by the craft of her formalist verse, and any conflict she might feel between woman and poet was projected through male personae and the objective masks of female artist figures like Aunt Jennifer.26

Rich herself has read her poem this way, suggesting in 1971 that ‘Aunt Jennifer’ was a mere distancing device:

It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible – distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone – even by putting the woman in a different generation. In those years formalism was part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up barehanded.”27

Yet our view is impoverished if we read the poem only as Rich using a persona to write about gender issues from a distance; much is to be gained from seeing the poem as an early example of Rich turning to a woman of another generation (even if an imaginary one) to figure out what possibilities her own female life might hold. This helps explain the poem’s carefully measured ambivalence, which is mirrored formally by the even split between six lines devoted to the tigers, and six to Aunt Jennifer – as well as by all the doublings of the poem’s couplet rhymes. When the speaker imagines Aunt Jennifer, her feelings are completely divided: on the one hand, Jennifer is able to make use of her enforced domesticity to create powerful imaginative figures, but on the other hand this sublimation changes nothing about Jennifer’s societal disempowerment, or the way she’s reduced to hands and fingers, and made to lie still


The poem cannot move beyond this division of Rich’s feelings: its three stanzas of four lines each suggest a sonnet, but it’s as though in losing its final two lines, the volta or resounding insight of the sonnet has been lost. All that’s left is the lockdown of impasse: on the one hand, prancing tigers; on the other, terrified dead hands.

Yet the very fact that there’s a third term – that the poem contains not only Jennifer’s strengths and weaknesses, but also an implied speaker feeling something about them – deepens this ambivalence until it feels like a small triumph. Since the poem dubs her an “Aunt,” Jennifer is placed in the generation above the speaker, but reciprocally also creates an implied speaker who is a niece. The use of the colloquial “Uncle” without a name attached to him in line 7, and of “Aunt” on its own in line 9, further suggests we’re dealing with a family issue that belongs to a speaker who is very familiar with it – and not just with a purely detached, supposed ‘Aunt Jennifer.’ In other words, despite the poem’s chilly distance and impersonality, we’re meant to be regarding Aunt Jennifer from a particular perspective where we find not the stasis of impersonal binaries – like a chalkboard tally, one for and one against – but remarkable justice being done to two contradictory yet simultaneous feelings.

We can read the poem as an ironic, detached, and paradoxical New Critical one in which Jennifer’s art is balanced and counteracted by her life. But we can also read it through the perspective of an implied speaker who is truly divided about what to make of such older generations of women, but who doesn’t want to dismiss by a jot either their power or their failures. And though the speaker’s divided feelings may be unresolvable, they hardly cancel each other out or reach equilibrium; instead, each remains in rather dramatic form. Ending with the fearless tigers after the Aunt lies dead can feel bitterly ironic, demonstrating the uselessness of the tigers and the Aunt’s art. Yet the tigers also get the last word, and aren’t held back even by the Aunt’s death: in fact, they seem to grow more powerful. Though they only ‘prance’ in a single moment in the poem’s first line, by its last one they more emphatically WILL GO ON PRANCing, PROUD and unaFRAID – the pile-up of four stresses in a row emphasizing the robustness of their continued activity. In this way, part of what’s moving about the poem is the depth of the speaker’s unresolved binocular vision. In the end, Jennifer is perhaps even more
open than closed – she retains some openness simply in the refusal to resolve these contrasting visions of her.28

The formal style of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” may disappear after Rich’s second volume, but this binocular view of other women returns in strikingly similar ways as far into Rich’s career as The Dream of a Common Language. Rich writes the following two poems in 1973 and 1974, but they contain much of the same ambivalence as “Aunt Jennifer.”29 Though Rich’s intent in these poems might originally have been to find feminist models or warnings in a female-barren tradition and patriarchal world, she again ends up listening to the others that she invokes enough not to come to any final determination about them.30

Dien Bien Phu
A nurse on the battlefield
wounded herself, but working

dreams
that each man she touches
is a human grenade
an anti-personnel weapon
that can explode in her arms

How long
can she go on like this


29 She also writes poems in which historical women become purely instructive models, or exemplars of the lot of women, but these poems are less likely to contain the feeling of pushback in which another particular woman gets her say. For instance, Marianne Whelchel writes of Rich’s first poem for the Russian poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya that the “poem ends on a strong note as Rich identifies herself with the Russian poet’s protest... Rich preserves this woman’s history, celebrates her actions, and presents her as a model for political activism” (Marianne Whelchel, “Mining the ‘Earth-Deposits’: Women’s History in Adrienne Rich’s Poetry,” Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-81, ed. Jane Roberta Cooper [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1984], 51-71, 55). Gorbanevskaya’s presence in the poem, however, is somewhat generically beatific – she even seems at times like merely a heroicized version of Rich (“we both/ sit after dark with the radio/ unable to read...taking a walk before bed/ wondering what a man can do, asking that/ at the verge of tears”); except for the fact of Natalya’s greater suffering and physical separation from Rich (as Rich tells us in a note Gorbanevskaya was imprisoned in a “penal mental institution”) (53-4, 312) she might seem identical to how Rich would like to see herself. Rich is inspired by Gorbanevskaya, but as a lyric character she comes across as somewhat vague other who is also fighting the good fight.

30 By this time Rich had already ‘broken through’ into politics and history, and was directly writing about feminist issues and implicating herself in them. If ‘Aunt Jennifer’ was merely a tool for writing about such things at a distance, then there should be no more Aunt Jennifers in this period; instead, Jennifer is the first in a long line of female characters whom Rich cannot fully or admire or dismiss.

296
putting mercy
ahead of survival

She is walking
in a white dress stained
with earth and blood
down a road lined
with fields long
given up blasted
cemeteries of one name
or two

A hand
juts out like barbed wire
it is terribly alone

if she takes it
will it slash her wrists again

if she passes it by
will she turn into a case
of shell-shock, eyes
glazed forever on the

blank chart of
amnesia. (115-6)

Power

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil
She died a famous woman denying
her wounds denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power (135)

Despite being written over twenty years later – and in free verse lines broken up with white space instead of metered couplets – both of these poems come to ambivalent, binocular conclusions similar to “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” In “Dien Bien Phu” everything is doubled and comes in pairs: the nurse dreams that 1) each man is a grenade and 2) an anti-personnel weapon; she puts 1) mercy ahead of 2) survival; she walks in a dress stained with 1) earth and 2) blood; she walks down a road 1) given up 2) blasted; fields like cemeteries are of one name or two. The poem also ends with two options: she can continue to place female caretaking ahead of personal survival, or she can withhold her caretaking in a situation where there is no one else to provide it, thereby letting wounded soldiers die, and suffering disastrous psychological consequences herself as a result. (We are in fact told the nurse will end up with “eyes/ glazed forever on the/ blank chart of/ amnesia” – and no mental state is so undesirable in the unflinchingly honest and confrontational Rich as “amnesia,” the state she will apply to her mother’s betrayals.)

“Power” too ends with a repetition that ties Curie’s wounds and fame closely together, and this poem is also full of pairs. We find a bottle 1) amber 2) perfect; a cure for 1) fever or 2) melancholy; a tonic 1) for living on this earth 2) in the winters of this climate; we meet a Curie who denied 1) the cataracts on her eyes and 2) the cracked and suppurating skin, etc. Despite having broken in a dramatic and visually showy way from the earlier metered quatrains, Rich still makes doubleness into a creative principle, as essential to the rhythm of these later poems as it was to the structure of “Aunt Jennifer.”

Rich, however, wants to push through her ambivalence towards some kind of resolution. When read as a series that runs from “Aunt Jennifer” (≈1951) to “Dien Bien Phu” (1973) to “Power” (1974) we can see each poem as trying to surpass its predecessor by further deepening and intensifying its ambivalent relationship toward its female protagonist. One way “Dien Bien

31 A similar duality and ambivalence dominates two poems I don’t have room to discuss here: the first is an early poem written about male and female parents (“The Middle Aged”), and the second a poem about Emily Dickinson (“I Am in Danger – Sir”) written in 1964.
"Phu" does this is by ratcheting up the drama: though Aunt Jennifer risked death too, the poem’s army nurse plays a far more adventurous, independent role. The poem’s stakes also seem higher since it’s set during the First Indochina War. Rich writes the poem during the American Vietnam-war, and at a time when she was thinking about how the war and the gender politics of the lover’s bedroom might be connected – how patriarchy, writ large, might lead to militaristic politics. Moreover, “Dien Bien Phu” takes on mythic and talismanic stakes as the nurse walks about in a sort of tribal wedding outfit, “a white dress stained/ with earth and blood.” The poem’s mythic, dreamlike quality suggests a kind of ur-struggle between gender archetypes as though female caretaking is being pitted against male aggression writ onto a geopolitical scale.

“Dien Bien Phu” also brings more direct authorial intensity and emotionality to bear on its protagonist and her predicament than we saw in “Aunt Jennifer.” The exploded (“blasted”) form of “Dien Bien Phu” – full of line breaks and white space – both gives the poem a certain authorial warmth in the tribute its visual drama plays to its protagonist’s situation, and makes the poem move more slowly, encouraging us to linger over shorter phrases as if we’re meant to press down more firmly on each one (“that each man she touches/ is a human grenade/ an anti-personnel weapon/ that can explode in her arms”). Rich’s treatment of Aunt Jennifer didn’t suffice, and so “Dien Bien Phu” must go further. After all, if “Dien Bien Phu”’s blasted pieces were glued back together, the poem would be about the same length as “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” It’s as though Rich is using her new formal techniques – and all that she’s learned about gender archetypes and the role of patriarchy in politics since 1951 – to blow open the schematic used for Aunt Jennifer, and to give the nurse a more thorough, piercing examination than the one the fictional Aunt received.

Correspondingly, in “Dien Bien Phu” Rich has a closer relationship to the poem’s protagonist. This closer relationship is evident in the visual warmth of the broken lines, but also

I was thinking about where sexuality belonged in all this. What is the connection between Vietnam and the lovers’ bed? If this insane violence is being waged against a very small country by this large and powerful country in which I live, what does that have to do with sexuality, and with what’s going between men and women, which I felt as a struggle even then?
in the way Rich and the nurse blur together in something like free indirect discourse as the nurse’s desperation bleeds into Rich’s speech. The use of the present progressive (“working,” “is walking”) puts us inside the woman’s head and makes us perceive things as she does (“fields long/ given up blasted”); but the dreamlike quality of the poem also makes it unclear whether the nurse is capable of questioning her situation, or if we are simply being given her sensory- psychological experience followed by Rich’s commentary on it. When the poem asks, “How long/ can she can go on like this/ putting mercy/ ahead of survival” it’s unclear whether this is Rich’s commentary on the nurse’s dream or the nurse’s question being put to herself. And when the poem ends with its two opposing options (if she takes it/ if she passes it by) we don’t know if these are options she has been able to articulate to herself, or if Rich is speaking independently, trying to learn from the nurse’s condition. If the nurse hasn’t been able to articulate such questions and options, then this could be a sign of her passivity, and part of the poem’s overall ambivalence about her. Yet the fact that both readings are possible shows us that Rich isn’t as worried about keeping herself at a distance. Though she is still full of ambivalence, Rich is willing to let that blur with the nurse’s own ambivalence, and to see things at least partially on the nurse’s terms.

This is perhaps why the poem revises its described predicament to make it more tragic. We move from the more simple and damning question of ‘how long she can put mercy ahead of survival’ (to which the implied answer is probably ‘not forever, she should change her life’) to the inescapable catch-22 of the poem’s end. This ending question, by focusing more on the “shell-shock” the nurse will suffer if she does nothing, demonstrates that not helping the hand that “juts out like barbed wire...terribly alone” might be just as problematic as putting mercy ahead of survival. There is real pathos to that hand even if it belongs to a man: as we saw in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” being reduced to a hand is a horrible condition in Rich’s poetry. In sum, it might have been easy for Rich to see what was valuable about Aunt Jennifer making art for herself, but it takes Rich’s greater identification with and ability to listen to the nurse to see how her sacrifice for men might be partially justified.

“Dien Bien Phu” doesn’t merely repeat its predecessor poem, but presents a new character about whom it feels more passionately ambivalent – a character who is perhaps more
admirable and difficult to dismiss than Aunt Jennifer. And yet – the poem arrives at the same doubleness and impasse of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”; Rich can clarify her understanding of the woman’s predicament, but she can’t go beyond the lockdown of her earlier binocular vision. So far, the only way she knows how to approach non-idealized women is to try to better imagine the double binds in which they find themselves.

The better-known, much anthologized, poem “Power,” written a year after “Dien Bien Phu,” can be read as a further evolution of Rich’s social poems of doubling and ambivalence. The poem’s form again demonstrates Rich’s joint admiration of and dissatisfaction with the woman about whom she writes, and Rich’s restless, ongoing attempts to imagine and reckon with her. For if in “Dien Bien Phu” Rich exploded “Aunt Jennifer”’s tidy quatrains, in “Power” she attempts an intermediate approach, drawing the experimental energy of her fractured shards closer together, and writing another quasi-sonnet in four sections. In these sections, blank spaces remain, but now they stitch the poem together more tightly.

In a sense, then, Rich doubles the formal pressure available to her in her exploration of her characters by using both traditional and experimental techniques in “Power.” She draws on the sonnet’s compactness, its pressure to arrive at a resolution, and its surprising changes of directions (for instance, the volta-like turn in the sixth line). Yet she also makes use of her experimental ellipses and blank spaces, which are used in a variety of ways. They’re used to focus on the dream of a miracle tonic, lingering over it and creating emphasis (“one bottle amber perfect”); to emphasize the horrors that Curie must face since the blank spaces create little stutters before a bleak point is driven home (“she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness”); and they’re used in combination with single-word lines in order to torque and refigure her summary of the poem’s overall situation into new insight and resolution. Rich’s wish to do more than repeat the preceding poems that we’ve looked at and to clarify her feelings about Marie Curie in particular, drive this restless formal inventiveness. Something remains unsatisfying to Rich about merely imagining the pros and cons of her characters’ situations, and she cares enough about Curie – a named, real, historical woman for the first time – that she wants to make a further push in her efforts to imagine and understand her.
Though ultimately “Power” remains an ambivalent poem too, its ambivalence is personalized more than it was in its predecessor poems. In the poem’s first section Rich lingers over the dream of finding some ideal history that might cure female ailments. Next, she turns to Marie Curie, the female scientist and pioneer to try to find such a history, but ends up reading about the grim final days of Curie’s life. Here, for the first time in the poems we’ve looked at, the lyric “I” enters the poem directly, partially in order to help distinguish Rich from Curie. While Curie could only remain in denial, perhaps lingering over the same wishful dream for a female “cure” that we encountered in the poem’s first section, Rich will say plain bald things and face hard truths. In this way, the blanks in the third stanza not only end up underscoring the wounds being described (“the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends”), they also crop up less frequently, so that the stanza as a whole can read more quickly. It’s as though after lingering in the dreamy wish for a cure, we now drop down a tonal register and get a prose-like no-nonsense rush of ailments: she did this to herself, she denied that fact, she suffered in these ways.

And yet, even as Rich tries to distance herself from Curie she is drawn back to her: introducing the first-person in a poem about another character can be risky in that it introduces more of an uncontrollable link between poet and character. Rich tries minimizing her relationship with Curie by using distancing techniques other than bald statements: phrases like she “must have known” or “It seems she denied to the end,” for instance, hold off the kind of close imaginative identification and quasi-free indirect discourse that we found in “Dien Bien Phu.” It’s as though Rich is trying to remind us continually that Curie is a distant historical person, and so Rich can’t know exactly what she thought or believed. Yet by the end of this penultimate section, Curie starts to look a lot like Rich: at the time of writing the poem, Rich had suffered for twenty years from the serious arthritis that would eventually require multiple surgeries and lead to her death. The focus then on Curie’s diseased hands – in addition to taking us back to Aunt Jennifer’s hands and the nurse’s ministrations to the terribly alone hand jutting

33 She says that the dug-up bottle will cure “melancholy,” which might in turn remind us of Durer’s female engraving of “Melancholia” that Rich describes in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” and that Rich hung for many years over her writing desk (Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* [Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1984], 172).
out – yokes Curie’s predicament to Rich’s act of writing. Appropriately, the section ends with Curie unable to hold “a test tube or a pencil.” The doublings that we’ve seen throughout these poems here becomes the split between Rich and her subject, between poet and scientist, pencil and test-tube. In other words, Rich is beginning to make her argument lie between self and other, rather than just between two aspects of another with herself kept at a distance.

The idea of Curie dying as a “famous woman” would also have held particular significance for a Rich who mistrusted her own ‘token’ status as a female poet who’d been granted early success by the male poetry establishment. Rich worries a lot about tokenism because it makes women into collaborators with patriarchy; she writes in 1979 that tokenism creates the illusion that women have equal access to power, while requiring that token women use their power to “maintain things as they are, and... essentially ‘think like men.’” Perhaps Rich is using Curie’s token status and death, then, to brace herself, change her course of action, and avoid becoming like Curie. Indeed, the critic Claire Keyes has read Curie as a purely negative example of a token woman who should have accepted her powers already present as an ‘ordinary’ woman and thereby evaded self-harm. Yet Rich can’t simply dismiss Curie; instead, this sonnet-like poem does contain a discovery in its last line. After the poem’s extended emphasis on Curie’s suffering and her denials, it feels shocking to end with her “power.” In her eagerness not to deny Curie’s blunders and suffering, Rich has suppressed the scientist’s remarkable accomplishments, and this knowledge bursts back into the final line, hooking into Rich and not letting her go.

34 The idea that Rich’s arthritic pain links her to others will surface again later on in Rich’s work. In “Tracking Poems,” she writes directly of her arthritic pain and how it provides a link to the “pain on the streets” and out in the world (212).


38 The line is powerful for other reasons: the doubleness we found in the preceding poems is now twined together. Instead of the nurse with her two bad options, we get Curie with no options, finding out that her two states share the same source.
arrive at a true uncertainty about whether the denial was necessary to attain that power, and
whether or not Curie’s sacrifice was worth it.

Rich, in other words, has reached a crisis point. If she intended to write a poem of reproof
and correction – of 1) the wish for a tonic 2) the hard reality 3) a clear vision of how to live –
what she in fact has written is a poem that emphasizes an impressive but doomed female power
that’s disturbingly similar to what she herself has attained. After all, at the time of the poem’s
composition in 1974 Rich has left her husband, but is only beginning to settle into the feminist
community for which she yearns, and has not yet met her long-term partner Michelle Cliff, or
come out as a lesbian. “Power,” then, can be seen as a way for Rich to take stock of how far
she’s come, and the poem’s similarity to “Aunt Jennifer” is unsettling. How much progress has
she really made? And where else is there to go? These questions suggest pessimistic answers,
and Curie can even be seen as a ‘haunting’ character whose lockdown in her entangled power
and dying threaten to pull Rich into them. I don’t think Curie is a purely closed character – she is
meant to be a real historical person, and her power clearly lingers. Yet that power traps Rich; she
has found herself hard pressed to say how she might be different from Curie, and she seems to be
writing the same poem over and over despite her break from New Criticism, her flight from her
family, and the passage of twenty years.

Her solution to this crisis is to embrace the personalizing turn we found in the free
indirect discourse of “Dien Bien Phu” and in the emergence of the “lyric I” in “Power”: Rich
will stop keeping the women she is frustrated with at a distance, and will start turning outwards
toward them, invoking them at greater length, addressing them directly, and treating them, even
if dead, as living presences with whom she can have evolving arguments and exchanges. If these
women have trapped Rich in ambivalent, binocular visions instead of bringing her clarity and
showing her how to live differently from them, then perhaps the problem is that she hasn’t let

2003), 458.

40 I think it is for the poem’s powerful encapsulation of her trapped ambivalence that she places it at the beginning of The Dream
of a Common Language, and that, when editing both her Selected Poems and Later Poems, she includes “Power” but not
“Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev.” In the latter poem, an all-female mountain climbing team all die, but speak from beyond the
grave as a harmonious, empowered collective we of sisterhood. Something seems more important, more haunting to Rich about
“Power.”

304
them be different enough from her, hasn’t brought them enough to life, or brought herself into the poems and engaged these women as full, separate people. As we’ll see, when these women are released from their binaries and their short, sonnet-like forms into longer poems of conversation and exchange, they exhibit far greater depths, and have far more to tell Rich.

For my first example, I will turn to a later poem in the same volume as “Power.” I won’t discuss the more famous “Twenty-One Love Poems” which in my view speaks more to a community than of an individual, keeping its beloved mostly hidden while modeling the difficulties of being in a lesbian relationship. Instead, I will turn toward the end of the volume and examine “A Woman Dead in Her Forties.” This poem was begun in the same year as “Power,” yet took four years to write instead of just one. In it, Rich again speaks of her dissatisfactions and ambivalences with a particular woman, but here these complaints lead to a series of exchanges with an open, responding presence that can hold its own.

** but you, but I **

“A Woman Dead in Her Forties,” Rich’s first major poem of address and exchange, focuses on a less risky and fraught subject than do its predecessor poems and the poems that follow it. Unlike, say, Marie Curie, the dead woman is neither responsible for her own death, nor has she made any unusually contentious or risky decisions. And unlike the later poem, “For Ethel Rosenberg,” in which Rich addresses the famous alleged spy, executed for treason, “Woman Dead” merely addresses an estranged friend from childhood, dead of natural causes. Admittedly, the friend’s death by breast cancer is linked to a duality that seems reminiscent of Curie. Here’s an excerpt from the poem’s fifth section:

```
You played heroic, necessary
games with death

since in your neo-protestant tribe the void
was supposed not to exist

except as a fashionable concept
```

41 I don’t have space to quote the poem in full here but it can be found on pages 154-9 in The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001.
you had no traffic with

I wish you were here tonight I want
to yell at you

Don’t accept
Don’t give in

But would I be meaning your brave
irreproachable life, you dean of women, or

your unfair, unfashionable, unforgivable
woman’s death?

The woman’s success and death are again juxtaposed – as we see elsewhere in the poem, the
courage that enables Rich’s friend to succeed is bound up in her Christian faith in an afterlife that
leads her to face her death with equanimity. And since that death is caused by breast cancer, it is
uniquely ‘feminine.’ Yet Rich does not claim that the woman’s choices led to her cancer, even if
Rich draws attention to how that disease itself receives an unfair gendering as unfashionable and
unforgivable. Instead, as we’ll see, the woman’s determination to face her death with relative
equanimitiy (playing “heroic, necessary/ games” with it) is representative of a larger
disagreement between the two friends about their differing personal styles and ideas about what
degrees of feminism to adopt. By the end of the poem, we see that the woman’s religious faith is
bound up in her modesty, heroism, stoicism, and avoidance of passionate emotional displays.
While Rich the feminist-warrior wants fewer secrets and more direct expression, (“more crazy
mourning, more howl, more keening,”) her friend the successful “independent woman” wants to
work more closely within the traditions and possibilities already available to her. Rich dreams
of a common language, and yearns for a feminist sisterhood in which women might claim each
other with great love and intensity; her friend, meanwhile, has less interest in bald intimacy and
emotional expression between women: “I would have touched my fingers/ to where your breasts
had been,” says Rich, “but we never did such things.”

Rather than ‘smashing the mold straight off’ like Rich (“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”).

“A Woman Dead in Her Forties” picks up on and alters two strands in Rich’s career. First, as I’ve said, many major
critics (Vendler, Perloff, von Hallberg) fault Rich for her polemical writing in which all women are good and all men evil. They
point to poems such as “Rape” in Diving into the Wreck, in which a cop turns out to be almost as bad as the poem’s rapist: “his
hand types out the details/ and he wants them all/ but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best” (106). Or they point to the later
We can already begin to see how Rich’s poem moves beyond a binocular view of the pros and cons of its characters’ choices since those choices are now contrasted with Rich’s own instead of being shown to be inherently self-destructive. And though the poem is spoken from Rich’s perspective, its directly addressed character will also press back strongly on Rich for the first time, forcing her to adapt and revise her position. As Adela Pinch points out in her book *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, to think of another in the third person implies “‘that our knowledge of him is past,’ embalmed in a totality, [while] thinking of someone in the second person gets at the person’s essential freedom and their essentially transcendent nature.”44 I would add that this freedom and transcendent nature have the ability to teach the poet things that she didn’t know at the start of writing her poem. It’s no wonder then that “Woman Dead” takes Rich four years to write, and that she counts it as one of the “landmarks” in her development, part of the “very long struggles to understand what I was writing, why I needed to be writing this at all, and to make it happen... some kind of watershed perhaps.”45 In it, she learns how to create and listen to an open character.

---

44 Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 82.

Her friend’s open ability to push back on Rich and correct her is an essential part of the poem. We see this first in how her friend’s disease and isolation reprove Rich’s dream of an idealized female community:

Your breasts/ sliced-off The scars
dimmed as they would have to be years later

All the women I grew up with are sitting half-naked on the rocks in sun we look at each other and are not ashamed

and you too have taken off your blouse but this was not what you wanted:

to show your scarred, deleted torso...

I want to touch my fingers to where your breasts had been but we never did such things....

you pull on your blouse again: stern statement:

There are things I will not share with everyone.

The poem begins with Rich’s friend rejecting the idealized female community that Rich envisioned throughout the preceding pages and sections of Dream. Though the poem begins with Rich and the other women sitting naked and unashamed, the “but you” of social lyric enters quickly to disrupt this fantasy. And after the friend takes issue with idealized female community by pulling on her blouse (a “stern statement”), Rich fills the poem with other moments where the speaker’s views are revised or corrected. Though the woman never speaks directly, her summoned, open presence leads Rich to engage in various acts of self-reproach and self-scrutiny. Rich doesn’t only blame herself – she continuously confronts, accuses, and implores her friend – yet the woman’s presence forces her repeatedly to question herself and to revise her understanding of her friend and their relationship:

from Section 2
You send me back to share
my own scars first of all
with myself

What did I hide from her
what have I denied her
what losses suffered

from Section 4
...[we] kept in touch, untouching

lied about our lives: I wearing
the face of the proper marriage

you the face of the independent woman...

from Section 5

I want
to yell at you

Don’t accept
Don’t give in

But would I be meaning your brave
irreproachable life, you dean of women, or

your unfair, unfashionable, unforgivable
woman’s death?

from Section 6

You are every woman I ever loved
and disavowed...

How can I reconcile this passion
with our modesty...

from Section 7

Time after time in dreams you rise
reproachful...

You left me amber beads
strung with turquoise from an Egyptian grave

I wear them wondering
How am I true to you?
I’m half-afraid to write poetry
for you who never read it much...

from Section 8
I thought: I understand

life and death now; the choices
I didn’t know your choice...

Rich the intransigent advocate disappears here in a poem full of self-doubt that listens, adjusts, and responds to what her friend’s life has to say. This poem is different in kind from the more cerebral Rich-poem in which two floating voices debate their positions; rather, in “Woman Dead” Rich attempts to let another’s life – and the way another’s decisions and viewpoints are embedded and rooted in that life – challenge and contest Rich’s own. Rich asks: is writing poetry useful to a woman who didn’t like it? She asks: even if I didn’t like my friend’s choice to accept her death with equanimity, did I even understand it (“I didn’t know your choice”)? She asks: why am I still mad at her, why is she haunting me reproachfully? What are my own scars, how am I too culpable in our friendship’s failures? She listens as her friend becomes an accusing presence, representative of all of Rich’s relinquished friendships with women who didn’t live up to her ideals: “You are every woman I loved/ and disavowed/ a bloody incandescent chord strung out/ across years, tracts of space...” In Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry, Charles Altieri writes about how Rich’s self-reflexivity helps her to escape from what he calls the limited, anti-intellectual “scenic mode” of, say, deep image poetry in the 1960s and 70s. But we can see here the extent to which this self-reflexivity doesn’t just function on its own but depends on other people, and on putting the self in relation to summoned others whose presence can then drive and spur on Rich’s revisions and self-corrections.

The dead woman’s ability to push back against Rich, and trigger such thorough self-scrutiny depends on the intensity of her encounters with Rich over the course of the poem. Now that Rich is done keeping her arguments at a distance, she draws her friend as close to her as possible as can be seen in the poem’s transformation of the motif of hands and touching. In “Aunt Jennifer,” “Dien Bien Phu” and “Marie Curie” hands remained solitary or damaged; when
they reached out they felt like “barbed wire” (116); or else they replicated and mirrored damage, holding their isolated test tubes and pencils. Now Rich transforms the charge and violence of such earlier poems into the shock of lyric contact that I described in my introduction: “I want to touch my fingers/ to where your breasts had been,” she says in the poem’s first section, and repeats in the last one. Yet Rich only ‘wants’ to touch; she adds, “but we never did such things.” The painfulness of hands remains, but is charged with a passionate intensity and intimacy that’s all the greater because it acknowledges both loss and distance.647 This wish enables the poet to bring herself closer to her friend while acknowledging their ultimate separation.

I have claimed that Rich lacks a gregarious social imagination, but it might be truer to say that she, like James Wright, finds other people both necessary and excruciating. It is in part for this reason that she vacillates and is drawn toward the extremes of both solitude and company. Rather than always living for others and putting their needs first, it seems far more appealing at times to Rich to be “cold and egotistical,” or isolated like the Emily Dickinson, Robinson Jeffers, and A.R. Ammons about whom she frequently writes.48 Yet such separateness can also be painful, and so Rich fantasizes about how division, isolation, and difference can be overcome by a common language or matriarchy in which women are united.50 The moments of encounter and

---

46 For instance, when Rich repeats herself at the end of the poem “I want to touch” becomes the smaller, more fatalistic “I would have touched.”

47 As I also claimed in my introduction, the shocking presence of open others is often in dialogue with their absence and distance.


49 For solitude’s allure in Rich, see also the final section of “From an Old House in America”: “Isolation, the dream/ of the frontier woman / leveling her rifle along/ the homestead fence/ still snares our pride...” (130).

50 In the 1970s, for instance, Rich is drawn to thinking that women have weaker-ego boundaries than men because they become something like two people at once when they’re pregnant. In other words, gender leads Rich to become fascinated with questions of separation and union, and of how alone we are doomed to be: “Does the infant memorize the body of the mother/ and create her in absence” she asks in “Splittings,” “or simply cry/ primordial loneliness?” (Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 76). Throughout her career she wants to be a poet who both “love[s] clear edges” and one who seeks out “the edges that blur” (212); wants to write poems with titles like “Splittings” and “The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen As One.” She is also temperamentally drawn to strong versions of solitude and company at different times. As Eric Murphy Selinger writes, the poet’s craving for separateness “is part, not a contrast to, her underlying dream of a love put into action” (Eric Murphy Selinger, What Is It Then Between Us?: Traditions of Love in American Poetry, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998], 154). Or as she herself will happily write in 1993, “I work in solitude surrounded by community, solitude in dialogue with community...” (Adrienne Rich, What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics [New York: Norton, 2003], 54).
shock in “Woman Dead,” and in subsequent exchange-poems, though, gain their intensity because Rich is emerging from solitude without claiming any union, but instead wrestling with separation and difference. At the end of the poem, Rich repeats and revises her statement: she only “would have” touched her fingers to her friend’s missing breasts; in fact they ended up ‘cleaving’ to each other “across that space” of their ‘lies about their lives’ “fingerling webs/ of love and estrangement.”

“Woman Dead” is filled with such charged yet distanced moments. For instance, Rich, while wearing “amber beads” her friend left her “strung with turquoise from an Egyptian grave,” questions how true to her friend she is being. Wearing someone else’s gift of funereal beads is a form of intimate connection, but Rich uses the beads to question herself, and to explore the nature and limits of that connection. The poet also describes vivid childhood memories of the two friends lying “side by side/ in narrow cots/ the night-meadow exhaling/ its darkness”; of her friend fighting a girl who bullied Rich; and of how they “did each other’s homework/ wrote letters.” Again, these are moments of powerful intimacy, but they are soon revealed as lost states that preceded the friends’ estrangement. Both shock and distance govern these encounters, and they encourage Rich to listen raptly yet never to forget herself. Again, like Wilbur respecting his daughter’s closed door in “The Writer,” Rich must learn to accept her friend’s aloofness: she must turn outward toward her, summon her through specifics, and bring her life as close as she can while acknowledging their difference and letting her friend’s summoned presence push back and have its say. Their estrangement and the woman’s death, then, become not just reasons to

51 As early on as 1965, while imagining the frontiers of America, Rich wrote of the intense encounters solitude can produce: “How people used to meet! starved, intense, the old/ Christmas gifts saved up till spring,/ and the old plain words,/ and each with his God-given secret/ spelled out through months of snow and silence,/ burning under the bleached scalp; behind dry lips/ a loaded gun” (Adrienne Rich, Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Barbara and Albert Gelpi [New York: Norton, 1993], 28). Yet in these lines Rich focuses on the intensity of the meeting rather than on the meeting itself, whereas in “Woman Dead” Rich pushes through her past distance and isolation from the women she’s taken issue with (Jennifer, Curie) into a powerful contact that’s described at length – while also holding back from any merger experience, and respecting the other’s different life and choices.

52 The poem can be seen as a prolonged serious act of summoning that invokes 1) many specific scenes of Rich and her friend 2) many wonderings about and descriptions of their changing relationship across the years 3) several distinct memories of their girlhood friendship 4) descriptions of her friend’s approach to her own death 5) of their different personal styles 6) of her friend haunting her and 7) and of facts about her friend’s life – that she didn’t read much poetry, etc. Yet if this summoning works, if Rich is able to get somewhere new in her relationship to her friend, it’s only because she summons her friend as an open presence who can correct her, insisting upon boundaries and differences.
mourn, but also extreme reminders of Rich’s friend’s separateness and of her different experiences and life.

This simultaneous straining toward another yet respecting and being corrected by that other depends on the poem’s form. White space and ellipses again play key roles. Such lacunae are not common in *The Dream of a Common Language*, and we can see Rich as importing them from “Dien Bien Phu” and “Power”; here, though they function to acknowledge divisions or force leaps of thought. For instance, the poem begins with three such dividing blank spaces as it describes the woman’s double mastectomy and her separation from Rich (“Your breasts/sliced-off    The scars/dimmed    as they would have to be...”). And throughout the poem blank spaces often signal little disconnects, such as the gap between Rich’s thinking and understanding (“I thought:     I understand”); or between her writing of poetry and “you    who never read it much.” These disconnects prompt Rich to take risky leaps in thought as her friend’s distance from her – her independence and mysteriousness – requires guesswork and new discoveries: “You send me back to share/ my own scars    first of all/with myself”; “I wish you were here tonight    I want/to yell at you.” Who should she share her scars with? Why does she want her friend here tonight? The blanks often feel like a stutter, as if she’s not sure what to say next, and must grope her way toward what her friend’s life is telling her. Hence, such lacunae often spring up after colons. Rich pushes herself forward with the punctuation, but then must pause as she searches for an elaboration or interpretation: “Most of our love from the age of nine/ took the form of jokes and mute/ loyalty [thought]:    you fought a girl/ who said she’d knock me down [exception].” Or: “you pull on/ your blouse again [action]:    stern statement [interpretation].”

The poem’s form also helps Rich approach her friend with careful tentativeness and thought by requiring her to make leaps not just over blank spaces, but also over section breaks; this is a technique that she will use not only in “Woman Dead,” but in almost every other poem of encounter at which we’ll be looking. Sections both compress and gesture outward: “Woman Dead”’s eight sections leap back and forth in time giving us the history of a friendship, its failures, ending, aftermath, and hope for renewal in six pages. Yet that compression is also an open one that makes us feel that we’re only glimpsing a few points in a constellation, the barest
contours of a life and of the multi-decade relationship between Rich and her friend. The sections also help give us the poet’s differing thoughts about a person or relationship: with each new section we are given another take, another scene or angle of approach with which to complicate and deepen our picture of a described character, and to imagine all that is left out or not yet understood. Hence, not only can individual brief lyrics contain singular powerful encounters, they can also give us a multi-faceted picture of another as they’re considered and reconsidered across time. After all, there is a way in which the poem – which took four years to write and yet is made up of fast-paced free-verse sentences without periods – contains opposing types of time within it. Though lyrics are usually short, they can contain many years of thinking and feeling about another person.

The poem’s restless, surprising movements eventually take a final swerve to arrive at a satisfying exchange. By the end of the poem the initial “but you” of the woman’s insistence on possessing her own death and difference leads to the “but I” of Rich’s new, clearer understanding and acceptance of her difference from her friend:

Most of our love took the form
of mute loyalty

we never spoke at your deathbed of your death

but from here on
I want more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening.

For instance, think of how Larry Levis’s “Winter Stars” began with Levis’s father listening to music after breaking a man’s hand and then moves quickly into the future where Levis says, “I never understood how anyone could risk his life,/Then listen to Vivaldi” (Levis, Selected Levis, 87).

Consider all the ground covered in “Woman Dead”: we quickly move from (section 1) the “but you” of Rich’s friend’s refusal to sit topless with the group to (section 2) Rich’s self-reproach and examination of her own scars and deficiencies; to (3) a memory of girlhood intimacy in wartime; to (4) memories of mutual loyalty and then of eventual estrangement as both Rich and her friend lie about their lives; to (5) the friend’s strategy for dealing with her approaching death; to (6) Rich’s new insight about how she treated her friend, and about how their ‘modest’ relationship was at odds with the passion Rich now feels; to (7) Rich’s dreams of her friend haunting her – “unfinished” – as though she has ghostly business Rich needs to complete; to (8) a final reckoning in which Rich notes the limits of her understanding of her friend, and voices her ultimate disagreement with how they both behaved. Rich uses her section-breaks here to swoop and veer into different time periods (say, childhood); or types of encounters (being haunted by her friend after her death); or movements of thought (“You send me back to share/ my own scars first of all/ with myself”). Meanwhile, the white spaces between sections become direr versions of the gaps between lines, and thereby necessitate these surprising, improvisatory leaps and transitions.

The sense of encounters and memories being reshuffled – as Rich continually changes her mind and is corrected – also depends on the repetition of phrases with slight modifications in new contexts ("we never spoke at your deathbed of your death,” “I would have touched my fingers...”). “Woman Dead” with its many sections is particularly well-suited for refiguring and returning to old phrases and moments in new ways.
We stayed mute and disloyal
because we were afraid

I would have touched my fingers
to where your breasts had been
but we never did such things

The woman’s objection to Rich’s initial wish for female solidarity – and her figurative and literal haunting of Rich throughout the poem – ultimately lead the poet to a clearer understanding of their mutual failures. Over the course of the poem she comes to see how they lied to each other, and were both culpable in their estrangement. And though Rich holds herself up to particularly intense scrutiny (“What did I hide from her/ what have I denied her”... “How am I true to you?”), and listens to her friend’s summoned, corrective presence again and again, Rich ultimately takes a stand. She refuses to be the woman who pretends to be happy in her ‘proper’ marriage; who won’t speak directly of her love or talk explicitly of death; who can be loyal only ‘mutely’; who doesn’t strive for physical intimacy and touch; and who remains ‘reasonable,’ decorous, and controlled.

In sum, Rich arrives at a position that’s not radically new, but rather one that has been tested, clarified, and owned. Instead of describing her friend’s strengths and weaknesses and remaining at an impasse, Rich takes a stand by saying that they were wrong to love each other only at a distance later in life, that fear made them “mute and disloyal,” and that from “here on” Rich is going to be less restrained and decorous than previously allowed by “our modesty/ your calvinist heritage/ my girlhood frozen into forms.” In other words, Rich’s concluding disagreement emerges out of real struggle and consideration of her friend’s life and death. Moreover, in saying that from “here on” she wants more mourning, more vocal loyalty, and less fear, Rich admits that she’s continued to fail, but she also imagines a way forward. The poem, then, ultimately transforms itself from a missed exchange into a more satisfying one wherein the woman’s resistance and haunting presence lead Rich to fulfill the ‘unfinished business’ between them, and to clarify and articulate, once and for all, the nature of Rich’s love, loss, and disagreement.55

55 By putting herself directly into the poem and into charged relation with her friend, Rich breaks through any impasse and arrives at a new perception of that relationship, and at new ways of wanting to act in the world. As we saw in Catullus in my
“A Woman Dead,” though, is only a partial breakthrough. Three years after completing it, Rich writes “For Ethel Rosenberg,” a poem that takes a greater risk by invoking and addressing a woman whose gender is directly involved in her death, and who was also a political warrior like Rich.\(^{56}\) It is also not until Rich writes this poem that she learns to relinquish control and to create an open other who fully escapes her ideology. For, unlike Rich’s dead friend, Ethel Rosenberg gets the last say in her poem, insisting that Rich knows her only imperfectly.\(^ {57}\)

Rich also speaks of this poem as a “watershed,” and as a “very important poem for me to write.” She adds the following:

It was like touching the tip of an iceberg. I’m struggling with a lot of that stuff. When I wrote the poem, I wrote it as best as I could, but there’s so much more.\(^ {58}\)

And indeed, “Ethel Rosenberg” leads to “so much more”: it’s followed directly in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) by a whole sequence of poems in which Rich addresses specific real women with whom she struggles and disagrees.

**

“For Ethel Rosenberg” requires some context and summary: Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, as the poem’s epigraph tells us, were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and killed by electrocution on June 19, 1953. In particular, they were accused of passing nuclear information to Russia, and enabling it to develop a bomb a few years ahead of schedule.\(^ {59}\) Many left-wing

---

\(^{56}\) Again, though I don’t have room to quote the poem in full, it can be found on pages 174-179 of *The Fact of a Doorframe.*

\(^{57}\) It’s perhaps more than mere artistic tact that keeps Rich’s dead friend nameless while Ethel Rosenberg appears in the title of the poem about her.


sympathizers believed that the trial was an anti-Semitic witch-hunt, and that the couple was innocent. Today we know that Julius did pass some information to the Russians, but it’s unclear how useful it was, and Ethel’s culpability remains greatly in doubt. Ethel was convicted for typing up the stolen information; however, in the 1990s David Greenglass – an Army machinist at Los Alamos recruited by Julius Rosenberg as a spy – admitted that he fabricated the most damning testimony against her. He didn’t know who typed the notes, but was encouraged by the prosecution to give false testimony in order to protect himself and his wife. Today, the Rosenbergs’ children argue that whatever information was passed to the Russians was superfluous; that the trial of their parents was riddled with prosecutorial and judicial misconduct; and that their mother was convicted on flimsy evidence in order to place leverage on her husband.

Though writing the poem in 1980 Rich wouldn’t have known about these more recent developments, they certainly bear out her conviction that Ethel was particularly wronged, and lend credence to her belief that not just anti-Semitism but patriarchy was a factor in Ethel’s conviction. In the poem, Rich claims that Ethel was “charged by posterity/ not with selling secrets to the Communists/ but with wanting to distinguish/ herself    being a bad daughter   a bad mother.” It’s also worth noting – because Rich does in her poem – that Ethel has the harder death of the two: while Julius Rosenberg died quickly, his wife had to be shocked five times until smoke rose from her head.

Rich experiences the violence of this death with powerful, exhausting empathy: “volts grapple her, don’t kill her fast enough... something so shocking so/unfathomable/ it must be

---


62 Ibid.


pushed aside... ignored for years” (my emphasis). Rich responds to Ethel’s death on the terms that this death occurs, and in a way that makes my use of shock thus far seem rather glib. Rich’s encounter with Ethel is both sudden and painful: a young Rich hears of Ethel’s death one week before Rich’s wedding. In that moment, she dimly intuits that her Jewish “family arguments” – about the desirability of assimilation and a woman’s place in the world – might actually be political matters of life and death (“I hadn’t realized/ our family arguments were so important”). Yet Rich’s understanding is imperfect, and Ethel represents a wound too deep to survey all at once.

Hence, the poem again condenses a lot of time into a few pages. Rich divides it into sections that provide opportunities for new insights and changes of heart and mind. For instance, after Rich pushes the “shocking...unfathomable” encounter aside in the first section, the second section skips ahead to a time when Rich sees Ethel as being punished in part for being a woman:

that daughter of a family
like so many
needing its female monster

she, actually wishing to be an artist
wanting out of poverty
possibly also really wanting revolution...

charged by posterity

not with selling secrets to the Communists
but with wanting to distinguish herself being a bad daughter a bad mother

And I walking to my wedding
by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister
my forces focused

on that hardly revolutionary effort
Her life and death the possible ranges of disloyalty

Rich comes to understand that she found Ethel Rosenberg’s execution so painful because she felt that she herself had committed a minor version of the same rebellion. Those familiar with Rich’s biography will know that she set out to marry a man more overtly Jewish than her assimilationist
father wanted, and that this led to a falling out between father and daughter, and to Arnold Rich writing the “seventeen pages/ of finely inscribed harangues” mentioned in the poem’s first section. And before writing the poem Rich ‘betrayed’ her second family as well by leaving them in order to be an artist and revolutionary like Ethel; her marriage took place ‘under the sign of Ethel Rosenberg,’ and in that way might have felt doomed from the start. Both Rich’s difficult rebellions and Rosenberg’s direr experience help bring the violence of patriarchy to light: it’s no coincidence that some of the violence of the electric chair is transferred into the diction of Rosenberg being “charged by posterity” as being a failure as a woman (a bad daughter and bad mother like Rich). At the beginning of the poem’s next section Rich will similarly juxtapose a description of Ethel becoming “a natural prey for pornographers” with an eye-witness description of her death “sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail.” Rich begins to see – and wants us to see – the violence perpetrated against Ethel as far-reaching, systemic, and ongoing.

Rich, though, is deeply ambivalent about Rosenberg. Rich would not have known for sure how culpable Ethel was; even if she was purely innocent, her Communist-affiliations and ways of being political were not Rich’s own. Charles Altieri writes:

...Rich turns to a figure with whom she finds it difficult to sympathize... Rich cannot share any of Rosenberg’s specific beliefs or choices. But the process of the poem’s remembering makes it impossible to avoid identifying with her plight... this is the poem where Rich has to see herself as other, her ideals as partial traps.⁶⁶

I’m not sure that Rich disagrees with Ethel’s “beliefs or choices” as much as Altieri claims, but we can probably infer that Rich has mixed feelings about an Ethel who is, after all, yet another painfully victimized woman. And Ethel is a victim who bears some disturbing similarities to Rich herself since they’re both disloyal daughters in families needing their “female monster[s],” and both women “wishing to be...artists[s],” yet “rigid of will.” We can see how Ethel might help and hurt, leading Rich toward greater clarity and revolutionary activity, but also toward futility and despair. Should she heroicize Rosenberg? Or try to forget about her, focus her thoughts elsewhere? The conjoining of power and victimhood also returns here: being a female “monster” is to be seen as bearing power, and Ethel at one point is described as being “burned to death” like a witch. The last section of the poem appropriately ends with a series of ambivalent

Again, Rich’s divided feelings are built into the syntax and rhythms of her poem.

Yet though the poem contains these doublings and ambivalences, Rich is once again able to move beyond them. We’ve mainly looked at the poem’s first two sections, but the poem’s third and fourth sections allow for further leaps and insights. These can be painful: in the fourth section Rich has “to imagine... the pain inflicted on her [Ethel] by women/ [how] her mother testifies against her/ her sister-in-law testifies against her” (Rich’s emphases). In other words, after Rich comes to understand the role of patriarchy in Rosenberg’s death, she has to face women’s complicity in it. It’s as though the “shocking” news of the opening must be diffused through the poem’s sections, so that it can be internalized piecemeal. Yet shock is only one governing metaphor: another metaphor that better explains the functioning of the sections is that of sinking in – of time’s passage gradually leading to new levels of understanding:

from section 2:
She sank however into my soul  A weight of sadness
I hardly can register how deep
her memory has sunk...

from section 3:
Her figure sinks into my soul
a drowned statue
sealed in lead

For years it has lain there  unabsorbed

Rich continues to probe her discovery from “Woman Dead” that a lyric poem, in its reaching out toward a specific character, can be a place of multiple takes – staggered or tiered understandings. She finds that a lot of thinking and internalizing can happen in the gaps between sections, which
here work in tandem with the way they provide relief and recuperation from the period-less forward-driven energy of each long preceding section. The section breaks then function as mental and rhythmic rest-stops in which time passes and the preceding section’s experience is processed; from each such full-stop a new section can then be launched on an altered trajectory that will lead to Rich toward new insights, and toward her “narrow understanding” (section I) being revised and corrected.67

The third section takes Rich’s understanding and Ethel’s sinking in further: whereas the trajectory of the second section was toward understanding the connections between Rich and Ethel, the third section moves toward an Ethel who is independent of Rich. This section begins by returning to Ethel’s death and her sinking “into my soul”; this sinking in now reaches its final stages, and Ethel becomes maximally closed and deathly. Yet just as we get the most direct description of Ethel’s execution, just as she becomes “a drowned statue/ sealed in lead,” Ethel also becomes mysterious (“what are her politics by then no one knows”), and begins to undergo a new metamorphosis and ascension:

For years it [the statue] has lain there unabsorbed
first as part of that dead couple
on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

no longer the Rosenbergs
no longer the chosen scapegoat
the family monster

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep

67 Swift high-energy encounters and gradual ‘sinking in’ are equally present in “For Ethel Rosenberg.” The poem is comprised of short two-to-three beat lines that often contain the mid-line lacunae we found in “Woman Dead” and often defer their direct object onto a subsequent line. These lines are grouped in loose tercets that are themselves grouped into long sections with capital letters but no periods. Anaphora is common here, as are rhetorical doublings and repetitions. All of these features lead to a sense, when reading the poem, of quick notation, of the rapid movement of Rich’s always provisional, ongoing comprehension. Yet, since the lines often contain internal pauses and defer the arrival of their direct objects, the sentences also feel cut off and slowed down like someone out of breath trying to get across some complicated important news. Alternatively, since the sections are quite long and devoid of periods, we might think of a runner pacing herself and holding a conversation in between measured breaths. In sum, we get a sense of urgency and incredible energy that is also measured and shaped so as to be sustained over long periods. The section ends then make dramatic breaks with this forward, purposive energy; a lot then happens in the pauses between sections as Rich regroups her forces and begins again, veering off in a new direction – improvisatory high energy is maintained throughout but it works in tandem with careful sustained thought and acts of comprehension.

321
in the Women’s House of Detention

Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg  would you
have marched to take back the night
collected signatures

for battered women who kill
What would you have to tell us
would you have burst the net

It’s as though in the midst of this third section Rich’s internalization of Ethel Rosenberg ceases to be traumatic, and the poet can start to imagine Ethel as a living person and open character. Or, to shift the emphasis from Rich to Ethel, it’s as though Rosenberg has disappeared so utterly into her execution and the legends about her that these no longer have much to do with her, and she can escape into her secret politics and life that “by then no one knows.” Having become the deathly “drowned statue/ sealed in lead,” Ethel can ‘drift apart,’ claiming her own “separate death,” which can become “a life unto itself.”

Hence, it’s at this particular moment in the poem that Rich gives us the anecdote about Ethel singing a prostitute to sleep – the most vital anecdote about Rosenberg thus far. This story helps brings Ethel to life as it suggests that she herself might have had a kind of feminist sympathy; it’s also the kind of memorable detail that produces a suggestive character. As I said in my introduction, lyric is especially adept at such finding just the right omissions and tantalizing bits of description to make others stay with us. Moreover, it’s the first detail in which we see Ethel doing something other than being the impersonal “extremest victim” with a “rigid...will” that tolerates “no fear and no regrets.” Here, instead, we are given a glimpse of the Ethel Rosenberg who had a sense of beauty and wanted to be artist. Appropriately, then, Rich chooses the moment following this anecdote to address her by her full name: “Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg  would you/ have marched to take back the night/ collected signatures....” I’ve already cited Adela Pinch’s description of how switching from third to second person helps get at a person’s essential freedom. William Waters too writes of how direct address to a historical character can transform something contained and done with into “something still open or not yet done.” He adds, as we move between “the static figure of history and the fresh possibilities of a living interlocutor,” a poem can reveal “a new, open dimension” to a situation without it “losing
its character of containment or fixity....” In this way, Rich addresses Rosenberg and makes her seem more vital by imagining the life she could have led – taking back the night, collecting signatures, etc. This new vitality leads Rich for the first time to ask Rosenberg herself for answers: “What would you have to tell us....” The section ends with Ethel as a living presence, rising up from the deep and “burst[ing] the net.”

In the ensuing gap between the third and fourth sections it’s as though Ethel’s new vitality takes hold and becomes a palpable independent presence that turns Rich’s scrutiny back on herself. This section begins with a series of self-directed questions: “Why do I even want to call her up/ to console my pain (she feels no pain at all)/ why do I wish to put such questions... why all this exercise of hindsight?” These are real questions since calling up Ethel comes with a price. Rich continues, “since if I imagine her at all/ I have to imagine first/ the pain inflicted on her by women....” This statement both emphasizes the real bitterness and uncertainty behind the section’s opening questions, and also answers those questions: Ethel’s summoned presence causes Rich to imagine things that she didn’t intend to imagine, leading her to new insights and states of painful wisdom.

Rich’s most important imagining and insight, though, concerns Ethel herself. Having burst the net and found a life unto herself, Ethel’s new liveliness causes Rich to stop regarding Ethel’s situation as a political case, and to start imagining her more purely on her own terms. If Rich ‘imagines her at all’ she has to imagine not just the women collaborating with patriarchy, but also how Ethel experiences the scene of her own mother and sister-in-law testifying against her: “how she sees it/ not the impersonal forces/ not the historical reasons/ why they might have hated her strength.” For Rich, focusing on an individual instead of impersonal forces is always difficult, but Rich’s besting of that difficulty is an essential part of the poem’s triumph.


69 Since Rosenberg becomes more of an open character at the end of this section, she gains some independence from Rich; however, this independence is only made possible by Rich’s continued consideration of her, the way Rich lets her sink in and reprove her. The singing anecdote for instance, and Rich’s preceding quotations from a novel about Rosenberg, both suggest that Rich has continued to read and learn about Rosenberg; i.e. Rich has been treating Ethel as an ongoing subject of investigation rather than a closed case. Similarly, in addressing Ethel and asking her whether she too would have become a feminist marching to take back the night, Rich makes it more possible for Ethel to break from Rich and say no.

70 Again we see how self-reflexivity is driven by the presence of another person.
“For Ethel Rosenberg” ends this way:

If I have held her at arm’s length till now
if I have still believed it was
my loyalty, my punishment at stake

if I dare imagine her surviving
I must be fair to what she must have lived through
I must allow her to be at last

political in her ways not in mine
her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine
defining revolution as she defines it

or, bored to the marrow of her bones
with ‘politics’
bored with the vast boredom of long pain

small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties
liking her room her private life
living alone perhaps

no one you could interview
maybe filling a notebook herself
with secrets she has never sold

As in “Woman Dead,” Rich uses lacunae here to allow little sunderings between herself and Ethel to spring up as she gives way to Ethel’s privacy: “political in her ways not in mine,” “her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine....” Yet, paradoxically, relinquishing control over Ethel is also a way of reaching out, and of fully extending the hand she had feared to offer Curie, Jennifer, and the nurse. To use Rich’s own terms, Rich must cease ‘pushing Ethel aside’ cease holding her “at arm’s length,” and using her mainly as a tool for understanding herself (“my loyalty, my punishment at stake”).

Admittedly, Rich’s feminism still requires that she imagine Ethel living alone without Julius, yet on the whole, Rich releases Ethel from any designs on her. Indeed, Rich gives her privacy at last, and transforms her clandestine activity from espionage to the pursuit of her own suddenly mysterious and independent life (“Be secret and exult,” says Yeats).7172 Rich’s

description of Ethel as “small; tiny” shows us how far Rich has come: these words help Ethel shrink down and escape from the political spotlight and they give us a Rich who can value the “tiny” over the large, the private life over the “long pain” of politics. This is a particularly surprising act of valuing for a poet who usually insists that there is no such thing as truly private life because ‘the personal is the political.’

The form of the ending also underscores the importance of its discovery. All the doublings in this last section (If I have/ if I have, I must/ I must, small/tiny, etc.) help make the poem’s unpaired final line feel like a surprising swerve. Yet it’s also a completion: even as ambivalent doublings are left behind secrets return and are re-visioned; we swerve away yet are back to where we started. The poem, then, achieves a surprising, sudden aesthetic shapeliness that depends on how Ethel sinks in, guides the poem’s many turns, takes on new life, and leads to dramatic final insights. Though the poem ends with a floating counter-factual character who is obviously partly made up by Rich, this counter-factual is also an expression of Rich’s newfound love for an Ethel at last imagined on her own terms and released from judgment. This achievement will have wide-reaching effects on Rich’s career: it will help her adopt a more flexible stance toward her ideology. It will also provide her with a kind of spiritual relief by expanding her world, which can now have secrets in it as well as the known, long pain of politics. The ending of “For Ethel Rosenberg” is Rich’s own version of James Wright saying “it is alright with me to know that my life is only one life.”

** so much more **

Rich describes “For Ethel Rosenberg” as a watershed, and says that writing the poem was “like touching the tip of an iceberg...there’s so much more.” And indeed, “For Ethel Rosenberg”

---

72 This staggered, layered process again shows us that social lyric can not only enact intense, singular encounters, but can also swoop through many different imagined versions of a person and many stages of a relationship. In this way, we might think of Rich’s layered process and multiple sections as having something to do with returning character where recurrence makes a character seem less constricted by any individual instance, and shows a poet continuing to think about that character in a way that makes the character more likely to take on a life of their own.

73 The exchange is satisfying for both sides: Rosenberg’s life and death teach Rich painful lessons and prod her out of her complacencies, and Rich gives Ethel her independence and an imagined secret life that she was denied by both Rich and the public; in turn, as we’ll see, this gift will expand Rich’s world and loosen her rigid ideology.
is followed in *Wild Patience* by a number of poems of ambivalence about other women, all of which but “Turning the Wheel” were written in a flurry in the very same year (1980). Not all of these poems, though, are as successful or go so far as “For Ethel”; as is the case in many breakthroughs, the stages that follow involve a slower, messier process of repetition and consolidation. Yet in many of these poems, Rich takes new risks or learns new lessons about how to conduct her exchanges with the other women toward whom she has mixed feelings. And in all of these subsequent poems, Rich addresses or puts herself in direct relation to these women; or else she grants them new freedom and insists on the importance of their lives beyond any representations of them.

“Mother-in-Law” follows “For Ethel Rosenberg” in *Wild Patience*, and perhaps is the poem in which Rich most struggles to process the lessons she’s learned. The poem is a dialogue between Rich and her dead husband’s mother, and it has been criticized for its caricatured depiction of that older woman. Marjorie Perloff, for instance, claims that the mother-in-law “is presented as the stereotypical nagging housewife, preaching to her daughter-in-law that “*A cut lemon scoursthe smell of fish away.*” Helen Vendler also describes the mother-in-law as “the stereotype of the discontented idle older women....” Both critics accuse Rich of bringing insufficient imagination to bear, for example, by failing to consider that the mother-in-law might have her own strengths (Perloff) or that Rich could one day become a mother-in-law reckoning with younger generations herself (Vendler).

Though there is stereotyping in this poem, I think there’s also dynamic risk: for the first time, Rich addresses a living woman with whom she disagrees and lets that woman directly speak back (in the poem’s italicized lines). In fact, the mother-in-law initiates the poem, and repeatedly demands that Rich ‘tell her something’ with what Charles Altieri points out is a ballad-like questioning refrain. Now it is Rich’s character who wants to have the conversation.

---

74 Again, I don’t have room to quote the poem in full. It can be found here: Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York: Norton 1993), 31-2.


Moreover, stereotyped as the mother-in-law’s housewifely tips may be (“A cut lemon scours the smell of fish away/ You’ll feel better when the children are in school”), Rich too has trouble speaking effectively: “I think I’m breaking in two/ and half of me doesn’t even want to love/ I can polish this table to satin because I don’t care/ I am trying to tell you, I envy/ the people in mental hospitals their freedom....” Rich is frustrated because she feels that the mother-in-law doesn’t actually want to hear any of her complaints, and this leads Rich to exaggerate and employ a vocabulary of melodramatic striving (e.g. I think, even want, I don’t care, I am trying). There’s self-disgust too in the hackneyed, melodramatic quality of her language, as though Rich knows she’s behaving badly, self-indulgently. And if this is the case, it complicates the idea that the poem is pitting a straightforwardly righteous Rich against a cowardly, stereotyped opponent.

The mother-in-law’s clichéd suggestions for remedies turn up after Rich’s tirade, and can be read as a reaction to it, not just as a stereotyped depiction. The mother-in-law’s suggestions can in fact be seen as desperate, frustrated attempts to return the conversation to a world with which the she has some familiarity – to respond to Rich’s excessive speech with a kind of excessively narrow ideology of household remedies. After all, the mother-in-law too is frustrated, and her frustration becomes evident when she interrupts Rich a few verse-paragraphs later:

Rich: I wish I could tell you –
Mother-in-law: Tell me!

They think I’m weak and hold things back from me. I agreed to this years ago.
Daughter-in-law, strange as you are,
tell me something true

There’s desperation in the mother-in-law’s interruption and her admissions about what others say about her and how she is complicit. But the mother-in-law also has agency here: she can face painful things and insist on speaking up.

Rich then responds out of a sense of impasse and futility, and says the conversation-and-poem-ending things that she most likely couldn’t say in real life (that her husband’s been dead ten years, she’s a lesbian, etc.). I’m not arguing that the poem is evenly proportioned and fair, but

78 We get two such tips as they again take on the doubling of Rich’s ambivalence.
rather that it’s a necessary part of Rich’s ongoing struggle to hash out the arguments with other women that have smoldered for so long. After writing “For Ethel Rosenberg,” Rich takes greater risks in pursuing these arguments, and these risks sometimes lead to messy, emotionally fraught poems instead of to the satisfying exchanges of “Woman Dead” and “For Ethel Rosenberg.” Yet though the poems that follow may be fraught, they are far from solipsistic: in “Mother-in-Law” the struggle is two-sided, with both sides acting badly – interrupting each other, and adopting the wrong tone or emotional register.

Rich does not continue to write dialogues. In considering “Mother-In-Law” I’m reminded of Philip Fisher’s comment about the importance of letter writing in *Pride and Prejudice.* Since you can’t interrupt a letter as you can a person, you have to hear it out, and hence you have more chance of being persuaded by another person’s position as it gradually sinks in. Similarly, Rich’s exchanges with others are most successful when they invoke people who aren’t present because then Rich is really forced to listen.

Hence, “Heroines,” the poem that follows “Mother-in-Law” again addresses women who can’t respond. The poem is about affluent first-wave feminist white women from 19th century America. Once again, Rich contrasts strengths and weaknesses: though these women were victims and bold pioneers, they weren’t bold enough, and even collaborated with patriarchy in their racist attitudes (“you have been taught that light/ came/ to the Dark Continent/ with white power/ that the Indians/ live in filth/ and occult animal rites”). As it’s title suggests, though, “Heroines” is mostly a poem of praise that describes its characters’ privations and boldness: “you are an outlaw/ Your mind burns/ not like the harbor beacon/ but like a fire/ of fiercer origin...” The poem returns to binocular ambivalence mostly at its end:

...a great gust of freedom
rushing in with your words
yet you still speak
in the shattered language
of partial vision

---

80 Again, as in the case of Richard Wilbur writing about his daughter from outside her room, Rich’s poetry is more successfully involved with others when it remains primarily located in Rich’s mind.
registering injustice
   failing to make it whole
How can I fail to love
   your clarity and fury
how can I give you
   all your due
take courage from your courage
honor your exact
   legacy as it is
recognizing
   as well
   that it is not enough?

Ambivalence returns – but with some crucial differences. The poem’s direct address, which starts with its very first sentence, helps place Rich into warmer, more personal relation to her 19th century women than would have been possible in her earlier, third-person poems. This warmth of address, as well as the expansion of the poem past the earlier sonnet-like compactness, leads Rich to imagine her way into her heroines’ plights more sympathetically and with greater detail. For instance, the poem includes long descriptions of her heroines’ contemporary legal status (“You belong first to your father/ then to him who/ chooses you...your husband/ has the right/ of the slaveholder/ to hunt down and re-possess you...”); but it also includes more personalized wonderings about them (“you have heard many sermons/ and have carried/ your own interpretations/ locked in your heart...”). Rich’s political admiration for these women even becomes love (“How can I fail to love/ your clarity and fury...”). And though ambivalence and impasse don’t disappear here, they receive their clearest articulation yet: when turning to past women with whom she at least partially disagrees, Rich must love and admire them (“give you/ all your due”), take them as examples (“take courage from your courage”), but also recognize that they are imperfect models, and that she herself must do more. It’s no coincidence that most of the poem is taken up with praise and yet that Rich is still able to clearly see and state what’s lacking. After writing “For Ethel Rosenberg,” Rich can better imagine the women’s legacies and lives on their own terms: she can honor “your exact/ legacy as it is/ recognizing/ as well/ that it is not enough” (my emphasis). Rich is less inclined to see these women as mirrors, and thus doesn’t have to feel as betrayed or trapped by their failure to live the life she herself wants. The poem, of course, offers no answer to its ultimate question, but Rich
now can at least directly articulate it: in better imagining these women, she can also more clearly leave them behind, and see what still remains to be done. As Rich asks in “For Julia in Nebraska,” a poem finished the year after “Heroines,” “How are we going to do better?/ for that’s the question that lies/ beyond our excavations....”

Honoring another’s exact legacy as it is, though, sometimes requires admitting ignorance of that legacy. In the poems that follow “Heroines” in *Wild Patience*, Rich again moves past ambivalence, but she does so not by ‘figuring these women out,’ understanding their limitations, and dropping them as she moves back into her own life, but by allowing them to become more open and mysterious. For though Rich needs to clarify her arguments and the stakes of her disagreements, she also needs to perceive the limits of her own understanding in order to grant these women their full power to inform, inspire, and expand Rich’s sometimes still narrowly ideological world.

Hence, in “Grandmothers,” the poem after “Heroines,” Rich gives us knowing character-portraits of the titular women in the first two sections only to correct and chastise herself in the poem’s third and final section. The initial portraits are sad and unflattering: Rich describes “Mary Gravely Jones” in the first section as another female artist stymied by her gender, “smoldering to the end with frustrate life/ ideas nobody listened to, least of all my father.” And she describes “Hattie Rice Rich” in the next section as a woman made redundant by age, shuttled passively back and forth between her son and daughter’s homes. Both portraits are of foiled women with whom Rich cannot totally sympathize, but must instead see as being complicit in their fates either from faking a kind of stylized poise that hides anger (Mary Gravely Jones) or from playing the role of benign caretaker and pandering too much to “your son’s whims” (Hattie Rice Rich).

On their own, these sections might seem like steps backward for Rich. Though the

---


84 Though in general Hattie’s “sweetness of soul [her acceptance of this situation] was a convenience for everyone,” the poet once saw her “crouched on the guestroom bed, knuckles blue-white around the bedpost, sobbing... [about how] you didn’t want to go back South that year.”
sections contain second-person addresses they again tend toward the succinct and fail to personalize: Rich speaks to her grandmothers from an aloof distance, as though their lives have little directly to do with her. Moreover, even if the poems are not openly unsympathetic, they are somewhat uninterestingly brutal in their succinct, unhappy encapsulations. Marjorie Perloff describes them as “ironic, slightly condescending epitaph[s]... almost like a pastiche of Lowell’s family poems.” She adds that each poem falsely assumes that it gets at “the meaning of her [Rich’s] grandmother’s life as if that life – any woman’s life – could be summed up by a catalogue of character traits, of habitual actions, or of roles assumed....”

Yet in the poem’s third section, entitled “Granddaughter,” the women take on greater openness. Reading the third section, we are invited to see the preceding ones as merely being first approaches to the two characters:

Easier to encapsulate your lives
in a slide-show of impressions given and taken,
to play the child or victim, the projectionist,
easier to invent a script for each of you,
myself still at the center,
than to write words in which you might have found
yourselves, looked up at me and said
“Yes, I was like that; but I was something more...”

There are several corrections here: Rich notes that the preceding ‘encapsulations’ were impoverished because they were too focused on Rich and saw too much from her perspective. Rich also notes that even if she had written words in which her grandmothers “might have found” themselves (which she implies she hasn’t), they would still have claimed to be “something more.” It’s important that this second correction be in quotes: it’s as if the grandmothers are both revealed as the agents driving Rich’s newfound skepticism about her depictions, and are brought more to life – get to speak – via this skepticism. The corrections don’t blot out our vision of the grandmothers, but gesture toward them with increased imaginative seriousness and accuracy. We aren’t meant to forget Rich’s earlier depictions, but to see them as providing limited data that’s at least at two removes from the truth.

86 These characters are again best approached in the stages or levels of sinking in provided by sections.
Rich concludes the poem with a final attempt to imagine Mary and Hattie’s “something more.” Attempting a different angle of approach, Rich wonders what it was like for them to live in the South after the Civil War. In particular she wonders what they made of segregation since each was “twice an outsider” herself as an artistic woman or Jewish woman:

“blood” the all-powerful, awful theme –
what were the lessons to be learned? If I believe
the daughter of one of you [Rich’s mother] – Amnesia was the answer.

This ambivalent ending has none of the triumph of “For Ethel Rosenberg.” In imagining their experiences of southern segregation, Rich ends up having to entertain the possibility that her grandmothers only learned to repress their political awareness. In other words, this final attempt to get at the “something more” of her grandmothers’ lives triggers a thought that makes them again seem predictable and small: the grandmothers are opened up as characters in the third section only to suffer another small act of enclosure at the poem’s end.

The poems that follow “For Ethel” do not always release their women into autonomous privacy. Indeed, these women are sometimes caricatured, or described as a plural type, or fail to bring about triumphant exchanges (they may not be worthy of them). Yet all of these women now have some openness and power to interrupt, correct, or instruct. Nor is it a coincidence that compared to “Aunt Jennifer,” “Dien Bien Phu,” “Power,” “Woman Dead,” and for “For Ethel Rosenberg,” there’s far less dwelling on female death. After Rich starts addressing her women, and after Ethel Rosenberg ‘comes back to life,’ the women Rich argues with routinely start wielding more living presence as part of their ability to contest Rich and have some of their own say.

In fact, the two long poems that conclude the volume – “The Spirit of Place” and “Turning the Wheel” – gesture toward the extreme vitality and openness of their female characters. For instance, the third section of the “The Spirit of Place” describes the way Emily Dickinson eludes her scholars’ ‘pious or clinical legends’ about her.87 These scholars may ‘paw’ her “relics,” but Rich, addressing Dickinson, says “you... resist your shrine/ escape/ are found/ nowhere/ unless in words (your own).” Rich then quotes a Dickinson letter about being

87 For the complete third section of the poem see: A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (New York: Norton 1993), 42-3.
“strangers” in a “world... not acquainted with us,” and thereby heightens the older poet’s mysterious individual presence to the point where Rich feels obliged to relinquish her grasp on Dickinson as well. In the early poem, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” Rich described Dickinson ambivalently as “writing, My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –/ in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum” (18). And a few years after writing “Snapshots,” Rich wrote a poem just about Dickinson (“I Am in Danger – Sir –”) in which she described the older poet as “mothballed at Harvard” and “equivocal to the end...[with] a forehead battered paper-thin...masculine” (my emphasis, 38). Here Dickinson, like Curie, gains power only by doing damage to herself: “masculine/ in single-mindedness... in your half-cracked way you chose/ silence for entertainment,/ chose to have it out at last/ on your own premises.”

The stages of Rich’s ambivalent relationship to Dickinson are beyond the scope of this chapter; for my purposes, it’s enough to see that Rich has been struggling with Dickinson as a problematic feminist model for years, and that after quoting Dickinson in “The Spirit of Place,” Rich is able to let her go:

This place is large enough for both of us
the river-fog will do for privacy
this is my third and last address to you

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
from all intrusion even my own
saying rest to your ghost

Though Dickinson’s is put to rest as a ‘ghost,’ it’s as a ghost who suddenly has new potential to exist on her own terms in the “privacy” of a “large” place full of obscuring “river-fog” reminiscent of Rosenberg’s secret, solitary room. Moreover, as she leaves Dickinson, Rich also adopts the role of parent in a way that suggests that the older poet has newfound potentiality: “with the hands of a mother I would close the door/ on the rooms you’ve left behind/ and silently pick up my fallen work.” That return to work too demonstrates Rich’s commitment to letting Dickinson exist in her independent life: Rich has taken what she can from wrestling with Dickinson and now can exist comfortably near her – in her tradition as it were – and yet apart

from her. And one should note that again the multiplicity of addresses to Dickinson throughout Rich’s career ("this is my third and last address to you") is important. We can see here the link between ‘returning character’ and multiple sections: whether it’s by writing different poems about a person or by considering a long relationship through different sections within a single poem, the need for multiple takes or stages is crucial for Rich to be able to let another person’s life sink in, so that it can be both imagined and gestured toward, scrutinized and let be.

“Turning the Wheel,” the final long poem in *Wild Patience*, similarly imagines and lets go. The poem is set in the Southwest, and in its fifth section Rich addresses both her reader and herself to provide a series of instructions about how to picture a desert shamaness. I provide excerpts below:  

> In search of the desert witch, the shamaness
> forget the archetypes, forget the dark
> and lithic profile, do not scan the clouds
> massed on the horizon, violet and green,
> for her icon, do not pursue
> the ready-made abstraction...
>
> So long as you want her faceless, without smell
> or voice...

> so long as she does not have her own peculiar
> face, slightly wall-eyed or with a streak
> of topaz lightning in the blackness
> of one eye, so long as she does not limp
> so long as she merely symbolizes power
> she is kept helpless and conventional
> her true power routed backward
> into the past, we cannot touch or name her
> and, barred from participation by those who need her
> she stifles in unspeakable loneliness.

Rich tries to see how close she can come to the shamaness – an ancestral, powerful woman who might serve as an inspiration or guide – simply by dismissing all the shallow ways of imagining her. Don’t use stereotypes, says the poem; don’t say what the woman’s power is or be too quick to say what she means. The poem also provides some more positive instructions by saying that picturing her without certain qualities will keep her “helpless and conventional.” For instance,

---

89 For the complete fifth and sixth sections of the poem see: Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York: Norton 1993), 56-7.
you must imagine her as a concrete woman with bodily functions (squatting to urinate or pausing to scratch herself); you must imagine her in her daily routine (grimacing as she grinds stone at dawn); you might even begin to imagine her features (she has a limp, she has one of two possible described faces). Rich uses her negative list with positive instructions hidden within it in order to imagine without controlling – to give us enough of the woman to glimpse her tantalizingly without treating her generically or symbolically. In the poem’s very next section Rich warns us: “look closely [at the shamaness] if you dare/ do not assume you know those cheekbones/ or those eye-sockets; or that still-bristling hair.” Lyric helps Rich correct both the southwestern tourist’s knowingness and her own, as she shifts from viewing the shamaness as a stereotype to viewing her as a shocking Coleridgean mystic (those flashing eyes, that floating hair).

There is still some ambivalence in these poems: the shamaness can perhaps dissolve too easily into her “archetypes,” coming “merely [to] symbolize... power” in a mythic form of tokenism. Her more literal form as an actual reservation woman can also seem crushed by modernity. In section six we hear about how she “comes skirted like a Christian”; sits “pretending/ to weave or grind/ for the appeasement of the ignorant” (probably tourists); and sells “treasure by the road/ to spare a brother’s or an uncle’s dignity,” sacrificing herself for the sake of men. Yet despite these qualifications, the sequence I’ve been tracing in *Wild Patience* ends on a note of female mysteriousness and power.

That Rich makes progress in her poetics of struggle with other women does not mean she has to relinquish all her criticisms of them, or always free her characters by admitting her great ignorance about their actual lives. “Mother-in-Law” never moves beyond the impasse of its argument; “Heroines” bears witness to its protagonists’ many accomplishments but ends by insisting that they are not enough; “Grandmothers” releases the titular women somewhat, but still ultimately takes issue with them; “A Woman Dead in Her Forties” makes disagreement itself a kind of expression of love and a way of moving beyond impasse and estrangement. If Rich always let her characters leave her arguments with them behind as she does with Ethel Rosenberg or Emily Dickinson, then these leave-takings would not feel like triumphs that work against Rich’s habitual stubbornness and adamant views. That stubbornness never goes away – Rich only learns how to work with and against it. In the poem “Frame,” which is sandwiched in
between “The Spirit of Place” and “Turning the Wheel,” Rich vacillates back to a poetics of extreme sympathy with other women who are beatifically allied with each other against a stereotypically brutal police force. The woman-victim in the poem is black and the police officers white, but the solidarity here is with women against men. In fact, the poem could almost be a retelling of Rich’s earlier poem “Rape” in which a predatory, unsympathetic cop whose “blue eyes... grow narrow and glisten” (106) torments an innocent rape-victim.

Rich’s feelings about other people are messy and move in multiple directions, including back to old patterns. As different as her subject matter is, then, Rich’s temperament might remind us of James Wright whose success is also often messy, and must be measured by looking at his career’s larger trajectories as well as at his best individual poems. We might wonder, then, if mess and struggle are common features in socially oriented poems. This would not be altogether surprising: accommodating oneself to other minds’ and lives is usually an incremental and inelegant affair that requires missteps, overreaches, and vacillations.90 Perhaps more than other kinds of lyric poetry, lyrics about others reward reading the poems surrounding them, and considering the larger shape of a poet’s career.91

**

For Rich, this fraught struggle reaches its greatest intensity in Wild Patience, and it’s no coincidence that Rich writes this volume in the same period as she shifts from her essentialist, sisterhood feminism to a more flexible feminism that’s attentive to multiple, overlapping

90 James Wright’s struggle, though, is driven by his empathy, which naturally seeks out and returns to other people. Rich, in some sense, is more like Thom Gunn in that her struggle works against her own inclinations, and she must continually learn to overcome both her self-interestedness and her tendency to see other people in terms of known political situations. Like Gunn, she turns outward and sometimes finds a way of overcoming her solitariness and intransigence. Yet Rich lacks Gunn’s countercultural gusto and sense of humor; more than any other poet I will look at in this book, Adrienne Rich depends on her poems about particular others to push back and provide resistance to her own movements of mind. Unlike Gunn for whom others provide relief only from his own temperament, Rich uses her poetics of struggle with others’ to test the fundamental values by which she lives.

91 We also see in Rich how a poet who doesn’t frequently write with vivid interest in particular other lives can still be deeply influenced by the few poems in which she does. I asked in my introduction how a human being can enter into a lyric and not alter the poem’s direction, and I think we can also ask how a powerful social poem – another imagined heart and mind – can enter into a career without altering its direction. My suspicion is that when poets who don’t regularly write of others end up doing so these are often poems of particular importance. After only listening to oneself, another voice suddenly speaking up can be a shock.
identities and political categories. For instance, by 1984 Rich no longer describes her feminist project as one to “repossess” women possessed by the “daemons” of a patriarchal universe but, rather, to reconstruct “the history of the dispossessed” more broadly. 92 Critic Sabine Sielke even attributes this change to Rich’s new emphasis in *Wild Patience* on women’s difference:

> With a renewed emphasis on the specific historical and geopolitical conditions of different women’s lives, the 1981 collection, by contrast, acknowledges the limits of a feminist ‘drive to connect,’ accepts the difference within women’s positions and modes of expression, and recognizes that their ‘maps diverge.’93

Betsy Erkkila says something similar about *Wild Patience*: “No longer dreaming of a common language the poet is troubled by her sense of difference, distance, and separation.”94 Yet these critics only describe the fact of Rich’s new attention to difference, not the long multi-volume process that brings it about, or the way it depends on the dynamics of Rich’s encounters with particular others within individual poems.

Moreover, such critics, as well as Rich herself,95 often focus predominantly on Rich’s new attention to racial issues in the early 1980s. While her earlier sisterhood feminism insisted on women’s essential similarity, Rich later comes to write about how such a presumption elided key differences – such as color – between women. Rich writes in 1986:

> To believe that it was right to identify with all women, to wish deeply and sincerely to do so, was not enough. (I still hear the voice of a Black feminist saying with passionate factuality: *But you don’t know us!*96)

Indeed, we can see Rich beginning to make this transition toward more racially sympathetic writing in *Wild Patience*, for instance, in her focus on the passive racism of the white women of “Heroines,” and on the experience of a black woman assaulted by the police in “Frame.” What I’m arguing, though, is that this newfound sympathy and attention to issues of race (and not just

---


93 Ibid., 201.


gender) is indicative of a larger shift in Rich toward an array of more flexible and complex ideological stances,\(^7\) a shift triggered by her newfound ability to listen and accommodate herself to others— to have it out with those others, but also let their lives sink in and correct her. Once others are listened to as open, complex individuals, then they insist on there being more to their lives than abstract struggles against patriarchy, and Rich must in turn complicate and widen her political thinking.

Though my claim about the source of this shift must remain somewhat speculative, we can see further evidence for it in Rich’s changing attitudes toward her parents and husband in the volumes following *Wild Patience*. Rich’s next two books— *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986) and *Time’s Power* (1989) – each begins with a poem that addresses family members and revises a long-held criticism of them. In one of the prose-sections of “Sources,” which begins *Your Native Land*, Rich describes her ex-husband with new compassion as a person who “ended isolate, [and] who had tried to move in the floating world of the assimilated who know and deny they will always be aliens.”\(^9\) Rich remains a political poet, and it’s easier for her to sympathize with those whom she can first approach through political categories (in this case Anti-Semitism and the pressure to assimilate), but now her list of categories has become lengthier and her application of them more nuanced.

Rich here is also more capable of flexibility and forgiveness: in the same poem, she manages to write sympathetically of a father who Rich for decades had seen as the ur-patriarchal tyrant. Adrienne blamed Arnold Rich for expecting his wife to sacrifice her career as a concert pianist; for breaking the bond between Adrienne and her mother;\(^9\) for deeming Rich’s husband ‘too Jewish,’ writing Adrienne “letters of seventeen pages/ finely inscribed harangues/ questions of loyalty” (175); and for forcing Rich to undertake a grueling regime of scholarship and training ‘as though she were a son’ until she developed a series of facial tics.\(^1\) But in “Sources,” we find

---

\(^7\) After all, Rich will go on not just to write of race and gender, but also to imagine a more complex politics of location in which people are made up of diverse conflicting identities.


the following prose-passage:

For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inextricable from your love. For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you. I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son. After your death I met you again as the face of patriarchy, could name at last precisely the principle you embodied, there was an ideology at last which let me dispose of you... hate you righteously as part of a system, the kingdom of the fathers. I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore... It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own.¹⁰¹

As Albert Gelpi writes, “No discursive commentary can convey the concentrated catharsis” of such a passage.¹⁰² Rich here makes her peace with the father whose treatment of her helped make her a feminist in the first place, and with whom Rich carried on a savage mental argument for decades, including long after her father’s death. The difficulty of writing these lines is perhaps why they’re in prose (unlike those that precede and follow them): it’s as though Rich can barely bring herself to write the words and must say them as plainly as possible. One might think here again of the mess and struggle of social poetry in James Wright, and of the awkwardness of the “Many of Our Waters” poem in Wright’s Two Citizens, which also contains some of Wright’s best lines.

Rich begins “Sources” the year after writing “For Ethel Rosenberg,” and in a sense “Sources” carries the work of the earlier poem into more personal and difficult territory. The advantage of placing oneself in direct relation to another (“For years I struggled with you”) and of allowing that one doesn’t know their whole story (say, of the wounds involved in Arnold hiding his Jewishness), is that one ends up relating to a slightly different person than before – a person who may have new, surprising things to say. Rich’s exchanges with women about whom she’s ambivalent give her these new tools and strategies¹⁰³ – her new “womanly lens” – that then allow her to have more flexible stances towards the world, and even toward people with whom she’s had bitter, longer standing arguments. And she wants us to realize that this is so: “Sources”


¹⁰³ i.e. her new “powerful, womanly lens.”
is the first poem in *From Your Native Land* and thereby becomes the gateway into Rich’s new volume and her more flexible feminist poetry.

**

Eventually this more flexible stance also comes to include Rich’s mother who is still living at the time Rich writes to her and for whom, it turns out, Rich harbors feelings even more fraught than those for her father. We already saw Rich accuse her mother of amnesia in “Grandmothers”; moreover, the very same volume in which she forgives her father contains a poem criticizing her mother (“Virginia 1906”). Though Rich’s relationship with Arnold Rich has received more attention, Rich’s most dynamic struggles have always been with the women who both disappoint and inspire. It’s fitting, then, that Rich’s poem of ambivalence toward her mother would come second. Arnold Rich could be demonized as the embodiment of patriarchy, and then be discovered to be partially human after all, but the way forward with Helen is less clear. Rich harbors more complex, ambivalent feelings for her mother who from Rich’s early life was part loved victim and part hated betrayer and collaborator with patriarchy.

Rich writes about her relationship with Helen at length in her prose work *Of Woman Born*, describing how her mother went “over to the enemy,” making Rich feel “wildly unmothered.” She adds: “I know deep reservoirs of anger toward her still exist: the anger of a four-year-old locked in the closet (my father’s orders, but my mother carried them out) for childish misbehavior; the anger of a six-year-old kept too long at piano practice (again, at his insistence, but it was she who gave the lessons) till I developed a series of facial tics.”

---


105 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1986), 224-5. “Many daughters,” she continues, “live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively ‘whatever comes’” (*Of Woman Born*, 243). Rich also sees mothers as transmitting gender-based suffering and privation to their daughters: “Thousands of daughters see their mother as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female experience were perforce transmitted (*Of Woman Born*, 235). Sylvia Henneberg writes:

The poet starts to feel that her mother is systematically sacrificing her daughter’s needs to those of her husband. A ‘tragic, unnecessary rivalry as women’ thus arises” a significant outgrowth of which is Rich’s desire to give birth to a son ‘in order to do what my mother had not done: bring forth a man-child’ (Henneberg, *The Creative Crone*, 63).

We can only imagine the anger and self-reproach the adult, lesbian-feminist Rich might later feel about having internalized a need to produce men to compete with her mother for her father’s love.

340
Jahan Ramazani suggests that much of Rich’s “work of passionately identifying with women could be seen as an effort to compensate for her frustrated and contradictory identification with her own mother.”

We might similarly imagine that Helen Rich, as the first woman in Rich’s life to inspire and disappoint, might lie behind all of Rich’s poems of ambivalence toward other women; these poems could then be seen as ways of girding herself for the ur-argument with her mother that she’s not yet willing to undertake.

The earlier poems of ambivalence toward other women make “Solfeggietto” – the poem to her mother that begins *Time’s Power* (1989) – possible. After Rich learns to grant more life and openness to her female characters, she can eventually apply this principle to Helen Rich too and treat her as an unpredictable interlocutor instead of just a known frustration. Though, as critic Sylvia Henneberg points out, Rich will never “resolve...her conflicts” with her mother, her treatment of Helen in “Solfeggietto,” displays a new “willingness to negotiation and partial resolution.” And the fact that her mother is still alive at the time of the poem’s composition is also important: if this poem is one of the endpoints of the progression I’ve been tracking, and if this progression leads from a focus on death and dying to greater emphasis on vitality and elusiveness, then it would follow that Rich should eventually address a living person who might respond.

Rich uses a governing scene and metaphor to get to the heart of the struggle between mother and daughter. Helen’s Steinway grand piano – a “windfall at fifteen...paid for by fire insurance” – was both Helen’s source of vitality and one of her great concessions to patriarchy

---


108 In *Of Woman Born* Rich says she has given up on the fantasy of “some infinitely healing conversation” with her mother “in which we could show all our wounds, transcend the pain we have shared...say everything at last” (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* [New York: Norton, 1986], 224). But she also says that writing about her at all “is hard,” and that it’s an accomplishment for her even to admit “how importance her existence is and has been for me” (ibid., 221, 224). “Solfeggietto” will not provide an infinitely healing conversation, but it will go farther than Rich can go by merely admitting her mother’s importance in *Of Woman Born*.

since she gave up her career as a concert pianist to become a housewife. As we’ve seen, Helen Rich also carried out Arnold’s orders to give six-year-old Adrienne long and demanding piano lessons until she “developed a series of facial tics” from the stress. In “Solfeggietto,” Rich uses these music lessons to get to the heart of her ambivalence toward a mother who never fully lost her connection to her art (“You kept your passions deep You have them still”), even as that art was stolen from her and forced onto Adrienne by paternal decree. That ambivalence, though, is now made into a direct argument that’s enacted by the mother and daughter’s struggles at the piano; Rich doesn’t just want to describe her mixed-feelings from a distance, she wants to dive back into her struggle with Helen and see what she has to say.

The poem plunges immediately into that struggle, but it is also made up of a number of different stages. If the poem is a summation of Rich’s arguments with other women, or even a summation of her poetic arguments with her mother, then it’s already been preceded by many stages of understanding, many self-corrections and turns-of-mind. But “Solfeggietto” is also made up of five short sections in its scant three pages, as if Rich is holding an old, chipped object, turning it over in her hands, fingerling and re-examining what is there. (Hands again play a central role in this poem as her younger self faces “the keyboard world of black and white” with her hands “set on the keys wired to their mysteries.”) The risk and contract of the poem is to stick with a single scene that can’t be escaped and must be reimagined: hence, Rich names the components of the scene again and again, using metaphors and parallel syntax to continuously handle and re-describe it:

Your windfall at fifteen your Steinway grand... came to me as a birthright a black cave...

that child set on the big book on the chair... The child’s hands... the child’s wits...

the hours of solitude the practising...

The mother and the daughter


111 Moreover Rich begins the poem only two years after she writes “Virginia 1906,” and it takes Rich four years to write – hence “Solfeggietto” is clearly a product of considerable thinking and consideration.
Their doomed exhaustion their common mystery...

The yellow Schirmer albums quarter rests double-holds
glyphs of an astronomy...

My wrists your voice...

The daughter... would rather learn by ear and heart The mother
says she must learn to read by sight not ear and heart

One should note how Rich’s doubled ambivalence has now been shifted outward: instead of using doubling to weigh the pros and cons of another’s behavior it enacts the opposing sides of an argument between two people. Much of the poem comes back to the mother and daughter at loggerheads (“Side by side I see us locked”), the daughter’s wrists and mother’s voice “tightened” as they engage in a contest of wills. Meanwhile, the rhythm is truncated with short lines and mid-line caesuras, and the poem in general eschews elaborate syntax, as if Rich is refusing to come too quickly to any interpretations or impositions of critical thought, clipping them away, so that the scene can be held in suspension re-named, re-described, elaborated upon. Rich is taking what she’s learned from her previous arguments with other women, and making room for the possibility that the situation might have more to it than she had supposed, and that perhaps her mother might have new things to say for herself.

And though Rich begins the poem with the way she long conceived of her lessons – the piano a torturous “black cave/ with teeth of ebony and ivory” – the section changes also enact Rich’s re-imaginings. The sections themselves are rather short in order to stop Rich from coming to any premature conclusions, and to insist that she start over again and again each time describing the same lessons from a new angle of approach. After the first section sets that scene, the second section makes it a habitual (“For years we battled over music lessons”) yet then quickly shifts to the mother’s perspective. Starting in its second line Rich also uses this second section to reproach herself: “Nor did I wonder what that keyboard meant to you...what it was to teach/ boarding-school girls what won’t be used/ shelving ambition beating time...for a child/ counting the minutes and the scales to freedom.” A new implied thought seems to be emerging: might it be possible that Adrienne actually betrayed her mother by resisting when Helen, unable to pursue her life’s passion, offered it to her daughter?
But as if it to clip that thought before it emerges too fully, the third section then focuses in on a different, more specific scene. Rich writes of her fond memories of the summers of 1936 and ’37 when mother and daughter took breaks from studying classical music. During these breaks, Helen took over playing the piano, and the two of them sang popular songs and spirituals such as “Swing Low” and “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.” Rich’s fourth section though quickly punctures this halcyon scene, and plunges the mother and daughter back into their earlier struggle. In fact, Rich ratchets up her efforts to re-describe the tension of that struggle, giving us many nouns without verbs in quick succession. She also tries very hard to look at the two of them from the outside as ‘the mother and the daughter.’ This section ends with Rich finally – if only implicitly – articulating a thought. Rich implies that she’s drawn to learning from their black servant’s singing and their father’s teaching of the bible – to learning by ear (from the servant) and by heart (from her father) – instead of by sight (from her mother). The fifth and last section then returns to the present moment and addresses Rich’s mother as she is now – as if the preceding thought has opened the way for Rich to try to get to the heart of the relationship and draw some new conclusions.

Part of the poem’s technique of re-handling the singular scene, and seeing it in new ways, making new “quarter-rests and double-holds,” is to switch between different types of time and degrees of distance. To begin with the former, we’ve seen how the poem starts by setting a single scene (“that child was set on the big book”); switches that scene over to the habitual (“For years”); moves into the mother’s past and lost ambitions; centers on a specific set of summers and memories; returns to the habitual scene as it’s perceived from the distance of a present-day vantage point; and finally switches over into the present for most of its last section. But meanwhile the poem also alters the speaker’s proximity to the scene and mother. In previous poems of struggle and argument, Rich learned to address the women with whom she disagreed and personalize her exchanges with them. Here, though, the scene requires continually shifting the point of view, and so Rich must be both personal and impersonal, intimate and distanced. Correspondingly, she shifts rapidly back and forth between first-person statement/second person address and third person description of both herself and her mother. The first section switches from Your windfall and me to the child; the second back to we, you, and I, then to a child; the
third back to you, me, and I; the fourth to the mother and the daughter, and then to the present-day I who watches My wrists, your voice until these resolve back again into the daughter and the mother.

These shifts in and out of third-person allow Rich to see her mother and herself as both familiar and strange; the shifts in time similarly allow her to recognize that she herself has had different feelings and thoughts, and is in that sense alien from herself. Ultimately, then, these techniques work together to deepen both Rich’s intimacy and distance from her mother, allowing their relationship to seem more passionate, multi-faceted, and strange. In a sense, Rich is making both her mother and their relationship less “locked” and “tightened” “side by side.” Instead, they become more open, as if they can only be glimpsed in the cracks of the section breaks, or hinted at through the shifts in time and person.

In the poem’s final section this newfound openness triggers a particularly useful insight: Rich is able to recognize that she never quite understood what the piano meant to her mother. Hence, what was for most of her life only an instrument of torture, suddenly takes on elements of pathos and mystery. Though in memory Adrienne is still “held by a tether over the ivory/ and ebony teeth of the Steinway” and its literally black-and-white struggle, at the end of the poem’s fourth section her child-self begins to see Helen’s sheet-music as “strange notations/ – dark chart of music’s ocean flowers and flags.” And in the final section, as she turns to the present day-(and moment) of lyric writing, Adrienne realizes that she is still “illiterate” in the “mother-tongue” of this music: “Had it been Greek or Slovak/ no more could your native alphabet have baffled/ your daughter.” Though Rich describes her continued present-day distance from her mother here, Rich’s act of reconceiving the instrument of torture as a baffling foreign alphabet sets the stage for the poem’s final lines in which the piano becomes part of a painful, but richly intimate mystery:

the three hundredth anniversary of Johann
Sebastian Bach My earliest life
woke to his English Suites under your fingers
I understand a language I can’t read
Music you played streams on the car radio
in the freeway night
You kept your passions deep You have them still
I ask you, both of us

345
–Did you think mine was a virtuoso’s hand?
Did I see power in yours?
What was worth fighting for?  What did you want?
What did I want from you?

The poem is now set in the present, but a present richly haunted by the past – by Bach’s three hundredth anniversary, by the music of Rich’s infancy pouring out of the car radio into the fertile dark of the “freeway night.” Earlier elements of the poem return and are transformed: the Bach that was dismissed in favor of *Best-Loved Songs* in the poem’s third section now is numinously linked to Rich’s “earliest life”; the withheld freedom of the child “counting the minutes and the scales to freedom”<sup>112</sup> returns as the *freeway* where the same once-bothersome music “streams.” Helen and her relationship with Adrienne become more mysteriously intimate as they are linked to historical anniversaries, understood but illegible languages, and remembered songs suddenly played over the nighttime radio by what Keats called “the magic hand of chance.”<sup>113</sup> This newly discovered relationship to Helen and her music then leads Rich to see that her mother’s passions were ‘kept deep’ (i.e. were both rich and evasive) and also that she ‘keeps them still (i.e. they’re still out there beyond the edges of the poem).

Adrienne takes advantage of her mother’s newly discovered openness and mysteriousness to move finally past their black-and-white struggle into a series of questions about what transpired and still exists between them. Now, basic questions of desire that Rich might have been all too quick to answer before the start of the poem – what did her mother want, what did she want from her mother – are defamiliarized. These questions even reverse Rich’s usual wonderings about the relation of another woman’s power to her weakness in order to see from Helen’s perspective and wonder if Helen too might have wanted to see power in her daughter (Did you think mine was a virtuoso’s hand?). These questions are also transmutations of the mother-in-law’s hopeless attempts at communication in her earlier poem; though the questions are still unresolvable, they replace blame with passionate inquiry, reducing the matter to its essential ambiguities, and asking hard points equally of both sides. The structure of the questions

<sup>112</sup> “Freedom: what could that mean, for you or me,” Rick also asks at the start of the poem’s third section.

balances at its center a question addressed to both mother and daughter. Questions one and two, and four and five, are each posed first to Helen then to Adrienne, but the third, central question is posed to both and all: “What was worth fighting for?” This is a political question that for once sees both women as having power in their ability to fight with each other; it’s also a question that has ongoing significance in the present as it asks also how they – and all women, mothers, and daughters might turn that power outwards and do better.

Rich’s exchanges with her mother in “Solfeggietto” enable her to perceive new things about their relationship, and to ask questions that are in-and-of themselves forgiving. That these questions are unanswered and the relationship remains unresolved are the poem’s strengths: by its end, Rich is able to treat a relationship that was understood and closed, as ongoing and possible – something to which her mother might respond; simultaneously, Rich is able to ask anew some political questions that she and her readers perhaps had previously been too quick to answer.

The poem, then, demonstrates Rich’s continuing escape from ideological rigidity and her growing capacity to be affected by others and to change her mind. It also helps demonstrate one of the overlooked contributions of Rich’s political poems: the way they model how to talk and listen to someone who we think knows less than us, or who disagrees with us in seemingly unforgivable ways. Learning to imagine how another’s beliefs grow out of a life and are embedded in it, and learning how to imagine that life with more accuracy and less presumption, need not mean recanting one’s own positions. However, it might mean deepening those positions and giving them more flexibility and subtlety, and thereby avoiding becoming an ideologue. Looking back now on Rich’s poems of ambivalence and exchange we might recall Helen Vendler’s description in Invisible Listeners of how lyric can model ideal relationships between persons. George Hebert addressing God, or Whitman addressing future generations might model relationships that “resemble[s] one of those ‘pure’ problems posed by mathematics, where one assumes the absence of friction.” Yet Rich’s poems depend on friction and impurity; they

---

114 Looking at the poem we should see it both as the sum of its forms and techniques and as the sum of Rich’s predecessor poems, her ambivalent feminist thinking, and the post-essentialist moment in feminism in the 1980s. Doing so can again help challenge the barrier between historical and aesthetic reading.

suggest how to approach particular, tangible human others in ways that can be ungainly, incremental, and full of struggle, but yet are charged with passion and able to bring about accommodations to actual minds and lives.

Such accommodations might be particularly useful to those interested in feminism today. In her 2006 book, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, the historian Judith Bennett argues that though in our postmodern world focus on the category of women is “easily ridiculed as naive and old fashioned,” women are still usually seen as a distinct category and treated poorly accordingly.\(^{116}\) She adds: “Feminism’s chief observation about women is also its motivating force, women’s relative disadvantage vis-a-vis men.”\(^ {117}\) Bennet also argues that feminist studies today are impoverished relative to gender studies, and that part of this impoverishment has been caused by a loss of feminist interest in history:

> In women's studies programs in the United States, most feminist teachers and students now assume that "the most recent is also the best." They are replacing the old grand narrative with its inversion; instead of a lost golden age that feminists can work to recover, the past is now caricatured as a wretched abyss from which today's feminists have luckily escaped...\(^{118}\)

> I believe that modern history is impoverished by inattention to the premodern past and that feminism is impoverished by an inattention to history. By broadening our temporal horizons, we can produce both better feminist history and better feminist theory.\(^ {119}\)

I myself have attended two separate classes taught by influential critics who spoke admiringly of Rich, but dismissed her as belonging to the past in the way a modern physicist might dismiss Isaac Newton. Yet Rich’s very work suggests how we might acknowledge the limitations of figures from the past, while also noticing the surprising things that they still have to tell us.

Two years after writing “Sources,” and one before starting “Solfeggiotto,” Rich gives a lecture at Scripps College. In it, Rich invents a conversation between herself and the college’s founder, Ellen Scripps, who was born in 1836 and lived until 1932. Rich argues with Scripps in this conversation, chastising her for making too many compromises: “It seems to me you’re


\(^{117}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 33.
saying that a women’s college should adapt its curriculum to the existing premises about women in the society, and at the same time you’re saying that it should open women’s minds to all kinds of possibilities.”

Rich, though, gives Ellen Scripps the final words, and Scripps uses them to rebuke Rich:

So far I have answered your questions because they had to do with things that were being discussed and happening in my lifetime. Don’t you know there’s a strict rule about interviewing the dead, that you mustn’t ask us questions which came out of your time frame? There is just too much danger of our being misquoted.

In this passage, as in many of the poems at which we’ve been looking, Rich gives us a feminism that looks backward neither condescendingly nor without present-day convictions, a feminism both adamant and open-minded. Rich is not merely reprising T.S. Eliot’s defense of the poetic tradition:

Some one said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.’ Precisely, and they are that which we know.

Instead, Rich’s poems suggest that we might not know the past so well as we think; that in fact these historical women knew their lives – the difficulties of living through them, and of making choices from within them – in a way we never shall.

** Men **

I conclude my study of Rich by glancing at one last stage of her increasing social open-mindedness. After writing “Solfeggietto,” Rich tends to write less about difficult women; it’s as though she has come out on the other side of her long struggle with them. Instead, she begins to write long poems that patch together many voices and political issues often seen through the lens of the Marxism of her last decades. Rich can now pursue the diverse interests and myriad issues (from the Gulf War to the exploitation of Mexican migrant labor) that her struggles with

---


121 Ibid., 195.

particular women have given her the flexibility to imagine. Yet in two poems in *Midnight Salvage* (1999), Rich is finally able to do more than forgive her male characters.

In “Char,” Rich in fact writes a poem of praise for the eponymous poet and French resistance fighter (280-2). The poem’s three sections describe various points of admiration and end up providing a layered, intricate reading of Char as a complex hero. Rich applauds Char for breaking from the ethically-suspect surrealist movement, which advocated the shooting of a revolver as its simplest act (Breton). She also praises him for remaining uncorrupted by the thrill of self-righteous killing; for his “courage wrapped in absolute tact”; his ability to make “terrible delicate decisions”; and the way he keeps poetry intact through horrors, a “piece of wild thyme ripped/ from a burning meadow a mimosa twig/ from a still unravaged country.” The poem even dubs Char a “guide in resistance,” and concludes with a present-tense vigil for him in which Rich suggests that he continues to be a source of instruction and learning. For a poet who once cut the men out of her life, Rich has come a long way.

Perhaps even more surprising, though, is Rich’s three-sectioned poem “Seven Skins” in which she writes about going on a date with Vic Greenberg – “paraplegic GI/ Bill of Rights Jew” – during her college days at Radcliffe. This poem is one of Rich’s liveliest portraits, both satiric and compassionate:

Dating Vic Greenberg you date
crutches and a chair
a cool wit an outrageous form:
“–just got back from a parapalegics’ conference,
guess what the meeting was about –
Sex with a Paraplegic! – for the wives –”

We also hear about Vic giving an “electrical monologue[s]” “furiously calm” and without a break as he gets out of a cab and transfers to his crutches. We hear about him mixing martinis, playing Billie Holliday, and talking about Melville’s vision of evil. We also hear about how his bathroom sports “huge/ grips and suction-cupped/ rubber mats long-handled sponges/ the reaching tools a veteran’s benefits/ in plainest sight.” That word *plainest* suggests that the young Rich was a little shocked by the tools; we too may also be invited to wonder about a Vic who

---

denies any shame while hiding his ailment behind his style and electrical monologues. Yet we are also simply being invited to imagine a lively character, and to consider the ways in which he’s interesting.

The poem displays sympathy to various forms of wounding – Rich’s early experience of gender roles, Vic’s status as a Jew in the anti-Semitic Harvard of the early 1950s, Vic’s literal wounding as a wheelchair-bound GI. Yet Rich is also able to find humor in the situation, and to blame herself for their awkwardness together as much as she does Vic: “What a girl I was then,” she writes in the poem’s second section, “what a little provincial village/ what a hermit crab seeking nobler shells/ what a beach of rattling stones...what a mass of swimmmy legs.” For perhaps the first time she can watch gender roles play out with some amusement, even if this is mixed with more biting satire and mutual-reproach:

Chair to crutches, crutches to cab
chair in the cab and back to Cambridge
memory shooting its handheld frames
Shall I drop you, he says, or shall
we go back to the room for a drink?
It’s the usual question
a man has to ask it
a woman has to answer
you don’t even think

The poem, however, implies that Rich rejects this offer, and so its third section imagines, with something like regret, what sex with Vic might have been like:

Vic into what shoulder could I have pushed your face
laying hands first on your head
onto whose thighs pulled down your head
which fear of mine would have wound itself
around which of yours could we have taken it nakedness
without sperm in what insurrectionary
convulsion would we have done it mouth to mouth
mouth-tongue to vulva-tongue to anus earlobe to nipple
what seven skins each have to molt what seven shifts
what tears boil up through sweat to bathe
what humiliatoriums what layers of imposture

What heroic tremor
released into pure moisture
might have soaked our shape two-headed avid
into your heretic
Rich uses this imagined encounter to wring out all that’s within them – their fears, sadesses, humiliations – and thereby to give their characters new depths and vitality, and their relationship a kind of triumphant, if imaginary, consummation. Rich is even able to describe sex with a man here as “heroic” and “insurrectionary” – and it’s partially her ability to see the encounter as these things that makes them so. The poem, though, is only partially insurrectionary: in other ways, it’s a reprise of lessons learned in Rich’s ambivalent poems toward women. Getting naked with somebody – pursuing the charge of real encounter and exchange where self and other reveal and alter each other and another life shakes the foundation of your own – can be an accomplishment that requires many moltings, convulsions, sections, shedded skins, changes of heart and mind. Lyric poetry can enact such re-visions and exchanges after life tells us it’s too late. Lyric both acknowledges that everything in life conspires to pull us apart, and yet itself sometimes becomes a force that can joyfully, powerfully, give us back other people.

I have been arguing not that Rich isn’t an adamant political poet – a warrior for her causes – but that she’s a better listener than we might think. This listening happens not by silencing herself, but through and in spite of herself, by letting her views and positions be contested, and by letting others have their continued, incremental say as they sink in by stages. Lyric here becomes a tool for bringing the poet’s life and her adamant views into her listening; and it rewards her by leading her back to her politics with greater flexibility and understanding.

124 For instance compare Rich’s passage to the following, famous passage from Rilke’s Fifth Duino Elegy. The power of the Rilke-encounter too seems to work because the place of that encounter is imaginary and conditional – is in other words one of the places of poetry:

Angel!: If there were a place that we didn’t know of, and there, on some unsayable carpet, lovers displayed what they never could bring to mastery here – the bold exploits of their high-flying hearts, their towers of pleasure, their ladders that have long since been standing where there was no ground, leaning just on each other, trembling, – and could master all this, before the surrounding spectators, the innumerable soundless dead: Would these, then, throw down their final, forever saved-up, forever hidden, unknown to us, eternally valid coins of happiness before the at last genuinely smiling pair on the gratified carpet? (Rainer Maria Rilke, The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, trans. Stephen Mitchell [Vintage: New York, 1989], 179-80)
Rich’s prose work, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* bears on its cover a Jacob Epstein statue of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Rich writes, “This is the image with which I want to reopen these notebooks, an image befitting the long, erotic, unending wrestling of poetry and politics.” It’s also an image befitting the wrestling of her politics with other people.

---

Frank O’Hara: A Party Full of Friends

For Frank O’Hara, unlike for Thom Gunn, Adrienne Rich, and James Wright, other people are often a source of pleasure. Below are the first three stanzas of O’Hara’s poem, “A Party of Full of Friends”:¹

Violet leaped to the piano stool and knees drawn up under her chin commenced to spin faster and faster singing ‘I’m a little Dutch boy Dutch boy Dutch boy’ until the rain very nearly fell through the roof!

while, from the other end of the room, Jane, her eyeballs like the crystal of a seer spattering my already faunish cheeks with motes of purist colored good humor, advanced slowly.

‘Poo!’ said Hal ‘they are far too elegant to be let off the pedestal even for a night’ but Jack quickly and rather avariciously amended ‘it’s her birthday,’ then fell deliberatively silent...”

The first thing to notice is that the people in this poem – real members of the 1950s New York art scene – are having a good time, and are enjoying their ridiculous antics. Moreover, their celebratory, madcap behavior matches and blends with the poem’s overall quasi-surrealistic style. If surrealist poems are usually made up of striking discordant images, the revelers, two of whom are artists, are happy to supply those images themselves through their behavior (just look at Violet!). O’Hara’s style then doesn’t invent so much as cooperate, drawing out and amplifying Jane’s “purest colored/ good humor” through his wacky added description of her “eyeballs” being “like the/ crystal of a seer spattering.” And after this eyeball-image, O’Hara’s characters take over again – as is only appropriate if they are based on real people at what we should

assume was a real party. Hal objects that “they” belong on a pedestal as if he too has been looking at Violet and Jane, somehow privy to O’Hara’s poetic descriptions. Since the crystal eyeballs are also plural, and are mentioned immediately before Hal speaks, we can also read Hal’s “they” as referring to the eyeballs themselves. It’s as though O’Hara’s simile has become a literal objet d’art that Hal praises and Jack subsequently plans on (“avariciously”) stealing. O’Hara’s characters seem both to have access to his authorial perspective, and to take over his figurative language. If the partygoers and their celebratory energies guide and participate in the writing of the poem, then they also alter the physics of the world in which they exist – a world where similes can become literal, and the rain can “very nearly” fall right “through the roof!”

O’Hara appears in the midst of this scene with his “faunish cheeks” spattered by motes of Jane’s good humor. O’Hara is “faunish” in the mythological sense in how he helps to amplify his friends Dionysian antics, but he’s also ‘faunish’ in the sense of fawning over someone: he loves his friend, the painter Jane Freilicher, and is glad to be in her presence. Though O’Hara appears in the poem, he’s not its protagonist – his ‘I’ is rather limited, and comes and goes. As O’Hara will write in another poem for his friends a few years later, merely being there among them is “pure heaven.” But the party isn’t over; the poem continues and concludes as follows:

Larry paced the floor. Oh
Larry! ‘Ouch’ he cried (the latter) “the business isn’t very good between Boston and New York! when I’m not painting I’m writing and when I’m not writing I’m suffering for my kids I’m good at all three’

indeed you are, I added hastily with real admiration before anyone else could get into the poem, but Arnie, damn him! had already muttered ‘yes you are’ not understanding the fun of

---

**2** Several hilariously well-chosen adverbs reveal that Jack seems to be plotting to take advantage of the eyeballs new accessibility off their pedestal. The use of adverbs here (avariciously, deliberatively) helps create the feeling of crammed-in data and texture common to surrealist poems; however, unlike surrealist poetry, the adverbs have specific psychological implications about Jack’s attitude. In a funny way then, the density of surrealist description overlaps with the densely particular stances the partygoers adopt.
idle protest.

John yawked
onto the ottoman, having eyes
for nought but the dizzy
Violet, and George thought
Freddy was old enough to
drink. Gloria had not been
invited, although she had
brought a guest.

What
confusion! and to think
I sat down and caused it
all! No! Lyon wanted some
one to give a birthday
party and Bubsy was born
within the fortnight the
only one everybody loves. I
don’t care. Someone’s going
to stay until the cows
come home. Or my name isn’t
Frank O’Hara.

One of O’Hara’s major differences from the preceding poets we’ve looked at is his sense of
humor: it’s not so funny to brag about being good at painting and writing, but it is pretty funny to
brag about being good at “paint/ing...writing and... suffering/ for my kids.” The way O’Hara
earnestly praises Larry for his ability to suffer (“indeed you are, I/ added hastily with real
admiration”) is also amusing, as is his criticism of Arnie for not playing his part earnestly
enough (Arnie only mutters “yes you are,” without really “understanding the fun of/ idle
protest”). The scene here is one of 1950s queer, avant-garde camp – everyone is embracing
theatricality and adopting playful, self-conscious attitudes towards suffering, beauty, courtship,
and banter. Individual identity is important, but also fluid. Though each name does its best to
grab the reader’s attention as it rushes by, the partygoers also seem to enjoy giving way and
turning into each other just as Violet becomes a little Dutch boy. There is an attitude of
determined celebration, of making one’s own avant-garde holiday in order to escape or enchant a
drab and unsympathetic regular world. This is an environment, after all, where people try to find
someone born within a fortnight in order to have an excuse to throw a party.
The style of the poem is just as campy as its participants: John ‘yawks’ because he has been “having eyes” for Violet who has been spinning around, and delight in such over-the-top colloquial phrases pervades the poem. Lines also break in the middle of words (sing-/ing, ad-/miration) as though Violet’s spinning has become a kind of whirlwind that turns lines over quickly and unexpectedly. This whirlwind also affects people, propelling them together, and mixing them up. Hence, more and more people enter the poem as it proceeds: initially it adds just one new person per stanza, but after O’Hara and Arnie fight over responding to Larry in stanza five, no one has a stanza purely to herself, and as many as five people crowd into stanza six.

We can now extrapolate a couple of general principles that will remain true throughout O’Hara’s oeuvre: First, the striking, lovely energies of other people – the crystal seer eyes of Jane, the way Larry prompts “real ad-/miration” – are tied to a sense of humor and amusement about them, and to a love of their ability to playact and fool around. Second, these performative, campy energies can simultaneously guide and be made visible by a poetic style that embraces weird line-breaks, odd and excessive images, exclamations, and errancy. In some of his best social poems, O’Hara will both accurately depict real people (say Larry Rivers’ and his real problems with his painting and family), while also using surrealistic and experimental interventions of style to make their delightful energies more visible.

Third, the characters here – Violet (Lang), Larry (Rivers), Jane (Freilicher), John (Ashbery) and the rest – are open ones. They are all real people who exert independent presence in the poem. Though each person appears only briefly, and though each is fitted into a stanza of relatively equal size with shaved down procrustean line lengths, O’Hara is not in control. People enter the poem willy-nilly, and Gloria, who hasn’t even been invited, has “brought a guest.” These examples suggest that presence in this poem, like attendance at a good party, is overflowing and difficult to regulate. When O’Hara tries to speak “hastily...before anyone else/ could get into the poem,” he is not hasty enough. Even when he tries to take credit for the poem (“to think/ I sat down and caused it/ all”), he immediately corrects himself and insists that Lyon and Bubsy are responsible, and that Bubsy – not O’Hara – is the “only one [whom] everybody loves.” O’Hara is happy to be put in his place: he just wants to be there as long as possible, and to add his own name to the roll call: “I/ don’t care. Someone’s going/ to stay until the cows/
come home. Or my name isn’t/ Frank O’Hara.” And who wouldn’t want to be there? This is a scene where it feels like the rain might fall through the roof, and the cows might really show up – a scene where George decides suddenly that Freddy can drink, as if Freddy has sprouted up all at once for the purposes of the party.

**

O’Hara is by far the most naturally gregarious and extroverted of the poets at which we’ve looked, and he is also the poet who is least tempted by the hermetically-sealed New Critical model of lyric. As scholars such as Marjorie Perloff have shown, O’Hara’s models and influences are wide-ranging and iconoclastic from the start, and he never adopts the ironic, ambiguous, carefully rhymed style of his period.³ Admittedly, O’Hara’s early style does adopt a surrealism so dense that it often distorts its characters so that they seem closed. For instance, take the following 1952 quote: “...he rescued the maid/ who wore trousers in the dun berried solarium/ and had fiddled/ away a fortune in platinum kangaroo pouches/ to be blown up/ like photographs in the crockery mouth of the tropics.” Or here’s another example from as late as 1955: “Leaning from the balcony the senile laundress/ exclaims over aviators, grounded, their wrists/ a whole hairy bicycle racing her vertigo....”⁴ Neither the maid, nor the laundress, nor the aviators emerge clearly; they are lost in outlandish transformations, and we lose any sense of their independent presence. By the mid 1950s, though, O’Hara’s poems are more careful in their portrayals of particulars from the outside world. The poet’s surrealism and stylistic density now frequently work in tandem with the people they encounter, as much guided and instructed by them as determining of them, just as we saw above in “A Party Full of Friends.”

O’Hara, then, does have a breakthrough similar to those of the other poets at which we’ve looked. Yet his breakthrough is less of a major transformation. Even at the start of his career, O’Hara includes the names of friends in his poems; and by the end of it, he has composed some

---


⁴ Frank O’Hara, *Poems Retrieved*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1996), 84, 165. Or here’s a 1953 one: “...two sullen lower East side thugs — well known to the safe and loft squad —/ received prizes and reigned at a Hawaiian feast/ at Bayville, once it’s put on the face...” (ibid., 107).
of the most unabashedly and famously sociable poems in the English language. Overall O’Hara is far more comfortably and naturally directed towards other people than my other poets. Like Gunn, O’Hara admires Williams who plays an important role in opening him up to recognizable external particulars. Yet O’Hara is also more precocious than Gunn and breaks through his closed characters about twenty years earlier.

Yet despite his legendary sociability, there has not yet been a sustained account of what others are like in O’Hara’s poems. In writing about O’Hara and the social, critics tend to leave the poems behind rather quickly in order to focus on the surrounding cultural contexts, politics, and communities. This can be partly explained by the widespread internalized New Critical prejudice I mentioned in my introduction – the prejudice that still considers lyric poems to be solitary texts in and of themselves. But I think, in this case, the explanation has much to do with Frank O’Hara’s work in particular. People in O’Hara are unfamiliar: he doesn’t give us anything like Thom Gunn or Adrienne Rich’s psychological or biographical treatments of others. Instead, characters often appear only through quick cameos or else by crowding together into a single poem in the way we saw in “A Party Full of Friends.” And there’s also often something performative, excessive, and slippery about them.

Adrienne Rich and James Wright’s characters are frequently summoned out of the past. We are often told about important events in their lives, and the shapes of those lives are outlined for us. For instance, in Rich we hear about Marie Curie’s key discoveries and her death; or in Wright we are told about his father’s layoff, fight with his son-in-law, and last words. Only rarely, though, do we hear about such defining events in the lives of O’Hara’s characters. These characters are usually free of such markers – radically present, in flux, and ongoing. Violet leaps

---

5 For more on O’Hara and Williams see Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*, pages 44-49.

6 In fact, it’s interesting to note that by 1960, the time O’Hara finished writing the majority of his major poems, Rich, Wright, and Gunn have not yet arrived at major breakthroughs in their careers. James Wright is still struggling to break out of traditional forms, and *The Branch Will Not Break* won’t come out for another three years. Adrienne Rich is also writing in traditional forms and laboring in domesticity; she has just had her third son, and won’t publish *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* for another three years, or leave her husband for another nine years. Thom Gunn has been in America for six years, (and O’Hara at one point even expresses interest in his poems) but he hasn’t yet relaxed into his more humanistic, Williams-influenced mode. In fact, Gunn won’t write his most famous book of poems, *The Man With Night Sweats*, for another thirty-two years, by which time O’Hara will have been dead for over two-and-a-half decades.
up on the piano and spins around; John yawks onto the ottoman; Larry paces the floor. Though
we hear about Larry Rivers’ troubles, we’re not asked to take them seriously as defining events.

As a result, O’Hara’s characters are more elusive than those of Rich, Wright, and Gunn. They disappear quickly, and reappear without warning in subsequent poems. Even when they do appear for longer periods, O’Hara uses a variety of off-kilter strategies to represent them, as if growing bored with any single view of a person as soon as it comes into focus.\(^7\) People in O’Hara also hide and dissolve: he loves writing acrostics of his friends’ names, or embedding his poems with secret references to their specific traits. He fits Larry Rivers’ Polish background into the “Polish rudder” of the poem “To The Harbormaster,” for example, or hides his lover Vincent Warren’s middle name in the title of “St. Paul and All That.” In the poem “In Memory of My Feelings,” O’Hara famously puns on the painter Grace Hartigan’s name (“Grace/ to be born and live as variously as possible” (256)),\(^8\) after describing himself in terms of Grace’s paintings of him. Often O’Hara mentions a friend once in a random context in a poem without any characterizing commentary or description. If such are figures are to be called open characters, they might seem like they are so far to the open end of the spectrum as not to be particularly interesting since they appear and vanish so quickly that they’re hardly visible to the human eye.

Yet the same impulse that turns some characters into barely-glimpsed ciphers, makes others seem fascinating, energizing, and just plain fun. After his lonely and socially anemic childhood in Grafton, Massachusetts, O’Hara delights in discovering his avant-garde New York social scene and hence, unlike my other poets, his interest in describing others is very often celebratory. O’Hara’s experiments in representation, as we’ll see, are guided by a wish to amplify others’ tenuous living energies rather than pickle and preserve them in more solid and conventional depictions. Rather than struggling to understand those others, or place them in a poetic world free of external contexts, O’Hara will use his poems as means of giving people more life, paying homage to them and refreshing our perceptions of the social world they inhabit.

---

\(^7\) It’s appropriate then that O’Hara tries his hand at plays, novels, and prose character sketches, and that he loves figurative painting and even writes a calligram that imitates his friend Jane Freilicher’s face. By trying different genres and art forms, O’Hara wants to maximize the number of tools at his disposal for portraying others, but he also reveals that he’s continually unsatisfied.

For these reasons, I think that O’Hara puts more pressure on what openness might look like or be able to accomplish than any of the preceding poets at which we’ve looked. In his best social poems, a convincing, skeptical, campy delight and love of others transfigures them, and makes O’Hara seem like our host at a dazzling party.

**

If O’Hara is so sociable and extroverted why doesn’t he simply describe others? Why do the others in his poems turn up in ways that are so fleeting, elliptical, and strange? Why do they, as O’Hara says of the extras in “To the Film Industry in Crisis,” so often “pass quickly and return... saying...[only their] one or two lines? (232)” I think the answer has to do with the way O’Hara is the temperamental opposite of Thom Gunn. Both O’Hara and Gunn recognize that writing about a person can end up imprisoning and reducing that person in a knowing encapsulation. However, Gunn remains drawn to such encapsulation and imprisonment. Though he eventually learns to bring others to life in the ways they athletically make use of the constrictions of his poetic forms, his impulse is still to epitomize these others. O’Hara, on the other hand, wants his poems to give his characters maximal freedom, and wants his poems to serve almost as refuges for his friends, as escape-hatches or rest-stops where they can be appreciated, enhanced, and revitalized before returning to the world on their own terms.

O’Hara’s wish to grant others maximum freedom helps explain his attacks on stasis and stability. In “To Hell With It,” O’Hara says that he hates “subject matter...and all things that don’t change,/ photographs,/ monuments,/ memories of Bunny and Gregory and me in costume/ bowing to each other and the audience, like jinxes)...” (275). O’Hara goes on:

```
nothing now can be changed, as if
and Bunny never change her writing of
any gift further, beyond liking my poems
last crying no tears will dry
the Bear, nor Gregory bear me
(no new poems for him.)
```

Static forms of preservation – photos, monuments, even clear subjects in poems – are for O’Hara emblems of the changelessness of death. “Sad friend, you cannot change,” says Elizabeth Bishop
in her eulogy for Robert Lowell, making a similar point. Even pausing too long while alive can amount to a kind of death. In O’Hara’s play Try, Try John excuses his behavior to Jack, the soldier whose wife John has been sleeping with, as follows: “Someone has to smile/ at her as she comes back from the bathroom... Do you think everything can stay the same,/ like a photograph? What for?” If one wants to remain vital, then it’s better to keep moving, and a poem that’s like a photograph of someone – a poem that makes a person hold still as it tries to sum them up – ends up killing the thing it loves.

This desire to keep others quick, surprising, independent, and vital is why people appear in a flash at unexpected moments in poems that seem to have little to do with them, or to be concerned with them only in passing. And it’s also why O’Hara’s characters often return at unexpected moments in poem after poem as if they stray on stage whenever they’re in the mood. Of course, some characters disappear for good from the work: for instance, after Jane Freilicher gets married and departs from O’Hara’s life, she disappears from his poetry as well. However, the number of sudden, surprise encounters in the poems – a number reflective of the unpredictable encounters with others in O’Hara’s Manhattan streets and bars – can create the feeling that you never know when someone might turn up. It can foster the utopic daydream that the whole cast is ever-present in the wings, chatting, and enjoying themselves at their leisure just outside each poem.

In order to create such unpredictable, open characters, it’s crucial that O’Hara relinquish control. This is part of the reason why he writes poems at parties or for particular social events; why he stuffs his poems in sock drawers to be discovered and collected by others; why he...

---


10 Frank O’Hara, Selected Poems, 53-4.

11 O’Hara also sees more traditional descriptions of others as reductive and boring. O’Hara’s poem, “Those Who Are Dreaming, A Play About St. Paul” begins this way: “He gets up, lights a cigarette, puts fire/ under the coffee and dials on the telephone./ Where is he? he is everywhere, he is not/ a character, he is a person, and therefore general./ He has no tic, unless someone is observing him, and no one is...” (373). Here we have a mini-attack on traditional character depictions: these lines suggest that it’s terribly presumptuous to assume someone can be summed up by tics, or by specific scenes or locations (“he” is everywhere). Hence, as we’ll see, O’Hara’s great desire is to create a poetry hospitable to people rather than to characters in the usual literary senses of the word; he wants to create something closer to my open characters. (Hence, I’ll continue to use the term ‘character’ for convenience’s sake.)
doesn’t worry about others changing lines in his plays; why he edits only a little; and why he feels that uncompleted poems sometimes finish themselves on their own. O’Hara wants to relinquish control so that his poems will become less aloof, more porous and hospitable to others who can then turn up in the poems as if by accident – or by their own choice. As O’Hara’s longtime friend and roommate Joe Lesueur writes, O’Hara filled his life with other people who, though they made many demands on him, were not a distraction from his poetry. Instead, they impinged “upon and enter[ed]... his poetry, which wouldn’t have been the same and probably not as good without them.”

People often appear briefly and without introduction in the poems because to take the time to introduce them and explain exactly who they are would be to treat them as characters to be served up to a reader. Instead, O’Hara wants them to feel immediate, and to appear as if they’re really alive and there, so that even if his reader doesn’t understand the details, she is convinced by their particularity. It’s like being at a party where you don’t know the guests yet, but everything seems very animated and interesting and heightened – O’Hara may be our host, but he’s one who keeps giving minimal introductions before getting pulled away and leaving us to fend for ourselves.


13 Ibid., 286.


15 In O’Hara’s early journals at Harvard we see him working toward the ideal of making his work hospitable to others without deadening them. Though he is discussing prose fiction here his comments have bearing on his poetry:

I want to move toward a complexity which makes life within the work and which does not (necessarily, although it may) resemble life as most people seem to think it is lived. If I am successful this should not need to be received as exotic or phantastic. The only simplicity I want is that of a coherent thing, a result of the work-as-a-whole’s integrity...If I must abandon characters to do this, then I must... But it won’t be necessary if I can avoid creating character as such, and only develop character in terms of the story, like puppets manipulated for effect (Frank O’Hara, *Early Writing*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Grey Fox, 1977), 102).

O’Hara’s emphasis on puppets here is misleading because in general he is about as far as one can be from Nabokov’s famous comment that his characters are like “galley slaves” (Vladimir Nabokov, interview with Herbert Gold, *The Paris Review*, Web, 10 May 2015). It also might seem like the poet is advocating for a kind of closed character since the people here exist only in terms of the story. And indeed, though O’Hara’s journals are speaking about prose, during this phase of O’Hara’s poetry his characters were more closed, more swallowed up by the heavy surrealist distortions through which they were conveyed. Yet this isn’t the full story because O’Hara’s goal is to use stylistic complexity to create “life within the work” without creating traditional characters, or “character as such.” We see here a distrust of the ability of traditional representations to convey ‘living’ characters. And this distrust reappears a few pages later:

Works which deal with developing characters, with exploring mental states, with preaching, can never be more than what they set out to do. (Dickens comes to mind as refutation: but his novels are novels first, afterward they have
By refusing to cut characters out of their backgrounds, and by striving to present them with immediacy and minimal framing, O’Hara ends up somewhat resembling Gertrude Stein. Like Stein, O’Hara seems most concerned with giving us a playful, quasi-metaphysical sense of what someone’s vitality or presence feels like at a particular moment, rather than in giving us a more holistic depiction of that person’s psychology or of key events in their lives. Wendy Steiner, in her book *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein*, explains Stein’s efforts in terms of William James’s distinction between ‘acquaintance’ with someone and ‘knowledge about’ them. Listing traits or facts about a person creates ‘knowledge about’ him, but to present a “subject with immediacy, to render him present, is an attempt to create ‘acquaintance’ with him as a simple point in perceiver’s awareness.” O’Hara too is interested in something more like acquaintance. How does it feel to be in a room with Jane Freilicher? What is it like when Kenneth Koch’s suddenly drops by?

characters which live within the novel ((it is this that gives them their immortality – the character which can be abstracted from his setting is perishable)...The artist works and his preoccupations appear in the work inadvertently; only the inferior artist, or the non-artist, needs the artificial stimulus of intent...” (O’Hara, *Early Writing*, 103-4). O’Hara doesn’t want traditional novelistic character development and psychology, and part of the reason for this is that he thinks that focusing on character deliberately fails to produce life within the work. As he says a page earlier: “So often the direct way of doing a thing is ruinous; try to grab the trout and it always gets away” (Ibid., 103). If one goes about directly trying to capture a person in writing, the person escapes (or worse is ruined). Yet if O’Hara writes novels as “novels first” – or poems as poems first – then his preoccupations, which include other people, can appear “inadvertently” and the trout can be captured. In other words, the style and the integrity of a work of art can become not ends in themselves exactly, but things to focus on so living others can appear indirectly, inadvertently. Of course, the idea that a character can’t be abstracted from her setting makes more sense when speaking about novels than about O’Hara’s poems about real people, but even that makes a kind of sense when applied to the poetry: again, O’Hara is less interested in creating a well-rounded and relatively well-understood character in his poems, than he is in producing the less abstractable feeling of what it’s like to encounter that person.

These early writings even help explain O’Hara’s later famous comment in his joke manifesto “Personism” that the Personist poet is concerned with invoking “overtones of love [for another person] without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem without preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person” (O’Hara, *Selected Poems*, 248). These lines don’t mean that O’Hara isn’t interested in writing about others (he does want the poem to be between two people instead of two pages after all), but that too much direct focus on the other ends up ruining or lessening the other (“It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!”). If the poet can invoke another, but direct his feeling toward the poem instead of the person, then there’s a chance he may create ‘life within the work’ inadvertently, and that the person might just decide to make an appearance in the work as if by their own accord.


17 Ibid., 29.

18 One reason O’Hara is obsessed with names is that names are indexical and create a sense of immediacy. As Wendy Steiner writes, “a name has no class meaning, but simply points to a particular person.” She adds that a painted portrait too in its “pure indexical function... would function as a name, an immediate evocation of an individual” (Steiner *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, 6). O’Hara’s brief descriptions of others plays a similar role: since we have no chance to contextualize them before they appear (often in the middle of a poem), it is almost like O’Hara is saying, again and again, ‘lo, voila, there they are!’ (Cf.
O’Hara, unlike Stein, does give us lots very carefully observed particulars about others: we hear, for instance, about New York construction workers wearing yellow hats and drinking coke. However, O’Hara usually avoids presenting absolute takes on his characters, and the particulars he gives us about them are often eccentric, more suggestive than revealing (e.g. “Cornel Wilde coughing blood on the piano keys while Merle Oberon berates” (232)). O’Hara is also happy to gossip with us about his characters. For instance, he tells us that Joe LeSueur is going to lunch with Norman, but is snubbing Kenneth Koch; that Allen Ginsberg is back from his exotic foreign travels and going on about God a lot; that Lana Turner has shamefully collapsed at a Hollywood party; or that John Ashbery doesn’t want to go to a dance bar, but then really gets into it. This is fun, suggestive information, but it’s not comprehensive, or necessarily even accurate.

O’Hara want us to be taken with the immediate vitalities of his characters, but he also wants them to remain multifaceted, mysterious, and slippery (he wants them to be something like the suggestive or evasive characters of my introduction). As I said earlier, opening characters up can depend on making us wonder about them, intriguing us with the ways they elude us, and thereby making us look for them beyond the frame of a poem. Both eccentric descriptions and gossip play such a role. So too does the fact that many of O’Hara’s characters are famous (like Willem de Kooning or James Dean), and that O’Hara lets them trail their own sets of associations. It’s no coincidence, then, that Alan Feldman compares the biographical interest of O’Hara’s love poems to Shakespeare’s Sonnets\(^{19}\) – or that Allen Ginsberg compares O’Hara showing Ginsberg around New York to Catullus giving one a tour of the Roman Forum.\(^{20}\) To read O’Hara is to grow intrigued by the world around the poems in the same way readers have been captivated by Catullus’s Rome, or by speculations about Shakespeare’s relationship to the young man and dark lady.

\(^{19}\) Alan Feldman, *Frank O’Hara* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 126.

Above all, O’Hara wants his characters to be maximally open, and to seem like living people, not just literary constructs. Many critics and theorists have described how literary portrayals of others can do damage to them. For instance, Catherine Gallagher argues that part of what we like about literary characters is actually their hollowness and the way their shoddy incompleteness makes us feel whole: “We need in characters the contradictory sense of not being a character.”

Or Allen Grossman writes about how the visibility of a person in a poem is contingent upon the loss of some other more vital form of personal presence. O’Hara’s strategies I described above are attempts to avoid these perils, and to give others to us living and unharmed.

It’s important that O’Hara write about others despite the risks because, as he himself says, “attention equals life.” Without the intervention of art, others can all too quickly become dull and only half-perceived. Micah Mattix writes of how O’Hara’s version of the artist “transfers, and therefore transforms, objects from a half-dead (immobile) existence to one that is full of ‘being’ and life, and... in this sense... completes, or brings into a renewed existence, objects of the material world.” And Marjorie Perloff relatedly reads O’Hara in terms of Viktor Shklovsky’s famous idea that art defamiliarizes and refreshes our perceptions. Indeed, O’Hara is constantly trying to reveal the extraordinary in the prosaic. In one poem O’Hara speaks of destroying Kansas to reveal Oz (363), and in his essay on Claus Oldenburg, he writes of how with the “perverse charms of Gulliver and Alice-in-Wonderland, Oldenberg makes one feel almost hysterically present, alert, summoned to the party.”

Summoned to the party – the metaphor is again of a celebratory social gathering – for not just objects but also other people require this kind of defamiliarizing re-vision and renewal. To

---


put this in Wendy Steiner’s terms, fresh *acquaintance* with others leads quickly back to dull itemizing of qualities and mere *knowledge about* them. But to see “A lady in/ foxes on such a [hot] day” putting her “poodle/ in a cab” (258) – or “Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling through Niagara Falls” (232); or Violet spinning around and saying *I’m a little Dutch boy* – is to wake up, have our perceptions refreshed, and to see others at their most vital and surprising. Joe LeSueur is right: these others intrude upon and make the poems better, providing little jolts of energy, jump-starts, or defibrillations that startle O’Hara, inspire him, and spur him onwards. Such intrusions renew O’Hara’s joy in the social world, and fill his poems with his favorite kinds of amusing independent vitality (the vanity of the rich lady in foxes who is determined to put on a good show despite the hot weather; the pleasure of Marilyn Monroe and Violet in their dramatic performances and inventive play).

As in “A Party Full of Friends,” role-playing and theatricality in O’Hara don’t contradict but rather are expressions of presence and vitality – of people’s desires to show off, to be multiple and contradictory, to feel passion whether artificial or no. Part of O’Hara’s delight in open others is that they don’t hold still but vacillate and are many things at once: they can be present and evasive, real and surreal, cartoons and unknowable others. Vacillation, freedom of movement, and slipperiness are all forms of life in O’Hara, which is why in “Having A Coke With You” we find the lovers “drifting back and forth between each other” like ethereal clouds – the opposite of the locked-down, “solemn... unpleasantly definitive...statuary” around them (360).

** Quick Glimpses **

Let’s look at a couple examples of what O’Hara is able to accomplish with the quick glimpse even when that glimpse is of strangers who will appear only once in the poems, and about whom we are unlikely to have any previous knowledge. To do so, I must detach the quotations from their wonderfully jumbled and cluttered poems, and this is already to deprive them of some of the surprise and energy they carry as they wheel by:

I go to the bank/ and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)/ doesn’t even look up my balance for once in her life... (“The Day Lady Died”) (325)
...and the little box is out on the sidewalk/ next to the delicatessen/ so the old man can sit on it and
drink beer/ and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day/ while the sun is still shining...
(“Steps”) (371)

...laborers feed their dirty/glistening torsos sandwich/ and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets/on...
(“A Step Away From Them”) (257)

A/ Negro stands in a doorway with a/ toothpick, languorously agitating./ A blonde chorus girl
clicks: he/ smiles and rubs his chin. Everything/ suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of a Thursday... (“A
Step Away From Them”) (257)

Ginger Rogers with her pageboy bob like a sausage/ on her shuffling shoulders, peach-melba-
voiced Fred Astaire of the feet, Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of mountain-climbers’ gasping
spouses... (“To the Film Industry in Crisis”) (232)

Meeting Linda Stillwagon above, we lose the anticipatory buildup and slightly frantic rush that
surrounds the errands in “The Day Lady Died” and that makes each encounter in the poem
surprising. In the quote from “Steps” we miss the surprising way in which the old man’s
altercations with his wife are shown to be part of a paean to a particular day (“oh god it’s
wonderful/ to get out of bed/ and drink too much coffee/ and smoke too many cigarettes/ and
love you so much” (371)). Moreover, the laborers, the black man, and the chorus girl from “A
Step Away From Them” all gain vibrancy from being single instances in a packed and dazzling
scene – as do Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, and Eric von Stroheim. When added back in, this
missing context helps to energize each scene and make it more tangible.27

Yet even without that surrounding context, Charles Altieri’s view that these fragmentary
encounters with others alienate the reader from any “inner reality they might possess,”28 and Paul
Breslin’s view that such others are flat and go by too quickly to yield meaning,29 seem hard to
sustain. In O’Hara’s early, more inward and densely surrealistic lyrics, strangers do indeed carry

27 O’Hara also often helps hide and camouflage others in his energetically messy poems full of jumbled images and assorted New
York street scenes. In this way, characters in O’Hara seem similar to figures in the paintings by O’Hara’s friends Willem de
Kooning and Larry Rivers, in that these figures vanish into, emerge from, and blur with a storm of surrounding marks and
gestures (e.g. “at the station a crowd of drunken fishermen on a picnic Kenneth/ is hard to find but we find, through all the
singing, Kenneth smiling” (329)). In the later work, though, and in what I think of as O’Hara’s best social poems, these figures
carry powerful external presence nonetheless, and their distortions make them like tricksterish characters in Gunn in that they
seem to distort themselves only to gesture toward their real lives more powerfully.

28 Charles Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s (Cranbury: Associated University
Presses, 1979), 110-111.

little sense of particular presence. In “The Three-Penny Opera,” O’Hara even questions his characters’ substantiality directly: “Polly, are you a/ shadow? Is Mackie projected/ to me by light through film?” These characters are “Chipper,” O’Hara concludes, “but/ not so well arranged...” (32-3). Yet such shadowy projections and shoddily composed figures are a far cry from the utterly tangible Linda Stillwagon as she musters an unusual generosity for the impoverished (and perhaps underdressed) O’Hara. And Polly and Mackie couldn’t be more different from the sexy construction workers enjoying their drinks, from Fred Astaire dancing, from the black man striking a pose while admiring a chorus girl, or from the wife beating her husband and sending him off packing back to work. Though Altieri and Breslin are right that these characters aren’t obvious symbols for something else, there is most decidedly a ‘there there’ in the above quoted excerpts.

Though such characters appear only briefly, they stay with us. Deirdre Lynch, Alex Woloch, James Wood, Frank O’Connor, E.M. Forster, and Lisa Zunshine have all written in different ways about the power of minor characters and underrepresented others. These theorists demonstrate that minor others – those who come across via as few details as possible – can arrest and intrigue us just as much as characters who are depicted at length.30 “Very few brushstrokes are needed to get a portrait walking,” writes James Wood, and E.M. Forster writes about how successful minor characters have “lit upon that one memorable gesture.”31 O’Hara too relies on economy of description and judicious selection of details. In the above examples, we can see how he seeks out and selects for moments when an individual’s overflowing vitality and performativity makes them the source of their own poetic image – whether it’s the wife’s strength, Ginger Rogers’ shuffling shoulders, or the laborers health and sexiness.

Yet though such selection is important, so too are O’Hara’s stylistic, tonal, and interpretive interventions. For the above quotations aren’t objective snapshots so much as brief


exchanges or struggles between the poet’s personality and style and each character’s individual presence. O’Hara is not trying to hide his own presence in order to emphasize realistic details in the manner of, say, Gary Snyder, Robert Hass, or Elizabeth Bishop. O’Hara finds realism and clarity on their own to be rather dull, and not even particularly revealing: it is through his interventions, which often occlude or make the picture more subjective, that other people can be seen in their full vitality and suggestiveness. Through these authorial occlusions, O’Hara suggests, we can register more fully what is there, and be intrigued and struck by it, like a familiar face suddenly seen upside down.

So for example, we have to think through what “languorously agitating” might look like, and what it might imply about the “Negro...[who] stands in a doorway with a toothpick.” (We are meant to see, I think indolence, self-enjoyment, and a slightly uncomfortable pent up energy, but this dense particularized description takes a minute to process, and even then is open to some interpretation.) Similarly, we have to think about what it means to be “peach-melba-voiced, and we have to see others in terms of wacky details like Ginger Rogers’ pageboy bob looking “like a sausage.” Or we have to see them in terms of eccentric ones like how Eric von Stroheim is most memorable for being a fictional “seductor of mountain-climbers’ gasping spouses.” We then have to recognize the fun of that double-entendre (gasping), and the fact that the laborers feed their torsos not their mouths as O’Hara’s erotic eye strays and lingers. It’s also not clear what the black man ‘smiling and rubbing his chin’ at the clicking chorus girl might mean: is he merely appreciative? Is he thinking of pursuing her? Is he immersed in his own thoughts?

Tone adds complicating texture as well. We perceive Miss Stillwagon only through the sass in the poet’s voice when he encounters her, and through his exasperated amusement at her finally not looking up his balance. And we have to reckon with how the wife beating her husband, so he’ll stop being a drunken layabout, is supposed to be the clinching image in a poem celebrating a sunny day in New York (o lovely vulgar scene, O’Hara seems to be saying). These others then become more not less interesting because we see them through the subjective film of O’Hara’s eccentric style and voice. And our difficulties in understanding these quick, occluded, intriguing, and lively others makes us attribute more significance to them, just as Hemingway, in a different, less stylistically playful way, entices us toward the blanks of his underrepresented
characters. If “a glance/ master more may than gaze,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins says, it’s because the glance must settle for the full textures of intrigue and surprise rather than for more abstract knowledge and understanding.

Of course, the speed of the encounter with each person, as he or she suddenly emerges from O’Hara’s crowded streets and lines, is crucial for catching the poet off guard, so he can give us such textured, unstudied glimpses. And O’Hara himself experiences these collisions with others in a profound way. To provide some new examples, in “For Grace, After A Party,” we hear about how while the poet was “blazing my tirade against someone who doesn’t interest me” he suddenly realizes that “it was love for you [Grace Hartigan] that set me afire” (214). Or in “Poem (The fluorescent tubing),” O’Hara calls Kenneth Koch on the phone, and is surprised by how swiftly Koch appears: “presto/ he is leaning on the shelf in the kitchen three hours away” (331). Or in the midst of the hurried paratactic list of errands in “The Day Lady Died,” O’Hara runs into an obituary for Billie Holliday, and then is taken aback by an unexpected memory of Holliday whispering “a song along the keyboard/ to Mal Waldron” so that “everyone and I stopped breathing” (325). Such encounters are not only lightning-glimpses of other lives, they also push up against the boundaries of individuation itself as isolation disappears with a thought, separation is trumped by telephone wires, and a chance encounter with a newspaper leads “everyone and I” to forget themselves in the presence of Billie Holliday’s song. O’Hara’s brief encounters give us memorable others and transformative moments of connection.

**


33 In this way, O’Hara resembles his friend and hero Willem de Kooning. According to MOMA curator John Elderfield, de Kooning wanted his paintings to have “the effect of suddenly catching sight of something – while crossing the street quickly, for example, or coming into a room, or glancing out a window... a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash...” His paintings were to include “everything erratic as well as erotic, everything that flashed by, appearing-and-disappearing...everything that could be taken off guard when he allowed himself to be taken off guard... [for being] specific to the experience of meeting what was external to himself: that was the essential thing” (John Elderfield, “Space to Paint,” de Kooning, a Retrospective (New York: MOMA, 2011), 8-46, 20). This is where New York comes in for O’Hara because it is a constant source of new surprising encounters. More crowded than Gunn’s San Francisco, New York also quickly sweeps O’Hara on to the next sight, the next person.

34 Or in “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed)” O’Hara is “trotting along” and “suddenly” sees a headline about the titular movie star.
I am not arguing that O’Hara likes everyone in his poems equally, or that the social world of his poems is a kind of paradise devoid of any problems. Indeed, O’Hara, like Catullus, writes tirades: he accuses Vincent Warren of not loving in equal measure (“St. Paul And All That”), and he attacks contemporary Russian poets for being simple-minded racists unworthy of their literary heritage (“Answer to Voznesensky & Evtushenko”). It is through the poems that we learn about O’Hara’s ambivalent feelings about Joe LeSueur (“Joe’s Jacket”) and about his uncertainties about Jane Freilicher’s upcoming marriage to Joe Hazan (“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s”). We also witness O’Hara’s condescension toward Allen Ginsberg’s spiritualism (“Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul”), and bear witness to the deaths of various friends and beloved figures (Jackson Pollock, Bunny Lang). We even hear about how parties turn sour, so that O’Hara drinks to “smother my anxiety,” and goes home “purged of everything except anxiety and self-distrust...” (“Joe’s Jacket”) (330).

Nevertheless, such poems help O’Hara clarify or express something – even his broodiest social poems help him work something out, or get something off his chest, and enable him to say things he couldn’t say in person. In other words, such poems serve as important tools that help make his social world better. They are, after all, not the aloof excoriations of the social world we find in T.S. Eliot, but attempts to work things out from within it. Such poems seek out wiggle-room in relationships in which art may intervene, and they extend what is socially possible, even when that only means voicing a complaint. Moreover, the way such complaint poems bend toward a particular other not only opens that other up in the ways he or she can then come to intrigue us, but also demonstrates lyric’s dialogic possibilities, the way it can really contain the pushback of another view and mind. Lyric can then lead to discussion and understanding not just to complaint.

Yet despite O’Hara’s complaints about others, his most compelling descriptions of them are tangled up with joy, and there is a compelling drive toward the utopian in O’Hara’s poetry – toward the party where others “illumine space with...[their] marvellous appearances, delays, and enunciations” (232), and where “we shall continue to be ourselves [and where] everything continues to be possible” (329). O’Hara is distrustful of self-pity, but he is less distrustful of
praise: while his laments rarely rise above gripes, his raptures often attain a full-throated ease. Again and again he locates and polishes off what about others might be inspiring; in so doing he steers between the Scylla of the world’s bored and dulled perceptions, and the Charybdis of art’s harmful, knowing caricatures – between a tiresome realism and a surrealism careless with the things of the world.

** Crowds, Parties, Pantheons **

To keep others fresh and lively, and to prevent them from becoming encapsulated and reduced, another strategy O’Hara employs in addition to the glimpse is the jumble. This is the strategy of making a poem contain many characters and many disparate glimpses. One can think about this multiplicity in a linear sense where others function as energizing waypoints as O’Hara moves through each poem and through New York. For instance, “In A Step Away From Them” O’Hara walks around first noticing the construction workers, then the black man and chorus girl, then the “lady in/ foxes on such a day,” and finally the “Puerto/ Ricans on the avenue” who make it “beautiful and warm” (257-8). “Joe’s Jacket” too has a linear trajectory that picks up and drops off passengers like the train with which the poem begins. We start “Entraining to Southampton” with Jasper Johns and Vincent Warren (329); the group then finds Kenneth Koch and his wife Janice and goes to a party; after that party O’Hara is alone until Kenneth appears again for awhile; Vincent then is mentioned in passing; and finally the poem ends by focusing on Joe LeSueur. O’Hara’s famous ‘I do this, I do that’ mode can then seem to depend on appreciative encounters with different kinds of people in the way that a few words exchanged in passing or at lunch can keep one’s energy up in between hours of work.35 One can see the distribution of people across a poem in this way as being like vertebrae that keep the whole structure erect and humming.

35 It’s true that the above encounters aren’t always simply appreciative – for instance, O’Hara has mixed feelings about Joe in “Joe’s Jacket.” Nevertheless, Joe, like the others, provides an infusion of energy that helps keep the poem’s momentum up, and in this case prompts another sixteen long lines. Even when he’s frustrated with his friends, O’Hara is rarely bored when talking about them. Others are where O’Hara’s interest and inspiration lies, and even his more negative emotions allow him to be “direct/like an arrow that feels something” (334). I’ll return to the question of ambivalence, and of O’Hara’s more negative takes on his friends, later on in this chapter.
Yet such poems can also be read as democratic jumbles. As we saw in “A Party Full of Friends,” O’Hara often gives a poem a crowded, slightly chaotic population, like a clown car, or like that game of how many people can fit inside a telephone booth at once. In “A Party Full of Friends” we still move through a sort of linear roll call, but the poem also makes haphazard connections between the friends who start crowding into the poem faster and faster as it progresses (John ‘has eyes’ for Violet, Frank and Arnie respond to Larry). Even a poem such as “A Step Away From Them” can be read as a sort of mixed hodge-podge of glimpses and types, and its linear arrangement can be seen just as a way to fit as many different kinds of others into the poem as swiftly as possible.

Such democratic jumbles should be read politically. O’Hara’s unabashed praise of Blacks and Puerto Ricans has at times led to the charge of exoticizing racial otherness; however, O’Hara has also been applauded for making racial differences visible in the predominantly white New Critical poetry of the 1950s, and for celebrating “the love we bear each other’s differences” (“Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets”) (305). Indeed, he even attacks those who oppose such differences: in “On the Vast Highway,” he responds to a racist cab driver by writing “it is good that there are so many kinds of us/ so death can choose/ and perhaps prefer/ he who casts the first shadow of the day/ on those who are trying to live till dark....” Presumably the “he” here is the cabbie on whom O’Hara places his mild curse.

Not only is O’Hara is appreciative of difference, but the people in his poems usually seem appreciative of each other, energized by the diversity of the scenes in which they take part. O’Hara enthusiastically describes this phenomenon as being particularly American:

...Europeans are very often surprised at, say, if you have an American artist and you are to, oh, give a party for him. Then you would have a very wide range of people who are not, who may or may not know each other. In fact the person that you give the party for would be the only cohesive element which will link them all together. For instance, it’s always very interesting that, say, it is not surprising at a party at Bill de Kooning’s studio to meet Harold Rosenberg. And it’s also not surprising to meet an atomic physicist, who will turn out be a very good, old friend of de

---


37 *Poems Retrieved*, 199.
Kooning’s. You know. And you can see it. That it’s perfectly obvious that they’ve had endless talks together. They understand each other perfectly well. Whereas, I think, in European circles the social area is much more definitely established. There aren’t these strange buckaroos whose interests you wonder about, and this sort of thing. Now what does this businessman care about abstract expressionism?\textsuperscript{38}

O’Hara is lightly defending his country against his interviewer’s suggestion that Americans are too individualistic and don’t see themselves enough as part of a cohesive social whole. It’s true, says O’Hara, and that’s a great thing because it makes for a kind of healthy pandemonium, a pinball machine sociality where everyone cavorts with everyone else. Of course, it’s not quite everyone: his examples are of Willem de Kooning and an atomic physicist, and his ideal here is one in which everyone seems rather exceptional. Even the businessman cares about Abstract Expressionism in a way that makes one “wonder about” him. Yet O’Hara’s social vision doesn’t just include the elite: as we’ve seen, it also includes racial minorities and average Joes. In “A Step Away From Them,” as Brad Gooch points out, “even the construction workers...are made to seem mysterious and tropically sexy.”\textsuperscript{39} Only the dull and the browbeaten seem to have no place in O’Hara’s Manhattan.\textsuperscript{40}

O’Hara’s faith in lively American groups links him to Whitman, and we can think of O’Hara’s quick glimpses of others in terms of the Whitmanian catalogue full of the essential characters of my introduction. Yet Whitman’s characters are depicted in terms of single skills being carried out in zestful, energetic ways (e.g. a blacksmith swinging his hammer, a butcher-boy sharpening his knife and making repartee, a policeman with a star working his way toward the center of a crowd). In O’Hara, one would have to replace ‘skill’ with something like a robust


\textsuperscript{39} Brad Gooch, \textit{City Poet}, 289.

\textsuperscript{40} O’Hara wants to celebrate others and this celebratory instinct does require some ruthless exclusions – rarely do we see the drudge or the tormented or helpless person in O’Hara poetry; at one point O’Hara and LeRoi Jones even rebuff a beggar woman who wants money for a “terrible disease” (335). O’Hara’s vision of happiness, as I will say elsewhere, is always aware of and fully embraces its own uncomfortable, necessary selfishness – the way being happy always means ignoring someone else’s suffering. This doesn’t mean O’Hara’s selections of others don’t have political ramifications though. And it doesn’t mean O’Hara only focuses only on those who are privileged and well off: O’Hara often finds surprising open energies and vitalities in unexpected places (like construction workers engaged in dangerous work in “Naphtha,” the black man languorously agitating in “A Step Away From Them,” or the woman knocking her husband off his box while the sun is shining in “Steps”). Yet O’Hara’s poetic town does have a very different makeup from that of James Wright.
and often theatrical action, stance, or attitude – languorously agitating, deciding to look up O’Hara’s balance for once in her life, feeding sexy torsos sandwiches.  

O’Hara also differs from Whitman in that O’Hara’s catalogues work to blur types and identities as well as to list them of:

- Bar Américan continues to be French
- de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus
- Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
- and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!) (“Adieu to Norman...,” 329)

Vincent tells me about his mother’s trip to Sweden

Hans tells us about his father’s life in Sweden, it sounds like Grace Hartigan’s painting Sweden (“Poem” (Khrushchev is coming),” 340)

Then there is another friend of mine who was just dogged by good fortune and there is another friend whose dogs got away and wounded another dog belonging to an old man of that neighborhood... I once knew a Pan-Slavist who wanted to live in Panama but never could somehow. He lives in Brooklyn Heights. She, rather...”

Contrary to Whitman, listing off different individual identities here helps to destabilize those identities. For example, the idea of ‘continuing’ allows O’Hara to delight in the paradox of having married and maiden names simultaneously, and of being both French and American (or Algerian) at once. Even the very idea of having a unique identity is interrogated playfully through the notion of something like Platonic Shirley Goldfarbness.

Identity categories such as nationality and sex can be used to separate and sort individuals and gesture toward the diversity of the American scene, but they can also be used to show how each individual contains multiple and contradictory types within herself. One can be both French and Algerian at once; or a person can be from one country, long for another, and end up in a third; a real life can sound like a painting of that life; three people (Vincent, Hans, and Grace) can be bound together by a country none of them lives in; and a person can be male for a while, and then suddenly become female. Such multiplicities and contradictions make barriers between

---

41 Like Whitman, O’Hara clearly has an admiring eye for male laborers, who are after all helping to construct America and O’Hara Manhattan: he praises, for instance, the “gated Iroquois on the girders/ fierce and unflinching-footed...” as they work construction (337). Yet in O’Hara sexuality, vitality, and skill, are yoked to playfulness, self-consciousness, and the striking of poses.

42 Poems Retrieved, 207.
people less absolute, and allow them greater freedom to overlap with each other in surprising ways. If one can be male and female, be a citizen of several countries, and be defined by a fantasy life as much as a real one, then there’s no way of telling how people might end up relating to each other, and groups become far more interesting.

Moreover, the very act of placing different kinds of people next to each other in O’Hara helps to form surprising connections. Shirley Goldfarb ends up in the same list as Camus, and Grace Hartigan is suddenly linked to Vincent Warren via Hans’s father. O’Hara also tries to create additional links between people through repeated words (continues, Sweden, dogged). No wonder O’Hara and Ashbery love imitating each other’s voices and tricking people on the phone; or that O’Hara writes a poem in which his friend Grace Hartigan appears both in male and female incarnations of herself; or that he writes plays “in which his friends played outrageously torqued, accentuated, or childish versions of themselves.” Part of what makes O’Hara’s crowded poems exciting is the way individual identities are enriched by surprising connections and confusions.

Such confusions are also seen as being particularly American. Though we travel to various countries in the examples above (Algeria, France, Sweden, Panama), the poems are usually set in New York. After all, it’s the “Bar Américan” that is French, and the Pan-Slavist wants to live in Panama, but ends up in Brooklyn-Heights. Even the discussion of Sweden occurs in the middle of a New York poem filled with people from other countries: Khrushchev, the

---

43 The reference to De Gaulle’s being Algerian and French, for example, seems like a nod to the French President’s surprising act of granting Algeria the right to self-determination, which occurred the same year O’Hara wrote his poem.

44 Chance links between people further confuse the idea of unique identity in a way that makes singularity seen undesirable, even boring. In the above examples, O’Hara enjoys showing how three people can be quickly, if tangentially, connected by having three different relations to Sweden. Any of these facts (that Sweden was visited, or lived in, or painted) would be dull on its own, but the way they are jumbled together by what Keats called “the magic hand of chance” gives life to them. Language too abets such mix-ups: names, which are supposed to be clear indexes pointing us toward specific individuals, actually mislead (as in “Bar Américan” or Jane’s married name). Moreover, a repeated word in a conversation or a poem (Sweden, the word dog) can form a kind of accidental link between people that then helps to spur on O’Hara’s lively, surrealistic comedy of errors. Hence, we see how poems can amplify such energetic connections by repeating sounds and taking turns of phrase (‘dogged by good fortune’) literally.


46 Lytle Shaw, The Poetics of Coterie, 105.

47 Burt, Close Calls, 305.
Russian Premier, is visiting; “a Puerto Rican cab driver” drives O’Hara around (340); various French writers are mentioned or discussed. O’Hara only barely lives to see the 1965 immigration law that ends the racist quota system, and allows immigrants from more varied countries into the United States. Yet he already seems to celebrate America’s – and New York in particular’s – potential for lively diversity.

The benefits of the jumble become clearer when we consider “To The Film Industry in Crisis,” O’Hara’s epic list-poem that celebrates Hollywood actors. I’ve provided a lengthy excerpt below that continues from the point where we last left off earlier with Eric von Stroheim. I’ve also bolded all the linking words that help connect and mix people up together to show the extent to which O’Hara strives to amplify the kind of energetic mix-up I’ve been describing:

Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of mountain-climbers’ gasping spouses, the Tarzans, each and every one of you (I cannot bring myself to prefer Johnny Weismuller to Lex Barker, I cannot!), Mae West in a furry sled, her bordello radiance and bland remarks, Rudolph Valentino of the moon, its crushing passions, and moonlike, too, the gentle Norma Shearer, Miriam Hopkins dropping her champagne glass off Joel McCrea’s yacht, and crying into the dappled sea, Clark Gable rescuing Gene Tierney from Russia and Allan Jones rescuing Kitty Carlisle from Harpo Marx, Cornel Wilde coughing blood on the piano keys while Merle Oberon berates, Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling through Niagara Falls, Joseph Cotten puzzling and Orson Welles puzzled and Dolores del Rio eating orchids for lunch and breaking mirrors, Gloria Swanson reclining, and Jean Harlow reclining and wiggling, and Alice Faye reclining and wiggling and singing, Myrna Loy being calm and wise, William Powell in his stunning urbanity, Elizabeth Taylor blossoming, yes, to you and to all you others, the great, the near-great, the featured, the extras who pass quickly and return in dreams saying your one or two lines, my love! (232)

The people in this poem are all actors playing parts, and they are even confused with those parts and with each other in the way Johnny Weismuller and Lex Barker are at first referred to just as “the Tarzans.” Moreover, these actors follow not unique but recycled plots; they imitate each other’s actions of rescuing or reclining or wiggling; and they often seem silly and artificial as they eat orchids and ride in furry sleds. Yet despite all this, the people underneath the

---

performances don’t disappear, and O’Hara in general calls them by their real names (not their character ones). In fact, the artificial and theatrical nature of their roles is exactly what helps these actors’ individual energies emerge. O’Hara’s deconstruction of identity only goes so far, and this is a poem that celebrates individual performers as much as it pokes fun at them and shows how they resemble each other.

In fact, these actors inspire and instruct O’Hara: their theatricality helps him to imagine a way to slough off societal constraint and become more flexible and vital himself. Writing about “To the Film Industry in Crisis,” Mark Silverberg describes how O’Hara and other gay and lesbian film buffs in the 1950s identified with and admired Hollywood actors’ exaggerated or unusual gender performances on screen. Silverberg continues:

> It is not only viewers who identify themselves as gay or lesbian who may take delight in male or female actors who deviate from prescribed character and gender roles. In fact, such deviations are related to the essence of the comic, which values childlike freedoms – of expression, movement, and play – over rigid adherences. If, broadly conceived, a ‘tragic’ view of life is dominated by rigidities and restraints, by codes and rules dictating how one ‘ought’ to act (the “starched nurse” [of the poem’s beginning]), a comic view is characterized flexibility and freedom.”

In other words, the Hollywood actors aren’t just passive subjects in O’Hara’s poem – they themselves inspire its comic vision. They also help O’Hara to imagine ways of being in the world full of the flexibility and freedom of movement that help maximize vitality without destroying individual identity. Underneath each pose – reeling in spike heels through Niagara falls, or crying into the dappled sea – is a person adopting and enjoying that pose. The theatricality of the poem’s movie stars, then, is not that different from how people behave at a party, or on an exhibitionistic New York thoroughfare.

O’Hara is inspired enough by these actors that he wants to pay homage to them. The poem in fact can be read as being like a kind of rowdy playful Olympus where everyone is a version of Hermes. Everyone plays tricks and adopts disguises, yet the people underneath those disguises remain important, and indeed seem almost divine. The poem ends this way:

> Long may you illumine space with your marvellous appearances, delays and enunciations, and may the money of the world glitteringly cover you as you rest after a long day under the kleig lights with your faces

---

in packs for our edification, the way the clouds come often at night
but the heavens operate on the star system. It is a divine precedent
you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on! (232-3)

O’Hara insists on the actors’ importance despite and because of their silliness, and tries to make
his love catching. He also tries to grant them more life (“Long may you illumine space”) by
deifying the actors like characters in Homer; as is true of Homer’s gods, each actor is equipped
with a particular tool or epithet. Instead of ‘grey-eyed’ Athena or ‘distant deadly’ Apollo with his
bow, we have Rudolph Valentino of the moon, Marilyn Monroe with her spike heels, and Mae
West in a furry sled.50 O’Hara also crowds the actors together and lets them play off each other,
so their vitalities will be amplified. Not only do they rescue, berate, and copy each other, they
also build on their predecessors (we go from reclining to reclining and wiggling to reclining and
wiggling and singing). Yet though there’s something pantheon-like about the poem’s list, it’s
important that each actor only appears briefly and that his or her epithet is not encapsulating (and
indeed, we don’t think we know that much about William Powell just because we hear of his
“stunning urbanity”). O’Hara thus tries to make his characters simultaneously fleeting and
immortal. Above all, he tries to make them satisfied. Instead of the deathly repetitions of art – of
Hamlet dying over and over again, or of Keats’s lovers remaining forever young and frustrated –
O’Hara’s characters seem happy. Sue Carroll sits “for eternity on the damaged fender of a car
and smiles,” the reels of celluloid roll on like a planet, and art becomes a quasi-organic thing, a
secondary world, that can supplement, aid, and keep things alive and humming a little longer.

Here the seriousness and pomp of art, the splendor of Olympus, and the dignity of
Whitmanian catalogues and celebrations serve to enliven through their very contrast with the
more prosaic material of Tarzan and the Marx brothers. This is a kind of art, after all, not full of
a temple’s solemn decorousness, but full of “reclining/ and wiggling and singing” – and it’s
partially the clash of high and low that makes the actors seem like open living presences. The fun
of pandemonium too is key: the poem is like a Noah’s ark in which all the cages have been flung
open. Or else it’s like Bruegel’s “Children’s Games” (Figure 1) – a work which is perhaps as
close to ‘all-over painting’ as figurative painting can come. O’Hara’s observation about New

---

50 Hence, the actors become another version of Thom Gunn’s *mythic* or *tricksterish* characters (characters who imitate closed
distortions with protective costumes that ultimately actually end up pointing us toward their irreducible charge and vitality).
York in a subsequent poem applies to “To the Film Industry in Crisis: “even the traffic halt so thick is a way/ for people to rub up against each other” (370).

Again, O’Hara is far from being a controlling ringmaster: one imagines him letting each striking Hollywood actor turn up in his memory, and then transcribing them as swiftly as possible onto the page. The poem after all shows no sign of careful choice and selection, but seems guided by a principle of maximal inclusion that cannot distinguish between Tarzans and that wants even the extras to be honored. In an interview, O’Hara describes a “Happening” in a way that similarly celebrates the lack of authorial control:

I’m thinking particularly of, let’s say, the happening which had a text by Kenneth Koch and a construction by Jean Tinguely and a collaboration by Bob Rauschenberg and Niki de St. Phalle and Merce Cunningham... you know, it really was a collaboration in the sense that nobody had, absolutely, made themselves the key figure in it. They were still arguing about what would happen when Jean would go on and build the wall, what would happen, what was going to be said, Kenneth was still writing. You know, the whole thing was really very lively and exciting. And it wasn’t... in that sense it was not at all like a play although it had a script. It really was a happening.51

Similar principles can apply even to a poem written by just one author: in “To the Film Industry in Crisis,” O’Hara wants all of his characters to be running around and having their own say, but for no one to be “the key figure in it.” He wants a maximally populated poem full of cross-purpose energy where everyone contributes to the scintillating, “puzzling,” enlivening, fantastic whole – full of slipperiness and freedom, fakeness and humor, theatricality and individual presence.

---

Though O’Hara is enthusiastic about movie stars, and passers-by on the street, he cares most deeply about his friends who are his gay man’s alternative to traditional family. Hence, he takes every opportunity to list them off in poem after poem:

John’s most sophistical
Jimmy seriousest, Kenneth large, locomotive
laughing like Midas of the Closed Fist... (75)

I hope there will be more...half-mile swims in which Joe beats me as Jane watches...I think of our friends...John and the nuptial quality of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) and Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing respectively (they are probably laughing at the Leaning Tower right now)... (266)

He enjoys listing off his friends even when he’s complaining about them:

Jane is rescuing herself at the mercy of her...
ill temper towards me which is expressed only in the riddles of her motival phantasies; what am I to say of Larry? who really resents the fact that I may be conning him instead of Vice and Art; Grace may secretly distrust me but we are both so close to the abyss that we must see a lot of each other, grinning and carrying on as if it were a picnic given by somebody else’s church; Kenneth continually goes away and by this device is able to remain intensely friendly if

not actually intimate. (94)

Though people here are listed sequentially more than they’re mixed together, they’re again connected to succinct descriptors or epithets (e.g. Kenneth is “large, locomotive/ laughing”; John’s verses have a “nuptial quality”). Moreover, these descriptions of friends are again filtered through the estranging lens of O’Hara’s style, so that they become suggestive, strange, and difficult to interpret: what exactly does it mean to be a locomotive who is laughing “like Midas of the Closed Fist”? What does it mean for Jane to express ill temper only in “the riddles of her motival phantasies”? Grace Hartigan has said that the above quotation accurately depicts her friendship with O’Hara at the time; moreover, as we’ll see later, the description of Kenneth will also turn out to be useful in understanding him. We thus shouldn’t be hasty to dismiss these descriptions as too strange to contain real information; in fact, we’re often never quite sure when such descriptions will suddenly click into place and reveal something important. By this ambiguity O’Hara is again able to grant others an open, suggestive character’s power to intrigue but not necessarily to disclose.

Though the long quote above is still playful, I don’t mean to minimize the complaining and griping expressed in it about Jane, Larry, Grace, and Kenneth (the full version of this poem also includes John Ashbery and John Myers in the tally). It’s harder to maintain a utopic attitude when dealing with real friendships than it is when admiring strangers from afar. In Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry (2006), Andrew Epstein makes a compelling case that O’Hara’s feelings about his friends are often very mixed. Epstein goes on to show that O’Hara often yearns for solitude and freedom from company, and that his competitiveness with some friends like Ashbery is at times downright hostile. Yet happiness in O’Hara’s work is always fleeting, and emerges through and in spite of O’Hara’s realistic sense of it being the exception to the norm – his ‘clear-eyed happiness’ in this way is what makes it sharper and more

---


54 In his poem “Round Robin,” O’Hara insists that he’s giving us real information even though that information is quite difficult to understand. The poem is made up of elusive descriptions that are footnoted with the name of a friend attached to each footnote, as if to insist that each description really is about that person (138-9).

convincing. So too, knowing that one's social scene often disappoints can make one seize fast to its satisfying moments, which can then appear all the more delightful – at times even becoming a kind of “heaven” as O’Hara would have it in “At The Old Place” (223-4).

And whereas O’Hara’s intense distrust of self-pity prevents his poems of social complaint from becoming true laments, his poems of happy company can soar:

“At The Old Place”

Joe is restless and so am I, so restless.
Button's buddy lips frame "L G T TH O P?"
across the bar. "Yes!" I cry, for dancing's
my soul delight. (Feet! Feet!) "Come on!"

Through the streets we skip like swallows.
Howard malingers. (Come on, Howard.) Ashes malingers. (Come on, J.A.) Dick malingers.
(Come on, Dick.) Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up,
Alvin.) Jack, Earl, and Someone don't come.

Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-
cha-cha. Through the urine and smoke we charge
to the floor. Wrapped in Ashes' arms I glide.
(It's heaven!) Button lindys with me. (It's
heaven!) Joe's two-steps, too, are incredible,

This is why the woman knocking her drunken husband off his box can occur in a poem of celebration; why in “Personal Poem” O’Hara can make a joke about the woman who “asks for a nickel for a terrible disease” (“we don’t give her one we/ don’t like terrible diseases”); and why in “Steps” O’Hara can write rhapsodically (and with dark humor) that “even the stabbings are helping the population explosion/ though in the wrong country” (335, 371). O’Hara is very aware of how happiness exists in spite of horrors, and often selfishly has to ignore those horrors in order to take hold. He’s even willing to seem heartless in order to enjoy his life – and a certain dark humor or an off-key moment in a poem of celebration is O’Hara’s method of reminding us that happiness is the exception, and that it needs to happen with eyes open to its necessary selfishness. He applies the same standard to himself: “When I die, don’t come, I wouldn’t want a leaf/ to turn away from the sun – it loves it there.”

Happiness must be seized ruthlessly because it’s one of the few things that makes life worth living, and because it’s so rare. He adds, “There’s nothing so spiritual about being happy/ but you can’t miss a day of it, because it doesn’t last” (244).

There has been a recent critical trend to downplay the enthusiasm and ebullience of O’Hara’s poems. Epstein’s Beautiful Enemies is a good example of this trend. Or consider Dan Chiasson’s dismissive comment that we underrate O’Hara’s darker sides and overrate his “benign, effusive, and anti-intellectual” modes because we sentimentally want a ‘kindly’ poet, and our definition of kindliness has merely shifted from “in [Robert] Frost’s case, a benignly avuncular folksiness to, in O’Hara’s, a gleeful – and proudly gay – optimism” (Dan Chiasson, One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007], 114-115).

Yes O’Hara has lighthearted moments, say many critics, but ultimately he is a poet terribly aware of the passage of time OR full of anxiety OR frustrated by others OR frantically unable to stop moving OR really interesting because of his deconstructions of the self OR because of his radical experiments with collage, etc. It’s not that these readings aren’t convincing, but that they are often invoked in order to supplant rather than add to our understanding of O’Hara. Rather than discussing the ways in which O’Hara’s optimism or effusiveness might themselves be complex mechanisms that work in tandem with his darker kinds of awareness, the joyful O’Hara is shied away from as embarrassing or, in Dan Chiasson’s quote, even somewhat middletongue.
and then a fast rhumba with Alvin, like skipping on toothpicks. And the interminable intermissions,

we have them. Jack, Earl and Someone drift guiltily in. "I knew they were gay the minute I laid eyes on them!" screams John. How ashamed they are of us! we hope.

Bringing all of O’Hara’s friends into the same poem, and cataloguing their individual energies and gestures – Button’s lindying, Joe’s “incredible” two-steps, Alvin’s “fast rhumba...like skipping on toothpicks” – creates an overall sense of delight.57 The chaotic jumble now is placed inside a gay bar where the characters literally mingle, dancing together and playing off each other’s energies. For a little while at least, the poet’s gripes about his friends are forgotten.58

“At the Old Place” reprises several of O’Hara’s strategies for portraying others. LeSueur says that the events in the poem happened in exactly the way O’Hara describes, and concludes that it’s “probably as close to reportage as anything Frank ever wrote....”59 Thus, the poem provides another example of O’Hara being carefully attentive to the particulars of a scene (of his friends and their dance styles). And though his friends don’t disappear after they are named, they again do still appear without introduction or framing since O’Hara wants the poem to seem as immediate and inexplicable as real life. Like “A Party Full of Friends,” characters also seem to leave and enter the poem at will: they “malign” and have to be cajoled to come along; they “dart” ahead, or dance side by side; or they don’t come initially but turn up unexpectedly later.

We again encounter others whose performative and celebratory excesses make for fresh poetic images, and thereby minimize the need for stylistic intervention. Button mouths Let’s Go To The Old Place from across the room; all of them charge into the steaming cha-cha-cha through

57 Helen Vendler describes this poem as a mix of “frivolousness, bathos, high-pitched boredom, and self-satire,” and I think all of these qualities combine to create a faux-naive sense of joy (Helen Vendler, Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980], 182).

58 Amusingly, the way the ‘restlessness’ of the poem’s beginning leads to the pell-mell energy of the dance floor makes the poem perfectly fit Charles Olson’s hieratic exhortation that each poem “must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, ed. Jahan Ramazani et al., 3rd ed., Vol. 2 [New York: Norton, 2003], 1053-1061, 1054). O’Hara found Olson to be too self-serious (Frank O’Hara, “Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara,” Standing Still and Walking in New York, 12; Burt, Close Calls 307: Perloff, Poet Among Painters, xxi), and we can see how human and socially-oriented O’Hara’s conception of energy is by contrasting it with Olson’s.

urine and smoke; Alvin rhumbas; Jack, Earl, and Someone drift guiltily in – and all these actions are fun, extravagant, and energetic on their own. Though no one is spinning around here and pretending to be a little Dutch boy,\footnote{O’Hara writes “At The Old Place” in 1955, four years after “A Party Full of Friends,” and his need for surrealist excess has diminished somewhat.} no one is holding still and waiting for O’Hara to hurry up and make them interesting either.

Yet O’Hara, of course, does intercede stylistically somewhat in order to intensify our interest as well as to make his characters more slippery. As a point of contrast, let’s look at the opening of Gary Snyder’s plainer poem, “Hay for the Horses”:

```
He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous Mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
behind the barn.
With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle-cracks of light,
Itch of haydust in the
```

O’Hara admires Snyder who even appears in several O’Hara poems, and yet, comparing the two, we can see how far O’Hara is from straight reportage. While Snyder relies mainly on sensory precision and a rough Anglo-Saxon meter to transform his transcript into a poem, O’Hara tries to load every rift with the ore of some delightful strangeness. Reading “At the Old Place” we encounter mid-line parenthetical interjections; sudden chorus-like addresses to various characters; a surprisingly delicate description of urine; a pun on “soul delight”; another one on “incredible” that mocks Joe LeSueur’s skill at dancing;\footnote{LeSueur writes that the one way the poem deviates from reality is that his dancing was not so great: “to describe my two-steps as ‘incredible’ was stretching it – though the word is admittedly ambiguous” (LeSueur, Digressions, 56). Knowing O’Hara, the funny double meaning was probably deliberate.} the sudden entrances and exits of various characters; humor and funny repetition (“Come on, Dick... Wait up./ Alvin’’); seven
exclamation points; odd line breaks; quotations of friends; and seeming paradoxes (“How ashamed they are of us! we hope”).

The poem then is actually a mix of reportage and intervening style, and O’Hara uses this mix to keep his characters lively and intriguing. For instance, some of his descriptions are deliberately ambiguous. Though O’Hara tries to catch others in moments when their vitality and theatricality are already in evidence, he again also uses elliptical descriptions to tease and provoke our interest in them without locking them down into damaging, reductive understandings. We are left with questions: what exactly does a fast rhumba “like/skipping on toothpicks” look like? For that matter, what does it mean to skip “like swallows”? Why are O’Hara’s friends malingering? Why do they change their minds? And why do the dancers hope that the latecomers are ashamed of them? To this last question we might concoct several plausible answers – for instance, that Jack, Earl and Someone are ashamed to be found at a gay bar, and that O’Hara’s friends think that it therefore serves them right to be found out. Or perhaps O’Hara and company are enjoying the Wildean paradoxical sentiment of being hopeful about someone else being ashamed of them – how delicious and amusing. Or perhaps they hope the others are ashamed of them because it would be proof of the way O’Hara and his friends are pulling out all the stops with their dancing and gay festiveness, and holding nothing back.

O’Hara also makes his characters more flexible and slippery by playing around with their names. On the one hand, the poem demonstrates O’Hara’s interest in accuracy as he names his friends over and over with an Adamic delight (“Howard malingers (Come on, Howard)”). But on the other hand, he enjoys centripetally pressing these names close together, almost blending them:

Come on Dick.) Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up, Alvin.) Jack, Earl and Someone don’t come.

Moreover, the names mutate: John Ashbery becomes J.A., and then “Ashes.” The last of these has a lovely mirage-like quality about it that makes Ashbery seem like one of the trickterish characters in Gunn as “Wrapped in Ashes’ arms” O’Hara ‘glides’ along the smoky dance floor. There’s also something fun and flippant about the way “Jack, Earl and Someone” appear exactly the same way twice as though they are an inseparable, ordered unit. The way “Someone” is
capitalized is funny too, but also makes that last figure seem a bit mysterious like the third person walking beside Eliot in *The Waste Land*.  

Finally, the poem’s characters gain interest and slipperiness through our own associations with them. For instance, it’s fun to see John Ashbery, now perhaps the most famous avant-garde American poet of the last half-century, malingering, and then having a good time in spite of himself. Even though O’Hara couldn’t possibly have known the way Ashbery’s name would change over the years, O’Hara’s focus on contemporary living friends, and his light, non-exhaustive approach to them, makes them particularly amenable to taking on such unexpected meanings. Think of the difference between Ashbery here and say, Marie Curie in Adrienne Rich’s poem, or the pinball player in Thom Gunn’s work. Both Rich and Gunn give their characters room to speak for themselves, but the poems still include generalizing suggestions about why Curie died and why the player returns night after night to his game. O’Hara, on the other hand, doesn’t make any broad claims about Ashbery: instead, he manages to preserve some of the living presence of his friends on a particular night out, and to amplify that momentary, fleeting presence instead of killing it off like museum piece, or a fly in amber.

“At the Old Place” also reveals another political component of O’Hara’s celebratory social poems. The poem was written in 1955, and though O’Hara lacks Gunn’s hippie-culture and identity politics, he shares Gunn’s feeling that queer and artistic life can at times lead to revolutionary social arrangements. The desire to celebrate instead of focusing on disempowerment, to laugh to keep from crying, to play around with and deconstruct identity, and to represent others in new, experimental ways all are strategies with a strongly queer political valence. As Hazel Smith writes, “O’Hara’s gay sexuality overlaps... with the carnivalesque, the campy, the humorous, the linguistically inventive, the deconstructive, and the ethically subversive...” In “At the Old Place” these modes of being, and that sexuality, help bring about

---

63 The way the characters morph here and become like Gunn’s mythic or tricksterish characters doesn’t close them down, but lets them remain slippery and suggestive of independent lives – while also making them seem more arresting and intriguing.

64 Both poets claim to have central insights into the shapes and patterns of their characters’ lives, and so it’s not coincidence that both poets often write poems about the dead as well as the living.

a kind of heaven, but the threatening world remains just outside the dance floor and poem. O’Hara usually emphasizes joy and understates sorrows, and so very little is needed in “At the Old Place” to remind us of the normative world to which it takes exception. After all, just writing about a fun night at a gay dance bar in 1955 is a courageous act (even if the poem wasn’t published until after O’Hara’s death). And the shame of “Jack, Earl and Someone” as well as Ashbery’s screamed exclamation (“I knew they were gay/ the minute I laid eyes on them!”) provide light reminders that most gay men in this period are far from out and proud. The Avernal quality to the poem – Ashbery’s transformation into “Ashes,” the dinginess of the “Dark stairs,” and the seediness of the “urine and smoke” – also lightly suggest the adversity through which the night’s joy must be seized. Even the act of ‘charging through the smoke’ to the dance floor seems like an inversion of the straight, manly world of war and “battery smoke” through which Tennyson’s Light Brigade charged.

O’Hara’s desire to cram his friends into poem after poem can also not only be read politically, but also in terms of an ongoing general desire to find or create adequate society. In Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie (2006), Lytle Shaw discusses how O’Hara’s repeated naming of his friends in his poems helps him to imagine queer social configurations that can replace normative family-based ones. We again see why gay poets have so often been the ones in recent American poetry to write poems about others. Yet O’Hara’s queerness spurs him on not just to imagine a more sexually permissive social world, but also a more variously satisfying one, that, as we’ve seen, would be full of lively diversity and exceptional individuals.

More, this satisfying social world would also be free of the burdens of the past. O’Hara, like Gunn, Wright, and Rich, grows up in place of relative bleakness and privation. Reading Brad Gooch’s biography of O’Hara, we see how much of a relief the discovery of New York and his artist friends is for him after surviving his insular childhood in Grafton, Massachusetts, his

---

66 Burt, Close Calls, 314.

67 LeSueur describes The Old Place as a “seedy, out-of-the-way basement bar” (LeSueur, Digressions, 54).


69 LeSueur writes of how O’Hara was grateful for his sexuality because it freed him from feeling the pressure of various other social conventions: see LeSueur, Digressions, 68-9.
two years in the navy during World War II, his glum, somewhat angry years at Harvard (during which time his father died), and his isolated time in lackluster Michigan. “I’m going to New York!” he cries in “Song,” written in the middle of his Michigan-period:

(to my friends! mes semblables!)
I suppose I’ll walk back West.
But for now I’m gone forever!
the city’s hung with flashlights!
the Ferry’s unbuttoning its vest!”

New York here seems like the Promised Land compared to the world of the poet’s childhood depicted in “Autobiographia Literaria”: “When I was a child/ I played by myself in a/ corner of the schoolyard/ all alone./ I hated dolls and I/ hated games, animals were/ not friendly and birds/ flew away.”

All of the poets at whom we’ve looked turn to others because their social worlds are painful, even unbearable. Thom Gunn escapes from England, journeys 6,000 miles, and makes a new home in countercultural San Francisco. Adrienne Rich builds a community of women to find release from her stifled roles as wife and mother. James Wright drags the ghosts of Martins Ferry behind him wherever he goes, until he ultimately finds Annie and Italy and is able to see his abject past through new eyes. Frank O’Hara, though, is lucky enough to find New York while still in his twenties. The New York social world has its own problems – as Gooch, Epstein and many others have shown – particularly in its ephemerality, and lack of stable relationships. Yet compared to Grafton, New York is a wonderland that allows O’Hara glimpses of radical, ideal community.

Part of what’s great about New York is that it gives O’Hara freedom to create new forms of social existence. Sally Banes, for instance, argues that Greenwich Village around this time enabled artists to create their own tight-knit communities:

These artists reinvented the village, but squarely in the city. For them, to find a utopian feeling of communitas was perhaps only possible in the city, in the forest of gesellschaft [impersonal associations].”

---

71 Ibid., 3.
72 Qtd. in Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes*, 76.
Whereas in a small town one is stuck with everybody who lives there, in the bohemian version of the city one can construct one’s own secret town out of those one chooses and likes. We can see how my idea of the poetic town applies, then, even to the work of the cosmopolitan O’Hara. For O’Hara populates his poems with a limited, but not tiny cast of characters, and also tries to make this poetic town bring about real community in the world (the village within the city). As Shaw and others have shown, the poems’ roll calls of friends, and their occasional subjects intended for public readings, help to cement the bonds between members of O’Hara’s social group. And as we’ve seen throughout this chapter thus far, the poems also function simply to help O’Hara better imagine and appreciate the society and company he wants. We see here one of the implications of the poetic town that extends far beyond poetry: for many poets, the town can be thought of as a work in process or an ongoing project to find bearable, if not ideal society – whether this happens through the transplantation of Martins Ferry onto Verona, through Gunn’s abandoning of deathly soldiers barracks for San Francisco, through Adrienne Rich’s attempt to imagine a place where women might live freely together, or through O’Hara’s founding of a village of brilliant friends in the midst of the bustle of post-war New York. Rather than being a way of turning one’s back on society (like Adorno’s poet), lyric in these cases becomes a tool that helps poets find and create society that works for them.

** Recurring Characters **

So far we’ve still only looked at how others appear in O’Hara via quick glimpses in which they impart little jolts of energy, or as parts of groups or crowds in which they play off and against each other. But despite O’Hara’s wish not to summarize, order, and encapsulate others, his poems do study individuals at greater length. One way he does this, and that I’ve

---

73 Gay men and women are not the only ones who might enjoy such an alternative to traditional family structures: it is easy to see how artists in general might be drawn toward a community based on friendship and shared aesthetic interests set in the midst of post-War New York and its thriving art scene.

74 Ironically, O’Hara’s ideal social world even seems to fit Bakhtin’s description of heteroglossia (in O’Hara’s many competing stylistic registers and independent characters) and the carnivalesque (in O’Hara’s resistance to straight, non-campy forms or power). It is in any case far from monologic. Cf. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1186-9.
already gestured toward, is through making poems that are about particular characters only very
elliptically. For instance, a friend’s name can appear in a poem that then moves into floating
surreal and emotive description until the name suddenly recurs, thereby creating the feeling that
the poem has somehow been about that character all along. O’Hara also creates this feeling of a
poem being elusively about someone by encoding his poems with references to friends – say, to
Larry Rivers’ Polish background, or to Florida, the state of Vincent Warren’s birth. Or he’ll
lightly suggest that a friend is a governing presence in a poem, say, by punning on Grace
Hartigan’s name in a climactic passage in “In Memory of My Feelings,” or by describing a
process of yearning through the metaphor of a river (presumably referring to Larry Rivers and
O’Hara’s attraction to him). These longer poems can then be both about and not about his
friends: they can become places where those friends can hide or become genius loci, and where
we can see them dimly through the shadows they cast instead of exposed in a harsh spotlight.75

Yet O’Hara has other less ethereal strategies for representing others. One common
strategy is that of building up our sense of a character incrementally over the course of their
multiple appearances in different poems. I’ve already described how such recurrences allow
characters to retain their openness and independence, while also creating the utopian feeling that
these characters never truly disappear but are always waiting in the wings – or out in the real
world. These recurrences also are also enticing: in O’Hara’s preoccupation and frequent return to
particular others we are encouraged to wonder about their lives beyond the poems, and even to
learn something about those lives. Recurrences also contribute to a sense of O’Hara’s work
overall as being a party full of friends, riffing, ragging, and playing off each other from page to
page.

Yet such recurrences also build on each other; the poems almost seem to encourage us to
be on the lookout for certain characters, and to keep track of their appearances. Joe LeSueur, for
instance, uses theatrical and filmic metaphors to do so. LeSueur writes of how Helen
Frankenthaler is ‘ushered’ into O’Hara’s work “in a cameo part... [but not in Jane Freilicher’s]

75 The danger here, as always, is that the poems will be too elliptical and that others will remain hidden in those shadows.
starring role”; of how Bill Berkson makes his “debut” in the poetry; and of how Kenneth Koch’s name is “trotted out...the way a great star pops up in a cameo role.”

This tendency to keep track of recurring characters leads them to accumulate various traits. Lytle Shaw describes this phenomenon as follows:

repetition [of names] in different contexts teaches new glosses... characterizing details accumulate without poem-to-poem plot structure that converts this accumulation into narrative actions...the result is similar to what Roland Barthes described as ‘the novelistic without the novel’....

I would add that such cumulative portraits often end up remaining contradictory and elusive, so that our understanding of characters is developed without being pinpointed or finalized. Such shifty elusiveness fits with O’Hara’s desire for vital flexibility and identity play. When thinking about the ‘sum total’ of a character’s appearances, we add together the different angles of approach and strategies of description. The very multiplicity and mess of these different appearances then brings a character to life in the same way that the blind men groping at the disconnected trunk and leg actually know more about the elephant than the sighted man who takes it in all at once. We see how the strategy of the jumble applies even to individual character descriptions: lots of different kinds of portrayals and glimpses of a single person jostle against each other just like O’Hara’s diverse characters at a party.

Joe LeSueur, *Digressions*, 128, 236, 257. LeSueur also takes note of absences: after “Poem Read At Joan Mitchell’s,” Jane Freilicher “virtually disappear[s] from Frank’s poetry” (ibid., 236). And anyone who reads through the poems will notice Bunny Lang and Jackson Pollock’s deaths. Yet deathliness or loss is rarely the direct focus, and, even after someone dies, we are often never certain when that character might reappear as Bunny does in several posthumous poems. In this way O’Hara shares something with James Merrill’s eternal community of chatty ghosts in *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

This feeling that we are never quite sure when someone might turn up again is aided by the uncertainty about where O’Hara’s work ends. Not only is the boundary between art and life often blurred, as O’Hara’s characters dip in and out of the poems from their homes in the external world, but the boundaries of his art are themselves hard to perceive. O’Hara wrote a lot, and was also famously careless with arranging and publishing his poems, so that his friends discovered new poems by him long after his death. Hence, the volumes of poems published in O’Hara’s lifetime were followed by the massive posthumous *Collected Poems* whose bulk surprised all of O’Hara’s friends; the *Collected*, then, in turn was followed by *Early Poems* and *Poems Retrieved*, as if new O’Hara poems might keep on forever bursting out of towel drawers, and turning up in letters from friends (Gooch, *City Poet*, 370; Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 48). Who is to say then if a person is really gone from the work, or if they might not turn up in yet another poem, especially since it’s not always clear when a friend is in a poem or not (as a secret reference to them might always be encoded somewhere as yet unnoticed within it)?

Reading through O’Hara’s oeuvre certain characters begin to stand out, one begins to remember them, and associations between their different respective appearances start to build up.


It’s not coincidence that some of O’Hara’s closest friends were figurative painters who disrupted and blurred figures to make them stranger and more resistant to apprehension. For instance, consider Willem de Kooning’s Women-paintings, which the art historian Linda Nochlin has described as “fierce and well-defended creatures” (Elderfield, “Space to Paint,” 28).
Let’s look for instance at the different ways John Ashbery appears in O’Hara’s poems. First, he’s mentioned in brief asides: in “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” O’Hara speaks of “John and the nuptial quality of his verses,” adding parenthetically that Ashbery “is always marrying the whole world...” (266). In “Brothers” we learn that “John’s most sophistical” of O’Hara’s friends (75), and in “Day and Night In 1952” we hear that John “thinks I [O’Hara] am the child of my own age” (93). Ashbery also appears for longer stretches through O’Hara’s elliptical, admiring descriptions of Ashbery’s work and its importance. For instance, the early surrealist poem “A Note to John Ashbery” is full of praise: “More beautiful even than wild ducks/paddling among drowned alley cats/your green-ringed words roll...” (33). Or in “Ashes on Saturday Afternoon,” a poem whose title again puns on Ashbery’s nickname, we are shown a desolate landscape where the “banal machines are exposing themselves” because Ashbery won’t “speak” (i.e. write poems) (77). The poem then addresses Ashbery and pleads with him to write: “You, dear poet,/who addressed yourself to flowers...must save me from the void’s external noise” (78).

At other points, Ashbery becomes a direct actor in the poems. We’ve already seen this happen in “At the Old Place” (“I knew they were gay/ the minute I laid eyes on them!’ screams John”), as well as in the more surrealistic “A Party Full of Friends” (“John yawked/onto the ottoman, having eyes/ for nought but the dizzy/Violet...”). In “To John Ashbery” the poet becomes a quasi-mythic actor. The poem addresses Ashbery: “I can’t believe there’s not/another world where we will sit/and read new poems to each other/high on a mountain in the wind” (211). O’Hara then goes on to imagine that mountain where the two poets will become Tu Fu and Po Chü-i (“and the Monkey Lady’ll be in the moon/smilng at our ill-fitting heads/as we watch the snow settle on a twig”). Here we have the two poets’ real friendship portrayed in its mythic afterlife as a kind of eternal poetry confab.

The sum of these moments and poems is clearly not a straightforward character portrait. Instead, we get several suggestive and elliptical descriptions of Ashbery’s work. We see him as a participant in specific scenes in which he does things that are indirectly suggestive of his
personality. For instance, he is petulant and doesn’t want to dance; then gets over it and embraces O’Hara in a stately manner (“Wrapped in Ashes’ arms I glide”); and finally “screams” when he finds out that “Jack, Earl, and Someone” are gay. We also see him in a more purely comic mode in “A Party Full of Friends,” and as a kind of salvific genius in “Ashes On Saturday Afternoon.” He is also portrayed via brief epigrammatic descriptions, through extended anecdotes, and in terms of O’Hara’s feelings about the two poets’ relationship. We hear about the way O’Hara depends on his poems and their friendship, and can’t imagine a world in which the two are not writers and competitors. And we see him portrayed through more surrealistic and more documentary styles, and as a literal person as well as a mythical one. Finally, we also see him as someone with a slippery name and identity (J.A., Ashes) who transforms into a famous Chinese poet in a particularly literary kind of heaven. And again, such visions of Ashbery can’t help being bound up in what know about him independently in the 21st Century; O’Hara’s poetry is generous and uncontrolling enough to seem to encourage such new associations.

We are given different amounts of data about O’Hara’s various returning characters, and Ashbery is perhaps in the middle of such a spectrum. For instance, we’re given more information about Ashbery than we are about Allen Ginsberg who appears in the poems only a few times in fragments extracted somewhat haphazardly from the two poets’ overlapping lives. Ginsberg is criticized for going on spiritualist expeditions to other countries, given a remedy for a stomach ache, and shown walking with Peter Orlovsky to visit friends down a newly repaired street – but the comedy about him is somewhat dismissive, and he’s not returned to as often or as variously

---

80 O’Hara doesn’t ban personality and narrative descriptions entirely, but he doesn’t want them to become the main focus of a poem, and so when they are invoked it’s usually elliptically and alongside many other approaches to his characters.

81 Remember that part of O’Hara’s delight in others, and his way of making them come alive, involves letting them vacillate and become many things at once – even if some of these things are myths, scribbles, or cartoons. In this way, O’Hara’s characters are a lot like Thom Gunn’s tricksterish ones in seeming to court closed distortion only ultimately to become more evasive, vital, and open.

82 O’Hara already knew that he and his friends were interesting, so if time ends up making them more so, then so much the better. O’Hara in general is happy to have his poems become intertwined with worlds beyond them. As we’ve seen he encourages this by using glimpses and indirect descriptions to make us learn about the people mentions in his poems. Andrew Epstein, for instance, uses the poems to make a compelling case for the intense and fraught rivalry between O’Hara and Ashbery; he relies heavily on quotations from the poems, which point him to materials in the outside world (to secondary materials, letters, and anecdotes) (Epstein, Beautiful Enemies, 233-274).
as Ashbery. Yet we’re given less information about Ashbery than we are about several others (for example Bill Berkson or John Button).

Perhaps the most elaborately recurring character in O’Hara, though, is Kenneth Koch who O’Hara describes again and again – like how Cézanne keeps painting Marie-Hortense Fiquet over the course of twenty years. In *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara*, Joe LeSueur describes Kenneth Koch’s central role in the poems:

> His name is like a leitmotif, a recurring theme, a tune Frank can’t seem to get out of his head; and perhaps it serves Frank as a charm, a talisman, a mantra. Leaf through the pages of the *Collected Poems* and you’ll see what I mean: his name will appear when you least expect it, but not as often as it might seem – by my count, in a mere seventeen poems. Sometimes his name is trotted out, the way a great star pops up in a cameo role, or it will be mentioned in passing, usually his first name only, as though that is enough to identify him, and indeed it is. At other times he is the subject of the poem, or one of its subjects, and he even has a poem dedicated to him..."  

LeSueur emphasizes the sheer variety of the ways Koch appears in the poems. He also emphasizes how Koch is continually surprising and slippery, how he appears “when you least expect it, but not so often as it might seem....” If vital, flexible, energetic people – people who like Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi naturally overflow confinement – make for good open characters, Kenneth Koch seems born for the role:

> Why this prevalence of Kenneth Koch in Frank’s oeuvre? The answer, *my* answer: implausibly, Frank was crazy about this bumptious, blustering, irrepressible, and never-at-a-loss pundit,

---

83 I would also place O’Hara’s female muses – Bunny Lang, Jane Freilicher, and Grace Hartigan – closer to the Ginsberg side of the spectrum. They appear more frequently in the poems than Ginsberg, but perhaps because they are most strongly featured during O’Hara’s more closed and purely surrealist period, they tend to appear in rather evasive ways: “Before dawn you roar/ with your eyes shut, unsmiling,/ your volcanic flesh hides/ everything from the watchman,/ and the tendrils of dreams/ strangulate policemen running by...” says O’Hara of Jane Freilicher in “Jane Awake” (72). Nevertheless, some critics have found these muse-poems helpfully illuminating of real relationships, and these critics account for the poems’ ambiguities by showing how they help overturn the conventions governing poems written to women by men. Mark Silverberg, for instance, describes how these poems function as campy parodies of Petarchan love sonnets in which the gay O’Hara expresses his love for his female friends in a way that deviates from heterosexual poetic traditions (Mark Silverberg, *The New York School of Poets and the Neo-Avant Garde*, 29). Maggie Nelson also writes about how O’Hara’s depiction of his female muses departs from the idealizing, heterosexual male tradition, and returns us to particular real women and “to their historical presence and activities” (Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007, 58)). Hence, we might think of these female characters in terms of O’Hara’s description of Alex Katz’s paintings wherein Katz’s wife appears “as a presence and at the same time a pictorial conceit of style...” (Frank O’Hara, *Frank O’Hara: Art Chronicles 1954-1966* [New York: George Braziller, 1975], 147). As I said in my introductory chapters, sometimes the slightness of the representation of another person can make that person seem insignificant, but sometimes even the scantiest representations can come alive and bring external social presence to bear. Grace Hartigan, for instance, appears through a pun in “In Memory of My Feelings” after two descriptions of her paintings of O’Hara. “Grace to be born/ to live as variously as possible,” writes the poet. Here we don’t learn much about Grace Hartigan, but we do see her as kind of energizing presence or genius loci within the poem (256).

84 LeSueur, *Digressions*, 257.
pedagogue, wit, egomaniac, and impossible human being, a friend of Frank’s unlike any other of
the many people who entered his poetry and whom he counted as an intimate. (LeSueur 257)

In almost every appearance of Koch in the poems we feel the degree to which O’Hara is both
amused and inspired by him:

He never, Kenneth, did an effortless thing
in his life, but it pains us to send him into the world
in a hurry, he might stumble and commit a series!
Under the careful care of our admiration his greatness
appears like the French for ‘gratuitous act’ and we’re proud
of our Hermes, the fastest literary figure of his time. (“3 Poems About Kenneth Koch,” 151-2)

I think of...

Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing, respectively
(they are probably laughing at the Leaning Tower right now)...
if Kenneth were writing this he would point out how art has changed
women and women have changed art and men, but men haven’t
changed women much... (“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” 266)

O’Hara is amused, incredulous, and happy to poke fun at Kenneth. But we also feel his
amazement at Koch’s sheer surplus of energy that enables him and his wife Janice to treat the
Leaning Tower not as a tourist spectacle, but as a great joke, or that allows him to stumble and
commit a series as if by accident. O’Hara views him as “our” Hermes – half-friend, half divine
messenger and trickster who may ultimately help the poet learn something.

Like Hermes, Koch is stubbornly independent and unpredictable: he comes and goes as
he pleases in the poems. As LeSueur points out, Koch’s “name will appear when you least expect
it, but not as often as it might seem....” In other words he’s elusive, and his irrepressible energy is
tied to his reserved sense of privacy and independence:

...Kenneth large, locomotive,
laughing like Midas of the Closed Fist. (“Brothers,” 75)

Kenneth continually goes away and by this device is able to remain intensely friendly if not
actually intimate... (“Day and Night in 1952,” 94)

Koch’s large, locomotive friendliness is tied here to his greedy closed-fistedness, and to his
ability to withdraw his presence. Yet whenever Koch does choose to appear in the poems he is
accompanied by a sense of vibrancy and delight. Notice how in the quote below we have to wade
through a dependent clause (“through all the singing”) to “find” the direct object that is Kenneth:
...at the station a crowd of drunken fisherman on a picnic Kenneth
is hard to find but we find, through all the singing, Kenneth smiling... (“Joe’s Jacket,” 329)

Later on in this same poem, he vanishes, then appears “mysteriously” and transports O’Hara out
of a state of “ugly calm” where O’Hara is ‘sinking,’ ‘drifting,’ and “somnolent”:

...I lie back again and begin slowly to drift and then sink....
the car horn mysteriously starts to honk, no one is there
and Kenneth comes out and stops it in the soft green lightless stare
and we are soon in the Paris of Kenneth’s libretto...
I am there with... the spirits of beauty, art and progress” (330)

Koch takes advantage of the messiness and crowdedness of O’Hara’s New York poems to hide
within them, only to spring forth suddenly, transporting O’Hara into his inspired world.85

In one poem in which O’Hara is feeling both neurotic and uninspired, he deliberately
seeks out Koch. Here Koch becomes a “tremendous poetry nervous system” that refreshes and
recharges O’Hara while also keeping things “balanced” for him:

I am so nervous about my life the little of it I can get ahold of
so I call up Kenneth in Southampton and presto
he is leaning on the shelf in the kitchen three hours away...
Kenneth you are really the backbone of a tremendous poetry nervous system
which keeps sending messages along the wireless luxuriance
of distraught experiences and hysterical desires so to keep things humming
and have nothing go off the trackless tracks
and once more you have balanced me precariously
on the wilderness wish
of wanting to be everything to everybody everywhere...
and the phone clicks as your glasses bump the receiver
to say we are in America and it is all right not to be elsewhere (“Poem (The fluorescent
tubing...)”) (331-2)

Koch has no trouble matching O’Hara’s at times excessive energy, but he can also be a calming
presence as he seems better than O’Hara at taking care of himself and maintaining boundaries
with others. Hence, Koch is able to help O’Hara “keep things humming,” and even amplify
O’Hara’s desire to the point where he can wish to be “everything to everybody everywhere.” Yet
Koch has an intimate and gentle quality as well – as suggested by the detail of his glasses

85 O’Hara here has learned from his friends Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers: his figures emerge from a storm of
surrounding gestures and marks, and do so in a way that increases their powerful open presence.
bumping the phone receiver – and so he’s able to calm O’Hara down and reassure him that it’s also okay to be finite and limited.

Koch appears elsewhere throughout the poems, but just looking at the above examples we get a sense of the variety of ways in which he is described. We see him through clear characterizations in the midst of nonsensical surrealist description (‘3 Poems About Kenneth Koch’); via brief cameos in the midst of role calls of other friends; through wild, strange metaphors (laughing like Midas of the Closed Fist); via an array of emotional attitudes directed toward him (praise, mockery, dependency); through particular actions and scenes in which he takes part; and finally through his miraculous and independent-seeming appearances and vanishings (‘presto/ he is leaning on the shelf in the kitchen three hours away...’). Through these different methods of portrayal, as he weaves in and out of the poems, we gain a suggestive but not absolute sense of a person who is at once playful, ebullient, distant, reserved, silly, and gentle. Above all, we feel like we are in touch with the exciting presence of a particular, admired person.

Finally, I should also briefly note how much our sense of Koch in the poems depends on his exchanges with O’Hara. I’ve been arguing that in return for O’Hara’s gentle and defamiliarizing representations of others, these others provide him with little jolts of energy and inspiration that wake him up and help him to imagine an alternative, improved social world. And with no other character is this more true than with Koch where the exchanges becomes literal and intimate as Koch directly improves O’Hara’s life through a surprise visit, or through his glasses bumping the receiver after taking O’Hara’s call. We’ll return later to the importance of exchange to O’Hara’s open others; for now it’s enough to see that Koch gains presence not only through what he’s like, but also in the ways O’Hara depends on him.

** Single Poem Portraits **

As I’ve suggested, O’Hara is far more interested in representing someone’s exciting presence than he is in delving into psychologies or biographies. What he is after is something like what Wendy Steiner, speaking of Gertrude Stein, dubs “immediate evocation of essence” as
opposed to “descriptive definition.” I don’t want to press this point too far: as we’ve seen, O’Hara does portray some of the particular qualities of his characters. Moreover, the idea of ‘essence’ or ‘presence’ in O’Hara is instantly complicated since it blurs with cartoonishness, artifice, and theatricality – and since these two poles of personhood are seen as mutually reinforcing rather than as contradictory. Nevertheless, the terms presence, energy, essence, and vitality, are useful in helping us think about what is unique about O’Hara’s characters compared to more familiar ones from prose fiction. For above all, O’Hara tries to make other people seem alive and exciting in ways that enchant the world merely by our perceiving them (in this way many of his poems about others have something in common with love poems).

I have shown how O’Hara bypasses standard character descriptions to get at such exciting presence through quick glimpses, jumbles, and recurrence. Yet O’Hara sometimes also risks lengthier character descriptions within individual poems. If O’Hara can get at particular presence through the quick look, he can also sometimes do it in more sustained way through a kind of quasi-metaphysical portraiture:

Mrs Bertha Burger

A widow. She has lived so many lives
and each is like an ember glowing now.
On days of darkness like so many knives
she feels each fullness press her breast and brow.
Each life, protected, prized and coveted
and thought through for the wisdom of events
she sees again as she is buffeted:
delicate ships know well their own torments,

86 Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, 42.

87 In O’Hara “essence” is not a reduction of the person’s life or being, but an attempt to create the feeling of what it’s like when that person walks into the room. Like Stein, O’Hara is more interested in rendering a sense of *acquaintance* than of *knowledge about*. Rather than focusing on listing character traits in a straightforward way, or summing up a person in terms of a narrative or a past and a future, O’Hara first and foremost attempts to render a character powerfully “present” in “an attempt to create ‘acquaintance’ with him as a simple point in the perceiver’s awareness” (Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 29). Oren Izenberg makes a similar observation in his discussion of naming in O’Hara, in his insistence that such naming ends up highlighting particularity rather than *specificity* – where *specificity* includes qualities potentially shared by many people, but *particularity* “admits of no degrees” (Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011], 114). In “Poem (WHE EWHIE),” for instance, O’Hara writes a calligram that looks like Jane Freilicher’s face (25) in an attempt to summon her up right away and cause her to make an instant impression. Thinking of people in O’Hara in terms of portraits in addition to as characters makes sense because painterly portraits usually create such immediate impressions.

88 I will use the terms ‘portraiture’ and ‘character study’ interchangeably for the sake of variety, and because O’Hara’s descriptions of others sometimes have painterly as well as literary qualities to them.
and she knows well the dignity of storms.
She offers in a chance remark her fate
and her reflections are not flights or calms.
Her life is beautiful, and free from hate;
to know her is to know how rarely one
may love, as one again beholds the sun. (181)

This poem is anomalous in the later work in that it’s a sonnet – and in that it gives us something of a temporal history of Larry Rivers’ mother-in-law. However, except for telling us that Bertha Burger is a widow, the poem avoids particulars, and is more of a description of Burger’s soul than of her story or personality. Yet in typical O’Hara fashion Burger is seen as both single and multiple, a widow with a particular name, yet one uncomfortably full of the embers and blades of her many difficult lives. We could crudely sum up the poem as follows: this woman has been through a lot and suffered much, and now she both loves and is tormented by her past, yet treads very humbly and lightly (“She offers in a chance remark her fate”), is neither lethargic nor paranoid (she is free of flights and calms), and ultimately inspires O’Hara through her balanced stance toward her difficult memories and past lives. We learn almost no facts about her, and yet we are told something deeply personal – something that allows us to see her in the sudden way O’Hara does at the poem’s end, surprised by his own love. For we end with a single glimpse of Burger through the simile of ‘again beholding’ the sun; instead of her being locked down by the sonnet or by this metaphysical description of her, the poem leads to a kind of fleeting vision of her rare, chancy brightness. O’Hara finds a way here for the glimpse and the longer description to become compatible.

O’Hara is particularly successful with this kind of longer quasi-metaphysical portrait when its subject is another artist whose style he can imitate. This imitation of style applies to some degree to any friend O’Hara chooses to address. Several commentators – Perloff, Gooch,

89 There are various formal swerves in the poem (enjambments, short sentences, and varying line lengths – as well as the extra line after “torments” that makes it seem as if Bertha Burger’s ship is emerging from the rhyming lockdown of the storm in the preceding quatrain). These swerves all contribute to a sense of Burger’s accepting and chastened, yet powerful and evasive presence: Burger has been buffeted and sent off course in these lines, and yet she has managed to adapt to and even profit from these changes. The swerves also end up delivering the surprise vision of Burger that ends the poem: the final sentence finishes the third quatrain’s rhyme, emerges into the couplet, enjams (one/ may love), and then ends with an extra clause and the sudden appearance of the sun. We look at Burger at the end of the poem, and it is as though her ship has unexpectedly and suddenly emerged from the storm into calm, sunny waters.
LeSueur – have remarked that O’Hara adjusts his style to his addressee so that, for instance, the poems to Vincent Warren are more emotional and Romantic; the poems to Joe LeSueur are written in the more “realistic, documentary ‘I do this, I do that’ mode which LeSueur himself admires most”; and the poems to Bill Berkson are more “elusive, detached, abstract.” 90 O’Hara poems often bend outward, courting the interest and imitating the spirit of the person they most have in mind.

In the case of poems about other artists, though, such bendings and imitations become more explicit and elaborate. The idea of homage is key: on some essential level O’Hara doesn’t distinguish between his artist friends and their works, 91 and so in praising another as an artist, or in imitating that other’s artistic style and strategies, O’Hara has another way of getting at that person. The artist’s work then can also become newly inspiring and impressive because it too is being filtered through O’Hara’s various defamiliarizing strategies. Larry Rivers undertakes a similar project toward the end of his career by painting portraits of famous painters (Miró, Picasso, Matisse, Léger) in front of backgrounds in the styles of their work. Rivers says that he wants this series “to show the artist in the work, as part of it,” and speaks admiringly of how in a photograph of Léger working in his studio you “couldn’t tell where he ended and the work

90 Perloff, Poet Among Painters, 117. Cf. LeSueur, Digressions, 238; Gooch, City Poet, 362.

91 Just as he blurred the line between art and life, O’Hara often didn’t really distinguish between artists and their artworks. Bill Berkson said in an interview that the New York school principle was that “you can’t maintain a friendship with someone whose work you don’t admire... you don’t just like someone’s work because they are a friend of yours, those friendships broke up on aesthetic grounds” (qtd. in Hazel Smith, Hyperscapes, 78). Yet Gooch writes that “O’Hara’s current feelings about his friends, both positive and negative could be strong enough to affect his critical eye” (Gooch, City Poet, 251). The solution to this seeming contradiction is to extend another proposition of Berkson’s – that O’Hara viewed ideas as “inseparable from the people who had them” (qtd. in Perloff, Poet Among Painters, 16) – to art. Hence, disliking another’s art could lead O’Hara to dislike the artist, and vice versa. His friends’ works of art are parts of O’Hara’s social world that extend and reveal more about those friends. Artists, then, are easier to represent than other kinds of people in that their interests and struggles are more publically visible. The fact that such struggles may be manufactured for the purposes of art doesn’t matter since they are still indicative of particular aesthetic choices and avenues of approach that lead back to the artist – elliptically perhaps, but not unimportantly.

O’Hara also confuses the inspiration he gets from an artwork with the ways he is inspired and energized by a person. In “Radio,” O’Hara turns to a Willem de Kooning painting he owns for “a little/ reminder of immortal energy” on a dreary day (234). He refers to the painting as “my beautiful de Kooning” as if the artist and artwork are one and the same. And in “Cambridge” O’Hara seems to replace the work with the artist, and on a freezing, rainy day keeps his window open to let Pasternak’s “breath [in] from the Urals” to draw O’Hara “into flame/ like a forgotten cigarette....” He continues, “this is not negligible,/ being poetic, and not feeble, since it’s sponsored by/ the greatest living Russian poet at incalculable cost.” Again, the inspiration O’Hara gets from some art is a lot like the jolts and infusions of energy he gets from the vitality of other people. As Marjorie Perloff puts it, “To be ‘influenced’ by another artist is... to find new means of evading monotony, boredom, sameness – to force oneself to ‘see’ in new ways, to defamiliarize the object,” and these goals overlap strongly with O’Hara’s goals in writing about others more generally (Marjorie Perloff, “Frank O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention,” Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City, ed. Jim Elledge [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990], 156-88, 172).
began...” (Figure 2). Getting at others through their art is also one of Gertrude Stein’s strategies. Wendy Steiner puts it as follows:

The equivalence of ‘working’ and ‘being,’ of the created identity and the created artefact, has important implications throughout the early portraits. For almost half of the early portraits are certainly of artists, and several unidentified subjects might easily have been artists as well. If a creator and his creation are alike, then an assessment of his work can stand for an assessment of him; artistic judgment and character appraisal seem to go hand in hand.\footnote{Steiner, \textit{Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance}, 76-77.}

Since O’Hara shares Stein’s desire to get at others’ vitalities and shifting essences rather than (primarily) at their biographies and psychologies, artwork can provide a convenient access point.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{(Figure 2: Larry Rivers, \textit{Déjà Vu and the Red Room: Double Portrait of Matisse (Harmony in Red)})\footnote{Larry Rivers, \textit{Larry Rivers: Art and the Artist} (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2002), 76.}}
\end{figure}

O’Hara puts pressure on this idea in his extended, single-poem descriptions of others by portraying his artist-characters at varying degrees of remove from their works. In “A Young Poet,” for instance, O’Hara portrays John Wieners in terms of his evolving poetic consciousness (278-9). Wieners is portrayed first as a “A Young Poet/ full of passion and giggles,” “ecstatic” and with a high sense of calling. Two years later “he has possessed/ his beautiful style,/ the
meaning of which draws him further down/ into passion....” Soon after that, though, Wieners becomes tired out, is “jeered at by thugs/ and taken for a junky or a pervert.” Before long he is “scared/ to death,” and by the end of the poem is “exhausted by/ the insight which comes as a kiss/ and follows as a curse.” In sum, we have a description of a person in terms of their evolving feelings about their art, which O’Hara links to a somewhat conventional temporal structure with its discrete stages of initiation, breakthrough, and discouragement. Though the transformation here is perhaps more existential than psychological, the poem is more conventional than the average O’Hara portrait, and Wieners the person remains distinct from his poetry.

A second type of such artist-portrait removes the narrative and brings artist and artwork closer together, showing her exhibiting her powers ‘in process,’ as it were:

“Glazunoviana, Or Memorial Day”
I see a life of civil happiness
where the leaves whirl into blossoms
and everything is tingling and icy as a smile
and Maria Tallchief returns to the City Center
in a full-length The Seasons
as the true spirit of our times
escaping from my heart the vision
hovers in the air like a cyclone over sordid Kansas
as her breathing limbs tear ugliness out of our lives
and cast it into the air like snowflakes
just as Boston once looked ravishing and ravished
when in the distance through the trees
she rose dawning and tender from her shell
as Sylvia with the Public Gardens in her arms (363)

Except for a single anecdote about her performance as Sylvia, any narrative or sense of the past and future of ballerina Maria Tallchief (Figure 3) has been removed. Nor is Tallchief’s personality or psychology described; instead we approach her solely through her transformative artistic presence in Glazunov’s The Seasons.95 And though Tallchief is an individual artist here, she also has a morphing set of identities that emerge through her dance: she becomes The Seasons, “the true spirit of our times,” the dawning sun, Venus, and Sylvia. O’Hara’s poem pays homage to Tallchief and tries to heighten her freely shifting, enchanting power, but he also looks

---

95 It’s appropriate that O’Hara should use a dancer to confuse a person with an artwork since Yeats did so as well in his famous lines from “Among School Children.”
to her to defamiliarize the world for him, to rip away “sordid Kansas” with the cyclone of her dance to reveal Oz (to “tear ugliness/ out of our lives and cast it into the air like snowflakes”). The symbiotic process here is complex: Tallchief leads to O’Hara’s own internal (“escaping”) vision, which leads back out to “her breathing limbs,” then in again to O’Hara’s memory, and then finally out to the particular setting of Boston’s Public Gardens. In those Gardens Tallchief, like Bertha Burger, appears via a final culminating glimpse “in the distance through the trees,” ‘rising’ and “dawning” like the sun. It’s almost like O’Hara has looped the circuitry of her performance into his poetry to create an escalating feedback loop that amplifies her enchanting power, and builds to that final powerful vision. Tallchief’s presence is heightened, and O’Hara too is inspired.

(Figure 3: Maria Tallchief in George Balanchine’s ballet Firebird)

The third and final type of artist-portrait removes the physical person entirely, and treats only the artwork. Examining “Christmas Card to Grace Hartigan,” Marjorie Perloff argues that O’Hara lets images bleed into each other just as Hartigan does in her paintings. Perloff adds that several O’Hara poems have “the intent of ‘translating’ the tone of the painting into a verbal medium,” and that in “certain cases, when O’Hara worked very closely with a particular painter, the poem absorbed the spirit of the painting thoroughly enough to become independent.” Working closely is important not only to capture the spirit of the painting, but also to see how the spirit of the person is bound up in that painting, and convey it too. Again, if artworks and their

---


97 Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 79, 82, 84.
creators are not truly distinct, one of the best ways to imitate a person is to study and imitate their art.

It’s difficult to prove that an ekphrastic poem is about the artist as much as his art, so let’s look at “Joseph Cornell,” a poem that shows O’Hara approaching but not yet fully arrived at this third type of artist-portrait. The poem is arranged into two square stanzas that are meant to resemble Cornell boxes, yet is named after the artist as if Cornell in a sense is his work (237).

The first stanza describes a Cornell box:

> Into a sweeping meticulously-detailed disaster the violet light pours. It’s not a sky, it’s a room. And in the open field a glass of absinthe is fluttering its song of India. Prairie winds circle mosques.

The second stanza, though, moves from box back to artist:

> You are always a little too young to understand. He is bored with his sense of the past, the artist. Out of the prescient rock in his heart he has spread a land without flowers of near distances.

Using the second person, O’Hara addresses and corrects himself, trying to better understand the Cornell boxes by imagining Cornell’s motivations. The descriptions of these motivations are somewhat abstract, and are more intriguingly evocative than clearly stated. O’Hara here returns to his trick of evasive descriptions, as nothing here clearly shows what the ‘prairie winds circling mosques’ of the first stanza have to do with the barrenness of the second one. Is that lushness of mosques part of the disaster of the past that the artist attempts to remedy through the creation of a landscape without flowers? Does that mean that the first stanza doesn’t in fact describe a Cornell box? Or is the second stanza a second box that counteracts the first? What are the objects in the second box if any? And what does this tell us about the artist? Why is he bored with the past and what does this mean? Is it because he is resisting his own impulse to exoticism or decadence? What does it mean to have a heart like a “prescient rock”? How can the artist be a
total ascetic or stoic if he must still create “a land” or a set of objects? Though these questions remain unanswered, they reveal how the poem approaches not only the artwork, but also the artist through his art. The two are intertwined: understanding one necessarily involves understanding the other. More, like Cornell “bored with his sense of the/ past,” the poem abandons history, time, and far distances, using only the materials immediately at hand – the Cornell boxes – to think about him.

** Strange Portraits **

O’Hara’s quasi-metaphysical portraits, and his portraits that focus on others purely in terms of their art, though, miss some of the humor and playful weirdness that are some of O’Hara’s greatest strengths. They also lack the jumbled variety and sheer confused excess typical of O’Hara at his best. In other words, I think these characters are in danger of becoming more closed, or are at least less vital and ebullient, in their transformations of a person into a box (or a dance or a poetic career or a life trajectory). Hence, in some of O’Hara’s other extended single-poem portraits, he uses his quasi-metaphysical descriptions, and his stylistic imitations and descriptions of his subjects’ artistic endeavors, as just two important tools within a more varied, zany set. We’ve seen how others can appear briefly and jostle against each other within a single poem, and how their multiple appearances can play off each other over the course of many poems. In a related way, a character can also be portrayed at length within a single poem via a jostling multitude of simultaneous off-kilter approaches – a further drawing out of Bertha Burger’s many lives, or of Maria Tallchief’s multiple identities, in which more blind fingers grope at the singular elephant.

Consider “Edwin’s Hand,” a poem about the dance critic, poet, and novelist Edwin Denby (238-9). The poem’s overall form suggests the variety of its approaches: it is made up of five sections, each of which is composed of two acrostic stanzas that spell out Denby’s first and last names, as if we’re meeting him not once but five times. Whereas Rich uses multiple sections

---

98 Put more simply, when O’Hara takes others too seriously those others end up being less interesting.
to let others sink in over time, O’Hara uses them here to provide a variety of simultaneous approaches like Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” The poem’s first section gives us a straightforward description of temperament (Edwin is “Easy to love, but/difficult to please...”99), that is then quickly complicated by a quasi-metaphysical description of how “he/ walks densely as a child/ in the midst of spectacular/ needs to understand.” Next, Denby is put in relation to an interlocutor: when Denby surprises himself by becoming gracious, the interlocutor finds herself suddenly gracious too and surprised at her very identity (“he’s surprised...And so are you to be/ you, when he smiles”).

In the poem’s second section, O’Hara gives us a playful, somewhat psychological description of Denby in terms of his art and art criticism: “Eagerness doesn’t/ dare interrupt him when he works....” Yet O’Hara quickly complicates this more straightforward artistic description with a bizarro existential trip “behind his [Denby’s]/ eventful eyes” and into his composing, sloth-or-spider-like brain: “Dusk falls behind his/ eventful eyes like a thread/ nearing the many-toed busy/ beast who leaves red/ yarns of thought in stitches.”100 As the poem continues it grows even stranger. It includes a seemingly pointless anecdote about Denby (that he once was seen in Italy in a white suit near the Spanish Steps); an apostrophe to an Italian embarcadero that involves comparing Denby to “a/ narrator in Conrad”; an elliptical description of O’Hara being inspired by Denby (“yellow and white I was lifted into the air”); and a rhyming section full of questions and exclamations that apostrophizes New York and asks the city how it feels about Denby. We might recognize the evasive strategies of character-description here from the Cornell-poem, but now those strategies and approaches multiply, and combine quasi-metaphysical description with zany playfulness.101

---

99 Joe LeSueur says that these lines capture Denby very well: “there in a nutshell, is Edwin, his affability and kindness tempered by his high standards and expectations of excellence... Thus Frank seems to be acknowledging that Edwin could be demanding, even severe” (LeSueur, Digressions, 94). LeSueur here provides more evidence that O’Hara’s poetry, in spite of the stylistic liberties it takes, often exhibits a careful fidelity to observed realities about others.

100 In writing about others, O’Hara becomes an expert in the over-the-top, eccentric yet evocative description. For instance, he describes Gregory Corso as follows: “too lustrously dark and precise, he would be excavated and declared/ a black diamond and hung round a slender bending neck/ in the 26th century...” (317-8). And he describes a critic he doesn’t like in this way: “A chicken walked by with tail/reared looking very personal pecking and dribbling, wattles...” (496). James Dean is described as follows: he “mumbled and scratched/ as if speech were too/ awesome a gift and beauty/ a thing you’ll keep moving” (250).

101 We may not always understand the references or descriptions; Joe LeSueur, for instances, argues that Edwin’s handwriting was what O’Hara had “in mind when he hit on the title ‘Edwin’s Hand’” since it was “miniscule, spidery,
“Embarrassing Bill,” a poem about the poet Bill Berkson, provides another example of such oddball portraiture (359-60). This poem also relies on O’Hara’s sense of humor, and shows how his tendency to poke fun at his friends is totally compatible with his wish to praise them. The poem describes a particular scene in which Bill Berkson ‘helps himself’ to a bath in O’Hara’s tub. The scene is absurd: Berkson is described as being like a walrus. Yet it is also full of O’Hara’s playful, zany praise: Berkson “is just like a pane of glass/ in a modernistic church, sort of lofty and elevated and substantial.” His presence is thus linked to aesthetic experience, even if it’s in a rather jokey way.

The poem employs multiple strategies: it approaches its subject through the particular anecdote of the bath; it contains surreal, off-kilter, extravagant descriptions of Berkson; it also contains more substantial existential descriptions (“well, if that isn’t your idea of a god, what is?); and it filters Berkson through O’Hara’s own varying emotional stances of amused gratitude and annoyance (“in these times one is very lucky to get a bath at all, much less/ have someone cheerful come over and help themselves to one in your tub...now, Bill, use your own towel”).

The poem also focuses on the wrong detail, getting sidetracked by O’Hara’s own wandering thoughts and ideas. It then returns to Berkson, literally amplifying him in a funny celebration of his presence as O’Hara ‘hopes’ he will “get bigger / and bigger...” until “I’ll have to get a whole house” in order to have him over. This comic celebration culminates by reminding us of Bill’s status as artist: instead of getting a house, O’Hara could just get him a “pedestal with central heating perhaps/ in case he wants to write his poems standing up....” The poem thus contains a theatrical and wacky sense of Berkson’s free, mutable identity. And note also how the act of writing poems itself becomes a sort of artwork, as Berkson and his poems blur into each other.

indecipherable... (LeSueur 94, 5).” Secretiveness and evasiveness are key: we have not only the embedded acrostic name, but also the reference to Denby’s handwriting, which was itself hard to decipher. Again, O’Hara’s poetry becomes a place where his friends can hide as much as emerge revitalized and appreciated.

We should note too that any single clear approach to another person when extended too long begins to bore O’Hara, who wants to get at something of another’s ‘immortal energy,’ amplify it, but also keep it moving, and keep it from becoming too exposed and thereby harmed and made prosaic. Hence, just in in the parts of the poem I mentioned above, we see Denby through straightforward characterization of his temperament; through phenomenological and existential description; through Denby’s own surprise at how his character works; through our surprise at our ways of relating to him; through acrostics; through obscure references to particulars such as Denby’s handwriting; through seemingly irrelevant anecdotes; through descriptions of his artistic labor; through bizarre similes and trips into his composing brain; through whimsical and surreal apostrophes to locations; through O’Hara’s inspired reactions to Denby; through strange similes that compare Denby to a narrator in Conrad, etc.

Indeed, his poking fun makes his praise seem less purely idealized, so that it becomes more convincing.
Above all, the poem celebrates immediate presence and even tries to give us the feeling that Berkson is really there through O’Hara’s back and forth exchange with him (“now, Bill, use your own towel”). It’s as though Berkson has started using the towel while O’Hara was busy writing the poem. Again, the poem avoids straightforward narrative or psychological description. Instead of giving us backstory or providing telling psychological details that will give us key insights into Berkson’s personality, we get the zany literal freshness of Bill “there in the bathtub” right in front of us – “like a walrus...very talkative and smelling like a new rug in a store window.”

For my final example of O’Hara’s oddball portraiture let’s return to one of his favorite subjects: Kenneth Koch. The following poem again pokes fun in order to praise. It also captures something of Koch by imitating his playful, often lighthearted style, and in general strives to amplify Koch’s laughing presence while avoiding summing him up in a reductive way:

“On a Birthday of Kenneth’s”

Kenny!
Kennebunkport! I see you standing there
assuaging everything with your smile
at the end of the world you are scratching your head wondering what is
that funny French word Roussel was so fond of? oh “dénoument”!
and it is good

I knew perfectly well that afternoon on the grass when you read Vincent
and me your libretto that you had shot out of the brassière factory
straight into the blue way ahead of the Russians (what do they know
now that Pasternak is gone) and were swinging there like a Strad
And that other day when we heard Robert Frost read your poems for the
Library of Congress we admired you too though we didn’t like the way
he read “Mending Sump”

103 There are other examples of such oddball portraiture in O’Hara’s work such as “Saint,” a love poem for Vincent Warren (332). Though no reference to Warren’s art form (dance) appears in this poem, many of the same strategies of oddball portraiture are used. We are given a description of Warren that at first dramatizes him (he lies down and is like the sun); the poem then goes into his mind and shows us some of Warren’s disconnected and seemingly irrelevant thoughts (about how he is waiting for a sofa to arrive from Toledo, and about whether someone named Maxine wants jet earrings). Again, we see how showing us the wrong (irrelevant) bit of information about someone – rather than the telling detail – is one of O’Hara’s central strategies for making others seem intriguing yet evasive. We are then told about one of Warren’s particular qualities (he’s not a good swimmer), and swimming becomes the basis for a quasi-existential description: “he founders childlike and aggressive/ until the tow draws him out/ and scared he swims for it...” This description then becomes more mysterious through use of an odd simile: he swims “like a rapist pushing through stormy wheat and he is safe and serious.” Finally, the poem returns to praise: Warren “sleeps like a temple to no god.” Here, unlike “Embarrassing Bill” or “On a Birthday of Kenneth’s,” the single unpunctuated sentence and the quick stream-of-consciousness style of narration allow O’Hara’s different types of portrayal to blur quickly into each other. The evasive confusion, intrigue, and wonder of O’Hara’s oddball, off-kilter portraiture are thereby heightened as this type of portraiture is adapted to the breathless mode of O’Hara’s love poems that wants to overwhelm us with Warren’s presence.
and when Mrs. Kennedy bought that drawing that was a wonderful day too

but in a sense these days didn’t add up to a year
and you haven’t had a birthday
you have simply the joyous line of your life like in a Miro
it tangles us in your laughter

no wonder I felt so lonely on Saturday when you didn’t give your annual
cocktail party!
I didn’t know why (396-7)

O’Hara’s poem begins by summoning Koch like a genie from his bottle. We start with an exclamatory apostrophic address followed by the performative claim to see Koch “standing there,” as if he is visible from the vantage point of the poem. O’Hara also plays around with Koch’s identity by riffing on his name, and this playfulness contributes right away to our sense of his freshness. Koch is then described in a way that makes him seem both calmly benign and wonderfully zany: “at the end of the world you are scratching your head wondering what is that funny French word Roussel was so fond of?” The zaniness seems to guide the poem’s form here, leading its fourth line to expand over the edge of the page in an excessively elaborate hypothetical scenario that nevertheless tells us something important about Koch – that even at the end of the world he won’t take things too seriously or lose his sense of humor.

As elsewhere in O’Hara, humor, excess, and surrealistic imagery provide the means of balancing revelation with discretion; O’Hara isn’t against giving us some information about personalities, he’s only against this information making others seem too thoroughly known and dull instead of quick, multi-faceted, surprising, and vital. In order to maintain the sense of surprise, and keep his portrait moving, O’Hara quickly switches over from invocation and general description into a specific memory of Kenneth reading his libretto. This memory reminds

---

104 Wendy Steiner speaks of how indexical words and phrases create acquaintance rather than knowledge about:

If a portrait is written as a conventional physical description or an enumeration of parts, then its purpose is to provide information – “knowledge about” its subjects. However, the attempt to present the subject with immediacy, to render him present, is an attempt to create “acquaintance” as a simple point in perceiver’s awareness. Indeed, when [William] James gives examples of words which create acquaintance, he relies exclusively on indexes: “The minimum of grammatical subject, of objective presence, of reality known about, the mere beginning of knowledge, must be named by the word that says the least. Such a word is the interjection, as lo! there! ecco! voila! or the article or demonstrative pronoun introducing the sentence, as the, it, that.” All these words express the reality, presence, immediacy of their referents. They are an epitome of the portrait function.” (Steiner, Exact Resemblance, 29)

O’Hara uses equivalent tricks for rendering Kenneth present.

411
us that Koch is an artist, and that O’Hara admires him because of his ability to do creative work. As if bored with the mundaneness of this anecdote, though, O’Hara again switches gears. We move into the weird, excessive compliment that Koch’s reading of his libretto prompts: “you had shot out of the brassière factory straight into the blue way ahead of the Russians...and were swinging there like a Strad.” This compliment is also a description. Koch, O’Hara is suggesting, is as avant-garde, weird, fun, and up-to-date as this image.105 And although this runaway image and description is hardly out of place in O’Hara’s poems, it’s easy to see how it could have been inspired by Koch’s own work. We might recall, for instance, Koch’s famous love poem that begins, “I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut/ That will solve a murder case unsolved for years/ Because the murderer left it in the snow beside a window/ Through which he saw her head, connecting with/ Her shoulders by a neck,/ and laid a red/ Roof in her heart.”106 Hence, like “Joseph Cornell,” the poem also represents Koch through imitating his artistic style.

After we’ve rocketed up into the blue, O’Hara quickly brings things back down to earth by focusing on another specific anecdote. This anecdote also involves art: Robert Frost reads some Koch poems including “Mending Sump,” Koch’s parody of Frost. The anecdote reminds us of Koch’s mischievous sense of humor and connects that humor to Koch’s best writing. And it’s worth noting that the first-person singular becomes plural at this point in the poem as listening to Frost’s reading we hear about how “we admired you” and “we didn’t like the way he read ‘Mending Sump’” (my emphasis). Vincent was mentioned earlier on, but we’ve lost track of him somewhat by this point, and thus it’s as though the first-person plural is less about O’Hara and Vincent’s particular relationship to Koch, and more about a communal appreciation of him. The second verse paragraph then ends with another anecdote that further fills out Koch’s artistic range: “Mrs. Kennedy” buys Koch’s drawing, so Koch now has been portrayed as a poet, parodist, libretto-writer, and visual artist. This variety of skills suggests Koch’s flexibility and

105 O’Hara perhaps is also offering a more harmless alternative to Cold War competition here (poetry instead of the space race). He also takes the time to add more disruptive noise and texture by griping about the decline of Russian literature (“what do they know now that Pasternak is gone”), and teasing Kenneth Koch for his heterosexuality (he shoots out a brassière factory “straight” into the blue).

openness: through reference to his copious creations, Koch again comes to seem maximally flexible, energetic, slippery, and productive.

In the crucial penultimate stanza, the poem swerves once more as O’Hara renounces anecdotes, and tells us that no amount of incidents and events can fill up a year let alone give us a complete person. O’Hara even denies the importance of birthdays since they suggest that lifetimes can be kept track of and divvied up. You “haven’t had a birthday” O’Hara insists, “you have simply the joyous line of your life like in a Miró/ it tangles us in your laughter....” O’Hara insists here on Koch’s irreducibility: Koch is an open character whose life continues in a single line beyond the boundaries of birthday celebrations or poems about him. Yet since it’s O’Hara and Koch we’re dealing with, and since a single line on its own might seem a bit dull, that line is described in terms of Miro, the playful Surrealist artist whose painterly line wavers, loops, and indeed often continues unbroken all over the canvass (Figure 4). Koch’s presence can then seem both irreducible and charmingly odd – a net that inevitably “tangles us” in its puckish laughter.

The poem concludes by revealing that it was inspired by Koch’s absence since he didn’t throw his usual birthday cocktail party. We see then that O’Hara’s poem is a kind of social supplement that partially restores presence by first showing us Koch “standing there,” and then by drawing out and amplifying what’s fantastic about him. In so doing, it gives us some real ideas about Koch as an individual while avoiding too much harmful reductive summary of him. In return for this careful depiction, Koch’s lifeline tangles O’Hara in it, making O’Hara feel the loss of the party less keenly and restoring his feeling of “joyous” celebration. It also teaches O’Hara why exactly he felt lonely, and what it is that he values about and needs from his friend. All of this is dependent on seeing Koch through his art, and of letting O’Hara’s homage be guided by and imitative of his friend. And thanks to the switch to the first-person plural, it’s also not just O’Hara, but also “us” who become tangled in Koch’s laughter.
** Leaning Toward, Exchange, We Do This We Do That **

We’ve now considered O’Hara’s brief glimpses of others and his arrangements of others within individual poems that are raucous and crowded. We’ve considered the way others recur and develop across different poems, as well as O’Hara’s extended quirky portraits within single ones. However, we have not yet looked at poems principally of address or exchange where others appear not so much through description per se, but principally in terms of O’Hara’s feelings about them or in terms of their relationship to the poet.

In poems of address that focus on O’Hara’s feelings, sometimes the addressee will seem too inchoate to count as a character. Yet, as we’ve seen, even rather ethereal characters can sometimes surprise us and become substantial and influential presences that push back on a poem’s speaker and help shape his thinking. As Mark Silverberg writes of an O’Hara poem addressed to Bunny Lang: “we see how the speaker’s imagination of another person as reader and recipient can shape the way he speaks and the kind of poem he makes” (Silverberg’s

---

emphasis). Or as Alan Feldman writes of O’Hara more generally, “we have to gauge how much the language is bending itself to accommodate and charm the person to whom it is addressed.”

The very act of address in O’Hara often ends up altering a poem’s style and pointing us in the direction of the person to whom it speaks. Such poems often include in-jokes or specific references that only the addressee would fully understand, but which are suggestive, and help us to imagine the fuller relationship.

---

108 Mark Silverberg, *The New York School of Poets and the Neo-Avant Garde*, 54.


In poems in which the addressed person does not act, this stylistic ‘bending out toward’ and these references may be all we have to go on in imagining the addressee. For instance, I’ve already mentioned the ways in which poems addressed to certain friends take on styles that those friends admired, so that those poems come to seem somewhat representative of them. Or consider the Vincent Warren love poems: though they give only a little particularizing description, these poems manage to yoke together breathless descriptions of Warren’s continual dazzling presence with a few specific mundane details, thereby creating a palpable sense of open independent presence and enacting what O’Hara at one point calls “my insatiable thinking towards you” (354). This does not mean that every poem that addresses another really bends outward, though, and invokes a substantial external presence. In the James Dean poems the eponymous movie star seems to me unreal and closed, a prop for O’Hara’s own isolated emotional theater who does not bring much external input to bear on the speaker’s song.

111 O’Hara’s love poems to Vincent Warren are particularly interesting examples of how a character can be created through repeated acts of ‘bending outward towards’ and only a little added personal detail. As Alan Feldman points out, our relationship to O’Hara’s love poems is similar to our relationship to Shakespeare’s sonnets where we end up inevitably speculating about the history of the relationship – and in that sense Warren is already an open character in that he leads us beyond the poem to speculate about the real person. Warren’s recurring appearances in so many poems has the effect of making us feel that his presence endures beyond any individual poem’s boundaries, and also of making us consider him more thoughtfully in the way we consider Bonnard’s Marthe de Meligny or Cézanne’s Marie-Hortense Fiquet. As Feldman puts it, O’Hara prolongs his love by “studying Vincent the way a painter studies a subject, not by trying to define what it is but by observing how the light transforms it.” Feldman then quotes O’Hara’s poem “Saint”: “Like a pile of gold that his breath/ is forming into slender columns/ of various sizes, Vincent lies all/ in a heap as even the sun must rest” (Feldman, *Frank O’Hara*, 127). When we encounter so many inventive, passionate takes on a single subject, we begin to piece together and imagine the person that lies beyond those takes – and that person becomes more interesting for not being directly and easily apprehensible.

O’Hara, though, also strives to make Warren’s *individual* appearances arresting. For instance, he makes Warren seem like he’s constantly appearing from thin air as though O’Hara is constantly approaching Warren but not getting any closer. We then don’t take Warren’s presence for granted, but feel like he’s always striking us anew. In Poem “V (F) W,” for instance, O’Hara writes of how “I came around the corner/ inside the room/ to close the window/ and thought what a beautiful person/ and it was you...” (347). Or in “Present” O’Hara describes a moment of running into Warren by accident in Union Square (352-3). Or in “Avenue A,” O’Hara compares the experience of being with Warren to how “We hardly ever see the moon any more/ so no wonder/ it’s so beautiful when we look up suddenly” (355-6).

Yet such dazzling appearances are often linked to humble quotidian specificity: in “Avenue A” we quickly move from the moon to how “a cool wind fans/ your hair,” and how “I want some bourbon/ you want some oranges...” O’Hara continues, “I love the leather/ jacket Norman gave me/ and the corduroy coat David/ gave you...” Even that humble coat, “is more mysterious than spring...” It’s the humbleness of that dazzling presence that helps make it seem particular and human: “you are familiar and have lingered as the hills/ still linger outside Madrid...” (374); “for a moment I realize how happy I am to be beside you on the floor” (355) Moreover, such humbleness often manifests itself in terms of intimate specificity: we learn about Vincent’s love of yoghurt, his orange shirt and corduroy jacket; we get quoted snatches of Vincent’s conversation; we get embedded details about his birth-state, Florida.

To think in the second person, as Adela Pinch tells us, gets at a person’s essential freedom and transcendent nature; in English where there is no distinguishing between types of second person, it can even make the addressee seem inherently dramatic, plural, unknowable (Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* [New York: Cambridge UP, 2010], 81-2). O’Hara takes full advantage of this effect because, more than anything else, he wants to represent
A mostly un-described other who exists mainly in terms of O’Hara’s relationship to them, though, can gain presence not just through the way address bends toward them, but also through exchange – by acting with or in relation to O’Hara. “Personal Poem,” for instance, depicts the poet and LeRoi Jones spending time together, joking, eating, drinking, and discussing literature (“we don’t like Lionel Trilling/ we decide, we like Don Allen, we don’t like/ Henry James so much we like Herman Melville” (335-6)). Jones tells O’Hara about Miles Davis being beaten by a cop; the two friends joke darkly together (“we/ don’t like terrible diseases”); they enjoy a cool crowded bar; they revel in shared tastes; and they indulge in some shared fantasies (“we just want to be rich/ and walk on girders in our silver hats”); finally, they shake hands and leave each other behind. There’s a humbleness to this kind of exchange: O’Hara is not trying to represent all of a relationship (let alone all of a person), but only what it’s like for O’Hara and Jones to be together on a particular afternoon. Yet this very humbleness helps us believe in the reality of that shared afternoon and in the friends’ mutual enjoyment of each other’s company.

and amplify the sense of Warren’s dazzling presence without reducing him to prosaic description. The “mere presence/ changes everything like a chemical dropped on paper,” writes O’Hara (350), but if Warren is too clearly described beyond that, if he slips farther back from the far open end of the spectrum, he’ll lose his ability to dazzle quite so much. Instead, O’Hara wants his love poems feel like a kind of endless continual approach (“my insatiable thinking towards you” (354)).

O’Hara’s feelings then become like arrows pointing us toward a you and trying to make us believe that this you is there in a specific, profound way (O’Hara wants his love poems to get as at another’s life force, their most intense form of presence). Nevertheless, if Warren becomes too open, it might be hard to identify him at all, and so O’Hara includes all sorts of particulars, and also uses the love poems as a whole to build up a cumulative impression. For instance, some of the poems instruct Warren (to be willing to feel hate sometimes); and some scold him (for not loving as well as O’Hara, for not reading what O’Hara reads when O’Hara reads what Warren reads). Hence, we are given different approaches and attitudes other than loving awe. Ultimately, by the end of the series, we have the sense of Warren as a naïve, perhaps slightly unserious, beautiful and talented young man; Warren seems genial and playful, but is also perhaps a bit impatient to get on with his life. Rather than this information being the point, though, it helps convince us of Warren’s real presence in the poems, and of the way in which the ‘thinking towards him’ is guided by real external pressure and imagining of him. Another person can be a real player in a dialogic lyric without us learning too much about them.

O’Hara also likes bouncing himself off others in order to know himself better. For instance, in “Why I Am Not A Painter” he compares his own process of poetic composition to Mike Goldberg’s painterly one. Goldberg is not diametrically opposed to O’Hara – the poem is famously slippery – but Goldberg functions as a point of contrast by which O’Hara may think through his own identity and evasive artistic process. In “Poem (Lana Turned has collapsed!)” an encounter with a headline about the eponymous movie star grants O’Hara self-knowledge and leads him to rebuke the actress. Where, as Andrew Ross writes, Billie Holliday and her whispered song in “The Day Lady Died” could invoke “the survivalist spirit for the gay community” and “camp’s insistence that the show must go on,” Lana Turner collapsing can be seen as someone failing in this survivalism, and therefore as representing what O’Hara doesn’t want to become (Andrew Ross, “The Death of Lady Day,” Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City. ed. Jim Elledge [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990] 380-91, 387). Hence, in a funny, queer, critical, and theatrical way, Lana Turner helps O’Hara articulate his own ideal for toughing it out and continuing: O’Hara has been having an awful day “trotting along” through the rain and snow, but he “never actually collapsed” (449). As Doctor Zhivago says in a moment quoted by O’Hara in his essay on Pasternak: “However far back you go in memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity – in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people... You in others, that is your soul. This is what you are” (504).
“It is 1:55 in Cambridge, Pale and Spring Cool,” combines the two techniques described above: it both leans out toward another via direct address, and becomes a kind of ‘we do this, we do that’ poem reminiscent of the Leroi Jones section of “Personal Poem.”113 “It is 1:55,” begins, obviously, in the middle of the day, but then jumps to more habitual “Evenings” spent in “Jim’s place” with the poet “Jimmy” Schuyler, and then to sessions where the two poets listen to “[Lotte] Lenya sing all day long.” Hence, we feel anchored in early afternoon with plenty of daytime left, and we feel that this moment exists within a cycle of the pleasant days and evenings as the two poets pass their time together.

O’Hara then seems to go directly into the two poets’ conversation without introducing or framing this switch: “I would like another beer and Bert Brecht is/ a great poet, and Kurt Weill, he is a genius too.” Though O’Hara speaks in the first-person, we get the sense that the first-person is now either delivering both sides of a back-and-forth conversation, or that the two poets are speaking in unison. In this way they are just like O’Hara and Leroi Jones in “Personal Poem,” and like “Personal Poem,” the conversation begins by discussing issues of taste (they like Brecht and Kurt Weill). We also see how the two poets move naturally from listening to the Austrian singer Lotte Lenya to discussing her husband Kurt Weill and his collaborator Bertolt Brecht. As usual, O’Hara prizes immediacy over clarity: just as free indirect discourse in prose fiction dives into a character’s mind without telling us so explicitly, O’Hara plunges us into the middle of the two poets’ conversation.114 At this point, the conversation takes off and leaves both speakers behind as we move from discussions of German writers to lessons from W.H. Auden (Wystan) about Nazi Germany. The discussion then becomes about the terror of being found out by Storm Troopers, and then about the worse, moral terror of becoming a fascist ‘bully’ oneself. It’s a conversation about difficult topics, but one that is interesting and engrossing enough for the “I” of the talkers to be forgotten and largely disappear.

113 Frank O’Hara, Selected Poems, 98.
114 He thereby gives us the feeling of being inside a good discussion that involves discovering new ideas and being pleased at mutual agreement.
However, the poets are then suddenly shaken from their shared reverie and become aware of the time. The communal voice breaks up, and O’Hara has to address Schuyler as a separate person:

And now it is almost the last hour
of your visit, Jimmy, no more walks by the Charles
‘the alluvial river’ drifting through a town
that’s pretty because it is so flat. No more
great decisions on titles and places, no more
too many drinks. Will those poems ever get
written? will our royalties from VISITING
ANGKOR VAT AND VIENNA really sustain us, in a
future that only yesterday seemed so literally
bright? Goodbye. At least we’ve written our ODE.
And elsewhere, as snows dirty, we’ll sit
for long long days and talk and play the phonograph
and heat the coffee. And silent, go to a bar.

It turns out that the circle of happy days was only a finite visit, and that early afternoon has already become its “last hour.” We then get a kind of negative ‘we do this, we do that’ list of shared activities that won’t happen again: once the visit is over, the two poets’ artistic and alcoholic fun will dissipate, and a plainer reality will set in. The two indulged in making various fantastical plans, but those plans are now revealed to be illusions. The sudden swerve of the visit’s end, enacted by all the sheer enjambments, leads them to doubt “a/ future that only yesterday seemed so literally/ bright.” That brightness turns into dirty snow, and the two enter a pale posthumous existence where they go to bars “silent[ly]” and drearily on their own in a pale imitation of their fun shared activities.

The ending still contains some of the pleasure of the pair’s shared company, as is evident in its sense of humor, in-jokes, and digressions. We hear about the playfully redundant “alluvial river,” the slightly perverse observation about Cambridge’s prettiness, and the absurd dreams of royalties from Vienna and Angkor Vat (the Cambodian temple about which Allen Ginsberg later writes). There’s a note of self-parody here – evident in the melodrama of yesterday’s literal brightness fading – that seems aimed to entertain Schuyler and soften the actual sadness of the

---

115 This breakup and separation also confirms that the preceding lines were indeed describing a conversation and not just O’Hara’s thoughts. Since those preceding lines are bookended by “Evenings in Jim’s Place with Jimmy” and the realization that “now it is almost the last hour/ of your visit, Jimmy,” we may infer that the lines were a portrayal of the content of that visit.
parting, as well as to prevent the poem from slipping into mawkishness. Meanwhile, the list of shared activities (no more walks by the Charles), and the specificity of the address (“Jimmy”) and in-jokes (Angkor Vat and Vienna), make the poem seem convincingly about the loss of shared concord with a particular person. This is what it was like to enjoy the visit, to think and drink together; and this is what it was like for the pair’s time together to be over. Even in this negative mode, O’Hara is able to capture the pleasure of good company, and we again feel Catullus’s dismay from my introduction at being separated from Licinius and his witty jokes and poetry games.

I should point out that enjoying shared company in O’Hara does not always mean having a rapturously good time. O’Hara and Schuyler discuss hard topics such as Nazism and moral complicity in political evils. In “Personal Poem” too, O’Hara and Jones talk about Miles Davis being assaulted by a cop, and joke darkly about a diseased beggar woman. Even in “A Party Full of Friends” Larry Rivers’ real familial problems are invoked. Enjoying others’ presence in O’Hara doesn’t mean being in denial about hard things; instead, it means owning the fact that happiness and good company are things that emerge in spite of their rareness – and in spite of much of life being difficult and solitary. The dream of the good poetic town that I discussed earlier, then, is partially an effort to stay in touch with social joy.

I’ve been emphasizing the way O’Hara uses poetry to pay homage to others, and to improve his social world, in part because I think much recent criticism has shied away from O’Hara’s ebullience out of a concern that it’s simplistic or sentimental. O’Hara must be made respectable by refocusing our attention on his pessimisms – on his criticisms of particular relationships; his grim awareness of the passage of time, his deconstructive insight into the lack of stable human identity, etc. I would argue, though, that these pessimisms actually work to heighten O’Hara’s celebratory impulses. O’Hara’s party full of friends is often in implicit dialogue with horrors (Nazism, terrible diseases, the Cold War, stabbings in other countries (371)); with the frequent mundaneness of the world (of his Grafton childhood, of dreary office work); with oppressive hetero-normative social conventions; with a knowledge of how

\[116\] And O’Hara’s poems are often full of fraught political references from Khrushchev and the Cold War to de Gaulle and the war in Algeria.
frustrating and difficult other people can be; and above all, with the inevitability of separation, and with the absence and silence that surrounds all parties. The very awareness of these evils sometimes allows O’Hara’s social poems to become all the more celebratory: after all, parties, like songs or lyric poems, are wonderful exceptions to normal life. If lyric, as I said in my introduction, contests separation and drift, and if it sometimes becomes a force that joyfully, powerfully gives us back other people, never has it had such a champion as O’Hara. After all, the cataloguing of others in “A Step Away From Them,” is a way of trying to measure against and counter the fact of a few central deaths (“First/ Bunny died, then John Latouche,/ then Jackson Pollock. But is the/ earth as full as life was full, of them?” (258)). So too the negative catalogue in “It is 1:55” is a way of heightening the importance of shared company just as it is being lost.

**

Not every O’Hara poem about other people seems aware of ephemerality to the same degree. But O’Hara poems where we see others primarily in terms of their immediate relationship to the poet often seem keenly aware of such transience as the relationships recounted by them are more fleeting than individuals. A person may be imagined as continuing long past the ending of a poem, but this is less true of a good visit or a particular relationship dynamic. O’Hara’s poems of address and exchange not only invoke loss, though, but often attempt to combat it, and to extend a relationship with another person past the poem’s ending, or past its ending in the world. I call O’Hara’s strategy here ‘floating exchange’ after my idea of floating characters, as it involves partially fictionalizing and mythologizing the real person it treats. O’Hara’s ‘floating exchanges’ use a dreamlike principle to represent interactions and exchanges that are partially imaginary\(^\text{117}\) – because their characters are dead (e.g. “To My Dead Father” and “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Blue windows, blue rooftops)”\(^\text{118}\)); or because the exchanges take

\[^{117}\] Many O’Hara poems contain real people and their actions as they appeared in O’Hara’s dreams, thereby demonstrating O’Hara’s interest in partially imaginary others (e.g. “Two Dreams of Waking,” “Crow Hill,” and “At Kamin’s Dance Bookshop”).

\[^{118}\] Thom Gunn portrays a similar exchange with the floating, dreamed figure of his dead friend in “The Reassurance.”
place in a distant future (e.g. “To John Ashbery”); or because they describe a relationship with a living person who has been lost to the past (e.g. “Poem (There I could never be a boy,)”).

I only have room to examine one of these poems here, so let’s look again at “To John Ashbery.”\(^\text{119}\) Though I mentioned this poem before in my discussion of Ashbery’s cumulative appearances I didn’t focus on its playful sadness:

I can’t believe there’s not
another world where we will sit
and read new poems to each other
high on a mountain in the wind.

\(^{119}\) Here are readings of the other poems: “To My Dead Father” addresses Russell O’Hara as a kind of ghost, haunting Frank (“I couldn’t do what you/ say even if I could hear.”), and appearing in Frank’s own face in the mirror (160-1). Yet the son is also haunting the father here, as Frank lives out his artistic life long past the father’s death and understanding of his son (“don’t ask/ that I be other than your/ strange son…”). It’s as if father and son might use the poem – which ends with a plea for Russell’s forgiveness – to better understand their differences. Thus, O’Hara uses lyric not only to mourn, but also to have an honest conversation with his father – even if the conversation must remain imaginary and true reconciliation is no longer possible.

“To My Dead Father” uses memories of riding a horse in childhood to portray O’Hara’s fraught relationship with his mother (216-7), with whom he has had a dramatic falling out by the time of the poem’s composition (Gooch, \(\text{City Poet, 13}\). Horseback riding stands in for the poet’s first intuitions of his artistic callings, which will lead him away from Grafton and his family. Katherine O’Hara here attempts to hold her son back: “I rode like a god when the horse reared...[but] at a cry from mother I fell to my knees!” “All things are tragic/ when a mother watches,” O’Hara adds, and continues, “I knew her but I could not be a boy/ for in the billowing air I was fleet and green.” The poem even attempts to describe Katherine’s desires: watching O’Hara on his mare, “she wishes upon herself/ the random fears of a scarlet soul, as it breathes in and out/ and nothing choke, or breaks from triumph to triumph!” The poem does not address Katherine directly, or bring her into the poet’s present, but instead tries to reproduce the lost texture of a particular fraught moment within a relationship that will soon fall apart. And since that relationship is lost to a quasi-mythical version of the past, it again seems dream-like and partially imaginary – very different, in any case, from the present-tense relationships that are typical of O’Hara’s poetry.

“On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday (Blue windows, blue rooftops...)” (189) is a poem written to the eponymous composer whose music O’Hara loved, but who had been dead for nine years at the time of the poem’s composition. The idea of celebrating Rachmaninoff’s birthday, then, is a fantasy – a way of insisting that the composer has had a kind of continued life through his music and artistic influence. The poem begins by speaking of the composer’s great effect on O’Hara who has “enormous ears” for his music, and who depends on him to become inspired (“tears falling into my blindness/ for without him I do not play...”). O’Hara – who originally trained as a pianist – then invents a scene in which he has the “Good/fortune” to have Rachmaninoff as his teacher. The poet imagines a close, gentle teacher-student relationship wherein O’Hara doesn’t mind repeating his exercises, and, in return, “Secrets of Liszt and Scriabin” are “whispered” to O’Hara “over the keyboard” with the powerful intimacy of Billie Holliday ‘whispering’ a song along her keyboard to Mal Waldron.

Ultimately, the poem doesn’t deny loss and lack, but, like “The Day Lady Died” (or “Poem,” or “To John Ashbery,” or “To My Dead Father”), it insists on art’s supplementary ability to provide intimate connection in spite of loss:

Only my eyes would be blue as I played
and you rapped my knuckles,
dearest father of all the Russias,
placing my fingers
tenderly upon your cold, tired eyes.

We’ve already seen in Adrienne Rich’s “Solfeggietto” how intimate piano lessons can be in the way they bring one’s hands close to another’s. In O’Hara’s lines observing eyes are crucial too: O’Hara’s eyes seem to glow with his wistful imagining of Rachmaninoff correcting him and rapping his knuckles (“Only my eyes would be blue as I played...”). In return O’Hara helps shut the composer’s eyes, which “cold and tired” need to be soothed back into death. And there’s a way in which Russell O’Hara stands behind Rachmaninoff here as “dearest father” since Russell was the original pianist in O’Hara’s life as well as the one who introduced his son to the famous composer (Gooch, \(\text{City Poet, 28}\). Rachmaninoff is partially closed – he is deathly and associated with another dead man; he is cold, tired and only capable of whispering – and yet he plays an active, intimate role in the poem. Through O’Hara’s floating exchange, he provides a partly imaginary company that helps to better imagine loss, and to contest it somewhat.

421
You can be Tu Fu, I’ll be Po Chü-i
and the Monkey Lady’ll be in the moon,
smiling at our ill-fitting heads
as we watch the snow settle on a twig.
Or shall we be really gone? this
is not the grass I saw in my youth!
and if the moon, when it rises
tonight, is empty – a bad sign,
meaning ’You go, like the blossoms.’ (211)

The poem’s opening suggests that his friendship with Ashbery is so essential and present that it’s hard for O’Hara to believe in its finitude. He then tries to use Chinese poetry’s seemingly simple style and observations both to reckon with that transience (this/ is not the grass I saw in my youth), and simultaneously to extend the two poets’ relationship into the next life. Here the playfulness about identity and use of alter egos is somewhat melancholy as it involves a sort of beautifying transmutation or stellification that exemplifies loss as much as it negates it; yet, at the same time, there is delight in the adoption of these famous Chinese alter egos, reminiscent of the way O’Hara and Ashbery would pretend to be each other on the phone. One has the sense that the poets’ adoption of their new roles is both genuine and slightly hammy and camped up. Their heads are “ill-fitting” as if they haven’t quite embraced their new incarnations, and the “Monkey Lady” seems to license mischief as they strike a poetical Chinese pose and stare at the snow settling on a twig. There is real delicacy and sadness here: after imagining such an afterlife, O’Hara negates it (“Or shall we really be gone”) and tells us that the empty moon is a bad sign like a death’s head. We end, though, not with empty moon, but with blossoms: the imaginary scene of the two poets on the mountaintop captures something of the joie de vivre of their relationship, preserving it beyond death so that we can find it now.

**

We can start to conclude by looking at “John Button Birthday” – an extended portrait of an artist within a single poem that includes many of the strategies we’ve been considering

---

120 Pace Epstein.
throughout this chapter (267-8). Though largely addressed to the eponymous artist, the poem begins by employing several different strategies of indirection:

Sentiments are nice, “The Lonely Crowd,”
a rift in the clouds appears above the purple,
you find a birthday greeting card with violets
which says “a perfect friend” and means
“I love you” but the customer is forced to be shy. It says less, as all things must.

But
grease sticks to the red ribs shaped like a
sea shell, grease, light, and rosy that smells of
sandalwood: it’s memory! I remember JA
staggering over to me in the San Remo and murmuring
“I’ve met someone MARVELLOUS!” That’s friendship
for you, and the sentiment of introduction.

And now that I have finished dinner I can continue.

The poet, like the greeting card, says “less, as all things must,” and approaches Button at first only very indirectly, as the poem slides between loneliness in the form of David Riesman’s book, a natural scene of sudden illumination, a commercial etiquette lesson, and the dinner that triggers the memory of first hearing about Button. In fact, in the first third of the poem the only direct information we get about Button is that John Ashbery was delighted when he first met him – and this information also allows O’Hara to express his own affection at a careful remove (like the symbolism of loneliness being replaced by an opening in the clouds). O’Hara here is following the sun’s advice from “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island,” and approaching Button with an “appropriate sense of space” (307). The indirection and tentativeness of the address then becomes a kind of birthday gift: Button will be described and praised, but not in ways that are cloying or carelessly reductive. Indeed, throughout the rest of the poem, O’Hara will continue to switch between his immediate quotidian moment (eating dinner, taking down the laundry) and his addressee – yanking us away from Button only to propel us back toward him. One effect of this is that Button’s presence is never taken for granted, but is encountered again and again, so that it can continually surprise us (“it’s memory!”) and so that none of Button’s luster will be dulled by overfamiliarity.
After the dinner scene, the poem does focus a bit more directly on Button, and the ensuing stanzas are like a compendium of O’Hara’s strategies for representing others. The poem continues:

What is that attracts one to one? Mystery?
I think of you in Paris with a red beard, a theological student; in London talking to a friend who lunched with Dowager Queen Mary and offered her his last cigarette; in Los Angeles shopping at the Supermarket; on Mount Shasta, looking... above all on Mount Shasta in your unknown youth and photograph.

And then the way you straighten people out. How ambitious you are! And that you’re a painter is a great satisfaction, too. You know how I feel about painters. I sometimes think poetry only describes.

Now I have taken down the underwear I washed last night from the various light fixtures and can proceed.

Here Button is represented via several poses and scenes (such as being Paris “with a red beard”), so that he can seem both singular and multiple. It’s as though the different movie stars in “To the Film Industry in Crisis” have been replaced by different poses struck by the same person. Button is also represented through suggestive but elliptical character descriptions (the way you straighten/people out) and through O’Hara’s various feelings about him (incredulity, curiosity, surprise, respect, jealousy). We again get a reference to Button’s status as an artist, and he is again put in relation to O’Hara by being compared to him (“I sometimes think poetry/only describes”). As in the poem for Koch, a birthday becomes an opportunity for taking stock of a friendship. And O’Hara also employs his strategies of intrigue and obfuscation: we encounter one of his frequent digressions (“Now I have taken down the underwear”), and we frequently see him focusing on the wrong point or the seemingly irrelevant detail instead of the telling one (on his own amusing way of drying his underwear, on extraneous gossip about Button’s friend lunching with Queen Mary, or on the unremarkable scene of Button shopping in Los Angeles).

Despite such obfuscation, the poem enacts serious attempts to reach outward toward O’Hara’s friend. First, as in many of O’Hara’s poems of address, the language adapts to its addressee, particularly in how it becomes flatly conversational in the second quoted stanza above.
(“And that you’re/ a painter is a great satisfaction, too”). Second, O’Hara humorously gives up on finding a clinching description of Button on Mount Shasta, and instead lets his attempt fade out in ellipses. In a funny way, he thus ends up highlighting Button’s recalcitrant mysteriousness. Again, O’Hara is far more interested in making Button seem intriguing than he is in explaining him. He precedes his various glimpses of Button in London and Los Angeles with an open-ended question: “What is it that attracts one to one?” The various glimpses of Button that follow are then framed in terms of O’Hara’s mysterious attraction to him.

The poem also uses direct-address both to heighten Button’s presence and to limit the poem’s representative claims. As we’ve seen in the poem for Kenneth Koch’s birthday, direct address can help invoke its subject and make us feel like he or she is somehow present and listening. Yet it can also help that subject become more slippery: Adela Pinch writes that whereas the third person often reduces and embalms a person in a known totality, address in the second person can get at another’s essential freedom and transcendent nature. In particular in English, where there is no distinguishing between types of second person, the pronoun can make its addressee seem dramatic, mysterious, and multiple. Second-person address in “John Button Birthday,” then, can be used to help O’Hara strike the right balance between reaching out toward his friend and not reducing or encapsulating him. And the fact that the poem is an occasional one written for Button’s birthday helps indicate that it is meant not as a final summary of O’Hara’s feelings about his friend, but rather to play an important part in a relationship that is still ongoing.

Yet, as we’ve seen, O’Hara’s poems of address often become aware of the transience of satisfying moments of friendship, and of the way the connection between poet and addressee is severed as soon as the poet falls silent. Hence O’Hara ends the poem with an effort to maximize exchange and shared presence, and with a floating projection of his friendship far into the future:

And the lift of our experiences together, which seem to me legendary. The long subways to our old neighborhood the [sic] near East 49th and 53rd, and before them the laughing in bars till we cried, and the crying in movies till we laughed, the tenting tonight on the old camp grounds! How beautiful it is to visit someone for instant coffee! and you visiting Cambridge, Massachusetts, talking for two weeks worth

---

121 Adela Pinch, Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 81-2.
in hours, and watching Maria Tallchief in the Public Gardens while the swan-boats slumbered. And now, not that I’m interrupting again, I mean your now, you are 82 and I am 03. And in 1984 I trust we’ll still be high together. I’ll say ‘Let’s got to a bar’ and you’ll say ‘Let’s go to a movie’ and we’ll go to both; like two old Chinese drunkards arguing about their favorite mountain and the million reasons for them both.

O’Hara writes a mini ‘we do this, we do that’ poem that depicts what it was like to be part of a particular relationship at a particular time. His anthologizing impulse switches from providing snapshots of Button alone, to ones of the two together (on the subway, laughing in bars, crying in movies, having instant coffee, watching Maria Tallchief). That relationship – like O’Hara’s parties – is jumbled, perverse, and playful. It is full of mix-ups, of confusions of laughing with crying, bars with movies, swans with boats, and ages with dates (03 and 1984). The scene is also full of Button’s animating energy: his ability to talk for “two weeks worth in hours,” to make instant coffee seem beautiful, and to help make them both “high together.” Furthermore, it shows how much they enjoy each other’s company, particularly as gay men “tenting/ tonight on the old camp grounds.” The jumbles and lists here insist on maximum presence rather than on careful assemblage and choice: they’ll go to a bar and a movie rather than bar or a movie, and arguing is merely an excuse for listing the “the million reasons” to admire each option.122

In sum, anticipation of loss leads O’Hara to invoke past instances of good company, and to make it seem like all of these past scenes are present in the moment of address, binding the two artists together. And once this vision of maximum shared presence is invoked, O’Hara projects their relationship far into the future in a floating manner very similar to how he imagined himself and Ashbery living on after death. The jumble moves from mixing up laughing and crying, to mixing up dates and identities, and thereby sends the pair into the future (1984) where they’ll become “like two old Chinese drunkards arguing....” O’Hara’s social poems try to keep others open and alive, and so they usually resist turning people into myths in the way Milton transforms Edward King into Lycidas, or Yeats makes Major Robert Gregory into

122 It’s no coincidence Maria Tallchief turns up in this ending since, as we’ve seen, she’s associated for O’Hara with the artistic power that can make another’s presence seem enchanting and transformative.
“soldier, scholar, horseman” and “all life’s epitome.” Yet O’Hara is aware of how fleeting moments of good company are, and so when it comes not simply to portraying other people on their own, but to depicting O’Hara’s ephemeral relationships with them, he is sometimes more willing to mythologize. In “John Button Birthday” O’Hara still doesn’t want to make his friendships as “solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary” (360), but he is willing to speak in the participles of habitual actions (laughing, crying, tenting, visiting, talking) rather than specific ones, and to transform the pair into the floating (“legendary”) archetypes of “two old Chinese drunkards” so that he can imagine them arguing and enjoying each other’s company endlessly. Of course, O’Hara still picks the least marmoreal of emblems for the pair becomes not heroic statues but laughing Buddhas. We can still hear their laughter now though O’Hara would be dead nine years after writing the poem, and John Button would die of AIDS two years prior to 1984.

**

Just before writing “John Button Birthday,” O’Hara writes a poem to celebrate Jane Freilicher’s engagement to Joe Hazan (265-7). “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” was to be read at a party given in the couple’s honor. The poem directly addresses the couple in question, and the gathered and assembled friends at the party. It’s full of praise and celebration (“Only you in New York are not boring tonight”), but also of ambivalence. Because its subject is the marriage that will take Jane out of O’Hara’s world and propel her towards a conventional family lifestyle, the poem inevitably ends up facing the dispersals of time:

This poem goes on too long because our friendship has been long, long for this life and these times, long as art is long and uninterruptible, and I would make it last as long as I hope our friendship lasts if I could


124 O’Hara first tries just to maximize and heighten his present friendship: he offers a tableau of bright scenes to remind himself and Button of how close they are; he draws attention to the particular moment of the poem’s reception (“And now, I mean your now”); and he expresses hope that the friendship will continue for decades – in 1984 O’Hara would have been 58, and Button 55. O’Hara, then, first imagines a plausible future before mythologizing.

125 Cf. Feldman, Frank O’Hara, 123.
make poems that long

O’Hara equates poetry with friendship, and so wishes for an endless poem that will never allow friendship to dissolve. When one considers its bulk and all its recurring, returning figures, O’Hara’s oeuvre can be seen as an attempt to fulfill this wish. As Kenneth Koch writes, the Collected Poems is “not all one great poem, but something in some ways better: a collection of created moments that illuminate a whole life.”126 And through that life, other lives. O’Hara calls Whitman his “great predecessor” (305), and there is something Whitmanian about the way O’Hara uses his own life to host his poetic parties and press the partygoers together, making them “rub up against each other” just as he does with the passers-by in “Steps” (370). Yet in “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” O’Hara implies that both poem and friendship have gone on “too long,” and that he, like a failed Scherazade, is merely forestalling the inevitable. In this way the poem’s haphazardly punctuated long lines seem born not just out of a desire to create a chatty, improvisatory poem to be read at a particular event, but out of a slightly jittery fear of falling silent.

Hence, O’Hara again draws together scenes of company like shards of magnetic filing thereby trying to maximize the connections among his assembled listeners. With this vision of maximum collective presence in mind, O’Hara projects the party into the future in a simultaneously hopeful and hopeless vision:

I hope there will be more
more drives to Bear Mountain and searches for hamburgers, more evenings
avoiding the latest Japanese movie and watching Helen Vinson
and Warner Baxter in Vogues of 1938 instead, more discussions
in lobbies of the respective greatness of Diana Adams and
Allegra Kent,
more sunburns and more half-mile swims in which Joe beats me as Jane
watches, lotion-covered and sleepy, more arguments over
Faulkner’s inferiority to Tolstoy while sand gets into my
bathing trunks
let’s advance and change everything, but leave these little oases in
case the heart gets thirsty en route

Here we find O’Hara’s usual jumble of energetic scenes and characters alongside his wish for an eternal recurrence of particulars – we are reminded of O’Hara’s wish that he and Button will go

126 Qt. in Perloff, Poet Among Painters, 7.
on endlessly arguing about movies and bars, and that he and Ashbery will go on reading new poems to each other high on a mountain in the wind. O’Hara doesn’t mythologize much here though: the in-jokes and references amplify the living communal presence of the assembled group, but also suggest its fragility and ephemerality. These particulars are too particular ever to happen again: abstract arguments or poetry readings can be imagined as going on forever, perhaps, but a day of arguments over Faulkner and Tolstoy with sand in the bathing trunks, swim-races, and Jane covered in lotion is a day that happens only once.

The poem does press back against inevitable absence, hoping for other kinds of presence and even invoking and gathering in absent friends by “proxy”:

and I should probably propose myself as a godfather if you have any children, since I will probably earn more money some day accidentally, and could teach him or her how to swim
and now there is a Glazunov symphony on the radio and I think of our friends who are not here, of John and the nuptial quality of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) and Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing, respectively (they are probably leaning at the Leaning Tower right now)
but we are all here and have their proxy
if Kenneth were writing this he would point out how art has changed women and women have changed art and men, but men haven’t changed women much
but ideas are obscure and nothing should be obscure tonight
you will live half the year in a house by the sea and half the year in a house in our arms
we peer into the future and see you happy and hope it is a sign that we will be happy too, something to cling to, happiness
the least and best of human attainments

O’Hara invokes children, thereby imagining new life and not just the repetition of past pleasures. The idea of children even gives him a way to reinvent the beach scene with Joe and Jane as O’Hara could give swimming lessons to Jane’s child. O’Hara also invokes absent friends, giving us the particular suggestive glimpses of John, Janice, and Kenneth we’ve seen already. These friends are brought together just as the memories of drives and searches for hamburgers and evenings “avoiding the latest Japanese movie,” were summoned and yoked, increasing the poem’s sense of shared presence. Yet these summonings are double-edged: they invoke presence only negatively – and in contradiction to the facts. Even the mention of children seems
bittersweet since O’Hara won’t have any; the idea that he would “earn more money some day accidentally” must have also seemed pretty unlikely. And when O’Hara elaborates on his description of Kenneth, even this seems to backfire by leading to one of Kenneth’s ideas, which leads to ‘obscurity.’ O’Hara rallies with a final proposal for a wishful future, which is a version of the Persephone myth: “you will live half the year in a house by the sea and half the year in a house in our arms.” This is obviously not meant as a real proposal, and its allusion to the myth suggests deep loss. Yet Demeter gets Persephone back each spring. And each time it is read the poem gives us the party for Jane and the scene of friends in its splendid fragile specificity. By hinting at oncoming loss, and by wishing it weren’t so, O’Hara is also able to use lyric to sharpen and celebrate happiness with particular others as “the least and best of human attainments.” And something of that scene remains for us today.

(Figure 5: Photo of O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch and others.127)

Bibliography


431


http://www.vqronline.org/essay/will-change-and-power-poetry-adrienne-rich


—. “These Drafts and Castoffs: Mapping James Wright.” *Kenyon Review* 31, no. 3 [Summer 2009].


Torrey, E. Fuller. “Ronald Reagan’s shameful legacy: Violence, the homeless, mental illness.”


