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Professor Helen Vendler Nikki Skillman

The Lyric in the Age of the Brain

Abstract

This dissertation asks how the physiological conception of the mind promoted by scientific, philosophical and cultural forces since the mid-twentieth century has affected poetic accounts of mental experience. For the cohort of poets I identify here—James Merrill, Robert Creeley, A.R. Ammons, John Ashbery, and Jorie Graham—recognition that fallible, biological mechanisms determine the very structure of human subjectivity causes deep anxiety about how we perceive the world, exercise reason, and produce knowledge. These poets feel caught between the brain sciences' empirical vision of the mind, which holds the appeal of a fresh and credible vocabulary but often appears reductive, and the literary tradition's overwhelmingly transcendental vision of the mind, which bears intuitive resonance but also appears increasingly naïve. These poets find aesthetic opportunity in confronting the nature of mind: Merrill takes up forgetting as a central subject, making elegant, entropic monuments out of the distortions and perforations of embodied memory; Ammons and Creeley become captivated by the motion of thinking, and use innovative, dynamic forms to emphasize the temporal and spatial impositions of embodiment upon the motions of thought; Ashbery luxuriates in the representational possibilities of distraction as a structural and thematic principle; Graham identifies the anatomical limits of the visual system with our limits of empathetic perspective, conceiving of her poems as prostheses that can enhance our feeble power to imagine other minds. In a host of significatory practices that reimagine lyric subjectivity in physiological terms, these poets' ambitious and influential oeuvres reveal the *convergence* of "raw" and "cooked" post-war poetries in a set of fundamental suppositions about our aptitudes as observers, knowers, and interpreters; this convergence exposes the vestiges of the Romantic mind in modernism's empowered conception of the poetic imagination. Uniquely equipped to explore meaningful

correspondences between physiological and literary form, the contemporary lyric defies the novel's preeminent position in the study of literary consciousness by demonstrating an enterprising talent for philosophical investigation of the experience of mind.

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Introduction

In the poem "Mechanism" (1957), A.R. Ammons describes an extraordinary encounter with a relatively ordinary bird. As he watches a goldfinch flitting from branch to branch, gobbling up a seed, flashing its plumage in a wild cherry bush, the poet realizes that what he *knows* about the goldfinch supervenes upon his apprehension of the bird and transforms his experience of it. What he knows—about the orchestra of its bodily parts and their harmonious cooperation, about the organism's nuanced role in a vast ecological system, about the serendipitous course of its evolution toward such distinctive beauty—leads him to identify the finch's singular splendor with the splendor of all kinds of "working order[s]," natural and artificial. He begins his poem by enjoining us to revere the bird as a biological *system,* and thus, in a sense, as a mechanism not unlike the adaptable armature of a moral code or the dynamic scheme of labor and profit within a commercial enterprise:

> Honor a going thing, goldfinch, corporation, tree,
> morality: any working order,
> animate or inanimate: (*E* 34)

It is not just any working order, in fact, but the sentient goldfinch that proves to be Ammons' particular focus in the poem, and as he comes to imagine the creature as a marvelous working fulfillment of the chemical prescriptions of its DNA, his encounter evolves into a meditation on the emergence of animacy from the interaction of inanimate parts—on the origins of mind in matter.

Ammons assertively connects the array of physical processes that comprise the goldfinch—"enzymic intricacies," "gastric transformations," "physical chemistries"—with the intangible textures of experience that characterize conscious life—"control," "knowledge," "instinct," and most capaciously, "mind":

honor the chemistries, platelets, hemoglobin kinetics,
the light-sensitive iris, the enzymic intricacies
of control,

the gastric transformations, seed
dissolved to acrid liquors, synthesized into
chirp, vitreous humor, knowledge,

blood compulsion, instinct: honor the
unique genes,
molecules that reproduce themselves, divide into

sets, the nucleic grain transmitted
in slow change through ages of rising and falling form,
some cells set aside for the special work, mind

or perception rising into orders of courtship,
territorial rights, mind rising
from the physical chemistries

to guarantee that genes will be exchanged, male
and female met, the satisfactions cloaking a deeper
racial satisfaction: (*E* 34-5)

A hybrid of a lyric blazon and a CT scan, "Mechanism" displays specialized knowledge of "hemoglobin kinetics" and the self-replicating "nucleic grain." But even as Ammons luxuriates in the argots of biological, chemical, even evolutionary science, the poem also expresses what seems to be *common* knowledge in the age of the brain; it assumes that the connection between the physical and the mental is close and direct ("mind/ ris[es] from the physical chemistries"), even if the character of that connection remains deeply mysterious. Indeed, as he contemplates the nature of human and animal minds through the imagined physiology of the goldfinch, Ammons exhibits in "Mechanism" fundamental premises that have overwhelmingly dominated scientific, philosophical, and popular conceptions of mental life since the mid-twentieth century: he takes for granted that the mind has its origin in tacit, autonomic interactions of non-intentional matter; he assumes that mental experience, subject to somatic necessity, is constitutively shaped by genetic and evolutionary forces; he situates all dimensions of mental experience, from perception to reason, within a finite economy of physical resources.

"Mechanism" asks how close identification between the chemical and the experiential, which all but collapses subjective and objective aspects of reality, transforms the translation of experience into poetry. The seed the goldfinch consumes is synthesized not only into "control" (agency), "vitreous humor" (the substance of its eye, a metonym for perception), "knowledge," and "instinct," and but also into the bird's "chirp," its mating call and individual song. Ammons reminds us that the goldfinch is a representative of an actual avian species, but that it is also an emblem of the poet—Yeats' own mechanistic, golden bird brought back into nature. The self-deprecating parenthesis of the poem's final lines, in which the poet observes that the goldfinch is "not a/ great songster," confirms that Ammons has in mind the biological operations that shape his own subjectivity and his own singing. As the poem concludes, the "isolated, contained reactions" that regulate the bird's temperature proceed unrecognized,

while the

> goldfinch, unconscious of the billion operations
> that stay its form, flashes, chirping (not a
> great songster) in the bay cherry bushes wild of leaf. (*E* 35)

In "Mechanism" Ammons surmises that the biological mechanisms that generate and shape experience also shape our attempts to make sense of experience, from the moralities we construct to the texts we compose. He thus poses the question that centrally occupies this study of the contemporary American lyric: what happens to the *poem* when the poet becomes so vividly conscious of the billion operations that stay his or her forms of thought, perception, memory, imagination?

Poets such as Ammons, who came of age as artists in the fifties or later and witnessed the proliferation of empirical discourses that have addressed themselves with increasing optimism to investigation of the "mind," have had to become more vividly conscious of the biological systems that mediate inner life than poets of any other era. Over the past sixty years, the empirical study of the brain has touched nearly every discourse concerned with the actions

we ascribe to minds, from learning language to suffering grief. The insights of brain science have comprised many of the most visible developments of human knowledge since the mid-twentieth century, from the invention of neural imaging in the 1960s to the engineering of sapient machines (named "artificial intelligence" in 1956), to the prodigious expansion of the pharmaceutical industry from the century's central decades to the present. The growth of these technologies, fields of inquiry, and industries is too vast in scope and significance to be surveyed meaningfully here, and its symptoms may be too plain and pervasive to require account. So widely has the "cognitive revolution" disseminated the materialism of the mind sciences, so efficiently has it channeled into vernacular discourse its terms for describing what happens when we sense, think, and feel, that we have come intuitively to identify subjective experience with objective, biological fact. We know that love is both an experience and a chemical phenomenon, that attention and mood are dimensions of interiority and also processes that can be regulated by drugs, that memories are both representations of lived experience and dynamic networks of activation in the brain. As devoted to love, mood, and memory as poets have ever been, they have inevitably adopted biological terms to frame their accounts of mental experience, from James Merrill's "polypeptides/ on the dimmest shore of consciousness, / in primeval thrall," to Jorie Graham's comparison of migratory salmon to perceptual data moving "upstream" from the retina to the brain.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century it is a commonplace that mind science has, for some time now, been appropriating questions that traditionally belonged to humanists—questions about selfhood, agency, the meanings of "mind" and "body," the origins of knowledge. Within the philosophy of mind, physicalists—who unite in proposing, despite nuanced internal contention, that all phenomena in the universe are of a single substance, and that minds are ultimately like everything else in nature—have drawn extensive support from the insights of accelerating neuroscientific discovery. Jerry Fodor updates Hilary Putnam's

computational functionalism using the concept of neurological modularity; Daniel Dennett adapts Gilbert Ryle's classic critique of "the ghost in the machine" using explicitly evolutionary terms; Paul and Patricia Churchland radically extend Wilfrid Sellars' empiricist epistemology, espousing an extreme form of eliminative materialism; John Searle proposes a "biological naturalism" in which physical causes yield subjective effects, and so on. Physicalist perspectives are so pervasive and widely accepted that the most visible accounts of consciousness in recent decades have been presented by 'hard' scientists of mind—Steven Pinker and Antonio Damasio most notably, perhaps—who interpret the significance of neuroscientific findings to our understanding of emotion, reason, and 'human nature', and who speculate about consciousness in commercial books and essays that circumvent the rigid disciplinary dogmas (and disciplinary standards) of strictly academic genres.[1] The authority of physicalism has contributed to the impression that science has 'ruled out' the existence of an immaterial spirit, that the term "soul" is a superannuated folk-psychological term, that the tendency to dissociate psyche from soma is a conceptual vestige of centuries of ingrained religious superstition.[2]

Despite the hegemony of mechanistic perspectives in recent decades, a minority of philosophers have stressed the "explanatory gaps" in physicalist accounts of consciousness. Thomas Nagel defines the empirically elusive feeling of "what it is like" to be sentient—to have will, to be a *self*—as the characteristic of mind that sets it apart from other aspects of reality.

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[1] Cf. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (1997) and *The Blank Slate* (2002) and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (2003), and *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (2010).

[2] Paul and Patricia Churchland have made a particular target of "the prescientific, commonsense conceptual framework" known as "folk psychology," claiming that terms such "belief, desire, pain, pleasure, love, hate joy, fear, suspicion, memory, recognition, anger, sympathy, intention, and so forth" (3) ought to be eliminated in favor of a neuroscientific terminology they deem more philosophically precise (cf. Churchland and Churchland, *On the Contrary*, 1998). Neuroscientists and cognitive scientists have been among the most visible recent critics of organized religion on rational and empirical grounds, among them Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006) and Sam Harris (*The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, 2010), who with Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have come to be known as "the four horsemen of the New Atheism" (cf. Gibbon, 2011).

Raymond Tallis claims that intentionality, an essential aspect of the experience of mind, "has no place in the material world…since no material object is *about* any other material object" (8)—a thought can be *about* a chair, but a chair cannot be *about* an apple, thus the mind cannot be like everything else in nature. In David Chalmers's lucid taxonomy, there are "easy" and "hard" problems of consciousness; easy problems of consciousness, he explains, are ones that "seem directly susceptible to the standard methods of cognitive science" (200)—they are problems that can be answered by describing a phenomenon in terms of computational or neural mechanisms. How we focus our attention, how exactly we discriminate and react to external stimuli, how wakefulness differs from sleep—these are "easy" problems in that "there is no real issue about whether [they] can be explained scientifically"—even if "getting the details right will probably take a century or two of difficult empirical work." The hard problem of consciousness, on the other hand, is the problem of how it is that matter has consciousness at all, of how organisms become subjects of experience, of how and why it is that a set of automatic processes should give rise to the feeling that there is something it is like to be a self with a coherent inner life. "It is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis," Chalmers accedes, "but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises" (201); twenty-first-century science and philosophy of mind, then, are no closer to resolving this hard problem than Plato or Lucretius or Descartes were, despite the fascinating and rigorous insights the brain sciences have offered over the past several decades.

What may distinguish our age is a tendency to project the sense of *possibility* that has accompanied rapid, demonstrable progress in resolving "easy" problems of consciousness onto the hard problem, a tendency to see all questions about mental life as physiological questions that are subject to inevitable empirical demystification. Whether this is astonishing hubris or good sense—since problems that now seem 'easy' were once hopelessly beyond human reach—remains to be seen. But what this predicament means for the poets who are the particular

subject of this study—James Merrill, A.R. Ammons, Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, Jorie Graham—is not only that they make escalating use of physiological terms to frame metaphysical questions, but that they find the vocabulary of the mind sciences both seductive and intuitively reductive—they see traditional, transcendental metaphors of mind as obsolescent and ever more naïve, yet also, somehow, true to subjective experience and therefore salutary. As lay people outside of the scientific establishment, they have a strong interest in investigating the human implications of the findings of the cognitive sciences; in keeping with the prevailing scientific and philosophical consensus of their time, they tend to view the mind as something essentially material, of one substance with all other visible and invisible forms of creation. Still, as they set out to demonstrate the capacity of the lyric to assimilate the 'news' of twentieth and twenty-first century brain science, they continue to ratify those structures of feeling that have rendered dualistic models of mind, such as body and soul, intuitive and culturally pervasive.

This study argues that recent poems, like the proliferating technologies that scientists have developed to investigate mentality over the past several decades (the EEG, the neuroimage, the connectionist model), have become refined instruments for tracing the scope of cognitive potential in objective and disenchanted terms, and for deconstructing boundaries that have traditionally framed our self-understanding—boundaries between self and world, inside and outside, human will and the furtive biological operations out of which that will arises. Recent poets ingeniously compensate for the finite compass of the embodied mind in lyric form itself; by demonstrating an enterprising talent for philosophical investigation of the experience of mind, they challenge the novel's preeminent position in the study of literary consciousness. Merrill takes up forgetting as a central subject, making elegant, entropic monuments out of the distortions and perforations of embodied memory; Ammons and Creeley become captivated by the motion of thinking, and use innovative, dynamic forms to emphasize the temporal and spatial impositions of embodiment upon the motions of thought; Ashbery luxuriates in the

representational possibilities of distraction as a structural and thematic principle; Graham identifies the anatomical limits of the visual system with our limits of empathetic perspective, conceiving of her poems as prosthetics that can enhance our feeble power to imagine other minds.

The widespread acknowledgement within the contemporary lyric of the mind's connection to (or identity with) physiological states and processes, then, yields two distinct categories of response. One is formal; as poets come to conceive of the mind as an embodied machine, the linguistic reflection of the mind—the machine of the poem—inevitably becomes transformed as well. To illustrate briefly the first kind of response—the poem's answer, in its formal shape, to an embodied conception of the mind—we might return briefly to "Mechanism." Its forty-eight lines are divided in turn into jagged, isomorphic tercets, and comprise a single sentence punctuated by commas and colons. Ammons initiated his widespread use of colons instead of periods in *Expressions of Sea Level*, the volume that contains "Mechanism"; the appearance of the colon coincides with the appearance of the kind of pervasive, clamorously scientific diction that appears in the poem. Here again, for reference, are the lines quoted above:

> honor the chemistries, platelets, hemoglobin kinetics,
> the light-sensitive iris, the enzymic intricacies
> of control,
>
> the gastric transformations, seed
> dissolved to acrid liquors, synthesized into
> chirp, vitreous humor, knowledge,
>
> blood compulsion, instinct: honor the
> unique genes,
> molecules that reproduce themselves, divide into
>
> sets, the nucleic grain transmitted
> in slow change through ages of rising and falling form,
> some cells set aside for the special work, mind

or perception rising into orders of courtship,
territorial rights, mind rising
from the physical chemistries

to guarantee that genes will be exchanged, male
and female met, the satisfactions cloaking a deeper
racial satisfaction:

From Ammons' perspective, the definitive gaps marked by periods rupture the unified substance of the poem—what he calls its "tissue" (Fried 105)—which is itself a representation of the unified texture, the seamless process, of inner life. In another poem he writes that "mind…flows and stalls, holds and gives way" ("The Ridge Farm," *SV* 7), identifying the motions of the mind with the punctuated flow of impulses through cells, with the peristaltic and pulsating operations of his organs, with bodily processes that are defined not by closure but by continuity. As Ammons himself observed, by obviating initial capitals the colons equalize the poem's syntactic parts, transforming it into a reticulated network of equivalent, dynamically interconnected clauses, a rhizomatic structure that is itself an image of the complex biological activity—the billions of operations—that underpin his poem. In poems such as "Corsons Inlet," Ammons uses more open, organic forms to evoke mental flow, but in keeping with the interest "Mechanism" has in the genetic mechanisms through which evolutionary processes "redeem," as Ammons puts it, "random, reproducible" (*E* 35) actions from chance, the poem's identical replications of its idiosyncratic stanza form resemble the integral ur-activity of life, the autonomous action of genetic "molecules that reproduce themselves." Having juxtaposed the intangible system of "morality" to the animate system of the goldfinch, Ammons also evokes with his orderly textual silhouette the emergence of elegant, abstract orders—the coherent orders of rational consciousness—out of apparently chaotic and non-intentional natural events.

"Mechanism," then, expresses Ammons' biological materialism in the substance of its formal structure; its third-person account of the goldfinch defamiliarizes human consciousness and attempts to picture its objective dynamics through both its content and its form. The

second main consequence of cognitive embodiment for the lyric encompasses a set of significant revisions to poets' very conception of the lyric subject. The increasingly passive, physiological mind probed by contemporary poets conspicuously resembles the mind constructed by the discourses of twentieth- and twenty-first-century brain science—the mind that is not transcendental but natural, that is designed by the non-intentional forces of evolution, and whose powers, inextricably bound by the limited resources of specific neural architecture, are fundamentally constrained by space and time. Recognizing that real—fragile, physical, fallible—mechanisms underlie and shape the very structure of human subjectivity, the poets here are acutely sensitive to the ways in which biological systems determine how we perceive the world, exercise reason, and produce knowledge; they envision the mind less as a seat of awesome imaginative power than as a fallible, mortal process that produces an unreliable picture of reality.

To illustrate these consequences of cognitive embodiment for poetic representations of subjectivity we might turn from "Mechanism" to a very different kind of poem. Jorie Graham's "To a Friend Going Blind" makes no reference to science; it explores what it feels like to run up against the limits of embodied perception—limits that close in with distressing urgency upon Sara, Graham's friend, as she loses her power of sight. Two interwoven vignettes unfold within the walls of an Italian town, each an allegory of the process of reckoning with the "built-in/ limits" of the perceiving body: in one, Graham, a disoriented visitor to the town, traces the town's "inner/ perimeter" in a circuit along its medieval walls; in the other, Bruna, a well-adapted native of the city, balances practical and aesthetic concerns as she selects material to sew a dress:

> Today, because I couldn't find the shortcut through,
> I had to walk this town's entire inner
> perimeter to find
> where the medieval walls break open
> in an eighteenth century
> arch. The yellow valley flickered on and off
> through cracks and the gaps
> for guns. Bruna is teaching me

to cut a pattern.
Saturdays we buy the cloth.
She takes it in her hands
like a good idea, feeling
for texture, grain, the built-in
limits. It's only as an afterthought she asks
and do you think it's beautiful?
Her measuring tapes hang down, corn-blond and endless,
from her neck.
When I look at her
I think *Rapunzel*,
how one could climb that measuring,
that love.
But I was saying,
I wandered all along the street that hugs the walls,
a needle floating
on its cloth. Once
I shut my eyes and felt my way
along the stone. Outside
is the cashcrop, sunflowers, as far as one can see. Listen,
the wind rattles in them,
a loose worship
seeking an object,
an interruption. Sara,
the walls are beautiful. They block the view.
And it feels rich to be
inside their grasp.
When Bruna finishes her dress
it is the shape of what has come
to rescue her. She puts it on. (*E*, 27)

Graham extends the reach and relevance of her consolatory poem by stressing that the extreme privation that awaits Sara as she goes blind differs only in degree from the prohibitions the body imposes upon all human sensation. Both vignettes center, appropriately, upon moments of touch. Relinquishing sight altogether as she feels her way along the stone, Graham imagines sunflowers "as far as one can see"—a view that clearly transcends the real, impoverished view she pieces together from her glimpses of the blurred "yellow valley" that flickers through the "cracks and the gaps/ for guns." The deteriorating wall is an inexorable physical limit that is also, its cracks reveal, vulnerable to time; the wall is a figure for the boundary of the corporeal senses that conducts the given, imperfectly, to 'inner' life. There is no "shortcut through" to a fuller picture of reality; all looking is "a *loose* worship/ seeking an object," a humble, hopeful

endeavor to touch the actual through approximation, to feel out knowledge through a vast, concrete array of embodied constraints.

Just as Sara, offstage, forcibly confronts the limits her body imposes upon her vision, Graham, the disoriented visitor, butts up against the surrounding walls, searching unsuccessfully for someplace they might "break open." The "texture, grain, the built-in/ limits" of Bruna's cloth remind Graham of the experiential texture of an "idea," for thought, she reminds us, *feels* material; even a "good idea," in its tangible immediacy, has constraints recognizable to both the senses and the intellect, and as a product of the embodied mind it must necessarily express the limits of material substance. The question, then, is what to *make* of those limits, how to reckon with the confinements of the material without reference to anything beyond the material. This recuperative act of making, of course, is precisely what the artist Bruna accomplishes; aware but unmindful of the city's walls, sensitive to the possibilities of the finite cloth, she is preoccupied with generating a workable, inhabitable, beautiful form out of the constraints of physical substance. It is not because she subordinates aesthetic concerns to practical ones that she asks, as an afterthought, "*and do you think it's beautiful?*" The question is an afterthought because Bruna is equipped, however humble the material, to make it so. She not only accepts limits, she masters and wields them; the measuring tapes she uses to shape the dress drape over her shoulders like Rapunzel's braids, the archetypal image of escape through beauty; when Bruna puts on the dress it is "the shape of what has come/ to rescue her." The consolatory reckoning with limits that accompanies any act of creation—particularly the act of creating poetry, which is both confined and liberated by its own forms of measure—is the model Graham proposes for redeeming the exigent limitations of the perceiving body.

The poets in this study are always walking the perimeter of interiority, feeling its limits. They attribute to the built-in constraints of a physiological mind our intuition that human experience misses, mistakes, and distorts the given in countless knowable and unknowable ways.

Cognitive breakdowns and failures, from forgetting a word to going blind, particularly highlight these omissions and distortions, rendering the body's invisible determinations of conscious life suddenly obvious; like lightning in a dim landscape, failures of perception, memory and attention violently illuminate a correlation between the scope of human mental power and the frailty of the mortal body. While in "To a Friend" Graham exhibits unusual poise and equanimity as she responds to the illuminating disruption of Sara's blindness, like many of her peers she tends to see in the matter of written language an opportunity to translate and redeem the imperfections of thought.

The bearings of cognitive embodiment upon form and upon the subject are thus convergent and integral, and they raise further questions about the ambition to situate contemporary poetry in the age of the brain. Why have those of us who are interested in literature written since the cognitive revolution largely neglected contemporary literature's ambitious and self-conscious representations of the embodied mind? Of the literary genres that necessarily respond to the convergence of mind science and philosophy of mind in the late twentieth century, why isolate the implications of that convergence for poetry in particular? How is the conception of the lyric "I" that has been transformed by cognitive materialism meaningfully distinct from the conceptions of previous generations of poets?

Predictably, perhaps, the influence of the philosophy and science of the mind upon contemporary literature has been recognized primarily within the study of science fiction;[3] N. Katherine Hayles, for example, has explored the role of cybernetics and distributed cognition in

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[3] Outside of the contemporary period, long-standing recognition that philosophy of mind deeply informs the phenomenology and aesthetics of Romantic poetry has encouraged literary critics to explore the commerce between mind science and literary representations of cognition during the Romantic period (see, for example, Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001) and Noel Jackson's *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (2006)). Likewise, there has been vast contextual inquiry into modernism's formative absorption of psychoanalytic theory, neurology, and the philosophy of mind. Observing how the cultural transformations of modernism "occurred precisely when the distinctively modern disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis began to establish their "scientific" foundations and to achieve the intellectual, institutional, and professional forms in which we largely know them today," Mark Micale assembles an impressive variety of essays addressing the "intellectual traffic that linked these different cultural fields" (1) in *The Mind of Modernism* (2004).

literary constructions of the posthuman in novels by Neal Stephenson, Cole Perriman, Greg Bear, Philip K. Dick, and others.[4] Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2* (1995) and *The Echo Maker* (2006) have attracted considerable critical notice for their deft navigation of the schism between the "two cultures" and their exploration of the explanatory gaps that permeate accounts of mental experience offered by the cognitive sciences.[5] Robert Chodat, who has drawn insight from *Galatea 2.2* in assessing philosophical critiques of artificial intelligence, has thought expansively about the participation of post-positivist philosophies of mind in shaping "the relation of the intentional to the non-intentional" in canonical twentieth-century literature, considering how "questions of mind, meaning, and modern science" (20) inform depictions of agency in the works of Gertrude Stein, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, and Don DeLillo.[6] Chodat argues that literary critics must address not only the ideological, linguistic and socio-historical determinations that shape modernist and post-modernist representations of subjectivity (above and below horizons of authorial awareness), but also the problems of agency "raised by modern biology and brain science" (20), since "intentional behavior has never been so regularly described as reducible to the non-intentional: neural configurations, brain chemistry, genes, and so forth" (19). In a similar vein, Jennifer Ashton begins to explore some of the implications of cognitive materialism for lyric subjectivity in *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (2006), where she argues that the influence of cognitive science leads Jorie Graham to portray the self as an outcome of biological interactions, and that "poetic agency as such becomes…one more nonintentional material cause" (161).

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[4] See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999).

[5] Joseph Tabbi's *Cognitive Fictions* (2002), for example, explores the echoing material "ecologies" of neural and media networks in the work of Powers and other late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century prose writers. See also D. Quentin Miller's "Deeper Blues, or the Posthuman Prometheus: Cybernetic Renewal and the Late-Twentieth Century American Novel" (2005), Jeffrey Pence's "The End of Technology: Memory in Richard Powers's Galatea 2.2" (2002), and Arthur Saltzman's chapter on Powers in *This Mad "Instead": Governing Metaphors in Contemporary Fiction* (2000).

[6] Cf. "Naturalism and Narrative, Or, What Computers and Human Beings Can't Do" (2007) and *Worldly Acts and Sentient Things* (2008).

While the stakes of our conception of the mind for our ideas about what art does and how it works are at the heart of recent cognitive approaches to literature, the forms that cognitive literary criticism has come to take have perhaps led those critics and theorists who are vitally concerned with the bearing of the brain sciences upon the production and interpretation of literary texts *away* from those artists who explicitly share their interests. These critics have favored using the discoveries of the many empirical and speculative disciplines identified with the investigation of the mind to uncover universals of literary production and reception. This methodological orientation may have caused cognitive critics to overlook the conscious, specific uses to which writers have put the cognitive sciences to individuate their works of art.[7] Chodat and Ashton, in their thinking about how canonical writers represent epistemological and ethical problems raised by the science of mind, necessarily address dimensions of literary difference that have notoriously disappeared in the blind spots of cognitive criticism—the idiosyncratic

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[7] The relatively high-profile field of cognitive rhetoric, for instance, has stressed the fundamental importance of metaphor in shaping human thought, addressing the ways in which linguistic and conceptual structures operate in figurative language. Examples include George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's early cognitive metaphor theory, Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier's attempts to describe the cognitive mechanics of literary metaphor in "conceptual blending theory," and Reuven Tsur's "cognitive poetics," which shares Lakoff, Johnson, Turner, and Fauconnier's emphasis on the universal mechanisms through which literary language produces meaning, but also demonstrates the bias of cognitive literary theory and criticism toward reader response.

This disposition toward the universal and the acontextual is evident in many other forms of cognitive literary criticism that I cannot hope to summarize here. For an overview of recent developments in cognitive narratology, for example, see Monika Fludernik's "Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative" (2010); see also Patrick Colm Hogan's seminal essay "Literary Universals" (1997) and his recent monograph *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion* (2011), Blakey Vermeule's *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (2009), and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) for a sense of the diversity of current approaches that focus on universal conditions of literary production and consumption. Responding to the kinds of trenchant criticism of cognitive approaches offered by Tony Jackson, Hans Adler and Sabine Gross in the early 2000s, in *The Work of Fiction* (2004) Ellen Spolsky and Alan Richardson define the "second generation in the cognitive study of literature" (x) in part through acknowledgement that "literary universals cannot be understood apart from the specific sociocultural contexts in which they are instantiated," and that "Cognitive approaches are at their best complementary rather than antithetical to contextualist approaches" (24). Supplementing his helpful "field map" of cognitive literary studies in his introduction to *The Work of Fiction*, in his prolegomenon to *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (2010) Alan Richardson discusses and cites at length the many recent critics who have sought to redress the disposition toward the universal and the acontextual that has left cognitive approaches to literature—however innovative from an interdisciplinary standpoint—open to censure from within literary studies for indifference to the cultural and historical embeddedness of literary texts. Readers interested in critical attempts to synthesize cognitive approaches with poststructuralist ones, particularly with new historicism and cultural studies, would do well to begin with these essays and with Lisa Zunshine's introduction to *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (2010).

biographical formations of writers, their governing themes, their positions in literary history. A great strength of such perspectives is that they can accommodate both the eccentricity and the representativeness of individual artists as lay imaginers of the personal meanings of scientific discovery. Despite their intellectual development within epistemes shaped by science, this is how literary artists (and critics) in an age of rigid disciplinarity are likely to see themselves—as illiterate immigrants, tourists, even poachers—when they advance into fields circumscribed by empirical terms. James Merrill is one such hesitant wayfarer; in his epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* JM (as he calls himself there) professes to comply only grudgingly when spirits at the Ouija board command him to write "POEMS OF SCIENCE" (113): "Poems of *Science*? Ugh./ The very thought" (*CL* 109)).

Pronouncing the rise of the "neuronovel" over the first decade of the twenty-first century, Marco Roth claims that "what has been variously referred to as the novel of consciousness or the psychological or confessional novel—the novel, at any rate, about the workings of a mind—has transformed itself into the neurological novel, wherein the mind becomes the brain" (139). Roth has in mind a group of Anglo-American novels that center on neurologically abnormal characters—characters with disorders such as Tourette's Syndrome (Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn*), autism (Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*), paranoid schizophrenia (John Wray, *Lowboy*) and Capgras Syndrome (Rivka Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances*)—or, alternatively, that center on professionals within the mind sciences who study, diagnose, and in some cases treat such conditions (a neurosurgeon in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, a cognitive neurologist in Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*). Like much neuroscientific study itself—and like the many recent poems that are devoted to phenomenological ruptures that can be traced to physiological causes—the neurological novel often uses cognitive dysfunction to explore, through contrast and defamiliarization, the operations of 'normal' minds.

Neuronovels thus tend to depict characters who see the world through an immediate, personal awareness that the nature of experience is highly contingent upon the specific permutations of particular bodies. Such novels, according to Roth, largely reflect, but sometimes critique, "the new reductionism of mind to brain" that pervades journalistic and popular discourse, a reductionism that "explain[s] proximate causes of mental function in terms of neurochemistry, and ultimate causes in terms of evolution and heredity" (140). Roth interprets the readiness of neuronovelists to absorb scientific influences as a symptom of shifting conditions within humanistic discourse—the waning of the "linguistic turn" and the skepticism concerning theoretical and clinical incarnations of Freudian psychoanalysis. He gently condemns neuronovelists for grasping at the low-hanging fruit of a fresh and trendy empirical vocabulary, even to the point of "ced[ing]…ground to science" (150). It is as a matter of fashion, he suggests, that novelists flock to the next big thing in the history of ideas: "As young writers in Balzac walk around Paris pitching historical novels with titles like *The Archer of Charles IX*, in imitation of Walter Scott, today an aspiring novelist might seek his subject matter in a neglected corner or along some new frontier of neurology" (139).

The topical neurological novel *per se* may be a relatively recent phenomenon, but canonical prose fiction has for decades been prone to identifying the "workings of a mind" with the neurochemical workings of a living brain. In 1947 Samuel Beckett's Murphy felt his mind to be hermetically detached from nature— in his own words, "bodytight"—but by the early sixties Thomas Pynchon narrates Stencil's dreams of moving through "immense lightning bursts of nerve-impulses" and "waving dendrites" (523) in search of the soul in *V* (1963), and in *White Noise* (1985) the adolescent sage Heinrich describes the thrill-seeker Mercator: "He thinks he's happy but it's just a nerve cell in his brain that's getting too much stimulation or too little stimulation" (174). In *Infinite Jest* (1996) Orin watches a Canadian documentary called *"SCHIZOPHRENIA, MIND OR BODY?"* looking on in horror as doctors conduct a P.E.T.

scan on a "a dyed-in-the-wool paranoid schizophrenic" named Fenton. In Wallace's mordant description, Fenton is dehumanized by both the experience of the test and the film's assumptions about science's access to human subjectivity:

> The voiceover evinced great clipped good cheer as it explained that well, yes, poor old Fenton here was more or less hopeless as an extra-institutional functioning unit, but that, on the up-side, science could at least give his existence some sort of meaning by studying him very carefully to help learn how schizophrenia manifested itself in the human body's brain…that, in other words, with the aid of cutting-edge Positron-Emission Topography or 'P.E.T.' technology…they could scan and study how different parts of poor old Fenton's dysfunctional brain emitted positrons in a whole different topography than your average hale and hearty nondelusional God-fearing Albertan's brain. (second ellipsis mine)

The thesis of the documentary, Orin concludes, "was turning out pretty clearly to be *SCHIZOPHRENIA: BODY*."

While Ian McEwan and Richard Powers explore the practical and philosophical implications of cognitive materialism by focusing upon the subjects and practitioners of brain science, Pynchon, Delillo, and Wallace set out to accomplish similar goals by very different means. Like the comparably canonical and aesthetically diverse post-modernist poets here, the latter novelists place scientific insight where most of us, as uninitiated observers outside the scientific establishment, encounter it—on the periphery of our experience, as a conceptual backdrop against which everyday life plays out. This backdrop comes into focus on particular, if crucial and common, occasions: when our bodies malfunction through illness or injury; when we ask what becomes of the self when the body dies; when addiction pits conscious will against corporeal will; when we consider the inaccessible subjectivities of non-human animals; when computers seem to 'think'; when the inconceivable leads us to confront the limits of the imagination, and so on. Such canonical writers of contemporary prose and poetry are at times awed by mind science and at times embattled defenders of human mystery; disinclined to focus myopically upon the neurological, they tend not to isolate materialist terms but to absorb them

into an ambient din of overheard discourses—a din that coalesces, at times, into a syncretic music, and devolves, at others, into menacing, meaningless noise.

Ambitious literary fiction, then, has made a *theme* of mind science and its meanings, but it has not—as it has in the past when contemporary philosophy of mind has presented new terms of self-understanding—meaningfully reconstituted itself as an art form. Ian Watt identifies the advent of the novel with the emergence of the Cartesian subject, claiming that "Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century" (12). Robert Humphrey, accounting for the stylistic invention of literary stream of consciousness, observes that "Among the philosopher-psychologists, William James and Henri Bergson convinced the following generations that consciousness flows like a stream…thus, flux and *durée* are aspects of psychic life for which new methods of narration had to be developed if writers were to depict them" (120). The question of what new method of narration, if any, will accompany the "spectacular developments in psychology, linguistics, philosophy of mind, and neuroscience that form the central story of Anglo-American intellectual life from the 1950s to the present" (Richardson 39) remains open, however, for stylistic responses within the texture of recent prose fiction are difficult to discern and await critical investigation.[8]

Recent lyric poetry, on the other hand, has reacted both thematically and formally to these developments, asking how this endemic philosophical reorientation ought to transform a literary work's arrangement of words on the page, and how an altered conception of the mind that underpins the lyric "I" might fundamentally alter what it means to write a poem. The genre has surely proven to be especially responsive for a number of reasons. The modern lyric's

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[8] One instance of formal response within the novel is the experimental novel *La Medusa* by Vanessa Place, a satire that explores neurological modularity's resemblances to nineteenth-century phrenology, and whose chapters correspond to parts of the brain.

plastic formal contours and its openness to 'organic' forms have encouraged poets to explore correspondences between physiological and literary structure, enabling the poems themselves to be physically shaped by the evolving concepts of mind they express. Even in an age of open forms, the creative advantages of self-imposed limitation tend to be particularly obvious and attractive to poets, and have surely also attuned them to the aesthetic possibilities of the built-limits associated with biological materialism. While Marco Roth attributes the advent of the neurological novel to "a cultural (and, in psychology proper, a disciplinary) shift away from environmental and relational theories of personality back to the study of brains themselves, as the source of who we are" (140), recent poets are notably *disinclined* to pit nature against the 'environments' of language and culture. Inheritors of Nietzsche's skepticism of language, Marx's skepticism of ideology, Freud's skepticism of the transparency of consciousness to itself, they tend to adopt an ethos of suspicion with respect to the body, couching the embodied mind as yet another system that invisibly mediates the production of knowledge, and that inevitably conceals as much as it reveals.

Finally, because the expressive short-form poem has, from the very beginning, been devoted to the articulation of individual consciousness, and has been modest (relative to prose, drama, and epic) in its attempts to represent history and social life outside personal experience, the lyric is uniquely receptive to and integrally invested in cultural assumptions about the nature of subjectivity. This raises the continuing question posed by literary history: how has the conception of the lyric "I" that has been transformed by cognitive materialism become distinct from the conceptions of previous generations of poets? M.H. Abrams, among others, has thoroughly traced how philosophical developments of the counter-Enlightenment influenced the Romantics as they formed and promoted their boldly humanist vision of mental power, revising earlier portrayals of the mind as a passive, imitative reflector of the world outside the self.[9] The

[9] Cf. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953).

aesthetic philosophies of the Romantics empowered the poet not only to discern evidence of divine order in nature through intuitive perception, but to "half-create" reality through experience—from Wordsworth's conception of the mind as an "auxiliar light" (48) that shapes as it illuminates, to Coleridge's definition of the imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation" (144), to Shelley's vision of Mont Blanc as the sublime image of imaginative power, to Blake's extravagant sense of his own eternal, visionary mind, in which there are "studies & Chambers filled with books & pictures of old," he writes, "which I wrote & painted in ages of Eternity before my mortal life; & those works are the delight & Study of Archangels" (76).

As twentieth-century poetry's perspectives upon the mind begin to arrange themselves, in hindsight, into "one clear view," we can see that the Romantics' conception of the mind as an infinite reservoir of possibility laid the foundation for modernism's monumental endeavors to conjure supreme fictions, to shore fragments against ruin, to make the chaos of history cohere in epic forms. Contrasted with the fragile, embodied mind of late twentieth-century poetry, the omnipotent, transcendental minds of high Romanticism and high modernism appear more alike than different. W.B. Yeats, the spiritualist, pictures the mind as an instrument of supernatural manifestation immaterially tapped into a *spiritus mundi*. T.S. Eliot sees in the elegant architecture of memory "clear relations," and "divisions and precisions," and conceives of the poet's mind as a numinous, catalytic shred of platinum—"the more perfect the artist the more separate the man who suffers from the mind that creates" (31). The jagged assemblage of the *Cantos* audaciously illustrates Pound's vision of the mind as a magnet commanding iron filings into the shape of a rose; Wallace Stevens, whose Blakean "eye altering alters all," attributes to the mind the capacity to arrange, deepen, and enchant experience. William Carlos Williams' and Marianne Moore's piercing forms of observational clarity rarely admit the physiological glitches or constraints poets pervasively identify with perception after modernism,

from Robert Lowell's "The Flaw" and Sylvia Plath's "The Eye-Mote" to Elizabeth Bishop's ubiquitous double-takes ("Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!" [37]) and Seamus Heaney's interpretation of vision as a faculty "Focused and drawn in by what bar[s] the way" (22). And W.H. Auden, who describes Freud at the time of his death in 1939 as "a whole climate of opinion// under whom we conduct our different lives," writes under an altered climate three decades later; in "Talking to Myself" (1971), dedicated to Oliver Sacks, it is the "mortal manor" of the brain "but for whose neural instructions I could never/ acknowledge what is or imagine what is not" (297).[10]

From the perspective of literary history, then, this study diverges from many recent interpretations of twentieth-century poetry in asserting a fundamental aesthetic rupture that divides modernist poetry from the poetry that has succeeded it.[11] The selection of poets represented here also makes an implicit claim for the *convergence* of "raw" and "cooked" post-war poetries in a set of critical suppositions about our aptitudes as observers, knowers, and interpreters, and in a host of significatory practices that reimagine lyric subjectivity in physiological terms. Charles Altieri has claimed that a mid-century shift in American poetics from humanism to anti-humanism meant that with the "breakthrough" poetries of the 1960s, the model of the self as an agent who *informs* his reality gives way to a model of the self who is passively *informed* by the conditions of a specific environment—social, cultural, and biological

[10] Gertrude Stein is arguably the exception that proves the rule, since William James' physiological psychology is a critical source for Stein as she frames the epistemological indeterminacies that have contributed to her reputation as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. In *Irresistible Dictations: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (2001), Steven Meyer traces the deep influence of William James's radical empiricism, and physiological psychology more generally, upon Stein, who worked closely with James and Hugo Münsterberg as a student at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory before briefly attending medical school at Johns Hopkins University. Meyer proposes "that the neuron doctrine played a crucial, and among major writers unique, role in the development of Stein's compositional practices" (xx).

[11] See James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (1997), Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism* (2002), Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (2005).

(612).[12] This study attempts to redress the indisputable precedence social and cultural 'environments' have taken over natural, biological ones in critical discussions of American poetry over recent decades. Each chapter is devoted to one or two poets, focusing on a specific cognitive faculty (memory, thinking, attention, perception) whose power is somehow undermined or significantly contracted through the poet's identification of that faculty with its concrete, somatic aspect; each chapter, in turn, demonstrates a central form of aesthetic compensation that redeems the body's circumscription of mental experience. The four chapters also focus, in turn, upon the aesthetic, formal, epistemological, and ethical implications of cognitive embodiment upon poetic practice.

The first chapter argues for the significance of forgetting to James Merrill's later poetry, tracing the empirical, biological terms with which he frames his experiences of mnemonic loss. Critiquing the ageless notion of lyric as a permanent monument, Merrill adopts the remembered image poised on the verge of oblivion as a central metaphor for the poem that coalesces tenuously on the white void of the page; forgetting, as a process anchored in the body, becomes an immediate reminder of the losses that punctuate mortality and that typify the translation of life into art. Troubling the critical commonplace that Merrill's representations of memory are "Proustian," the chapter demonstrates that the 'effortless' epiphanies of involuntary memory in his poetry have been misappraised, and that in the ennobling labor and loss of memory Merrill finds a more subtle reflector of human experience.

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[12] In his argument that post-modernist poetry exhibits "renewed attention to the biological…the necessary as opposed to the creative" (613), Altieri has confessional poets in mind in particular. He writes of Robert Lowell: "In Lowell's own case, *Life Studies* initiated the habit of conceiving human problems along the metaphorical lines of biological process, a tendency which has grown more and more pronounced in his subsequent poetry. Along with the emergence of the biological metaphor goes an increasing passivity, a surrender of a faith in man's creative processes in favor of at least the appearance of becoming merely a vehicle for experience" (615-616).

Representations of thinking in the poetry of Robert Creeley and A.R. Ammons are the subject of the second chapter, which traces the poets' respective transitions from transcendental to embodied concepts of mind and the substantive transformations of form that emerge as a result. Creeley experiments with lineation and sequence to stress the temporal constraints that govern the mind's distinctive motions, picturing thought, for example, as a paltry trail of breadcrumbs strewn behind experience; he revises his emphasis on spatial ("projective") organization, developing emphatically linear forms to represent thinking as a process that "stumbles after" experience in real time. Ammons, on the other hand, adopts the biological membrane as a central metaphor of mind (and of language, and of the poem); his depictions of bodily functions abet his pervasive neuroscientific vocabulary in representing ideas as imperfect outcomes of osmotic, physiological "digestion." In addition to clarifying his use of the (textual) colon as an apparatus of assimilation and disintegration, Ammons' metaphors of the mind can help us understand how he wields form and syntax as digestive structures that subliminally "process" meaning.

Turning to the faculty of attention, the third chapter considers Ashbery's distractibility, revealing the ways in which he identifies his incessant and often exuberant failures of attention with embodiment. Though it has been suggested that his lapses of attention arise from overstimulation in the information age, Ashbery's distractions prove to be ones that his mind presents to itself, revealing our powerlessness over the cognitive processes through which we derive our knowledge of the world. Consistent with his aversion to all forms of hierarchy, Ashbery sees that the ambition to privilege any entity as a *sustained* object of concentration is invariably doomed—even the soul "fits/ its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention." Adopting capacious forms that encourage excesses of inclusion, Ashbery hoards "the gigantic/ Bits and pieces of knowledge" the mind manages to retain.

The final chapter addresses Jorie Graham's sensitivity to the boundaries of visual perspective, boundaries she identifies with the anatomical limits of the visual system and with the limits of human sympathy. Graham worries that the suffering of others recedes all too easily to the periphery of our own experience, and therefore to be vigilant and circumspect—to be as inclusive a receptor as possible for as long as possible—is for her both an aesthetic ambition and an ethical one. While Graham's cognitive materialism has seemed to some critics to entail an abrogation of authorial agency that allies her with the language poets, Graham's recent poetry stridently critiques the influence of empiricist interpretations of human experience upon the way we view ourselves as moral agents. Even as she embodies the mind with an explicitness and self-awareness unprecedented in American poetry, she responds to her own criticisms by drawing her lyric voice into resounding coherence in order to assume "the mantle of accountability."

Graham has frequently recounted in interviews the moment when she was called to poetry; as she passed down an NYU corridor, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" wafted out to her from a classroom like a siren's song. With the image of "a magic lantern" that "threw the nerves in patterns on a screen," T.S. Eliot slips into Prufrock's voice his vision of a poetics that might assimilate and project a distinctively modern way of imagining consciousness in relation to the body; writing in 2002, Helen Vendler describes that image as a "formulation that is still a challenge thrown down to the poets of this century" ("Ammons' Last" 174). Eliot might have had, in 1920, an inkling of how urgent that challenge would become, but he could hardly have imagined how ingeniously poets of his own century, and of this one, would greet it.

CHAPTER ONE

"Dreamy Blinkings-Out": Embodiment and the Encroachment of Oblivion in James Merrill

Inherent in the etymology of "oblivion," the void into which the forgotten recedes, is an underlying metaphor of mind. Conjoining the Latin *levis* ("smooth") with *ob*, a preposition that connotes progression and opposition, "oblivion" likens forgetting to erasure, to a tangible process of smoothing over. The images James Merrill uses to figuratively embody aspects of memory are in some cases conventional (mirror, projector, computer, bank) and in others novel (postcard, puzzle, hoop-jumping equestrienne), but they have in common the harsh light Merrill casts upon them as he illuminates their faults. Through both oblique cues and explicit association he identifies those faults with memory's biological underpinnings, and as his metaphors evolve, they become increasingly self-conscious in linking the phenomenology of forgetting with its dynamics as an empirical, cognitive event.

Forging a felicitous poetic syncretism out of what he identifies to be the countervailing mainstreams of Western thought—"Aristotle/ And Plato, gristle and dream" (604)—Merrill is disposed to combine scientific materialism's concreteness with the abstract, universalizing resonances of myth. The nine muses who "ROAM THE DIMLY VAULTED BRINE-/ ENCRUSTED CHAMBERS MAN CALLS BRAIN" (*CL* 401) and the polypeptides "On the dimmest shore of consciousness,/…in primeval thrall" (*CL* 110) demonstrate the aesthetic gratification Merrill derives from the chimerical union of biology and fancy, a union through which he freely recognizes scientific ways of imagining the mind even as he firmly resists the

modern tendency to privilege them.[1] Merrill admitted a dilettantish familiarity with non-specialist scientific (and pseudo-scientific) texts—Isaac Asimov's *Guide to Science*, Lewis Thomas' *Lives of a Cell*, Arthur Young's *Reflexive Universe: Evolution of Consciousness,* Julian Jaynes' *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, to name a few—and his scattered borrowings of their diction and imagery demonstrate the extent to which their content both captures his imagination and supplies, when desired, conceptual frameworks for the translation of spiritual experience into secular, empirical terms. He writes of Dante, that "like Milton or Yeats he had mediumistic powers—a sustaining divinatory intelligence which spoke to him, if only (as Julian Jaynes would have it) from that center of the brain's right hemisphere which corresponds to Weinecke's [*sic*] area on the left" (*CPr* 184).[2] While such a statement demonstrates Merrill's awareness of the corroborative utility of a scientific vocabulary in overcoming a certain kind of readerly skepticism, it fails to reveal how the idea of a mind underpinned by material constraints inflects his interpretation of experience. In a concept of mind no longer imaginable as freestanding, Merrill not only finds new metaphors and images for the embodied mind, and a

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[1] Recoiling from the "translucent, half effaced" language he associates with "Poems of Science," JM asserts in *Mirabell's Books of Number*: "Opaque/ Words like 'quarks' or 'mitochondria'/ Aren't *words* at all…./Whereas through Wave, Ring, Bond, through Spectral Lines/ And Resonances blows a breath of life" (*CL* 110).

[2] Julian Jaynes (1920-1997) was a Princeton biology professor who proposed that early, "bicameral" humans had not evolved the meta-conscious awareness that characterizes modern humans' experience of consciousness, and that before roughly 1200 BCE neural activity in the left hemisphere of the brain was modulated by the right temporal cortex, which projected auditory verbal hallucinations that were interpreted as the voices of the gods. (For consideration of the possible relationship between Jaynes' conception of the bicameral mind and the bats of the *Sandover* cosmos, see Stephen Yenser's *The Consuming Myth*, 263-4). Brian McHale points to the Ouija dictation of *Sandover* as "open to…naturalization and 'taming,' mainly in psychological or even neurological terms. For instance, Merrill more than once cited Julian Jaynes's account, at one time celebrated (though no longer taken seriously, if it ever was), of communication between the cerebral hemispheres as the organic basis of 'inspiration'" (42). Jaynes' seminal, if controversial text has in fact significantly influenced Daniel Dennett (see *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006)) and Antonio Damasio (see *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999) and *Self Comes to Mind* (2010)).

Werneike's area is located in the left temporal lobe, and refers to a region of the brain concerned with the production and comprehension of language. Werneike's aphasia effects several aspects of verbal processing, impairing the ability to form comprehensible utterances; speech is riddled with "semantic substitutions as well as the production of nonwords (neologisms)" (Encyclopedia of the Brain, *Werneike's Area*). Though language content is affected, the production of correct syntax is not; Werneike's aphasia thus resembles the affliction suffered by the patient described in part 6 of "Losing the Marbles," for whom "aphasia skewered/ The world upon a word," whose syntax is filled with "sorry spaces" (see discussion below).

current language appropriate for a mind embodied to speak, but uncovers an organic, anti-monumental model for the poem in the living brain. Such insight cannot be gained by enumerating the dispersed poetic intimations of Merrill's embodied philosophy of mind, for only poems that address Merrill's most cherished themes—love, loss, memory, poetry—can fully express the affective implications of existing in a world where "Mind is Matter" (*CL 150*).

That the mind's embeddedness in nature announces itself to Merrill first and foremost through the experience of forgetting is evident in *Verse for Urania*, first published in *Divine Comedies* (1976). The poem looks to the forbidding emptiness of deep space to express the feeling of absence generated by mnemonic loss. The central event of the poem is the baptism of the poet's Greek-American goddaughter, Urania, as she assumes the name borne by Milton's "Heav'nly muse," the traditional Greek muse of astronomy. Merrill's awkward participation in the religious ritual and good-natured but irritable initiation into the office of godparent are offset by his harmonious intimacy with the child, who is his twin at life's opposite pole; asserting a generational connection "in time embedded," he affirms that "Our bond was sacred, being secular" (391). He has in mind the temporal sense of "secular" (Latin *saeculum*, generation, century, age), for the arrival of "the newborn child, whose age begins" ushers in the poet's own childless middle age, which he prematurely, and somewhat petulantly, names his "second childhood" (390). The stages of life represented by the infant and the poet prove also to be the ages of man, for the primitive innocence "in which our wisest apes/…Stared the random starlight into shapes" (387) has given way to a benighted modernity in which an "unlettered urban glow/ On everyone's horizon turns to gist,/ That rhetoric of starry beasts and gods" (386). In the poem's scheme of human history, the progress of man has entailed a devastating process of forgetting, whereby myths that once shaped human experience in accordance with our spiritual and imaginative needs have been reduced to a vague "gist" within cultural

consciousness, displaced by scientific epistemes that value technology as a source of knowledge before the "old truths" preserved in art.

In *Verse for Urania*, the imagination's vulnerability to the allure of celestial bodies forms the point of convergence between the minds of early man and our own minds as children; always captivated by symmetries between the inner world of private experience and the outer world of public action, Merrill frequently compares lapses of personal memory with lapses of historical memory. Although we once knew the constellations by heart, time has wrought upon us—as adults who were once children, and as sophisticated moderns who were once primitive ancients—an incremental reversion back to an original, pre-imaginative ignorance:

> From out there notions reach us yet, but few
> And far between as those first names we knew
> Already without having to look up,
> Children that we were, the Chair, the Cup,
> But each night dimmer, children that we are,
> Each night regressing, dumber by a star. (387)

Merrill imagines the knowledge lost to oblivion as a spray of stars blinking out. But the image of waning stellar fire reminds him of the similarly delicate biological fire that courses through neurons, JM's "Electric currents [that] quicken brain and heart" (*CL* 380). As he addresses Urania, considering her rapid growth in light of his own accelerating decline, Merrill reintroduces the image of stellar fire to describe the embodied origins of his mnemonic atrophy:

> Where has time flown? Since I began
> You've learned to stand for seconds, balancing,
> And look away at my approach, coyly.
> My braincells continue to snuff out like sparks
> At the average rate of 100,000 a day—
> The intellect suspiciously resembling
> Eddington's universe in headlong flight
> From itself. (388)

Throughout his mature verse, Merrill imagistically associates the brain with the firmament, identifying the biological determinations that structure human experience with the mysterious conscriptions of human fate. Here he sets the growing emptiness of the expanding universe,

which in its own unfathomably vast lifetime is projected to pass from a stelliferous heyday to a "degenerate" age of starlessness, against the expanding mental void left by his aging neurons' degenerate reconstructions of the past.[3] Forgetting is the prevailing index of mortality in *Verse for Urania*; through the mundane affliction of mnemonic loss, the speaker registers his anxiety not only about his own life's "headlong flight/ From itself," but about Urania's mortality as well. Crystallizing the poem's association of the transience of memory with the transience of life, in Urania's nursery there sits an embroidered memento that has utterly failed as an aid to memory—"your great-/ Grandmother's? No one remembers"—and that bears, "appliquéd on black," an ominous message; its silk threads might have been entwined by the Fates themselves: "ΚΙ ΑΥΤΟ ΘΑ ΠΕΡΑΣΗ—This too will pass" (386).

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates asserts that writing "will create forgetfulness in [writers'] souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves" (Jowett 3:484).[4] Merrill possesses the poet's natural fascination with the rapport between writing and memory, but like Valéry, who writes that "Without forgetting one is no more than a parrot,"[5] and Mallarmé, for whom Roger Dragonetti affirms "forgetting is a necessary condition of poetic status" (23), Merrill also acknowledges the reciprocities that obtain between poetry and forgetting. Within *Verse for Urania* he reflects upon the process of bringing the poem into being, of shaping his memories surrounding the

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[3] Supporters of expanding universe cosmologies, including Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, inevitably speculate about future eras in the finite 'life' of the universe; I borrow my terms here from Fred Adams and Geoffrey Laughlin's *The Five Ages of the Universe* (1999), which divides the timeline of the universe into the Primordial Era of the Big Bang, our current Stelliferous Era of active star and galaxy formation, the Degenerate Era in which stars will cease to be born, the Black Hole Era in which organized matter will remain only in the form of black holes, and the Dark Era in which the constituent particles of the diffuse matter that remains will "annihilate."

[4] The enmity Plato proposes between natural memory and writing finds unexpected support in a form of therapy that has been shown to help patients suffering from hypermnesia, a condition in which pathologically retentive memory inhibits normal cognitive functioning or compromises psychological health. Researchers have found that those suffering from hypermnesia can expunge superfluous information from their memories by writing down the information that they want to forget. (If the act of writing alone fails, destroying the paper on which the memory has been written almost invariably suceeds). The Russian physician and psychiatrist Alexander Luria (1902-77) describes his discovery of this "lethotechnic" strategy in *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1968).

[5]"Sans oubli, on n'est que perroquet" (*Cahiers*, 1:1212).

baptism—the morning's preparations, the hectic drive to the church—into verbal art. The process involves translating memory, always inscribed against the dark horizon of impending loss, into a poem that coalesces on the page, black on white:

> Finding a moment, I've written: *Rose from bed*
> *Where I'd begun imagining the baptism*
> (In my old faith bed *was* the baptism)
> *To dress for it. Then all of us were racing*
> *The highway to a dozen finishing lines*
> *Every last one unquotable, scored through,*
> *You bubbling milk, your sister in my lap*
> *Touching her rhinestone treble-clef barrette*
> —Made-up touches. Lately I forget
> The actual as it happens (Plato warns us
> Writing undermines the memory—
> So does photography, I should tell your father)
> And have, as now, less memory than a mind
> To rescue last month's Lethe-spattered module
> From inner space—eternal black-on-white
> Pencilings, moondusty palindrome—
> For splashdown in the rainbow. Welcome home. (389)

Merrill conceives of acts of memory as acts of rescue; he depicts the poet as a cosmonaut navigating the depths of inner space, always retracing—since a palindrome is literally a "stepping backward"—mnemonic imprints as dusky and fragile as footprints in lunar dust. But even as he regrets forgetting so much of "the actual as it happens," he suggests that memory's erratic, up-to-the-moment self-erasure, in conjunction with the deliberate process of 'scoring through' unsuitable details, opens a literary space for "made-up touches" that enrich the reality of the past. (Indeed, the made-up "*rhinestone treble-clef barrette*" fingered by Urania's sister deepens the presence of music—and musical time as an alternative to historical and biological rhythms—within the poem, anticipating the recording of "The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation" that will play in the smoldering dusk of the poem's conclusion; Purcell's piece, of course, heralds the advent of yet another infant whose birth marks the dawning of a new age in the life of man.) As the imagination colorfully supplements last month's sketchy, grayscale "pencilings"—Plato's mnemonic images "seen through a glass dimly" (*Ph* 456)—Merrill welcomes the past home into

the technicolor multiplicity of verse.[6] The poem's exaltation of the process whereby "Lethe-spattered" memories, riddled with blanks, are supplemented and enhanced by a poetic touch, inspires the poem's unorthodox invocation: "Mother of that hour's muse, Forgetfulness,/ Hold me strictly to the might-have-been" (390). The goddess Urania's mother, the mother of all the muses, is Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory; for the purposes of his poem, however, Merrill rewrites the muses' lineage, replacing Memory with Forgetfulness as the generative source of art. He fills the Hippocrene well of inspiration with the waters of Lethe that are consumed by spirits bound for rebirth, that liminal stream which itself resembles the baptismal waters in which the infant Urania is submerged, lifted by her godfather and "born anew/ Squalling and squirming out of the deep font."[7]

Merrill died from complications arising from AIDS in 1995, and as the progression of his illness over the preceding decade exhibited the encroachment of oblivion upon his historical, biological being, he composed lyrics in which the figurative significance of forgetting to his poetics becomes increasingly legible. Discerning in Merrill's late self-portraiture the struggle to "find a stylistic equivalent for the quickness of the senses and the spirit even as the deathly dissolution of the body becomes certain," Helen Vendler emphasizes the undiminished wit the poet displays in *A Scattering of Salts* (1995) as he grapples with the wrenching disharmony between his body's exhaustion and his mind's indefatigable liveliness. "In age and illness (barring dementia) one is as much alive in consciousness as ever" (117), Vendler observes, and in

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[6] On several occasions in *Urania*, Merrill alludes to *Hamlet's Mill: an Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (1969), which includes an extended appendix summarizing several primitive myths' speculation about the celestial location of Lethe within the Milky Way. The authors mention Macrobius' identification of Lethe with "the Cup," one of the constellations to which Merrill specifically refers in *Urania*: "Our most competent witnesses for the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition take Lethe for the last 'station' before rebirth, e.g. Plato in the myth of Er (Republic 10.620), and Virgil in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (748-51), but only Macrobius…pretends to know the source of the drink: the constellation Crater, the 'bowl of Bacchus'." Incidentally, Merrill's grumbling regret in *Urania* about our modern tendency not to observe or contemplate the patterns in the stars recalls von Dechend and de Santillana's grumbling refutation of Macrobius' claim: "Macrobius was, apparently, not in the habit of looking at the sky, and in this respect he was a very modern character" (406-7).

[7] Merrill's awareness of the Muses' traditional mythological lineage is evident in his foreword to Daniel Hall's *Hermit with Landscape*: "If Memory is the mother of the Muses, concision is their mentor. Faced even with the vast canvases of Dante and Proust, we appreciate how much is foreshortened or left out" (*CPr* 316).

light of his unyielding mental fitness Merrill's tendency to exaggerate his depictions of mnemonic failure is one sign that his interest in forgetting transcends that which predictably accompanies advancing age. (Merrill's wistful look at Urania and at his own declining, "Lethe-spattered" mind, for example, was composed in 1976, when Merrill was forty-eight and the greater part of his work lay ahead of him.) Throughout his oeuvre, he recognizes that the mundane experience of forgetting is an exceptional aspect of mental life, for it allows bodily materiality to bear discernibly upon the operations of consciousness.

In *Scrapping the Computer*, Merrill adopts an emphatically fallible machine as his metaphor for the mind, exploring the ways in which memory's imperfections enrich and complicate the fragmentary chronicle of identity. The poem recounts Merrill's inscription of his memories onto the *tabula rasa* of a blank hard disk—"*It* had no memories—anyone's would have done"—as he composes a memoir on his new computer. The computer's initial crash deconstructs the memoir-in-progress into an array of indecipherable symbols, but the damage is easily repaired—"The patient left on a gurney,/ Returned with a new chip, the following week." The second crash, however, takes place once the memoir has been completed, and proves to be fatal:

> Another year or two, the memoir done
> And in the publishers' hands, the pressure's off.
> But when I next switch it on, whatever Descartes meant
> By the ghost in the machine—oh damn!—gives itself up:
> Experts declare BRAIN DEATH. (The contriver of my program
> Having lately developed a multiple personality,
> My calls for help keep reaching the wrong one.)
>
> Had it caught some "computer virus"? (635)

As a model of the mind, the computer's defining characteristic in the poem is its tendency to break, a tendency Merrill emphasizes with the facile joke of the programmer's schizophrenic breakdown. Like the first and last lines of each seven-line stanza, whose perfectly consistent rhymes frame the interior lines' variable configurations, the computer's monitor frames the shifting projections on its screen, giving the impression that the machine somehow contains

(rather than generates) the phenomena it displays. This impression of containment immediately suggests to Merrill—primed by early cognitivism's pervasive computational metaphors of mind—the terms with which Gilbert Ryle famously critiqued Descartes, mocking Cartesian dualism's "dogma of the ghost in the machine" (17). Following Ryle, the poem embraces a contiguous view of soma and psyche in which material conditions yield phenomenological effects. Merrill's depictions of the malfunctioning computer as a "patient…on a gurney," of its crash as the result of a "virus," and of its ruined condition as "BRAIN DEATH" implicitly compare the concrete architecture of the computer, which determines the nature and extent of its memory, to the biological architecture that subtends and shapes the experience of the mind. For the poet who would succumb to complications of his illness in the year *A Scattering of Salts* was published, the inexorably broken computer becomes a *memento corporis* that yokes the shortcomings of his abortive natural memory with his own incurably fragile, embodied being.

Despite the poem's pervasive losses, ultimately *Scrapping the Computer* recasts the sublime, central cataclysm of losing the self as a renovating gift bestowed by a "selfless," newly selved machine:

> …was the poor thing taking upon itself a doom
> Headed my way? Having by now a self of sorts,
> Was it capable of a selfless act
> As I might just still be, for someone I loved?
> Not that a machine is capable of anything *but*
> A selfless act…We faced each other wordlessly,
> Two blank minds, two screens aglow with gloom.
>
> Or perhaps this alter ego'd been under "contract"—*Yep*,
> *You know too much, wise guy*… Feet in cement,
> A sendoff choreographed by the Mob.
> But who the Mob is, will I ever know?
> —Short of the trillionfold synaptic flow
> Surrounding, making every circumstance
> Sparkle like mica with my every step
>
> Into—can that be sunlight? Ah, it shines
> On women in furs, or dreadlock heads on knees
> (Hand-lettered placards: BROKE. ILL. HELP ME PLEASE),
> This prisoner expelled to the Free World,

> His dossier shredded. Now for new memories,
> New needs. And while we're at it a novice laptop
> On which already he's composed these lines. (635-6)

In the sense that nature, cell by mortal cell, conspires against us all—"women in furs" and dreadlocked indigents alike—each human is as terminally infirm, as helplessly "BROKE" as the scrapped computer. Still, it is the very mob of synapses that Merrill imagines bullying his memory into oblivion that makes "every circumstance/ Sparkle like mica," setting life aglitter by placing it "under 'contract'." The final stanza's transition to the third person coincides with the rebirth of an emancipated self set free through the sacrificial gift of a clean slate, but even as the incriminating record of his autobiographical past is "shredded," Merrill remains poised to frame a new history within the confining structure of a lyric text. Set to begin again, he replaces the euphoria of hypothetical self-destruction with the euphoria of creation, filling the fresh screen's blank slate with lines that trace their own history even as they anticipate interpreting "new memories,/ New needs."

Technological metaphors stressing the somatic fragility that underpins the mind surround "Scrapping the Computer" in *A Scattering of Salts*. "On the Block," which immediately precedes "Scrapping," depicts a once-bright idea as a burned-out filament entombed in the light bulb of its annunciation, "Briefly too hot to handle,/ Too dim a souvenir"; the bulb that contains "Imagination's debris" suggests the dome of the skull in which real, physiological connections continually "give out" (633). "A Look Askance," which immediately follows "Scrapping," replaces the exhausted circuit of "On the Block" with an overloaded one, imagining the body as a city and a sudden electrical surge as a lethal event. The surge resembles an incendiary, creative torrent inspired by a supernatural creator and destroyer, who in turn resembles the poet himself ("mad speed-writer plugged into the topmost outlet"). The lines suggest an effluence of the imagination that proves powerful enough to destroy the imaginer:

> Will it be heat of his—our—bright idea
> Makes that whole citywide brainstorm incandesce,

Sets loop, dot, dash, node, filament

Inside the vast gray-frosted bulb ablaze? (637)

As it did in "On the Block," the bulb recalls the brain housed in a skull, assuming here even the color of gray matter as it blows out violently in the combustions of the "brainstorm." The "loop, dot, dash, node, filament" evoke the textual symbols that record the creative rush before death, but they also suggest the contingent and ultimately friable physiological connections that facilitated it.

In "Dead Center," a villanelle from *The Inner Room* (1988), the fragile circuitry that enables every act of recollection defines the relationship between memory and poetry. The reflexive rhyme and the permutations of the refrains echo the rippling, liquid surface upon which Merrill stages the convergence of "Now" and "Then" in memory, a surface where the scintillations of a lived past are charged with inscrutable meaning. Burning at the "dead" midpoint of "Dead Center" is a remembered scene of childhood in which the speaker is abandoned at his grandmother's home, his parents' roadster disappearing down a dusty road:

Upon reflection, as I dip my pen
Tonight, forth ripple messages in code.
In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then.

Seen from the embankment, marble men
Sleep upside down, bat-wise, the sleep bestowed
Upon reflection. As I dip my pen

Thinking how others, deeper into Zen,
Blew on immediacy until it glowed,
In Now's black waters burn the stars of Then.

Or else I'm back at Grandmother's. I'm ten,
Dust hides my parents' roadster from the road
Which dips—*into* reflection, with my pen.

Breath after breath, harsh O's of oxygen—
Never deciphered, what do they forebode?
In Now's black waters burn the stars. Ah then

Leap, Memory, supreme equestrienne,
Through hoops of fire, circuits you overload!

> Beyond reflection, as I dip my pen
> In Now's black waters, burn the stars of Then. (540)

Sketched in one tercet, the central memory falls away just as it is brought into being, barely glimpsed before dipping out of sight. Merrill ultimately suggests that the fiery code formed by such glimpses of the past—an answer, in inner space, to the enigmatic code of fate encrypted in the stars—may be fanned "Breath after breath" by poetic inspiration, but is "Never deciphered"; "Thinking how others, deeper into Zen, / Blew on immediacy until it glowed," Merrill is left questioning his choice to depict the unreliably mediated reflections of memory in his verse. The closing quatrain's fusion of abstract and embodied ways of imagining memory tentatively reconciles these countervailing aesthetic impulses: figuring memory as a dazzlingly unfettered circus performer and her combusting props as neurological 'short circuits', Merrill expresses the awe and the exasperation that can arise when memory's flamboyant exhibitions overwhelm the intellect's power to comprehend them. The "hoops of fire" through which the equestrienne passes recall the flaming, astral "O's" whose light reaches us from the remote past, but in order to represent the limits of his comprehension Merrill implies the somatic underpinnings of thought, drawing on the burning hoops' conceptual resemblance to neural circuits. Even as he asserts his choice to draw on the substance of the immediate moment in his poetry, he exalts the audacious performances of his recollection, inviting Memory to leap forth and the fires of reminiscence to burn on beyond the tightly structured villanelle's longing to contain and comprehend them.

Long before such explicitly meta-mnemonic late lyrics, earlier poems that have frequently been labeled "Proustian" reveal that for Merrill the corruptions, losses, and labors of fallible remembering powerfully affiliate mnemonic and literary act.[8] Merrill and Proust share

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[8] Since the publication of *Water Street* (1962), critics have characterized Merrill as a poet of memory, particularly by association with Proust. Encouraged by Merrill himself, who counted Proust as a "surrogate parent" (*CPr* 8) along with Elizabeth Bishop and W.H. Auden, readers have been disposed to discern traces of Proust's "résurrections du passé" in Merrill's intricate reconstructions of personal history. Harold Bloom writes that

not only a fascination with the conjugation of the past and the present in consciousness, but a profound skepticism with respect to the generic mechanisms of recollection and the mental representations rendered by the work of remembering.[9] As Merrill once put it, "When the muse speaks, Clio, she seems to be saying…that things are unknowable and memory plays you false" (*CPr* 131). For Proust, the effortless recrudescences of involuntary memory occasion the quickening of self-knowledge; the work of *la mémoire volontaire (la mémoire de l'intelligence)*, on the other hand, is "useless" for the purposes of art, for "the pictures which that kind of memory shows us of the past preserve nothing of the past itself" (*RTP* 1:47). The very instability and waywardness that renders 'everyday' memory aesthetically inadmissible for Proust renders it eminently useful to Merrill; their shared skepticism, it would seem, impels them to lodge their faith in opposing representational choices. While Proust invests the extraordinary epiphanies of involuntary memory with the potential to disclose the truth of the past and facilitate a salvific stasis outside of time, Merrill finds in the creativity, the fallibility, and the labor of intellectual memory (whose strict distinction from involuntary

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like Proust, his "truest precursor…Merrill too is always in search of lost time" (2-3); in *The Consuming Myth* (1989) Stephen Yenser traces Proust's imprint on some of Merrill's most celebrated lyrics; John Hollander has said that Merrill continually reengages "those Proustian themes of the retrieval of lost childhood, the operations of involuntary memory and of an imaginative memory even more mysterious"; Christopher Coffman notes that Proust's involuntary memories "provid[e] a pleasurable glimpse into…'the essence of things . . .outside time,'" and that "Merrill's characters experience revelations of a similar sort" (403). Merrill's indebtedness to Proust is beyond question, but the very visibility of the relationship between Merrill and Proust's meta-mnemonic art has obscured that relationship's precise nature, eclipsing the significance of mnemonic failure to Merrill. His own laudatory references to Proust emphasize the novelist's style, occasionally acknowledging the subject of memory but ardently admiring the sensitive mechanics of his metaphor and the courtesy of his formal, yet intimate voice; Merrill explains that "Proust is subtle enough to persuade us that the real feat has been one not of style but of memory" (*CPr* 124). Merrill admits that upon first reading Proust he was able to grasp fully neither his feats of language nor "the intricacies of his thought," but he goes on to add, "I don't think [Proust's] ideas are that wonderful even if that is what he was admired for as a disciple of Bergson…I think he's much more original simply as a writer of sentences and as a viewer of society" (*CPr,* 92).

[9] Terdiman writes of the "suspicion which for Proust attaches to any recollected thought or emotion, any proffered interpretation—to any memory save the epiphanic upon which he rests responsibility for the redemption of the world" (201); see his chapters on Proust in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (1993) for an extended discussion of the historical and epistemological context of Proust's mistrust of conscious thought and faith in the authenticity of involuntary cognitive experience.

memory he is disinclined to recognize) meaningful correspondences to diverse domains of experience, particularly to the process of ushering a poem into being.

For Merrill, the corruptions, losses and associative excursions of remembering prove integral to the process of constructing meaning, rather than discovering it. Proust's "édifice immense du souvenir" (*Recherche* 1:46) is reduced to rubble in Merrill's first major memory poem, which begins at a demolition site. Upon venturing out for a rehabilitative turn around the neighborhood, the speaker of *An Urban Convalescence*, who has been confined to his bed for a week while recovering from an unnamed illness, stumbles upon an unexpected scene of devastation. As he observes a building, possibly a home, in the last stages of demolition, he imagines the mind as an analogous field of destruction, conflating the wreckage on his "block" with the mnemonic wreckage in his head, the debris of a public and a private past made manifest. The vista of churning waste is dismal enough to suggest to Merrill the total cognitive devastation of dementia, emblematized by the (feminized) mechanical crane whose jaws "dribble rubble" as she "Fumble(s) luxuriously in the filth of years." Merrill embeds one image of senility within another as he describes the sinister hysteria of the crane operator, an old man who "Laughs and curses in her brain." As he joins the other onlookers who greet this mundane apocalypse "in meek attitudes," Merrill finds in the building's glaring absence an unexpected absence within himself:

> As usual in New York, everything is torn down
> Before you have had time to care for it.
> Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall
> What building stood here. Was there a building at all?
> I have lived on this same street for a decade.
>
> Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises
> Some five floors high, of shabby stone
> —Or am I confusing it with another one
> In another part of town, or of the world?—
> And over its lintel into focus vaguely
> Misted with blood (my eyes are shut)
> A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,

> Which years of grit had etched until it thrust
> Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.
> When did the garland become part of me? (127)

Behind the poet's gentle censure of relentless urban progress is an implicit condemnation of his own inattention ("I have lived on this street for a decade"), a pang of the embarrassment Edward Thomas describes as "shame/ That I missed most, even at eye's level" (20). Merrill's criticism of himself for failing to take the time to see and to care deepens to a diagnosis of constitutive, essential inaptitude as he admits the force with which the etched garland had to thrust itself "into the poor soil of [his] seeing." The process of recording experience, the first act of memory, is as fraught for Merrill as the processes of retrieving and interpreting it. While Proust's metaphor of memory-as-archive presumes the faithful transcription of events that remain immaculately preserved but that are also inaccessibly secreted from consciousness, Merrill's organic metaphor associates the faculties of attention and perception encompassed by "seeing" with corporeal clay, with "poor soil" that will inevitably bear inadequate mnemonic fruit; he thus locates the first problems of recollection in the biologically determined conditions of cognitive receptivity. (Indeed, the unidentified illness from which the speaker is recovering is itself a kind of *memento corporis* that obliquely connects his somatic fragility with the toppled remnants of his abortive memory.) It is the self-conscious labor of intellectual memory that Merrill consecrates as he bows at the chaotic "shrine of noise," enjoining himself to "try to recall/ What building stood here" and conjuring a single, quavering image that feels utterly foreign to him: "When," he wonders, "did the garland become a part of me?" As if to stress the status of the mental image as a figure reconstructed rather than discovered, the stone garland that Merrill recollects is itself an etched representation of a perishable artifact, a reiteration of the poem's prevailing analogy between mnemonic, architectural, and poetic constructions.

In no part of *An Urban Convalescence* does Merrill find himself overwhelmed by the euphoria of extra-temporal grace; Proust describes how "The past was made to encroach upon the present, and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other" (*RTP* 3:904), but to remember in *An Urban Convalescence* is never to be in two places at once. In addition to the unfolding, real-time trajectory of mnemonic construction—from shabby stone to lintel to garland, for example—Merrill uses the obtrusiveness of the remembering body to anchor mnemonic experience unambiguously in the present. Reintroducing the somatic diction used to describe the personified crane in the first verse paragraph, the garland is "misted with blood"; it constitutes a mental representation stained by the process of embodied recollection, by eyelids shut in the strain of *la mémoire de l'intelligence*. Constitutively distinguishing the image visualized in the present from the original referent perceived in the past, Merrill's model of memory is one of anything but sublime transport. Introducing the blood-stained image that yokes mortality with mnemonic fragility, Merrill does not transcend time but rather affirms *tempus edax rerum* as devourer of body and memory alike.

Stephen Yenser singles out as especially "Proustian" the depiction of the etched garland that comprises the poem's first instance of recollection, but the label might be applied more intuitively to the poem's second mnemonic episode, which follows spontaneously from the first through involuntary association. The decorative architectural detail of the tendril etched in stone reminds Merrill of "a particular cheap engraving of garlands/ Bought for a few francs long ago," a print disposable enough to have sheltered a rainy dash toward a Parisian cab; the drawn garlands in turn evoke the hand that had clasped them, which belonged to Merrill's companion in his descent down the Champs Elysées:

> Also, to clasp them, the small, red-nailed hand
> Of no one I can place. Wait. No. Her name, her features
> Lie toppled underneath that year's fashions.
> The words she must have spoken, setting her face
> To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,
> Let alone understand.

> So that I am already on the stair,
> As it were, of where I lived,
> When the whole structure shudders at my tread
> And soundlessly collapses, filling
> The air with motes of stone.
> Onto the still erect building next door
> Are pressed levels and hues—
> Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.
> Who drained the pousse-café?
> Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.
>
> Well, that is what life does. (128)

The unfolding complex of remembered images—the engraving, the companion, the arrival home—is "torn down,/ Before you have had time to care for it," before being fully realized either visually or connotatively. The significatory implications of the woman's features lie toppled under the trivial, unavailing debris of "that year's fashions"; her diaphanous face, "fluttering like a veil," refuses to assume the "solidity" of the water-lilies on the Vivonne. While "I am already on the stair" verges upon pronouncing the indistinguishability of past and present, "as it were" disrupts the impression as definitively as the etched garland's bloody tint; the greater disruption is that of the collapsing, deracinated edifice of memory itself, sprung from "poor soil" and now "snapped off at the roots." The adjacent building imprinted with rose and green and white strata is imagined rather than remembered, of course, for the building's collapse is not a memory but a metaphor of forgetting, the visual details of which the speaker imports from the literal demolition before his eyes. Comparing those strata to the variegated layers of syrupy liqueur that coat the drained glass of a pousse-café, Merrill characterizes memory as a kind of feeble residue, a trace of the nourishing but exhausted substance of life lived. While Proust savors a mnemonic banquet as he drains his *tilleul*, Merrill does not even taste his own pousse-café; tantalized by insubstantial impressions of his own history, memory awakens Merrill's appetite for a fuller experience of the past but continually fails to satisfy him.

Merrill's involuntary revelation of the Parisian vignette is violently truncated, but even before his remembrance collapses he finds its messages inscrutable; the words that his companion "must have spoken," he laments, "…I cannot hear now,/ Let alone understand." It is not the recollected past that confers self-knowledge, but rather the unstable process of recollection itself. Embedded in nature, what memory does to the forgotten edifice is "what life does" to every being endowed with it:

> Well, that is what life does. I stare
> A moment longer, so. And presently
> The massive volume of the world
> Closes again.
>
> Upon that book I swear
> To abide by what it teaches:
> Gospels of ugliness and waste,
> Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,
> Of a shrieking to be faced
> Full into, eyes astream with cold—
>
> With cold?
> All right then. With self-knowledge.

The lessons of annihilation recorded in "the massive volume of the world" are hypostasized in the ruinous wasteland Merrill discovers on his block; the building's looming absence, the emptied cordial glass, the image of the past obliterated before it can be fully realized in the mind's eye, all exemplify "towering voids" left by material and mnemonic loss. They are voids in which the "will-to-structural-elaboration" that Merrill describes in *Losing the Marbles* will inevitably stir again, perpetuating the endless beginnings of human creativity despite the impossibility, outside of the whimsical vicariousness of *Scrapping the Computer*, of a fresh start. Merrill's poetry abides by Proust's principle that "studying ideas…is not as great as studying memories,"[10] but Merrill arrives at self-knowledge not by studying the disclosures of the past *per se* but by recognizing in memory the gestures of attrition and renovation that are ubiquitous in

[10] "Approfondir des idées (Nietzsche, philosophie) est moins grand qu'approfondir des réminiscences" (*Carnet*, 101), translation mine.

the phenomenal world. Merrill attests to the fact that no condition of feeling or perspective—or matter, for that matter—is ever permanent, and just as infirmity holds the promise of convalescence, the "soiled gusts" that beset nature, art, and mind alike in the course of their isomorphic cycles may prove to be winds of change. (Indeed, these lines prove to be the emotional nadir of *An Urban Convalescence*, which concludes on a tempered, but certainly higher note.)

At the conclusion of *An Urban Convalescence*, Merrill arrives, exhausted, at a chastened affirmation of art as an insufficient yet necessary response to mnemonic and historical ruin, identifying the poem's own affective origin in the "dull need to make some kind of house/ Out of the life lived, out of the love spent" (129). Merrill closes *A Tenancy*, another poem of reminiscence in *Water Street*, by equating the roles of poet and host: "If I am host at last/ It is of little more than my own past./ May others be at home in it" (170). In *An Urban Convalescence,* Merrill stresses that the home one builds out of poetry is a temporary one, not an everlasting monument but a shelter to house the ephemeral conjugations of human empathy. The pervasive analogy between edifice and poem that is finally made explicit in the concluding verse is expressed formally as the physical contour of the poem, following the speaker, arrives "Indoors at last," moving from irregular verse paragraphs to the symmetrical architecture of embraced quatrains that serves to compensate materially, if only modestly, for the poem's various mnemonic demolitions. The stanzas, which persist from the speaker's begrudging admission of "self-knowledge" through the poem's conclusion, generate the readerly satisfactions that accompany the conformity of sense to the exigencies of musical design, but in their pervasive schematic aberrations—frequent slant rhyme (air/passenger, his/house), non-rhyme (prime/lasted, poem/time), and even an errant alternating (rather than embraced) quatrain—the stanzas implicitly reiterate the poem's deeply qualified consolations, demonstrating

that even the shaping force of received forms cannot tidily square the jagged remnants that are left in the wake of forgetting.

Merrill's beloved embraced quatrains resurface, albeit transformed, to frame the claustrophobic, cork-lined bedroom in which the narrative of *For Proust* begins. As the poem opens, its quatrains reveal themselves to be considerably more formally demanding than the variable structures of *An Urban Convalescence*; its stanzas are isometric throughout, its rhyme is almost perfectly regular, and the interior couplet of each quatrain is in *rime riche*. The first three words of the poem anticipate the obsessive returns that will preside over its language and its narrative:

> Over and over something would remain
> Unbalanced in the painful sum of things.
> Past midnight you arose, rang for your things.
> You had to go into the world again.

Having lived with Proust since his artistic adolescence, Merrill allows himself the intimacy of second-person address, empathetically imagining the novelist in the final phase of his life, as an infirm recluse writing feverishly in the hope of finishing the *Recherche*. Proust's is a humble foray but its emotional scale is epic; neurasthenic, agoraphobic, in declining health, he presses through the "packed public rooms" of a hotel lobby on an urgent mission to uncover the truth of the past. Pressed on by the feeling that his "time is running out," hoping that the mysterious woman he has "conjured" will prove willing and able to help him, he comes at last to his questions for her:

> …There had been a little phrase
> She hummed, you could not sleep tonight without
>
> Hearing again. Then, of that day she had sworn
> To come, and did not, was evasive later,
> Would she not speak the truth two decades later,
> From loving-kindness learned if not inborn?
>
> She treats you to a look you cherished, light,
> Bold: "Mon ami, how did we get along
> At all, those years?" But in her hair a long

White lock has made its truce with appetite.

And presently she rises. Though in pain
You let her leave—the loved one always leaves.
What of the little phrase? Its notes, like leaves
In the strong tea you have contrived to drain,

Strangely intensify what you must do.
Back where you came from, up the strait stair, past
All understanding, bearing the whole past,
Your eyes grown wide and dark, eyes of a Jew,

You make for one dim room without contour
And station yourself there, beyond the pale
Of cough or of gardenia, erect, pale.
What happened is becoming literature.

Feverish in time, if you suspend the task,
An old, old woman shuffling in to draw
Curtains, will read a line or two, withdraw.
The world will have put on a thin gold mask. (139-140)

That Merrill chooses not to emulate Proust's scrupulous veracity in his own poems is evident from his proud acknowledgement in *Verse for Urania* that "Made-up touches" supplement the poem's 'true' details. *For Proust*, however, reveals the depth of Merrill's sympathy and admiration for the novelist's appetitive pursuit of the "little phrase" that will correct, if only temporarily, the "painful imbalance in the sum of things." Merrill's juxtaposition of Proust's first and second requests equates the once-known (the melody) with the unknown (the companion's inscrutable betrayal) based upon the feeling of cognitive inaccessibility they generate; the sense of absence that attends the detail Proust has forgotten is as absolute as the sense of absence that attends the detail he never possessed. The revolutions of Proust's mind as he searches for the lost information, the woman's putative reproduction of it, and the subsequent reconstitution of the musical phrase within the verbal phrases of Proust's novel, all find expression in the redoublings of the poem's *rime riche*. But Merrill also exploits the unique propensity of such rhyming to draw out difference in sameness, to reveal the multiple identities of a word by clothing it in different contexts. Rhyming the verbal and nominal forms of "leaves," for example—drawing together

the act of being abandoned with the dregs of Proust's tea—Merrill strikes a perfect morphological balance and a 'painful' semantic imbalance at once. In this sense, the poem's *rime riche* generates a structure of feeling that is also generated by memory, for between real experiences and mnemonic representations there is always both identity and difference. When Proust first encounters his companion she, too, proves to be two versions of herself at once; an embodiment of both continuity and transformation, she appears to be "a child still/ At first glance," and yet "in her hair a long/ White lock has made its truce with appetite."

The poem is not only a tribute poem (it is the only poem Merrill ever dedicated or addressed to the novelist), it is a behind-the-scenes poem that exposes and glorifies Proust's alchemical transformation of memory into art.[11] The poem concludes with an account of the past "becoming literature," but it begins by representing Proust in the weary stage of laborious mnemonic recovery that precedes that final apotheosis, and that could hardly look any less like the spontaneous, revelatory *memoire involuntaire* that Proust distinguishes as the only type of memory condign to immortalization in art. Critics have long observed that Proust takes a rare but familiar form of recollection and so extravagantly amplifies it that it ceases to be credible. Observing that the madeleine must have been "a very poetical cake," Rebecca West asserts that "it is…extremely doubtful whether such a process [of involuntary recollection] would furnish

[11] Merrill's inability to credit the transcendent immortalization of the artist through his art forms an early point of divergence from Proust. In his undergraduate thesis, Merrill considers the meaning of "The Work of Art" to the novelist as it is expressed in the *Recherche*: "Most significant is Proust's simple belief that only through artistic creation can a man achieve greatness and place himself beyond the damages of time and social intercourse; apart from his mother and grandmother (whom he rewards with love rather than praise), only Elstir, Vinteuil, and Bergotte, of all the characters in his novel, appear as truly good and noble men. In their private lives they are occasionally shown as weak and foolish, but their roles as Artists give them an invulnerability that his other characters lack. And the Work of Art is the symbol of their conquest of time, society, and, in one sense, themselves. Yet, because the subject of Proust's novel, insofar as we can assign it one, is a changing universe, a world in which society, individuals, landscapes, even works of art are 'inconstant objects of inconstant cause in a universe of inconstancy,' the mention of a work of art does not create in itself a more than relative permanence" (16-17). Note that Proust's subject is not interpreted to be "memory," and that the application of Stevens' statement from *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* emphasizes Merrill's own perspective on "relative permanence," not Proust's. In Proust's use of metaphor, the subject of Merrill's thesis, the young poet saw the novelist pursuing a release from time on a minute linguistic scale; he explains that the two elements of a metaphor, tenor and vehicle, "both existing separately in time (in Proust's mind) are spatially combined (in Proust's sentence) in order to achieve that release from time which is the ultimate effect of all of his revelations."

memories in the state of purity that the narrator supposed" (233). Richard Terdiman argues that Proust, influenced by contemporary scientific discourse, imported into his theory of involuntary memory attributes of hypermnesia (the pathological obverse of amnesia, in which the mind retains too much detail, rather than too little); he writes, "I am convinced that large numbers of Proust's readers have never truly believed that the phenomenon Proust described was real enough to occupy the conceptual space he attributes to it, but rather that Proust's prestige and conviction alone induce us to credit this singular construction" (237). When Merrill observes that "Proust is subtle enough to persuade us that the real feat has been one not of style but of memory, and therefore within even the common man's power to duplicate" (*CPr* 124), he acknowledges that the *Recherche* perpetrates a benign deception; he recognizes that Proust's feat of recollection originates not in the veridical translation of prodigious acts of memory, but in subtleties of literary effect. Merrill relishes "the rips and ripples that make the reader know there is a fabric of illusion" (*CPr* 95), and finding no loose threads to tug in the pristine mnemonic tapestries of Combray or Venice, he instead exposes Proust's illusion by portraying him in the act of assiduously piecing it together.

It is a striking representational choice on Merrill's part, when so much detail clearly did remain available to Proust's capacious memory, to portray him under the humbling strain of frustrated recollection (once again, the copresence of physical affliction and forgetting draws a subliminal, etiological connection between mortality and mnemonic loss). Merrill's choice to represent Proust in this way clearly arises, however, from a humane, panegyric impulse to give him credit for the extraordinary mnemonic and artistic labor through which he ushered his masterpiece "safely into being and onto the page." Put differently, "For Proust" demonstrates two ways of directing the impulse towards "realism" in literary representations of memory: while Proust occupies himself with constructing a Barthesian "referential illusion" (148) of the past—a process that arguably entails the distorted representation of memory as most people experience

it—Merrill devotes himself to the mimetic representation of the contingent, fallible, constructive act of remembering, replete with aesthetically expedient distortions of detail. In the case of *For Proust*, Merrill's realism in representing the procedures of memory involves exposing the exacting process through which Proust's seamless realism of the past is pieced together.

It is difficult to imagine a metaphor that could convey the "rips and ripples" in the fabric of memory more evocatively than the puzzle, the sinuously fragmented surface of which presents both an image and the obtrusive evidence of its construction. Like the governing metaphors in many of Merrill's other meta-memory poems—the house in *An Urban Convalescence*, the reflective waters in *Dead Center*, the memoir in *Scrapping the Computer,* the manuscript and Parthenon frieze in *Losing the Marbles*, to be discussed shortly—the puzzle that forms the central metaphor of *Lost in Translation* expresses aspects of both art and mind. In the poem's opening verse paragraph, the speaker recalls his privileged but lonely childhood routine during the summer of 1939, portraying his recollection as a "Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands/ Or fallen piecemeal into place" (362); he thus compares autobiographical memory's assemblage of images and episodes to a puzzle's disjointed assemblage of pieces even before the poem's literal puzzle is introduced. When the desperately anticipated puzzle is delivered from the Manhattan rental shop, its arrival is "Out of the blue," suggesting the sudden mnemonic arrival whereby "The hour came back" (363) to the adult speaker, followed incrementally by aspects of the summer that surrounded it. The involuntary memory arose, he recalls, during an evening's idle reading, as the central image of Valéry's lyric *Palme* and a vague recollection of a German translation of it by Rilke reminded him of a palm-shaped jigsaw piece and the multilingual governess who, in the absence of his parents, helped him to assemble the puzzle.

Merrill's portrayal of recollection as a constructive process is phenomenologically intuitive, but his choice to adopt a visual model that emphasizes this experiential aspect of memory is exceptional. While many conventional metaphors—tablet, book, storehouse,

videotape—imply the status of memories as static wholes recorded and stored in the mind, the puzzle uniquely emphasizes the active and often intentional work of mnemonic construction, the process not of retrieving but of dynamically making and remaking memories anew.[12] Merrill prefers to depict small mnemonic parts that suggest, but never fully coalesce into, stable wholes; his memories are made of "Fragments in revolution" which, before being summarily disassembled, provisionally cohere to define a succession of shapely absences, each gaping after a missing piece. His representational preferences comport with those of contemporary cognitive theorists of memory who stress that most perceptual data are not recorded at all. Discrete units of sensory, emotional, and contextual information are encoded in dynamic neural networks—engrams—that are activated together (though never in precisely the same way twice) and whose ranging complexity accounts for the varying vividness and emotional resonance of mnemonic experiences. Illustrating the nature of memories not as retrieved objects but as novel constructions made afresh with every act of recollection, Daniel Schacter describes the integrative complex of information formed and reformed in memory as "something like a giant jigsaw puzzle" (87).[13]

But *Lost in Translation* proposes that the act of piecing a puzzle together is not only like the act of remembering, it is also like the act of writing a poem, not least because it is riddled with obstinate but exhilarating forms of limitation. As the boy assembles the puzzle with the help of his governess, the pleasures of working within its various forms of circumscription begin to take shape. Strategically progressing from the edges inward, "Mademoiselle does borders" (363); just before bed, last-minute discoveries are anchored "to the scene's limits" (364); and

[12] Merrill often adapts traditional metaphors of memory by depicting them as dysfunctional, decaying, or defunct, from the flaking looking glass in *Mirror*, to the home movie reel that catches fire in *Scenes from Childhood*, to the "burning filaments" of memories that inevitably "give out" in the light bulb of *On the Block* (633).

[13] The puzzle's most glaring limitation as a model for memory is, of course, that the image it displays when assembled is always identical—it is reassembled rather than truly recreated.

even the craftsman's repertoire of carved shapes is "Nice in its limitation" (363). The drama of assembling the puzzle is painfully circumscribed, as well, and the scene depicted in the puzzle, like the memory of it, is subjected "All too soon" to "swift/ Dismantling":

> Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue
> Fragments in revolution, with no clue
> To where a Niche will open. Quite a task
> Putting together Heaven, yet we do.
>
> It's done. Here under the table all along
> Were those missing feet. It's done.
>
> …All too soon the swift
> Dismantling. Lifted by two corners,
> The puzzle hung together—and did not.
> Irresistibly a populace
> Unstitched of its attachments, rattled down. (366)

Proust claims that the only true paradises are lost ones, but in Merrill's poem it is the iterative and inexhaustible pleasure of poetic and mnemonic craft, of putting experience together in the mind and on the page, that is heavenly. *Lost in Translation* redeems the work of intellectual memory by comparing it to the poem's own synthetic composition. Like *An Urban Convalescence*, *Lost in Translation* leaves the seams of mnemonic construction conspicuously apparent as it stitches diverse contexts of experience into meaningful correspondences: the speaker's recollection is riddled with self-doubt ("…surely not just in retrospect…" (363)), with confusion between the imagined and the remembered ("…Yet I can't/ Just be imagining…" (367)), and with interpretive self-interruption ("A summer without parents is the puzzle,/ Or should be…" (362)). Though Merrill acknowledges the accident of involuntary association through which Valéry's poem indirectly engenders his own, *Lost in Translation* constitutively rejects chance as an autonomous principle for disclosing the truth of the past. Merrill's brazenly literary poem, with its intercalation of memory and meditation and elaborate matrix of allusions to Valéry, Rilke, Proust, Goethe, and many others, flaunts the role of the intellect in making memory meaningfully, if imperfectly and ephemerally, 'hang together'.

Before returning the puzzle to the rental shop, "Something tells me that one piece contrived/ To stay in the boy's pocket," Merrill writes. "How do I know?/ I know because so many later puzzles/ Had missing pieces." The lines suggest not only that the child was instinctively inclined to withhold his own "bit of truth" from the picture, but that the "sum of things" described in *For Proust*, operating through the will of the piece that "contrived" to be lost, conspires to make its totality unknowable. In *The Book of Ephraim*, JM wonders "what vigilance will keep/ Me from one emblematic, imminent,/ Utterly harmless failure of recall" (*CL,* 74). In *Lost in Translation*, Merrill attests to the benign inevitability of the missing mnemonic piece, offering the hand-sawn silhouette as an emblem for all aspects of experience lost to time, from "the end of the vogue for collies," and the familiar image of "A house torn down" (366-7) to the spectral Rilke translation of *Palme.* Reena Sastri writes that when, in *Lost in Translation*, "Merrill evokes the Proustian myth that nothing is lost, he does so with his eyes open to its fictional status" (45), knowingly entertaining a consolatory conceit. Proust's conviction that the mind loses nothing implies an implausible transcendence of the limitations of embodied human reality, but the conclusion of *Lost in Translation* suggests that mnemonic permanence can be credibly reconceived in terms compatible with the materiality of the mind.

It is out of an instance of mistrust in memory, as Merrill contemplates the elusive Rilke translation that he 'seems to recall' (363), that the poem's final lines introduce the organic terms of this reconception:[14]

> Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?
>
> But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
> And every bit of us is lost in it

[14] David Kalstone writes of *Lost in Translation,* "Transmuting childhood mysteries into the saddened versatility of adult performance, the poem is a long and grateful farewell to Proust, whose doctrine of time recaptured has long been an article of faith for Merrill, but not until now so triumphantly realized in his work" (49). As many have observed, the themes of lost childhood, longing for the love of absent parents, and the prospect of time regained permeate *Lost in Translation*; these Proustian presences (and the presence of an involuntary memory, of course) are unmistakable. I hope to have clarified the fact, however, that the poem's experiential account of memory nevertheless diverges from Proust's, just as the appearance of a Parisian landscape and infirm speaker in *An Urban Convalescence* may nod to Proust without emulating him.

> (Or found—I wander through the ruin of S
> Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
> And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
> Color of context, imperceptibly
> Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
> To shade and fiber, milk and memory. (367)

Every fragile, mnemonic bit of personal history, like every minute, organic bit of the physical self, loses its identity in the process of being transmuted and reconstituted as something else, blending imperceptibly into its evolving contexts like the "self-effacing" blue palm blending into the puzzle's blue sky. And just as a real palm "turns the waste" of fertile soil into the shade of its fronds and the nourishing milk and fiber of its coconuts, the poem translates private loss, mnemonic and otherwise, into a munificent tissue of signs. For the tree is "self-effacing" in the sense that the translation of experience into art entails, in Eliot's terms, an "extinction of personality" (10), but also in the sense that the reabsorption of the mortal self into the boundless and cyclically permanent organic "memory" of the physical world entails the effacement of the chronicle of selfhood strung together in the mind. Balanced on the fulcrum of its central comma, the last line's four nouns—"shade and fiber, milk and memory"—split neatly into balanced units (A and A, B and B). In such a grouping "memory" is the abstract final term to which the replenishing qualities of the preceding concrete offerings of the tree—shelter, food, drink—are imputed. The final line's terms can also be read chiastically, however (A and B, B and A), placing "shade" in apposition with "memory" to obliquely recognize the spectral dimness of most mnemonic representations and what is lost in their remoteness from the tangible substance—the fiber and the milk—of sensual immediacy. Still, Merrill asserts that in mnemonic ruin, as in the "ruin" of Sandover, his childhood home, there can be a "peacefulness" that redeems this distance. Evoking the sublime violence of the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel (Genesis 32:24-32) and recalling that the angel (Greek *ἄγγελος*, messenger) is a vehicle for divine acts of "translation," Merrill writes over his angst at what is lost with the gentle

swaying of the arching palm, "rustling with its angel" as its carries "every bit of us" from one realm of significance to another.

Poesis, mnemonic loss, and biological necessity converge in the most sustained, synthetic terms of Merrill's oeuvre in "Losing the Marbles," his great disquisition on poetic monumentality. The seven-part sequence compares the erosion of memory to the partial obliteration of a poetic manuscript, modeling in reciprocal ters the experience of consciousness suffused with empirical knowledge of its connection to physical being (the embodied mind) and the physical text, suffused with writerly and readerly experience (the poem) in reciprocal terms. "Losing the Marbles" is written, Merrill pronounces in its fourth section, from the "highwire between the elegiac and the haywire," a perspective that sets the tragic and the ridiculous in their right orders, and from which rage against the ravages of mortality appears both histrionic and futile. Merrill's affable, familiar tone and propulsive punning create an atmosphere of courageous levity in the face of doom, expressing the magnanimity of one taking his lot in stride; his breezy movement between the intimate and the extravagant, whereby a morning's rummaging around the house gives way to the lofty domains of acrobat, acropolis, and imagined heaven, typifies the poem's effortless alternations of scope. Engaging in the kind of dreaming "(after the diagnosis)" (580) that Merrill describes in "Investiture at Cecconi's," "Losing the Marbles" situates Merrill's own terminal diagnosis as a parenthetical instance of the terminal diagnosis pronounced on every life.

The first part of the poem reveals the eponymic pun that associates the marbles proverbially lost in senility and the Elgin Marbles lost to the British Museum, a correspondence

that emphasizes the vulnerability of memories and monuments alike to forms of theft and corrosion:[15]

> Morning spent looking for my calendar—
> Ten whole months mislaid, name and address,
> A groaning board swept clean…
> And what were we talking about at lunch? Another
> Marble gone. Those later years, Charmides,
> Will see the mind eroded featureless.
>
> Ah. We'd been imagining our "heaven"s.
> Mine was to be an acrobat in Athens
> Back when the Parthenon—
> Its looted nymphs and warriors pristine
> By early light or noon light—dwelt
> Upon the city like a philosopher,
> Who now—well, you have seen.
>
> Here in the gathering dusk one could no doubt
> "Rage against the dying of the light."
> But really—rage? (So like the Athens press,
> Breathing fire to get the marbles back.)
> These dreamy blinkings-out
> Strike me as grace, if I may say so,
> Capital punishment,
> Yes, but of utmost clemency at work,
> Whereby the human stuff, ready or not,
> Tumbles, one last drum-roll, into thyme,
> *Out* of time, with just the fossil quirk
> At heart to prove—hold on, don't tell me… What? (572)

The lost calendar, a reification of lost time, introduces the lines' many stinging forms of belatedness. The groaning board is swept clean not only to evoke the blankness of the speaker's malfunctioning mind, but also to set the scene on the morning after a party, when the noonday feast of life at its peak is palpably over. In Merrill's dream of heaven, the Parthenon is likened to a philosopher in his prime whose unspoiled mind is equipped to support his love of wisdom, and the temple's marble friezes are pristine in "early light or noon light"; but when Merrill descends from his reverie he finds himself in the ominously "gathering dusk," with the twinkling

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[15] For an exemplary reading that addresses the correspondence of literary and cultural monuments in "Losing the Marbles" and "Bronze" (*Late Settings*, 1985), see Guy Rotella's *Castings: Monuments and Monumentality in Poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Derek Walcott, and Seamus Heaney*, (2004).

lights of Athens blinking out like forgotten names and addresses. It is no wonder that Merrill dismisses as absurd the fierce rhetoric with which the Athens press demands the Elgin Marbles' repatriation—its "breathing fire" is a part of the carnivalesque unreality evoked by the dreamed-up acrobat and death's suspenseful drum roll—for the losses this poem recounts are final; once a marble is lost, it is gone forever.

Not only are such losses irrevocable, they are often compounded by the absence of language sufficient to describe them. Foreshadowed by the silent "groaning board" that no longer sings under the strain of life's banquet, Merrill finds the degradation of the Parthenon unspeakable—the temple once "dwelt/ Upon the city" in a magnificent vigil, but now, he evades, "—well, you have seen." Dylan Thomas's declamatory poetic language is deflated by Merrill's earnest doubt about its amplitude ("But really—rage?"), and the final line's attempt to express how a mitigating "fossil quirk" can redeem this process of inexpressible dispossession trails off into silence. Still, for all the mystery they keep in play, the lines retain their conviction that forgetting, as part of the larger process "whereby the human stuff, ready or not,/ Tumbles…/*Out* of time," is somehow redemptive. Merrill's association of mnemonic loss with both physical erosion and expiation bears out the etymological sense of oblivion as a smoothing over of both glories and mistakes, and his choice to portray his "dreamy blinkings-out" as forms of "grace" and "clemency" recalls the close relationship between amnesia and amnesty, forgetting and forgiving.

The copacetic equanimity of this conclusion to the first section of *Losing the Marbles* rights the error of Dylan Thomas' intemperate rage. It also engages Merrill's suggestive decision to address his poem to Charmides, the beautiful young poet who lends his name to Plato's dialogue on the nature of *sophrosyne*, soundness of mind.[16] In the dialogue, Charmides is not

[16] On Charmides' identity and significance in *Losing the Marbles* as the addressee of both the poem and the poem-within-the-poem, criticism has been virtually silent. Evans Lansing Smith provides the only recognition of Charmides' presence in the poem that I have been able to discover, observing that the reconstructed ode (to

Socrates' primary interlocutor, but rather the person who best exemplifies *sophrosyne* among the Athenian youth, and who is enticed into conversation by Socrates' promise to cure a headache that persistently afflicts him. The holistic treatment that Socrates proposes requires both the consumption of an herb and the recitation of a charm, and in the course of explaining this cure to Charmides, Socrates emphasizes at length the continuity between *psyche* and *soma* that renders the treatment effective:

> If the head and body are to be well, you must begin by curing the soul; that is the first thing. And the treatment of the soul, my dear youth, has to be effected by the use of certain charms, and these charms are fair words; and by them temperance is implanted in the soul, and where temperance is, there health is speedily imparted, not only to the head, but to the whole body. And he who taught me the cure and the charm at the same time added a special direction: 'Let no one,' he said, 'persuade you to cure the head, until he has first given you his soul to be cured by the charm. For this,' he said, 'is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body.' (trans. Jowett 1:13)

The "error" perpetrated by the physicians in separating *psyche* from *soma* is archetypal; it underlies the mythological expression of *psyche* as a butterfly, a symbol that draws together the concept's many aspects—soul, mind, spirit, intellectual and moral self—by defining them in opposition to the body, grouping them as what death puts to flight. According to Socrates, the young man's physical suffering must be cured through his *psyche*, and as such Charmides becomes the site of an explicit and corrective merging of material and incorporeal dimensions of selfhood, an integration that Merrill sets at the threshold of *Losing the Marbles* by addressing Charmides in its first stanza. The means of Charmides' cure is, of course, a lyric—the "fair words" of a charm that will help to bring about a sound body by restoring a sound mind. Merrill's choice to address a poem about the infirmity of memory to Charmides, a young man who requires a poem to cure

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be discussed below) "is addressed to Charmides, a poet and lover whose name alludes to the title of the Platonic dialogue devoted to the concept of 'sophrosyne' (nothing in excess)" (109-110). In the context of *Charmides*, *sophrosyne* is often translated as "temperance," "rightmindedness," "rationality", or "modesty," but, as W.R.M. Lamb points out, "its most basic meaning is "wholeness or health of the faculty of thought" (3). Liddell and Scott give "soundness of mind" as the primary definition; Jowett notes that the term "may be described as 'mens sana in corpore sano,' the harmony or due proportion of the higher and lower elements of human nature which 'makes a man his own master,' according to the definition of the *Republic*" (1:3).

his own affliction of the head, places *Losing the Marbles* in the position of a remedy, if not for the "capital" punishments of forgetting and death, then for the angst and intemperance that they can inspire. Merrill restates this conviction about poetry's purview in the austere opening sentences of *Farewell Performance*, also from *The Inner Room*: "Art. It cures affliction" (581).

Elsewhere in *Losing the Marbles*, however, poetry is an abject casualty of forgetting, not its antidote. The poem's second part recounts the decimation of a poetic manuscript by a rainstorm, its words drowning in "oblivion's ink-blue rivulet"; by juxtaposing his disfigured draft with the first section's eroded mind and looted temple, Merrill subjects mind, monument, and text alike to analogous forms of attrition:

> Driving its silver car into the room,
> The storm mapped a new country's dry and wet—
> Oblivion's ink-blue rivulet.
> Mascara running, worksheet to worksheet
> Clings underfoot, exchanging the wrong words.
> The right ones, we can only trust will somehow
> Return to the tongue's tip,
> Weary particular and straying theme,
> Invigorated by their dip.
>
> Invigorated! Gasping, shivering
> Under our rough towels, never did they dream—!
> Whom mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by
> Even your Golden Treasury won't save,
> They feel their claim
> On *us* expiring: starved to macron, breve,
> Those fleshless ribs, a beggar's frame…
> From the brainstorm to this was one far cry.
>
> Long work of knowing and hard play of wit
> Take their toll like any virus.
> Old timers, cured, wade ankle-deep in sky.
>
> Meanwhile, come evening, to sit
> Feverishly restoring the papyrus. (573)

In the face of oblivion, Merrill's words are made flesh; gasping, shivering, starving, their frailty facilitates his identification of the materiality of written language with the materiality of the human body. The lines do not yield much hope for the daunting task of accurately "restoring

the papyrus," as the vulnerability of the concrete signifier is matched by the signified's tenuous hold within the speaker's unreliable mind; even Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* fails to jog his memory, the mouths of its poets unable to resuscitate his dying words. In light of Merrill's own HIV diagnosis, "virus" imbues with chilling gravity the words' dire emaciation and attunement to their own expiring claim on the minds of others. Still, this section of the poem contains the earliest signs that Merrill's reconstructive poetic endeavor holds promise, if not of faithful restoration then of invention. "Driving its silver car into the room," the storm's flamboyant entrance gives the impression of definitive and destructive intrusion, but the storm also shapes the terrain of "a new country" on the page; by introducing the "brainstorm" that generated the poem in the first place, Merrill reminds us that the fructifications of a creative flood can yet recuperate the obliterations of a destructive one. And though the hope that the drowning words might be "invigorated by their dip" is dismissed in the second stanza, in the penultimate section of *Losing the Marbles* we learn that "thanks/ To their little adventure" the few surviving words of the original text—"never so/ Brimming with jokes and schemes"—are rejuvenated in the youthful company of the rewritten poem's fresh language.

By referring to his sodden worksheets as a "papyrus" and to his words as "starved to macron, breve," Merrill draws an analogy between the re-creation of his own text and the academic restoration and interpretation of ancient manuscripts. With his written record compromised, yesterday's intentions seem as elusive as those of a stranger writing millenia ago; his failure to recall gapes on the page like the interstices in Sappho's fragmentary poems and the lapses in our cultural memory that they betoken. The third part of *Losing the Marbles* sets the reader in Merrill's predicament by reproducing the jagged remnants of the ruined text itself. With the knowledge that—within the narrative world of *Losing the Marbles*, at least—an antecedent, "complete" poem at one time existed, the reader inevitably assumes the role of paleographer, trying to fill in the gaps. But the *disjecta membra* of the original manuscript also

form a poem in its own right, one that resembles the graphical open verse of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Des* and that invites the reader to become interpreter and critic as well, trying to make sense of the poem as it stands and to find meaning in the relationship between the text and the empty field that surrounds it:

body, favorite
gleaned,   at the
vital
frenzy—

act and moonshaft, peaks
stiffening
Unutter[able]
the beloved's

slowly
stained in the deep   fixed
summer nights
or,

scornful   Ch[arm]ides,
decrepitude
Now, however, that
figures also

body everywhere
plunders and
what we cannot—from the hut's lintel
flawed

white as
sliced turnip   the field's brow.
our old
wanderings

home   palace, temple,
having   of those blue foothills
no further   clear
fancy[.] (574)

Losing the Marbles would have suffered if Merrill had excluded these lines that body forth the absence at the center of the poem by self-consciously protruding through it. Here Merrill stages a confrontation between the reader and the void that is disarming after the more traditional free

verse that appears in the poem's opening sections, but that also allows the reader unprecedented freedom. In some cases, the words' arrangement allows a number of non-linear readings that encourage us to choose our own interpretive adventures, and in light of the shaping force of a cataclysmic accident (recollected by the poem's droplet-shaped silhouette), we are freed of the notion of a purely intentional mind at work behind the poem, since its authorship is a putative hybrid of will and chance. With Charmides' reappearance as the ostensible addressee of this poem-within-the-poem, the eroticism of the opening lines ("vital/ frenzy—/ act and moonshaft,/ peaks/ stiffening") reminds us that he is a figure handed down by Plato not only as an exemplum of the embodied *psyche*, but also of youthful beauty and sexual interest.[17] It is through this eroticism that Merrill reintroduces the centrality of the body within his poem of memory, setting the vitality of youthful "summer nights" against the "decrepitude/ Now, however, that/ figures also" within the speaker's senescent point of view. The ramifications of this opposition between youth and age are registered through the experience of memory; the poem concludes with a spatial metaphor wherein ranges of foothills, blue in the distance, are compared to "old/ wanderings" that, from the temporal distance of advanced age, can no longer be pictured with the imaginative precision of "clear/fancy." Given Merrill's affinity in *Losing the Marbles* for puns that exploit the conventional metonymic association of the head with the workings of the mind, the description of "the field's brow" as "white as/ sliced turnip" associates the fertility of an open field—the agricultural field sprawling beneath the blue foothills, and the white field of the page itself, perhaps—with the phenomenological blankness of forgetting.

Merrill meditates directly upon this open field in the next segment of *Losing the Marbles*, the pentameter couplets of which seem palpably solid after the reproduced manuscript's diffuse

[17] Plato unmistakably emphasizes Charmides' erotic appeal in the dialogue; before he has begun the interview, Socrates admits that upon being told "that it was I who knew the cure [for his headache], [Charmides] gave me such a look with his eyes as passes description, and [I] was just about to plunge into a question….when I saw inside his cloak and caught fire, and could possess myself no longer" (*Lamb* 17).

spray of words. Here Merrill offers a critique of the "cloyed/taste" that his dense lines seem to embody; recasting oblivion's rivulet as the proverbial emblem of irrevocable accident—the white rinse of spilt milk—he considers the virtues of an aesthetic that embraces, rather than laments, the encroachment of absence:

> …Yet should milk spilt
> (As when in Rhetoric one's paragraph
> Was passed around and each time cut in half,
> From eighty words to forty, twenty, ten,
> Before imploding in a puff of Zen)
> White out the sense and mutilate the phrase,
> My text is Mind no less than Mallarmé's.
> My illustration? The Cézanne oil sketch
> Whose tracts of raw, uncharted canvas fetch
> As much per square inch as the fruit our cloyed
> Taste prizes for its bearing on the void. (575)

The pedagogical exercise of whittling a paragraph to its pith models the poet's calculated invitation—as opposed to accidental intrusion—of emptiness into poesis. In contrast to the Western association of "void" with the agonizing post-religious emptiness registered by Beckett or Camus or Kafka, the "puff of Zen" invokes a perspective that values nothingness as a source of enlightenment (*sunyata*) rather than fear. The concentration of matter and energy suggested by the physical, if facetious, metaphor of implosion brings to mind the condensed aesthetic of the haiku or Zen *kōan*, forms that recognize—like Cézanne's oil sketch, with its estimable negative space—the role of absence in defining an impression of luminous being.

Though Merrill has been elaborating the metaphorical assertion that his washed-out "text is Mind" since the introduction of the manuscript 'plotline', his reference to Mallarmé in this context, in addition to the aforementioned resemblance of the disfigured poem to Mallarmé's late, experimental verse, reminds us that Mallarmé underwent an acute spiritual and intellectual crisis upon confronting the nothingness at the center of a Godless universe. At the depths of his disconsolate meditation upon "*le Rien*," he arrived at the famous epiphany he describes in a letter to his fellow symbolist poet Henri Cazalis in the spring of 1866:

> Yes, I know, we are nothing but vain forms of matter—yet sublime too when you think that we invented God and our own souls. So sublime, my friend! that I want to give myself this spectacle of a matter aware, yes, of what it is, but throwing itself madly into the Dream that it knows it is not, singing the Soul and all those divine impressions that gather in us from earliest childhood, and proclaiming, before the Nothingness that is the truth, those glorious falsehoods![18]

For Mallarmé, religion's vitiated miracles are redeemed by the miracle of conscious matter, the mind aware of itself and able to populate the void with its own wondrous inventions, "ces glorieux mensonges." The poem itself forms a material counterpart to the embodied mind's process of inventing reality, the "surrounding silence" of the page mimetic of a "mental context" in which all experience, including the experience of the poem, takes place.[19] Mallarmé observes with regret that we write black on white, never like the stars against the dark.[20] Merrill's approbation of a poetics aiming to dignify and manifest obscurity while holding sacred its incandescent perforations finds expression in his response to a question about difficult poetry:

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[18] Roberto Calasso, whose translation I borrow here, writes of this sentence: "The threads that interweave in this sentence would go on spinning out until Mallarme's death. And likewise the ambiguities: above all in that verb *s'élançant* ('throwing itself') in which converge both the subject who wants to give himself 'this spectacle of a matter,' etc., and the matter itself observing its own behavior" (translation and quote 111). For reference, here is the French: "Oui, *je le sais*, nous ne sommes que de vaines formes de la matière—mais bien sublimes pour avoir inventé Dieu et notre âme. Si sublimes, mon ami! que je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière, ayant conscience d'être, et, cependant, s'élançant forcenément dans ce Rève qu'elle sait n'être pas, chantant l'Âme et toutes les divines impressions pareilles qui se sont ammassées en nous depuis les premiers âges, et proclamant devant le Rien qui est la vérité, ces glorieux mensonges!" (Letter to Henri Cazalis, April 1866; *Correspondance* 207-8).

[19] Merrill writes of *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* that "the idea is more interesting than the execution" (*CP* 69). In the "Comment" with which he prefaced the initial 1897 publication of *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé summarizes "the idea" in his own words: "I would prefer this Note not to be read, or to be glanced at and then actually forgotten; it teaches the practised Reader little that is located beyond his perception: yet may cause trouble for the novice who should apply his gaze to the Poem's first words so that the following ones, laid out as they are, lead him to the final ones, the whole without any novelty except in the spacing of the act of reading. The 'blank spaces', in reality, assume the importance and catch the eye at once; versification has always demanded them, as a surrounding silence, so that a lyric or a short-lined piece usually occupies only about the central one-third of its page: I am not transgressing against this arrangement, merely dispersing its components. The paper intervenes every time an image ends or withdraws of its own accord, accepting that others will follow it; and as there is no question of the customary regular sound patterns or lines…at the moment when they appear and as long as they last, in some precise mental context, the result is that the text establishes itself in varying positions, near or far from the implicit leading train of thought, for reasons of verisimilitude" (*CPOV* 262-3). Paul Valéry writes of the experience of hearing Mallarmé read the poem, "My comprehension had to cope with embodied silences" (*SW* 218).

[20] "On n'écrit past, lumineusement, sur champs obscur, l'alphabet des astres…; l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc" (*Oeuvres* 370).

"My own ideal of the hermetic artist is Mallarmé. Under his difficult surface there's the midnight sky, a skull of stars" (*CPr* 73).

The difficulties of piecing together Merrill's papyrus version of the manuscript, part three of *Losing the Marbles*, are met with a somewhat ambiguous reward in part five's palimpsest version of the text, in which Merrill has rewritten the poem over the remnants of the original, incorporating them into an ode in Sapphic stanzas. The two drafts do not appear side by side, as the poem's fourth part intervenes between them; as a result, after struggling to infer the relationships between the papyrus version's fractured parts, we turn the page to find a set of 'answers' that inevitably depart from those to which the fragmentary text directed us. We find, for example, that the context of the opening lines' "frenzy" is not that of a sexual encounter, but of an oracular conference with the sibyl at Delphi, and as the speaker's recollection of an unnamed beloved gives way to reflection on the experience of recollection itself, we see that in the course of filling in the gaps, Merrill has eradicated one account of forgetting only to introduce another:

> he had joined an elite scornful—as were, Charmides,
> your first, chiseled verses—of decrepitude
> in any form. Now, however, that
> their figures also
>
> begin to slip the mind—while the body everywhere
> with peasant shrewdness plunders and puts to use
> what we cannot—from the hut's lintel
> gleams one flawed image;
>
> another, cast up by frost or earthquake, shines white as
> sliced turnip from a furrow on the field's brow.
> Humbly our old poets knew to make
> wanderings into
>
> homecomings of a sort—harbor, palace, temple, all
> having been quarried out of those blue foothills
> no further off, these last clear autumn
> days, than infancy. (577)

The previous draft's concluding suggestion of youth's "old/wanderings" viewed at a hazy distance gives way in the reconstructed ode to the public and poetic accounts of "old poets" like Homer, who facilitate in their archetypal chronicles of wandering heroes the "homecomings" of universal recognition, quarrying sites of epic adventure—"harbor, palace, temple"—out of the common ground of human experience. Here, it is the youthful beloved and the elite group of poets with whom he associated whose figures "begin to slip the mind," and it comes as no surprise that the ode's trope of forgetting should be, once again, a looted monument. The "flawed image" of the past projected in the mind's eye suggests our inevitably erroneous image of the poem based on the preceding draft, as well as the Sapphic image divested of its context, pendent and solitary in the mind. These implicit and explicit examples of incomplete mental representations are likened to the damaged fragments of an ancient frieze, appropriated by peasants and placed in the architectural service of "the hut's lintel" or jostled into visibility "from a furrow on the field's brow" by swelling frost or a seismic shudder. That the fate of the flawed mental image is attributed to a body that "plunders" suggests that Merrill's own verses may be as "scornful…of decrepitude" as Charmides' own. But that the resourceful, enterprising body "puts to use" those fragments suggests the use to which the body puts forgetting in an evolutionary sense, employing it as a mechanism for streamlining thought, and emphasizes that the mind recovers these modest, gleaming remnants for use in constructing new artifacts, such as poems.[21]

Perhaps the most striking single revision between the fragmentary draft and the finished ode is the replacement of "fancy" with "infancy," a substitution that evokes the speaker's inevitable 'homecoming' into the second childhood of his dotage, but that also suggests, through the etymological sense of "infancy," the advent of a state of silence where the imagination had once declared itself. This silence recalls the failures of language that permeate the opening

[21] For a recent study exploring the evolutionary value of forgetting and its impact upon the efficiency of thought, see Barrett and Zollman, "The role of forgetting in the evolution and learning of language" (2009).

section of *Losing the Marbles*, and is amplified in the dire neurological terms of the poem's penultimate section. Here, Merrill exaggerates the limitations of the embodied mind through the extreme circumstance of brain damage, finding in the impairment of language resulting from stroke or injury (aphasia) an alternative to the comparably routine, but no less biologically grounded, mnemonic atrophy associated with aging. In three stanzas of trimeter quatrains, Merrill introduces three examples of deductive recovery in the face of material loss: that of the archaeologist who reconstructs a handmaiden's form from an errant finger in the shattered statuary of an ancient pediment; that of the poet (or reader, or paleographer) who conjures an ode from the remains of a single metrical foot; and that of the steward of a brain-damaged companion, whose patient attention allows him to discern a message in his aphasic friend's torrent of incoherent speech, lighting at last on the all-important, misplaced word:

> Who gazed into the wrack till
> Inspiration glowed,
> Deducing from one dactyl
> The handmaiden, the ode?
>
> Or when aphasia skewered
> The world upon a word
> Who was the friend, the steward,
> Who bent his head, inferred
>
> Then filled the sorry spaces
> With pattern and intent
> A syntax of lit faces
> From the impediment? (578)

The lines emphasize, above all, care. The persevering gaze, attentive enough to see the ghostly contours of an ancient "pediment" through the "impediment" of millenial decay, draws the fire of inspiration even in the face of ruin. The last of the three stanzas fuses the various circumstances Merrill has superimposed, revealing the conjunction of industry and imagination common to them all: the "sorry spaces" are those left by the handmaiden's missing form, the draft's missing lines, and the impaired man's missing language; the "lit faces" are those of the figures in the sculpted scene, the young poets in the ode, and the struggling aphasic beaming

with the relief of recognition; the "impediment" is in every case the obstacle of incomplete information resulting from vital material limitations. By this point in the poem, the plastic arts of sculpture and architecture, in addition to the verbal art of poetry, are familiar concrete reflections of the mind. By drawing the losses of language associated with aphasia into apposition with signs rinsed from the page and statuary eroded and concealed by time, Merrill emphasizes that the experiences of loss that riddle the phenomenology of thought are likewise symptomatic of concrete, physical conditions that are beyond the administration of human will.

In his description of aphasia having "skewered/ The world upon a word," Merrill imagines what it is to suffer from a pathology of expression by amplifying the mundane torment of having a word on the tip of one's tongue, calling upon the shocking feeling of consequence that attends drawing a blank while all the surrounding structures of intellectual possession remain in play. Merrill conveys this feeling of consequence through hyperbole, hanging the fate of the cosmos upon a single, resplendent word, but his hyperbole serves yet another purpose in the context of the surrounding lines' searching questions about the identity of the mysterious and benevolent "steward" who brings order to the chaos of loss. The aphasiac's missing word, through the lines' ambience of cosmic significance, is writ large as *Logos* itself, the syntax of creation through which divine reason "filled the sorry spaces/ With pattern and intent." Like the Word personified, Merrill's personified words undergo a process of fleshly mortification; "starved to macron, breve," their watery sacrifice ultimately proves and glorifies their creator's imaginative power.

That every act of mnemonic re-creation should be exalted for reflecting—like the doodler's sunbursts and garlands or Mallarmé's *glorieux mensonges*—a more sublime and originary act of design is consistent with Merrill's interest in the countervailing forces of entropy and organization and their bearing upon mind and monument alike. Affirming with aphoristic definitiveness that "All stone once dressed asks to be worn," *Losing the Marbles* also asserts that

"the will-/To structural elaboration"—the human impulse to design, to organize, to interpret—ensures that where recovery may fail reinvention will inevitably flourish. Merrill imputes this "will-/To-structural-elaboration" to the raw materials of the monuments themselves, suggesting that the will of nature finds expression in the signs that record our public past; by conceiving of monumental artifice not in opposition to nature but as an extension of it, Merrill finds a way to rewrite cultural memory as he has written individual memory, through the rhythms of embodiment:

> Does the will-
> To-structural-elaboration still
> Flute up, from shifting dregs of would-be rock,
> Glints of a future colonnade and frieze?
> Do higher brows unknit within the block,
> And eyes whose Phidias and Pericles
> Are eons hence make out through crystal skeins
> Wind-loosened tresses and the twitch of reins?
> Ah, not for long will marble school the blood
> Against the warbling sirens of the flood.
> All stone once dressed asks to be worn. The foam-
> Pale seaside temple, like a palindrome,
> Had quietly laid its plans for stealing back.
> What are the Seven Wonders now? A pile
> Of wave-washed pebbles. Topless women smile,
> Picking the smoothest, rose-flawed white or black
> Which taste of sunlight on moon-rusted swords,
> To use as men upon their checkerboards. (575-6)

Just as Merrill's poem-within-the-poem echoes the fragility of embodied memory by proving to be anything but a *monumentum aere perennius*, his marble monument proves vulnerable to the "warbling sirens" of destruction, finally unable to "school the blood" of poets in their pretentions to immortality. What permanence there is is a permanence of minute parts, of "wave-washed pebbles" and "shifting dregs of would-be rock," remnants as full of promise as Whitman's smallest sprouts of grass, which "show there is really no death,/ And if ever there was it led forward life" (35); the monument's permanence proves to be not continuous but cyclical, modeled upon the fragility and resilient perpetuity of life, renewed generation by generation. This resemblance between flesh and marble, "rose-flawed white or black," is only

visible from the highwire of the imagination or the magnificent perspective of the gods themselves, a height from which men are merely pawns. Using the Seven Wonders, now reduced to pebbles, "as men upon their checkerboards," the topless women resemble the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne, and the Fates, too, from whose vantage the markers of cultural memory are shown to reflect, rather than transcend, the mortality of the body.

This organic view of monumentality, in which every end proves to be a beginning, finds a verbal model in the palindrome. Describing the monument that "quietly laid its plans for stealing back" into being, Merrill has in mind the palindrome as a literal "running back" along a prescribed path, letter by letter. At the poem's conclusion, the minute organic parts that form the mechanism of hereditary continuity—the body's chemical plans for stealing into and back out of existence—are invoked in the "DNA-like wisps" that twist in a 'pregnant' pouch of toy marbles[22]:

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[22] As Reena Sastri observes, the DNA double helix lends its form to the silhouette of "An Upward Look," in which caesuras splice the narrow, descending strip of text in two; in the poem Merrill depicts the motion of human consciousness as the result of genetic expression and mockingly suggests that the vacillation of thought might be causally, rather than coincidentally, related to the physical composition of the doubled chemical strains, "halves of a clue"

> In bright alternation   minutely mirrored
> within the thinking   of each and every
>
> mortal creature (674)

[22] Such balancing strokes as these, which allow Merrill to accomplish his performances upon "the highwire between the elegiac and the haywire," seem to me to refute Timothy Materer's argument that in Merrill's final collections he finds himself "beyond consolation" (124), that there is an "uncompromising bleakness characteristic of Merrill's finest late poems" (125), among which "Losing the Marbles" must certainly be counted.

The pool-as-prison of the poem's concluding lines recurs in the fragmentary final stanza of "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek(™) Windbreaker," the penultimate poem of Merrill's final volume:

> Love, grief etc.****for good reason.
> Now only *******STOP signs.
> Meanwhile *****if you are I've ex-
> ceeded our [?]***~~more than time~~ was needed
> To fit a text airless and ** as Tyvek
> With breathing spaces and between the lines
> Days brilliantly recurring, as once *we* did,
> To keep the blue wave dancing in its prison. (673)

After the endless jokes, this balmy winter
Around the pool, about the missing marbles,
What was more natural than for my birthday
To get—from the friend whose kiss that morning woke me—
A pregnantly clicking pouch of targets and strikers,
Aggies and rainbows, the opaque chalk-red ones,
Clear ones with DNA-like wisps inside,
Others like polar tempests vitrified…
These I've embedded at random in the deck-slats
Around the pool. (The pool!—compact, blue, dancing,
Lit-from-beneath-oubliette.) By night their sparkle
Repeats the garden lights, or moon- or starlight,
Tinily underfoot, as though the very
Here and now were becoming a kind of heaven
To sit in, talking, largely mindless of
The risen, cloudy brilliances above. (579)

From the lover's morning kiss and the sparkling pool-side chatter to the luminous constellation of targets and strikers, *Losing the Marbles'* clement final scene fulfills the poem's earlier claim that "Art furnishes a counterfeit/ Heaven" (575). In the midst of the human consolations that array Merrill's paradisiacal garden party (chief among them the aesthetic consolation of ravishing poetic language), Merrill conceals a sinister emblem of forgetting in plain sight; in a sudden and dispassionate metaphorical stroke, the swimming pool—"compact, blue, dancing," and in perfect harmony with the blithe and stylish scene—is transformed into a hidden dungeon, a

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Earlier in the poem, Merrill had discovered "lucite coffins/ For sapphire waves that crest, break, and recede" among the souvenirs in a new-age boutique; as the wave of the poem's final line engulfs the poet's voice, its fluid movement suggests not only "the motion of the spirit [contained] in the measure of the poem," as Vendler notes (134), but also the defiant dance of the mind's play within the cell of the failing body and the liquid oubliette that both threatens and allures the speaker of "Losing the Marbles." Riddled with the omissions of the speaker composing *in extremis*, this final stanza resembles the ravaged Sapphic ode that figurally evokes Merrill's Lethe-spattered mind in "Marbles," and embroidered with "starry longitudes" in a map of the zodiac, the black jacket that "Self-Portrait" describes also answers "the risen, cloudy brilliances" that twinkle above the swimming pool in "Marbles" and the forgotten "rhetoric of starry beasts and gods" in "Urania." In light of Merrill's use of snuffed-out stellar sparks and the Athens twilight's "dreamy blinkings-out" to evoke mental decay in these earlier poems, the astral asterisks that appear in the final stanza of "Self-Portrait" suggest, as Timothy Materer proposes, dying stars. They collapse into the void that Merrill identifies with the emptiness of the white page in *The Book of Ephraim*:

This net of loose talk tightening to verse,
And verse once more revolving between poles—
Gassy expansion and succinct collapse—
Till Heaven is all peppered with black holes,
Vanishing points for the superfluous
Matter elided (just in time perhaps)
By the conclusion of a passage thus. (85-86)

receptacle for the hopelessly forgotten. The innocuously effete ring of "oubliette"—from the French *oublier*, to forget, itself derived from *oblivisci,* the corresponding Latin verb—disguises the utter ghastliness of its meaning. A cell that is accessible only through a hatch in a high ceiling, the oubliette is a terminal prison, a chamber designed to foreclose release. Merrill's "Lit-from-beneath-oubliette" thus imagistically, etymologically, and acoustically recalls "oblivion's ink-blue rivulet," the force of mnemonic destruction that courses throughout the poem's various parts and plotlines. In contrast to the twinkling marbles that "Repeat…/ The risen, cloudy brilliances above," the pool is illuminated from below, its surface unreflective; in the midst of the deck-slats' mimetic firmament, the Lethean swimming pool forms the last in the long line of graphical, verbal, and mnemonic blanks drawn in *Losing the Marbles*. It seems appropriate, at the conclusion of the poem, that Merrill should choose to situate the abyss of forgetting at the center of the scintillating fête of life, but he also chooses to neutralize the watery prison's menace through the enticements of its warm glow and gamboling ripples, which seem to invite the heedless pleasure of an 'invigorating dip.'

Answering the missing calendar of the poem's opening lines, the birthday celebration observes the passage of time as it affectionately recasts its losses as gifts. Despite its balmy radiance, the celebration takes place in the terminal phase of both the day and the year, not in the "gathering dusk" of the poem's opening section, but by a winter's moonlight. Merrill is on the brink of following his own past into oblivion, fulfilling the biological fate prescribed by the deterministic double helix of DNA, that "spiral molecule/ Whose sparklings outmaneuver time, space, us" (*CL* 274) and that abides, furtive and inevitable, within the bound-to-be-lost emblems of memory. In a poem so sensitive to the ways in which the phenomenology of recollection reflects underlying somatic conditions—from the aphasic's brain damage to the speaker's brain cells 'blinking out' with age—Merrill emphasizes that circumstances of embodiment are as

intractable in shaping the experience of memory as nature and time are intractable in shaping the material legacies of art.

The poem's cascade of afflictions began implicitly and intertextually with Charmides' headache and the poetic "charm" that might cure it. The English word "charm" has its origin in the Latin *carmen*—song, incantation, verse—and carries into modernity its superstitious suggestion of a diminutive force that at once excites admiration and dispels, if only temporarily, the threat of mortal danger. Thus "charm," though often condescended to as an aesthetic attribute of verse, is a form of beauty characterized by its talismanic power to protect its possessor, a power that distinguishes Merrill's voice as he portrays the forms of loss, mnemonic and otherwise, that populate his poetry. The capacity not only to be charmed by aspects of mundane experience but to charm his readers through his resilient felicity of expression enables Merrill to dispel temporarily the anxiety that the irresistible and ubiquitous encroachments of oblivion—upon the self, upon the body, upon history—can generate within us. And yet as aspects of beauty, the self-effacement, wit and poise that characterize Merrill's charm are also forms of affirmation, ways of asserting the aesthetic freedom that can arise from the powerlessness of the self in the face of forces that constrain it, whether those forces are embodied in flesh, in the enclosures of lyric form, or in the laws of nature.

CHAPTER TWO

Physiological Thinking: Robert Creeley's Forms of Process, A.R. Ammons' Processing Forms

In an age of secular poetry, A.R. Ammons makes a religion of science. "God Is the Sense the World Makes Without God," the title of a late poem, suggests the spiritual significance Ammons finds in natural order and in the "sense" the sciences make of phenomena observable in the physical world. Ammons longs to see into the life of things, to catch a glimpse of the natural *logos* that intimates divinity to Wordsworth but that all but *comprises* divinity, two centuries later, for his American inheritor. In his early poem "Hymn," Ammons calls out to nature itself, acknowledging that if he is to glimpse its animating design he will "have to stay with the earth"—to train his eye upon the ground of material being. Such scrutiny, he knows, will lead him to the biological limits of perception, so he promises nature that he will use the "thin" (refined, subtle) instruments of science—and of poesis—to regard its minutest visible forms with vigilant devotion:

> …I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
> inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
> trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
> coelenterates
> and praying for a nerve cell
> with all the soul of my chemical reactions
> and going right on down where the eye sees only traces
>
> You are everywhere partial and entire
> You are on the inside of everything and on the outside (*Expressions*, 8)

For Ammons, who spent a decade managing a biological glass factory, the optics of the microscope were a seamless prosthetic for natural vision; cellular membranes ("microvilli"), minute botanical structures ("sporangia"), and primitive animals ("coelenterates") were easily

accessible to his mind's eye and thus to his spiritual imagination.[1] He is at ease coordinating his refined scientific vocabulary with an untutored, folk vocabulary of belief—with the language of trust and prayer, and with the voice of a supplicant; in Ammons' poetry anatomy mingles gracefully with doxology, for he conceives of the most invisible aspects of human experience in somatic terms. If the soul is an emergent property of chemical reactions, then praying is a perfectly natural way to approach a nerve cell, and the boundaries between outside and inside—between the "You" of nature and the "Me" of the phenomenal self—naturally fall away.

Creeley possessed neither Ammons' consuming interest in non-human nature nor his fluency in the discourse of biology, and yet the strident scientism of Ammons' conception of the soul in "Hymn" is the outcome of an evolution the poets have in common; Ammons and Creeley both wrote rigidly dualistic poems early in their careers before arriving at transforming, spiritually enriching conceptions of the relation between physiological being and mental life. In an interview with Lewis MacAdams in 1969, Creeley recalls how the dissociation of psyche and soma bore palpably upon the tenor of his early writing; he explains the emotional consequences of relinquishing the idea of a spectral "deity" that animates a bodily machine:

> It honestly, to my mind, isn't until the sixties that people begin to…come back into the experience of their own bodies as primary, and to realize that the mind is physiological. It is not some abstract deity that can be apart from the physiological moment of existence. It seems to me that we have moved from that duality that absolutely informs all

[1] Of his effortlessly "natural" use of scientific terms in his poetry, Ammons explains in a 1986 interview: "It was perfectly natural for me to speak that way and to write that way because what I knew and understood, and the things that I thought I could see into with some clarity, were deeply informed by the reading I had done and the experiences I had had which you might call scientific" (Stahl 49). The most sustained investigation of the "expansive influence of science on Ammons's poetry" (194) is Steven Schneider's *A.R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope* (1994), which focuses on both astronomy and biology, particularly the physiology of vision; other sources that address Ammons' thematic uses of science include Alan Holder's *A. R. Ammons* (1978) (Holder notes that "science does not function primarily as a source of metaphors for Ammons, but as a supplier of knowledge and concepts whose contemplation gives him pleasure" [36]); Daniel Tobin's "A. R. Ammons and the Poetics of Chaos" (1999) in which Tobin claims that Ammons' work "reveals at every turn its profound sympathy with the new science" (113); Miriam Marty Clark's "The Gene, the Computer, and Information Processing in A. R. Ammons" (1990), which addresses Ammons' depictions of biological information processing; and Willard Spiegelman's chapter on Ammons in *The Didactic Muse* (1989), which identifies Ammons as a poet who "shares Auden's and Nemerov's interest in scientific discovery and James Merrill's impulse to present 'poems of science'" (111).

> my thinking when I'm a kid, for example, that 'the mind is to discipline the body,' or 'the body is to relax the mind'….The torque that's created by that systematization of experience is just awful. Just incredible. It can *whip*. You know I called a book *The Whip*. And that's why, that's why the title. I don't think I consciously went and said, 'What's a word for this particular kind of experience', but...I knew that something whipped me constantly in my own experience of things. Something was really, you know, WHAM, WHAM, slashing and cutting me. (*Contexts* 166-7)

The "torque" Creeley identifies with this rigidly dualistic philosophy of mind is evident in the syntactic and imagistic torture of early lines that proclaim "My mind/ to me a mangle is" ("Chasing the Bird," 1953). In his poems of the 1950s, Creeley conceives of the mind as an entity disconnected from the feeling body, an "abstract deity" that applies agonizing circumscriptions upon sensation, subordinating instinct to the artificial impositions of reason and intention. Over the course of the 1960s, however, Creeley ceases to see the mind as a disembodied force whose 'disciplining' exertions upon the body recall the exertions of the superego upon the corporeal id, and comes instead to see the mind as a process that resembles the flow of biological events whence cognitive life emerges.

This chapter sets out to isolate and explore the poetic forms Creeley and Ammons adopt as they come to "realize that the mind is physiological," to address how the immediacy of physical being suffuses the *feeling* of thinking and shapes each poet's distinctive habits of arranging words on the page. Critics have long acknowledged Creeley's and Ammons' respective interests in the phenomenology of mind—Roger Gilbert identifies Ammons as a poet "more concerned with rendering the *experience* of reflection, its rhythms and contours, than with delivering completed thoughts that can claim the status of truth" (246), and Benjamin Friedlander has noted that Creeley "sings the very process of thinking" (16), but the extent to which Ammons' and Creeley's interests in mental process are earned, evolving, and invested in biological materialism requires fuller account. Each poet abandons his earliest strategies for describing thought and comes to insist upon the situation of mind in *life*—within nature and subject to the constraints of physical

necessity. Creeley is relieved to relinquish the model of the mind as a metaphysical prison, but as he situates the operations of embodied thought within the unrelenting, directional flow of time, he adopts forms that highlight the embodied sequentiality of all acts of mind, including the act of reading; with strikingly minimal forms and virtuosic deixis, he represents thinking as a process that "stumbles after" experience in real time. Ammons experiments with an evolving repertoire of analogies and forms before adopting digestion as a central metaphor of mind (and of language, and of the poem); he combines vivid depictions of bodily functions and a robust neuroscientific vocabulary to represent ideas as imperfect products of a living body. In addition to clarifying his uses of punctuation as an apparatus of assimilation and disintegration, Ammons' metaphors of the mind prove integral to deciphering how his late forms subliminally "process" meaning.

Both Ammons and Creeley resist easy ranking among the manifestoed poetic factions of the Cold War decades, Ammons because he identified with no particular coterie and Creeley because he circulated among so many (the Objectivists, the Projectivists, the Black Mountain poets, the Beats, and later, the Language poets). Creeley's conviction that mental life is embedded in physical reality is ultimately heuristic in origin; just as the subjective texture of forgetting is Merrill's primary source of evidence that the mind is embodied (and that, therefore, empirical ways of framing memory have epistemological value), for Creeley the fact that thought *feels* as if it has a directional flow confirms that mentality is mortal and temporal (and that it therefore belongs to the order of things in the universe that are legitimately subject to scientific inquiry).[2]

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[2] In a 1980 review of Arakawa and Madeline Gins' *The Mechanism of Meaning*, a collaborative exhibition whose ambition, in the artists' own terms, was to map visually "what is emitted point-blank at a moment of thought" (4), Creeley quotes from *The Living Brain* (1953), an enthusiastic history of electroencephalography written for a popular audience by the neurophysiologist W. Grey Walter. In light of Walter's account (which emphasizes, Creeley explains in a footnote, "the 'mechanical' construct of the brain"), Creeley identifies the representational demand Arakawa and Gins face in their exhibition as one of capturing thoughts as they speed along in real time, as a matter of *rate*:

> …a present commonplace would be the fact that "facts accumulate at a far higher rate than does the understanding of them," which "understanding" or "rational thought" "...depends literally on ratio, on

Distinguishing Creeley from Merrill and the other poets in this study is the significant role drug use has to play in eliciting his epiphany that the mind is a part of nature. Despite broadening popular recognition over the course of "the tranquilized/ Fifties" that brain chemistry intricately and subliminally determines experience, for Creeley it isn't until recreational "experimentation" with illicit drugs becomes pervasive during the sixties "that people begin to…realize that the mind is physiological." Creeley identifies this experimental exploration of "the particularity of thinking" with a fundamental break from earlier generations' hubristic faith in the power of the 'abstract deity' of the human mind to organize reality:

> In the forties mind was thought of as the primary *agent* of having place in the world. I think that [attribution of agency] came probably from that sense of getting out of the whole nightmare of the Depression by being able to think your way out. And isn't that characteristic of Roosevelt's administration that there enters into American government in political circumstance a sense of expertise—the ability to think your way out of dilemmas; that is, to deal with the national economy by thinking of a way out….But it's very interesting that all of the people of my generation, so to speak, have each one of them come to some resolution of this dilemma with all the energy and all the particularity of thinking that they can bring to it. When Allen [Ginsberg] speaks of his ability presently to have a good LSD trip, what he's also saying is that he has finally been able to relax, not only to relax, but to get beyond the thinking that was the bad trip all the time. Or that when Gary is drawn to Zen, it's again to exhaust the mind's exercise of its will upon the body's nature. (McAdams 168)

In Creeley's account, everyday thinking—thinking engaged in solving problems and demonstrating "expertise"—is just another kind of trip, one path among many chemical possibilities. This normative thinking is a "bad trip" because it critically overestimates the power of the mind to make sense of the chaos of experience, an overestimation that is expressed in human constructs ranging from economic policy to literary art. When an interviewer identifies the New Criticism with a "a willful coercion" of experience into aesthetic unity, Creeley

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> the proportions and relations between things. As facts are collected, the number of possible relations between them increases at an enormous rate." A small instance of this would be the present monitoring of "signals" from "outer space" (or "inner," for that matter), which constitute such an immense bulk of possibly significant data that the mind boggles at the idea of "containment" or "subject" implied. (422)

responds by couching this critical impulse as "a legacy of modernism that was [a] gift particularly of…the great Imago Mundi makers," going on to cite Pound, Joyce, Mann, Proust, and Freud as examples; Creeley explains of these thinkers, "I see them really broken on that painful wheel of trying to sustain a continuing cohering imagination of the world. And not only won't it cohere but it literally breaks in the process" (17). The bad trip of aspiring to imagine a coherent reality finds its obverse in the utterly passive LSD trip, in which the mind contracts to occupy a finite, human scale. In 1969 Creeley claims that the use of mescaline occasions in him a more realistic awareness of mortality, and that this is the drug's most intellectually "useful" aspect:

> What becomes—to my own mind deeply useful—so explicit with either mescalin [*sic*], or acid, is the *finite* system of the *form* of human-body life, i.e., that that phase, call it, of energy qua form is of no permanent order whatsoever, in the single instance, however much the species' form is continued genetically, etc….That the I can accept its impermanent form and yet realize… it is one of many, also *one*. (*CPr* 312-313)

Creeley reveals a conception of drug use as an investigation of the relationship between mental life and bodily life, one that puts him in touch with limits and with the absolute non-permanence of the individual, "however much the species' form is continued genetically."

By the time Creeley's philosophy of mind begins to undergo dramatic revision in the mid-sixties, his enthrallment with the nature of thought is already well established in his poetry. In "The Mountains in the Desert" (1961), an early poem from *Words*, Creeley characterizes as irrepressible, even compulsive, his inclination to reflect upon the nature of reflection itself:

> The mountains blue now
> at the back of my head,
> such geography of self and soul
> brought to such limit of sight,
>
> I cannot relieve it
> nor leave it, my mind locked
> in seeing it
> as the light fades.

> Tonight let me go
> at last out of whatever
> mind I thought to have,
> and all the habits of it. (269) [3]

"The Mountains in the Desert" is overtly metacognitive, taking as its subject the "mind locked" in concentration upon its own activity. Creeley compares "the geography of self and soul" to a panorama that sprawls behind him, his bodily eye as "locked" as his mind's eye is in "seeing it," its "sight" circumscribed not only by the limits of its own habits of thought but also by the natural constraints the eye imposes upon perception. The thrice-repeated *it* of the second stanza refers in each instance to the mind hypnotically locked in the condition of reflecting upon itself, and "as the light fades" upon this ineluctably dim, and possibly doomed, process of conjecture, the speaker's inability to expand his range of cognitive motion results in a desperate appeal to be let go "at last out of whatever/ mind I thought to have,/ and all the habits of it." Significantly, the speaker characterizes the mind as a thing that he *has* and that he attempts to think away in his renunciative poem; the nature of his plea reveals his conception of the mind as an entity that the self possesses and that can in turn powerfully and painfully possess the self.

This paradoxical conception of the mind, in which thought does not comprise and constitute the self but is an entity boxed within it, is characteristic of Creeley's early poetry. In his frustration and longing to be relieved of rational thought, of the self-conscious "mind" that he represents as an external, oppressive, reified 'other,' the speaker of "The Mountains in the Desert," recalls the bitterly anguished speaker of "The Kind of Act of" (1952), a poem that Creeley composed a decade earlier:

> Giving oneself to the dentist or doctor who is a good one,
> to take the complete
> possession of mind, there is no
>
> giving. The mind

[3]All composition dates included parenthetically after poem titles are available in Mary Novik. *Robert Creeley: An Inventory, 1945-1970*. Kent: Ohio Kent State University Press, 1973.

> beside the act of any dispossession is
>
> lecherous. There is no more giving in
> when there is no more sin. (122)

Just as in "The Mountains in the Desert," here the mind is represented as a possession of which the speaker longs to be dispossessed. "The Act of Kind of" situates the desire to relinquish the burden of self-consciousness through a dentist's or doctor's anesthetic within a moral and religious paradigm, characterizing the longing that occasions the poem as a form of lust. Through his treatment of the mind as a possessed *thing*, particularly within this specifically Christian context, Creeley implies the familiar role of the body as the edifice that houses the mind, or as an integument that shrouds the incorporeal self; in "The Act of Kind of" he aligns the opposition of mind and body with the ethical dualism of virtue and vice and demonstrates that alignment's emotionally devastating effects upon the tormented speaker. With the statement "There is no more giving in/ when there is no more sin," the speaker acknowledges that to equate the desire to "dispossess" the mind—and the post-lapsarian self-consciousness he associates with it—with spiritual failure (or, "giving in") is to immure himself in a repressive paradigm, but this acknowledgement alone does him little good. "The Mountains in the Desert" and "The Kind of Act of" demonstrate that by the early sixties Creeley had a firmly established set of terms with which he was accustomed to representing the mind, terms that reflect the moral and spiritual estrangement of soul and body that the poet himself identified with his New England heritage. In *Autobiography* (1991), Creeley attributes to his Puritan upbringing a feeling of inexorable rupture, "a curious split between the physical fact of a person and that thing they otherwise think with, or about, the so-called mind" (122). This curious break in the "I" permeates all aspects of his being, transforming even sensation and perception; as the visible world fragments before him, the

dualist speaker of "The Window" declares pitiably, and punningly, "I can feel/ my eye breaking" (*CP 1*, 284).[4]

A group of poems that Creeley composed in the fall and winter of 1963 mark a crucial transition in his representation of consciousness and of "the so-called mind." These poems emphasize the physical underpinnings of the mind, thought, and language, and range in their explicitness from the unmistakably 'embodied' opening lines of "The Language" (1963):

> Locate *I*
> *love you* some-
> where in
>
> teeth and
> eyes... (283)

to the more subtle intimations of the mind's emergence from finite, and necessarily imperfect, material conditions in "I Keep to Myself Such Measures…" (1963). In the latter poem the mind ceases to be an "abstract deity that can be apart from the *physiological moment* of existence" (italics mine); the poem emphatically situates thinking in *time*, and thus situates the mind in nature. The poem is divided into four four-line stanzas, "measures" that represent the succession of moments that structure mental experience:

> I keep to myself such
> measures as I care for,
> daily the rocks
> accumulate position.
>
> There is nothing
> but what thinking makes
> it less tangible. The mind,
> fast as it goes, loses
>
> pace, puts in place of it
> like rocks simple markers,
> for a way only to

[4] As he looks through his window, the speaker attempts to comprehend the arrangement of objects in the visual field by pairing them off—a water tank and a church, a man and his car—fragmenting the visual scene perceived by the eye in accordance with the dualistic organization of reality projected by the riven, speaking "I." For a compelling reading of this poem among Creeley's dozens of other poems entitled "Windows," see Marjorie Perloff, "Robert Creeley's Windows" (2002).

> hopefully come back to
>
> where it cannot. All
> forgets. My mind sinks.
> I hold in both hands such weight
> it is my only description. (297)

"There is nothing/ but what thinking makes/ it less tangible" appears to express irritation with the rarefying touch of an "abstract deity"—a frustration with the tendency of conceptual thought to make sensation feel unreal, and to contaminate the sudden and "tangible" feeling of knowing with the insubstantiality of doubt. As the poem proceeds, however, it is revealed that the speaker's frustration arises, like Merrill's, from his sensitivity to the phenomenology of forgetting. With the assertion that "The mind,/ fast as it goes, loses// pace," Creeley introduces two representational consequences of 'coming back into the experience of his own body as primary': he characterizes thought not as force but as a *process*—as something that 'goes fast'—and he frames the limitations of the mind not in terms of containment or repression but in terms of its directional, inexorable *motion* in real time. In the poems of the mid-sixties, thought is no longer a disembodied force that disciplines the libidinal, emotional aspects of the self, but rather an embodied activity that is inherently and distressingly circumscribed. Poetic "measures" become "rocks" and "markers" carefully positioned in a mnemonic trail behind experience; these are the measures language takes in order to pin down the swift, elusive process of thought, but the path of the mind cannot really be retraced—the mind cannot "come back to// where it cannot." By the conclusion of the poem, Creeley confesses, "My mind sinks"—he necessarily relinquishes his transcendental concept of mind as he acknowledges the mind's contingency upon material conditions in space and time.

Creeley's preoccupations with the seriality and fallibility of embodied cognition in "I Keep Myself to Such Measures…" are echoed throughout the poems that he composes between 1963 and 1966. He opens "A Place" (1963), for example, by insisting that sensory experience and

the verbal accounts we use to describe them are not identical, and that embodied memory, like language, distorts more than it preserves:

> The wetness of that street, the light,
> the way the clouds were heavy is
> not description. But in the memory I fear
>
> the distortion. I do not feel
> what it was I was feeling. (325)

It is the body in *time* that makes it impossible to reproduce experience, to "feel/ what it was I was feeling." In "Distance" (1964), Creeley defines the mind as "nothing/ otherwise but/ a stumbling/ looking after" (371); his pejorative tone reaffirms the incapacity of retrospective contemplation to recapture the vivid immediacy of living. In "A Birthday," a poem that he composed in 1966, Creeley makes the logical leap from recognizing the mind's incapacity to fully retain experience to recognizing stasis itself as an impossibility:

> I had thought
> a moment of stasis
> possible, some
>
> thing fixed—
> days, worlds—
> but what I know
>
> is water, as you
> are water, as you
> taught me water
>
> is wet. Now slowly
> spaces occur, a ground is
> disclosed as dirt.... (371)

Creeley defines stasis as an unknowable impossibility; though he had "*thought*/ a moment of stasis possible" all he can *know* is the perpetual flow of his embodied experience in time and space, a flow as tangible and incontrovertible as the flow of water. By his own account, the speaker's immersion in process requires that he suppress the impulse to hold abstract concepts at an intellectual remove from material reality: "ground is disclosed as dirt."

Among others, "I Keep Myself to Such Measures..." and "A Birthday" demonstrate that as he embraces an embodied concept of mind Creeley exchanges one set of constraints for another; "realiz[ing] that the mind is physiological" entails the specific realization that the nature of the mind is ontologically determined by the spatiotemporal constraints of material existence. Though the stylistically experimental poems of the latter half of the 1960's have generally been considered to mark a point of departure in Creeley's poetics, they are altogether consistent with the developments under discussion here. Creeley addresses his increasingly materialist outlook topically in several of the poems I have already discussed, but it is in these stylistic experiments that his reformed philosophy of mind begins to shape his poems constitutively. Of these 'minimalist' poems that first appear in the last third of *Words* (1967) and that abound in *Pieces* (1969)*,* the poem that seems to have garnered emblematic status, if not critical acclaim, is "A Piece" (1966):

> One and
> one, two,
> three.

Cynthia Edelberg attempts to situate "A Piece" in the development of Creeley's poetics by arguing that the poem signals his intentional scaling back of the rational mind's role in poetic composition:

> "A Piece"...represents Creeley's discovery that the deliberately non-intellectual vantage point has its value. The 'mind' will continue to be the shaping power behind the poem, but hereafter it will incorporate the spontaneous impulse and the irrational insight into the structure of the poem. (274-5)

Though Creeley himself characterizes some of the early experiments in *Words*, including "A Piece," "The Box," "They (2)" and "The Farm," as "*scribbling*,...writing for the immediacy of the pleasure without having to pay attention to some final code of significance" (*Prose*, 42), it seems to me that Edelberg's characterization of such poems as vaguely significant but "deliberately non-intellectual," "irrational," and "illogical" (273), allows them to be dismissed too easily as incomprehensible and ultimately unremunerative objects of critical investigation. Creeley

writes in 1967 that "When *Words* was published, I was interested to see that one of the poems most irritating to reviewers was "A Piece"—and yet I knew that for me it was central to all the possibilities of statement" (*Contexts* 41-2) At first glance, the possibility of statement that "A Piece" seems to realize is the possibility of poesis without paraphrasable content. Without contextual cues and identifiable referents, the occasion of the poem and the voice that speaks it remain utterly obscure. This is not to say that the poem has no content, however, for its content in the traditional sense, very significantly, is the purest linguistic means of representing temporal progression—counting. The numbers' ontological discreteness allows Creeley to string them together without grammatically finessing them into a significatory 'message'; they require us to leap from one to the next in an effect that Creeley augments with the sheer brevity of his lines, which propel us horizontally and vertically in jarring alternation. Through these effects Creeley emphasizes the status of words and lines as graphical units, "measures" that he has placed in a particular order in time and space; the poem encourages the reader to attend to her own reading, to the sequential process of comprehending the poem's language unit by unit in real time.

This feeling of process constitutes the poem's most significant content, as it does in so many of the diminutive poems from this period that self-consciously stage the evanescence of the linguistic or contemplative moment, that dwell on the page just long enough to specify the ephemerality they enact:[5]

One thing
done, the
rest follows. (388)

Nothing but
comes and goes
in a moment. (391)

Where it is
was and
will be never
only here (388)

Here here
here. Here. (388)

In these poems, Creeley explores not only the temporal aspect of embodied thinking but also its spatial aspect; "here" and "there" insistently recur in *Pieces*, often in the company of rapidly shifting verb tenses that accentuate the deictics' spatiotemporal ambiguity. As a single indicator

[5] These poems were published originally in *Pieces* (1969); they were written in 1968 and 1969, though their specific composition dates are difficult to determine because they are untitled "serial" poems.

of the embodied speaker's position in both space and time, in *Pieces* "here" becomes a deeply consequential concept for Creeley:

> The which it
> was, form
> seen---there
> here, re-
> peated for/
> as/--- There
> is a "parallel." (423)

"Here" is the present relative to "the which it was" as well as the place subjectively opposed to "there"; to realize that "There/ is "a 'parallel'" is to identify a profound, subtending identity between time and space, an equivalence grounded in our conceptualization of each in terms of our embodied position at any given moment. In Creeley's epigraph to *Pieces*, he quotes Allen Ginsberg's *Song*: "yes, yes,/ that's what/ I wanted,/ I always wanted/…to return/ to the body/ where I was born" (378), and in the experimental poems of the late sixties this return enables Creeley to deconstruct yet another dualism—the binary opposition of space and time—by recognizing their common "measure" relative to the physical body of the subject.[6]

The poems of *Words* and *Pieces* represent an especially sustained and coherent aesthetic response to a critical transition in Creeley's metaphysics, but the grounding of mind in matter continues to find expression in his poetic forms even after he abandons the radical experiments of the sixties. Decades later, in "Old Story" (*Life & Death*, 1998), Creeley imagines the mind's

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[6] Compare "On Acid," a poem that explicitly connects the mind's drug-induced "sensations" with the shifting meanings of "here" and "there":

And had no actual
hesitancies, always
(flickering) mind's
sensations: here, here, *here**

philo-tro-
bic-port-
a-bil-ity?
End, end, end, end, end, end
Next? Next who/ who/ they we
_________ for she me
*or there? is not we'll
be…. (*CP* 508)

vulnerability to the physical deterioration of old age as the vulnerability of a child stranded on a floating remnant of ice. The poem's unrhymed quatrains form discrete units that float on the snowy field of the page; the lines' compressed syntax and prominent omissions suggest the erosion of the ice and the disintegration of biological matter that the ice represents. As the poem correlates the erosion of synaptic and syntactic connections, the deterioration of sense accompanies the physiological decay of "conduits" and "circuits"; Creeley reminds us that sense is ultimately "made" by reticulations of senseless matter:

> Like kid on float
> of ice block sinking
> in pond the field had made
> from winter's melting snow
>
> so wisdom accumulated
> to disintegrate
> in conduits of brain
> in neural circuits faded
>
> while gloomy muscles shrank
> mind padded the paths
> its thought had wrought
> its habits had created
>
> till like kid afloat
> on ice block broken
> on or inside the thing it stood
> or was forsaken. (631)

Creeley has rewritten the habits of thought that "locked" him in the prison of the disembodied mind in "The Mountains in the Desert," reinscribing those habits as neural "paths" rehearsed and reinforced by dynamic physiological processes. The final stanza's jumble of prepositions places the kid "on or inside" the disintegrating emblem of mind, reflecting the ambiguous status of the self in a materialist paradigm; while the biological substance of the mind seems to subtend and generate an emergent sense of self, it also seems to *contain* the self, to quarter the "I" as a distinctive mental representation. The final lines propose that wisdom may either stand or fail in the face of biological fact, but such a dichotomy, Creeley has already acknowledged, is a false

one; all wisdom is inevitably "forsaken," for personal knowledge, "accumulated/…in conduits of brain," dies with the body.

Critics have widely observed Creeley's "belief in 'process' as the nature of reality" (Navero 349), but in his early poetry this belief does not apply to his conception of the mind; his reimagining of mind not as a thing but as a process did not emerge fully formed but developed in a set of recognizable stages over the course of the 1960's. Though the mind may have been a "mangle" to Creeley in 1953, by 1969 it had become grounded in the fallible, ephemeral, and familiarly contingent substance of material reality, and had reshaped his representation of thought in language; by the final decade of his life the notion that biological fact subtends the experience of mind is an "old story" Creeley inscribes in syntax modeled on the frayed connections of a decaying brain. Creeley's situation of the mind in the realm of the tangibly *real* awakens in him an alertness to the temporal limitations of embodied thought, but it also presents him with an exhilarating aesthetic challenge: to create a poetic language "As real as thinking/ wonders created/ by the possibility—" (379).

Like Creeley, Ammons hesitates to confine the idiosyncrasies of his personal experience within the conventions of inherited forms. Creeley is overwhelmingly drawn to the minimal and the fragmentary, to "pieces" that assemble a larger picture only when viewed from a distance; Ammons amassed a significant body of "really short poems" himself, but was equally inclined to investigate natural order by producing vast, synergetic armatures of poetic language. In his long poem *Sphere,* Ammons explicitly identifies his use of expansive, open forms with his unified conception of the universe:

> ….I don't know about you,
> but I'm sick of good poems, all those little rondures
> splendidly brought off, painted gourds on a shelf: give me
>
> the dumb, debilitated, nasty, and massive, if that's the
> alternative: touch the universe anywhere you touch it
> everywhere: (72)

"Good" poems, Ammons suggests, are well-behaved ones. They obediently yield to inherited prescriptions of aesthetic virtue; they privilege craft, which he associates here with trivial, domestic handiwork; they aspire to beauty, which he couches as kitsch; they cinch themselves in stays of schematic form, which he identifies with the unnatural repression of the instinctive, the liberally massive, and the organically shaped. The greatest offense, though, of the painted gourd—the ersatz doppelgänger of the well-wrought urn—is that it aspires to be unique; its maker exhibits the humanist's reverence for the personal and individual, rather than the scientist's ambition to discern in any particular specimen the secrets of a species and of all creation. The modest aspirations of the precious, virtuosic poem of personal feeling allow it to be marginalized ("on a shelf") and to become estranged from nature. Ammons' frame of reference, even in his most intimate lyrics, is the sum of all natural processes. A scientist by early training, a manufacturer of scientific instruments by early trade, Ammons insists that the forces that propel "the 800 mph earth spin,/ the 190 million-mile yearly/ displacement around the sun,/ the overriding/ grand/ haul/ of the galaxy" (*Uplands* 50) act not only upon us but within us, determining the very structure of human experience. Within this unfathomably vast context, the common and unifying elements often appear more meaningful to Ammons than the exceptionally unique, and thus it is not uniqueness but *representativeness* that finds its place in his oeuvre as a heuristic and criterion of poetic value—"touch the universe anywhere," he promises, "you touch it everywhere" (72).

Despite his contempt for the traditional forms he associates with "good" poetry's compliant decorum, Ammons' prevailing themes are grand inheritances. Romanticism's

American currents course, by way of Emerson and Whitman, through Ammons as he yearns both to discern transcendental unity in material diversity—"the one-many problem" (12), as he puts it in *Sphere*—and to define the relation between the human mind and non-human nature. At the convergence of these preoccupations is Ammons' obsession with the motion of his own consciousness, with thinking itself as a process that is at once highly specific and universal, and that resembles observable processes within the physical universe even as it seems to "touch" the universe from without. In the flow of cognitive process, Ammons feels the motion of nature operating within and through him, and *experiences* his greatest subject; "I have practiced over and over, poem by poem," he explains, "to try to see if I could reach the…point where what is happening in my mind and what is happening on the page seem to be identical….The problem is that once you get there, it no longer seems necessary to write" (Fried 101). In order to portray motions of consciousness that are "representative of what can happen in other minds," Ammons' poems often flout conventions of lyric propriety: they embrace the unseemly and inelegant, giving the impression of blundering, spontaneous, "unedited" thought; they refuse to extort moments of unusual beauty or clarity from the brume of cognitive static, entangling the poetic and the prosaic; they often spurn the "little rondures" of closed form, adopting textual silhouettes that recall the swerving and eddying of mental flow.

As it does for Creeley, a deepening conviction that mind and world are of a single substance transforms Ammons' accounts of the feeling of thinking. While Creeley becomes sensitively attuned to the experiential impression of cognitive *motion*—the worldly signature of time upon conscious experience—it is ultimately for Ammons the feeling of relentless transmutation—of assimilating and reconstituting the given—that most powerfully characterizes mental life, and that announces to him an integral congruence between cognitive and biological operations. Creeley's metaphors picture the mind on a hurtling, linear trajectory through time, but in Ammons' poems that line becomes a *limen*—first a static boundary, then a reflective

surface, and finally a biological membrane. In his early, dualistic verse, Ammons experiments with an image of the mind as a bounded space that encloses transcendental aspects of the self; he then adopts the timeless symbol of the mirror, whose seamless reflections obscure the boundary between the mental and the material. Finally, the biological threshold emerges as Ammons' prevailing metaphor of mind, for he finds in the autonomic, mediating systems of membranes and tissue a host of images that identify the osmotic feel of mental life with its origins in nature, and that provide analogies for the synthetic operations of poetic language. The pervasive comparisons Ammons draws in his late verse between the determinations of physiological, rhetorical and poetic form bring his philosophy of mind into consilience with his philosophy of language, and suggest new ways of interpreting how the distinctive stylistic features of his late poetry digest meaning.

Though the mind is notably abstract in his earliest poems, from the very beginning Ammons conceives of the mind as a *formal* thing; he identifies consciousness not with transcendental freedom but with determining structure. In the allegorical desert landscapes of *Ommateum: with Doxology* (1955), his first volume, the mind is a circumscribed area, an environment that hosts sentient experience but also contains it within the "boundaries of mind" (39). In the renunciative poem "Turning a moment to say so long," for example, the speaker stands poised upon a precipice at the outer limit of his apprehension, turning back to say "so long" to the knowable—to the "spoken" and "seen"—and to the captivity of his awareness within the realm of the senses:

> Turning a moment to say so long
>   to the spoken
>   and seen
>   I stepped into
> the implicit pausing sometimes
> on the way to listen to unsaid things
> At a boundary of mind
>   Oh I said brushing up
> against the unseen
> and whirling on my heel

said
   I have overheard too much
Peeling off my being I plunged into
the well…

The speaker's fantasy is to escape the constraints of cognition, specifically those sensory and communicative offices (seeing, speaking, hearing) that distinguish an embodied, environmentally plugged-in mind. The speaker perceives too much—as a bodily reflex, he hears to the point of *over*hearing—and it is the feeling of sensory surfeit through which the mind announces the maddening boundaries of its own possibility. Notably, the form of this early poem reflects not the repressive structure it imagines the mind gives to life, but the shifting, unencumbered dynamism of the transcendental spirit that Ammons continually associates with the wind in *Ommateum*, with that surging updraft that brushes seductively against the reeling speaker poised to peel one aspect of his being away from another.[7]

"Turning a moment to say so long" makes a whirling pivot of its own, however, turning away from the abstract and casting itself violently into the concrete. The speaker, having "plunged into/ the well," is horrified to discover that he has cast himself not into a symbolic portal in an allegorical landscape but into an *actual* well at whose bottom he finds not transcendence but refuse—"patched innertubes beer cans/ and black roothairs"; finally, terribly, he recedes into the well's terminal darkness, "night kissing/ the last bubbles from [his] lips." Ammons fatally punishes the speaker for his fantasy of spiritual deliverance, for imagining that he could escape physical reality and retain any meaningful aspect of "being." *Ommateum* (whose title refers to the compound eye of an insect that draws visual information from many slightly different perspectives) contains an introductory note proposing that its poems "suggest a many-sided view of reality," and express "a belief that forms of thought, like physical forms, are, in so far as they resist it, susceptible to change, increasingly costly and violent" (4). The volume as a

[7] See also the very similar repertoire of images—the bounded area, the transcendental wind—in poem 26 ("In the wind my rescue is…" [*O* 69-70]).

whole, like "Turning a moment to say so long," exhibits the changeability of thought that the poet identifies with "physical forms" under pressure. Ammons often seems to express earnest belief in the "dissentient ghosts of [the] spirit" (47) even as he sets out to expose "the creation of false gods to serve real human needs" (4).

From the precipitous descent Ammons imagines in "Turning a moment to say so long" to the poised counterbalance of science and faith embodied in the volume's title, *Ommateum: with Doxology*, the poet conceives of the material and the spiritual in opposition to one another. The transcendental realm of "Turning" may be an illusion, but as a reflection of the real it remains discrete from the real. Soon Ammons finds in the mirror a metaphor of mind that embodies this dualism but that also, with its doublings and redoublings, perplexes the boundary between the physical and the mental. Indeed, as the determinations of biological being upon consciousness become increasingly legible in Ammons' poems this boundary becomes increasingly indistinct.

In the poem "Bridge" (*Expressions of Sea Level*), for example, Ammons focuses "where bridge and mirrorbridge merge// at the bank/ returning images to themselves," and wonders "where ascension/ and descension meet/ completing the idea of a bridge." As he ruminates upon the fluid boundary between objective and subjective aspects of reality, he enjoins us to "think where the body is" (20), to contemplate how the substances of the perceiving body, the reflective water, and the arched structure seem to unify ("merge") the object and its mental reflection even as "the idea of a bridge" seems so remote from the corporeal operations that generate cognitive life. In his celebrated poem "Reflective," Ammons uses the mirror to confound the positions of subject and object, deconstructing animal (sentient, conscious) and vegetable (non-sentient, non-conscious) categories of natural being by rendering both "reflective":

> I found a
> weed

that had a

mirror in it
and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me that
had a
weed in it (*R* 16)

Unlike the pneumatic structure of "Turning a moment to say so long," which took no formal cues from the bounded constraints it ascribed to the embodied mind, the symmetries of "Reflective"—its three-line stanzas, its concentrated repetitions of "mirror" in the central stanzas and diametrical repetitions of "weed" in the first and last ones—formally evoke the acts of reflection and recognition that define mental experience within the poem. By placing a mirror "in" both himself and the weed Ammons proposes that an identity of substance may underlie the resemblances he discerns between mental experience and physical forms.

The mirror's inevitable suggestion, however, that the organic substance of nature and the reflective substance of mind reflect one another across a gulf of ontological difference ultimately undermines, for Ammons, the mirror's serviceability as a governing metaphor. It is in one of his earliest attempts to investigate the nature of mind by examining the experiential texture of thinking that he discovers the limits of the mirror's symbolic and aesthetic value to his poetry. This experiment involved the poet's 'recording' of the conscious content of his own mind, thought by thought, in "a long/ thin/ poem" (1) composed on a hundred-foot-long roll of adding-machine tape; the resulting poem, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*—written in daily entries from early December, 1963 to early January, 1964—proved to be a crucial experiment, if also an aesthetically unsatisfying one. Harold Bloom, Ammons' early proponent, called the poem a "most original and surprising invention" and also "a heroic failure" (23); Alan Holder describes *Tape* as a

"slightly nutty labor" that lacks coherence and contains numerous "dull passages" (Bullis 41); Helen Vendler calls *Tape* "a rather willed long poem" ("New Books" 421); it leads Willard Spiegelman to observe that "Ammons's greatest failing is the tedium of indiscriminateness" ("Myths" 344). Ammons' wish, if any, for the interest and approval of his imagined readership was certainly superseded by the poem's central, sovereign aim: to discover in mental experience a reflection of natural design. With his apparently spontaneous entries Ammons answers in *Tape* Emerson's injunction to himself in "Self-Reliance": "let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical" (34)—symmetrical to the autonomous natural processes that animate creation.[8]

In this long, thin poem that ponders how "the nerve/ [converts] chemical into electrical energy" (140), Ammons updates Emerson's "objective" poetic record of thought by alluding to technologies that document the physiological manifestations of thinking. The poem's narrow margins continually bring to view the material constraints of the tape, and thus emphasize Ammons' substitution of the creative intellect for the adding machine that automatically records its own activity; this substitution of the poet's brain for such a machine implies an underlying, computational concept of mind, a mind that is defined by the process of yielding outputs from inputs. (The adding machine and tape also conspicuously resemble the tape-bearing Turing

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[8] Explaining his practice of 'recording' experience in an interview with Steven Schneider, Ammons mistakenly attributes the lines to "Nature":

> Emerson said something that has affected me more deeply than anything [else] he ever said. That was some casual remark, I think in the "Nature" essay: "Let me record from day to day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect.. . .I have no doubt it will be found to have been symmetrical." Your honest thought today may be one thing and it may be different tomorrow. He says you have to be honest day to day. Put down exactly what you think even though it contradicts something and without regard to the future or the past, but just today. And then, that will cause possibly to emerge from the depth of your mind or your experience, this alignment which is symmetrical and harmonious and you learn from that something that you could never have gotten to head on. (*Complexities* 335-6)

machine, a model of mind favored by philosophers during the early sixties,[9] while the lines' jagged profile recalls the contour of an EEG, that measurement of electrical activity that W. Gray Walter zealously described as "a mirror for the brain" [20]).

Lest Ammons' readers forget that *Tape* is meant to be a veridical transcription of an operating mind, he announces that his poem, following the torrent of consciousness, flows in a single direction. Like the mind in Creeley's "I Keep to Myself Such Measures…," Ammons' text cannot "come back to/ where it cannot"—it is insistently and somewhat affectedly unrevised. In the poem's second dated entry Ammons reflects upon the "classical considerations" of the previous day's prologue, recalling with compunction the grand ambitions his epic invocation had "betrayed." His refusal to revise the offending lines reveals that for the purposes of his experiment the authenticity of spontaneous transcription trumps the accuracy of judiciously chosen language; he does not rewrite the lines that seem "phony and posed," but instead merely regrets them:

> 7 *Dec:*
> today
> I feel a bit different:
> my prolog sounds phony &
> posed:
>   maybe
> I betrayed
> depth
> by oversimplification,
> a smugness,
> unjustified sense of
> security:….
> I hadn't meant
> such a long prolog: it
> doesn't seem
> classical to go ahead
> without a plan: (5-7)

In truth, *Tape*'s attempt to appear authentically improvised—its (quite classical) pretense of

[9] *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind* (2009) describes the Turing Machine as a primitive computer "consisting of a tape, on which is written some pattern of distinguishable symbols…and a writer/scanner that can move right or left along the tape" (614).

"go[ing] ahead/ without a plan," often does seem "phony and posed." The poem's central ambition, after all, is to make itself a mirror of thought, but the mirror is not the most probing of analytical tools; it inevitably attracts the distortions of self-presentation and confers its own lack of depth upon its subjects. The poem accordingly offers an image of the mind that does not mediate or transform but that passively, purposelessly reflects, producing "the tedium of indiscriminateness" that Spiegelman observes. Ammons himself prefers a geological metaphor to describe the reflections of *Tape*; he remains on the "hard-clear surface," he explains, hoping to infer from the topography of mental experience deep, determining stirrings in nature's most elusive quarters:

> I mean to stay on the
> crusty
> hard-clear surface: tho
>   congealed
> it reflects the deep,
> the fluid, hot motions
> and intermotions where,
>   after all, we
>   do not live. (6)

Dwelling upon a "crusty," "congealed" surface would not ultimately suffice for a poet so obsessed with life's integral motions, however, and though *Tape* aspires to touch thinking everywhere the poem arguably touches it nowhere. In order to achieve an identity between "what is happening in [the] mind and what is happening on the page," Ammons would need to find a poetic language to portray and *enact* the mind's active powers of discriminating, assimilating, and transmuting, powers both modeled and underpinned by the autonomic functions of the body.

It is only when he replaces the early poetry's pervasive model of the mirror, which dissociates mind and nature, with an embodied model of mind—as an organ, a membrane, a biological engine—that Ammons is able to coordinate mental and mortal being and discover meaningful ways of harmonizing the determinations of biological and poetic form. The year he

was experimenting with the "heroic failure" of *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, Ammons also composed his acclaimed poem "Corsons Inlet" (*Corsons Inlet*, 1965), another attempt to translate and investigate the experience of thinking. A miniature compendium of his early, governing metaphors of cognition, the poem pictures Ammons' incremental descent from a transcendental concept of mind to a somatic one. As many have observed, the poem takes the concept of a walk—swerving, processual, non-reproducible, *embodied* excursion—as its central metaphor for thinking.[10] Embedded within the overarching allegory of the walk, however, are successive images that correct and replace one another in a précis of the mind's evolution from *Ommateum* to Ammons' final volumes *Glare* (1997) and *Bosh and Flapdoodle* (2005).

In *Ommateum* Ammons had paused "at a boundary of mind" to reflect upon the limitations of his mortal consciousness, finally "peeling off [his] being" from the material and plunging into the eternal. The mind of such early poems, as part of a dualistic scheme, possesses distinct boundaries that Ammons seems to register within the very texture of conscious experience. But while Wallace Stevens' littoral poem of poetic consciousness identifies the mind's imposition of forms with the "arranging, deepening, enchanting" power of the imagination, Ammons' poem identifies the "categorizing mind" (*Sphere*, 39) with spiritual containment. "Corsons Inlet" begins from this common conception of thought as an activity framed by "perpendiculars/ straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds":

> I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
> to the sea,
> then turned right along
> the surf
> rounded a naked headland
> and returned
>
> along the inlet shore:
>
> …the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
> from the perpendiculars,

---

[10] Cf., most significantly, Roger Gilbert's *Walks in the World : Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (1991).

straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
of sight:

I allow myself eddies of meaning :
yield to a direction of significance
running
like a stream through the geography of my work :
you can find
in my sayings
swerves of action
like the inlet's cutting edge :
there are dunes of motion,
organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
in the overall wandering of mirroring mind :

but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events
I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting
beyond the account:

in nature there are few sharp lines : (5-6)

The speaker approaches the sea across the dunes and turns "right along/ the surf," setting out on a course paralleling the shore, one that will evolve into an irregular swerve as he 'rounds' the tip of the headland. Just as the "straight lines" of his walk will deliquesce into conformity with the topography of the natural landscape, the swerve of his mind will cease to reflect a transcendental, conceptual order outside nature and come into congruence with the somatic environment, 'grounding' his conception of thought in nature. The gradual "hues, shadings, rises" of pure perception release the speaker from the right angles of the ratiocinative, enabling what Ammons would later describe as "the renunciation of boxes, magicless" (*Sphere* 45).

Roger Gilbert proposes that in these lines Ammons "insists that his walk…is given over entirely to the subtle continuities of perception" (*Walks* 214), but the speaker does not dwell in "flowing bends and blends/ of sight"; perception is not an end in itself, but a process that directs consciousness into eddies of non-perceptual "meaning" and "significance." The

liberation the speaker describes entails abandoning a conception of consciousness based in "perpendicular" abstraction and adopting instead a model defined by "wandering" and "mirroring"—a model in which the mind does not categorize and contain but passively reflects and resembles the motions of the visible world. Ammons frames the operations of the mind as the operations of nature (literally) writ small; "the overall wandering of mirroring mind" replicates in lower case the activity of the "Overall," a system that remains inexorably beyond human account. As "Corsons Inlet" proceeds, the harmonious but discrete motions of the mind, of the walker's body, of the dunes and the sea, and of the poem's dynamic form all come to reflect each other, generating an impression of numinous symmetry; although there may be, as Ammons himself notes, "no direct contact between words and things," (Fried 107) the natural, the mental, and the linguistic powerfully *correspond.*[11]

As they did in "Bridge" and "Reflective," these correspondences obscure the boundary between the physical and the mental without effacing that boundary, without going so far as to propose an ontological contiguity between the mental and the physical. "Corsons Inlet" ultimately does make the leap from a model of correspondence to one of continuity, however, finally repudiating the Emersonian distinction between the Me and the Not Me. Ammons continues to use the figure of the line to chart this transition from a dualist metaphysics to a materialist one; having first adopted the "straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/ of thought" that identify consciousness with disembodied, geometrical abstraction, and having gone on to imply, ubiquitously, the invisible axis of symmetry across which the processes of mind and nature

[11] Ammons explains that in Corsons Inlet he sought "to insist that somehow, although there was no direct contact between words and things, the motion of mind and thought corresponded to natural motions, meanders, you know, like the winds or streams" (Fried 107). Inherent in this idea of correspondence, however, is the distinction Emerson draws, ontologically, between the *me* and the *not me*, between the self and nature. Emerson draws the distinction in the introduction to "Nature:"

> Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.

reflect one another, Ammons proceeds in "Corsons Inlet" to adopt the biological membrane—an *active* line that mediates, translates, and continually reconstitutes itself—as a symbolic form that does not segregate, but integrates mental and physical aspects of being.

The conclusion of "Corsons Inlet" develops the analogy between the operations of bodily organs and the operations of the poem as a record of cognitive life; having reflected at some length upon a vast congregation of tree swallows whose mysterious coordination embodies "the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness," Ammons turns to the minute orders that he exalts so rapturously in "Hymn":

> in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
> blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:
> snail shell:
> pulsations of order
> in the bellies of minnows : orders swallowed,
> broken down, transferred through membranes
> to strengthen larger orders : but in the large view, no
> lines or changeless shapes : the working in and out, together
> and against, of millions of events: this,
> so that I make
> no form of
> formlessness : (7-8)

The organs of the minnows—the membranes that digest tiny formations of consumed matter "to strengthen larger orders" of the organism, of the darting school, of the heterogeneous ecosystem—model the cognitive activity of synthesizing "millions of [sensory] events" without imposing ratiocinative "form" upon the openness of perception. The membranes also model the literary activity of the poet who gives "Corsons Inlet" its distinctive shape and texture, who "make[s]/ no form of/ formlessness" as he translates natural processes into correspondingly open, errant, organic verbal shapes. Ammons' materialist rewriting of the action of the mind involves envisioning the mind as an analogue to the biological membrane that is, by definition, a threshold, an osmotic one. This rewriting also involves, "in the large view," eradicating the distinction between the material and the non-material—drawing "no/ lines" and relinquishing the notion of ideal, "changeless shapes." In the final lines of the poem, Ammons imagines

cresting a dune to find the startled congregation of swallows suddenly taking flight, but he characterizes their synchronized behavior as an expression of embodied instinct rather than of ideal order. The mechanism of their coordination is a physical and affective phenomenon—terror—that "pervades but is not arranged" by any intellectual or transcendental design:

> no arranged terror: no forcing of image, plan,
> or thought:
> no propaganda, no humbling of reality to precept:
>
> terror pervades but is not arranged, all possibilities
> of escape open: no route shut, except in
> the sudden loss of all routes:
>
> I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will
> not run to that easy victory:
> still around the looser, wider forces work:
> I will try
> to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening
> scope, but enjoying the freedom that
> Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
> that I have perceived nothing completely,
> That tomorrow a new walk is a new walk. (8)

Like the membranes in the minnows' bellies that "strengthen larger orders" through the process of digestion, thinking (and poesis) are acts of "fasten[ing] into order" the humble, the fragmentary, the entropic. Ammons' account of mental process has become one in which there is "no humbling of reality to precept" and the processing of knowledge depends upon and resembles the processing of food; his conviction that "we are not half-in and/ Half-out of the universe but unmendably integral" (43), as Ammons puts it in *Sphere*, enables the epistemological and emotional resolutions of the poem. The speaker recognizes that human knowledge, as a product of physiological process, is limited by real, material constraints (he has relinquished the fantasy of the ommateum's synoptic perspective in favor of a human eye that "perceive[s] nothing completely"); inevitably he finds freedom in those constraints, not least by joyfully surrendering any ambition to transcend them. The poem's concluding tautology—"a new walk is a new walk"—suggests the possibility of aesthetic renewal within nature's flow of repetitions,

but it also reflects the endemic circularity of any definition within a monist paradigm, within which any phenomenon—thinking, walking, being—must inevitably be defined in terms of itself.

The model of thinking as biological processing becomes ever more pervasive in Ammons' poetry after "Corsons Inlet." In "Prodigal" he pictures the mind "running to link effective chains,/ establish molecules of meaning" (52), and in *Sphere* "mind gathers and dissolves" (18), is "a little mill that changes/ everything, not from its shape, but from change" (42). A sequence of 155 12-line poems divided into tercets, *Sphere* is absorbed with the balance of particle and system, diversity and unity, the one and the many; in it Ammons enjoys the freedom of imaginative scope that his immersion in the physical offers ("I figure I'm the exact/ poet of the concrete *par excellence,* as Whitman might say" (65)), and exuberantly experiments with a novel range of somatic metaphors for the mind. Ammons imagines, for example, a gardener whose proximity to the soil obscures from him the ground of his own being:

> …the mind studies the soil, wedges
> out spudeyes and plants them, attends, devours with its body,
> and yet declares itself independent of the soil:… (61)

In another instance Ammons compares the discriminating intelligence of the critic assembling an anthology—a paradigmatic document of cultural inheritance—to the genetic forces that determine biological inheritance; the critic administers the convergence of "good sayings" ("genes") and "poems" ("chromosomes"), drawing upon "gene pool, word hoard":

> 15
>
> in the generations and becomings of our minds, anthologies,
> good sayings are genes, the images, poems, stories
> chromosomes and the interminglings of these furnish beginnings
>
> within continuities, continuities within trials, mischances,
> fortunate forwardings: gene pool, word hoard: the critic
> samples the new thing, he turns it over in his consideration,
>
> he checks alignments, proportions, he looks into the body of
> the anthology to see if the new thing hooks in, distorts, to raise
> or ruin: he considers the weight, clarity, viability of

> the new thing and reconsiders the whole body of the anthology:
> if the new thing finds no attachment, if energy, cementing,
> does not flow back and forth between it and the anthology,
>
> 16
>
> it dies, withered away from the configuration of the people:
> but if it lives, critic and teacher show it to the
> young, unfold its meaning, fix its roots and extend its reach:
>
> the anthology is the moving, changing definition of the
> imaginative life of the people, the repository and source,
> genetic: (11)

The exercise of the scholar's critical faculty involves 'hooking in' and 'finding attachments' among haploid literary cells, husbanding a "whole body" of cultural knowledge. In this mélange of mixed metaphors, the critic's eye is also the eye of the surgeon who "looks into the body of/ the anthology to see if the new thing hooks in," who not only assesses the literary organ's "viability" but facilitates and evaluates the sustaining flow of energy through the osmotic seam—the "attachment"—that unites the part and the whole.

In his final volumes, *Glare* and *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, Ammons fixates upon the body's translation of consumed matter into energy and waste, emphasizing the most unseemly aspects of digestion with unflinching description and sometimes shameless vulgarity; this fixation has challenged Ammons' readers to assimilate what can appear to be cheap scatological thrills within a broader account of the aesthetic ambitions and experiments that distinguish his late verse. Ammons' gravity as he dwells upon organs devoted to digestion and excretion—stomach, intestines, colon, and anus—carries forth his long-standing reverence for the humble organisms whose lives are entirely circumscribed by such processes. In "Catalyst" he encourages us to venerate even the most repulsive scavengers:

> Honor the maggot,
> supreme catalyst:
> he spurs the rate of change
> (all scavengers are honorable: I love them
> all,
> will scribble hard as I can for them) (*CI* 22)

Such reverence befits a "transformer of bloated, breaking flesh/ into colorless netted wing," a larval maggot turned butterfly, whose digestion mysteriously coordinates soma and psyche and embodies the poet's transformation of the devastating ruptures of emotional life into the sublime transport of sympathetic recognition. This reverence, rooted in an explicit symbolic association between the activities of scavengers and the activities of literary artists, pervades *Garbage* (1993), which is dedicated "*to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers.*" Indeed, the ur-image of *Garbage*, a smoldering mound of refuse, proves to be an emblem of the mind's nourishing 'digestion' of language itself: "there is a mound,/ too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled off to and burned down on, the energy held and/ shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind strengthened by what it strengthens" (20).

In *Glare*, however, Ammons finds in his own body's digestion of consumed matter a model that unites the mental and semiotic systems whose morphologies mediate our self-understanding—he discovers in digestion a single, dynamic symbol that connects thought and language to each other, and to the body, as products of biological process. *Glare* is a volume comprised of two parts that were composed independently before Ammons chose to join them for publication; the poems are unified, however, by the use of couplets and the continuous numbering of the otherwise untitled poems throughout. The title of the first part, "Strip," announces Ammons' return to the form of *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, for he composes, yet again, on a strip of adding machine tape that allows a maximum of 36 characters per line. The volume self-consciously answers in its form the poet's earlier experiment in recording thought, but here the material constraints of the "skinny" poem charged with 'digesting' meaning are continually shown to reflect the constraints of the body specifically:

> this tape is so skinny: I
> have to crack off the lines and roll

> the trimmings back into the next line:
> there is never enough room: the
>
> lines have to digest something, pack
> it down, shove stuff together:
>
> I was thinking how this tape cramps
> my style: it breaks down my extended
>
> gestures: it doesn't give your
> asshole time to reconfigure after a
>
> dump: everything happens before its
> time, interrupted, turned back, cracked
>
> up. (135)

In light of such lines, the title "Strip" also suggests the unseemly exposure of the striptease, a message denuded of euphemistic rhetoric and the stately garb of lyric propriety. While the skinny medium emphasizes the poems' textual form, Ammons' chatty tone confers upon the poems a spokenness that is also crucial, for "Strip" identifies the oral and the anal as integral counterparts. Ammons writes elsewhere in "Strip" that "the worm I am/ extruding has a long wiggle" (51); knowledge and poesis are not reflectors of the world, but byproducts that retain the traces of processes that generate them. Ammons suggests that just as the rigid limits of his medium determine the representational scope of his poem, the limits of the body entail fundamental epistemological limitations upon the poem as well; and yet even as the medium "cramps/ [Ammons'] style," ostensibly leaving little room for the lines "to digest something," the poem's narrow shape yet "breaks down," "interrupt[s]" and "crack[s] up" the raw matter of his unfolding ideas.[12]

In the second part of *Glare*, "Scat Scan," Ammons uses a slightly wider tape that can accommodate 45 characters per line, allowing him greater freedom within his chosen limitations.

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[12] Ammons likens the cognitive cramping of "trying to remember a memory" (175) to digestive cramping elsewhere in *Glare*; see poem 64. Roger Gilbert has observed that "the strongly somatic language Ammons uses to describe the tape's effects [in "Strip"]—cramps, cracked shoulder blades, etc.—…suggests that his textual and corporeal bodies have become intimately connected, and that the limitations of the former reflect the attrition of the latter" ("Mobius," 192).

The title "Scat Scan" concisely draws together three central aspects of Ammons' late poetics—cognitive materialism, scatology, and nonsense—and illuminates the idiosyncratic sense Ammons makes of them in relation to one another. "Scat Scan" contains and rhymes with "CAT scan," of course, evoking (like "Strip") the glaring exposure of the human body—particularly, in this case, the aging body; Ammons turned seventy while writing *Glare*, and he alludes on several occasions to a nearly fatal heart attack he had suffered several years before. Certainly "Scat Scan" evokes the medical surveillance of the aging body, and as Roger Gilbert proposes, it also metaphorically "suggests absolute authenticity in mapping the ups and downs, peaks and valleys, and assorted vital signs of its author's inner life" (*Mobius* 207). By pervasively acknowledging the distortions imposed by its form, however, *Glare* does not, like *Tape*, naively entertain the dream of directly transcribing thought in language. By attuning itself to the physiological determinations that mediate and constrain mental life, *Glare* rules out the fantasy of the mind's transparency even to itself; on several occasions Ammons finds, in the medicated contingency of his emotions, reason to question the authenticity of his experience. "One of the drugs makes// me wonder if I'm doing medical/ emotions or synergetic emotions" (59), he writes in "Strip," and in "Scat Scan" he wonders whether his feelings are genuinely "lofty" or fraudulently "zolofty":

> …so many pills you
>
> can't tell the effects from the side effects:
> and who are you, someone before the medications
>
> or during or after: at least, you are being
> kept, but in another place: are your feelings
>
> lofty or zolofty, red or blue, down or double
> downdown: do you, in this condition, have any
>
> right to speak, for who or what is speaking, is
> it milligrams or anagrams, is it tranquility or

> tranquilium: will we psyches be like the
> skies: we'll never again see clouds that may
>
> not be vapor trails: we'll never be clear and
> know our clouds for what they are: (283)

Since the endemic realization that emotions are chemical phenomena, who "you" are and "who or what is speaking" in a poem will never again be so clear as they once seemed to be; the spectacles in the skies of our psyches inspire a new kind of skepticism and curiosity about whether their sources are natural or artificial. Ammons' zolofty feelings remind him that he is a thinking thing, and that looking to the physical origins of experience generates as many questions about the self as it does answers; the CAT scan obscures as much as it discloses.

The "scat scan" is also an investigation, surely, of scatological remains, of the evidence of what goes in in what comes out, the trace of interior processes that extends in a legible trail behind experience. Knowledge, as a product of cognitive digestion, becomes an exalted kind of waste, what is left over after the given has been processed by the body. One of *Glare*'s striking poems begins with an enormous question—"where do poems come from"—that Ammons poses innocently enough, but answers with a knowing account of the emergence of a poem's form out of an embodied swerve of feeling. To host the process by which a mute sensation "describes" itself into the articulate shape of a poem is a source of consolation for Ammons—"I'm// more miserable than most anybody I/ know," he admits, but "I'm// okay when I'm typing like this, tho":

> there's a currency of feeling and it
> flows as unformed, if noticeable, as
>
> a drive, and describes a form of
> itself…
>
> motion, going from here to there,
> describes a swerve or arc or salience
>
> and that is form: that is the seed
> of form, born in the very bosom of

its substance, which is motion: next
to that, tell me what you think of

a sonnet or some fucking cookie-cutter:
I mustn't become high-handed: I'm

more miserable than most anybody I
know, so don't take after me: I'm

okay when I'm typing like this, tho:
I'm in motion and the worm I am

extruding has a long wiggle: it
seems to me as I look about that I

know some things well: but they are
about nothing: there is no seedcorn,

there are no potato eyes in my stuff: (51-2)

Ammons sets the "cookie cutter" (which gives static shape to undigested food) in contrast to the dynamic "long wiggle" of the poem issuing from the body "in motion" at the typewriter. Indeed, Ammons insists, in his poem *everything* is digested—"there is no seedcorn,/ there are no potato eyes in my stuff." Form itself is a "seed" that does not grow but breaks down, permeating every aspect of the poem's substance—from the contour of its excremental wiggle to its assimilation of aesthetically 'indigestible' parts of discourse (obscenity, profanity, scatological reference), to its use of punctuation.

Ammons' use of the colon comports, many critics have noted, with the organic thrust of his verse, with its emphasis upon flow and its resistance to closure. The colon becomes Ammons' punctuational signature early in his career, largely replacing the period in the majority of his poems from *Expressions of Sea Level* onward. In his later verse he puns on the corporeal and linguistic meanings of "colon": the aging speaker of "Body Marks," for example, complains of a darting pain in his leg, and tellingly misunderstands a friend who attributes the pain to his "colon": "well, it's really/ your colon hurting: what?" (BF 92). The morphological congruence of the etymologically distinct words comes to signify to Ammons a deeper congruence between

the operations of the organic colon and the syntactic colon, both of which impose peristaltic rhythms on (excremental and semiotic) matter, processing their 'content' as they translate it. Punctuational colons not only alter the heard texture of the clauses they concatenate, causing the phrases to end with an anticipatory rise in pitch rather than a conclusive drop, they transform the texture of the poem into a matrix of equivalent units, a unified fabric continuous with the world it represents. In an interview with Philip Fried, Ammons describes how colons, unlike the divisive periods and capital letters that frame 'complete' thoughts, unify the "tissue" of the poem; "I hate periods," Ammons explains, "because the gap then suggests that one whole sentence has been separated off from the tissue of the whole poem":

> the world is so interpenetrated that it must be one tissue of size, of letters…what is the skin called? Something like [the epidermis], something that contains. So the colon jump should do that, just connect and connect and connect, until you build not just the assertion you're making but this landscape. I've never been interested in single discursive statements as such, as explanation, but I'm interested in clusters of those, because then they become, they sort of come to be the thing they represent. They're many-sided. (Fried 105)

As Ammons uses it, the colon tends to replace a period or semicolon to form a conjunctive fissure, a caesura that at once connects and disconnects related but independent thoughts. The colon thus atomizes, equalizes, and aggregates those thoughts, allowing the unified poem to *become* the thinking it represents—thinking that "flows and stalls, holds and gives way:" (*SV* 7), the mind itself as it processes the given according to the constraints nature imposes upon consciousness.

In light of *Glare*'s neurological and scatological interests, then, the title "Scat Scan" makes sense. The title also makes sense, though, for appearing to make no sense at all. That "Scat Scan" appears to be governed primarily by a logic of sound rather than meaning is consistent with yet another underexplored aspect of *Glare* and of Ammons' late verse generally—its frequent use of nonsense. Ammons begins his musical poem 105 with a jazzy "scat" improvisation about a familiar writer of "nature poetry":

nature poetry, nature poetry
he's got nature
poetry up piss ass

nature poetry, nature poetry
he's got nature
poetry up piss ass DA de DA

I mean DUM de DUM

music for my opening: overture to my manure
(you're out on the highway of life when

unfinished you end butt up):

no, I mean UP piss ASS (267)

Exchanging heads for tails ("butt up"), equating the "openings[s]" of the oral and the anal, interpreting nature's claim upon poetry as nature's call, Ammons' poem is in many senses "up piss ass." He proceeds to conflate physical and metaphysical forms of 'inwardness' in the poem, balancing his impulse toward self-exposure with our invasive desire to look *inside*: "I suppose you would like to/ know something about my inner life: well, it// stinks" (267). This chiming "overture" to Ammons' poetic "manure" embraces the musicality of the scat singing that recurs in "Scat Scan" ("bittle de doo doo/daw: de daw daw:" [203]); "DA de DA" and "DUM de DUM" playfully identify the alternating stresses of metrical lines with the musical rhythms of which poetic meter is a textual vestige and signature. As Roger Gilbert remarks, the poem's musical nonsense, when it "hijacks the poem" (208), "achieves something like a verbal equivalent of jazz, marked by the freshness of continual improvisation" (209).[13]

[13] The comparison between musical improvisation and the flow of cognitive interiority appears elsewhere in *Glare*; in poem 91 Ammons compares the electrochemical "effusions" that underpin mental acts to "improvisational melodies":

as improvisational melodies

come and go at the piano, so the mind breaks
against some configuration and makes off into

Still, scat singing is only one permutation of nonsense among many that pervade the final volumes *Glare* and *Bosh and Flapdoodle*; the latter title suggests the importance to Ammons of both "babble" and "doodle," Northrop Frye's terms for the lyric's essential elements of the heard and the seen. Both volumes contain numerous poems that conclude with provocatively dissonant, unpunctuated words and phrases printed in capitals, tags that are set apart from the bodies of the poems; the relationships of these tags to the poems they follow are in some cases clear and in others entirely obscure, but the words and phrases nearly always contain some element of nonsense. In poem 105, quoted above, the tag's significance is relatively clear; it unifies, with Ammons' familiar, deflationary irreverence, the wind of inspiration that issues from metaphysically "inner" life and the wind that issues from anatomically "inner" life:

> anyway, I love you, you know I love you, and I
> want your life inner and outer to be doused
>
> with radiance, even if it is really a
>
> STINKEROO (269)

The final word is syntactically and thematically connected to the poem, which continually dispels forms of transcendence with anti-lyrical obscenity and pits the music of the spirit against the slangy music of the body. In poem 101 of "Scat Scan," however, the relevance of the tag to the poem that precedes it is much less clear. Ammons contemplates the end of his own life and the end of the world, picturing the convergence of two roads (punningly, "wheys") that come to an undifferentiated terminus in oblivion; the breaking off of the final stanza suggests the breaking off of the story of self when "the clabber's all gone"—when life's possibilities seem entirely consumed:

> …if there's any story left

> netlike effusions, or so brooks register at the
> surface a crack in the slate and flow on, the
>
> registration dissolving in the mixed motions: (240)

to tell there'll be no telling what the story

is: differences can be important where it's
hard to make out a difference: this is so

philosophical! but I better look out: I
might miss the road (if I don't want to): in

any case, whey leads on to whey and pretty
soon the clabber's all gone: I think I'll take

a stanza break here. . . .

THE BEE MITES ARE A MIGHTY
BIG PROBLEM (261, second ellipsis Ammons')

Led down a relatively neat path of metaphors, the reader comes at the end of the poem to an untended plot of chiastic nonsense, a weedy patch of sounds. Whatever else the bee mites might signify, their immediate effect and their primary significance lies in their flirtation with meaning nothing at all. The final tags of other poems reveal similarly tenuous connections with the lines that precede them:

…the present drawn forward

and backward into itself, now, just *now*, just
now:

THERE ARE PLENTY OF SEATS
UP FRONT (197)

…oh, I been wild a lot: the
title of my autobiography is *Me All Over*:

this isn't it: I have miles to sleep before
I go

YOU BET YOU BIT (235)

…we shouldn't worry so
much about consciousness as unconsciousness by

the conscious: eczema, noxzema, and psoriasis

NOTHING CAN HOLD UP NOTHING,
IT REALLY CAN (255)

…will we be too rare

or too tough or overdone or sauceless: I
think not: I think we will be acceptable:

anyhow,

LET'S NOT SPOIL THE TRUTH
WITH BEAUTY
HERE, OKAY (276)

…running through, and

rising, is the constant will that longs for
companionship with an all-keeping indifference

YOU'VE NEVER
SEEN ANYTHING
LIKE IT
OR LIKED
ANYTHING SCENIC (285)

An early reference to the Tower of Babel hints at the ancestry of these unusual, babbling tags; in Poem 4 Ammons searches for redemption through "broken sounds," calling out "from the height of/ the high place, where speaking is not// necessary to hearing and hearing is/ in all languages" (13). During his childhood in rural North Carolina, Ammons witnessed the spectacle of glossolalia regularly in church, and recognized early and first-hand the disorienting power of the verbal sign untethered from significance. "I've seen people [speak in tongues] for hours," he explains:

> It's incredible to watch a person whose behavior is absolutely regular as if he were buying ham from a delicatessen speaking to you in totally ununderstandable words. Not done in a frenzy. I remember sitting on a bench in church when a person so possessed would come directly and stand in front of you as if telling you how to bake a cake and would go through this rigamarole and be absolutely unintelligible. (Fried 104)

This disconnection that so impresses Ammons—the disconnection between the mien of the speaker who appears not to be *in extremis* and the "absolutely unintelligible" words with which that speaker pushes language to its farthest limits—is also a model for the operation of the nonsensical poetic tags that appear in Ammons' last volumes. With conventional syntax and allusion ("LET'S NOT SPOIL THE TRUTH/ WITH BEAUTY/ HERE, OKAY"), chiastic structure and rhythm ("YOU'VE NEVER/ SEEN ANYTHING/ LIKE IT/ OR LIKED/ ANYTHING SCENIC"), colloquialisms and clichés ("THERE ARE PLENTY OF SEATS/ UP FRONT") and the placement of the tags, in capitals, at the end of his poems (like summary morals printed after children's fables), Ammons makes the tags *behave* as if they make sense and expect to be understood; he places a thoughtful, expressive countenance upon a frenzy of unintelligibility, and generates in us the same expectation of meaning that the "absolutely regular"[14] behavior of the ecstatic Baptist worshippers generated in him as a child. By evacuating rhetorical and syntactic structures of decipherable "content," the tags isolate and expose the tacit operations of form that subliminally process meaning. They wreak an ecstatic separation of the word's spirit, its sense, from its rhetorical embodiment in order to reveal their true inextricability; Ammons' spectacle of nonsense makes us *feel* the worldly coercion of convention, reified in rhetoric, upon the experience of meaning.

In Ammons' title "SCAT SCAN," then, excretory, neurological and verbal forms of 'scat' collapse not only punningly but ontologically, for their congruent forms of digestion reveal that the body, the mind, and language itself—the cascading articulations of corporeal systems in mental experience and in linguistic codes, in turn—are the manifold expressions of a unifying

[14] The most committed readers of Ammons to have addressed these tags are Roger Gilbert and Helen Vendler, both of whom see in them a novel manifestation of Ammons' perennial resistance to closure. Roger Gilbert sees in these tags "deferred titles": he writes that "by refusing to position them conventionally at the beginning of the text, Ammons illustrates the way his themes emerge out of his process rather than preceding and dictating it" ("Mobius" 209). Helen Vendler writes that "in *Glare,* true nonclosure is dared, often with an irrelevant capitalized phrase at the end of an individual poem, a gesture toward a new start" ("A.R. Ammons' Last," 168).

natural truth, the one immanent in the many. The submission of all phenomena to the entropic forces that govern physical reality unifies creation, and Ammons finally finds both a suitable method of expressing this submission and a suitable use for a deeply-rooted, fallow, glossolalic form in the disintegrations of meaning that punctuate his late poems. Ammons' dream of mimetically transcribing thought in *Tape for the Turn of the Year* entertains a conception of language as a transparent medium—it fails to recognize the immense, subliminal sway of rhetoric at work in any verbal act. In the late poems, however, Ammons exploits ostentatious suasions of rhetoric to expose what are for him the most striking features of embodied thought and language alike: their surreptitious forms of synthesis and determination. These features invest poetry with the power to digest *anything*—scientific jargon, vulgarity, cliché, nonsense, the baffling hope and dread of old age, and even the digestion of the self within the forms of nature:

> oh, the spirit dies, but the body
> lives forever, run out of its limits
>
> though and caught up into others,
> the housing spirits of others,
>
> mold feed, ant freight, the mouth
> parts and anuses of riddling larvae:
>
> alas, not as ourselves do we come
> again or go anywhere else, after we
>
> go: oh, we go, we go, we go, so
> long (7)

CHAPTER THREE

Redrawing the Soul: John Ashbery, Inattention, and the Chiaroscuro of Consciousness

> *It is impossible to say just what I mean!*
> *But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:*
> *Would it have been worth while*
> *If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,*
> *And turning toward the window, should say:*
> *"That is not it at all,*
> *That is not what I meant, at all."*
>
> T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

In "The Skaters," John Ashbery considers the mental events of an ordinary morning—a morning spent in the house among newspapers and letters, while laborers mend the road outside the window. The morning appears mundane, but "So much has passed through my mind," he writes, "….That I can give you but a dim account of it." The immense scope of even a morning's inwardness makes it impossible for Ashbery to say just what he means about it; this impossibility reminds him of Prufrock's predicament as Eliot encapsulates it in the image of the magic lantern—the lamp that projects raw, unprocessed experience ("the nerves") through the patterned conformities of language and artifice. Like Eliot's lantern, Ashbery's elliptical account of his morning conceals as it reveals; the episode alludes cryptically to successive forms of "bad news" that preoccupy the poet, piquing our interest only to deny us intimacy:

> So much has passed through my mind this morning
> That I can give you but a dim account of it:
> It is already after lunch, the men are returning to their positions around the cement
> mixer
> And I try to sort out what has happened to me. The bundle of Gerard's letters,
> And that awful bit of news buried on the back page of yesterday's paper.
> Then the news of you this morning, in the snow. Sometimes the interval
> Of bad news is so brisk that . . . And the human brain, with its tray of images
> Seems a sorcerer's magic lantern, projecting black and orange cellophane
> shadows
> On the distance of my hand . . . The very reaction's puny,

> And when we seek to move around, wondering what our position is now, what
> the arm of that chair. (151, ellipses Ashbery's)

Ashbery's rewriting of Eliot's image is revealing. While the projections of Eliot's lantern symbolize a verbal process of making the mind legible to the world through the distorting order of language, Ashbery's lantern is an image of "the human brain" filtering reality into consciousness;[1] its projections symbolize a process of cognitive distortion that *precedes* language altogether. The brain itself is the medium that projects experience through a schematic "tray of images," casting Platonic shadows of the real in eerie Halloween colors; Ashbery's images are thrown not on a page-like "screen" but back upon the body itself—on the outstretched writing hand, in fact. Like the chemical reactions that generate the structure of experience, the "very reaction" of the light and cellophane, though "puny," generates astonishingly amplified effects; among these is existential confusion, for the disorienting shadows leave us unsure of "what our position is" and of the true identities of even the most familiar objects ("the arm of that chair"). Most significantly, perhaps, Ashbery implies that the shadowy projections of his cognitive architecture *beget* the many disorienting verbal obscurities of his "dim account": the ellipses that might be hesitations, omissions, or evasions; the identity of Gerard; the catastrophe buried publicly in the newspaper; "the news of you this morning, in the snow," with its ambiguous suggestion of an estranged intimacy with a lover and a textual assignation with the reader. As Ashbery puts it plainly in the title of another poem, there is "No Way of Knowing"; these interpretive uncertainties are integral to the signifying texture of the poem, and evoke the epistemological confusion Ashbery identifies with the innate conduct of "the human brain" itself.

In discussions of Ashbery's poetics critics understandably, if a bit obsessively, return to

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[1] Ashbery uses the metaphor of filtration to describe the metacognitive "experience of experience" he tries to capture in lieu of paraphrasable content in "Leaving the Atocha Station": "Most of my poems are about the experience of experience….the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me….I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long" (Poulin, 245).

the question of "meaning"— whether his poems mean, where to find their meaning, why they might resist meaning altogether.[2] The insistence with which he troubles the cognitive and linguistic acts that conspire to produce "meaning" brings a distinctively Ashberian unity to the stylistic diversity of poems that range from comic to meditative, satirical to surreal, taut to teeming. Critical disciples of the "linguistic turn" and successive generations of "language poets" who claim Ashbery as an influence have habituated readers to attributing his instabilities of expression—his infamous substitutions of pronouns, his fondness for the defamiliarized cliché, his interspersals of noise and lucidity, and so on—to his patent conception of language itself as unstable, opaque, fluid, open.[3] The philosophy of mind that accompanies and complements this philosophy of language, however, is nebulous by comparison; the mind that subtends and generates the poems' ubiquitous disruptions of conscious awareness remains critically undefined. This lack of definition has suppressed a crucial point of aesthetic origin for

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[2] Take, for example, Richard Howard's assertion in his review of *The Double Dream of Spring*: "the great innovation of Ashbery's poems is that they do not explain or symbolize or even refer to some experience the poet has had, something outside themselves in the world, something precedent. The poems are not about anything" (53); Roger Shattuck writes that "Fantasia of a Nut-Brown Maid" "creates the sense of a container without contents" (38); Robert Boyers proposes that "If we take meaning to refer to the possibility of shared discourse in which speaker and auditor may participate more or less equally," then "Ashbery is an instance of a poet who, through much of his career, eliminates meaning without achieving any special intensity….Meaning is left out of an Ashbery poem…to ensure the continuity of a quest for which ends are necessarily threatening" (962).

[3] In his 1981 interview of Ashbery, Richard Jackson demonstrates the critical tendency to see in Ashbery's style the expression of a sensibility immersed in literary theory and poststructuralist philosophy of language; Ashbery's response is telling:

> [RICHARD JACKSON]:….In "And UT PICTURA POESIS Is Her Name" you deconstruct, as Derrida would say, traditional poetics "so that understanding/ May begin, and in doing so be undone." And in "Flowering Death," you write, "We must first trick the idea/ Into being, then dismantle it, /Scattering the pieces on the wind." I think also of "Five Pendantic Pieces," in which you write, "The poem of these things takes them apart." The poems tend to take apart or undo what they refer to in a way that reminds me of the writings of such contemporary thinkers as Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan.
>
> JOHN ASHBERY: I think that it is probably not a coincidence that we've been addressing ourselves to similar problems and that these sorts of things tend to happen simultaneously in history from certain causes. I know, for example, that Raymond Roussel, who has been characterized as a kind of primitive Mallarmé, was asked in a letter about his opinion of Mallarmé, and he replied that he was unfortunately not familiar enough with the poet to give a serious estimation. So, while I am not very familiar with these authors, you may have a point in mentioning them. (Jackson 71)

Ashbery, for he often enlists quirks and ruptures and dislocations of language to evoke aspects of cognition that precede language—that in fact have very little to do, *per se*, with language at all. Ashbery identifies the problems of knowledge that riddle "the experience of experience" (Poulin 245) with the biological systems that give us what we have of the world, even as they fail in rendering reality knowable; benignly consumed by this skepticism, Ashbery is driven to find forms that accentuate and compensate for the "chronic all-too-human weakness" of the embodied mind, forms that do not reveal an obsession with the liabilities of language *per se*, but in fact conscript them to reflect "the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand" (298). With a special focus on distraction as a thematic and structural presence, this chapter sets out to identify the ultimate sources of Ashbery's skepticism in a distinctively materialist philosophy of mind—in a conception of the mind that leads back, like Parmigianino's swerving hand, "to the body of which it is so unlikely a part" (475).

Ashbery's propensity for the abstract—and in *Three Poems* even for "a refined, high-toned prose, such as a philosopher might use" (Hennessy 42)—means that he tends to dwell on the physiological ontology of inattention by dwelling on its conceptual consequences for our notions of self and spirit and mind; he tends not to use illustrative conceits (e.g., the ministrations of Merrill's God Biology) or exuberantly argotic language of the body (e.g., the "hemoglobin kinetics" of Ammons' goldfinch), but instead to identify distractibility directly with the negation, or dismantling, of the immaterial soul.[4] In his earliest long, meditative works, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" (1972) and *Three Poems* (1973), Ashbery invents distinctive means of evoking embodied consciousness, devising a set of practices for modulating poetic

[4] I mean to suggest here that though it is evident from his poems that Ashbery commands an educated person's familiarity with the language of brain science (in 2005 he sat with Stephen Pinker, Angus Fletcher, Walter J. Freeman, and Rebecca Goldstein as a featured speaker at the Dactyl Foundation's Poetics-Cognitive Science Colloquy), he is less preoccupied with assimilating the diction and imagery of the mind sciences than he is with assessing their philosophical foundations—their assumptions about causal relationships between brain and mind, about agency, spirituality, emotion, etc.

clarity that become a baseline from which similarly expansive later poems of mentality venture, subtly refining and elaborating and inflecting what amounts to a fairly consistent picture of inner life. Ashbery identifies this picture's dramatic contrasts—of intelligibility and obscurity, of hope and confusion—with the frailty of embodiment, and therefore, also, with the ascendancy of materialist conceptions of interiority towards which he is deeply ambivalent. As he grapples with the decline of cherished forms of human mystery, he discovers that the challenge of recuperating a soulful vision of the human that can accommodate the natural constraints of mortal consciousness yields "a strange kind of happiness within the limitations" (263).

Ashbery has a unique talent both for depicting distraction, as he does in the bored reverie of his early poem "The Instruction Manual," and for *inducing* distraction in the reader, particularly with a kind of dreamily droning abstraction—Helen Vendler compares Ashbery's sentences in the prose of *Flow Chart* (1991) to "chains of crystal alternating with jello" [Soul Says] (); he prefers, in his own words, to intersperse "a few important words" amid "a lot of low-keyed,/ Dull-sounding ones" (519). A tearing asunder of subject from object, "distraction" is, etymologically, a loosening of a mental foothold ("traction") where a connection once held, and its constitutive presence in Ashbery's poems is one of his most distinctive stylistic contributions to the strategies of the lyric. It is also for him, as forgetting is for Merrill, an aspect of mental life that continually reminds him of the body's inexorable, invisible, determinations of experience. Ashbery overwhelmingly attributes the disparity between the oceanic vastness of consciousness and the negligible knowledge we derive from it to the cognitive sieve of attention; what is lost in translation from reality to mind and from mind to language confirms for Ashbery, over and over again, that sustained focus is an impossibility. "Probably the hardest thing to do is give your attention to something" (Hennessy 42), he explains, and he returns frequently in his poems to the liberating ineluctability of *inattention*—"no one is punished for inattention any more: It seems,

in fact, to further the enjoyable/ Side of the world's activities" (623). In "Late Echo" Ashbery frames the repetitions of poesis—its wonted interests in the maddening chaos of inner life, and in the orthodox *mise-en-scène* of non-human nature (flowers, insects, "the color of the day")—as a form of loving regard that answers and redresses "the chronic inattention/ Of our lives":

> Alone with our madness and favorite flower
> We see that there really is nothing left to write about.
> Or rather, it is necessary to write about the same old things
> In the same way, repeating the same things over and over
> For love to continue and be gradually different.
>
> Beehives and ants have to be reexamined eternally
> And the color of the day put in
> Hundreds of times and varied from summer to winter
> For it to get slowed down to the pace of an authentic
> Saraband and huddle there, alive and resting.
>
> Only then can the chronic inattention
> Of our lives drape itself around us, conciliatory
> And with one eye on those long tan plush shadows
> That speak so deeply into our unprepared knowledge
> Of ourselves, the talking engines of our day. (672-3)

Poetry's eternal reexamination of the "same old" reflections of the human—in the toiling ants, in the social bees, in the moods of the seasons—renders these things accessible to us as objects of "love"; writerly repetition "slow[s] down" subject and object alike "to the pace of an authentic/ Saraband," a slow dance between the self and nature. Poetry's cumulative fullness of regard thus compensates for personal limits of attention that cannot be altered, only accepted; aesthetic looking allows our "chronic inattention" to drape around us in a confining embrace. With this acceptance of the limits of attention comes preoccupation with the unknown, with outlines of the mysterious drawn in familiar "tan plush shadows" on the carpet. Attracting one tantalized eye to the unknowable, these invisibly mundane shadows proclaim "knowledge/ Of ourselves" to be always *not-yet-made* ("unprepared") because, of course, such knowledge *cannot* be reliably made, only expected, yearned for. This conviction that our chronic inattention obscures us from ourselves is for Ashbery an impetus, rather than an impediment, to the pursuit of self-

knowledge—he shares Gertrude Stein's perspective, which he quotes in a review: "If it can be done why do it?"[5]

The "talking engines" of Ashbery's poems thus dwell in the possibilities of obscurity as a source of art, keeping one eye on the void and the other on fresh incarnations of the same old human preoccupations—including the gaudiest visual enticements of popular culture. Ashbery's attraction to pop phenomena from Popeye cartoons to *Antiques Roadshow* amplifies the poems' powerful evocation of a sensibility unusually aware of a populous, heterogeneous, dynamic cultural environment. This impression that Ashbery is a "traveler down the billboard-clotted lanes of modern life" leads Andrew DuBois, in *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (2006), to attribute Ashbery's distractibility to modernity's proliferating claims on our interest. Drawing on Jonathan Crary's premise "that the ways in which we intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything have a deeply historical character" (1), and on Crary's argument that these ways of listening, looking, and concentrating have been radically fragmented by technological innovation since the turn of the twentieth century, Dubois proposes that Ashbery's divided attention is a symptom of unprecedented environmental distraction due to a "general rise in stimuli." Dubois uses this "crisis of attentiveness" to frame his picture of Ashbery as a poet "central to the age":

> "It is possible," writes Jonathan Crary, "to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis of attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then respond with new methods of managing and regulating perception." If my own experience is an able guide, I suspect that many readers will respond to Crary's description of the modern era.…For this reason alone Ashbery might be seen as a poet central to the age, as a critic, guide, and fellow traveler down the billboard-clotted lanes of modern life. Among the poets of our era, Ashbery is an especially crucial figure for understanding contemporary changes in mental and social life related to shifts in

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[5] In "The Impossible," his review of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (also cited in Stephen Fredman's chapter on Ashbery in *Poet's Prose* [1983]) Ashbery reproduces this quote from Donald Sutherland's introduction to Stein's volume (253-4).

> aesthetic reception, the accelerated flow of information, and the general rise in stimuli.[6] (xiv)

"The changing configurations of capitalism" embodied in "new products, sources of stimulation and streams of information" that define the American cultural landscape inevitably pervade Ashbery's poems. Mutlu Blasing has noticed perceptively that they influence his conception of poetry itself as a cultural commodity; she strikingly aligns Ashbery's critique of the market-driven production of riskless experimental art in "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968) with Fredric Jameson's claim that the avant-garde is absorbed into 'official culture' in the age of late capitalism, such that "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods . . . now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (4-5).[7] Christopher Shaun Nealon sees "the crises born of [capitalism's] victories….in the long postwar boom" as a force working not only upon Ashbery's themes but upon his forms, in which "a dialectical understanding of style that is always in relation to catastrophe" (73) reflects the fluctuations of faith and fate that typify boom-and-bust economic reality.

Whether the commercially-driven "general rise in stimuli" that makes sources of distraction difficult to avoid in modern life meaningfully transforms Ashbery's fundamental conception of the faculty of attention, however, is another question. Distractions themselves

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[6] C.f. *Suspensions of Perception* (2001); the lines to which DuBois refers appear on pages 13-14. Diverging from a critical lineage indebted to Walter Benjamin's claim in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that perception since the mid-nineteenth century constitutes "reception in a state of distraction" (239-40), Crary argues that "modern distraction can only be understood through its reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices" (*e.g.* the economically valuable concentration of factory workers on repetitive tasks). Crary focuses on "the paradoxical intersection…between an imperative of a concentrated attentiveness within the disciplinary organization of labor, education, and mass consumption and an ideal of sustained attentiveness as a constitutive element of a creative and free subjectivity" (1-2).

[7] In "The Invisible Avant-Garde" (1968) Ashbery recalls that in 1950 the avant-garde was "very exciting" because "there was no sure proof of its existence," but by 1968 "there [was] no longer any doubt in anyone's mind that the vanguard [was] 'a' tradition" of its own; "Is there nothing then," Ashbery asks, "between the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbury, between an avant-garde which has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one? In other words, has tradition finally managed to absorb the individual talent?" (131).

tend to play a minimal role in Ashbery's own attempts to explain why his poems lapse into unintelligibility, carrying the reader's attention with them as they swerve in and out of focus. It is not that extrinsic, environmental stimuli intrude relentlessly upon Ashbery's attention, but rather that fluctuations of focus that lie beyond conscious control form an integral dimension of "how," Ashbery explains, "experience comes to me":

> It seems to me that my poetry sometimes proceeds as though an argument were suddenly derailed and something that started out clearly suddenly becomes opaque. It's a kind of mimesis of how experience comes to me: as one is listening to someone else—a lecturer, for instance—who's making perfect sense but suddenly slides into something that eludes one. What I am probably trying to do is to illustrate opacity and how it can suddenly descend over us, rather than trying to be willfully obscure. (Osti 87)[8]

Ashbery describes the "obscurity" readers often attribute to his poems as *mimesis* of his own chiaroscuric experience of consciousness; he recruits the opacities of language to serve the overwhelmingly conventional ambition of the lyric to evoke how the world presents itself to a typical, unique, and unusually responsive array of senses. By his own account, Ashbery's obscurity reflects the constant, compulsory engagement with objects of external and internal attention that gives the experience of thinking its shape—the endless, rhythmic process of grasping and then releasing and then grasping objects of attention again, a process in which "there is always something fading out or just coming into focus" (298). Ashbery's poems show that the sudden 'descent of opacity' can accompany boredom, confusion and incomprehension alike, forms of distraction that are surely in some cases attributable to Dubois' historically

[8] That distraction particularly informs how experience comes to Ashbery is apparently evident to interlocutors as well; in a preface to his interview with Ashbery, Louis Osti writes, "Speaking in a distinct, full-bodied voice, he answered my questions after making short pauses to frame his response. Often he abandoned a sentence mid-way, and began anew; his thoughts seemed to interrupt one another" (84). Peter Stitt observes of Ashbery in the preface to his interview: "Ashbery's answers to my questions required little editing. He did, however, throughout the conversation give the impression of distraction, as though he wasn't quite sure just what was going on or what his role in the proceedings might be" (174). The extent to which Ashbery sees the texture of his own mental experience as representative is difficult to determine. When asked about his reputation for "obscurity," about "the way the details of a poem will be so clear, but the context, the surrounding situation, unclear," Ashbery explains, "This is the way that life appears to me, the way that experience happens.…I often wonder if I am suffering from some mental dysfunction because of how weird and baffling my poetry seems to so many people and sometimes to me too" (Stitt 186).

specific “sensory glut” (xv) but that are also historically pervasive mental phenomena and timeless inducements to the production of art. Ashbery’s analogy of listening to a lecturer who “suddenly slides into something that eludes one” describes, from an experiential standpoint, not so much a glutting surfeit of information but a dispersal or scarcity of information, something like hearing an unknown language and being forced, and freed, to dwell in a vacuum of meaning.

His most celebrated depiction of the mind in action, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, associates Ashbery’s distractibility not with his environment but with a specifically embodied ontology of mind; a ruptured vision of the soul shatters the rapt, attentive looking that is the underlying cognitive premise of ekphrasis as a mode. Published not long before Ashbery’s statement about his poems’ “derailed” trajectories (1974), the poem adopts the autonomous swerve of interest as a formal structure. Ashbery begins by situating Parmigianino’s head relative to his hand in the emphatically distorted self-portrait; in his description the poem uses the painter’s body to frame the relationship between the artistic object and the consciousness that generated it:

> As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
> Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
> And swerving easily away, as though to protect
> What it advertises. (474)

Ashbery metonymically separates the mind that conceptualizes the portrait from the hand that executes it; the head that recedes from the viewer is so different in scale from the magnified hand thrust into the foreground that the two body parts seem utterly disconnected. Parmigianino’s immortally lively face initially appears “intact” and the soul is a “captive” ghost housed in the representational machine of the portrait; Pargmigianino’s soul “establishes itself” when it is unlocked, like a genie freed from a bottle, by Ashbery’s “look as it intercepts the picture”:

> The time of day or the density of the light

> Adhering to the face keeps it
> Lively and intact in a recurring wave
> Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.
> But how far can it swim out through the eyes
> And still return safely to its nest? The surface
> Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
> Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
> That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
> In suspension, unable to advance much farther
> Than your look as it intercepts the picture. (474)

The portrait itself is painted on a convex surface to replicate the perspective of the mirror; the half-sphere that hangs on the gallery wall thus mirrors Ashbery's convex eye, establishing a mutual gaze between the painted Parmigianino swelling outward toward the poet and the 'real' Ashbery peering forward toward the painting. The portrait gives Ashbery the impression that the distended image—pregnant, after all, with the essence of a person—reaches toward him, decreasing the distance Parmigianino's soul must "swim out" from his painted eyes. Ashbery's mixed metaphor replaces the relatively unencumbered motion of the fish, which fails to evoke the classical sense of a spirit *tied* to something, with the flight of a bird bound by domestic obligation to a stationary "nest"; the captive soul occupies a dimension of being conceivable only by awkward analogy to the natural elements of air and water, hovering in spectral "suspension" as it reaches out toward us through the surfaces of the bisected wooden globe and the poem itself.

In the fantasy of Ashbery's initial description, then, Parmigianino's artistry facilitates a transcendental rendezvous between the souls of the painter and viewer. The poem proceeds to dispel that fantasy just as soon as it is constructed, however; just when he pictures a soul translatable "intact" through the portrait, Ashbery recognizes there a reflection of his own familiar "combination/ Of tenderness, amusement and regret" in contemplating a more sobering picture of a demystified psyche, a soul without secrets:

> But there is in that gaze a combination
> Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
> In its restraint that one cannot look for long.

> The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
> Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
> Has no secret, is small, and it fits
> Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention. (475)[9]

What is Parmigianino's soul if it is not a soul? The elusive, authentic, immaterial essence resuscitated by Ashbery's intercepting look has been replaced by a small, degraded thing solipsistically *generated* by that look. Divested of the dignity of its secrets, that unreal, imagined thing fits the tiny chamber of Ashbery's "moment of attention" because it reflects, and is constrained by, the subjective architecture that created it.

It is precisely at this moment of deflation, when Ashbery pronounces the immaterial soul to be a lie and the finitude of consciousness to be the chamber of that lie, that the distinction between psyche and soma in *Self-Portrait* begins to break down. First, Ashbery pictures the convex portrait as "life englobed," symbolically identifying the seductive enclosure of the *objet d'art* with the skeletally englobed mind, each of which 'represents' life according to internal principles; "One would like to stick one's hand/ Out of the globe," he writes, "but its dimension,/ What carries it, will not allow it" (475). "Carries" retains a trace of the dualistic vision the lines ostensibly dismiss, but now that the head and the hand exist in the same monistic "dimension," nothing can possibly "swim out"; "Everything," Parmigianino's eyes proclaim, "is surface" (70). This flattening means that the demystified "mind," or "soul," or "spirit" is now fundamentally *like* the portrait—it seems to possess an immaterial aspect, and yet it is merely a sum of parts that coalesce on a single plane of existence, along with everything else there is. The soul is as defined by its specific, mortal, physiological instantiation as Ashbery's vision of Parmigianino is defined by the portrait's flamboyant, protuberant, material instantiation. At this

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[9] Ironically, of course, it is a flash of recognition of Parmigianino's 'soul'—his "combination/ Of tenderness, amusement and regret"—that leads Ashbery to deny that he can discern any aspect of Parmigianino's soul in the painting; the moment of sympathy in fact embodies precisely the connection between the painter and viewer Parmigianino is likely to have aspired to foster in his art. In *On Painting* (1435) Leon Battista Alberti prescribes that "The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul" (Alberti 77).

moment of metaphysical collapse Parmigianino's hand appears to "rov[e] back to the body of which it seems/ So unlikely a part" (475), and henceforth in *Self-Portrait* biological terms emerge to frame mental events and products—from "memories deposited in irregular/ Clumps of crystals" (SP 71), to a corporeal experience of recognition that "Mov[es] outward along the capes and peninsulas/ Of your nervures" (SP 75), to a comparison of the "bubble-chamber" of art (hermetic, autonomous, beautiful, all surface) to "Reptile eggs" in which "everything gets 'programmed'" (478) genetically, an analogy through which Ashbery situates life at its most primitively slimy and art at its most diaphanously ethereal within a single line of descent from chemical sources. In the midst of this inexorable biological contingency, Ashbery concludes, the unity of the subject is a precariously fragile illusion, anything but "secure":

> The whole is stable within
> Instability, a globe like ours, resting
> On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball
> Secure on its jet of water. (476)

It is just as Ashbery has deflated his own Romantic vision of the immaterial soul that, famously, "the balloon pops"; the description of Parmigianino's portrait suddenly breaks off, proving the ephemerality of "our moment of attention."[10] The interruption reveals Ashbery's mind to be its own obstacle—no external "stimuli" divide his focus, fracturing his mental image of the portrait into "sawtoothed fragments" like reflected clouds shattered in a rippling puddle. Nothing pops the balloon of his attention—it simply pops—and its manner of popping proves to be consistent with the picture of the mind that emerges as Ashbery goes on to consider, in the lines that follow, the self divested of agency and the delusion of a deity "Whose curved hand"

[10] Ashbery's poem asks how the long tradition of describing visual art in verbal art is transformed and complicated by our heightened sensitivity to cognitive deficits of all kinds, particularly deficits of attention. Much critical treatment of *Self-Portait* has focused on its participation in the long tradition of poetic ekphrasis (cf. especially Heffernan [1993], Spiegelman [2005], Fischer [2006], Davidson [2011]) without acknowledging that ekphrasis in any period expresses historically and culturally specific assumptions about the nature of mind. (In her study of classical ekphrases, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* [2009], Ruth Webb explains that hers "is almost as much a study of ancient psychology as of rhetoric" [5].) Ashbery's ekphrasis is so striking a development within the mode precisely because it incorporates such a resonantly timely conception of embodied consciousness.

composes reality:

> The balloon pops, the attention
> Turns dully away. Clouds
> In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.
> I think of the friends
> Who came to see me, of what yesterday
> Was like. A peculiar slant
> Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model
> In the silence of the studio as he considers
> Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.
> How many people came and stayed a certain time,
> Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you
> Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
> Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
> Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk
> Have told you all and still the tale goes on
> In the form of memories deposited in irregular
> Clumps of crystals. Whose curved hand controls,
> Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
> That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
> Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
> From wet branches? I see in this only the chaos
> Of your round mirror which organizes everything
> Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,
> Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing. (477)

As his attention *turns itself* to internal, and apparently idle, subjects—a remembered visit from friends, "what yesterday was like"—Ashbery wonders if Parmigianino, in the "silence" of his own studio, ever found himself intruded upon by the same kind of internal distraction, by "a peculiar slant/ Of memory" of sixteenth-century friends who "came and stayed a certain time." The slant of memory descending on the artist would have summoned the voices of some friends and relinquished others' to oblivion; this intimate speech stippled "light or dark" by memory proves not only to become a part of the self but to *comprise* the irregularly lit story of the self, the polyphonic narrative sung in the dusk of consciousness by internal and external voices that have "told you all and still the tale goes on." The shadowy filtration of memory obscures the self from itself "until no part/ Remains that is surely you," and what is left is an illusion deposited in warped, "irregular/ Clumps of crystals," an illusion by which we navigate nonetheless; the "polestar" of Parmigianino's world, the eyes that ought to reveal his soul, prove to be empty. In

this portrait of consciousness there is no soul, and thoughts, as natural as leaves, are as destined as all other aspects of life to be ripped out of existence; Ashbery suggests that the only "curved hand" is the mindless hand of nature that commands chaos rather than order, whose swerve is contained by a finite cosmos, and whose constraints are writ small in all physical phenomena, from clouds and trees to memories.

Ashbery's epistemological troubles in *Self-Portrait*, then, arise not from environmental chaos but from "the chaos of/ Your round mirror"—from the finite, reflective organ itself. Unlike the adventurous soul that swims out in search of a connection across the boundary of mortality, the much 'smaller' self Ashbery embeds in nature is one things happen *to*; it is a self made by others' words, by extrinsic forces that 'filter and influence' self-illumination, and by misshapen clumps of chemicals in the brain. It is a self—no wonder "hot tears spurt"—that is powerless even to turn its attention as an expression of will. By the end of the poem Ashbery tempers this view by admitting that the searching self, though inexorably confined by worldly constraints, knows more than it realizes; as parts of nature we cannot help but recognize its truths here and there, in glimpses confined to the mind's tiny chambers of attention and "pockets/ Of remembrance":

> One feels too confined,
> Sifting the April sunlight for clues,
> In the mere stillness of the ease of its
> Parameter. The hand holds no chalk
> And each part of the whole falls off
> And cannot know it knew, except
> Here and there, in cold pockets
> Of remembrance, whispers out of time. (487)

Ashbery steps back from the precipice of absolute determinism with the pivotal "except," striking a balance between the confining parameters that define his experience and the modest claims he makes for the possibilities of both knowledge and communication; art *does* abet Parmigianino's transcendence of time as he communicates with Ashbery, albeit in a whisper, from the past. Ever sympathetic to the reader, Ashbery ends the poem in the role of the silent

viewer who looks upon the portrait but "holds no chalk" himself; though he feels disconnected—'fallen off'—from the whole of reality, the humble strains of memory and voice, however imperfect, are enough to offer consolation "Here and there."

The disjunctive force of distraction not only disrupts the continuities of memory and voice in "Self-Portrait," it lends the long, meditative poem its structure.[11] Parmigianino's painting provides a fixed focal point from which the poem's swerves of attention drift away and to which they safely return; the portrait is the track from which Ashbery's derailments can easily be charted. The much vaster *Three Poems* provides no such point of reference, setting the reader adrift in a sea of prose; like "Self-Portrait," *Three Poems* appears to translate the contents of a working mind, but the latter poems' unmoored amplitude reveal more radical formal means for exploring the constraints the body imposes upon consciousness. In *Three Poems* Ashbery attempts to transcend the limitations of subjective and objective accounts of inner life by making a case for a synoptic (*i.e.*, distracted) method of pursuing knowledge; indeed, it is the stunning ambition of this poem to reimagine the soul within the context of the mortal, physical systems that seem to Ashbery to comprise an integral aspect of its truth–to tell the story of, and find a suitable poetic form for, "the new spirit."

Explaining the effect of translating unabridged thought directly into prose (ostensibly without revision), Ashbery quotes from Max Jacob's *La Défense de Tartufe*: "I believe that prose which comes directly from meditation is a prose which has the form of the brain and which it is forbidden to touch" (Stitt 196). Certainly the premise that prose is a form capable of translating

[11] The six segments of *Self-Portrait* are determined by five distinct ruptures of mental focus, beginning with "the balloon pops"; the next breach in the flow of text appears with the intervention of "thoughts of tomorrow" (477), much like the earlier thoughts of "what yesterday/ Was like"; the fourth segment begins with a shift of attention occasioned by a failure of memory ("As I start to forget it" [479]); the urgent intrusion of a mental picture of marauders dazzled by the "inventions" they found in Parmigianino's studio during the sack of Rome sets off the fifth section; and in the final section the artist's face intrudes suddenly upon abstract ruminations ("A breeze like the turning of a page/ Brings back your face" [481]).

inwardness more transparently and capaciously than the compressed lyric poem animates the formal logic of *Three Poems*.[12] Contributing to that logic is the equation of *inclusion* with authenticity, a principle of composition that Ashbery addresses explicitly in the famous opening lines of the first of the three poems, "The New Spirit":

> I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.
>
> clean-washed sea
>
> The flowers were.
>
> These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on
>
> to divide all. (247)

The ambiguities in these lines reside, as they often do in Ashbery's poems, in the pronouns. On the one hand, the "you" who intercedes and 'stands in the place' of what Ashbery leaves out is the reader who steps in to supply meaning where the voice of the poet recedes; the "truer" compositional method of 'leaving out' acknowledges and makes space for the inevitable, aleatory, inscrutable participation of the reader "who made this."[13] On the other hand, the

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[12] That Ashbery associates prose with a transparent "sense" that is subsequently obscured by the formal compression of the more elliptical and ephemeral lyric is evident in his remark in an interview that "what interests me in poetry is the difference, the ways in which the prose sense of a poem gets transformed in poetry" (Bloom and Losada, 117-18).

[13] Ashbery's ease with relinquishing control over interpretation becomes clear in the context of pronoun use specifically:

> Well, I'm notorious for my confusing use of pronouns which, again, is not something I consciously aim at. There are questions as to whether one character is actually the character he's supposed to be. I feel not too sure of who I am and that I might be somebody else, in a sense, at this very moment that I am saying "I." But doesn't this open up a book and make it more available? A book is going to be interpreted or misinterpreted in as many ways as there are readers, so why not give them the maximum number of options to misinterpret you, for these are all only interpretations. This seems part of the nature of any kind of interpretation. (Jackson 72)

Marjorie Perloff particularly stresses this "open field of narrative possibility" in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), and elsewhere observes of *Three Poems* in particular that "Whereas modern poetry has the 'essentialist ambitions' of trying to 'actualize the potential of the signified in the hope of at last reaching something like the transcendent quality of thing,' it is *prose* that is the language of arbitrary rather than motivated signs" ("Barthes"

"you" of these lines is the informal, universal "you" who describes personal experiences he assumes to be shared; in practice, this "you" refers to the speaker himself, who considers his predicament to be comprehensible to the reader but acknowledges that he is describing an experience that is ultimately his own. In these lines, then, Ashbery wonders how best to convey his understanding of consciousness as a phenomenon that is at once riddled with forms of poverty and yet also utterly intolerant of a vacuum; "forget as we will," *something*—a thought, a memory, a new object of attention—invariably steps in to fill the void, occupying it with "Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself." Ashbery justifies here his chosen method of "putting it all down" in the expansive, voluble prose of *Three Poems*, for he suggests that (as in conventional lyric) he has filled the volume with the subjective truth of the writerly self "who made this," however limited or ephemeral that truth may be. In its self-consciously Romantic ambition to communicate the poet's inner life, *Three Poems* exhibits a naïve form of aesthetic hospitality, inviting us to recognize similarity in difference—to make ourselves at home in the familiar ecstasies and sorrows of a consciousness that belongs, distinctively, to another.

Having realized that putting in quite a lot of consciousness still leaves out plenty of subjective and objective reality, and having decided on a compensatory aesthetic strategy of hoarding inclusion rather than a negative, "truer" strategy of subtraction and exclusion (like Merrill's strategy of rampant ellipsis in "Losing the Marbles"), Ashbery faces the challenge of incorporating an urgent sense of epistemological deprivation within *Three Poems'* textual excess—the challenge of absorbing the leaving out *into* the leaving in. A dense, unrelenting monotone unifies the voice of *Three Poems*, creating the impression that its dizzying reversals of perspective

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269). On the other hand, it is obvious that Ashbery is governed by a traditional conception of the poem as a medium of communication. He explains:

> My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this; my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that's already known by the reader is not really communicating anything and in fact shows a lack of respect for him. (Bloom and Losada 12)

belong to a single consciousness encountering reality; what varies sentence by sentence is the intelligibility of that voice, for Ashbery mottles the dense, nearly solid, tonal field of *Three Poems* with patches of clarity and inscrutability that facilitate the reader's own mental traction, and *dis*traction, in turn. Sympathetic to the perseverance that plodding through the more inscrutable patches requires, Ashbery acknowledges that the reader of "The System" may sometimes feel discouraged, "Just as one may be depressed by reading the fine print in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, with long prose passages in eight point type, and feel as if one is drowning in a sea of unintelligible print"; "just as drowning is said to be delicious when one stops struggling," he goes on, "so I tried to reproduce that delicious sensation" (Shapiro 29). Ashbery openly praises Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* for its comparable strategy of demanding perseverance through obscurity, its elicitation of the helpless confusion and the rare bursts of clarity that characterize the mental texture of encountering "real-life" problems:

> As in life, perseverance has its rewards—moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau with a view of the whole distance we have come. In Miss Stein's work the sudden inrush of clarity is likely to be an aesthetic experience, but (and this seems to be another of her "points") the description of that experience applies also to "real-life" situations, the aesthetic problem being a microcosm of all human problems. (252)

In *Stanzas*, Ashbery contends, Stein exploits the rhetorical power of Eliot's objective correlative—she uses language not to represent the world but to *evoke* specific kinds of experience. This practice requires considerable faith in the power of signs to behave in predictable ways—a form of faith from which Ashbery is often said to be apostate—but this faith animates the prose of *Three Poems* as it shades in impenetrabilities that generate an objective correlative of a primary encounter with reality.[14] W.H. Auden aptly compares Ashbery to

[14] Addressing the question of Ashbery's "difficulty" in his illuminating chapter on *Three Poems*, Stephen Fredman quotes Ashbery describing poets as "necessarily inaccurate transcribers" of life:

> Only out of such "perfectly useless concentration" can emerge the one thing that is useful for us: our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point

Rimbaud in his foreward to Ashbery's first volume, *Some Trees*, observing that "Where Wordsworth had asked the question, 'What is the language really used by men?'" Ashbery, like Rimbaud, substituted the question, "'What is the language really used by the imagining mind?'" (16).

Critical accounts of *Three Poems* have focused on its style, perhaps because many feel, as Stephen Fredman puts it, that "If one wishes to state what *Three Poems* is 'about'…one encounters problems" (102).[15] In support of a non-thematic reading, Fredman goes on to cite Ashbery's own admission that "There are no themes or subjects in the usual sense, except the very broad one of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena" (Vinson, 36). Ashbery's "except" is a significant one, for while exploring the phenomenology of mind is the primary formal ambition of *Three Poems*, the ontology of mind is the volume's central, if still "very broad," subject; importantly, the form and content of *Three Poems* are utterly integral. The subjective aspects of consciousness Ashbery stresses on the level of the sentence—the mind's restless distractibility, its autonomous dilations of focus, its waywardness, its opacity—pose questions about the nature of inner life that Ashbery addresses discursively in the poems' abstract, philosophical meditations—questions about the origins of this distinctive texture of awareness, about what it means to produce knowledge and to love

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> of coming into being. ("Second" 10, quoted in Fredman 102; "perfectly useless concentration" is Elizabeth Bishop's phrase)

Why, Fredman asks, is the poet a "necessarily inaccurate transcriber"? His answer exemplifies the tendency to trace Ashbery's forms of difficulty to the slipperiness of language. "Necessarily inaccurate transcription," Fredman explains, "would seem to characterize a secondary operation rather than primary composition, something like a translation instead of an original presentation" (103). Fredman interprets Ashbery's ruptures of meaning as symptoms of the unreliable "secondary operation" of transcription rather than the 'primary operation' of experience itself, the original presentation of reality to the mind; Ashbery does not specify the more specific, presumably linguistic problem of "inaccurate transcription," however, but rather the broader problem of "inaccurate transcribers" who are inaccurate in all their worldly acts, including first-order experience and second-order transcription alike.

[15] In the appendix to his chapter on *Three Poems* Fredman lists for "the reader anxious for some heuristic device" forty-nine "descriptive titles" summarizing the volume's successive themes (160).

other people with only the very specific means of an imperfect, embodied mind, about whether archaic terms for thought or novel ones seem truer, ampler, more alive to modern sensibilities.

Three Poems charts a transition from a set of concepts that Ashbery associates with the past to a set of concepts he associates with the present: a transition from mystery, illusion, magic, solipsism, intangibility, innocence, and the soul, to "reality," empiricism, exteriority, tangibility, experience, environment, and embodiment. This conversion seems at once to allude to a subjective transition embedded inexorably within the life course (*i.e.*, the disenchantment and sensitivity to one's surroundings that mark the emergence from childhood) *and* to describe a distinct transition within the collective mind, within the history of ideas.[16] Ashbery proposes that in the nebulous interval from "then" to "now" the kinds of interpretations of reality we find credible have shifted swiftly and drastically, leaving one with the feeling, as he puts it in "No Way of Knowing," of "waking up/ In the middle of a dream with one's mouth full/ Of unknown words" (464). Devoted as it is to exploring "an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena," in *Three Poems* interpretations of *psyche* form a principal axis along which Ashbery traces this disorienting transition; "The system was breaking down" (280), "The System" begins, and despite Ashbery's pronouncement that "the magic world really does exist" (255), within the intellectual cosmos of *Three Poems* the notion of the transcendental soul is certainly part of that languishing system. What has emerged to replace it is "The only slightly damaged bundle of receptive nerves…dispatching dense, precisely worded [poetic] messages" (273), a replacement that seems at times to be an exhilarating source of possibility and at times a dismally inadequate substitute. In "The New Spirit" the longing to release the "self-propagating wind" of the spirit from the bodily "condition of hardness" that

[16] In "The System" Ashbery suggests that this convergence may arise through a kind of universal, organismal mind of which one's own consciousness is only one unique expression: "For just as all kinds of people spring up on earth and imagine themselves very different from each other though they are basically the same, so all these ideas had arisen in the same head and were merely aspects of a single organism: yourself, or perhaps your desire to be different" (314).

contains it entails deconstructing the very notion of the self ("tak[ing] apart the very notion of you"), and discovering in it a mechanism "like a watch"—a material system comprised of parts that can be "sorted and labeled":

> The wind is now fresh and full, with leaves and other things flying. And to release it from its condition of hardness you will have to take apart the notion of you so as to reconstruct it from an intimate knowledge of its inner workings. How harmless and even helpful the painted wooden components of the Juggernaut look scattered around the yard, patiently waiting to be reassembled! So ends the first lesson: that the concave being, enfolding like air or spirit, does not dissolve when breathed upon but comes apart neatly, like a watch, and the parts may be stocked or stored, their potential does not leak away through inactivity but remains bright and firm, so that in a sense it is just as much *there* as if it were put back together again and even more so: with everything sorted and labeled you can keep an eye on it a lot better than if it were again free to assume protean shapes and senses, the genie once more let out of the bottle, and who can say where all these vacant premises should end? (257-8)

In the past, the spirit was supernaturally "free to assume protean shapes and senses"—it was a genie in a bottle, a menacing Juggernaut. Ashbery's "first lesson" is that these assumptions are "vacant premises"; aside from the power of physical *reproducibility* (the potential of the spirit always "*there*" in the physical parts, ready to be activated by the orchestrations of nature), the spirit imagined mechanistically is far less numinous, far less imposing, and far less free; it is "harmless," it "comes apart," its "concave being" resembles the humble "hollow" the soul fits in "Self-Portrait," and once it's been deconstructed and demystified it fits fairly easily within a finite, human point of view—"you can keep an eye on it a lot better."

In Ashbery's more wistful moods, the older, exalted terms for interiority evoke nostalgia, but their decline also triggers in him a refractory impulse to root out sources of possibility in circumstances of ostensible debasement[17]; just as adolescence exchanges innocence for autonomy, compensatory forms of freedom have presented themselves as "we have broken

[17] In response to an interviewer's suggestion that critics tend to see his poetry as "rather lighthearted," Ashbery responds: "Some people wouldn't agree that my poetry is lighthearted. Frank O'Hara once said, "I don't see why Kenneth [Koch] likes John's work so much because he thinks everything should be funny and John's poetry is about as funny as a wrecked train" (Stitt 179).

through into the consequences of the grey, sagging flesh that was our due." Surrounding the poems' only explicit reference to the "new spirit" is a conflation of two processes: the process of acclimating to an aging body and the process of acclimating to a vision of inner life defined, through embodiment, by physical limitation. Through this running ambiguity Ashbery charts a path from the "old, irregular way of doing" to the sense of "proportions" between the old and the new that characterizes "the new spirit":

> Certainly the whiff of nostalgia in the air is more than a hint, a glaring proof that the old irregular way of doing is not only some piece of furniture of the memory but is ours, if we had the initiative to use it. I have lost mine. It has been replaced by a strange kind of happiness within the limitations. The way is narrow but it is not hard, it seems almost to propel or push one along. One gets the narrowness into one's seeing, which also seems an inducement to moving forward into what one has already caught a glimpse of and which quickly becomes vision, in the visionary sense, except that in place of the panorama that used to be our customary setting and which we never made much use of, a limited but infinitely free space has established itself, useful as everyday life but transfigured so that its signs of wear no longer appear as a reproach but as indications of how beautiful a thing must have been to have been so much prized, and its noble aspect which must have been irksome before has now become interesting, you are fascinated and keep on studying it. We have broken through into the consequences of the grey, sagging flesh that was our due, and it is surface enchantment, healing to the eye and to the touch. But there is no celebration of sensuality—there never could be, now—only of its counterpart, a temporary dignity for the mind, and waiting, that is satisfying anyway because it is a kind of a way of being, any old kind but belonging to itself, in and of itself and ourselves. The "luxury" of details that coagulated into the old sad excitement told us so little, really: at most the secret of choosing the most significant ones to be put together into something to play that takes up time, a scansion of that tough anxiety, ordering without analyzing it. The rewards and punishments remain the same, each accepted in a spirit of weary gratitude regardless of its nature. Take them away and the lived space will not have altered, but will have drawn enough initiative from the drop in tension produced by the sudden removal of competition to expand its spark into a glow, suffusing but not illuminating it, and the mind's suburbs too are suddenly infected with the new spirit, commenting on it in their accustomed lilting or droning vernacular; in some cases it will take the form of clumsy removal of the barriers by force—a slow but probably useful process; in others, getting used to inhabiting the ruins and artfully adapting them to present needs; in still others, standing up in the space certain that it is the right one, and feeling the sense of its proportions leave your mind like rays, striking out to the antipodes and polishing them, perfecting them through use. (263-4)

Ambivalence is Ashbery's one consistent form of response to this paradoxical transition: the "old irregular way of doing" is still promisingly viable, but he claims to have lost "the initiative to

use it"; the narrowness "One gets…into one's seeing" is discouraging and yet it is also "visionary"; the agreeable openness of the "panorama that used to be our customary setting" is replaced by "a limited but infinitely free space" that elicits "a strange kind of happiness within the limitations."[18] Ashbery hints that these antitheses might be resolved by entertaining the old in light of the new, by adopting a perspective from which "signs of wear" upon the traditional metaphors inspire not reproach, but rather a sense of "how beautiful a thing must have been to have been so much prized"; such a resolution recovers a subtle, ephemeral, "temporary dignity for the mind." Archaic spirituality and scientific vogue yield equally prejudiced and implausibly myopic fictions of inner life, but a compromise between them, Ashbery believes, might be greater than the sum of its parts; he aspires to render a credible, supreme fiction of interiority that both acknowledges the mysteries of mental life and ratifies its material constraints, indulging our taste for objective "truth."[19] This new, synthetic, syncretic "spirit" will in some cases "take the form of clumsy removal of the barriers by force," and in others involve "inhabiting the ruins and artfully adapting them to present needs," but it will undoubtedly, and perhaps predictably, be incarnated in a "lilting or droning vernacular" that resembles *Three Poems'* unmistakable voice.

Importantly, the compromise that defines "the new spirit" is less a middle ground than a parallax view, a progression through contraries. Ashbery admits the possibility "that knowledge of the whole is impossible or at least so impractical as to be rarely or never feasible" (290), but

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[18] Ashbery is accustomed to associating this particular brand of happiness with the limitations of his craft, with the freedom of writing in strict poetic forms characterized by "really bizarre requirements"; he compares writing a sestina, for example, to "riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your feet" (Bloom and Losada 124). Elsewhere in the same interview he explains that the form of *Three Poems* "occurred to me as something new in which the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create a much more—I hate to say environmental because it's a bad word—but more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts (Bloom and Losada 126).

[19] In *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (2000) David Herd asserts that "*Three Poems* is John Ashbery's version of the supreme fiction," that it "affirm[s] poetry by staging an inquiry into its capacity for harmony and order" (124-25).

he is undeterred in his ambition to attain, or at least approximate, that knowledge; in "The System" he lays out three methods of pursuit, and rejects a compromise between the objective and subjective—their "knowing combination"—to espouse instead an "erratic approach" in which the perspective is always shifting:

> ….of the three methods: reason, sense, or a knowing combination of both, the last seems the least like a winner, the second problematic; only the first has some slim chance of suceeding through sheer perversity, which is possibly the only way to succeed at all. Thus we may be spared at least the agonizing wading through a slew of details of theories of action at the risk of getting hopelessly bogged down in them: better the erratic approach, which wins all or at least loses nothing, than the cautious semifailure… (291)

"Erratic" shifts of focus certainly define Ashbery's style and themes in *Three Poems*, but why is the erratic so distinctively poised, epistemologically, to "win all" or at least "lose nothing"? The answer lies in a conception of mind Ashbery articulates as a portmanteau of contrary Platonic and Lockean philosophies; while Plato holds that knowledge is an innate possession of the immaterial soul (forgotten in infancy and recovered through *anamnesis*), Locke conceives of the mind as a blank slate and knowledge as an exclusive product of embodied experience. The perspectives are mutually exclusive, but Ashbery is not bound, as a philosopher must be, to reason, and will not choose between them. Iconoclastically, confusingly, he approaches the mind from both transcendental and materialist perspectives at once, and the experience of inattention is at the center of it all:

> For just as we begin our lives as mere babes with the imprint of nothing in our heads, except lingering traces of a previous existence which grow fainter and fainter as we progress until we have forgotten them entirely, only by this time other notions have imposed themselves so that our infant minds are never a complete *tabula rasa,* but there is always something fading out or just coming into focus…just, I say, as we begin each day in this state of threatened blankness which is wiped away so soon, but which leaves certain illegible traces, like chalk dust on a blackboard after it has been erased, so we must learn to recognize it as the form—the only one—in which such fragments of the true learning as we are destined to receive will be vouchsafed to us, if at all. The unsatisfactoriness, the frowns and squinting, the itching and scratching as you listen without taking in what is being said to you, or only in part, so that you cannot piece the argument together, should not be dismissed as signs of our chronic all-too-human weakness but welcomed and examined as signs of life in which part of the whole truth lies

> buried. And as the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it, as you yawn and rub your eyes and pick your nose or scratch your head, or nudge your neighbor on the hard wooden bench, this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. (298, ellipsis mine)

Ashbery's mixed metaphors picture the mind as an experience of unrelenting inscription and erasure in which there is "always something fading out or just coming into focus," and even "blankness…is wiped away too soon." This vision of consciousness is defined by dynamics of inattention that are an implicit outcome of somatic causes—they are "signs of life" and of "our chronic all-too-human weakness." This mental errancy proves to be the source and justification of *Three Poems'* aesthetic methods; the volume takes "just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you," forms that are congruent with "the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand." Ashbery even holds a mirror up to us as we wriggle uncomfortably on the hard pew of his prose—"you yawn and rub your eyes and pick your nose or scratch your head, or nudge your neighbor on the hard wooden bench"—but ours is a redeeming discomfort, he assures us, that makes way for a renovating spirit; his erratic form is the *only* one "in which such fragments of the true learning…will be vouchsafed to us."

Ashbery imagines the distracted reader elsewhere (everywhere, really) in *Three Poems*. At several points he considers what it means to feel connected with another person when you are in fact necessarily connecting with an *idea* of that person, an idea that is the creation of a human brain with limited powers of attention and interest and thus, necessarily, empathy. The liaison of writer and reader is the most dramatic instance of this mutual imagining, for it depends solely upon instructions convened scrappily in a finite text, and the instructions work only in one direction. Ashbery recognizes that the distractibility he expects of his readers necessarily fragments our perception of him, and thus undermines the connection to which he nonetheless aspires; we have seen that he associates lapses of attention with lapses of "comprehension"—with epistemological loss—but here we also see that he identifies them with lapses of sympathy,

with a feeling of deprivation he bears with anxiety and equanimity, in turn. Initially irritated to be neglected in favor of "some rapid lateral development" competing for attention from our peripheral vision, Ashbery reifies this lapse of "comprehension" in a blank space that literally shows us what we're missing:

> Even as I say this I seem to hear you and see you wishing me well, your eyes taking in some rapid lateral development
>
> reading without comprehension
>
> and always taken up on the reel of what is happening in the wings.… In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself. But we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their cold, piecemeal renderings of us: they create us. (253, italics mine)

It is a strain for Ashbery, the inveterate solipsist, to be created by anyone but himself, and it is utterly troubling to him that the distraction he identifies with "true learning" also entails the inability to sustain empathetic focus on the inwardness of other people. (As we will see, this becomes a consuming idea for Jorie Graham.) Ashbery follows his own injunction "to learn to live in others," however, and recognizes that our readerly "cold, piecemeal renderings" of him will have to suffice—just as his own fragmentary rendering of Parmigianino in "cold pockets/ Of remembrance" had to suffice. He frees himself to settle into a humanizing form of acceptance that is yet another kind of "happiness within the limitations."

Ashbery begins "The Recital"—the last, briefest poem of *Three Poems*—with a kind of exhausted admission: "All right. The problem is that there is no new problem" (318). Over and over again in *Three Poems*, "fragmentary awareness" (257) is both the problem and the solution: it is the only way to represent consciousness and the best way; it inhibits empathy but also humanizes us by putting us in touch with the humbling parameters of our being; the "erratic approach" obscures us from ourselves, but it is also the only path to what knowledge there is, and therefore "wins all." At one point in "The System" Ashbery describes an early, failed effort to fulfill the spiritual quest of *Three Poems*, a past attempt to "produce the inner emptiness from

which alone understanding can spring up, the tree of contradictions, joyous and living, investing that hollow void with its complicated material self" (287).[20] In "The Recital" he wonders why that quest to fill a spiritual vacuum with a slew of contradictions associated with the "complicated material self" had failed, despite his wanting an answer so badly in "the earlier days":

> The point was the synthesis of very simple elements in a new and strong, as opposed to old and weak, relation to one another. Why hadn't this been possible in the earlier days of experimentation, of bleak, barren living that didn't seem to be leading anywhere and it couldn't have mattered less? Probably because not enough of what made it up had taken on that look of worn familiarity, like pebbles polished over and over again by the sea, that made it possible for the old to blend inconspicuously with the new in a union too subtle to cause any comment that would have shattered its purpose forever. But already it was hard to distinguish the new elements from the old, so calculated and easygoing was the fusion, the partnership that was the only element now, and which was even now fading rapidly from memory, so perfect was its assimilation…. (325)

This seamless, "easygoing…fusion" was impossible in the earlier days because "not enough of what made it up had taken on that look of worn familiarity"; the new was still too new. The alluring "new and strong" synthesis Ashbery fosters in *Three Poems*—the beautiful texture of a whole, natural, weathered thing, like a pebble on a beach—appears only when the idea is "polished over and over again" by the undulating friction of consciousness. This perfectly assimilated, unshatterable unity emerges through the "fragmentary awareness" of the poem itself, but it is also subject to that awareness; it begins to recede as soon as it comes into view, "even now fading rapidly from memory." It is a unity that appears only in the past tense, in fact, vanishing as it comes into being. This quality of the new spirit Ashbery elegantly encapsulates in the poem's final image of itself as a performance just ended, an ephemeral, expressive offering swallowed by silence: "The performance had ended, the audience streamed out; the applause still

[20] Cf. Ashbery's use of the tree as an image of the miracle of conscious matter in "The New Spirit": "Can it be identified with some area in someone's mind? The answer is yes, if it is experienced, and it has only to be expected to be lived, suspended in the air all around us. As I was going to say, this outward-hanging ledge over the pitfalls of mankind, proves that it is something you know; not just as the tree is aware of its bark, but as something left with you on consignment" (251).

echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle as something to be acted out and absorbed still hung in the air long after the last spectator had gone home to sleep" (326). Indeed, Ashbery's enchanted spectacle of uniting the visible and the invisible offers his spectators temporary diversion and consolation, but more importantly it offers the echoing "idea of the spectacle," the enduring sense that one has witnessed, in an age when the soul seems divested of its secrets, the making of a "temporary dignity for the mind."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jorie Graham: The "Bedrock Poverty" of Embodied Vision and the Ethics of Virtual Selfhood

Portraying vision as the rivet through which the soul is fastened to the body, Jorie Graham invokes Plato's *Phaedo* twice in *Materialism* (1993). In a loose translation that forms one of the collection's many adaptations from literary and philosophical sources, Graham relates Socrates' conviction that it "is the element of *sight* by which a soul is depressed and dragged down into the visible world"; she pictures the "ghostly apparitions of souls which have not departed pure but are cloyed with sight" (62, Graham's italics). In an epigraph to the collection, Graham lyrically renders Socrates' image of the sentient *psyche*, affirming that "the soul, when using the body as an instrument of perception….is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders, and is confused—the world spins round her—and she is like a drunkard when she touches change" (ix-x). Graham elides the Platonic association between sense perception and moral corruption—the soul's addled intoxication is less sinister than seductive—yet she ratifies Plato's assertion that our inexorably 'embodied' perceptual encounters with the mutable superficies of the visible are always blundering ones. Not only are mnemonic representations of the past as impoverished as the physical copies of ideal forms, those dimensions of material and non-material reality that lie beyond our perceptual grasp are obscured by the cloying sensory plenitude with which the manifest "touches" the mind. In tracing the vagaries of the eye over the visible world, Graham addresses herself to the somatic constraints that furtively shape the character and production of human knowledge; always subtending her phenomenological, epistemological, and ethical inquiries into the nature of vision is the mysterious commerce between "mind" and "body."

The ubiquitous instances in which Graham represents the body as an integument that shrouds the incorporeal self are knowingly conventional and range in tone from earnest to self-consciously naïve. In its selective reference to Nietzsche's definition of the human subject as "a discord and hybrid of plant and of ghost" (42), the title of Graham's first collection of poetry, *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (1980), portrays the palpable fiber of material being and the intangibility of consciousness as aspects of a synthetic union, as contiguous dimensions of selfhood not discrete enough to be in "discord" with one another. But in "The Geese," a celebrated poem from that early collection, Graham definitively dissociates mind and body as she considers the "bedrock poverty" that accompanies the debasement of incarnation, a poverty the mind intuits in the circumscribed structures of bodily apprehension:

> There is a feeling the body gives the mind
> of having missed something, a bedrock poverty, like falling
>
> without the sense that you are passing through one world,
> that you could reach another
> anytime. Instead the real
> is crossing you,
>
> your body an arrival
> you know is false but can't outrun. (38-9)

"Crossing" the body's shallow capacity to receive the given, the depths of the real waft over the impervious surfaces of material being; it is only through the tentative sensation of "a feeling" that the body announces its constraints as a source of knowledge. The body is thus *false*—a dubious vehicle for the interpretation of the phenomenal world and the revelation of worlds that lie beyond perception and intellectual intuition—and it is also an *arrival*—not an origin of the self, but a provisional harbor for it. Nearly three decades later, in *Sea Change* (2008), Graham still radically dissociates material and immaterial aspects of being, continuing to portray embodiment as an inexorable thrall: "You/ will need to learn/ to live in this prison/ of blood and breath" (52) she warns in "Undated Lullaby"; "I cannot/ go somewhere/ else than this body," she protests in "Embodies," "…my cells reach out" (6).

Alongside this intransigent attraction to the Platonic dualism that Helen Vendler has described as "Graham's *donnée* and her demon" (92) however, is her vigilant responsiveness to contemporary scientific inquiry addressing the nature of the mind—inquiry which, despite its diverse disciplinary perspectives and contradictory conclusions, overwhelmingly undermines the mind's dissociability from its physiological underpinnings.[1] As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson rather bombastically put it in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), a book whose direct influence upon Graham's poem "Copy" I will address at the end of the chapter, "What we now know about the mind is radically at odds with the major classical views of what a person is" (5). Among prominent poets writing over the past sixty years, Jorie Graham is one of the most self-consciously attuned to brain science's enterprising assumption of questions historically 'owned' by philosophers and artists—questions of what is real, of how we know, of who we are. As one of the two epigraphs to his book *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (2000), Antonio Damasio acknowledges this mutual interest, including lines from one of the five poems in *Materialism* entitled "Notes on the Reality of the Self" (1993), lines that begin with the pronouncement: "The question of who I was consumed me" (ix). In a gallant endorsement that appears in the opening pages of Damasio's book, Graham displays her reciprocal openness to supplementing literary avenues of investigation with neurobiological ones in order to address that consuming

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[1]Materialism is unquestionably the dominant position in contemporary philosophy of mind, though now "materialism" is interchangeable with the ascendant term "physicalism," which has been adopted in order to accommodate modern physics' postulations of events and properties that are non-material; the materialist theory that everything that exists in the universe is made of matter (which takes up space, is inert, senseless, tangible, etc.) has been adjusted to allow the assertion that "everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on, or is necessitated by, the physical" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Physicalism*). Dualists of all kinds now constitute a small minority, although "property dualism," which holds that mental properties are distinct from and irreducible to physical properties, has become more prominent as the limitations of physicalism have become increasingly recognized in the past two decades (see, for example, David Chalmers' *The Conscious Mind* (1996)). In addition to Platonic and Christian forms of dualism, prevailing physicalist explanations of consciousness and phenomenal self-experience, in particular those of Antonio Damasio and Thomas Metzinger (to be discussed below), have a direct bearing upon the philosophy of mind Graham sets forth in her poetry.

question: "There is no simpler way to say this," she writes, "read this book to learn who you are" (iii).

Claudia Ingram has written that Jorie Graham "does not, like [James] Merrill, celebrate the mutually transformative relation between unassimilated twentieth-century 'news' and the subjective or cultural imagination" (159). But in fusing an embodied philosophy of mind and biological lexicon that are stridently *au courant* with a rigidly dualistic and willfully conventional repertoire of metaphors for mental experience, Graham's poems reveal an affirmative aesthetic ambition to assimilate the 'news' of twenty-first century brain science while attesting to those structures of feeling that have rendered dualistic models of mind intuitive and culturally pervasive. Graham's aesthetic resourcefulness prohibits her from dismissing paradigms of being that remain charged with such formidable religious, historical, and artistic freight, and her emotional sensitivity prohibits her from relinquishing the paradigm of the mind/body schism, gives such crisp metaphorical expression to forms of self-estrangement. No such sacrifices are necessary, Graham suggests, in order to explore questions of spiritual consciousness in a secular age, or to forge an empirically conscientious poetics that acknowledges the erratic correlation between the science of the mind and the experience of it.

In Graham's hands, the "prison/ of blood and breath" thus proves to be a resilient metaphor for the limits embodiment imposes upon the very nature of perception and thought. Conceiving of visual cognition as a process that constrains the correspondence between self and world, and conceiving of the self, following Damasio and others, as a dynamic cognitive representation that is virtual rather than real, Graham understands subjectivity to be determined by the somatic architecture through which it comes into existence. She shares with Merrill, Ammons, and Ashbery an alertness to the compass of the human mind that arises predictably from sustained, reflective identification of consciousness with the finite matter from which it miraculously emerges; Graham's rigorously philosophical disposition and scrupulously urgent

sense of social accountability, however, uniquely compel her to survey the rational and emotional implications of her own skepticism, and of the intellectual chain of cause and effect leading from materialist interpretations of reality to the moral impasse of unaccountable physical determinism.

Out of her embodied philosophy of mind and her solicitous surveillance of her own cognitive faculties' vexing circumscriptions, Graham assembles an array of ethical snares into which she stumbles willfully, making of herself both an example and a desperate offering. In her poetry since *Materialism*, Graham has suggested that to succumb to the compensatory impulse to 'ravish the visible' (*SC*, 52) with the eye, an impulse that is often encouraged by poesis, is to rehearse and fortify the drive to possess that is at the root of humanity's most inhuman transgressions. Led into the world of creative self-expression through visual art—by early, famous guides such as Giotto and Luca Signorelli, and by later, living ones that include Haig Manoogian and Martin Scorcese, Graham chose vision as her prevailing metonym for the embodied mediation of experience, and that it is in her poetic accounts of vision that she first registers unease in her own concentration upon the body's administration of experience. But that unease also finds a sharpening, collateral focus in recent poems through which Graham assesses the threat that her cognitive materialism poses to the very idea of self and the ontology of the lyric voice. While she is patently committed to forging a poetic language that can absorb the forms of empirical discourse through which we are increasingly accustomed to approach the mind, she is exceptional among her peers in articulating the risks of such habituation, in voicing her misgivings about imagining the self as an outcome and not an agent. Rather unpredictably, it is through an engagement with the vernacular science of the mind that Graham finds herself reckoning with nothing less vital than the ethical implications of poststructuralism's critique of the humanist subject.

Disputing the suggestion that spiritual despair underlies William Carlos Williams' recourse to the material in his apothegm "No ideas but in things," Graham explains in an early interview:

> The precept "no idea but in things" has always seemed to me to lead us *out* of a spiritual miasma. To refer us back to the material world as precisely the locus of the spiritual. To remind us of how *deep looking* (via language) is in fact a spiritual endeavor because of the way in which objects afford us the grace of the insensible orders….That is why [Williams] uses the verb *depends* in the red wheelbarrow poem. And why, it seems to me, he so often breaks his lines to separate the modifier from the noun—so that we may glimpse, in the crack between the quality and the thing, the very *thingness* of the thing suddenly freed of its garment of appearance. (Snodgrass, 155, italics original to transcription)

The arcane texture of the visible world Graham describes seems to descend from the spiritually redemptive inscrutability of the Romantics' natural landscapes, made to both intimate a transcendent order and conceal it behind a "garment of appearance." By occasioning a sublime confrontation with the unyielding resistance of visible objects, and by demanding a salvific submission to that resistance, Graham creates a perceptual and aesthetic model of deep—if ultimately thwarted—looking that affords "the grace of the insensible orders." While she inherits and entertains the notion of an unintelligible world built, by divine will or chaotic accident, to be known incompletely, she is also inclined to discern in reality the will to be known. Identifying the visual system as the mundane physical apparatus that segregates the sensible and insensible orders, Graham looks not to the structure of reality but to the structures of bodily apprehension in order to account for the inexorable human suspicion that we are prohibited from discerning resplendent, unifying truths. Using both the phenomenology and the physiology of vision to stress that something is always lost in perceptual translation, she traces this feeling of epistemological exclusion back to the intrinsic limits of the subject underpinned by its own unyielding objecthood, but as she surveys her relentless yearning to decipher the

mysteries that shape our encounters with the visible world, she finds herself deferring the humanizing grace that those mysteries can offer.[2]

Like Wordsworth, whose child philosopher "read'st the eternal deep,/ Haunted forever by the eternal mind," Graham uses spatial metaphors of depth and thickness to express the disparity between the unfathomable wealth of the given and the shallow poverty of the perceived; "For what we want/ to take inside of us…//there is/ no deep enough" (*E,* 20), she writes in "The Age of Reason," and in "Mist" she longs for "another, thicker, kind of sight" (*E*, 5). In "Salmon," Graham recounts having watched on television, in a motel room in Nebraska, the muscular convulsions of salmon leaping upstream, "past beauty," she writes, "past the importance of beauty…driving deeper and deeper/ into less." In one of the disarming juxtapositions characteristic of Graham's early style, the creatures' helplessness in their genetically programmed resolution towards procreation and death is compared to the act of seeing itself, to the flow of perceptual data "upstream" from the retina to the brain. In a rugged cascade of free-verse lines, Graham imagines the mind as the "still pool" where concepts ("justice"), concrete, visual images ("aspen leaves"), and memories ("mother attempting suicide") spontaneously intermingle in a creative *frisson*; the spawning of poetry, Graham suggests, like the spawning of salmon, arises from the countervailing necessities of dogged resolve and patient submission to generative forces that transcend conscious will:

> They would not stop, resolution of will
> and helplessness, as the eye
> is helpless
> when the image forms

[2] In "Friendly Fire," the University of Iowa Presidential Lecture Graham delivered in 1991, she asserts the redeeming value of the limited, ground-level point of view through which the subject sees the world, implicitly opposing it to the empirical, bird's-eye view of experience that originates outside embodied subjectivity: "The opportunities afforded the human soul by the acceptance of a limited view which the making of choice entails cannot be overestimated, it seems to me. One is *created* by limited point-of-view, by the suffering it entails, in a way that one cannot be simply by the overall mid-air view we now think of as "understanding," because it is a condition in which action is by definition impossible—the action of interpretation as well as the action of moral discernment. At the very least, both capacities should be present in us at once. Particle and wave. Left- and right-handed paths" (5).

itself, upside-down, backward,
driving up into
the mind, and the world
unfastens itself
from the deep ocean of the given.
Justice, aspen
leaves, mother attempting suicide, the white night-flying moth
the ants dismantled bit by bit and carried in
right through the crack
in my wall…How helpless
the still pool is,
upstream,
awaiting the gold blade
of their hurry. (*E*, 40)

Framing vision as a reductive process, the lines contrast the insubstantial mental image with the "deep ocean of the given" from which it is extracted, recalling the salmon's depleting migration from brackish depths to ominously shallow headwaters, "deeper and deeper into less." In its emphatic "helplessness," Graham's proves not to be the Wordsworthian eye that half-creates as it perceives; just as the scenery in "Relativity, A Quartet" "lay[s] itself down frame by frame onto the wide/ resistanceless opening of our wet/ retina" (*M*, 36), here, too, the image autonomously "forms/ itself," with the eye in a state of unmitigated receptivity. Stripped of agency—and thus, Graham will later come to stress, accountability—the eye in "Salmon" exemplifies the passivity that is intrinsic to all matter, and that she will later describe with ambivalent contempt as "perfect obedience" (*O*, 19).

The lines from "Salmon" also isolate a keenly illustrative instance of the body's derivation of sense data from 'external' reality and its radical, subliminal manipulation of that data in forging mental images.[3] With the image of the salmon projected "upside-down, backward" upon the retina before being inverted again by the brain, Graham demonstrates that

[3] In "Relativity," Graham elaborately compares the eye's scanning of the landscape to a camera's recording of visual information "frame by frame"; as she contemplates "a mounted, scanning, video-cam" and its bounded range of surveillance, she reveals an ethical concern about the moral transgressions that take place beyond our range of apprehension: "*Where is* I think,/ watching again,/ *the blind spot in its turn?*" (*M,* 35). It is also noteworthy that the visually striking migration in "Salmon" is projected on a television screen in a process that resembles the projection of the image onto the retina; in the succession of optical media through which the quanta of sensory information must pass—camera, television, eye—the intervention of the television is yet another instance of the transformative bearing of "mechanical necessity" (O, 19).

what she knows about vision affects how she experiences it; the empirical facts of visual cognition reinforce "the feeling the body gives the mind/ of having missed something," the intuition of a pristine immensity untouched by human apprehension. In the final element of the poem's unfolding triptych, the fish *en route* to fatal spawning and the helpless eye in the act of perceiving are juxtaposed with a desperate sexual coupling beheld by a child; the flood of noonday light in which the lovers bathe dispels all shadows but the one that marks them as separate beings, entangled but discrete:

> Once, indoors, a child,
> I watched, at noon, through slatted wooden blinds,
> a man and woman, naked, eyes closed,
> climb onto each other,
> on the terrace floor,
> and ride—two gold currents
> wrapping round and round each other, fastening,
> unfastening. I hardly knew
> what I saw. Whatever shadow there was in that world
> it was the one each cast
> onto the other,
> the thin black seam
> they seemed to be trying to work away
> between them. I held my breath.
> As far as I could tell, the work they did
> with sweat and light
> was good. (40-41)

If vision is Graham's prevailing metonym for the various forms of sense perception that abet our distorted liaisons with reality, in "Salmon" she stresses that such liaisons depend, like sexual liaisons, upon the unyielding boundary between self and other. With the "fastening,/ unfastening" of the lovers' bodies, the lines tacitly yoke that inexorable corporeal seam with the eye as an organ through which the visible world is "unfastened" and transported into the realm of invisible and private interiority. In this sense, the seam resembles the liminal "wall" drawn among "justice" and "aspen leaves" in the poet's teeming mind; the "white night-flying moth," like the visible world atomized into quanta of light and carried across the material boundary of

the eye, is “dismantled bit by bit and carried in/ right through the crack/ in my wall.”[4] Though “Salmon” yields the aesthetic consolations of exquisite natural and erotic imagery, it sees the derivation of mental representations from objective reality as a terminal migration; and by associating perceptual translation with the gruesome dismantling of the white moth (itself a fragmentary import from Robert Frost’s harrowing “Design”), “Salmon” betrays Graham’s disquieted longing for an infinitely capacious, disembodied—and of course purely hypothetical—kind of sight.

The first of several poems in *Materialism* (1993) entitled “Notes on the Reality of the Self” begins with a churning river and the throes of its “dance of non-discovery,” a dance that is also, of course, the dance of the poet’s buffeted eye, thwarted in the pursuit of knowledge through looking but cavorting rapturously despite the failure. Years later, addressing Gerhard Richter in a poem entitled “Disenchantment” (*Overlord*, 2006), it is instead Graham’s “madness of non-discovery” that she sees reflected in the artist’s blurred canvases, her searing disappointment with “this looking-away that we’ve come to call knowledge” (44-45). A critical step in this evolution from equable poise to urgent epistemological torment is “Subjectivity,” a poem in which Graham discovers the inert body of a butterfly that is at once an archetypal symbol of the disembodied mind (“my mind hovering…/ huge, ballooning, fluttering, yellow”) and a biological “specimen” objectified by her empirical gaze (“2 inches of body and 5 inches of wing”). The first of the poem’s three parts associates the brazen incandescence of the monarch’s markings with the phenomenal world unprocessed by perception, thought, and linguistic description, those arbitrating systems that Graham likewise associates with the reticulated “black bars” drawn ominously across the “atomic-yellow ground” of the insect’s wings. In a synaesthesic paean to the color yellow, Graham opens the poem with an extended comparison of the butterfly’s markings to other disarming impositions of natural and artificial

[4] The architectural metaphor for the eye’s obtrusive mediation of sensory information recalls the metaphor of the medieval walls of the Italian town in “To a Friend Going Blind”; see Introduction, pp. 10-11.

design: to the leaden matrices that support light through stained-glass windows; to the solidity of chimes and flutes that seize and direct supple gusts of air (their tones are imagined as a symphonic spectrum of yellow hues); to the "structure of tenses and persons" used to contain time in language; to the "cries forced through [the] mind's design" in the act of making poetry out of the cry of its occasion; and, finally, to the gauzy sieve of nerves that separates visible and invisible dimensions of reality.

Like the rest of "Subjectivity," the imagistic torrent that opens the poem—itself an insistent, virtuosic groping for poetic language adequate to the perceptual and intellectual experience of apprehending the butterfly—lurches back and forth along the left margin, replicating the saccadic leaps of Graham's restive eye:

> Black bars expanding
>   over an atomic-yellow ground—feelers retracted—
> the monarch lay flat on the street
>   and did not move at all
> when I lifted it
>   onto my spiral
> notebook
>
>   and did not move the whole length of the block
> during which I held the purple laminated
>
> cover still as
>   possible—
> my gaze
>   vexing the edges of
> the wings, ruffling the surface where it seemed
>   light from another century
> beat against those black bars—yellow, yellow, gorgeous, in-
>   candescent—
>
>   bells, chimes, flutes, strings—wind seized and blown
> open—butter yellow, fever yellow,
>   yellow of acid and flax,
> lemon and chrome,
>   madder, mikado, justic, canary—
>
> yellow the singers exhale that rises, fanged, laughing,
>   up through the architraves and out (slow) through the hard
>   web
> the rose-windows press

onto the rising gaze,
yellow cries of the mind's design,
like a clean verdict,
like a structure of tenses and persons for the gusting

heaven-yellow
minutes (so many flecks, spores,
in the wide still beam
of sun)
or the gaze's stringy grid of nerves
spreading out onto

whatever bright new world the eyes would seize upon—
pronged optic animal the incandescent *thing*
must rise up to and spread into, and almost burn
its way
clear through
to be. (*M*, 25-26)

With the "rose-windows" that form one of the lines' central metaphors, a semi-permeable partition is once again Graham's emblem of vision. She compares subjectivity to a magnificent interior space defined by its architecture; the fractured light of the vaulted nave intimates, however dimly, an exterior realm that is both pristine and plenary. It is just as Graham describes the maculate light refracted through the material imperfections of the glass—"so many flecks, spores,/ in the wide still beam/ of sun"—that she is reminded of the "stringy grid" of optic nerves that undertakes a similarly imperfect kind of mediation, and that morphologically resembles the "hard web" that shapes the light by obstructing it. Importantly, though, the high windows' obstructions are bidirectional; they not only determine the character—color, form, brightness—of the light that enters, they also sift and delay the out-going voices of the worshippers "that [rise], fanged, laughing,/ up through the architraves and out (slow) through the hard/ web," suggesting the inhibitive determinations of both matter and language upon self-expression.

This bidirectionality recurs in "the gaze's stringy grid of nerves" that Graham has turned inside out and sent protruding from the eye, the "pronged optic animal" with the grasping, appetitive tentacles of a predator. Its winged victim—"feelers retracted"—is stunned and insensate, one "*thing*" about to be consumed by another. The grid of nerves not only spreads out

onto the world but is "spread into" like the passive visual anatomy represented in "Salmon" and "Relativity: A Quartet," a vehicle for the butterfly's fiery metamorphosis from physical to mental substance. In the second of the poem's parts, Graham imagines what that metamorphosis would feel like if it could be felt, if objectivity and subjectivity were equally sentient conditions, and one could undergo the process of becoming, rather than forming, a mental image; as a sunbeam pouring through a window—her emblem for the gaze—sweeps across the room and engulfs her, she breaks into "I" and "she," occupying the roles of both subject and object at once. Rarefying into mental substance, her experience reflects the subject's familiar feeling of perceptual loss:

…my being inside the beam of sun,

and the sensation of how it falls unevenly,

how the wholeness I felt in the shadow is lifted,
broken, this tip *lit,* this other *dark*—and stratified,
analysed, chosen-round, formed— (29)

The second part of the poem breaks off here, with the gaze 'forming' a mottled representation that is partially illuminated and partially obscure, fragmenting and dispelling the "wholeness" in the unseen. Exposure to this gaze entails submission to a force that possesses properties of both perceptual and intellectual experience; Graham can feel herself not only being seen, but being made sense of ("stratified,/ analyzed"), dissected into fragments that seem willfully selected ("chosen-round") and indeterminately manipulated ("formed"). In the poem's final section, this alignment of embodied vision with the intellect's coercive impulse to make meaning becomes explicit, and the forcing of sensation through the "mind's design" reveals itself to be fatally destructive; in a perversion of Williams' "*deep looking* (via language)," Graham feels "thin almost icy beams" emanating from her eyes, "widening as they sweep down/ out of the retina/ to take the body in—," and it is with the weight of language that she intends to flatten the specimen in order to preserve it, since "the mind," she writes, "needs it so flat":

Home I slid it gently
into the book,

wings towards the center of the
page,
the body denser and harder to press
flat,
my mind hovering over it,
huge, ballooning, fluttering, yellow,
and back and forth,
and searching for the heaviest book
to lay upon
the specimen,
to make it flat—

as if it were still too plural, too
shade-giving, where the mind needs it
so flat the light can't
round it, licking for crevices, im-
perfections,

even the wings still arced enough to bring
awake
the secret blacknesses
of the page— (29-30)

The unrelenting gaze does not, like Williams' looking, set free "the very *thingness* of the thing," but rather tyrannizes the visible by attempting to efface its depth. Vexed by the "secret blacknesses" that it might have relished on the page, "Subjectivity" attempts to eliminate, rather than wedge open, "the crack between the quality and the thing." The exaggerated fragility of those persistently arcing wings, and of the body whose density Graham registers through the chilling pressure of her own grasp, only exaggerate the brutality of her ambition to flatten it. Amplifying that brutality further is the poem's concluding revelation that the ethereal insect has been alive all along, and that Graham has been unwittingly conspiring not to preserve it but to kill it; narrowly escaping the "envelope of glances" that would have smothered it, the butterfly is brought back outdoors and reanimated by the heat of direct sunlight, the benign natural counterpart to her marauding eyes' "almost icy beams." The antithesis of a sublime, salvific encounter with the unintelligible, Graham's vision in "Subjectivity" suppresses the imaginative faculty that is the source of compassion; she greets the object's impenetrability and irreducible plurality not with wonder but with a plundering desire to discover its secrets.

The poem suggests that Graham fails to discern the spirit lingering in the specimen because her impatient eye is blind to the spiritual in the material; unlike Wordsworth's "eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy," Graham's tortured eye is forbidden to "see into the life of things." Contemplating a leaf's "guard cells" and "substomatal chambers"—microscopic structures that she knows to exist but that are invisible to her naked eye—Graham exclaims in frustration in "Relativity," "I blink. I don't *see anything.*/ Lord,/ I want to see this leaf" (*M*, 38). The poet's irritated yearning for forms of perceptual and intellectual disclosure that transcend the apparent limits of human apprehension is surely a variety of the "irritable reaching after fact and reason" that Keats identifies with poetic failure, and whose antidote, of course, is "negative capability," the capacity to exist "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" and to "remain content with half-knowledge." Characteristically, this ability to be satisfied with "the half-truth that can be caught" (*O*, 54), to borrow Graham's language, is for her both an aesthetic ambition and an ethical one; also characteristic is Graham's conception of negative capability in embodied terms, as a "delay in the act of cognition" and a "lingering for a much longer duration in the state of receptive sensation…that allows for the world to thicken and become more real and more complex" (*NPR*, 12). Identifying the moral advantages of Keats' poetic state of being, she reflects that to see anything as "too plural" and to attempt to suppress that plurality is to rehearse an extremely dire habit of thought; the level of complexity we must be able to bear in order to retain "not only our sanity but our humanity," she explains, requires us "to remain fully capable of handling contradiction—fear, rage, compassion—capable of being outraged at terrorist acts and perhaps unwilling to undertake terrorist acts ourselves in order to retaliate" (*NPR*, 8). With comparable earnestness and intensity, she has said of the countervailing motions of thought and feeling to which negative capability is hospitable and to which the hegemonic force of reason is intolerant: "if you're allowed to feel mutually exclusive emotions at

the same time and not made to feel crazy, you might not end up shooting people in a high school" (Silverblatt).

Graham's intuitive association of irritable reaching with moral danger announces itself with intensifying shrillness in her poems since *Materialism.* With the grid of nerves that insatiably grasp "whatever bright new world the eyes would seize upon," Graham reminds us in "Subjectivity" that to "perceive" emerges from its Latin antecedent "capere," to take or seize; as her poetry matures she is increasingly disposed to portray vision not as receiving but as a forcible *taking*, a desperate yet despicable kind of theft motivated by the "bedrock poverty" of embodied vision. In her most recent collection, *Sea Change* (2008)*,* that poverty takes the familiar, if stridently exaggerated form of gluttonous hunger, as it does in "Undated Lullaby":

> …ravishing the visible with your inquiry, and hungry, why are you
> so hungry, you have already been
> fed, close your
> mouth, close your neck, close your hands chest mind, close them—& your eyes…
> (52)[5]

But as Graham searches for fresh terms with which to condemn her desire to apprehend more than the determinations of embodied vision will allow, she presents the ingenious, multivalent conceit of "Futures," in which the eye's longing to pour itself over sky and earth is imagined as a willingness to liquefy assets in order to make an extravagant purchase:

> …I own you says my mind. Own what, own
> whom. I look up. Own the looking at us
> say the cuttlefish branchings, lichen-black, moist. Also
> the seeing, which wants to feel more than it sees.
> Also, in the glance, the feeling of owning, accordioning out and up,
> seafanning,
> and there is cloud on blue ground up there, and wind which the eye loves so deeply it
> would spill itself out and liquefy
> to pay for it— (14)

[5] See also "Impressionism," where Graham finds herself "trying to look everywhere at once," a slave "ferrying the hunger back and/ forth" (*O*, 54-55).

It is at her most disillusioned, however, that Graham sees in vision a drive to persecute through self-interested and unaccountable violence that is even more sinister than the irredeemable avarice of "Futures"; in "Guantánamo," for example, she proposes that there is a "lock-up, deep in your pupil," where "there is no law," she writes, and "you are not open to prosecution" (10-11).[6]

Graham depicts the calamitous consequences of irritable perceptual reaching in comparably dire, if less political terms in "Upon Emergence," a poem in which the material embodiment of the "artificer mind" anchored in space and time becomes associated with an ethically negligent fixation upon what is lost in perception, upon what "burns off" of reality as it is transubstantiated into mental being. Drawing upon the most ancient sense of "devotion" as a verbal act, a consecration by vow, the poem sets out to answer its opening questions—"Have I that to which to devote my/ self? Have I devotion?"—by considering what the subject can ever really be said to *have* when the finite structures of human apprehension encounter the infinite surface of visible exteriority:

> what is it that cannot be given back
> in *any* form—which burns off—without
> residue—just by coming into contact with
> the verb of human inwardness? How helpless they are—
> both sides—can the gods really know?—the
> ineffable pain, amazement, thronging drift
> of accident whereby freedom of world, of
> subject, are forced to give way? Oh
> "path of inquiry"! All of it unable to die
> or kill. (*O,* 21-22)

[6] A predecessor of "Guantánamo" in this regard is "The Dream of the Unified Field," in which perception is likened to the various forms of rape undertaken by European colonizers in the New World:

> The storm: I close my eyes and,
> standing in it, try to make it *mine.* An inside thing….
> but inside, no more exploding, no more smoldering, no more,
> inside, a splinter colony, new world, possession
> gripping down to form,
> wilderness brought deep into my clearing,
> out of the ooze of night…
> not a lease—*possession*—… (*M,* 85-86)

What the gods cannot know is the helplessness of material being; the subject's encounter with the unyielding substance of the visible is governed not by free will but by the "thronging drift/ of accident," while the world is coerced, in its encounter with the dynamic "verb of human inwardness," along the narrow channels of embodied consciousness unfolding in real time. "Upon Emergence" is propelled by questions, but the poem periodically steps outside of its own querying in order to critique its inquisitive mode; here, the interjection "Oh 'path of inquiry'!" reflects upon Graham's own line of questioning, identifying it as interminable ("unable to die") and innocuously ineffectual ("unable to kill"). In yet another critical self-interruption, Graham identifies her curiosity as a force of "Unbearable/ tyranny," as a "Tiny/ monster picking up the reins of my eyes" (22). The path of inquiry does not lead her to satisfying conclusions, but instead tyrannically commands her attention, an arrogation to which Graham objects on moral grounds. As her intellectual curiosity takes up the reins of her colluding eyes (reins that resemble the stringy optic nerves of "Subjectivity," connecting the eyes and brain), her focus is directed away from the human community to which she ought to be devoting her vigilant regard; to warn her against this very danger, Graham has the poem itself rebuke her in its final line, "*Where is your brother* hisses the page" (*O*, 22, italics Graham's). At the conclusion of a poem in which she contemplates worthy, though extravagantly refined questions about perception and mind, Graham's repetition of the accusatory question God puts to Cain leaves her inaudibly uttering, in the shamed silence following the poem's final line, the paradigmatic expression of moral neglect: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Earlier in "Upon Emergence," Graham describes the formation of a mnemonic image, focusing not only on the image itself, but upon the biological mechanism that generates it. Once again, a striking moral critique suddenly intrudes upon her reflection, but here Graham's questions begin to betray a second symptom of her cognitive materialism that will reveal itself to be of far-reaching intellectual consequence in *Overlord*. The extent to which the immediate

material support of human subjectivity prevails upon her consideration of mental experience manifests itself as a bloody tincture in the image itself:

> The bird that was just feeding here
> is now appearing in my mind. The blood
> inside me now must take it round and round. Hardly changed,
> it bends and pecks at the last bits of seed below
> the lavender. Riding on the blood in me,
> its wings spread out. And also bloody, yes, the grass
> of mind, bright red its stalks. Also glints on its claws, its
> wingtips rising up, above the streams—of me? in me?—
> borne round and round by my sticky devotion here, my *thinking* it….
> So this is the source of evil? (21, ellipsis Graham's)

The shocking final sentence sends us back over the preceding lines in an attempt to discern some aspect of the bird or its mental emergence that might be construed as objectionable, let alone as "the source of evil." Once again, it seems to be not the cognitive act but the compulsive attempt to understand it that is the problem. The image is "borne round and round" in an obsessive metacognitive loop; Graham does not simply experience the memory, but reflects upon the phenomenon of its emergence interminably, so stuck in the process of "*thinking it*" that her "sticky devotion" begins to resemble John Berryman's "thinky death." Graham's grounds for characterizing this expenditure of her attention as a "source of evil" declare themselves in the scathing accusation of the poem's biblical closing line, but it is also in the course of this decidedly embodied formation of a mental image that Graham stumbles into ontological doubt about the very constitution of the self. Are the "streams"—the currents of air that are a part of the natural scene Graham pictures, but also currents of blood that sustain the recollected bird's emergence in the mind—"of me," or "in me?" Do the images comprise the self, or are they contained by it?

Her questions in "Upon Emergence" adumbrate Graham's overtly skeptical reexamination in *Overlord* of the notion of coherent, autonomous, intentional selfhood. In "Upon Emergence," amoral collusions of perceptual and intellectual inquiry provide an oblique entrée into the bearing of such forms of inquiry upon the idea of self. A similar association

occurs in "Dawn Day One" a meditative poem that portrays vision, in its alignment with the type of scientific inquiry through which we attempt to understand vision, to be not only invasive but lethally destructive. The poem begins with the inauspicious ring of two distant gunshots, the second of which awakens Graham; with the inclusion of the symbolic first shot, she acknowledges the iterations of human brutality to which she has not been wakeful, and imagines her sudden stirring as a rebirth into ethical alertness, a fresh start, a "day one." Still, the violently rude awakening anticipates the failures of ethical vigilance with which she will find herself to be complicit. Graham portrays her emergence into consciousness as a washing up into embodied sensation out of the oceanic depths of the unconscious ("The body's weight is/ a beaching"); out of the realm of the infinite and irrational, she awakens into the realm of reason and consequence that "puts one back on the walking-path one stepped off of/ last night" (4). That it is wearily, even scornfully, that Graham rejoins the walking-path of reason becomes evident as her meandering mind traces the inductive routes through which Zeno arrives at his paradoxes, the specious syllogisms that deftly render flying arrows motionless and finite spaces impossible to cross.[7] Having risen and passed through her light-dappled room, and having successfully arrived at the bathroom mirror ("Zeno reasoned we would/ never get there. Reason in fact never gets there"), she examines her eyes' reflection and addresses the reader peering alongside her. Ever sensitive to the Sartrean "essential poverty" of mental imagery, she compels us to close our eyes to the cloying surfeit of the sensory information that obstructs the imagining mind; she obliges us to picture with focused intensity a research lab that is remote from the domestic scene, but that also resembles the sterile bathroom where her own self-examination is taking place. She describes an experiment related to her by "Tony" (certainly Antonio Damasio,

[7] E.g. the dichotomy paradox: "That which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal" (Aristotle, *The Physics* VI:9, 239b). Thus, in order to arrive at the goal one must complete an infinite number of intervening tasks, which Zeno claims is an impossibility. The second problem that the paradox poses is that the trip cannot begin; it is impossible to cover the first segment of distance, since any possible first distance could be divided in half, and thus would not be first after all. Zeno's conclusion is that no travel over any finite distance can ever be completed or begun, and that therefore motion must be an illusion.

Graham's colleague for many years at the University of Iowa), an experiment in which a live subject is used to investigate primate visual cognition; in Graham's hands, the monkey's primary visual cortex, an area at the back of the brain into which visual data is projected from the retina, becomes the "the back/ of the cave" depicted in *The Republic*, the surface upon which the impoverished shadows of the real are projected:

> Are your eyes shut? I put cream on my lids
> and rub it in. I feel my eyes in there under the skin.
> How impersonal are they, these hardnesses, barely
> attached, in their loosely protected sacks.
> Tony tells me how, in the lab, they cast an image
> —a cross in this case—onto the gaze of a monkey then
>   "sacrifice
> the monkey" and how, when examined, the neurons in the
>   visual cortex
> actually form the imprint of
> the cross. It would have been, the cross (except under very
>   unusual circumstances), erased
> by the next image. Hence the need for
> sacrifice. Of what is it made, I ask. Of cells, of *active*
> cells, he says. It is imprinted, I ask. No. It
> would have disappeared and been replaced except
> the creature was stilled. I like it they
> use the word *stilled*. Then the back
> of the cave in there with its cross of cells. (*O*, 4-5)

The lyricism of the opening lines' anapests and internal rhyme (rub it in/under my skin; barely attached/ protected sacks), befits the relatively benign domestic ritual of Graham's toilette, but that lyricism gives way to the agitated and finally ungrammatical effusiveness of the reported conversation with Tony. Her own eyes remind her of the specimen monkey's, and her own manual examination of the organs under her skin reminds her of the scientists' penetrating investigation; she mordantly claims to "like" the ethically dubious choice of the passive, euphemistic verb "stilled" to describe the extermination of the monkey in the act of perception. Martyred on a cross of active cells, the euthanized animal is "sacrificed" in order to satisfy our desire to hold still what is transient and to understand what is elusive, but also, through the

prosthetic gaze of a CT scanner, to satisfy our appetite for an invasive kind of looking *through* matter that supplements and transcends the limitations of embodied, human sight.[8]

The poem's hardness of tone, the detachment of it, is intuitively related to the hardness of those impersonal eyeballs Graham feels under her eyelids, the organs that are "barely attached" to the subject looking through them. In their total alienness as objectified organs, the eyes become—in a way that makes Graham bristle—stripped of intention, and thus of accountability—they are "hardnesses," as she puts it, in both material and moral senses. She associates those hardnesses with the amoral aesthetic and intellectual forms of inquiry that are disposed to treat perception and thought as consequences of non-intentional, material causes and effects, and that are also disposed, in her view, to draw upon apparently reasonable premises to legitimize unsound ways of being in the world. She concludes the poem by drawing an implicit analogy between Zeno's pursuit of truth through logic (which, unsupervised by common sense, leads him to patently useless conclusions) and other aesthetic, empirical, and theoretical

[8] A figure from Tootell et al, 1982, the first study to generate a result of the kind Graham describes in "Dawn Day One." The upper image is the visual stimlus perceived by the macaque monkey; the lower is a tissue section from the monkey's brain:

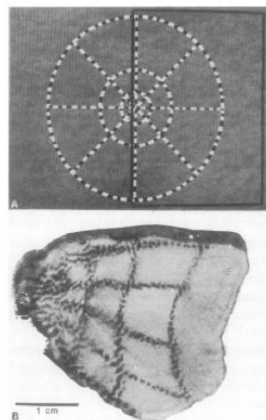

Fig. 1. (A) One of the visual stimuli used. The solid black rectangle encloses that portion of the visual stimulus that stimulated the region of striate cortex shown in (B). (B) Pattern of brain activation produced by the visual stimulus shown in (A), as revealed by 2DG. This is an autoradiograph from a single flat-mounted tissue section (mostly from layers 4B and 4C). About half of the total surface area of the macaque striate cortex can be seen.

modes of pursuing truth, which likewise, when unmonitored by practical and moral intuition, lead us nowhere:

> …there is an edifice
> you can build level upon level, from first principles,
> using axioms, using logic. Finally you have a house
> which houses you. Now look at you.
> Are you an entire system of logic and truth?
> Are you a pathway with no body ever really on it?
> Are you shatterable if you took your fist now to
> this face that looks at you as you hold to your stare?
> Here. You are at the beginning of something. At the exact
> beginning. Ok. This is awakening
> number two in here, in this poem. Then there are
> these: me: you: you *there*. I'm actually staring up at
> you, you know, right here, right from the pool of this page.
> Don't worry where else I am, I am here. Don't
> worry if I'm still alive, you are. (*O*, 6-7)

With the corrective questions she puts to her reader, Graham aims to redress models of selfhood that are derived intellectually rather than intuitively, that conceive of the "I" as theoretical and provisional rather than actual and authentic. As we peer into the poem, which is also Graham's bathroom mirror, the mirror art holds before nature, and the mirrored Narcissean pool where reflections are mistaken for reality (reminding us again of Plato's cave), we descry not only our own images, but an image of Graham herself, the textual reflection through which she manages to be, inasmuch as the text reserves some residue of her *self*, in two places at once ("Don't worry where else I am, I am here"). Intuition guides our invariably negative answers to Graham's rhetorical questions: we can *feel* that we are more than matrices of logic, that we are not paths but embodied nodes of feeling and intention that travel along them, that to shatter the bathroom mirror is not to shatter the face reflected there. Graham warns us against mistaking representations of the self—whether those representations are formed out of logic, or light, or language—for something real and alive, an "I" that is irreducible to such representations. It is thus with a second ethical awakening that the poem concludes, for in reminding us of our aliveness, Graham reminds us of the inalienable sense of agency that we possess through feeling,

and that could not accrue to a mere "system of logic and truth" or vacant "pathway with no body ever really on it."

Charles Altieri has suggested that in postmodern poetry "Value is a way of being informed, not of informing" (612), that postwar American poetry relinquishes the model of the lyric subject who "informs" reality by imaginatively ordering it into coherence, adopting instead a model of the self that is passively "informed" by the conditions of specific cultural or physiological environments. This transition from humanism to anti-humanism, he writes, entails "renewed attention to the biological…the necessary as opposed to the creative" (613).[9] In the face of recent arguments that attempt to deconstruct this boundary between modernism and the poetries that have succeeded it, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism* Jennifer Ashton upholds the utility of the division on the grounds that twentieth-century American poetics exhibits a shifting emphasis from causes to effects, from the autonomy of the text and the determinacy of its meaning (associated with modernism and the New Criticism) to the poetics of indeterminacy that Marjorie Perloff has described, the "open text" that refuses to assert an intentional artificer behind the poem and that demands readerly participation for the construction of meaning. As a final term in her argument, Ashton turns to Jorie Graham, using readings of two poems from *Materialism*—"Notes on the Reality of the Self" and "The Surface"—to claim that the influence of cognitive materialism upon Graham's poetics is evident in her total eradication of a coherent lyric subject, an eradication which leads Ashton to assert a congruence between Graham's

[9] Altieri has confessional poets in mind in particular. He writes of Robert Lowell: "In Lowell's own case, *Life Studies* initiated the habit of conceiving human problems along the metaphorical lines of biological process, a tendency which has grown more and more pronounced in his subsequent poetry. Along with the emergence of the biological metaphor goes an increasing passivity, a surrender of a faith in man's creative processes in favor of at least the appearance of becoming merely a vehicle for experience" (615-616).

Žižek echoes the rational implications of this physicalist anti-humanism in a discussion of the advent of the Cartesian subject: "Descartes, who asserted the *cogito* as the starting point of philosophy, simultaneously reduced all reality, life included, to *res extensa*, the field of matter obeying mechanical laws. In this precise sense, the thought of modern subjectivity is not a 'humanism' but, from the very outset, 'antihumanist': humanism characterizes Renaissance thought, which celebrated man as the crown of creation, the highest term in the chain of created beings, while modernity proper occurs only when man loses his privileged place and is reduced to just another element of reality—and correlative to this loss of privilege is the emergence of the subject as the pure immaterial void, not as a substantial part of reality" (164).

aesthetic aims and those associated with language poets such as Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein:

> If language poetry has been seen—from both within its own circles and without—as an attack on the "personal, 'expressive' lyric," the subjectivity that emerges in *Materialism,* I will argue, goes at least as far in theorizing the elimination of that "expressivity" as the claims language poetry makes for the "open text." (162)

Ashton invokes Antonio Damasio's questioning, in his own terms, of "how, in parallel with engendering mental patterns for an object, the brain also engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing" (*The Feeling of What Happens*, 9); she claims that Graham, "unlike Damasio…portrays the self as something that is at once an *effect* of nonintentional material causes and indistinguishable from them." She argues that in the course of portraying the self as an outcome of biological interactions, in Graham's poems "poetic agency as such becomes…one more nonintentional material cause" (161), that "there appears no controlling agency or, as Damasio would put it, no single central 'knower'" (164), no coherent intentionality that perceives and interprets experience and imparts its perceptions and interpretations to the reader.

And yet from Graham's increasing distress as she represents biological ways of imagining the mind alongside ever more urgent circumstances of moral anxiety, it becomes evident that the "elimination of…'expressivity'" that Ashton has Graham "theorizing" is precisely the consequence of cognitive materialism that Graham self-consciously sets out to oppose; she grasps for ways to ratify the facts of biological circumstance without allowing them to become ends in themselves, and without remitting a conception of the human as an answerable author of actions who is endowed with volition and voice. Embodying the mind with an explicitness and self-awareness unprecedented in American poetics, Graham is compelled to confront the determinism that is the most extreme intellectual consequence of her own fixation upon, in Altieri's terms, "the necessary," and thus to reckon with the potential of a

cognitivist poetics to jeopardize nothing less than the sense of personal accountability that accompanies belief in an autonomous and intentional, if elaborately constructed, lyric subject.[10]

In an NPR interview addressing the topic of "Emotion, Cognition and Consciousness" (2003), Graham, Antonio Damasio, and Thomas Metzinger, a German philosopher of mind, discussed the ways in which the brain "engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing," how the self, based on Damasio's claims, is a virtual representation derived from "a constant barrage of signals that represent the body," the body that forms an "anchor that allows us to generate a self and that allows us…to maintain a continuity of self over a lifetime" (*NPR*, 4). Graham subscribes to Damasio's definition of the self, and in fact explicitly ventures a way of imagining the brain's perpetually receptive monitoring of sensory signals as a form of negative capability; still, she is careful to note that while she finds the claim that there's no such thing as a "solid self" to be philosophically and empirically credible, she is troubled by the ethical implications of conceiving of the self as a merely cognitive construction and the lyric voice as a merely linguistic one:

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[10] Distancing herself from the language poets while thoughtfully identifying them with the British Romantics, Graham articulates the necessity, to her mind, of the "opposing motion" of an intentional, authorial presence for the formation of meaning: "I often think the language poets—who interest me more than any other "group" writing at present—are simply replacing nature with language—(it is after all a vast self-possessed field indifferent to our single instances and efforts.) And that they are repeating the Transcendentalist/Romantic venture with it as the *other*. None of which disturbs me in the least—on the contrary—Seriality is one very powerful syntactical maneuver that has floated to the surface of what I like to think of as our great collaboration as a result of their experiments. Although seriality and any other such openings outward are not moving, to me, unless they are seriously tested by their opposing motion. Openness has little power (or meaning, ultimately) for me unless it is earned or wrought against the powerful drives of closure (of fate). How does Prospero put it in *The Tempest*—"But this swift business/ I must uneasy make, lest too light winning/ Make the prize light..." (155-6).

Referring to the critical practice of deconstructionism in the academy, in "Friendly Fire," Graham further clarifies her philosophical divergence from the language poets, and from many fundamental premises of poststructuralism, by outlining her own philosophy of language: "What we are experiencing in our critical procedures sometimes resembles a great adolescent crisis in relation to reality. Reality as parent; the human mind as furious child, hovering upstairs above the problem of Life, refusing to come down, in a state of fury self-flatteringly referred to as "aporia"—the mystical overtones of that notion masking its deeply adolescent all-options-open refusal of the limitations and ennobling responsibilities of *choice*. Especially the kind of choice the belief in a stable terminology, in the possibility of stable reference, involves. After all, just because words are indefinite doesn't mean they're indeterminate. Just because things don't have proveable, objective, forensic meanings, doesn't mean they have *no* meaning. As human beings, haven't we always had to count on things we can't prove? Maybe we could just think of this as the *greater* dizziness—the enabling, *ennobling*, metaphysical dizziness—this understanding and acceptance of the true fluidity of words, and this choice to believe their *relative* meaning sufficient to hold us" (5).

> I don't think that the constructed voice of any poet or, for that matter, any painter or even composer is naive in the sense that it doesn't know that it's a construction. But it is concerned with creating a system which will allow a person to feel empathy and to undergo accountability. And, you know, we might not be here really, but we really are killing people. And…you could probably prove to me that I'm…a total creature of circumstance, but unfortunately, I'm also a creature that has to cast a vote. I'm a person who has to be a mother. I'm a person who's responsible for taking care of somebody wounded in an emergency. (8)
>
> …The solid self is no one's operative illusion…what we're trying to do is figure out…what goes into [its] construction, whether it's a poem, a work of art, a work of philosophy or…a neurological undertaking that exhibits the characteristics that momentarily coalesce into a self, and then whether that momentary coalescence can last long enough to love or do good or to do harm. (12)

While Ashton doesn't acknowledge the potential moral consequences of "the elimination of…'expressivity'," Graham is haunted by them. She may find herself persuaded by Thomas Metzinger's thesis that 'the self' is in fact only a "*phenomenally transparent self-model*" (331), "a virtual agent, perceiving and acting on virtual objects in a virtual world" (416), but she also finds herself inclined to disregard this thesis, adopting a self-conscious naïveté with respect to the objective mechanisms that regulate phenomenal self-experience in order to preserve the free will that cognitivist accounts of subjectivity are often inclined to reason away.[11] In the same NPR

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[11] In *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (2003), Thomas Metzinger argues that "what in scientific or folk-psychological contexts frequently is simply referred to as 'the self'" (331) does not exist in reality, that there are only "phenomenal selves" that are aspects of conscious experience. These phenomenal selves are not things but processes, and can therefore be interrupted, suspended, and dynamically reconstituted. In *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (2009), he reframes the intricate, empirically grounded theory for a general audience, concisely addressing the implications of his theory for the notion of free will: "The unsettling point about modern philosophy of mind and the cognitive neuroscience of will, already apparent even at this early stage, is that a final theory may contradict the way we have been subjectively experiencing ourselves for millennia. There will likely be a conflict between the scientific view of the acting self and the phenomenal narrative, the subjective story our brains tell us about what happens when we decide to act….From a scientific, third-person perspective, our inner experience of strong autonomy may look increasingly like what it has been all along: an appearance only" (127-129).

In "The Solar Parallax: The Unbearable Lightness of Being No One" (part II of *The Parallax View* (2009)), Žižek perspicaciously traces the undeniable impasses of cognitive philosophy, addressing Metzinger's thesis at length and proposing a reevaluation of the threats to freedom that cognitivism might pose: "As intelligent participants in the ongoing 'freedom versus brain sciences' debate have noted, the problem should not be reduced to the dilemma 'is the (deterministic) natural causal link complete, or is there a gap in it which allows an opening for a free act?'…'Freedom' is not simply the opposite of deterministic causal necessity: as Kant knew, it means a specific mode of causality, the agent's self-determination. There is in fact a kind of Kantian antinomy of freedom: if an act is fully determined by preceding causes, it is, of course not free; if,

interview, she concludes that "maybe we have to have selves and be too simple and naïve, because if we give up on that ['naïve' conception of the self], there's something horrifying about the degree to which we might slip out from under the mantle of accountability" (*NPR*, 8).[12] Aspiring to draw empirical and phenomenological truths into a unified field of significance, Graham portrays the human subject in two ways at once—as a being that is both intentional and biologically determined, both virtual and autonomous, an epiphenomenon that emerges as an effect of physical conditions, and an agent that is conscripted to efficacy in the physical world. Despite Graham's attempts to hold these perspectives in unresolved suspension, a grinding friction between them inscribes itself with increasingly exigent severity in her recent poetry, particularly in *Overlord*.[13] It seems to be no coincidence that as Graham's poems become explicit in invoking the impact of brain sciences upon the idea of self, that they assert an increasingly politicized, coherent, autobiographical lyric subject with a strident, moral point of view.

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however, it depends on the pure contingency which momentarily severs the full causal chain, it is also not free. The only way to resolve this antinomy is to introduce a second-level reflexive causality: I am determined by causes (be it direct brute natural causes or motivations), and the space of freedom is not a magic gap in this first-level causal chain but my ability retroactively to choose/determine which causes will determine me. "Ethics," at its most elementary, stands for the courage to accept this responsibility" (203).

[12] Graham is responding here to the following exchange, in which Metzinger identifies both Graham and Damasio as "naïve realists about the self":

"Prof. METZINGER …I notice when listening to Tony and Jorie is that they are both naive realists about the self.…They really think there is such a thing in reality, and I would rather claim that none of your listeners, nor you, Ira, have something or are something like a self. There are just no such things as components of reality. What exists are self models, representations created in brains, which are not any more recognized as representations by brains. But if we look closely, there is no thing, a self thing, that corresponds to these neurorepresentations in the brain, and that is the actual thing, the actual idea, we now have to depart from in this phase of our history.…

Dr. DAMASIO: There is no self thing, but there is something like a self process. I think that we can all agree with that, even Thomas.

Prof. METZINGER: Well, of course, right. We need a process perspective on selves. Selves are not things, but ongoing processes. And they are sometimes suspended. The process of conscious self-modeling goes on in dream sleep and it goes on during waking consciousness. Some parts are invariant; some parts stay really stable, like the bodily background of self-awareness. Other things are rather fleeting and change frequently, like thoughts or fast emotions. But we are much more processes than things, and we are not metaphysical entities. And if we start to think about these issues, I think it becomes clear that the contribution that, for instance, neuroscience currently makes to our self-understanding has great cultural ramifications, too, because we depart from an image of man which has been very dear to us for many centuries…" (6-7).

[13] Though I believe that early intimations of this friction are evident in *Materialism*, and in the poems that Ashton addresses, the poems in *Overlord* through which this friction is most fully realized are ones to which Ashton, of course, did not have access in 2005.

The construction of selfhood forms the explicit concern of the second of two philosophical poems in *Overlord* suggestively entitled "Disenchantment," in which the embodied mind is drawn into correspondence with language, ideology, and history as a system that mediates, below consciousness, all interpretive acts (including acts of self-representation). The first of the poem's five parts begins with the sentence "I shift my self," the third and fourth words of which form an emphatic splitting of the more normative possibility "myself." Ambiguously conjuring and challenging the notion of the Cartesian subject, the 'shifting' of the self seems as likely to describe an autonomous mind dragging along a physical body (to the window, to take in a view) as it is to describe the imperceptible rearrangement of a mental representation of the self, one of an infinite number of possible permutations that form not *the* 'me' but *a* 'me':

> I shift my self. It's me I shout to the tree out the window
> don't you know it's me, *a* me—I really don't care what we call it,
> this personhood—a hood isn't a bad thing, a place to live, a self-blinding. (61)

The lines suggest Graham's disenchantment not with the idea of self but with the tangled discursive frames surrounding that idea, with the verbal, and of course academic, question of "what we call it." She compares the self (the person, the subject, the "I") to a punning pair of 'hoods' that fulfill, if only barely, her modest proposition that "a hood isn't a bad thing." The first, the hood of the doomed prisoner or captive falcon, is a shroud that mollifies through perceptual deprivation ("self-blinding" seems to equate personhood with self-deception, admitting the possibility that, whatever we call it, it may be a naïve delusion); the second hood, in awkwardly parental usage, is the 'hood that is a genial, if only provisional "place to live" in space and time, a model of self that recalls Graham's characterization, in "Upon Emergence," of the visible world represented in the mind as "the version of a place/ inside a place" (*O*, 20).

The "you" that Graham addresses, the ontological standing of which constitutes yet another of the poem's central preoccupations, is a branching, brain-like tree that possesses, if not

animacy, then certainly a unique and living identity, a *haeccitas* that Graham posits as a counterpart to sentient selfhood. (The poem's second section is a direct quotation from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, in which Mrs. Ramsay reflects upon her "irrational tenderness" for mute, insensate natural phenomena, "how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one; in a sense were one…" (62).) As she does in "Subjectivity," "Dawn Day One," and "Upon Emergence," in "Disenchantment" Graham demonstrates her mistrust of empiricist pursuits of knowledge, reifying the abstract "path of inquiry" as a concrete guide book that allows her to assess the tree's age ("three centuries it is said according to the knowledge"), and that also stands in for the implied textual sources from which Graham has derived her knowledge of the brain as the biological "site" of the mind. To her regret, such sources have impelled her to imagine the tree as a manufactured representation drawn through physical interactions, as a "cloud" of data, as a "little flash" through which the tree manages to be in two 'sites' at once:

> I shift my self. It's me I shout to the tree out the window
> don't you know it's me, *a* me—I really don't care what we call it,
> this personhood—a hood isn't a bad thing, a place to live, a self-blinding.
> The book tells me I can't see you,
> it's all frames and lenses and you, you who have been here
> three centuries it is said according to the knowledge,
> you are but a little flash, a cloud taking form in my neuron chamber, my
> brainpan,
> in your *site* of my manufacturing of you—
> not to mention all the cultural variables—that I am white, a woman, live in
> x, earn my means via y—in a
> city, on a portion of the globe where empire collects its secrets—where I
> am one of its secrets—prey to the fine dust of its ideology,
> which slips into my very gaze this dawn,
> right there into the brain stem along with the feeding-in of
> your more than seventy-two shifts in the nature of the vertical
> just in your upward-reaching branch [I counted],
> which will take, in about 6 minutes, the very first ray of sun coming over the
> rooftops— (61)

"Disenchantment" identifies the variable structures of bodily apprehension that shape the "feeding-in" of the visible—Graham's percept here is the jointed climbing of a branch in

"shifts" towards the sun—with "cultural variables" of race, gender, and historical position that likewise determine the way in which a stimulus as simple as a tree is 'manufactured' as an interpretation of reality.[14] It is through the organizing gaze in familiar collusion with the nervously over-zealous intellect ("more than seventy-two shifts in the nature of the vertical….[I counted],/ which will take, in about 6 minutes, the very first ray of sun….") that Graham inevitably absorbs the ideology of empire, her anatomical brain "stem" like the botanical "upward-reaching branch" that will absorb the sun's rays. In the earlier "Disenchantment," which takes the *tabula rasa* of a painter's canvas as its model of mind, Graham writes that we are "So blank. So open to the brushwork of/ the given" (*O*, 43); here, her emphasis upon the forms of "feeding-in" that subliminally define subjective self-experience also seems to ratify the open text's premise that "meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts" (Hejinian, 1), contexts that obviate and displace the illusion of an autonomous subject and lyric voice.

It is ultimately Graham's dissatisfaction with such dogmatically 'postmodern' premises, however, her skepticism of her own modish skepticism, that makes itself felt in the latter "Disenchantment."[15] As she queries the transient specter of her manufactured mental tree, she

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[14] It is noteworthy that in her poetic reckoning with cognitivist philosophy of mind Graham seems to concentrate upon the extreme naturalization of agency posed by philosophers such as Metzinger, despite the prominence of more moderate cognitivist perspectives; Daniel Dennett, for example, shares the view that "there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theatre where 'it all comes together'" (*Consciousness Explained*, 253 (1991)), and yet he entertains and defends the existence of autonomous will (cf. *Freedom Evolves* (2003)). In light of its congruence with social constructionism's dispersal of agency, it is suggestive that Graham chooses to respond to the most extreme assaults upon selfhood and freedom that cognitivist philosophers are prepared to propose.

In *What should we do with our brain?* (2008), Catherine Malabou echoes Graham's correlation of the transparent determinations of the embodied mind with the transparent determinations of ideology: "Playing on the title of a well-known work by Daniel Dennett, we are not seeking to explain or explicate consciousness, but to *implicate* it. To implicate consciousness, to ask what we should do with our brain, means, starting from these clarifications, to attempt to develop a critique of what we will call *neuronal ideology*….[The question *What should we do with our brain*] should allow us to understand why, given that the brain is plastic, free, we are still always and everywhere 'in chains'… and why, given that it is clear that there can no longer be any philosophical, political, or scientific approach to history that does not pass through a close analysis of the neuronal phenomenon, we nonetheless have the feeling that we lack a future, and we ask ourselves *What good is having a brain, indeed, what should we do with it?*" (11).

[15] In "Friendly Fire" Graham articulates this disatisfaction explicitly and at considerable length. She writes, for example, "When before in history has there been a people for whom *no fact is true*? For whom every description

wonders whether she and it are *really* just illusions: "are you truly invisible, unknowable, unreachable, specter of transience/ only my own and not ever my own? So that I too am spectral now?/ I can destroy you but I cannot know you?" (62). As ever, Graham is urgently drawn to the epistemological implications of metaphysical propositions, and is baffled as she attempts to reconcile the mind's bounded powers of comprehension with its boundless creative and destructive powers of representation. In the poem's third part, she finds herself contemplating the creative and destructive forces of the mind once again, addressing memory's power to manifest and dispel apparitions of the past, its masterful repertoire of 'tricks' that mystify the bemused and passive subject/spectator. The most nefarious of these tricks is the illusion that everything is virtual, that nothing is real:

> …the mind is going along, fractioning, discerning, making categories by which to card
> this from that this from that—ghosts of children at their game around their
> tree—watch, they are disappearing as we summon them—now that
> is quite a trick
> wouldn't you say, this thing the mind can do—take it away as it gives it
> to you—
> proving NOTHING exists— (63)

The intellectual positions that Graham proposes (and obliquely disclaims) as she reflects upon the mind in "Disenchantment"—that "you are but a little flash, a cloud taking form in my neuron chamber," that her manufactured, mental tree, like her manufactured, virtual self, is truly and totally "unknowable," that "NOTHING exists"—are drawn under the harrying influence of a culturally ascendant, cognitivist body of knowledge and argumentation that she fears may supplant more humanizing accounts of subjectivity. But at the poem's conclusion she radically abrogates her own disenchantment, encouraged to find a way "to recover hope" by the rising moon that augurs the mounting significance of intuition and imagination and the waning

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of reality is private, for whom every system of description is only one stratum of perception, and there is no common language for moving from one stratum to another? What started out as a crucial philosophical skepticism, enhanced by relativity, psychology, and the brilliant speculations of contemporary theory and physics, and finally exploded by technology itself—(computer generated photographs? computer generated photographs of the holocaust?)—has created a surface so liquid it is barely a wind. And that wind blows through us" (4).

hegemony of empiricism and reason. Willing her flirtations with nihilism and determinism into the past, she enjoins herself to think "*that part of my life is over*"; as she discovers a flock of quarrelling birds outside her window, some of which "seek landing" from above, some of which squabble on the fixed pavement of the road below, she asserts affirmatively: "now *that* is a thing which exists, no one to quarrel over the fact of the road, no,/ nor the night, which is cold and fine, in which nothing is deemed to be either/ possible nor impossible" (63). It proves to be this very road, a road that Graham pragmatically, if arbitrarily, decides to *treat* as real, that she resolves to follow in the poem's closing lines, in answer to the moon's exhortation:

> —keep following this road my soul tells me and you'll find out—
> yes—
> stand in the disenchantment now and try to summon it, this thing the mind
> is trying to give you—your freedom!—try to breathe-in its
> absolutely clear air…amid the stubble, amid the shiny stones,
> thinking *that part of my life is over.*
>
> *
>
> Something has been sold to get here, something of mine, something perhaps
> very precious
> to me, an heirloom, an inheritance, I'm not sure what to call it.
>
> *
>
> Oh radical mind—you who have come from afar and who must now live
> among us—teach me from scratch how to love. Keep me kind. (64)

Graham resolves to forfeit the former cognitive enchantment that is "an heirloom, an inheritance"—a holding that retains the precious appeal of a thing bequeathed and nurtured over time—for "freedom" from the cultural, biological, and linguistic determinations that she describes at the poem's outset. (Her uncertainty here about "what to call" this forfeiture recalls the opening lines' semiotic problem of "what we call it" when we describe the self.) But that breath of freedom, of "absolutely clear air," is one that Graham can only *try* to take, for she can only will herself to believe in the existence of air that circulates unpolluted by the imperceptibly "fine dust of ideology." Choosing to start "from scratch," to be, in a sense, "too simple and

naïve" in order to assume the accountability that accompanies free will, she adopts a model of mind that is "radical" in dual senses: in the sense of a dramatic divergence from contemporary intellectual history's emphasis upon the "contexts" that generate the elastic matrix of the subject, and in the sense of a rootedness in antecedent conceptual ground, in an idea of mind summoned, in historical and intellectual senses, "from afar." Assigning pride of place to the moral aspiration that motivates her willful naïveté, she concludes with a prayer that suggests the power of models of mind to shape not only self-perception but conduct: "teach me from scratch how to love. Keep me kind."

"Praying" is perhaps preferable to "prayer" as a way of describing Graham's concluding appeal to the mind in "Disenchantment," however, for *Overlord* contains five poems with the progressive title "Praying" that are dated and subtitled as "attempts," pointedly suggesting the value of the action despite the hopelessness of its outcome. The volume's moral anguish declares itself through the concrete details of man-made destruction that seem to prove human prayers unheard, from the gruesome carnage of the eponymous Operation Overlord, particularly the allied invasion of Normandy ("bullets up through our feet, explosion of Jack's face, more sudden openings/ in backs, shoulders, one in a neck…" (37)) to bodies falling from the twin towers ("Headfirst some of the people, others not" (75)) and the catastrophic effects of global climate change ("grasses gone at/ the root, the birds in drifts at the feet of the trees" (79)). Graham quotes Yehuda Amichai in one of the collection's three epigraphs: "The gods keep changing, but the prayers stay the same" (*O*, xiii). "Copy (*Attacks on the Cities, 2000-2003*)" is an apocalyptic poem haunted by the horrific violence with which humanity ushered in the current millennium, particularly the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the retaliatory invasion of Iraq in March, 2003; it is also a poem deeply concerned with the constitution of the moral self, and the religious question of "Why there is something rather than/nothing" (78).

"Copy" begins in prayer, in a plangent, one-sided conversation with a *deus absconditus* in which Graham parrots William Blake's appeal in "Jerusalem," "Oh Saviour, pour upon me the Spirit, annihilate the Selfhood/ in me, be Thou all my life" (74). Like Thomas Metzinger, Blake interprets the sense of autonomy that issues from the conception of "Selfhood" as an illusion; instead of concealing an absence at the center of subjective being, however, Blake's illusion profanely conceals the true, divine agency that shapes the world of human affairs. Graham's congruent longing to reveal a transcendent, intentional force that might assure us that "whatever rains down on us is meant to" is undercut by her patent suspicion that no such omnipotent agency exists, her concern that "to annihilate the Selfhood/ in me" would be to replace a presence, however illusory, with a catastrophic absence. The appeal to God with which she begins the poem seems to have been provoked by an appeal that she herself received, one that led her to the feeling of absolute powerlessness that forms the emotional core of "Copy." That appeal, fittingly rendered in the "virtual" world of digital communication, arrives from Amnesty International in the form of an e-mail chain letter encouraging its recipients to sign an online petition in support of Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman convicted of adultery and condemned to death, "to be/ buried/ up to her neck and stoned." Finding her habituated awareness of endemic injustice and suffering suddenly concentrated upon a single, searing instance of torture, Graham ardently does as the letter instructs, but she feels that she has *done* nothing:

> Dear Susan. Have
> signed, have
> copied and pasted, have sent. Dear Amnesty, have prayed, have nursed, have
> copied,
> have pushed send. Have nursed thoughts and pushed send. Have
> sent again. Only my head is sticking out. My body is disappearing into
> the soil. (74)

Graham's desperate ineffectuality feels to her like Amina's torture, like having one's limbs pinned while the eyes and mind remain alert to surrounding horrors; while Amina, Graham reads, has been kept alive to nurse her baby, Graham herself has only "nursed thoughts." In an

attempt to account for the familiar sense of futility that her representative gestures of moral agency—copying and sending—inspire, the poem's third part draws from a translation of Edouard Récéjac's *Essai sur les fondements de la connaissance mystique* (1897), a treatise on Christian mystical theology in which Récéjac proposes that moral actions freely committed "cannot succeed" unless the transcendent, universal reality underlying the phenomenal world (objectified as divinity, or "the Absolute") is reciprocally responsive:

> Morality
> leads the soul to the frontiers of the Absolute and even
> gives it an impulsion to enter, but this
> is not enough. This
> movement of Freedom cannot succeed unless there is
> equivalent movement within the Absolute itself.
> I am waiting. I am copying. *Equivalent movement within the Absolute.*[16] (76)

The first two sentences are direct quotations from Sarah Carr Upton's translation of the *Essai*; Récéjac's conception of circumscribed human agency holds the appeal of accounting for the mysteriously unpredictable efficacy of moral actions, and suggests that acts of conscience, however pathetically futile they might appear, in fact reverberate throughout the unfathomable depths of being. It is with the irritable parallelism of "I am waiting. I am copying," however, and the accusatory italics of Graham's *verbatim* echo of Récéjac's consolatory sentiment, that she

[16] Cf. Sara Carr Upton's 1899 translation of Récéjac *Essay on the Bases of the Mystic Knowledge*, from which Graham quotes directly: "According to mysticism, morality leads the soul to the frontiers of the Absolute and even gives it an impulsion to enter, but this is not enough. This movement of pure Freedom cannot succeed unless there is an equivalent movement within the Absolute itself" (242). In Récéjac, "D'après le Mysticisme, en effet, la moralité conduit l'esprit au bord de l'Absolu et lui donne même du mouvement pour y entrer : mais elle ne suffit pas, et ce mouvement de pure Liberté ne peut réussir, si du dedans de l'Absolu ne se produit aussi un mouvement concordant" (252).

Récéjac emphasizes language and morality as necessary aspects of connection to the divine, defining mysticism as "the tendency to arrive at consciousness of the Absolute by means of symbols under the influence of love" (62). ("L'object qui nous occupe, c'est, en effet, la psychologie du « fait religieux » qui a éclaté avec le plus d'intensité dans le Christianisme et dont nous pouvons donner cette définition : qu'il tend à prendre conscience de l'Absolu par voie de symboles sous l'action de l'amour" (64).) In keeping with Graham's disavowal of irritable intellectual reaching, Récéjac describes the disposition of mystics, defining them as those who possess a "desire to know, only that they may love; and their desire for union with the principle of things in God, Who is the sum of them all, is founded on a feeling which is neither curiosity nor self-interest" (49). ("L'ambition des mystiques, c'est de s'unir moralement à l'Absolu : ils ne veulent connaître que pour aimer et s'attachent aux principes des choses, à Dieu qui les résume tous, par un sentiment qui n'est ni curieux, ni intéressé" (50).)

expresses her impatience as she waits to be met half-way by an intentional stirring in the structure of reality.

The relationship between conscience and the idea of self finds its most sustained and exigent investigation in the pivotal fourth part of "Copy," where Graham draws semiotic and cognitive constructions of 'virtual' reality into disarming correlation. Diversifying the poem's tissue of quotation, the opening lines allude to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's extravagantly ambitious collaboration *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999), which aims to undertake "a thorough rethinking of the most popular current approaches [in Western philosophy], namely, Anglo-American analytic philosophy and postmodernist philosophy" (3) in order to advance an "empirically responsible philosophy" consistent with the findings of brain science.[17] In its introduction, the book's authors assert that "the structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment" (4), pointing out the epistemic limitations that necessarily circumscribe our attempt to understand experience from 'inside' experience:

> If we are going to ask philosophical questions, we have to remember that we are human. As human beings, we have no special access to any form of purely objective or transcendent reason. We must necessarily use common human cognitive and neural mechanisms. Because most of our thought is unconscious,

[17] In the introduction to *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson enumerate several of the philosophical perspectives that they argue must be reevaluated in light of empirical findings, beginning, of course with Descartes' conception of the subject: "there is no Cartesian dualistic person, with a mind separate from and independent of the body, sharing exactly the same disembodied transcendent reason with everyone else, and capable of knowing everything about his or her mind simply by self-reflection." Among others, they also have in mind Kant ("There exists no Kantian radically autonomous person, with absolute freedom and a transcendent reason that correctly dictates what is and isn't moral"); John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham ("The utilitarian person, for whom rationality is economic rationality—the maximation of utility—does not exist"); Edmund Husserl and Hubert Dreyfus ("The phenomenological person, who through phenomenological introspection alone can discover everything there is to know about the mind and the nature of experience, is a fiction"); and poststructuralists of many stripes ("There is no poststructuralist person—no completely decentered subject for whom all meaning is arbitrary, totally relative, and purely historically contingent, unconstrained by body and brain"). The recourse of cognitivists to computational neural models such as connectionism is likewise dismissed ("There is no such thing as a computational person, whose mind is like computer software, able to work on any suitable or neural hardware"), as are disembodied theories of language ("there is no Chomskyan person, for whom language is pure syntax, pure form insulated from and independent of all meaning, context, perception, emotion, memory, attention, action, and the dynamic nature of communication" (5-6)).

> a priori philosophizing provides no privileged direct access to knowledge of our own mind and how our experience is constituted. (7)

Lakoff and Johnson emphasize the constrained relevance of philosophy of mind undertaken without reference to empirical investigation from 'outside' the self-directed process of *a priori* reasoning, even as they stress that in human investigation there is no true 'outside', for the reasoning through which we interpret empirical information is itself structured by the embodied mind that is the object of inquiry.[18] In "Copy," however, Graham ambivalently redeploys Lakoff and Johnson's words as she asserts the validity of moral intuition that is irreducible to its biological, social, and linguistic contexts, even as she redetermines the words' meaning by wresting them out of one context into another:

> <u>We have to remember that we are human</u>. Something
> said
> that. It is in me, that
> something. But see how I now
> want
> to place it *in you*. Human. As in <u>having no privileged access to</u>
> <u>knowledge of our own mind</u>. Or of the world. Although we
> think otherwise. To place it deep in you. That it *trouble*
> you. You. Yes, it is true, someone is always crying out for you to listen.
> (*O*, 76-77, underlining mine)

In "Copy," the injunction to remember that we are human sounds less like a reminder that somatic determinations limit our forms of self-understanding and more like a response to the anti-humanist conception of the passively constituted subject. Pointedly not a "someone," the "something" that utters the entreaty seems to be conscience itself, an immanently human thing "in me" that the poem aspires to awaken "*in you*." From Graham's perspective, our lack of "privileged

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[18] Metzinger describes this lack of "privileged direct access to knowledge of our own mind" as "autoepistemic closure," writing that "conscious experience severely limits the possibilities we have to gain knowledge about ourselves" (175); "Phenomenal selfhood results from autoepistemic closure in a self-representing system; it is a lack of information. The pre-reflexive, preattentive experience of *being someone* results directly from the contents of the currently active self-model being transparent" (337). This aspect of experience—that of transparently *being someone*—is one that he explains in evolutionary terms, arguing that its opacity would inhibit goal-directed action: "the phenomenon of *transparent* self-modeling developed as an evolutionary viable strategy [*sic*] because it constituted a reliable way of making system-related information available without entangling the system in endless internal loops of higher-order self-modelling" (338). In a sense, this would be the debilitating extreme of the self-obsessed, introspective entanglement that Graham identifies with moral negligence.

access to/ knowledge of our own mind" is simply one instance of the inexorable resistance of things (she adds, after all, that our lack of privileged access extends to "the world" at large), a form of resistance that can either provoke a yearning ambition to pursue knowledge of the mind through empirical avenues of inquiry or that can confer a humility and freedom within limitation that resembles the redeeming "grace of the insensible orders." The former response, of course, ultimately necessitates the poem's humanist intervention, while the latter entails a servile, if salvific, acceptance of ignorance; unsurprisingly, Graham's only explicit motive for inviting us to remember that we are human is the implementation of ethical solicitude, the stirring of conscience specifically "That it *trouble*/ you."

But the "someone [who] is always crying out for you to listen" comes crying out not only from within, but from without, "out from the screen" of the movie theater or television or computer monitor where atrocities are mediated through interested forms of narrative representation. As "Copy" continues, its title, which has suggested the copies of e-mails cut, pasted, and concatenated in a virtual chain, the promise of moral action copied by "equivalent movement in the Absolute," and the copying of language from disparate sources into the intertextual collage of the poem, also comes to suggest the use of "copy" in the argot of print and television reporting to describe real-life events likely to make a good story, as well as the film industry's verisimilar portrayal of human carnage for popular consumption. Graham defensively defines her own attempts to trouble her audience through language in opposition to the amoral rendering of suffering as a form of spectacle:

> …Yes, it is true, someone is always crying out for you to listen.
> Out from the screen. Where they play tricks with the soul.
> Where they cry out "whosoever brings forth the bitterness most vividly,
> whosoever makes us laugh when the blood shoots forth
> from the open mouth of an other—any other—
> from the open chest, cut through, penetrated eye,
> severed hand, arm, leg, cock, ear, severed artery wherever accessible—
> what a thing the body, what a citadel, so penetratable—ah—
> never never again to be tricked into believing
> a thing so breakable could house a soul!—whosoever

makes us laugh at the scattered limbs, blades still flashing
from the hands of the killers, the giddy heat
on/off on/off in the eyes of the dead—yes—close-up on that—end of
shot, end of scene—whosoever makes us feel
we are among those left at the end—oh lucky few—how very special we are
in our seats, ticket in hand—*among*
the survivors—worth the price of admission—yes yes let that one, that maker of
our virtual
selves, replacer of the heavy-headed virtuous self [or were you elsewhere
when it all went down] let him, let him get the prize."
(76-77, square brackets Graham's)

The filmmakers "play tricks with the soul" by commodifying our horror, by making violence familiar and tolerable, and by inviting us to 'prize' the vividness with which they depict brutality for titillation and profit. Certainly most chilling is the director's ruthless interjection "—yes—close-up on that" as he looks into "the eyes of the dead," the corrupt artist engendering not sympathy but *schadenfreude* through style, "mak[ing] us laugh" at the suffering of others and reassuring us of "how very special we are/ …*among the survivors*." Graham implicates such vulgar forms of representation in dispelling the humanizing notion of an eternal soul by making a fetish of the "penetratable body" that appears too breakable to sustain a force so numinous, much as she implicates cognitivism in impoverishing the humanizing notions of mind and self by fetishizing, in i ek's words, "this piece of meat that sustains our experience" (222). Here, however, it is not the philosopher of mind but the artist who is "that maker of/ our virtual/ selves, replacer of the heavy-headed virtuous self"; it is the complicit artist who enables us, no matter where we are when injustice 'goes down', to be unaccountably and conveniently "elsewhere."'[19]

[19] Elaborating the moral benefits of exercising negative capability, Graham sets the virtuous and the virtual in explicit opposition in the 2003 NPR interview: "one of the reasons that it's so important that we keep ourselves as complex as we possibly can, not oversimplified in either a notion of the self or oversimplified in the notion of an abandonment of self, is that we are, as I said before, creatures that have agency and are going to have to act. And to have an ethical universe that we can operate in, we have to perhaps make our reality as real [as possible]—and we're living in a world in which it's becoming more virtual every minute. So I think everyone at this table [herself, Thomas Metzinger, Antonio Damasio] is involved with an attempt to keep reality as thick and as materially real as possible in order that it not become, you know, something as thin as a screen" (12). Žižek asks, identifying the dimension of cognitivism to which Graham is responding so acutely, "Is not the *frisson* of cognitivism precisely in its radical notion that consciousness is in effect a 'user illusion' behind which (just as behind a PC screen) there are just blind asubjective neuronal processes, and, consequently, that there is

"Copy" is a poem through which Graham expresses her desperate desire for the self to survive, to prove its resilience and utility even as poets and filmmakers and scientists and philosophers portray it as fragile and vain, but it is also a poem through which Graham attempts to prove that resilience to herself. As the ardent resolve of her ambition to install conscience in her readers gives way to humiliating self-doubt, the real author and the real reader of the poem come to seem so insubstantial that they might disappear at any moment, leaving only the material matrix of language that subtends the immaterial substance of communicable meaning:

> …I imagine I can posit
> infinitude then it all collapses, poof, and there's just me and you, then of
> course
> just me, then nothing but the writing. This is a poem about wanting to survive.
> It must clearly try anything. (78)

It is striking that Graham groups the incomprehensible vastness of infinitude and the anonymous, unmet reader who takes up her book—demanding imaginative constructions by any standard—with "me," the self that she likewise characterizes as something that she can only tentatively, and ultimately ineffectually, "posit." The assertion that only language is left once the readerly and writerly selves have collapsed would seem to be consistent with Jennifer Ashton's association of Graham's materialism with poststructuralist subversions of authorship and the unified, humanist subject, but the poem does not end here; just as she has made the demoralized admission that her poem is only desperately *trying* to save "the heavy-headed virtuous self" from the entropic forces that threaten to dismantle it, she shrinks from her own doubt yet again, reasserting the viability and validity of the pronoun "you" in a minimal definition of selfhood as the mechanism of moral stewardship: "Something keeps you up at night, though./ Something must. What is it. What is it keeps you up at night./ Let no one persuade you you do not exist."[20]

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absolutely no theoretical need to posit some psychic global Entity, something 'in me more than me' which is the true agent of my acts?" (216-217).

[20]In "Europe," Graham's description of the mathematical concept of a Hilbert Space evolves into a description of the mind and of the self as a process that happens through it, however elusive that process might be:

The confrontational directness with which the poems of *Overlord* 'posit' an "I" that is recognizably Jorie Graham and a "you" who may be unknown to her but whose indispensability she unabashedly recognizes ("Don't/ worry if I'm alive, you are") is symptomatic of her conception of the poem as a form of intercourse in which real people take part, and of her sensitivity to the salutary challenges any reader faces in undergoing a poem. Asserting the value of stylistic difficulty, "whatever the charges of elitism," Graham points out that a bewildering encounter with radical, linguistically embodied otherness can ultimately empower the reader by facilitating a form of negative capability in which he or she "is forced to bury his or her desire for understanding." Still, Graham rejects the open text's pretentions to enfranchising the reader by inviting him or her to construct poetic meaning without regard for the directives of authorial intent:

> The reader of *The Waste Land* is forced to bury his or her desire for understanding in order to recover a deeper or more complete *method* for understanding. Not unlike the corpse that must be buried that it sprout again into a more complete life, the brain is forced to bury or drown its requests. In doing so a fuller "mind" is discovered by the reader in himself or herself via the reading of the poem. This seems to me a very compelling reason for resistant or obscure surfaces in poems—whatever the charges of elitism. I would make a distinction, though, between this kind of reader participation (controlled by the poem and the poet's ambitions) and the currently fashionable notions of a more free-floating co-creation of the text by the reader. What moves me is the deeply controlled relationship between the author and the reader, that marriage of needs. I don't go for casual sex in life or in art. (Snodgrass, 152)

For Graham, a poetics of indeterminacy that does not attempt to exert intentional will over the making of meaning devalues the communicative function of poesis. Like the replacement of human will with a deterministic chain of biological causes and effects, the replacement of a lyric voice with an echo chamber made of language is a missed opportunity. From this perspective, an

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> You can't go there. It is not what we mean by
> "real," but it is real. Not theoretical. Just made entirely of
> prediction—but is real. A kind of box
> made out of all of our predicted outcomes. Yet is real.
> Someone goes on in it.
> Don't seek. It is not open to seeking. (*O*, 52)

"open" text is a politically and ethically uncommitted one, a text that promises the reader a fulfilling form of creative enfranchisement but delivers only a cheap thrill. In order for the poem to conduct any valuable intellectual or emotional commerce across time and space—let alone an exalted "marriage of needs"—the presence of a lyric voice that might praise, persuade, console, or challenge simply needs to be there, however conflicted and constructed that voice might be. For Graham, there's nothing casual about either the making of selfhood or the making of meaning—there is simply too much at stake.

In "Posterity," the final poem in *Overlord*, Graham's hospitable concern about what her own poems deliver—about where her reader is left when the poems end—asserts itself as she translates her despair into a poetic message meant for another human being, specific if unknown. In the poem she reproduces lines she excised from an earlier poetic draft:

> "how can I write/in a lyric poem that the world we live in/
> has already been destroyed? It is true. But/ it cannot be said
> into the eyes of another,/as that other will have nowhere
> to turn."

This sentiment—that however persuasive an idea, it is worthless if it leads us into despair—governs Graham's reckoning with the reality of the self in her poems; however successful post-structuralist and cognitivist theories may be in deconstructing the subject, their compensatory revelations have failed to supply an adequate conceptual mechanism with which to facilitate humane action, and therefore, to Graham's mind, the utility of the idea of self persists.[21] It is arguable that the aesthetic cost of this conviction and the earnest vehemence of tone that it enables has been too great; with her importunate shrillness and discursive excess, at times she risks deafening her audience in striving to make herself heard. In "Posterity," even Graham considers

[21] Graham's position bears out Metzinger's speculation in *The Ego Tunnel:* "Now that the neurosciences have irrevocably dissolved the Judeo-Christian image of a human being as containing an immortal spark of the divine, we are beginning to realize that they have not substituted anything that could hold society together and provide a common ground for shared moral intuitions and values. An anthropological and ethical vacuum may well follow on the heels of neuroscientific findings" (213).

that she has "talked too much" in her endeavors to remind us that in the self, or whatever we choose to call it, we are given a thing that is as necessary as it is elusive:

> Oh I have talked too much.
> To praise to recall to memorialize to summon to mind
> the thing itself—forgive me—*the given thing*—that you might have persuaded yourself is
> invisible,
> unknowable, creature of context—it is there, it is there, it needs to be there. (88)

For Graham, conveying that message is worth any cost.

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