

WRITING THE DISASTERS:
THE MESSIANIC TURN IN POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY

by

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The Writing of the Disasters: The Messianic Turn in Postwar American Poetry

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Writing the Disasters: The Messianic Turn in Postwar American Poetry looks at how postwar avant-garde poets adopt Jewish textual tropes in their search for forms capable of regenerating the ruins of language after the catastrophe of Auschwitz. This study will show how three major postwar poets, George Oppen, Michael Palmer, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, employ these tropes to critique the culture of disaster, from the Holocaust to the Cold War's perpetual state of emergency. Working within the Objectivist tradition of adherence to things through rigorous perception, each poet stakes his or her claim for radical form's ethical engagement with history as outlined by Theodor Adorno's call for a new categorical imperative after Auschwitz: nothing less than the interruption of the hypnotic spell wrought by the homogeneity of everyday speech and kept intact by the logic of the disaster.

Though it encompasses many varieties of Jewish textuality, I name this moment the messianic turn in order to emphasize its interventional character. By interrupting the regulatory surface of poetry's reifying subjectivist modes, these poets attack cultural amnesia at the level of language. Walter Benjamin's advocacy of a messianic cessation of happening that can awaken awareness from the dream world of commodity culture is mapped onto the Objectivist principle of sincerity: the poem as a process for thinking within the act of perception, resulting in the liberation of repressed potential and the affirmation of difference. What Jewish textuality provides are models of interruption drawn from Talmudic practice: disruption, deferral, negation, and re-interrogation. These strategies are joined to Objectivist procedures of seriality, parataxis, and caesura to unsettle language's customary drive to closure.

My reading of Oppen's late work, such as *Myth of the Blaze*, demonstrates how he writes historical disaster through a constellated serial structure that prioritizes the provisional aspects of meaning, guarding its fragile and contingent status as a site for alterity. Likewise, Palmer's poetry in *Sun* and *At Passages* places a dissipating pressure on language in order to let the historical trauma of the Cold War speak through the Talmudic figure of the burnt book. And in *Drafts*, DuPlessis probes the complicated legacy of Poundian modernism through a midrashic poetics that dynamically subverts postwar culture's masculine discourse of power. By fashioning such self-interrupting texts, all three poets recover language by pushing it into deeper estrangement.

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Chapter 1—Introduction

Alain Resnais' haunting 1959 film, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, opens with a dialogue between an unseen man and woman, voiced over a montage of increasingly disturbing images. Identified only as "She" and "He," the pair gently spars, testing their memories against the actuality of the events of August 6, 1945, and its immediate aftermath. The script, by novelist Marguerite Duras, carries her trademark spareness, each exchange attesting to the unreliability of both memory and language to offer an adequate picture of experience. Yet, for all its ambiguity, the flat tone of contradiction between the Japanese architect whose family died in the blast, and the French actress on location in Japan who's plagued by memories of her role as a collaborator during the war, rises to an unsettling pitch as the scene progresses.

HE: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.

SHE: I saw *everything*. *Everything*.

SHE: The hospital, for instance, I saw it. I'm sure I did. There is a hospital in Hiroshima. How could I help seeing it?

HE: You did not see the hospital in Hiroshima. You saw nothing in Hiroshima (15-17).

As the dialogue continues the montage moves from scene to scene: a hospital, a museum, a bombed out ruins. We see the horribly maimed being tended to; we see the shattered survivors staggering and falling through the rubble. And gradually what becomes apparent is not a confirmation of the truism that no two people ever recall the same event in the same way, but that memory itself is damaged by the magnitude of the disaster. As Duras remarks of this scene: "Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima" (9).

This dissertation argues that the crisis of representing the impossible becomes one of the key concerns for a certain group of poets after World War II. The disaster of the war exerts enormous pressure on poetry's traditional powers of consolation, compelling poets to ask how

their work can engage the shock of historical catastrophe without exploiting it on the one hand, or else succumbing to its numbing effect on the other? *Writing The Disasters* tells part of this story by focusing on three American poets working in the late Objectivist tradition – George Oppen, Michael Palmer, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis – and their turn to what I call secular messianism: a turn to Jewish textual tropes which allows them to address the culture of disaster after Auschwitz. Though this language draws in complicated ways on the tradition of the messianic, it rejects much of the teleological and ontological underpinnings of these discourses. Instead, it adopts the tropological resources of a secular Jewish structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams’ useful, if somewhat problematic term. This structure, I maintain, provides these poets with the means to write a post-Holocaust poetry whose redemptive cultural work proceeds along formal lines and derives its authority from fidelity to the immanent, that is, the material aspects of language, rather than appeals to the transcendent or to idealist precepts. Correspondingly, it is built around strategies of interruption, quotation, and recursivity, rather than a discredited and ineffectual expressivism extolling the virtues of subjective candor.

To write the disaster is to accept that certain reference points, certain resources, are no longer available to poetry after Auschwitz. Faced with this, how do poets imagine a language that suffers its own demolition? My answer is that they must turn to a messianic poetics in order to preserve the promise of language, of a potentiality that can still offer the possibility for a saying otherwise, a form of speaking historical atrocity that acknowledges the role of language in that atrocity. *Writing the Disasters* argues that the migration of Jewish messianic tropes into secular postwar avant-garde poetry is crucial to understanding how the core aesthetic values of modernist formalism survive the transition to – and are transformed by – postmodernist ethical concerns. In examining the work of Oppen, Palmer, and DuPlessis I stake my claim for radical

form's commitment to a new categorical imperative after Auschwitz, as Theodor Adorno puts it, which requires the poem to interrupt the homogeneity of everyday speech in order to break the logic of disaster.¹

Part of my focus here will be mapping out the dynamic tensions animating the use of messianic and Judaic tropes by post-secular poets whose projects, while deeply invested in and committed to forms of redemption, are not in any proper sense religious or even metaphysical. What Jewish topoi offers to these three poets, I argue, is a way to address the hurts of history. Whether through Oppen's determination to perform tikkun in order to repair the traumas of war, Palmer's Talmudic image of the burnt book, or DuPlessis' intricate braid of midrashic poetics, each poet's work relies on a distinctive practice that combines generative forms of interruption on the formal level with the complex resources of Jewish tropes at the conceptual level.

While the religious traditions to which these modes belong lost traction with the advent of high modernism, which drew instead on William James, Henri Bergson, and others, to supply their foundational underpinnings, what remains a potent resource for postmodern poets is the language itself.² The figures of spiritual agon still offer a way to engage the ruins of culture from what Theodor Adorno provocatively calls "the standpoint of redemption."³ It is this standpoint, he asserts, which alone can provide the perspective for fashioning the necessary estrangement by which things may be seen as they are, "with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as [the world] will appear one day in the messianic light" (MM 263). That the messianic light Adorno envisions here is so impoverished testifies at once to the scope of the crisis it must

¹ "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen." *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

² See Sanford Schwartz's discussion of this trend in the first chapter of *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought*, Princeton UP, 1988.

³ There are obvious exceptions to this, the most notable being that of Eliot's conservative brand of Anglicanism. The hermetic Christianity of H.D. would be another. In neither instance, though, is the poet concerned with a post-secular tropology; rather each looks back to traditional religious models with a view to preserving their core dynamics.

confront and the diminished means for doing so. I will address this weakness in more detail below, but for now note merely that each of the poets I discuss take up the issue of poetry's weakness in turn, with varying conclusions. To paraphrase Giorgio Agamben, the messianic draws its strength from its very weakness; by its very inability to effect change, it preserves the promise of its potentiality and safeguards potentiality as such.⁴ I will read the poets here in just such a light.

Ultimately, I argue that the messianic turn in late Objectivist poetry functions through a poetics of interruption that draws heavily on Jewish textual models. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theories of Now-time, I will contend that this turn produces a writing that takes its power from formal strategies for disrupting historicizing claims to totalizing knowledge production. These poetic strategies are in many ways continuations of high modernism, but with the important difference that those techniques are now translated into the postwar moment where they are amplified and refitted in order to address the perpetual crisis, or state of emergency, which characterizes history after Auschwitz.

This messianic poetics resists the reifying tendencies of the dominant mode of expressivist aesthetics exemplified by the emergence of a personalizing workshop aesthetic that came to dominate much of postwar American poetry.⁵ The turn to the messianic is a return to or reclamation of certain high modernist values, in effect constituting a late modernist theodicy of radical constructivist poetics. Yet this turn is as much defined by what it rejects as what it embraces in high modernism. The punctum of messianic experience, its caesura of Now-time, it

⁴ See "Contingency" 250-51, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford UP, 1999.

⁵ Alan Golding's analysis of this trend in *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Wisconsin UP 1995) is indispensable. See also Christopher Beach's introduction to *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Northwestern UP, 1999).

“cessation of happening,” as Benjamin insists, destroys the illusion of continuity fostered by historicism.

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes a cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history (Illum 263).

I will maintain that this understanding takes place even in, or especially through, the absence of a subjectivist positivism.

Oppen, Palmer and DuPlessis each evince a strong turn to tropes of the messianic, characterized by the pronounced use of such modernist poetic strategies as parataxis, caesura, and negation, as well as the Judaic figures of midrash, diaspora and textuality, all employed in a bid to reanimate high modernist aesthetics in the service of an ethical critique of both modernism’s and modernity’s historical failures. In making these claims for this group of poets, whose work is joined through a complex network of mutual influences, I will be building on and, to some extent, contesting the recent work of such scholars as Peter Nicholls, Tim Woods, Norman Finkelstein, and DuPlessis herself, among others, all of whom have made significant contributions to the evolving discussion on the nexus of Jewish-American poetics and the Objectivist legacy.

One of the central questions their work raises is the importance for postwar American avant-garde poetry of understanding the role of traditional Jewish topoi of exile and diaspora as they pertain to the larger issues of cultural production and the culture of disaster. Where I hope to make an original contribution to this body of scholarship is in tracing how these tropes migrate across registers for Oppen, whose relationship to Judaism was conflicted; DuPlessis, who is a non-practicing Jew, yet openly engaged in a self-described midrashic poetics; and the markedly

secular, but theologically-inflected, work of Palmer. What do Jewish models of exile and disaster offer each of these writers in postwar culture and how do they reconcile or manage these models with their aesthetic debt to the Poundian legacy of modernism?

In “The Second War and Postmodern Memory,” Charles Bernstein observed that “the psychological effects of the Second War are still largely repressed and that we are just beginning to come out of the shock enough to try to make sense of the experience” (193). In assessing the continuing psychic damage inflicted by the war, a damage which, it hardly seems necessary to add, is historical in its scope,⁶ Bernstein claims that “much of the innovative poetry of these soon to be fifty years following the war registers the twinned events of Extermination in the West and Holocaust in the East in ways that hardly have been accounted for” (197). Similarly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, commenting on her poetic mentor, George Oppen, observes “that one project of contemporary American radical poetry mourns Auschwitz and Hiroshima; these disasters are encrypted and repressed information at the core of social identities and artistic practices” (BS 186).

Bernstein’s essay on the war and postmodern memory maps a major and historically overlooked connection between the exciting “aesthetic investigation” of High Modernism’s heyday, roughly spanning 1912 to 1930, and the example of the poets who, in the wake of the war’s unthinkable destruction, applied the pioneering techniques of radical formal disjunction to the difficult work of “human reconstruction and reimagining,” as he puts it (200). “Poetry after the war,” he maintains, “had its psychic imperatives: to dismantle the grammar of control and the syntax of command” (202). Oppen, Palmer and DuPlessis – between them spanning two generations – take up this imperative. While the latter two, both born in the 1940s, clearly belong

⁶ I will return to this point in greater detail below, but for now cite Cathy Caruth’s observation that “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (UC 24).

to a generation of poets employing Objectivist methodology, I class Oppen as “late” Objectivist as well because of his return to poetry in the 1960s after a twenty-five year interruption.⁷

This postwar poetry – some of it exemplified by Donald Allen’s groundbreaking 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* – makes a sharp swerve from a humanist to anti-humanist perspective commensurate with the cultural changes wrought by the war. Like Samuel Beckett, the poets I discuss here share a deep distrust of humanism, “a word,” as he once quipped, “that one reserves for the times of the great massacres.”⁸ This study will attempt to locate an ethical commitment in poetic form which persists outside appeals to an irreparably damaged humanism.

In what follows, I will connect the three major concerns of my dissertation. First, I will provide a brief background to the cataclysm of World War II and related events while revisiting Theodor Adorno’s impious comments on culture after Auschwitz. Secondly, I will explain why it is important to regard their work as constituting a turn to the secular messianic and how that term signifies, drawing on examples from Adorno, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben to make my case. Finally, I will contextualize what I am calling the late Objectivist nexus, amplifying that term’s original use by mapping the constellation of poetic practices and social contiguities which mark, nothing so definite as a movement per se, but a structure of feeling common to all three poets.

The Writing of the Disaster or, Poetry after Auschwitz

It may seem otiose at this late date to offer yet another account of Adorno’s infamous dictum about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. What more can be said? But the legacy of Adorno’s maxim, which has been misconstrued as a ban, is such a contentious one

⁷ Palmer was born in 1945; DuPlessis in 1946. Other poets operating in this postwar tradition would include John Taggart, Michael Heller, Harvey Shapiro, Hugh Seidman, and Jean Valentine.

⁸ Quoted in *Samuel Beckett*, Andrew Gibson. (London: Reaktion Books, 2010) 3.

that its provocations ask to be revisited through an account of late Objectivist poetry, especially given that critical commentary on this topic is actively ongoing. I hope to add some clarity to the long-running debate on Adorno's single sentence, which to judge by the most common reactions to it, deserves the kind of ignominy usually reserved for the Holocaust itself.

Before I turn to a discussion of Adorno, however, I wish to make clear how I am using the term disaster here. My title alludes to Maurice Blanchot's 1980 book, *The Writing of the Disaster* and takes its initial cue from his framing of a century's atrocities. For Blanchot, the disaster is an event of such an unprecedented order of violence that it simultaneously "ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact" (WD 1). At the same time, so extensive is the disaster that it "bears away everything, even the idea of limit" (WD 28). Not merely a synonym for the Holocaust, the disaster names the horrendous history of the 20th century and the collapse of Western culture. As survivor of a Majdanek put it: "Nobody will *want* to believe us, because our disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world."⁹ The aporia of writing the disaster derives in part from such disbelief. But it also stems from the realization that language is suddenly incommensurate to the traumatic scale of the disaster. This is the situation that confronts poetry after Auschwitz.

By now reduced very nearly to a cliché, a kind of shorthand standing in for a profound resignation about the fate of culture, the phrase "poetry after Auschwitz" needs to be viewed in the wider context of modern European history. It cannot be read in isolation from Adorno's larger critique of the Enlightenment, which as he observes in 1947, had "aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty," only to culminate as "disaster triumphant" (DE 3). As Adorno and his co-author Max Horkheimer elaborate, "the human being's mastery of itself,

⁹ Ignacy Schipper, quoted in "The Book of Destruction," Geoffrey Hartman, in *Probing the limits of representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (326). Edited by Saul Friedlander. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained ... self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved” (DE 42-43). Auschwitz epitomizes this logic, coming to operate along both a metaphorical and a metonymic axis, joining the diachronic disaster of progress to the synchronic panorama of atrocities that form the essence of 20th century history, and designating not only the singular events that marked the Nazi’s systematic destruction of the Jews, but the entire legacy of Hitler and Stalin’s programs of “political mass murder,” as historian Timothy Snyder calls them.¹⁰ As Snyder explains it, “the bloodlands,” a region of Eastern Europe that includes Poland, the Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states, became, in effect a vast, open air arena of systematic slaughter.

The bloodlands were where most of Europe’s Jews lived, where Hitler and Stalin’s imperial plans overlapped, where the Wehrmacht and the Red Army fought, and where the Soviet NKVD and the German SS concentrated their forces. Most killing sites were in the bloodlands ... the horror of the twentieth century is thought to be located in the camps. But the concentration camps are not where most of the victims of National Socialism and Stalinism died. This misunderstanding regarding the sites and methods of mass killing prevent us from perceiving the horror of the twentieth century (B xiii).¹¹

For Snyder, the Holocaust, while retaining its exceptional status in the annals of atrocity, nevertheless belongs to a larger pattern of mass extermination carried out between 1933-1945. Hitler’s plans for the conquest of Russia, he notes, included the eventual starvation or murder of some thirty million Slavs. This, in a region which had already, during the 1930s, suffered massive losses of human life as a result of Stalin’s forced famines, which killed upwards of five million Russian peasants in the name of modernization or, de-kulakization.¹² These appalling

¹⁰ See *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (NY: Basic Books 2010) for a devastating account of these institutionalized massacres.

¹¹ Noted historian of the Third Reich Robert J. Evans has taken exception to Snyder’s account. See *London Review of Books*, v. 32. N. 21, 11/4/2010 for his essay.

¹² Robert Conquest, in *Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, puts the number of Russian dead during the period 1930-37 at 14.5 million.

events are not aberrations. They are not psychotic breaks from social reality. Rather, they need to be understood as embodying the ruthless and dehumanizing system of modernity.

Responding to this in 1949, Adorno publishes an essay entitled “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in which he warns that:

To anyone in the habit of thinking with his ears, the words 'cultural criticism' must have an offensive ring, not merely because, like automobile, they are pieced together from Latin and Greek. The words recall a flagrant contradiction. The cultural critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent. He speaks as if he represents unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior (After Auschwitz 146).

Adorno's concern here, as always, is with the integrity of the dialectical procedure, which demands that any critique of culture also account for the subject position of the critique, the way it is inextricably embedded in and to some extent produced by the conditions which it analyzes and deplores. In the same spirit, Michael Rothberg has convincingly argued that in order to understand Adorno's remark about poetry after Auschwitz we must read it dialectically, keeping in mind Adorno's allusion to Benjamin's assertion that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism.

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation (CLA 162)

For Rothberg, the phrase “poetry after Auschwitz” is perhaps rendered with greater clarity (but less urgency) if translated into “poetry after reification.” Reification is the agent of poetry's impossibility, for, as he explains, “the barbarism or irrationality of ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ is that, against its implicit intentions, it cannot produce knowledge of its own impossible social

status ... this impossibility is neither technical nor even moral ... it results instead from an objective and objectifying social process that tends toward the liquidation of the individual,” or what Adorno elsewhere calls the totally administered world, the society of radical evil. (TR 36 35-36).¹³

Josh Cohen is particularly helpful in illuminating Adorno’s position here, which runs the risk of appearing willfully intransigent, if not actually nihilistic. In Cohen’s reading of Adorno, “the task of thinking the meaning of Auschwitz [is] indissociable from a radical rethinking of the Absolute.” To accomplish this, though, it becomes necessary to see that “the presence of the Absolute is one with its own *interruption*” (IA xvi). Adorno’s conception of the Absolute is conditioned by a double movement of simultaneous approach and withdrawal. In this negative dialectical mode of thinking “redemption itself,” Cohen concludes, “is nothing other than this” and moreover, is “the symptom not of a disavowal of transcendence, but of a distinctly Judaic prohibition of its positive expression” (IA xviii). For Cohen, this thinking requires a dual position: the understanding of Auschwitz as the interruption of thought, along with the necessity to re-think Auschwitz by interrupting it.

Modernity’s crisis of representation, in Adorno’s view, is not only a failure of means, of language’s impoverished ability to write adequately the century’s enormous social disruptions. The larger crisis, for Adorno, stems from literature’s blindness to its own ideological position, its inextricable imbrication with the very thing it opposes. Poetry is no longer capable of fulfilling its ancient Orphic role of saying the world into being. The longstanding assumption of a point-to-point correspondence between thing and word is insufficient for understanding how the language of Hölderlin, say, is also the same language responsible for generating *Mein Kampf*. Language’s

¹³ The concepts of “radical evil” and the “totally administered world” run through Adorno’s thought from the early works, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*, to his late summa, *Negative Dialectics*. In this latter, see in particular the section on “Freedom,” pp. 211-243.

complicity in the catastrophe of the modern means that poetry itself is vulnerable to reification. Poetry that does not acknowledge its own barbarism, then, its tendency to valorize subjective experience as though it floated free of its larger ideological framework, will do nothing to resist the cultural conditions that make an Auschwitz possible.¹⁴

To write poetry after Auschwitz means rejecting traditional aesthetic values like harmony, consonance, and even beauty. These values aim at reconciling tension and thus, for Adorno, can only corrupt the poem by reifying it.

Art is true to the extent to which it is discordant and antagonistic in its language and in its whole essence, provided that it synthesizes those diremptions, thus making them determinate in their irreconcilability. Its paradoxical task is to attest to the lack of concord while at the same time working to abolish discordance (AT 241).

Both Detlev Claussen and Gerhard Scheppenhäuser supply persuasively reasoned accounts as to why it is wrong to read Adorno's pronouncement as a superficial condemnation of culture delivered in a spirit of nihilistic bitterness. Schweppenhäuser provides a particularly cogent reading of Adorno on this still knotty issue.

"That culture has failed until now" simply means that it has not yet become fully real. The failure of culture is, for Adorno, not merely something imposed from outside. The "relapse into barbarism" that occurred in Auschwitz, which persists "as long as the conditions enabling that relapse essentially endure," has something to do with culture as often defined by the exclusion of nature, thereby making domination of nature into an absolute. Yet is also has a hidden side: the utopia of release from the sheer compulsion to dominate nature, of the comprehensive humanization of being in the form of a reconciliation with nature. But this submerged content first has to be fortified against the dominant concept of nature. Thus Adorno does not simply throw overboard the humanist-bourgeois concept of culture but, rather, adopts its liberating prospect of a genuinely human life for everyone as his own project. Adorno thus advocates solidarity with culture at the very moment when its historical failure is unmistakable (139).

¹⁴ For a more extensive discussion of this troubling paradox, see George Steiner, "A Hollow Miracle," in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (Atheneum, 1970) and "A Season in Hell," from *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes toward a Redefinition of Culture* (Yale 1971). Here, following Adorno, he notes that "Art, intellectual pursuits, the development of the natural sciences, many branches of scholarship flourished in close spatial, temporal proximity to massacre and the death camps. It is the structure and meaning of that proximity which must be looked at. Why did humanistic traditions and models of conduct prove so fragile a barrier against political bestiality?" (30).

As Schweppenhäuser goes on to explain, Adorno's path through the aporia of cultural criticism means avoiding at all costs the kind of amnesical rhetoric that induces spiritual reification and absolutism in the first place. Only dialectics can provide a sufficiently agile instrument with which to approach "the ambivalence of culture itself" (142). But neither is dialectics a magic bullet, offering salvation by rigorous analysis of the cultural constructs of which it is itself a part. What it can offer is a method for rejecting the forms of absolutism which hold that culture is either purely spiritual or purely artifactual.

All critiques of culture, Adorno insists, must begin by implicating themselves in the wreckage they are sifting. This is why the understanding that poetry after Auschwitz has become barbaric is endangered, he warns, of being confused with a merely punitive or reductionist gesture banning all aesthetic expression. If lyric poetry is also a critique of culture – a point he makes strongly in his 1957 essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society," where he writes "that the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism" – then it, too, is always already fully a part of the aporia of culture.¹⁵ This does not mean that subjective suffering has no right to express itself. Even if, as Adorno claims in the famous conclusion to *Negative Dialectics*, "all culture after Auschwitz, including the urgent critique of it, is garbage," "perennial suffering still has as much right to expression as the martyr has to cry out." (ND 362) The aporia of cultural failure does not mean the collapse of culture into total barbarism, neither does it signal the end of dialectics. Instead, Adorno tells us, it compels seeing things from "the standpoint of redemption," an act that requires the construction of perspectives that "displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear on day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, *entirely from felt*

¹⁵ *Notes to Literature*, v. 1, p. 45.

contact with objects – this alone is the task of thought” (emphasis added MM 247). That such a redemptive stance is to be achieved solely through “felt contact with objects” might seem at first glance a strange claim to make. Yet what Adorno is advocating here is a non-idealist move that, while reducible to vulgar materialism, seeks a return to things, not as essences, but as fragments whose integrity is guaranteed by their loss of wholeness. Located through a micrological sifting of the ruins, these fragments possess the ability to form new constellations of meaning.

The conclusion of Charles Bernstein’s essay on the Second War misreads Adorno, or rather, what Bernstein offers by way of response is more heartfelt than thought through. “Poetry is a necessary way,” he avers, “to register the unrepresentable loss of the Second War” (217). While it’s difficult to disagree with this claim, it requires more bolstering. Similarly, Edmond Jabes responds with sincere affront to Adorno. Poets, he claims, “must” continue to write. Yet surely Jabes is right to insist that: “One has to write out of that break, out of that unceasing revived wound.”¹⁶ Here, then, in embryo, is a theory of the messianic caesura and its complex relation to trauma. I shall have more to say on this in what follows. For now I note the remarks of Bernstein’s contemporary and fellow traveler in Language Poetry, Lyn Hejinian, who offers a more nuanced reading of Adorno, suggesting that his maxim “has to be taken as true in two ways.” “First, because what happened at Auschwitz ... [rendered] all possibilities for meaning ... suspended or crushed.” And second, and more importantly, because the event of the disaster enjoins poets

not to speak the same language as Auschwitz ... poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied) by foreignness—by the barbarism of strangeness (LI 325-26).

¹⁶ *From the Desert to the Book: conversations with Marcel Cohen*, trans. Pierre Jons (Station Hill Press, Barrytown, N.Y. 1980). P. 61.

This is a decidedly more Blanchotian posture, one that goes beyond Bernstein and Jabes' argument-by-force-of-affirmation. The poetry of Oppen, Palmer, and DuPlessis takes up the challenge of Adorno's complex charge, refusing to collapse itself into easy binaries or to reduce to a sentimental fetish the enormity of historical suffering. Instead, in Bernstein's own words, each of these writers turns to particularity, focusing on "the detail rather than overview, form understood as eccentric rather than systematic, process more than system" (201). This turn to particularity is an essential feature of the late Objectivist nexus, which I will outline below. All three poets imagine a radical way into language that faces toward the irresolvable dialectical tensions required by the recognition of suffering. As J.M. Bernstein explains it, "if enlightened reason is both cause and product of the aporia constituting damaged life, then only enlightening reason about itself can begin the process whereby that aporia is surmounted."¹⁷ At the same time, lest this sound too sanguine, Adorno himself cautions that: "Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped that context" (qtd. in Bernstein). The poets I read here do not refuse the challenge to language presented by modernism, only its "heroic universalizing," as Charles Bernstein puts it. The innovations of early modernism are continued, but, as he notes, in "an entirely different psychic registration" (205).

Likewise, in the wake of Auschwitz, Adorno calls for a "new categorical imperative" imposed by Hitler: "that Auschwitz will not repeat itself" (ND 365), while, Emil Fackenheim speaks of a 614th mitzvah or commandment, one that obligates Jews to not hand Hitler a "posthumous victory."¹⁸ The three poets whose work I consider here take up the challenge of this

¹⁷ "Whistling in the Dark: Affirmation and Despair in Postmodernism." In *Postmodernism and the re-reading of modernity* (271). Edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen. UK: Manchester UP, 1992.

¹⁸ See *The Jewish return into history : reflections in the age of Auschwitz and a new Jerusalem*. Emil L. Fackenheim. New York : Schocken Books, 1978

new imperative or commandment. Their work has to do with reclaiming memory from socially coerced oblivion by asking how poetic language can still work against its own instrumentalist tendencies to sentimentalize, or erase, suffering.

Josh Cohen observes that for Adorno: “to think after Auschwitz is also and always to refuse to bring thought to completion” (IA xvii). Negative dialectics maps onto Objectivist sincerity. The pressure the disaster exerts on language is so intolerable that poets must develop new ways to speak the subject. For each of the poets discussed here, the disaster is not to be located in the event of ontology’s imputed collapse. Rather, the disaster is the closure imposed on cultural memory and its collapse into a new totality. The postmodernist response to such schemes of totality is a poetics of suspicion: about language and the claims it makes for knowledge; about the position of the subject; about models of historical telos. Writing the disasters, then, is writing modernity: the broader crisis of subjectivity and its threatened destruction through the mechanisms of progress, as well as the trauma of massive catastrophes.

As postmodernists, Oppen, Palmer and DuPlessis all share a distinct ambivalence toward the positivist claims of language to represent reality. While it would be overstating the case to make a claim for an a-historical messianic form as such, the techniques these poets bring to bear – including caesura, seriality, interruption, paronomasia and similar devices – work toward “a cessation of happening” in Walter Benjamin’s words, a resistance to the reifying tendencies of language by privileging construction over expression and defamiliarization over the maintenance of the status quo. If the logic of the disaster, as both Blanchot and Adorno define it, is that positivist attempts to address its causes inevitably contribute to the disaster, then the choice these poets make is to refuse positivist utterance, which however sincerely offered, can only suffer the fate of ideological contamination.

All three poets work out of the assumption that writing's complicity in the catastrophe of modern history means that poetry itself is deeply vulnerable to reification. The poetry that does not acknowledge its complicity, then, but insists on valorizing the subjective as a privileged mode of experience somehow magically outside of ideology, runs the grave risk of multiplying, rather than resisting, the conditions that make an Auschwitz possible. In other words, the disaster is not what happens *to* discourse – it *is*, discourse, inasmuch as it contaminates all efforts to to circumscribe and contain it.

How the historical disasters of the 20th Century (and the concomitant complicity with or failure by modernists to address them) place acute pressure on poetic form and on language itself will be crucial to my dissertation. Poetry after Auschwitz is poetry that must continually struggle for its place inside a broken culture.

The Messianic Turn

Notoriously elastic and frequently applied across a range of registers and disciplines, the terms messianism and the messianic take their origins from Jewish religious and political thought. Historically, messianism has articulated the hope for an eschatological triumph that marks the climax and abolition of time through the intervention of a Messiah, or anointed one, who will set right the wrongs of history, ushering in a new era of peace and equality. Subsequently carried over into Christian eschatology's doctrine of the Parousia, or the return of Christ as God, the term has undergone a series of often fruitful, mainly secularized, migrations into an array of complex usages encompassing everything from apocalyptic death cults and political revolutions to redemptive modernist literary strategies. It is in this last context that I

wish to discuss the idea of the messianic, specifically in respect to its unfolding through postmodern American poetry.

As Gershom Scholem explains, the persistence of the messianic idea in history owes much to its ability “to stand a reinterpretation into the secular realm.”¹⁹ But for him, this carrying over, while promising restoration, can be tainted by destructive political ideologies stemming from its origins. “Jewish messianism,” as he writes, “is in its origins and by its nature –this cannot be sufficiently emphasized – a theory of catastrophe. [It] stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the messianic future” (MIJ 7). Broadly speaking, a messianic poetics describes those features of a literature committed to interrupting dominant ideological structures. Often, but not always, located at the crossroads of social and political strategies for renewal and a literary practice marked by an acute anxiety about the elisions and repressions of history, messianic literature’s most salient feature may be its desire for words to rescue their contract with things; for language to deliver some kernel of the real that, because it is beyond the reach of ideology, contains the potential to explode ideology. It is less concerned with engineering agendas for political reform than it is with staging interventions into the forms and practices of daily language. It strives to give utterance to the embattled longing to overcome repressive cultural mechanisms or, failing that, the consolations of building an alternative order of belonging, however peripheral or damaged.

It may be useful at this juncture to delimit messianic literary practice by briefly contrasting it to literary utopianism. The relationship between utopianism and messianism is too complex to adequately cover here, nevertheless it is worth pointing out Matei Calinescu’s distinction between an aesthetic utopianism that seeks to re-sacralize a profaned world and a secularized bourgeois utopianism that from the Enlightenment onwards has sought to achieve a

¹⁹ “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (NY: Schocken, 1976), 284.

state of rationalized perfectibility (41). It is this second form of utopianism that Adorno and Horkheimer subjected to such a devastating critique in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. My own provisional reading of the differences between the messianic and the utopian draws in part on their argument and in part on Derrida's response to criticism leveled against *Specters of Marx*, namely, that because the utopian is teleological in character it more readily lends itself to a kind of backdoor totalization, seeking to repress difference in the name of justice, while the messianic, because eschatological, resists such totalizing. As he sees it:

What remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice (SM 59).

Since the messianic event will always be deferred, messianism itself can never become reified into a system. It is, rather, a practice of interruption and caesura that continually brushes the present against the grain of history, to paraphrase Benjamin, in order to keep itself open to ever evolving forms of intersubjectivity, alterity, difference, and heterogeneity. The messianic commits to complexity; the utopian seeks to repress it.

The pre-eminent theorists of the messianic are Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. For Benjamin, the messianic unmistakably involves a theory of catastrophe. Historical progress can only occur through massive upheaval. "Progress," Benjamin notes, is not only "grounded in the idea of catastrophe," "the status quo *is* the catastrophe" (*Arcades* 473). Benjamin's fusion of Jewish theological thought with Marxism generates a provocative diagnostic instrument for thinking against the narcotizing effects of modernity's ideological productions.

For Benjamin, the messianic is not so much a practical political strategy for devising ideal forms of national statehood, as it is a drastic incursion into the murky processes of historical reification. Historical materialism, which he conceives of as a liberating antidote to

historicism's addiction to amnesical narratives of triumphalism, centers around the caesura-like device of the dialectical image. The phrase is somewhat misleading, as Andrew Benjamin argues, describing it instead as more of a temporal montage than a conventional overlap of images (109). If we substitute "image" for "document" in Benjamin's famous dictum that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," the alienating power of the nexus that is the dialectical image emerges more clearly and more forcefully (256). The key phrase in this formula, its equal sign, is "at the same time." The shock of simultaneity, Benjamin hoped, would dethrone the present from its exalted status as the naturalized outcome of the past, exposing the past as truly other. In this way the sight of an airplane serenely cutting through the sky might call up both the age-old dream of physical transcendence and the somewhat less idealized economic conditions that make its production possible. This unyoking of history from the conscriptive myth of the ideological present is a key task of messianic poetics, as Benjamin envisions it.

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes a cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history (*Illum* 263).

The destructive or critical momentum of materialist historiography is registered in that blasting of historical continuity with which the historical object first constituted itself ... in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally a-theological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts (*AP* 475).

Cessation and blasting; these twin movements of the messianic intervention belong to what Peter Osborne calls "a form of avant-garde experience." As he explains it, delineating Benjamin's notion of "now-time," "the avant-garde is that which, in the flash of the dialectical image, disrupts the linear time-consciousness of progress in such a way as to enable us to, like the child,

to discover the new anew and along with it, the possibility of a better future” (PT 150). With the concept of the dialectical image, Benjamin hoped that he had hit upon a method for exposing the obscure, and obscuring, mechanism by which history is reduced to myth. By seeing how two disparate things are sutured together into a dream-like image, or phantasmagoria, the means of their production and their specific historical location can be revealed and the reifying discourse of organic unity exposed as a coercive instrument of capitalism. The language Benjamin uses to describe this process relies heavily on a lexicon of trauma. His frequent use of such words as “blasting” and “exploding” for describing the process of producing “dialectics at a standstill” – that interruption of history’s illusory narrative continuum – points to an insistence on the act of reading history as a means for traumatic intervention.

Adorno’s thinking about messianism follows Benjamin’s, but also departs from it in significant ways. Whereas Benjamin pursues historical materialism through cultural artifacts and practices such as fashion, architecture and exemplary figures like the flaneur, Adorno makes a rigorous argument against Hegel using Hegel’s own dialectical methods. Adorno is less sanguine than Benjamin about the power of dialectical images to produce a historical frisson that will liberate narrative structures from ideological coercion. Nevertheless, he stakes much of his messianic stance on Benjamin’s closely allied concept of the constellation, which he develops at length in *Negative Dialectics*.

For Adorno, the constellation provides a non-hierarchical, non-totalizing structure of relatedness that maintains the play of dialectical tensions between history as it occurs and the amensical pressures of ideological systems. Modeled after the relational “force field” of language itself, the constellation’s flexible structure resists the temptation to collapse oppositions into reifying reconciliations, keeping the non-identity of subject and object alive and thereby

avoiding what Adorno calls “the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” (ND xx). Terry Eagleton sums up the constellation’s analytic utility by noting how it “safeguards particularity but fissures identity, exploding the object into an array of conflictive elements and so unleashing its materiality at the cost of its self-sameness” (IA 330). Though Adorno might resist descriptions of his thought as messianic, his thinking on lyric poetry announces a messianic agenda through which language may overcome its signifying prison through a process of non-signification: “the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice” (*Notes* 43). Sounding much like Benjamin in his essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” where he proclaims that the goal of language is not communication, but rather, the absolute conveyance of language itself, the materialist character of Adornian messianism comes close to a transcendental pronouncement.

Similarly, both Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida take up issues central to messianism’s concerns with social justice and the ethical space of the subject in their powerful interrogations of presence and the production of meaning. For Blanchot, literature itself is continually put into doubt by the very procedures used to create it. “Literature,” he writes, “is language turning into ambiguity,” that is, it is a system of destructive representations or substitutions, the chief effect of which is to sustain or keep in play the negation of the subject that ideology is anxious to suppress through what Blanchot calls literature’s “uselessness” (“Literature” 341). His thought here closely parallels Adorno’s ideas suspending closure through a negative dialectics. In *The Writing of The Disaster*, Blanchot’s aporetics of literature takes on a distinctly messianic cast since the conditions enabling its operation must also incorporate its own inadequacy to speak fully the event of the disaster.

The idea of a messianic break is present as well in Derrida's work, from his early essay on Edmond Jabés, in which he locates the caesura as the performative site of the messianic, the place where "meaning emerges" (71), to his late engagement with Benjamin in "Force of Law," where he describes the achievement of justice as the impossible event that must remain always on the horizon of the possible, not as a withdrawn remainder, but as a form of excess that constitutes the idea of intervention. "Deconstruction," he writes, "is justice" ("Force" 35). Indeed, *differance* itself works as a messianic procedure since it continually postpones the arrival of the definitive, using language as a strategy for disrupting totality, keeping telos at bay by keeping the tensions that animate the desire for telos in constant play.

Derrida is quite explicit on what he sees as the revolutionary power of the messianic, a position he outlines at length in his controversial *Specters of Marx* and his subsequent reply to the critics of that work, which I will quote at length here, contained in the essay collection

Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx:

Messianicity (which I regard a universal structure of experience, and which cannot be reduced to religious messianism of any stripe) is anything but Utopian: it refers, in every here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogeneous otherness ... *Anything but Utopian*, messianicity mandates that we interrupt the ordinary course of things, time and history *here-now*; it is inseparable from an affirmation of otherness and justice ... *Without* does not necessarily designate negativity; even less does it designate annihilation ... A messianicity without messianism is not a watered-down messianism, a diminishment of the force of the messianic expectation. It is a different structure, a structure of existence that I attempt to take into account by way of a reference less to religious traditions than to possibilities whose analysis I would like to pursue ... [as] the possibility of taking into account, *on the one hand*, a paradoxical experience of the performative of the promise (but also of the threat at the heart of the promise) that organizes *every* speech act, every other performative, and ever every preverbal experience of the relation to the other; and *on the other hand*, at the point of intersection with this threatening promise, the horizon of awaiting that informs our relationship to time – to the event, to that which happens, to the one who arrives, to the other (GD 250- 251).

As David Hoy explains, in his fascinating exposition on temporality *The Time of Our Lives*, Derrida's thinking about the messianic shares many features in common with Benjamin and Adorno's.

Messianicity is thus the eschatological possibility of an unpredictable, unexpected event that could break into the present at any instant. Derrida thinks that there is still some value in this vestigial bit of eschatology. What he rejects is messianism, which is based on the teleological draw of some remote future ideal ... messianicity is built into temporality, and temporality is a condition of the possibility of history. By attaching messianicity to temporality rather than to historicity, Derrida contests any attribution of utopianism to him (164- 165).

This view of the messianic agrees with the late Objectivist focus which will outline in detail below: the insistence on details, rather than universals; the attention to the particularities of language; and the formal employment of a variety of poetic procedures, including seriality, the caesura, and midrash, which I shall discuss in greater detail in the chapters which follow.

Messianic poetry arises out of a desire to confront the trauma of history and from its ruins to articulate a deeper structure or pattern to suffering that will not redeem it as such, in a palliative mode, but restore to it its urgency by recognizing it for what it is – a profoundly warping and distortive force that is, nevertheless, the normative course of the historical. Norman Finkelstein's astute attentions to the messianic impulse active in Objectivist poetry makes explicit some of the connections I have been gesturing at here. For Finkelstein, the idea of the messianic as Benjamin outlines it requires a new definition of fulfillment. "It becomes a function of the negative – the gap between rescue and reification" (RNC 121). This gap might be better termed a suspension – a messianic suspension of totality – whose interventional authority derives from its dialectical resistance to closing the distance between redemption on the one hand and idealization on the other. For Benjamin, this refusal of redemption while keeping one's face turned toward it, as it were, *is* redemption. Norbert Bolz summarizes this position succinctly:

How can interruption give form? ... through citation and montage. History is construction, not contemplation ... To actualize means to render history a scandal for the present ... The historicist is caught in images, which for Benjamin means mythical self-consciousness. Thus the sense of historical construction is the transformation of history into scandal (Benjamin's Ghosts 230).

Secular messianism converts the redemptive logic of the eschaton from the end of history to its immediate present. It is interventional rather than teleological; focused on rupturing the ideological construct overlaying the time of the now in order to break through to the other side of homogeneity. In other words, it gives out onto a different perception of time. In the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison describes the liberating, yet alienating, distension of time as caused by invisibility in terms of jazz's innovative use of syncopation, the practice of playing a note or measure just off the beat, either ahead or behind it.

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flow of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks, and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music (IM 8).

To "slip into the breaks" where time stands still is as succinct a description of the Benjaminian caesura as any. Duration, the quotidian rhythm of temporal immersion, is punctured by syncopation's calculated distress, its self-interrupting revision of the music's measure and the experience of the moment as continuous.

George Oppen, Michael Palmer, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis share a commitment to embodying the principles of the messianic in a late Objectivist poetics. For this kind of writing, that gropes for an adequate form after Auschwitz, redemption must, as Benjamin writes, "depend on the tiny fissures in the continuous catastrophe" (WML 161). Messianic poetry offers the work itself as a site of experience by rupturing form to such an extent that language must be undergone

in a process of phenomenological unfolding: it changes perception and cognition not upon reflection, but in the very act of reading, in the now time of the poem.

The Late Objectivist Nexus

What remains for me to do now is place late Objectivist poetics more securely within a messianic framework. To accomplish this, I will track Objectivist continuities within the context of the disaster, as I have outlined it above, with special emphasis on their complicated relation to the migration of certain Jewish tropological structures into a secular messianic horizon. Before I do that, however, I need to explain why Objectivist poetics still matters and why understanding it leads to a larger understanding of the links modernism between postmodernism. I take my cue from Stephen Fredman's study of Charles Reznikoff.

If there is one story already in place that portrays the Objectivists as the inheritors of a formed tradition, there is another story awaiting narration in which the Objectivists contribute mightily to the development of an entire strain of American poetry – and this latter story cannot be told properly without accounting for the element of Jewishness.
(Menorah 3)

Fredman's claim is an important one. It is my intention to supply some of that narration, showing how late Objectivist poetics is markedly Jewish in its approach to modernist aesthetics, employing such key tropes as exile, diaspora, midrash, the burnt book and the messianic in its effort to go beyond the naivete of the Imagist doctrine of direct apprehension. I want to take care all the same not to collapse Judaism into the Objectivist tradition. Rather, both are to be understood here as carriers of a secularism in search of redemption. The messianic imaginary forms the poetic horizon for poets working in the late Objectivist tradition.

The goal of this project is to map the historiography of the Objectivist lyric as an expression of Jewish tropes. I will argue, in fact, that Jewish tropes are central to the Objectivist

lyric and its heterogeneous and lasting legacy, from Oppen to Palmer and Du Plessis. This argument makes strong claims about the legacy of the Objectivists, placing Palmer within its ambit, not without some reservations, which will be discussed later, as well as DuPlessis, who clearly identifies with the Objectivists, but in ways which revise that connection significantly, both with respect to gender, form and self-historicizing. According to Andrew McAllister:

The Objectivists were a group of left-wing poets – predominantly Jewish and mainly American – who formed a brief but important and exciting alliance in the early 1930s. They felt that the art of poetry needed a revitalizing influence, and they determined to provide it, choosing a radiant, formally invigorated language, in which fresh vocabulary and a concern for the musical shape of a poem were the guiding principles. The core of the group was formed by Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi and Charles Reznikoff (9).

For McAllister, the Objectivists, though forgotten or neglected after their brief initial appearance on the literary scene in the 1930s, exercised a crucial influence on poets of the post-war generation, from Robert Creeley to Charles Bernstein. The range of this influence extends to Michael Palmer and Rachel Blau DuPlessis as well. Oppen's late career resurgence, culminating in the 1969 Pulitzer Prize, but hardly limited to that belated laurel, offers a singular linkage between two generations of Objectivist writing and is central to my consideration of how this poetics has continued to flourish.

Before I continue making the case for a late Objectivist nexus, I should lay out the contours of the first Objectivist nexus. I take the term itself from the anthology of essays edited by Peter Quartermain and DuPlessis, whose appearance in 1999 marked a significant intervention in the understanding of the larger role played by Objectivist poetry in the aftermath of first-wave modernism. In their introduction the editors forward a strong claim for locating Objectivist poetics as a nexus, or network of ligatures "joining items serially, a set of crossings that may proceed outward in a variety of directions from a nodule of importance' (ON 7).

“Objectivist,” they explain, comes to stand for “a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview’ (ON 3). Charles Altieri elaborates on this in his essay, “The Objectivist Tradition,” which first appeared in 1978, when he defines it as “that body of work molded by freeing imagist techniques into methods of thought based on notions of field, measure, and ‘open form’ in the service of principles of sincerity and objectification” (ON 32). Sincerity, a term first used perhaps by Ezra Pound in adumbrating the precepts of Imagism (“I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity”), carries a specific weight in Objectivist methodology that needs unpacking.²⁰ Zukofsky proposes an amplification of this in his essay for the 1931 issue *Poetry* devoted to the Objectivists, calling for poetry “which is the detail, not the mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” to “a rested totality” that is free from “predatory intent.” Sincerity comes to mean a poetry committed to perceptual fidelity (*Prepositions* 12-16). As Altieri sees it, “sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure – both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal” (ON 33). For Tim Woods, Zukofsky’s notion of sincerity as fidelity to precise description shares much in common with Adorno’s negative dialectics. Zukofsky’s “See sun, and think shadow” (from 1944’s *Anew*) perfectly emblemizes the Adornian principle of non-identity, by which difference is affirmed over reconciliation. As Woods remarks, this method places an ever greater weight on the materiality of language (94). The result is a poetry foregrounded by a vertiginous musicality: “Blest/Infinite things/So many/Which confuse imagination/Thru its weakness,/To the ear/Noises” (108). Lyric melody constitutes messianic cognition.

The Objectivist notion of poetic sincerity as a process that refuses closure may be read as belonging to the larger and older Jewish textual practice known as midrash. In locating its

²⁰ “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (NY: New Directions, 1968), 9.

presence among such contemporary thinkers as Freud and Derrida, Susan Handelman defines midrash as “the exegetical tradition ... and genre of Rabbinic interpretation which is a searching out of meaning of Biblical texts through methods close to free association” (SM xv). Following Freud, she sees midrash as a process that treats “every text as holy writ” and “possessed of multiple meanings, none of which are arbitrary.” Likewise, Gerald Bruns traces the origins of midrash to *darash*, a Hebrew word meaning “to study, to search, to investigate, to go in quest of” (HAM 104). “What matters in midrash,” he notes, “is not only what lies behind the text in the form of originating intention but what is in front of the text where the text is put into play ... midrash understands that if a text is to have any force, it must remain open to more than the context of its interpretation” (106). Midrash is an active poetic principle in the work of the Objectivists, who draw both from Old Testament and modern sources to create a sense of textuality that is vibrant with immediacy.

Charles Reznikoff’s 1936 *Jerusalem the Golden* connects the ancient Jewish past, in its days of religious glory, with the secular present, giving a vivid instance of how the messianic impulse persists. The second poem of the title sequence, “The Shield of David,” begins with the lines:

Then spoke the prophets: Our God is not of clay,
to be carried in our saddle-bags;
nor to be molten of silver or fine gold,
a calf to stand in our houses with unseeing eyes, unbending knees;

Who is the King of Glory?
He is from everlasting to everlasting;
we go down to the darkness of the grave,
but all the lights of heaven are His (PCR 114).

The final poem, “Karl Marx,” translates Jewish election into Enlightenment emancipation. Its first stanza runs:

We shall arise while the stars are still shining,
 while the street-lights burn brightly in the dawn,
 to begin the work we delight in,
 and no one shall tell us, Go,
 you must go now
 to the shop or office you work in
 to waste your life for your living.
 There shall be no more war, no more hatred;

The optimism that marks these lines is considerable. But as Norman Finkelstein notes, overall Reznikoff's work is melancholic. The transmission of cultural heritage does not derive from continuity so much as catastrophe, which indeed marks it as messianic (ON 205). This is certainly the case in his 1936 poem, "Messianic," in which Manhattan is transformed into a scene of exile that both joins and severs the American Jew from the ancient past: "You shall know the forest of your fathers/among these posts,/and you their deserts/upon these miles of pavement" (PCR 160). Nowhere, though, does the catastrophe of Jewishness appear more strongly than in his late book-length poem, *Holocaust* (1975), a singular work that distills testimony from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trial transcripts into harrowing poems.

The S.S. man took the baby from her arms
 and shot her twice,
 and then held the baby in his hands.
 The mother, bleeding but still alive, crawled up to his feet.
 The S.S. man laughed
 and tore the baby apart as one would tear a rag.
 Just then a stray dog passed
 and the S.S. man stooped to pat it
 and took a lump of sugar out of his pocket
 and gave it to the dog (H 14-15).

Here, the commitment to Objectivist sincerity and presentational immediacy becomes morally devastating.

For the other Objectivists, Jewish faith was less important as a form of devotion than for what it offered in terms of heritage, a sense of a still useable past after the Diaspora. Carl Rakosi

signals his own slight, yet lyrical, affiliation in “Scriptural Program,” from 1926, where Objectivist values of clarity are put into the service of Biblical themes.

The king of the Jews shall understand
that Yahweh is
 Lord of the four kingdoms.
And these be their names:
there is the kingdom of fire
that is the compend of his word;
and the kingdom of the earth
of which men say that it was
Eden of the ancient books (P 59).

Here, “the compend of the word,” the testament between Yahweh and the Jewish people, stands in for the Objectivist idea of sincerity. Yet, the poem moves quickly from the adoration to the erotic praise song, the poet locating the trace of historical identity in the beloved’s body: “that gradual passage/of her hair/wherein the last Hebraic light/supremely retires” (P 60). Like Reznikoff, Rakosi sounds a melancholy note whose poetic power comes, not from nostalgia, but from an affirmation of persistence.

Louis Zukofsky, whose aesthetic principles first shaped the idea of an Objectivist poetics, registered his Jewishness in an ethnic, rather than religious, mode, and quite loosely at that. What Jewish identity and history offers to him is the secular liberation contained in Marx and Spinoza, the two figures who dominate, respectively, the first and second halves of his epic poem, “A.” Yet his wartime poem, “Song for the Year’s End,” sounds a powerful note of affiliation through loss.

I shall go back to my mother’s grave after this war
Because there are those who still speak of loyalty
In the outskirts of Baltimore
Or wherever Jews are not the right sort of people,
And say to her one of the dead I speak to —
There are less Jews left in the world
While they were killed

I did not see you in a dream to tell you
And that I now have a wife and son (CSP xx).

Zukofsky's relationship to Jewishness is complicated. As a student at Columbia in the 1920s he suffered anti-Semitism first hand.²¹ Later, he developed a strong, mainly epistolary, relationship with Pound, which flourished even during the height of the older poets' hateful anti-Semitic radio broadcasts for Mussolini. The Holocaust pierces, if only briefly, the extraordinary insularity of his devotion to both the English canon (as in his 1948 vade mecum, *A Test of Poetry*) and his seeming aloofness from questions of cultural or ethnic identity.

What makes Zukofsky's poetics messianic derives, according to Norman Finkelstein, from the principles laid out in his 1931 essay, "An Objective."

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, or thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody . . . this rested totality may be called objectification . . . no verse should I call a poem that does not convey the totality of perfect rest" (*Prepositions* + 12-13).

As Finkelstein reads this (and here I concur with him), "the dream of the poem as the totality of perfect rest . . . involves the simultaneous experiences of action and cessation, the poem's Messianic identity secured through both utterance and stillness, these metaphysical as well as formal counterparts" (LI 12-13). Zukofsky's work is messianic to the extent that it envisions the poem as both a "refuge from history as well as an active response to it" (LI 14). The messianic in Objectivist poetics seeks to think through history as well as things (or experience) without predation.

This is certainly the route taken by George Oppen (1908-1984). Almost immediately after beginning his career as a poet, Oppen abandons it to take up union organizing during the

²¹ Mark Scroggins gives a full account of this time in Zukofsky's life in Chapter Two of *Louis Zukofsky: The Poem of a Life*. Shoemaker Hoard, 2007.

Depression, seeing it as a more direct form of social engagement. After service in World War II, which led to his wounding at the Battle of the Bulge, but also included his probable passing of military secrets to the Soviets (as detailed by Eric Hoffman),²² he and his family fled to Mexico to escape an FBI investigation into his Communist Party activities. Not until his return to the States, in 1960, did he take up writing again, and when he did much of his work had moved past Objectivist concerns with the fidelity of perception. Instead Oppen took up questions of the Old Left's legacy, the emergence of the New Left, and the vexed issues of Vietnam and the Cold War. Above all, his poetry was invested in a quest to articulate basic metaphysical principles of the process of consciousness (rather than its substance). Increasingly, in his work from the late 60s to his death in 1984, his poems are marked by a severe minimalism and their rejection of any trace of rhetoric, chiefly through the extensive use of caesura. Oppen's post-exile poetic project, especially from 1968 on – famously exemplified by his line from "Of Being Numerous" about "the shipwreck of the singular" – shapes itself as a response to disaster that relies heavily on a secularized messianic idiom.

Though he begins his poetic career without a trace of the Judaic, his first book, *Discrete Series* (1936), set resolutely in the secular world of urban modernity, nevertheless queries, rather than describes that world, revealing a messianic attitude toward the historical. His method relies on an underplayed juxtaposition, as in the section from *Discrete Series*:

Civil war photo:
Grass near the lens;
Man in the field
In silk hat. Daylight.
The cannon of that day
In our parks (NCP 21).

²² See Hoffman's essay, "A Poetry of Action: George Oppen and Communism," in *American Communist History*, 6:1, 1 – 28, June 2007.

In this deceptively simple poem, the contemplation of a Civil War era photo is associated with a marker of the urban (the silk hat – Lincoln, himself, possibly, visiting a battlefield) and the wry one-word description, “daylight,” which only deepens, rather than clarifies, the mystery of this image. Yet “daylight” also links the past to the present, in which cannons decorate city parks like souvenirs, seemingly absorbed into the pastoral present, while at the same time serving as disturbingly intrusive remnants of historical trauma.

After years of traumatic foreign exile during which he abandoned poetry, Oppen’s long, late poem, “Of Being Numerous” (1969), continues the investigation of modernity begun in *Discrete Series*, along with a consideration of the failures of modernism. With stark severity he flatly rejects Pound’s version of modernist transhistoricism: “By the shipwreck/Of the singular//We have chosen the meaning/Of being numerous” (166). As both Marjorie Perloff and Rachel Blau DuPlessis observe, Oppen’s choice of the numerous involves recognizing his own estrangement. He gradually comes to see this estrangement increasingly in terms of his status as a Jew. Not wanting to name the ruins of modernity in evasive terms, he nevertheless keeps faith with them through the use of a dislocating, ambivalent syntax. In DuPlessis’s potent phrase, political “commitment has migrated into form” (*Blue Studios* 187). The meaning of being numerous names a process of Objectivist messianic poetics.

Oppen’s guarded negotiations with modernity are staged on the negative space of the page through a strategy of gaps and breaks that formally enact an ethical posture of qualified utterances in which meaning is never totalized, but only offered partially, aslant. His resistance to consolation is the only form of consolation he offers himself. John Lowney persuasively amplifies Perloff and DuPlessis’s remarks by suggesting that “Of Being Numerous” is not only a poem of resurrection set amid alienation, but that it moves, via serial fragmentation and the

collaging of numerous textual and conversational quotations, from a critique of the public sphere and an interrogation of historical development and personal trauma to the welcoming enclosures of a feminine, domestic space.²³ Oppen's messianic strategy is summed up by John Taggart as a use of language that "builds tentative structures that remain tentative" (134). Caesura, in an Oppen poem, marks a space of messianic interruption, of multiple, shifting suggestions; a site, according to Benjamin, where "a constellation saturated with tensions" generates the startling recognition brought about by the dialectical image (*Arcades* 475). The meaning of being numerous finds its correlation to Benjamin's historical materialism by re-asserting, through a poetics of interruption, the primacy of the non-identical.

Central to my argument about how Oppen writes the disaster through messianic means is the way in which he positions himself both in and against the tradition of Poundian modernism. For Oppen, Pound occupies the dual role of mentor and adversary, particularly in his work after *Of Being Numerous* on. Beginning with that poem, Oppen painstakingly stakes his poetics on the paratactical aesthetics that is the cornerstone of Poundian modernism, but performs a powerful swerve to the negative in order to resist the totalizing agenda that is integral to Pound's view of history. Oppen writes the disaster of modernity and modernism by investing the gaps and spaces in his poems with an ambiguous and often interruptive status. This interruption carries a messianic charge that is the revision of modernism's overdetermined utopianism.

Oppen's poetry presses to reclaim a modernism lost to disaster, whether by historical catastrophe, or through the failure of its own blindly totalizing rhetoric. The poem becomes an instance of broken speech speaking broken history. "Song?" asks Oppen, in "The Little Pin: Fragment" – "astonishing//song? the world/sometime be//world the wind/be wind o

²³ See Chapter 7, "The Specter of the Thirties: George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* and Historical Amnesia," in *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry 1935-1968*. Iowa UP, 2006.

western/wind to speak//of this” (*NCP* 255). In “The Little Pin,” Oppen reflects on the estrangement of speech, the stagecraft of history and “the long cost//of dishonest music” (*NCP* 254-55). Whose “dishonest music” is he thinking of here? Pound, of course, comes to mind at once. Oppen repudiates his reductive program for coherence in “The Speech at Soli” and elsewhere. But beyond Pound, “dishonest music” names the threat that Oppen sees stalking the perimeter of the poem at all times, the possibility of lyric succumbing to a thematizing language of large, empty universals that destroy any chance for speaking in “the small nouns” that can still give us to direct experience. Dishonest music threatens language at every turn. This is another of the meanings “of being numerous:” that out of first-wave modernism’s collapse comes a recognition of the profound need for refusing the universal. To swerve away from totalizing claims, as Oppen so resolutely does, insisting instead on the place of “the small nouns” and the work they can do, prevents his work from suffering what Peter Nicholl’s in his admirable study of Oppen has called “the fate of modernism,” by which he means, more or less, Pound’s bellicose avant-gardism and the abuses to which he puts myth, placing it in the reifying service of fascism (2-3). But while “fate” is a powerful term for describing the crisis of modernism, it also suggests a certain acquiescence in the face of historical inevitability, “Dishonest music,” on the other hand, pointedly, if belatedly, acknowledges the *scandal* of modernism.

The scandal of meaning, itself a legacy of modernist aesthetic ideology, drives much of Michael Palmer’s poetry. Though frequently lauded as one of the most significant postwar American poets (the citation for the Wallace Stevens Award of 2006 names him “the foremost experimental poet of perhaps the last several generations”), to date Michael Palmer has received surprisingly little critical attention for a poet of his stature. Part of my work here will be to

rectify this conspicuous lack (due in part, no doubt, to the poems' difficulty), while placing Palmer's overall project within the larger context of my argument.

In many ways Palmer exemplifies the messianic turn of late modernism as a way to write the disaster. Abstract, hermetic, and intensely concerned with the ways in which poetic signification must negate its own grounds in order to resist ideology, his work is a kind of echo chamber for modernism, a sustained engagement with both the Poundian and Stevensian traditions, or the immanent and the symbolist modes, as Charles Altieri labels them.²⁴ Though often classed as a quasi-fellow traveler with the Language Poets, Palmer is more accurately located as a late modern internationalist working in the same continuum as Bei Dao (China), Gennady Aygi (Russian Chuvash), Emmanuel Hocquard (France) and Andrea Zanzotto (Italian), to name a few. What makes his work especially apt for my study is his dialogue with the ghosts of the theological tradition, in particular with two major post-Holocaust Jewish writers, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès. With their emphasis on the breakdown of language and their use of tropes of absence and evacuation, Palmer's poems are not merely haunted by other poems, but by the wreckage of poetry itself. His writing of the disaster offers one of the most powerful examples of a messianic form of post-Auschwitz poetics.

The disjointedness of Palmer's language is not the usual fractured collapse of syntax that marks so much of modernist and postmodernist poetry. On the contrary, it often flows in a smooth manner, adhering to a kind of late belle lettristic minimalism, an economy of polish and eloquence which, as many have commented, hews closely to the traditional pleasures of lyric, that is, to the satisfactions of a rounded, well-regulated linguistic surface. Yet this is precisely what is so confounding about his poetry. Because for all its careful and beautiful grace, it works

²⁴ *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry, during the 1960s*. Chapter One. Bucknell UP, 1979.

to dismay readerly expectations of sensibility. As he writes in “Baudelaire Series,” with a double-note of lament and hermetic mystery:

The secret remains in the book
It is a palace
It is a double house

It is a book you lost
It is a place from which you watch
the burning of your house

I have swallowed this blank
this libel of shores
nights that like the book are lost (CA 175)

It is through the very cohesion of its syntax that Palmer’s poems defy ordinary sense-making operations, testifying at once to the depleted yet still seductive power of those operations while laying bare their bankruptcy, unmaking their glamour through minor distortions of ordinary meaning-making. These are poems written on the verge of silence, a silence that edges into the messianic, where closure and identity are destroyed. As Finkelstein notes, “the poem in its utterance presents itself as an act of resistance to silence, even though it is bound, finally, to yield. It is at the moment the poem falls silent, enacting its closure, that a window opens upon the Messianic world” (LI 12).

In a somewhat similar manner, the poems of Rachel Blau DuPlessis push open a messianic wedge by pressing strongly against the genre of elegy. Primarily known as a pioneering critic of feminist and avant-garde literature (she has written notably on Oppen, whose friend and student she was), DuPlessis (b. 1941) has been publishing poetry since the 1980s and, beginning with the appearance of her long poem in progress, *Drafts*, in 2001, has emerged as a major presence in American experimental poetry. Consciously situated in the tradition of the modernist long poem of Pound and William Carlos Williams, DuPlessis’ writing of the disaster

is significant for the way it revises that tradition with an eye to what Pound and Williams excluded, namely gender. At the same time as she models a dynamic, avant-garde poetics of the feminine, she is also concerned with issues of loss and presence, memory and redemption, and this, perhaps, constitutes her most forceful contribution to late modernist messianic aesthetics.

In “Drafts 23: Findings,” she muses on the problem of placing loss:

Pretty difficult to say, finally,
if it's loss or gain that is the subject; they are so
mingled, as
 someone sleeping is mingled up, in it
without knowing it.
 A tangle of night sweats

 maybe falling,
 on edge.
This could be the finding. (*Toll* 145).

This matter of fact summation belies the complexity of the tangled spot where loss and gain are knotted. The mingling of one with the other, unconscious and figured as in a dream, suggests that this boundary zone is inhabited by an intimate fragility. Finding the point where loss becomes gain and gain fades into loss is like falling over an edge – a sudden displacement that upsets balance and reshifts perspective. This occurrence recognizes and undoes oppositions, modeling the poem's conception of writing as active cognition. The idea of a draft, a provisional statement sketched out as the first stage of a statement-in-process, itself subject to amendment, commentary, and revision, plays out the messianic game of deferral by way of a continuous self-interruption. Loss is grafted onto gain; gain re-dissolves into loss. That the messianic is implicit in these poems is a conclusion that can be drawn not merely from their incomplete, or never-to-be-finished status, but from the gesture they make in the act of their own writing, a gesture that is both foundational and self-emptying, a gesture that calls for continuation, a series of escalating, or modulating, repetitions, in different keys and registers, since it can never be fulfilled. In such a

scheme, writing takes on the property of the messianic itself. To write is never to be finished writing. To write is always to want to write more.

Like Benjamin's notion of translation as piecing together "fragments of a vessel," DuPlessis orders the debris and shards of her memory into a new reticulation, a mode of signification which recognizes that loss is not only informative of the poem, but of consciousness, too. In much the same way, just as midrash suggests the vertigo of a textual *mise en abyme* – an endless, echoing labyrinth in which words collide, deform, and transform their original valences — so the messianic desire for gathering disparate energies under the sign of hope may be understood as a formal commitment to discontinuity.

Words from before, words
from after,
they
specified into my blank voice
the. They said this this,
this that, and glut in the wonder
of all such singularity became the work (Toll 49)

As Giorgio Agamben notes, "Voice is the supreme shifter that allows us to grasp the taking place of language, appears thus as the negative ground on which ontology rests, the originary negative sustaining every negation" (LD 36). Likewise, deictic markers like "this" or "that" supply a foundational negativity that underwrites metaphysics and meaning. For DuPlessis, the aporia of memory is that consciousness can never resolve the problem of perfect recall, of total self-presence, but is always on the way to it, always enroute, through the poem.

Messianic poetics responds to catastrophe and, in each of the three poets I focus on here, links them to the larger nexus of Objectivist practice, with its emphasis on particularity, caesura, seriality, the spectral, diaspora, and midrash. What these late Objectivists share in common besides their commitment to a poetic methodology is, of course, lateness. In a sense, lateness is

the most acute expression of the messianic urge to redemption, since it is only by an awareness of what is already vanishing that the urgency to redeem lost time is activated. Lateness signals temporal estrangement – *an out of jointness*. Its very self-consciousness is what triggers its activity as interruption, the caesura that incurs the cessation of happening, and in this cessation the rescuing power is located, in Benjamin’s compelling phrase, in the idea of “reading what was never written” (qtd. in Agamben, *Potentialities*). It is not that the past must be saved as some kind of trophy. This is what ideology has already accomplished by embalming it as “heritage.” What is to be saved is the potentiality of the past and this means that tradition must be interrupted continually. As Stephen Moses puts it:

The end of belief in a meaning of history did not involve abolishing the idea of hope. On the contrary, it’s precisely on the rubble of the paradigm of historical Reason that hope is formed as a historical category. Utopia, which can no longer be thought as a belief in the necessary advent of the ideal at the mythical end of history, reemerges – through the category of Redemption — as the modality of its *possible* advent at each moment of time (AH 12).

In the chapters which follow I will show how all three poets are committed to putting this claim to the test.

Chapter 2—"Indestructible shards": Clarity and The Meaning of Being Jewish in George Oppen

Discrete Seriality and The Disaster of Modernity

In the previous chapter, I described how messianic poetics emerges at a particular historical moment in response to the acute crisis of the Second World War. Though Derrida insists that messianicity must be thought of as a "structure of universal experience," my argument here has to do with how it is implicit in the historical and can never be completely split off from it. The project of a late Objectivist poetic messianicity (distinct from a politically proscriptive messianism) is to articulate, in broken speech, the ruin of meaning by disaster. The postwar urge toward a messianic poetics emerges in late Objectivist poets who recognize the necessity for moving beyond Ezra Pound's naïve, if hopeful, "make it new" with the grim acknowledgement that poets must now "make it broken" if they are to write a poetry after Auschwitz which does not reproduce the logic of catastrophe.

For George Oppen, this move through and within brokenness, or what he calls in his major poem, "Of Being Numerous," "the bright light of shipwreck," takes the form of an intense struggle for the precise terms by which such brokenness – a kind of failed poetry – might be attained (NCP 167). The term he gives this condition is clarity. His search for it is formulated through seriality and caesura, devices that emphasize the gaps in poetic speech and, indeed, create a paratactical pattern of interruptions and silences. These devices re-order the poem's internal temporal structure, producing a messianic cessation of happening consistent with the Objectivist criteria for sincerity, of thinking with things as they exist. But in addition to the ontological status of the material world, Oppen's poetics is also deeply concerned with history.

Historical disaster compels Oppen to search for a formal poetics that might produce clarity. But it would be a mistake to read his use of the term as merely a synonym for truth.

Clarity is not a state of perfect transparency, nor is it the impossible erasure of mediation through a mystical act of transcendental idealism. Rather, it is the struggle of language *as it occurs* to redeem its own position with respect to the disaster. Adorno provides a useful way to understand this approach when he declares that “in the face of the abnormity into which reality is developing, art’s inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber” (AT 2). This is the dilemma Oppen faces in his belated postwar return to poetry. Such a dilemma entails what Josh Cohen, in his reading of Paul Celan’s poem “A Rumbling,” describes as a situation whereby “Truth cannot appear apart from that which prevents its appearance; the poem presents us with the essential dilemma of poetry, its dependence on the very language it wishes to silence in order to let truth emerge in its immediacy” (IA 69). Understood this way, Oppen’s poetry becomes a radical critique of poetry. It is driven by his deep mistrust of language. As he puts it in “A Language of New York”: “Possible/To use/Words provided one treat them/As enemies./Not enemies—Ghosts/Which have run mad” (NCP 116). That language has become not only haunted, but insane, as a result of the disaster drives Oppen’s poetry toward ever more radical measures.

He begins his return to poetry by taking up again the serial procedures of his first book, *Discrete Series* (1934), a move that sustains his project of historical engagement from *The Materials* (1962) through *Of Being Numerous* (1969). But his final volumes – *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972), *Myth of the Blaze* (1975), and *Primitive* (1978) – turn increasingly toward the caesura as a way to generate the cessation of happening that finally, perhaps, may only be expressed as silence. At the same time, this period in his work is marked by an ambivalent, but nonetheless strong, pull toward Judaism. The issue of clarity becomes bound up in important

ways with his own vexed relationship to his identity as a Jew and to the obligation he feels to Jewish disaster, specifically. As he writes in a letter to the Jewish-American poet Shirley Kaufman, who befriended him during his 1975 trip to Israel, the Holocaust story “is deep in my blood and I know it” (SL 234-35). His painstaking effort to work through both the disaster, in its larger sense as the crisis of modernity, and the meaning of being Jewish, is amply evidenced in both his poems and his notebooks. In the *Daybooks* he notes glumly that, “somewhere half-way between the fact of being singular and the fact of being numerous is the fact of being Jewish” (*Sulfur* 1990, 211). At the same time, he chastises himself: “Because I am not silent the poems are bad” (Iowa Review 3). My attempt in this chapter will be to trace the emergence of Oppen’s messianic poetics as it is located between these two self-assessments. I will take up the latter one first, reserving a consideration of Oppen’s Jewishness for my concluding discussion of caesura.

Is Oppen’s harsh self-critique about the lack of silence in his poems advocating a kind of numb quiescence? Or is it instead the expression of a longing for a kind of ontological knowledge that can only be acquired through a poetics of negation, a language of lapses, scissions, and failures, a kind of anti-poetry? Such a poetry might be a poetry of weak messianic power, as Benjamin describes it, which endows the present generation with the ability to redeem the past, rather than create the future. As he puts it in Thesis II, “like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (Illum 254). What the weak messianic power can hope to undertake is not the restoration of the past, but the interruption of its commodification by the present, a process which Benjamin labels historicism and whose chief goal is the maintenance of continuity through the repression or erasure of discontinuous elements. By contrast, the method of historical

materialism endorsed by Benjamin undertakes thinking as more than “the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.”

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad ... in this structure [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past (Illum 262-63).

With its paratactical form and its emphasis on interruption rather than continuity – that is on the discrete units of perception that constitute fidelity to experience – the form of Objectivist seriality employed by Oppen is consistent with this effort at messianic cessation.¹ Interruption in Oppen’s poetry, through seriality at the level of the stanza or segment, and caesura at the level of the line or phrase, recalibrates the poem’s internal sense of time, defamiliarizing it so as to achieve the messianic cessation that Oppen calls clarity.

Clarity in Oppen is not so much optical, then, as bound up with temporality and specifically, the temporality of the messianic, which shares some distinctive features in common with the Jewish Sabbath, as I will show below. What all three kinds of time strive for – the time of the poem, messianic time, and the time of the Sabbath – is an interruption of the temporal as such. This is accomplished not by abolishing time but by suspending it through the intrusion of a caesura that is itself the metric of another kind of time, an alternative time, a time outside of time. As Lyn Hejinian points out, “the problem of time ... the perception of time itself ... as measured in the form of recurrent shocks” induced by “the widespread historical trauma” of the late 20s and early 30s, dominates much of *Discrete Series* (TP 54-58). It is a problem that will occupy Oppen throughout his writing. In *The Time That Remains*, Giorgio Agamben traces the development of messianic time through its founding text, Paul’s Letter to the Romans, making a

¹ Objectivist seriality as practiced by Oppen, Zukofsky, Reznikoff and Rakosi from their early work on owes a debt to William’s *Spring & All* (1923) but must be considered as a case unto itself, pursuing distinctly different aesthetic and political goals than such modernist sequential poems as Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” Loy’s “Songs for Johannes,” or Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead.” Sequenced poems are hypotactical; serial poems paratactical.

strong claim for its influence on Benjamin's conception of Now-Time and its redemptive powers. Central to his thesis is the reiteration of the function of time in lyric poetry from his earlier work, *The Ends of The Poem: Studies in Poetics*. For Agamben, the poem is a "temporal machine" whose status is defined by the inevitability of its ending, that is, of its relinquishing of speech to silence.

Yet while the poem lasts, he writes, "it has a specific and unmistakable temporality, it has its own *time*" (TTR 79). In Agamben's view, the lyric poem offers "a small-scale model of the structure of messianic time" (78). The attributes of this model are consistent with the features of lyric as rhythmic speech that interrupts the daily flow of time with its own insistent counter-time, the intrusion of its own musical moment. "The time that the poem takes to come to an end," according to Agamben, is a "soteriological device ... [that] transforms chronological time into messianic time" (TTR 82-83). The chief example offered into evidence for this claim is the complex rhyme structure of a sestina by the 12th Century troubadour Arnaut Daniel. Rhyme, Agamben avers, is a rhetorical parallelism that articulates "a difference between semiotic series and semantic series" (TTR 87). The musicality of rhyme, in other words, is just as important as its contribution to a poem's meaning and very often, overshadows or undoes that meaning. This interruptive property of rhyme introduces a set of a non-semantic set of correspondences consistent with his idea of messianic time as now-time, or time outside of time. This is the kind of time which concerns Oppen's seriality as well.

Before I move in to a detailed reading of the poems themselves, I need to ground my discussion of Oppen's use of seriality in more specific framing terms, demonstrating how his pre-war work operated and how it changed after the war. Seriality is his method for interruption, for producing a poetry whose organizing logic is based on a commitment to non-identity, as

Adorno calls it. It is also his rejoinder to the overdetermined historicism of *The Cantos* and what he sees as Pound's "swirl of heroes" (Iowa Review 11). Clarity can only come through a powerful intervention in the temporal structure of the poem, and this is achieved first, through seriality, and later, by the more radical means of caesura. Both devices cut into the time of the poem by breaking it into discrete, modular units whose relationship is dictated not so much by the hypotactical logic of linear sequence as by the paratactical ligatures of the constellation.

In his *Daybooks*, Oppen describes one of the goals of his aesthetics: "discrete series: established certain points—dots—of meaning" (Iowa Review 18.3, 2). These dots of meaning are by no means to be understood as a retreat from meaning. Rather, they are Oppen's own dialectical procedure that permits his poems to think, to work out the terms of the clarity he seeks. As Alan Golding observes:

For Oppen, poetry is a form of thinking and the serial poem allows him a different, a more extended and flexible form of thinking than is possible in the lyric ... it enables Oppen 'to think actively in his poetry' without having to formulate an inclusive philosophical system (ON 89).

Joseph Conte, one of the few critics to address seriality at length, sees it as a dramatic shift in how poets undertake the work of form:

The serial form in contemporary poetry, however, represents a radical alternative to the epic model. The series describes the complicated and often desultory manner in which one thing follows another. Its modular form--in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination--distinguishes it from the thematic development or narrative progression that characterize other types of the long poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method ("Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem," *Sagetrieb* 11, 1992).

And Rachel Blau DuPlessis, whose own long poem, *Drafts* (the subject of a subsequent chapter) draws heavily on both the accidental and the midrashic character of seriality, makes an even bolder claim for what she calls segmentivity:

Poetry can ... be defined as the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units, units operating in relation to chosen pause of silence ... to write poetry is, as Oppen said, to control the 'sequence of disclosure' by segments that have strong relation to melos and to meaning: 'separating the connections of the progression thought'. Segmentivity—the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments—is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre (BS 199).

Following Adorno's reading of Brecht and Beckett's refusal of commitment in order to maintain aesthetic autonomy, she states that "Oppen's art is political in this way: commitment has migrated into form" (BS 187).² Unlike Pound, who used fragment and parataxis in a totalitarian way, Oppen, she writes, employs "the fragment negatively, as moving among contradictions" (189). This movement between contradictions enacts a dialectical process, each module speaking to, with, and against another so that the poem and the reader remain within a field of unsettled interpretative and epistemological possibilities.

It is precisely this sort of movement Adorno has in mind when he condemns Hegel's system building, countering it with a useful outline for the dialectical practice of constellation. Adorno's conception of the constellation is instructive for reading alongside Oppen's use of seriality:

Constellation is not system. Everything does not become resolved, everything does not come out even; rather, one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that the individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script (Hegel 109-110).

Constellation provides a method for seeing historical events asymmetrically, as they actually occur, or as Zukofsky puts it, "for thinking with things as they exist." This kind of thinking marks Oppen's first book, which I will now turn to supply some evidence for my claims about seriality.

² See Adorno's essay, "Commitment" in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* "What weighs heaviest against commitment in art is that even good intentions sound a false note when they are noticeable ... this is not the time for political works of art; rather, politics has migrated into the autonomous work of art." Pg. 251-58.

Discrete Series is not messianic as such, that is, it is not concerned with rescuing the past. Rather, it uses form to critique urban modernity's slow destruction of subjective experience and personal time.

Thus
Hides the

Parts—the prudery
Of Frigidaire, of
Soda-jerking—

Thus

Above the

Plane of lunch, of wives
Removes itself
(A soda-jerking from
the private act

Of
Cracking eggs);
Big-Business (NCP 7)

This seemingly cryptic poem gains its distinction not from any philosophical difficulty, as might be found in a Wallace Stevens poem, say, nor from its use of exotic cultural allusions familiar to readers of Pound and Eliot. Oppen's debt here is to the Williams of *Spring & All* and how the older poet positions the power of the imagination in service to a new aesthetics that resists commodification.³ The scenic topography of the poem – a lunch counter – undergoes a radical syntactic fragmentation congruent with its intention to defamiliarize its very ordinary setting in order to de-mystify the hidden procedures of by which capital – Big Business – fetishizes the exchange value contained in appliances like a Frigidaire.

³ “Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description or an evocation of objects ... poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it – it affirms reality ... it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—” (Collected Poems of WCW, v. I, p. 234-35).

Much of *Discrete Series* is comprised of such vignettes from city life, depicting solitary moments amid a crowd in a light that places them less as episodes of isolation and more as occasions in which the person is reduced to a thing. As both Michael Davidson and Monique Vescia have pointed out, many such scenes have to do with images of glass as an obscuring barrier rather than a medium of transparency.⁴ The poem beginning “Closed car” makes this process of reification explicit:

Closed car—closed in glass—
At the curb,
Unapplied and empty:
A thing among others ...

Tho the face, still within it,
Between glasses—place, over which
Time passes—a false light (NCP 13).

Far from offering an instance of the modern technological sublime, this poem, too, embeds the human within the mechanical, characterizing the condition as one in which even time itself is falsified by a corrupted form of perception, one that conceals the real relationship between persons and things.

Though Oren Izenberg asserts that Oppen’s postwar poetry “is not much different than” *Discrete Series*, the fact that nothing follows this first work until 1962’s *The Materials* is enough alone to consider it *sui generis*. In what follows, I will make the case that as a result of the war, Oppen’s methodology undergoes a dramatic shift. This shift does not represent a sharp break from what came before. Instead, it is an intensification of Objectivist procedures and, as I will show, marks a qualitative difference from the poems of *Discrete Series* while maintaining a core consistency to its serial aesthetics. Seriality in the postwar poetry becomes steadily charged with

⁴ See Davidson’s Introduction to Oppen’s *New Collected Poems* (2004) and Chapter Three of Vescia’s *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams*. Routledge, NY: 2003.

a messianic desire for interruption that does not stop at the level of simple critique, but questions the very basis of ontology in its pursuit of clarity.

After the War: The Difficult Route to Clarity

The messianic turn in Oppen's postwar poetry can be catalogued in a number of ways, for instance, by tracking the migration of serial procedure into the caesuras of the late work, as I will do later. But perhaps a more immediately telling method, initially, would be to list a partial inventory of those poems in which disaster is either named or alluded to. *The Materials* contains four that deal with the disaster in their titles: "From Disaster," "Time of the Missile," "The Crowded Countries of the Bomb," and "Survival: Infantry," a poem which, in looking back on Oppen's experiences as a combatant, also looks ahead to the fuller considerations of the war contained in "Of Being Numerous" and "Route." Other poems testify to the poet's postwar concerns with disaster on the social level, as *This in Which's* "Armies of the Plain," which treats the Kennedy assassination, while "The Language of New York," and "A Narrative," both from that volume, offer more oblique addresses to the ongoing demolition the self suffers under the pressures of modernity. The disaster of the social forms the main thread in "Of Being Numerous," while the war dominates "Route." I shall treat both in detail below. For now I want to note that disaster runs through Oppen's later poems as well. "Some San Francisco Poems" (from *Seascape: Needle's Eye*) continues the engagement with the Vietnam War begun in "Of Being Numerous" – "We will choke on each other//Minds may crack//But not for what is discovered//Unless that everyone knew/And kept silent//Our minds are split/To seek the danger out//From among the miserable soldiers" (NCP 225). In "Of Hours," (also in *Seascape*) the poet reflects on watching his comrades die in a foxhole while he lay beside them wounded:

No man
 But the fragments of metal
 Tho there men there were men Fought
 No man but the fragments of metal
 Burying my dogtag with H
 For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace (NCP 218).

The striking conjunction of Oppen's own dogtags with the fragments of shrapnel embedded in his own body as well as his fellow soldiers produce an unsettling effect: human beings reduced to "fragments of metal" where before "there were men." 1975's "The Book of Job" (from *Myth of the Blaze*) contends with the murders of Civil Rights workers Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, while his final book, *Primitive*, instances the catastrophes of Jewish exile in a poem entitled "Disasters": "and alone my young/brother he is my lost/sister her small/voice among the people salt//and terrible hills whose armies//have marched and the caves/of the hidden/people (NCP 269). This brief survey gives some indication of the extent to which Oppen focused on historical catastrophe.

One of the most striking early instances of this occurs in the opening section of "Image of the Engine," with its image of a "ruined head gasket" requiring repair that leads to a contemplation of some larger cultural or spiritual breakdown:

Hot lump of a machine
 Geared in the loose mechanics of the world with the valves jumping
 And the heavy frenzy of the pistons. When the thing stops,
 Is stopped, with the last slow cough
 In the manifold, the flywheel blundering
 Against compression, stopping, finally
 Stopped, compression leaking
 From the idle cylinders will one imagine
 Then because he can imagine
 That squeezed from the cooling steel
 There hovers in that moment, wraith-like and like a plume
 of steam, an aftermath,
 A still and quiet angel of knowledge and of comprehension (NCP 40).

What arises in the aftermath of this image of traumatic seizure – either modernity’s or the poet’s – is a rescuing counter-image of angelic clarity – “knowledge and comprehension.” Disaster is answered from its own ruins by a ghostly caesura, an intervention that creates a cessation of happening through its stillness and quietude.

Likewise, in “Time of the Missile,” Oppen joins the technological sublime, in the menacing figure of ships docked at a New York pier – “A steel wall: tons in the water, // Width” – to the rapture produced by gazing on the water it is anchored in: “The eye *sees*! It floods in on us from here to Jersey tangled/ in the grey bright air!” The dialectical tension of this moment stands between a vision of the water and how that vision is suborned, finally, to “the realm of nations.”

My love, my love,
We are endangered
Totally at last. Look
Anywhere to the sight’s limit: space
Which is viviparous (NCP 70).

Suspended between hope and terror, the sight of massive commercial ships conjures a strange trope for the figuration of space itself – as the site of mammal fecundity that also signals potential doom. The poem concludes by making explicit the link between creativity – the place of the mind – and self-annihilation.

Place of the mind
And eye. Which can destroy us,
Re-arrange itself, assert
Its own stone chain reaction (NCP 70).

For Oppen, as for Benjamin, the problem is not technology itself, but the creative processes that build a civilization while at the same time threatening its own destruction. And in the chillingly titled “Parousia,” Oppen ponders a dire fate seemingly at odds with the notion of the fullness of being promised by the disclosure of the material world. Here, seeing is something that is irrevocable and, as such, potentially fatal:

Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen
And because it is irrevocable

It cannot be understood, and I believe that fact is lethal

And man may find his catastrophe,
His Millennium of obsession. (NCP 103).

The impenetrable is the impossible because it repels perception, is utterly indifferent to the human gaze. Oppen's logic here infers an ultimate disaster deriving from the insatiable desire to penetrate the world, regardless of the cost.

Disaster as the crisis of modernity, epitomized by the Second World War, amplifies the desire for clarity, first announced in *Discrete Series*, over the course of his long final period. The Objectivist principle of "thinking with things as they exist" takes on a more urgent moral imperative: to "construct a meaning from these moments of conviction," as Oppen puts it.⁵ Such conviction impresses his earliest attempts to engage the trauma of his wartime experience. In "Blood from the Stone," the first poem written by Oppen after his exile, the war looms large.⁶ A serial poem in four sections, it shifts between scenes of domestic life with the poet's wife, Mary, (sections I and IV) and dark recollections of the Depression, haunted by "A spectre//In every street," to the war itself. Section III is entirely given over to the war.

There is a simple ego in lyric,
A strange one in war.
To a body anything can happen,
Like a brick. Too obvious to say.
But all horror came from it (NCP 53).

In many ways, this poem and others, like "Route," are taken up with how the simple ego of lyric is invaded – and transformed – by the strange one of war. The trauma that reduces a body to a brick, and which is the source of "all horror," is the site of a fierce struggle to confine,

⁵ Interview with L.S. Dembo, *The Contemporary Writer*, p. 174.

⁶ See page xviii of "Introduction" to *Selected Letters of George Oppen*, edited by DuPlessis. DuPlessis dates the poem's composition to May 1958.

understand, and utilize its damaging effects. In the lines immediately following, matter becomes fragile, something to be guarded.

The need
To see past every rock, wall, forest
Among so many, carrying in its frightful danger
The brick body as in one's hands (NCP 53).

What initially appears as threatening because of its impenetrability – the brick rubble of the body, the rocks and walls that might conceal the enemy – will, in his later work, take on a quasi-theological dimension, leading him to declare in “Myth of the Blaze”: “I believe//in the world//because it is/impossible” (NCP 248). This is the most direct expression of Oppen’s peculiar secular faith: a primal affirmation of the impenetrability of being, its utterly heterogeneous and unassimilable quality, in the face of human disaster.

The impenetrable is an important term for Oppen. It names the inhuman world as it exists outside of cultural construction, but is also that which must be taken purely on faith as “the impossible.” More than the classical bedrock of the empiricists (think of Dr. Johnson’s kicking a stone to refute Berkeley), it signifies the obdurate qualities of matter which, for Oppen, are tantamount to a theological facticity.

And the pure joy
Of the mineral fact

Tho it is impenetrable

As the world, if it is matter

Is impenetrable (NCP 164).

These lines about New York, from “Of Being Numerous,” are decidedly ambiguous. Is this praise for the modern metropolis, and the basic materials from which it has been built? Or an acknowledgment that urbanism, finally, is only deeply alienating? Oppen’s response to the city –

his taking joy in the materials while deploring its human inhabitants, whom he disparages as “shoppers, choosers, judges” and “ghosts that endanger//One’s soul” – appears to take the side of things, in Francis Ponge’s celebrated phrase (footnote). If anything is redeeming about the city it is not the diverse flux of people, (which he petulantly reduces to quarrelsome behaviors: “baseball is not a game/but an argument”), but the city itself as a conglomeration of built structures. The poem goes so far as to make an affectionate turn in its appraisal of the material:

Here is the brick, it was waiting
Here when you were born,

Mary-Anne (NCP 118)

Gradually, the substance of the world becomes spiritualized, and, without yielding any of its materiality, allows personal relations to penetrate, or be subducted by, the impenetrable. The traumatic brick of “Blood from the Stone,” signifying morbidity and death, becomes in this poem the welcoming gesture of a material universe, no longer at odds with the human, but acting to undergird it. Or as he puts it in “World, World—”: “The self is no mystery, the mystery is/That there is something for us to stand on” (NCP 159). It would be a mistake, however, to assume from this that Oppen’s poetics is predicated on the idea of a singular self. Singularity is precisely what is sacrificed for the sake of this vision, which prizes the ground over the figure, and celebrates heterogeneity over homogeneity.

One of the ways in which Oppen undertakes this heterogeneous ethics is by creating moments of scission: acts of perception that are as completely faithful to their self-disclosure as poetic language will allow. These messianic incursions aim at recalibrating the experience of time within the poem, producing what Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his explanation of the significance of the Jewish Sabbath, calls “a *sanctification of time*” (8). The idea of the Sabbath as a time outside of time, a temporal caesura, or cutting into quotidian time, derives from

Sabbath rituals designed to break with the practice of everyday culture and its “tyranny of space” (10). The Sabbath exercises a messianic function not unlike that described by Walter Benjamin in his critique of naïve historicism. Just as Benjamin felt that the idea of progress was founded on a specious conception of time as an empty, homogeneous structure,⁷ so Heschel maintains that the Sabbath urges us to break away from the utilitarian view of time as “unvaried, homogeneous ... qualitiless, empty” and to recognize that “no two hours are alike. Every hour is unique and the only given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious” (8). Oppen describes such a Sabbath-like moment in “Psalm”:

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down—
That they are there!

 Their eyes
Effortless, the soft lips
Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
Tear at the grass

 The roots of it
Dangle from their mouths
Scattering earth in the strange woods.
They who are there.

 Their paths
Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
Hang in the distances
Of sun

 The small nouns
Crying faith
In this in which the wild deer
Startle, and stare out (NCP 99).

The space of the forest clearing is depicted as an erotic moment out of time, the deer’s contentedness forming a sacred circle, a messianic gap that ejects the poet from homogenous time. “Psalm” asks the reader to forgo positive capability and enter the discrete, non-identical

⁷ *Illuminations*, 261.

time of the Sabbath. By keeping faith with the animals – as they exist – and then directing them along a line of melody, that is, of thought, the poem reaffirms the Orphic contract between things and words, “The small nouns/Crying faith.” In this sense, Oppen’s Sabbath is a corollary to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s observation that “perception is a nascent logos” (PW xx). What it summons us to is the task of knowing and acting in the world as we find it.

Burt Kimmelman reads this poem as evidence of Oppen’s nurturing of a Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*.⁸ My own reading doesn’t militate against this, but I prefer to view it, nonetheless, as Oppen’s Sabbath, his sense of clarity as a kind of silence, a hiatus, even, within the everyday, which interrupts the status quo of the temporal. As Tim Woods helpfully summarizes it in “Preferring the wrong way”:

Objectivist poetics disrupts totality as a way of presenting us with a glimpse of what things in their interrelatedness might become if they were allowed to rest in their affinity rather than forever being stuffed into a new system of identification or stifled by an imposed social totality (CC Mod Amer Culture 454).

Such a poetics of disruption calls to mind Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe’s remarks on Paul Celan, in whose work he locates an imperative for the “interruption of the poetic” itself, of the idol of the poem (PE 68). This same imperative drives Oppen’s poetry as well.

Oppen’s commitment to the phenomenal world of things and to the rootedness of embodied experience against the dull and enervating abstractions of metaphysics, carries a weird spectral charge. The poem aims to affirm presence, but it does so by unfolding as a dream-vision, one in which the reality of the spectator fades before the preternatural presence of the deer. Their “alien small teeth,” nibbling through “the strange woods,” marks them as uncanny revenants from a reality we have lost touch with. “This in which” becomes the site, not so much of an earthly there-ness, a kind of spiritual home, as the place where interior experience,

⁸ See “George Oppen’s ‘Psalm’: Manifest Things and a Poet’s Words.” Big Bridge 14. *A Garland for George Oppen*,. Edited by Eric Hoffman. www.bigbridge.org/BB14/OP-KIM.HTM. Accessed 02/07/10.

mediated by “the small nouns” of language’s symbolic order, names the delicate absence of the animals’ ethereal trace, simultaneously ratifying and abolishing the fragile Orphic contract between words and things. This haunted space, poised perpetually on the threshold of disaster, yet never quite collapsing, is also the Sabbath, or rather, the Sunday of its caesura: the messianic cessation of happening that permits the privileged experience of such extraordinary heterogeneity. For Oppen, this is what, *pace* Nicholls, an avant-garde moment of time might look like: an interdiction of the temporal that neither valorizes the present nor dotes on a nostalgic vision of the past.

Clarity recurs with such considerable frequency throughout the middle period and late poems as well as the daybooks that it takes on the weight of a shibboleth, an apotropaic password invoked against the disaster. Peter Nicholls notes that after reading Jacques Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* during his exile in Mexico in the 1950s, clarity became a “key term” of Oppen’s late poetics, “denoting that ‘fabric of being’ in which Self and Thing illuminate each other” (GOFM 34). Oppen himself makes the case for clarity in his 1962 essay “The Mind’s Own Place,” which begins with a discussion for the primacy of the image. “Modern American poetry,” he asserts, “begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and the color of our lives” (SP 173). Assessing the impact of the modernist turn made by Pound and T.S. Eliot, Oppen attests that the image is:

an account of the poet’s perception, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness. [Eliot and Pound] meant to replace by the data of experience the accepted poetry of their time ... that data was and is the core of what ‘modernism’ restored to poetry, the sense of the poet’s self among things (SP 175).

This sense that the poem can make good on the “data of experience” emphasizes the object as a purely visual entity, bracketed from epistemological suppositions and encountered as it is. But while this procedure suggests a phenomenological suspension, it also carries the rhetorical tone of an emergent knowledge economy that reduces experience *to* data. In “The Mind’s Own Place,” Oppen restates Zukofsky’s formulation of Objectivist principles as a kind of writing that attends to “the detail, not the mirage, of seeing” (*Prepositions* + 12-13). To write the detail means rejecting universals and abstractions – the beguiling sources of mirage – and attending instead to the particularities of the observed world that will disclose the things as they exist. It is this emphasis on particularity that leads to Oppen’s most radical and well-known formulation of the vexed relationship between the personal and the social, the singular and the multiple.

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous

*

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck (NCP 166-67).

While the “bright light of shipwreck” might be taken to denote the spectacular failure of modernity, especially after the Second World War, it can also indicate the need for a breaking of form that goes beyond mere avant-gardism, for which Oppen expressed disdain.⁹ Unlike his

⁹ In the *Daybooks* he writes: “avant-garde: I have no liking for the term and no need of it... I am concerned with ‘thinking’ ... that requires the poem, the verse... [it] is the distinction between writing stylishly and the attempt to

fellow Objectivist Zukofsky, who stressed the liberating potentialities contained in intricate and extravagant sound play, Oppen is resolutely set on what poetry cannot do, with the limits of what can be said and how it can be said. To this end he develops a strenuous minimalist aesthetic that rigorously curbs linguistic play in order to pursue the grail of clarity with something with a fervor for precision.

Precision, it's worth noting, is something of a fetish among the Objectivists, evoked in a clinical, almost Taylorist, language as a safeguard against the contaminating influence of feminine sentiment and mere personal expression. As William Carlos Williams remarks in his review of *Discrete Series*, "technical excellence" is what insures that the poem, "by being an object sharply defined and without redundancy" will generate a form commensurate to its meaning (*Something to Say*, 57). For Oppen, precision is a watchword against the falsity of rhetoric. To be precise is to pre-cut, to exclude, to limit. It is the operation of serial logic at the level of perception.¹⁰ This commitment to precision is what animates the serial procedures of his poetry.

Seriality politicizes the production of time within the poem at both the formal level, by its incursion into measure and its disruption of hypotaxis, and at the level of reception, where it compels the reader to intervene in the text. The logic of seriality is paratactical. It disrupts what Adorno calls "the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax," thereby disrupting the spell cast by a seamless homogeneity (NTL II 117). Parataxis, Adorno notes elsewhere, provides the "means to break the compulsion to achieve identity" (ND 157). Oppen's seriality does just this.

say with lucidity some part of what has not been said" (Iowa Review 2). For more on Oppen's vexed relation to the avant-garde, see Peter Nicholls excellent account in Chapter 5 of *GO and The Fate of Modernism*.

¹⁰ See Henry Weinfeld's informative critique in *The Music of Thought in The Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk* (27-28). Weinfeld claims that Objectivist notions of the empirical founder on closer examination are, at any rate, Romantic at bottom since they seek the essence of the thing, or the thing's essential connection to reality. The desire behind precision in the poem is to deliver the thing as it is, immediate. But the immediate is always what is registered through its trace, that is, after it has vanished.

It breaks meaning into a constellated pattern which exhibits the very process that produced it. More than that, though, seriality, at the macro-level of the poem, and caesura at the micro-level, constitutes nothing less than the meaning of being numerous as it relates to an ethics of form. I will now turn to a discussion of “Route” to demonstrate how this plays out.

Among the fragments found in George Oppen’s study after his death, which editor Stephen Cope has titled “Twenty-Six Fragments,” the one numbered 19b. reads, in its entirety:

The middle class boy to die
in a foxhole like a
dog (SP 234).

According to Cope, Oppen had circled the fragment, as if to emphasize its importance. Though no exact date can be given for its composition, it is clear that right up to the end of his life Oppen felt haunted by his experiences as an active combatant in World War II.

His line from 1975’s “Myth of the Blaze” resonates with survivor’s guilt and posthumous anguish: “why had they not/killed me” (NCP 247). According to David McAleavey:

George knew he was wounded badly, but the man on top of him was in even worse shape; however George’s guilt, which he evidently felt all his life thereafter, centered on the fact that he did not attempt to drag the badly wounded soldier above him to safety (Ironwood 26, 309).

This searing experience, I contend, shocked Oppen so badly that it took him years to recover enough to the point where he could begin writing again. His silence began by setting aside poetry to pursue more direct means of political intervention.¹¹ But it was poetry that abandoned him after the shock of the combat wounds. This forces a reconsideration of what has been comfortably transmitted as Oppen’s “decision” to leave writing. While he may originally have been motivated to give up poetry for laudable social impulses, I argue that these impulses underwent a violent wrenching as a result of the experience in the foxhole: both the wounding

¹¹ Recounted by DuPlessis, Introduction to *Selected Letters* (xiii). In the winter of 1935 Oppen undertook a “major decision” to set aside poetry and devote his energies to the Popular Front.

itself by tank shrapnel, and the terrible knowledge that he could not help his fellow soldier as he lay dying. Oppen's silence is not some quasi-mystical abeyance, nor is it a case of it having taken him another twenty-five years to write the next poem, as the visibly annoyed Hugh Kenner, in a moment of irritation with the rambling Oppen, insisted (Ironwood 5).¹² Simply put, he suffered a profound breakdown.

All of this is made explicit in "Route," which is the sequel, or companion poem, to "Of Being Numerous" and offers the fullest account in poetry of Oppen's wartime experiences. Characteristically, this account comes in coded form, as a kind of allegory about the poet's wounding in the foxhole during the Battle of the Bulge.¹³ As Oppen remarks to Dembo, "Route" is "very closely connected to 'Of Being Numerous,' the learning that one is, after all, just oneself and in the end is rooted in the singular, whatever one's absolutely necessary connections with human history are" (CW 185). In what follows, I will unpack the allegorical content of "Route" to demonstrate why this poem is so pivotal for understanding Oppen's work and for what it reveals about this serial strategy.

Steven Shoemaker notes that "The scene of the foxhole is a primal one for the development of what might be called the poetics of exposure in Oppen's later poetry" which he attributes, as so many other commentators have, to Oppen's highly selective reading of Heidegger and his "aesthetics of disclosure" (TP xxiii).¹⁴ Indeed, while Oppen's return to poetry can be attributed in large part to a desire to exhume this haunting scene, I read his use of Heidegger as a convenient scaffolding, something to give his project the kind of metaphysical bona fides he was anxious to secure. Disclosure takes on a double meaning here as Oppen

¹² See Oppen's interview with Charles Amirkhanian and David Gitin, pg. 23.

¹³ See Kristen Prevallet's thorough recounting of the details of Oppen's wartime experience in "One among the Rubble." *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen*, ed. Shoemaker.

¹⁴ See Burt Kimmelman, *Jacket* 36 and Nicholls *GOFM*.

diligently pursues an oblique method for confronting his trauma by staging an allegory about the material world.

Both personal trauma as well as the crisis of modernity occupy the central concerns of Oppen's major poems and "Route" is the poem which most sharply exemplifies the crisis he suffered. The anxiety of his dream in Mexico about copper pipe rusting is less a testimony to some kernel of absolute psychic resistance, than the fear that even the purest substance can be contaminated by trauma, that no place is safeguarded from the degradations of time, memory or injury (MAL 201-02).¹⁵ The meaning of the war, the meaning of Mexico, the meaning of Oppen's "exile" from both poetry and America, can be seen not as a self-determined pause, a principled withdrawal, but rather as a flight, a retreat from the agonizing pressures of history and the unbearable pain inflicted by the war. "Route," then, is Oppen's cryptonym; the secret, doubly coded word for the site where he re-enacts his premature burial in the foxhole.¹⁶ But "Route" also means escape; a way out. In his 1966 reading of the poem at SUNY-Buffalo, Oppen pronounces the title as "rout" (rather than "root"), indicating he means a "highway."¹⁷ All the same, the ambiguity attached to the word's pronunciation remains prominent. Route may mean either a highway or a defeat in battle. At the same time, when pronounced "root," it carries the suggestion of an underground foundation; a formative experience. All these meanings are in play in Oppen's use of the word.

"Route" is a poem in fourteen numbered segments which, taken at first glance, appear discursive, almost rambling, in their haphazard arrangement. The poem begins by considering

¹⁵ In this oft-cited dream Oppen read a paper found among his father's things on "How to Prevent Rust in Copper." Mary Oppen recalls that immediately afterwards he began writing again. N.B. copper of course is favored by plumbers because it cannot rust.

¹⁶ See *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (149). In re-visiting Freud's famous case, they coined the term "cryptonym" to name the elaborate subconscious linguistic play by which a symptom of trauma is identified through "the synonym of its alloeme."

¹⁷ Accessed at PennSound, July 14, 2010. writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Oppen.php

the vexing question of perception's opacity: "Reality, blind eye/Which has taught us to stare—
 //Your elbow on a car-edge/Incognito as summer" (NCP 192). Here, as in "Of Being Numerous," the nature and quality of the impenetrable are taken up, but in a register which implies that all seeing falls short, that even the simplest scenes, an elbow on a car in summer, must remain obscure. But rather than despair at the seemingly inaccessible, the poet turns this occasion to one of hymn-like radiance.

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful
 thing in the world,
 A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motive of poetry
 But to achieve clarity (NCP 193)

The poem begins, then, with the ardent expression of a hope for the clarity first articulated, as seen above, in "Of Being Numerous" – not in the sense of seeing, but of silence. But what is this silence? Is it a retreat from the world of things? Or the form of their most direct apprehension? In Part 2, Oppen refines the sense in which he is using clarity. It is a force "of what is not autonomous in us,/We suffer a certain fear//Things alter, surrounded by a depth/And width//The unreality of our house in moonlight" (NCP 193). Here, clarity marks a defamiliarizing of the world of ordinary objects, a movement that induces fear but then gives over to an experience of the uncanny, the house rendered unreal by alien moonlight which, if "strikes it/It is truly there tho it is ours" (NCP 193). This powerful collocation of otherness with belonging, the estranged with the homely, puts the reader on notice as to poetic language produces such an effect by elasticating a moment of perception through precise observation of its physical and affective details. This effect is Oppen's version of the dialectical image.

Benjamin's notion, it's worth recalling here from Chapter 1, takes up the problem of how to combat the reifying effects of the amnesia capitalism inflicts on the past. He concludes that

history's narrative invariably decays into fossilized images celebrating heritage while obscuring actual suffering. To contest this he proposes the dialectical image, which can fissure or blast apart the mechanism by which history is reduced to myth. By seeing how two disparate things are sutured together into a dream-like image, or phantasmagoria, the means of their production and their specific historical location can be revealed and the reifying discourse of organic unity exposed as a coercive instrument of capitalism.

Section 4 of "Route" takes up a theme first iterated in "A Language of New York": that words should be treated as enemies, as "ghosts that have run mad." In "Route," this condition is gentled somewhat. "Words cannot be wholly transparent. And that is the/heartlessness of words" (NCP 194). Heartlessness is not to be confused with a failure of affective response. What Oppen is indicating here is the materiality of words, the resistance they offer to easy or careless use, and thus, the corresponding need for precision, of attending to the way phenomena unfold through language. Such an unfolding initiates "the experience of time" as boredom, which, ala Heidegger, is conceived of as form of purity. "The purity of the materials," the section concludes, is "not theology," but a direct presentation of their circumstances as the poet finds them.

The center of the poem, sections five and six, are taken up by Oppen's wartime recollection. They function, within the time of the poem, as interludes or interruptions: temporal displacements that perform an analeptic intervention, or messianic cessation of happening, placing the now with then and exploding both in order to uncover the actuality of lost time. Section five, which runs to seven substantial paragraphs of prose, is worth dwelling on at length for the understanding it can provide about Oppen's dialectical method.

In revisiting the war in such a discursive manner, Oppen wisely refrains from telling his own traumatic story directly. Doing so would only falsify it. Instead, he turns to another story, related by an Alsatian he meets, Pierre Adam, who tells him how he aided men slated for induction into German labor camps or the Wehrmacht by helping them to hid in holes they dug near their farmhouses.¹⁸

Many men, learning in their own way that they were to be called, dug a hole. The word became a part of the language: *faire une trou*. Some men were in those holes as long as two and three years. It was necessary that someone should know where those holes were; in winter it was impossible for a man to come out of his hole without leaving footprints in the snow ... the Germans became aware that men were going into hiding and they began to make reprisals ... Men would come to Pierre and they would say: I am thinking of digging a hole ... Then Pierre would say, he told me: *if you dig a hole, I will help you* (NCP 195).

By setting this portion of the poem in prose paragraphs, Oppen emphasizes the need for a total lack of artifice. But why spend so much time on an anecdote seemingly unrelated to the rest of the poem? My contention here is that Oppen recounts this harrowing story at such length because it allegorizes his own experience of lying severely wounded in the foxhole, while at the same time speaks to his years of living underground with his family in Mexico in order to escape the FBI. Both his own story and Adam's are accounts of premature burials and call to mind lines from a later poem, "Of Hours," where Oppen must bury his dog tags with their H for Hebrew, literally encrypting them along with his identity as a Jew.

No man

¹⁸ Pierre Adam's story is but one of many. The English historian Richard Vinen devotes a chapter to the compulsory service mandated by Vichy's STO, or *Service du Travail Obligatoire*, in his study of the French under the Occupation, *The Unfree French*. "The STO," he writes, "required men of an age that would normally have made them eligible for military service ... to perform compulsory labour service ... it was generally understood that most young men affected by this scheme would be sent to work in Germany" (247). Vinen describes how many in the countryside either took to the woods, where they sometimes found refuge in caves, or else were sheltered by extended families on farms. But as Vinen also points out in response to an inquiry: "Remember that the situation in Alsace is slightly different - young men there would have been called up for the German army rather than the STO" (personal communication). The situation Vinen refers to is the fact that Germany regarded Alsace as a lost part of the Greater Reich and therefore treated it differently.

But the fragments of metal
 Tho there were men there were men Fought
 No man but the fragments of metal
 Burying my dogtag with H
 For Hebrew in the rubble of Alsace (NCP 218).

In more ways than one, Oppen himself was buried in that rubble. The dogtags function metonymically, signifying his belated identification with his own Jewishness. Cathy Caruth explicates the troubling dynamics of such a trauma:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—return to haunt the survivor later on ... history, like trauma, is never simply one's own ... history is precisely that way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (UC 4, 192).

This is yet another way to read "the meaning of being numerous." Returning to this grim scene allows Oppen to recover lost experience without naming it as such. This explains why he makes such a prominent place in the poem for Pierre Adam's grim story. "You must try," he enjoins the reader at one point, midway through this diary-like prose narrative, "to put yourself into those times" (NCP 195). This plea to the reader is deeply earnest, yet feels misplaced. Does it Oppen's lack faith in his reader? Or does he realize that no matter how sharply honed he makes his account, it will never be sufficient to his purposes, can never convey the utter urgency of this crisis?

The end of Adam's narrative takes on a rather bizarre and unintentionally comic aspect, with its depiction of one Frenchman's "solution" to his being drafted: throw a big party, get drunk, and ride your bicycle downhill at full tilt into a tree. The existential dilemma is vividly rendered here. It's Oppen's musings on what it would take to pull off such a desperate act that border on the grotesquely comic. Where a more seasoned prose writer would know to stop, letting the account speak for itself in all its horror, Oppen presses on: "Probably easier to do in

an automobile,” he notes, then goes on to ponder the thin boles of trees in the French woods and the will required to hold the bike on a dead-on collision course. It’s difficult to know what to make of this passage, which closes the section, but I would suggest that it serves as an analogue to Oppen’s own trial in the foxhole, when he lay wounded for hours, as both Mary and McAleavey tell us, and where he was unable to give any aid to “the middle class boy” who died beside him.

The story of the *faire une trou* provides a striking instance of what Maria Torok calls incorporation, a constitutive melancholy in which the lost object is kept alive. As Derrida puts it in his introduction to Torok and Abraham’s book on the Wolf Man’s cryptonym: “I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, safe (save) inside me, but it is only in order to refuse, in a necessary equivocal way, to love the dead as a living part of me” (*Fors* xvi). That Oppen’s concern in “Route” is to keep alive the dead becomes even more apparent in sections eight and nine of the poem. Section eight adds a touch of grim humor:

Imagine a man in the ditch,
The wheels of the overturned wreck
Still spinning —

I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not
He sees in the manner of poetry (NCP 198).

While these lines allude to his youthful car accident, they more pointedly draw the connection between disaster and a messianic poetics.¹⁹ To be caught up in disaster – and here he conflates, by juxtaposition, his own personal history with the larger events of the century, is not to despair, but to see “in the manner of poetry,” which for Oppen means seeing clearly. As I have shown, though, such clarity is not predicated on an idea of the transparent perception, but rests instead on the aesthetic displacement that enables the poem to re-order the flux of events. Clarity, in this

¹⁹ See DuPlessis’ Chronology for Oppen in *Selected Poems*, 191. “Oppen is involved (as driver) in a serious car accident in which a youth is killed.”

context, might indicate the ability to experience time itself as out of joint, to perceive it as discontinuous, a necessary estrangement. “Route” thinks through time disjointedly, the serial mosaic scattering discrete moments of experience and recognition through the poem asymmetrically, yet always circling back to the disaster in its various forms.

Section nine takes up a figure familiar from *Discrete Series*: the car. Here, however, it is introduced as an emblem, not of disaster, but of modernity’s utopian impulses: “the powerful tires — beyond/Happiness” Yet in the very next stanza this image of joyous velocity turns to a tragic awareness of the history of America as the history of “the descendents of/Of invaders.”

I began to be aware of a countryside
And the exposed weeds of a ditch

The context is history
Moving toward the light of the conscious (NCP 198).

The trail of references is elusive here. What they point to, gleaned from Oppen’s skeletal biography, is the suicide of his mother when he was four years old. “My mother was a tragic girl/Long ago, the autonomous figures are gone/The context is the thousands of days” (NCP 198). Clarity takes on a new valence in these lines. It is no longer a searching after ontological stability, but the desire for a usable, a recoverable, past. Oppen’s dialectical image juxtaposes his wartime trauma with the suicide of his mother. But the instant of contiguity is dismissed, in section ten. “All this is mere reportage.” The problem is how to write beyond that.

If having come so far we shall have
Song

Let it be small enough (NCP 199).

These lines might be taken as markers of the poet’s humility. But they can also be read as signaling a refusal of abstraction and a recognition of the limits of representation. In either case, they point to the burden which the smallness of song must bear in Oppen’s messianic poetics.

Interruption constellates new meaning from historical trauma. But it also provides an escape route.

Even if “time remains what it was,” as the poem puts it in section twelve, unamenable to messianic intervention, still there remains an “indestructible shard,” something that guarantees the redemptive power of the remnant, the fragment of memory. This deeply Jewish trope of cultural memory lays the ground for the climax of the poem.

To owe nothing to fortune, to chance, nor by the power of
his heart

Or her heart to have made these things sing
But the benevolence of the real

Tho there is no longer shelter in the earth, round helpless belly
Or hope among the pipes and broken works

‘Substance itself which is the subject of all our planning’

And by this we are carried into the incalculable (NCP 201).

Out of this poignant image of ruination, of “the pipes and broken works,” Oppen still seems capable of affirming an irreducible kernel of substance he calls the incalculable – a messianic fragment of lost time that returns to redeem the dark passage of experience.

“Route” increasingly comes to look central to an understanding of Oppen’s poetics, requiring that we read it alongside the more attended-to “Of Being Numerous” as the other panel in a poetic diptych. Why make this claim? Because “Route” is the poem where the question of messianic time is made the most explicit in middle-period Oppen. It offers one of the most striking instances in his work of how he addresses the crisis of the temporal. In many ways, “Route” is a poem about the difficulties contingency makes for an understanding of historical time. Through the dislocating juxtapositions it makes between past and present, it produces the

kind of blasting out of historicism's false continuity advocated by Benjamin in his theory of the dialectical image.

The final section, number fourteen, enacts this through a stark montage that critiques the logic and practice of disaster. "Ours aren't the only madmen tho they have burned thousands/of men and women alive" (NCP 201). The connection between the contemporary atrocity of Vietnam and the Holocaust is explicit here. As Nicholls remarks, in one of the few comments made on this poem, "'Route' is in many ways darker than 'Of Being Numerous,' with the larger perspectives of 'humanity' now coming under even greater pressure" (GOFM 106). Despite the earlier stress placed on "the incalculable," the poem comes to ground on a dismal note: "We are at the beginning of a radical depopulation of the earth//Cataclysm ... cataclysm of the plains, jungles, the cities." The perverted logic of Nazi extermination is not merely synchronic, though, but runs throughout history, is integral to the pattern of North American colonization. "As Cabeza de Vaca found a continent of spiritual despair/in campsites//His miracles among the Indians heralding cataclysm ... These things at the limits of reason ... it is the real//That we confront" (NCP 202). This damning critique of civilized values, entirely consistent with Benjamin's conjunction of culture and barbarism, seems to foreclose any opportunity for messianic intervention. It remains for Oppen to assay this, however brokenly, in his final three books, to which I now turn.

Caesura and The Meaning of Being Jewish

Thus far, I have been building a case for Oppen as a poet committed to a messianic dynamic of interruptive form, focusing on the tensions produced by his practice of breaking poems into disjointed segments. I now want to turn, in this concluding section, to a consideration

of how such a dynamics plays out in his late work at the level of the line and phrase. To do this I will read his use of caesura as a radical incision in the body of poem, (one that marks the aporetic role he assigns to caesura). At the same time I will argue that caesura may also be read as the formal embodiment of his ambivalent relationship to his Jewishness. Just as the caesura can be said to both sever and join, so Oppen's attitude toward belonging to the larger community of Jews never quite settles into one of frank affiliation, but remains in constant flux, continually tested against his own demanding measures for Objectivist sincerity. In what follows I will contend that the caesura undertakes the poetic value and function of the serial at the level of the line. Caesura, as Oppen practices it, can be understood as another method for reframing temporality within the poem by subjecting it to even more drastic syntactic dislocations. By fracturing meaning this way, the poem registers that only time is out of joint, but the idea of the aesthetic as well. This acknowledgement provides the basis for the poem's engagement with the disaster, supplying the necessary leverage to open a fissure into messianic time.

For Oppen, the cultural meaning of being Jewish can be placed alongside the formal meanings produced by the caesura. Both speak to finding a way to live in the interstice that separates the solitary self from the larger community. This gap might be called, after the title of his single essay on American poetry, "the mind's own place." It is a stubbornly held ground, cleared away with great difficulty. Given his contempt for the common social forms of religion, what he calls "the card-party-bingo-church-picnic office parties Catholic Protestant or Jewish," his sense of himself as Jewish becomes narrowly qualified. What Jewishness means for Oppen, finally, is a structure for maintaining a rigidly self-imposed internal exile. "I read Israel Zangwill," he recalls in an interview, "and came upon his phrase 'walking-stick Jews,' and I almost died and thought that is probably what I am. We were foreign in any country" (qtd. in

Nicholls, GOFM 156). The trope of self-alienated belonging is, of course, classically Jewish and runs memorably from Kafka to Groucho Marx.²⁰ Writing to Donald Davie in 1972, Oppen expands on this theme:

Perhaps it is true, as you suggest, that I feel myself the American and the Jew – Semite, nomad, no islander, unable to feel myself included in that tone or ever possibly included. Alien? ... I sometimes think that, being not quite American since I am a Jew, I am the MOST American (SL 244-45).

And in another letter he simply comments: “Afraid I am one of the Jews’ Jews, stiff-necked persons in the singular” (SL 235). A kind of self-effacing exceptionalism marks these comments and, while they might be taken for an aloof, disdainful pride, I think they can best be understood as Oppen’s way of keeping faith with himself and to his commitment to poetic rigor. As Stephen Fredman notes, the most salient meanings of being Jewish for Oppen were “resistance and betweenness” (Menorah 77). Jewishness epitomizes not belonging, even in the sense of rebelling, but an existential sense of out-of-jointness.

While much of modernist poetry engages to a large extent with formal experiments in fracturing the poem’s internal time logic, for instance, through montage, what makes Oppen’s work a case meriting special attention is the way it subjects syntax to temporal distension via the caesura. It is not a matter of him merely registering the effects on interior experience brought about by the acute confusions of modernity. Rather, he uses this strategy to think through the problematic of time in form and this distinction is crucial for understanding how out-of-jointness is not the subject of complaint, something to be passively endured, but rather that which must be actively articulated and worked through. For a modernist like Pound, for whom “all ages are contemporaneous,” the fractured time signatures of *The Cantos* represent a way to represent the synchronic continuities of eras as different from one another as ancient China and the Italian

²⁰ Kafka: “What have I in common with the Jews? I hardly have anything in common with myself.” Marx (but also attributed to other comedians): “I don’t want to belong to any club that will have me as a member.”

Renaissance. For Oppen, the fracturing of the poem's internal time is the performance of thought itself. Pound's method might be said to repress true dialectical thought by insisting on identity; Oppen's broken syntax blasts the poem apart in order to preserve non-identity. As he puts, rather bluntly, in "The Mind's Own Place": "the poet's business is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to seek to give to political statements the aura of eternal truth" (Sel Poems 182). The poet's business is to think through, on his own terms, a condition of clarity, and he does this by inhabiting the confusion rather than attaching comforting labels to it. If being out of joint is symptomatic of the confusion, then the poem can turn this to its advantage by redeeming form through "the tiny fissures in the continuous catastrophe."²¹

"To The Poets: To Make Much of Life" (*Myth of the Blaze*, 1975) can be read as an example of such a "catastrophic" style. Its central image of a crystal center presses forward to a conception of the abyss, itself a kind of caesura.

return
 return of the sun) no need to light

 lamps in daylight working year
 after
 year the poem

 discovered

 in the crystal
 center of the rock image

 and image the transparent

 present tho we speak of the abyss
 of the hungry we see their feet their tired

 feet (NCP 260)

²¹ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 161.

Here Oppen refines the Imagist method beyond the logic of the ideogram in order to, as he puts it, “construct a method of thought from the imagist technique of poetry – from the imagist intensity of vision” as he tells LS Dembo (interview, 1969). “The abyss” can be read as either end-stopped or enjambed, as a figure for the socially disenfranchised or the hermetic enclosure of the crystal center. To isolate one set of meanings from another is to set the tensile reticulation of the poem’s structure at risk. The line break suspends both relations, illuminating without resolving them, while refusing to confer continuity to the writing of the disaster.

Likewise, *Seascape: Needle’s Eye* (1972) begins with the cryptic, fragmentary lines for “From a Phrase of Simone Weil’s and Some Words of Hegel”:

In back deep the jewel
 The treasure
 No Liquid
 Pride of the living life’s liquid
 Pride in the sandspit wind this ether this other this element all
 It is I or I believe (NCP 211)

The elliptical tensions running through this poem are of such severity as to risk running aground on its own resistances, and indeed, Oppen builds a powerful self-interrupting rhythm:

We are the beaks of the ragged birds
 Tune of the ragged bird’s beaks
 In the tune of the winds
 Ob via the obvious
 Like a fire of straws
 Aflame in the world or else poor people hide
 Yourselves together Place
 Place where desire
 Lust of the eyes the pride of life and foremost of the storm’s
 Multitude moves the wave belly-lovely
 Glass of the glass sea shadow of water
 On the open water no other way
 To come here the outer
 Limit of the ego (NCP 211)

This enigmatic poem crackles with the stress of its construction. For Oppen, the song or tune of the birds does not, like the song in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” impose order on the chaos of the sea. Rather, it is a part of that chaos, or rather part of the process of the scene, part of the *ob via*, or the route through things as they present themselves to the poet. What the poem enacts, though, is far from scenographic description. It is the performance of consciousness pushing itself to a limit – “the outer/Limits of the ego” – through the concomitant pressures placed on syntax and enjambment. Without this pressure the last lines become something else:

Glass of the glass sea
 shadow of water on the open water
 no other way to come here
 the outer limit of the ego

Read this way, at the pauses between phrases, the lines grow slack; they lose the density and cohesive power of the mind as it thinks with the objects of its perception. John Taggart, one of Oppen’s most discerning readers, says of this verbless, stone-mason poetry, as he calls it, that it gives every appearance of having been written with a painstaking “difficulty beyond craft,” as if the situation of the poem demanded such an extraordinary degree of compression to produce revelation without the gloss of resolution (SD 10).

As Nicholls observes, in “Oppen’s late poems ... the caesural pause inhibits any rhetorical ‘smoothness’ and situates the subject on both sides of the ‘abyss’ at once” (GOFM 179). By destroying rhetorical smoothness, or hypotactical transparency, Oppen is able use the caesura to create the particular kind of clarity that is consonant with Objectivist principles of “accuracy, precision, a test of truth” (Sel Poems 173). The impact of the poem, as he writes in “The Mind’s Own Place,” depends upon “the shock of recognition,” or what Benjamin would call the rupture of transmission.

Jacques Derrida's comments in *Specters of Marx* are useful for thinking through Oppen's use of caesura. For Derrida, time out of joint indicates the precarious condition of justice in contemporary society. "Out of joint," Derrida comments, "would qualify the moral decadence or corruption of the city, the dissolution or perversion of customs. It is easy to move from disadjusted to unjust" (SM 19).

To be "out of joint," whether it be present Being or present time, can do harm and do evil, it is no doubt the very possibility of evil. But without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps, beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst. A necessity that would not (even) be a fated one" (SM 29).

Yet in its threat to social structures, out-of- jointness also contains the radical possibility for the occurrence of messianic justice. As John Caputo suggests:

The time that is out of joint is a messianic time, a time that does not close in upon itself, that is structurally ex-posed to an out-side that prevents closure. Injustice is closure, juncture even as messianic justice lies in disjuncture and being out of joint (PTJD 123).

Derrida's excursus can be profitably placed alongside Oppen's turn to the caesura. To be out of joint for Oppen is both to invite and undergo an acute form of temporal and historical estrangement. This estrangement takes an even sharper makes itself felt in the poems, both formally and thematically.

As a temporal marker, out-of-jointness, announces the acute awareness of time's fragmentation and at the same time, the potential, in each moment of perception, for the generation of messianic shards. Oppen's late work is fissured with discontinuous line gaps and ambiguous stanza breaks, forcing the reader to pick her way carefully through them in order to assemble meaning. Oppen is not indulging in difficulty for its own sake here. For him, nothing less than a total commitment to the poem as a vehicle for knowledge is at stake. This effort to achieve clarity requires an intransigence that imparts to his work all the uncompromising qualities Adorno attributes to late style. Like seriality, caesura in Oppen's poems exemplifies the

paratactical logic of messianicity. Oppen's turn to the serial and to caesura parallels Adorno's description of how parataxis shatters "the symbolic unity of the work of art" by refusing its claim to patch over aesthetically what, in reality, remains deeply and antagonistically divided, namely the difference between the cult of the free individual and her actual living conditions (NTL II xx).

From 1972-78, Oppen's final period of significant work, which includes *Seascape: Needle's Eye*, *Myth of the Blaze* and *Primitive*, the caesura announces itself as an intransigent refusal to settle for fixed meanings. While caesura resists any model of transparent writing, it also, in Oppen's aesthetics, forces a wedge through clarity might enter. Clarity proceeds by means of scission: "There is one gap *in the mind*, the space of the mind, in which everything may be held at arm's length, everything may be seen from outside, and in which the will moves" (SP 166) – a statement that resonates strongly with Merleau-Ponty's comment that: "Perception is a nascent logos; it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself ... it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action" (25). Clarity for Oppen does not provide the unmediated vision of the mystic, but strives rather to keep thinking free of dogmatic over reach, alive within the constellating possibilities of contingency. His use of the term is not unlike the terms in which Stephen Daedalus, recapitulating Aquinas, frames it. Clarity permits one to see "a thing as it is ... [its] radiance ... is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing" (PYA 231). But this clarity is achieved inharmoniously; by the rejection of classical aesthetic values of balance and wholeness. He affirms this anti-poetical stance in many places, but here I will note the final half of "Song, The Winds of Downhill" (from *Seascape: Needle's Eye*):

Who
so poor the words

would with and take on substantial

meaning handholds footholds

to dig in one's heels sliding

hands and heels beyond the residential
lots the plots it is a poem

which may be sung
may well be sung (NCP 220).

With its emphasis on the little words – would, with, and – expressive of desire and connection, “Song, the Winds of Downhill,” can be read as a companion to the earlier “Psalm,” in which the small nouns cry faith. It is the very poverty of these words, their generality and simple use value, which, in Oppen’s eyes, endows them with such power as makes for song.

Oppen’s late style is rooted in such concerns with the means for accomplishing the fissure of clarity that produces thinking. Because of his punctured publishing history, most of his work, as mentioned above, qualifies as “late” in one sense (though clear demarcations can be made between the poetry of the 1960s and the poetry of the 70s). Of the seven volumes published in his lifetime, six appeared between 1962 and 1978. It is worth reflecting on how lateness shaped Oppen’s style after this return to poetry. While Ron Silliman registers disappointment at what he calls Oppen’s “third phase Objectivism,” dubiously singling him out for censure because of an alleged shift from “from the aesthetically radical and oppositional poetry of the early thirties to a more conservative (aesthetically, if not politically) phenomenon that then served as the foundation for the ensuing middle road,” I read Oppen’s late style as ontologically, ethically and formally radical (TP 164).²² As Michael Heller puts it: “nothing in his early work quite prepares the reader for the extraordinary shift in the look and sound of

²² Silliman’s complaint fetishizes high modernist aesthetic disjunction, but conspicuously absent from his account are such major works as Zukofsky’s *80 Flowers* (1978) and Charles Rznikoff’s *The Holocaust* (1975), equally radical late Objectivist poems.

Oppen's later work. Syntactically, it is as daring and innovative as anything in contemporary poetry" (SE 87-88). This is especially the case where his use of caesura is concerned. Late Oppen moves beyond a narrow critique of capital to engage with pressing issues of consciousness, community and the meaning of catastrophe. Oppen's late style places aesthetic disjunction at the service of mature ethical concerns.

According to Adorno, late style is not ripeness, or completion; not some quintessential distillation of spirit as the purely subjective (idealist) expression of final plenitude. Instead, he says, it is "the sudden flaring up" with which a work of art abandons its own status as art (COL 297).

The power of subjectivity in late works of art is the sudden flaring up with which it abandons the work of art. It bursts them asunder, not in order to express itself but so as to cast off the appearance of art. What is left of the works is ruins, and subjectivity communicates itself, as if by means of ciphers, only through the hollowed-out forms from which it escapes. (Can One Live 297).

As Shierry Weber Nichol森 explains, "the essential feature of late work [is] the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, so that as work becomes late it becomes increasingly inorganic" (8). Late work is not about transcendent summations, but radical discontinuity. Adorno's remarks on Beethoven are apposite for a discussion of Oppen's late style: "The caesuras, the abrupt breaks that characterize the late Beethoven more than anything are those moments of eruption; the work falls silent when it is abandoned and turns its hollow interior to the outside world" (COL 300). The mystery, he writes, of the relation between compositional fragments is never resolved, only held in a perpetual field of tension. "What is objective," about Beethoven "is the crumbling landscape; the subjective side is the light that alone illuminates it." "In the history of art," he concludes, "late works are the catastrophes." It seems fitting that Oppen's writing of the disaster required such a radical turn.

In his final three books Oppen pushes clarity-as-cognition to its limit, carrying the messianic logic of the serial to the level of the line and the individual word. Clarity becomes a kind of invisible ideogram, a para-notational blank space, a scission cutting into the material body of the poem. No longer satisfied with referencing clarity, Oppen performs it through these lacunae, suturing aesthetic practice to cognitive process. As he writes in “26 Fragments”:

Clarity means, among
other things, to know how
the words come to
meaning

to experience how the
words come to meaning (SP 235)

Clarity, finally, is not what can appear through means of the orthographical sign alone, but only as and from the pauses within the overall shape of the poem, the white caesuras of its metrical breaks.

In “The Book of Job,” for instance (again, from *Myth of the Blaze*) we find this enigmatic cluster of lines:

bony bony lose me the wind cries find
yourself I?

this? The road
and the traveling always (NCP 244).

I extract these lines, with some violence to their context, to drive home my point about the unassimilable quality of Oppen’s use of caesura. By that I don’t mean that his lines defy parsing somehow, but rather that they invite the reader to join him in the difficulty of his actual thinking through of the poem. Michael Heller’s suggestion that meaning in an Oppen poem proceeds via just such a complex negotiation between different parts of the poem that each claim for themselves the single word necessary for their syntactical completion can be taken with equal

aptness as a model for reader reception (SE 90-91). I would only add to this that sometimes that single word is not a word at all, but the interstice of the caesura.

Derrida reminds us in his essay on Edmond Jabes, caesura is what causes meaning to emerge (though in Oppen emergence can easily be mistaken for something more gnostic). “Without interruption,” he warns, “no signification could be awakened” (WD 78). Likewise, Blanchot’s analysis of the function of interruption points to the “fundamental anomaly that it falls to speech not to reduce but convey, even if it does so without saying it or signifying it ... it is to this hiatus – to the strangeness, to the infinity between us – that the interruption in language itself responds” (77). Or as Oppen puts it in “The Little Pin: Fragment” (*Primitive*, 1978): “of this/all things/speak if they speak the estranged” (NCP 254).

Estrangement and interruption are central to the inorganic quality of Oppen’s late style and to his complicated engagement both disaster and the meaning of being Jewish. If, as I have suggested above, Jewishness is “betweenness” then the only way Oppen can ratify his affiliation with his own cultural identity is in the act of breaking it. The gaps and fissures that pervade his poems from the 70s hover between the substantial and the spectral, partaking of two meanings, two lexical events, or else emptying out both into a lacuna of pure potentiality, where the poem oscillates between contingency and determinacy, clarity and opacity.

At the hinge connecting silence and speech, caesura lets Being in. Not quite speech, but not quite not-speech, it offers what Rudolph Gasché calls a model for relation predicated on distance, rather than proximity. It joins as much as it divides (78). Hölderlin calls caesura, “the pure word” – a beat, a pulse, a touch: the very touch of the poem’s inner skin (102).²³ The caesura is Oppen’s late modernist theodicy; as the very signature of clarity it justifies the right of

²³ *Essays and Letters on Theory*. Trans. Thomas Pfau. “In the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein *transport* presents itself, there becomes necessary *what in poetic meter is called cesura*, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture.”

lyric to continue speaking against the pressures of history and totality. As Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe remarks of Hölderlin, “The interruption of language, the suspension of language, the caesura – that is poetry, then ... the spasm or syncope of language” (PE 49). He pushes this claim even further, elevating the role of caesura beyond the formal to the historical when he suggests that, “it is not perhaps impossible to raise the caesura to the rank of a concept, if not the concept, of historicity. A caesura would be that which, within history, interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, or else closes off all possibility of history” (HA&P 45). The history he has in mind, specifically, is the event of Auschwitz, which fulfills both the positive and negative functions of the caesura.

In “The Poem,” published three years before his death, Oppen distills the essence of clarity.

A poetry of the meaning of words
And a bond with the universe

I think there is no light in the world
but the world

And I think there is light (NCP 309).

Clarity is Oppen’s poetic theodicy of the immanence and an affirmation of a radical finitude that gives out onto the world, as the world. As a breaking of sequence in the very measure and act of thinking, it justifies the right of lyric to continue speaking against the pressures of history and totality. Whether enacted through seriality or the caesura, Oppen’s poetics serves an acknowledgement of Adorno’s ethics of estrangement: “only what does not fit into the world is true” (AT 59). For Oppen, the sense of what does not fit extrudes as the conviction that only the poem that fails, the poem that is broken, attains clarity. Or as he asks in the closing lines of “The Little Pin: Fragment”:

Song?

astonishing

song? the world
sometime be

world the wind
be wind o western
wind to speak

of this (NCP 255)

Chapter 3—"The Library is Burning": Jewish Textuality and The Burnt Book of Michael Palmer

Wittgenstein and "The Book Against Understanding"

The messianic turn of George Oppen writes the disaster through non-sequential series and caesuras that challenge the representational claims made by traditional aesthetics while at the same time staging a complicated confrontation with his status as a Jew. Though not Jewish, what Michael Palmer takes from both Oppen and Objectivist poetics is a set of strategies deeply informed by secular Jewish figurality. These include a commitment to minimalism, the use of serialism, tropes of negation, and an emphasis on a textuality of interruption and rewriting that owes a good deal to the scriptural practice of midrash. For Palmer, the Objectivists represent "the poetic values of resistance, social awareness and exploratory integrity," while Oppen himself is valuable for his maintaining faith "in the possibility of reference even when faced with the unspeakable and apparently unrepresentable events of our century" (AB 231). Above all, what marks Palmer as a poet writing in a secular Jewish vein is the predominance in his work of the figure of the book and an abiding concern with finding a language for the disaster that does not betray it by reducing it to an artifact for easy aesthetic consumption.

What Palmer shares with Oppen is a suspicion of language as untrustworthy and easily corrupted, a sense that words are always potential enemies and meaning slippery and unreliable. If Oppen can be understood as a poet exactly sculpting the rubble of poetic form in order to create a redemptive fragment that is at once a product of the disaster and its critique, then Palmer may be seen as a poet who writes disaster by attending to the nuances of textual poetic practice itself, the ways in which meaning is always on the verge of unmaking itself. Just as Oppen's caesuras intervene in the ordinary means of producing knowledge claims, so Palmer's more

hermetic poetry resists aesthetic reconciliation in order to keep faith with the scope of the disaster.

While Palmer is also deeply influenced by the gnostic and hermetic poetry of Robert Duncan (a tradition he similarly sifts through a secularizing filter), what I will focus on in this chapter are the features his poems share in common with Jewish tropes of the text. His attitude toward how poetic language operates shares much in common with Hans-Jost Frey's comments on Stéphane Mallarmé. For Frey, Mallarmé's poetry "always questions whatever it threatens to become, not to negate it but to bring it back to undecidability. The undecidable text has an undefinable status, because it constantly calls itself into question" (*Studies* 10-11). This commitment to a poetics of undecidability characterizes much of Palmer's work and is crucial for understanding how he writes the disaster. In this chapter I will map out the three main sources this approach derives from. The first is the influence of Wittgenstein's ideas about language; the second is the Objectivist practice of serialism; and the third is Jewish models of textuality and negation, drawn largely from the work of Edmond Jabes and Paul Celan. I will read this last mode through the Talmudic figure of the burnt book. Before I turn to a discussion of how Palmer uses Wittgenstein, however, I wish to begin with a brief account of the figure of the book in his poetry.

Images of the book run through Michael Palmer's poetry from his earliest volumes to his most recent, braiding an almost compulsive thread of linkages. In "Baudelaire Series," a poem whose range of reference is the history of Western lyric, he writes, "Dear Book, You were never a book/Panther, You are nothing but page/torn from a book//Stupid Lake, You were the ruin of a book" (S 12). The barbed deflation of his previous volume, *Notes for Echo Lake*, points to the larger fate of all books, perhaps – to become ruins – even as it perches alongside the luster of

Rilke's famous thing poem on the panther.¹ Norman Finkelstein, perhaps his most penetrating reader, comments that for Palmer, "the work unfolds through seriality and the highly overdetermined idea of the Book ... as an entity that is more than a gathering of poems" (OMV 143). At the same time, Palmer's adherence to serial procedures, with their emphasis on the logic of the constellation, reject "the book's traditional relation to totality, theology, and logocentrism" (OMV 143). But while Finkelstein quite rightly notes the centrality of the book as a unit of poetic composition in Palmer's work, he neglects to attend to how Palmer employs it at the level of the trope, where it signifies a continual process of the demolition and re-affirmation of meaning.

What Eric Selinger calls Palmer's "sweet, Hebraic ache" manifests itself particularly in the recurrent images of textuality which run through his poetry. This ache is for a lost world of meaning contained in the book, which, after the disaster, has become irreparably damaged, a site of random and confusing significations, rather than a conveyor of clarity. Selinger aligns Palmer's work, especially with the appearance of *Sun*, in 1988, to the larger political turns taken by American poetry in the same decade: "Palmer moves to write a poetry as responsive, in some sense, to Adorno's stern dictum about art after Auschwitz as it is to the horrors of war."² Yet this tendency can be found in some of Palmer's earliest work. A notable instance is "The Library is Burning," from his second collection, 1977's *Without Music*.

The library is burning floor by floor
delivering pictures from liquid to sleep

as we roll over thinking to run
A mistaken anticipation has led us here

to calculate the duration of a year

¹ Rainier Maria Rilke, *New Poems 1907*.p. 73. Trans. Edward Snow. Berkeley, CA: North Point, 1984.

² "Important Pleasures and Others: Michael Palmer, Ronald Johnson." *Postmodern Culture* 4.3, 1994. Accessed 10/9/2007 from Project Muse.

in units of aloe and wood

But there will be no more dust in corners
and no more dogs appearing through dust

to question themselves uncertainly
Should it finally be made clear

that there's no cloud inside no body
no streetlamps, no unfoldings at five o'clock

along the edge of a curved path
Masters of the present tense

greet morning from their cautious beds
while the greater masters of regret

change water into colored glass
The stirrings are the same and different

The stirrings are the same and different
and secretly the same

The fear of winter is the fear of fire
disassembling winter

and that time the message was confused
it felt the most precise (LB 50).

In its duplication of lines and its emphasis on the breakdown between similarity and difference, the library becomes a repository for anti-meaning, an archive of self-unmaking. Confusion is not the occasion of textual obscurity, but the source for a new kind of precision, one that militates against clarity by insisting on the negational properties of the written sign: “there’s no cloud inside no body/no streetlamps, no unfolding at five o’clock.” The erasure of such stable sites and rituals leads to a drab non-miracle: the transformation of water into mere colored glass. But because this event is posited as “the same and different/and secretly the same,” such a diminishment takes nothing away from its occurrence. That water can be “changed” by colored glass speaks to a process of perceptual, rather than material, transformation, accomplished

through the agency of letters. Likewise, the anxiety of winter disappearing into fire is dissolved in a deracinated version of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the ancient hermetic conjunction of opposites which signifies the achievement of the great alchemical work.³

At this juncture it might be helpful to pause and ask, more generally, what is a book? It is the holder of cultural memory, which is as the Baal Shem Tov says, is the secret of redemption.⁴ A conduit for transmission, a guarantor of cultural stability, the book as the repository of values and *techne* joins the past to present. It is also a medium of great malleability that can be contested, amended, revised, redacted, written over, or destroyed. From its beginnings the history of the book has been plagued by the practice of libricide.⁵ What the book offers above all, perhaps, is a promise of redemption through the window it offers into other lives, other forms of experience. But after Auschwitz, the book as a figure of redemptive agency is seriously damaged.

In taking up the trope of the book through a poetics of seriality, Palmer reinvests its potential for both undermining and reinventing how language means and fails to mean. In Palmer, the failure of language signifies the possibility of a radical opening in how meaning is constructed. As a critique of bankrupt cultural values which still persist in the wake of disaster, only the failed language of a burnt library carries the negational charge sufficient for re-imagining the poem. This process begins for Palmer with his reading of Wittgenstein, to which I will now turn.

³ See Karen Claire-Voss. "Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images" *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*. Ed. Roelof van den Broek & Wouter J. Hanegraaff. NY: SUNY Press, 1998.

⁴ Quoted in Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem & Levinas*, p. 149.

⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of this term see Fernando Baez's sobering treatise, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq*. NY: Atlas & Co., 2004.

Palmer's earliest work relies on the serial structure employed by the Oppen, familiar from Chapter 2. Equally important to his serial practice, however, is the example of Robert Duncan, whose two open-ended series, "The Structure of Rime" and "Passages," provided yet another model of a poetry of process that rejects closure. Like his interrogations of the book as a principle for organizing experience, seriality functions throughout his work as a means for questioning and disrupting the logic and practice of meaning. This kind of meta-linguistic poetics makes a dissonant music from its subversion of codes that enable signification in the first place. Palmer's first full-length collection, *The Circular Gates* (1974), opens with two series dedicated to this exploration, "The Brown Book" and "The Book Against Understanding." The former takes its title from a set of notebooks made by Ludwig Wittgenstein in which the philosopher first develops his theory of language games as a way to unravel how language means in ordinary everyday usage. In the sixth poem of the series, "The heron is riding," Palmer conjures a fantastic bestiary that allegorizes and parodies the way meaning is assembled.

The heron is riding
on a porcupine's back
and two apples hang

from the unicorn's horn
What is the name of
the Peregrine Falcon

What is the name
of the Ring-necked Duck
or the green-winged bird

perched upside down
in the hollow of a tree
or the bird with a human body

and a naked man in its beak
And why did he build a machine
allowing him to breathe

all night but never to speak
 Copper then red then brown
 the owl's eye gathers in the light

At the center of the fountain
 The first and last of
 the animals surround him (CG 19)

In this parody of Adam's naming of the animals, with its telling allusion to Hieronymous Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights," Palmer's preoccupation with tautological questions that blur into or mimic Talmudic or hermetic lore announces itself for the first time here. To ask what the name of a thing is that is already precisely catalogued – a Peregrine Falcon or a Ring-necked Duck – is to suspect language, and in particular, names, of obscuring, rather than clarifying, their referents. (This motif of the mock-catalogue is a life-long obsession of Palmer's, amounting to kind a poetic-compulsive tic). At the same time it implies that each thing possesses a second, secret name; that behind the screen of everyday nomenclature exists an esoteric system for identifying and encoding the true essence of the thing named. This is not quite as Platonic as it sounds though. This second layer of ambiguity only adds to the hermeneutic of suspicion. No matter which systems one employs, the thing itself will have been superseded by its name, just as Blanchot insists when he cites Hegel on Adam's naming of the animals, an act that "annihilated them in their existence" by replacing their substance with an abstraction.⁶

Palmer's employment of Wittgenstein is congruent with the general shift in both theory and late avant-garde poetry of the 70s from hermeneutical models to semiotic ones, from textual forms of understanding and composing poems to methods that interrogate the substratum of signs by which linguistic units cohere to produce meaning. For Wittgenstein, as for Palmer, this process is at once quintessentially pragmatic and subject to the most arbitrary caprice.

⁶ In "Literature and The Right to Death," *The Work of Fire*, p. 323.

“Language,” observes Wittgenstein, “sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings” (*Culture and Value* 18). He goes on to remark that his task as a philosopher is to provide “signposts” at the dangerous junctions where meaning can easily be carried astray. For Palmer, these junctions perform the opposite function: they invite the poem to turn astray, to perform a swerve or clinamen capable of generating surprise connections by interrupting logic, by questioning the logic of the ordinary, the given. Wittgenstein’s praxis of challenging the basis of common understanding and usage becomes Palmer’s sly and bewitching poetics. “This is difficult but not impossible: coffee/childhood; in the woods there’s a bird; its song stops you and makes you blush/and so on (CG 13). The opening lines of Palmer’s poem, “The Brown Book,” mix traditional poetic tropes of wonder and memory— childhood, the singing of a bird – in a flat, affectless tone which denudes them of the very properties they invoke. As the poem continues: “we wander around the park/and out of our mouths come blood and smoke/and sounds,” the poem issuing not a specific set of meanings, but categories of generality signifying disturbance and confusion (CG13) Yet there is more at stake here than merely affecting a frisson. What Palmer is getting at is Wittgenstein’s notion of the language game.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, a major text developed from the lecture notebooks of *The Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein delineates his theory of the language-game, by which speakers agree to certain protocols for recognizing common terms used to designate objects, processes, persons and so forth. As A.C. Grayling helpfully explains, what Wittgenstein wishes to demonstrate by his theory of language games is that “naming ... is not the basis of meaning” (W 85). And in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, Marjorie Perloff gives a very vibrant account of Wittgenstein’s appeal to modernist and postmodernist writers like Gertrude Stein and John Cage. Her provocative and sometimes testy

apologia (in which she rather perversely reads her fellow Viennese's work as both preceding and somehow superseding Saussure's analysis of language's non-essentialist structure) usefully situates his anti-philosophical philosophy in terms of "the commonsense recognition that there are metaphysical and ethical aporias that no discussion, explication, rationale, or well-constructed argument can fully rationalize. The appeal to "commonsense" is somewhat disappointing in a critic of her stature and acumen, but the point is well taken, all the same.

What Wittgenstein offers Palmer, first of all, is a way to push back against the traditional understanding of language, by which a word corresponds to the thing it names. Gerald Bruns calls this register the Orphic, "after Orpheus, the primordial singer whose sphere of activity is governed by a mythical or ideal unity of word and being, and whose power therefore extends beyond the formation of a work toward the creation of the world" (MPIL 1). This conception of language underlies the basic query with which Wittgenstein opens *The Blue Book*: "What is the meaning of a word?" As he goes on to note, such questions produce "a mental cramp" and are the source of "philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it" (BB 1). But the lack of a substantive for abstract words also leads to poetic bewilderment, and it is in this hall of mirrors where Palmer's work revels in the strangeness how we use to draw meanings between things can be re-invented.

Philosophical Investigations elaborates on this theme. Commenting on Augustine's account in *The Confessions* of how he acquired language by grasping the relationship between the sound his elders made and the object they pointed to, he remarks: "In this picture of language, we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (PI 1). For Palmer, Wittgenstein's plodding, yet beguiling, cross-examinations of linguistic practices and their

epistemological assumptions proves a kind of poetic catnip. Wittgenstein's leisurely, lecture-like prose – "Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination"

(P 265) offers a somewhat unlikely, but incredibly rich, vein for linguistic play:

[Let *a* be taken as ...]
 a liquid line beneath the skin
 and *b* where the blue tiles meet
 body and the body's bridge
 a seeming road here, endless (CA 54).

Palmer's method in poems like "The Project of Linear Inquiry" is to join parody to homage in the body of his own poetic investigations about how words mean or, more to the point, how they fail to mean, how they mean in wildly askew ways. Language is both bridge and road, and endless in its possibilities for signification.

Palmer's attraction to language games runs strongly through his work up to and including *Sun*. In part what Wittgenstein offers him (as Saussure did for other poets seeking a divergence from the mainstream) is way to capitalize on the inescapably arbitrary set of rules which govern how we make words mean what they do. To see language performing this way is subversive; it allows a way in for difference, a way to say otherness and so claim back some portion of autonomy from the commodity-driven uses of speech.

At first glance, "The Book Against Understanding" invites comparison to the classics of medieval apophysis, like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or the sermons of Meister Eckhart. These works of mysticism reject rationalism in favor of the power of intuition to restore the self to its primordial knowledge of the Godhead. But the title also lends itself to an Adornian reading: that books as representative artifacts of culture are no longer capable of serving as mediators of social experience or personal inwardness. They, too, have been damaged almost beyond repair. Yet it is this very damage that suddenly renders them capable of offering a radical new way of being

read, one that refuses the reader – and the poem – some clear cut set of meanings, but instead leads deeper into the maze that is the wreckage of meaning, the place where meaning’s redemption might also be found.

For Palmer, the book is not always a device for rendering the universe legible. Just as often it is obfuscatory; a darkened glass that obscures reading’s task. “To learn what to say to unlearn/The order of islands here//the number of fingers/made from ideas ... words for *are* and *are not*” run the opening lines from a poem in “The Book Against Understanding” (CG 26). Such words presumably would name another order of being altogether, one outside common linguistic understanding and belonging to an Orphic poetics where word and thing enjoy perfect congruity. Maurice Blanchot calls this procedure *désoeuvrement*, or unworking. “To write,” he declares, “is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness, unworking) ... writing is the absence of the work as it *produces itself* through the work” (IC 424). Blanchot’s involuted argument about worklessness is helpfully explicated by Gerald Bruns. “Blanchot’s anarchism is a critique of sovereignty, that is, a critique of Hegelian rationality ... he comes to speak instead of *désoeuvrement*, where the work of the work of writing (but not just writing) is an unworking—a dispersal—of the forms of social, aesthetic, and political practice by which we produce and universalize our scheme of things.” (MB RP 32). Bruns goes on to elaborate by discussing the poetry of Paul Celan: “Poetry is not a work or process of art; it is a *désoeuvrement*,: its movement is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement toward what is always elsewhere” (MBRP 88). Or as Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier puts it: “Unworking is not to be understood, then, as the disaster of the work, or the impossibility of writing following the catastrophe of History ... unworking renounces the

reassuring distinction between the thing gazed upon and its aesthetic elaboration”⁷ In Palmer, this notion expresses itself through image of the burnt book, a book always haunted by its empty twin. Emptiness, as a figure for negational poetics, destroys the satisfying illusions of completion offered by a poetry of the homogeneous.

In the title series of *Notes for Echo Lake* this unworking of words, of the very idea of the poem as a vehicle for transparent communication, is aggressively played out:

Words that come in smoke and go ...

The letter of the words of our legs and arms. What he had seen or thought he'd seen within the eye, voices overheard rising and falling. And if each conversation has no end, then composition is a placing beside or with and is endless, broken threads of cloud driven from the west by afternoon wind ...

Words would come in smoke and go, inventing the letters of the voyage, would walk through melting snow to the corner store for cigarettes, oranges, and a newspaper ... or was the question in the letters themselves, in how by chance the words were spelled.

In the poem he learns to turn and turn, and prose seems always a sentence long (CA 14-16).

The sense of uncertainty about language, about the solidity of words, as acute as it is here, masks a spiritual longing for words to come unmoored from their usual signifying duties and enter a game of chance and divination, dissolving as smoke, speaking and being erased. This thread dominates Palmer's middle period triad of books, *Notes for Echo Lake*, *First Figure* and *Sun*. I offer a few samples, chosen virtually at random, to illustrate my point.

Sign that empties itself at each instance of meaning, and how else to reinvent attention (Notes 5).

Once I could not speak of it
Now I am unable to (First 12)

I sang my song but it sounded strange
I sang the trace then

⁷ “On Unworking” The image in writing according to Blanchot,” in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demands of Writing*, 137-40.

without a sound
then erased it (*Sun*, CA 217).

This mysterious series of transactions – signs whose potency is gained from emptiness; a condition of aphasia that passes into apophasis; a song whose strangeness only achieves itself through self-erasure – all these instances indicate not only the journey the poem makes in its own passage through the logic of scriptural dissolution, but the larger fate of poetry after Auschwitz. The lament for song's collapse becomes the subject of song. These lines give strong evidence of how Palmer's encrypted poetry combines the Objectivist sense of investigatory ethics with a deracinated gnosticism taken from Robert Duncan to produce a powerfully messianic poetics. They break open the idea of the poem as self-contained expression of a homogenous self to present an idea of poetry after the disaster as dire, as drastic. Rejecting what Adorno calls "art's inescapable affirmative essence," they take up instead a negational stance, inhabiting an uncertain and indeterminate position (AT 2). Like the protagonists of Beckett's novels, these poems are virtually incapable of speech and yet unable to do anything but go on speaking. To write from a position of failure, of weakness and uncertainty, is not retreat from poetry, though, but rather an acknowledgement of its damaged status. Such a method decouples heroic agency and its claims to representation from the desolate site of actual speaking.

The failure of the aesthetic after Auschwitz to signify in the face of catastrophe must become its subject matter. To write otherwise is to deny historical reality. Josh Cohen supplies a helpful way into Adorno's intransigent position here:

History has annihilated the conditions for the artworks' self-certainty, and it is in the form of this annihilation that it enters the artwork. Any attempt at representational adequation between the artwork and suffering violates the truth of the latter, which lies precisely in its strangeness to any possible knowledge. Art must absorb into itself the experience of its own collapse as a form of knowledge (IA 64).

This absorption of collapse receives one of its most urgent figurations in the trope of the burnt book, which for Palmer stands as both the destruction of meaning and its redemption. After Auschwitz, the book comes as the angel of history, the messianic figure, in Benjamin's famous formulation, that gazes on history from outside history, yet at the same time is inescapably caught up in it, unable to stop its downfall. Simply put, the book in Palmer is destroyed and renewed in order to rupture the homogeneity of time and break through to Benjamin's messianic "time of the now." This trope of the book and how it signifies plays out in two ways in Palmer's poetry. Before I take up the subject of the burnt book, I must first give a fuller account of how loss and negation operate in his work. To do that, I will now turn to one of his most important poems, "Baudelaire Series."

Eurydice's Book of Negation

In "Baudelaire Series," a poem some commentators have elected as the culmination of his mature phase, Palmer builds a haunted house in which to conduct a séance with modernism.⁸ Underlying this séance is the sense that poetry after Auschwitz must, if it is to be honest, acknowledge its own posthumous status, as it were, its articulation of "ghostlier demarcations," in Wallace Stevens' famous phrase. Jacques Derrida locates the crossroads of spectrality and being, typically enough, in a pun. But this paranomasia is telling for a poetry that would write the disaster.

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only as a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration (*Specters of Marx* 161).

⁸ In discussing Palmer's "unabashedly lyric rigorous" experimental poetry, Robert Kaufman praises the poem's "phenomenal evocation and revisitation of a century and-a-half's lyric and social history." See "Lyric's Expression: Musicality, Conceptuality, Critical Agency," in *Adorno and Literature*, edited by David Cunningham.

To be haunted is not only to inhabit the vanished structures of being. It is to recognize that being itself is always already interrupted (and thus, constituted) by its spectral afterlife. It to live in a present continually threatened or invaded by the past. Haunting means the present is experienced as abeyance. It is to face the threat – or potential – of the present’s continuum, itself a form of historical amnesia, being punctured at any moment by the specter of loss, which offers the chance for messianic intervention.

In “Notes for Echo Lake,” for instance, a serial poem in twelve sections, Palmer enacts an complex dialogue between the poem’s speaker and his ghostly other, a kind of echological duet that draws out the ways in which both the subject and the poem undergo an enriching dispersal, a counter-poem whose interruptive colloquy proposes a more dynamic and restless form of continuity.

Who did he talk to

Did she trust what she saw

Who does the talking

Whose words formed awkward curves

Did the lion finally talk (Notes 4, CA 21)

Alluding to Wittgenstein’s remark on the failure of communication between incommensurate registers, the trope of the echo in these lines gives us a voice speaking to itself, asking itself questions without hope or even need of an answer, making a speech in order to be making it, and so that the search for in order that is in search of speech and so is a figure for the reader as well,

or for the distance (and the closeness) between poem and reader, the speaker and its other.⁹ But the echo is also what prevents the closure of self-identity, the seamless closure between voice and recipient, since all speaking is doubled by the echo and so never finished. The echo in this sense represents a splitting off and marks the site or occasion for the primal estrangement of speaking. Echolalic speaking is damaged midrash. This structuring dynamic of damaged midrash forms the animating core of “Baudelaire Series,” from *Sun* (1988), the book which follows *Notes for Echo Lake*.

“Baudelaire Series” is, among other things, a poem about how poems remember, or are haunted by, other poems. It is also a lyrical way for thinking through and beyond the problems such remembering brings with it, in particular, the tendency to reify the poetic past as heritage or cultural value. The prologue opens on this note.

*A hundred years ago I made a book
and in that book I left a spot
and on that spot I placed a seme*

*with the mechanism of the larynx
around an inky center
leading backward-forward*

*into sun-snow
then to frozen sun itself*

Here, Palmer’s predilection for oppositions asserts itself, conjoining like with unlike, semantic sense with semiological sounding, past with present, speech with the written word.

*Threads and nerves have brought us to a house
and clouds called crescent birds are a lifting song
No need to sail further
protesting here and there against some measures*

⁹ “If a lion could speak, we could not understand him.” *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 223. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. London: Blackwell, 1953.

*across the years of codes and names
always immortal as long as you remain a man
eating the parts of him indicated by the prophets*

*stomach skull and gullet
bringing back the lost state
Yes I just dreamed another dream and nobody was in it (CA 163)*

With its echoes of Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" the poem strikes an elegiac note, mixing memory, not with desire as such, but with the desire for words lost to the sunken regions of a modernism that has suffered shipwreck. Palmer himself comments that the poem is "an investigation of lyric form since its 19th century origins in Hölderlin and others" ("Dear Lexicon" 12), while Finkelstein views it as a "critical review of modernism" in which Palmer's "vision of cultural disintegration ... grows increasingly focused" along with "his sense of disaster" (OMV 145).

"Baudelaire Series" is populated with ghosts (Oppen, possibly, one of them) "Yes I just dreamed another dream and nobody was in it" (9). This ghostly nobody includes Dickinson ("I'm nobody"); Rilke ("to be no one under so many lids"), along with Celan's gloss on Rilke ("*Niemand*rose"). But "nobody" especially recalls Pound's Homeric *outis*, his Odyssean alias from *The Pisan Cantos*, signifying not so much escape as the abjection of failure and exile. All the ghosts of modernism are gathered together at midrashic banquet. Writing out of and to the catastrophe that is history, Palmer disavows the lyric's traditional, not to say, anxious, claim on the glories of the autonomous subject. This is one way to account for the extraordinary amount of quotation and allusion running through this poem.

At the same time, "Baudelaire Series" is Palmer's pointed response to Eliot's "The Waste Land." Where Eliot's poem uses quotation and allusion to erect a rearguard bulwark against the encroachments of chaos, Palmer employs it as a way of refusing to close off the question of meaning's imminent destruction. Instead, he adheres to the difficulty posed by the disaster,

lamenting that the Vietnam War has produced a world in which “languages break down ... where pacification means annihilation” (AB 252). This sense of ongoing political atrocity is registered most sharply in the book’s final poem, the second entitled “Sun.”¹⁰

Write this. We have burned all their villages

Write this. We have burned all the villages and the people in them

Write this. We have adopted their customs and their manner of dress

Write this. A word may be shaped like a bed, a basket of tears, or an X (S 83).

In these opening lines the poem couples the theme of the disappeared subject to the horrific images of burnt bodies in Vietnam. “Sun” demonstrates that a political poem can do more than offer commentary on massacre or the pernicious policies of the Cold War; it shows how disaster is written into the very logic of the language used to express and absorb it. Likewise, in “the Adorno sonnet” of “Baudelaire Series,” Palmer implicates aesthetics even more forcibly. In this poem, the desire to create or experience beauty as an anodyne for suffering is cancelled out by the overwhelming knowledge that suffering on a mass scale is taking place in that very moment, rendering the musician who would strike the piano keys helplessly inert, suspended between the desire for release or redemption and the crushing sense of such redemption’s futility.

A man undergoes pain sitting at a piano
knowing thousands will die while he is playing

He has two thoughts about this
If he should stop they would be free of pain

If he could get the notes right he would be free of pain
In the second case the first thought would be erased ...

¹⁰ In his 1993 interview with Palmer, Peter Gizzi speculates that Palmer’s fondness for double titles owes something to medieval scholar Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic study, *The King’s Two Bodies*, a book beloved by Jack Spicer. Palmer’s response is typically coy and evasive. My own research, based on a reading of Palmer’s senior thesis at Harvard on Raymond Roussel, shows that his preoccupation with doubling begins as an undergraduate. As he puts it, “repetition doubles the mystery by creating a false conventional logic” (TP 21).

Such thoughts destroy music
and this at least is good (S 61).

To destroy music becomes good when all music can offer is anesthetic. As Adorno himself remarks, in one his grimmer pronouncements: “The abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting” (CLA, 252). Palmer hews to this line, destroying the music of the poem, yet he never goes so far as to reject beauty altogether. Instead, he imbues it with resistive properties.

As the singular crisis of his generation, Vietnam presses Palmer to insist that lyric moved past mere self-expression. It must become “a critique of the discourse of power” (AB 256). Yet, very often, the terms of this address Palmer uses in responding to the disaster are haunting and intimate, as in this portion of “Baudelaire Series”:

I’m writing your letters back to you
which is a sound at least
to mirror another sound
where no other paintings can be found (CA 152).

The landscape of the commons is pocked with the ruination of mutual recognition. In such a place, only the tropes of absence can signify meaningfully. If Eliot is an elegist, he still holds out hope for renewing the contract between word and thing. Palmer, on the other hand, parses the symptoms of late modern life with ironic exactitude and a marked lack of self-pity. The difference between the two poems, one is tempted to simplify, is that one poet has betted heavily on the romantic anthropology of Frazier, with its assertion of an underlying, universal structure supporting all cultural behavior, while the other has steeped himself in Wittgenstein and the ambiguities of language. Still, to write a letter back to its sender is not a negation of communication: it is to communicate otherwise, to produce, in the awful vacuity of meaning, a sound, at least; enough to signify the human in an inhuman world.

Recalling how Oppen's micrological poetics emphasized, in "Psalm," placing faith in the small nouns of things and the phenomena of the numerous, then Palmer's focus on textuality as a practice of world-building engages Rilke's claim for the power of Orphic lament in "Baudelaire Series" only to empty it out through a poetics of negation:

She says, Into the dark –
almost a question—
She says, Don't see things –
This bridge—don't listen

She says, Turn away
Don't turn and return
Count no more lines into the poem
(Or could you possibly not have known

how song broke apart while all the rest watched –)
Don't say things
(You can't say things) (CA 177).

This flat injunction against speech, with its accompanying refusal of things, as speech offers them, hints at, then denies, the promise of the apophatic to deliver meaning from out of language's negation. Ghostly Eurydice's impermissibility sounds a note of finality. The metaphysical disaster that is the shipwreck of history destroys not only a naive historicism's insistence on continuity, but language's contract to join us with things. If art is still possible at the end of the history of being, when "song [is] broke apart" (like the body of Orpheus), then it will be art that speaks spirit in the ruins of spirit, after spirit has turned to cinders. The way out of this impasse, the poem suggests at its close, is to follow the logic of impasse: "some stories unthread what there was" (26). It is this unthreading, or untelling, this reversal of a destructive chain of narrative construction, that the poem must work to undo. In Blanchot's parlance, the poem must achieve "worklessness," an enabling negativity that strives to mark literature *as* literature, and not as the naked, unmediated discloser of the real itself. Literature for Blanchot is

a second-order revelation then; it attests to “the revelation of what revelation destroys” (*WF* 328). But the negativity of worklessness also provides a kind of radical openness that both resists closure and renews the aura, if only by way of the aura’s dispersal.

Worklessness appears in the phrase “into the dark” as it hovers midway between statement and question. The dark *is* the book, one might almost say, meaning that it is a space thoroughly blackened through overwriting and, at the same time, the negational space that safeguards potentiality as such.. At the same time, the book of Orpheus, which can only be inaugurated by loss -- that is through the negational agency of Eurydice’s kenosis, her deliberate withdrawal – retains its redemptive potential by being positioned as a station on the poet’s *via negativa*. According to Rilke biographer Ralph Freedman, “Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes,” “dramatizes not only Orpheus’ tragic failure ... but also tells how he had lost his beloved even before he turned” (207). Freedman sees Eurydice in a similar light to H.D.’s conception of her, as a figure who “enacts freely the fate suffered by Orpheus in the end. She dissolves into nature, becoming part of a total life that includes death” (208). As Rilke writes, “she was already loosened like long hair/and relinquished like fallen rain ... she was already root” (177). Palmer’s evocation allegorizes her along these lines. Eurydice *is* the always already dispersed subject who nevertheless persists as a body made solely voice, an echo that is more than echo, a supplement that underwrites the origin.

What does it mean to lose Eurydice? Palmer’s rewriting of Rilke’s own hermetic poem emphasizes the irretrievability of experience and finally, the ruination of language itself, its powerless to signify meaningfully. Orpheus forbidden gaze erases her even as it gives birth to a more powerful register of song. Her double loss calls to mind Cathy Caruth’s observations on the workings of trauma – that every trauma is double, as it were: the initial shock of experience

followed by the belated second shock in which the subject feels fully the first shock, that is, relives it.

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness ... trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—return to haunt the survivor later on (UE 4).

Rilke's poem, like H.D.'s, envisions Eurydice as already complete without Orpheus. In Rilke, this takes the characteristic form of a quietist resignation, a mystical sense of at-one-ment, with death depicted as a calm form of pregnancy so complete and fulfilling of itself that Eurydice has no longer any need for the mortal longing that still drives and torments her former lover.

She was within herself, like a woman rich with child,
oblivious to the man who walked ahead,
and to the path ascending into life.
She was within herself. And her being-dead
filled her with abundance.¹¹

H.D., on the other hand presents Eurydice as bitter and angry, determined in the wake of this second abandonment to achieve her own completion without any assistance from Orpheus.

I tell you this:

such loss is no loss,
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls
of blackness,
such terror
is no loss

hell is no worse than your earth (SP 39).

It is the disaster of Eurydice, the loss of her through a backwards glance, that allows Orpheus to ascend, in song, to even greater song, to write his book of song, as it were. If there is no lost

¹¹ *New Poems, 1907*. Trans. Edward Snow. Berkeley, CA: North Point Press, 1984.

Eurydice, then there is no book, no song. Her loss and his song are one and the same. As Norman Finkelstein perceptively notes, “in the dark” takes Rilke’s model as its “primal scene of poetic loss” and “furthers the deconstructive aspect of Rilke’s poem by emphasizing the radical negativity that Orpheus must endure through his loss” (OMV 152).¹² To “take nothing as yours,” as Eurydice advises her erstwhile lover at the end of Palmer’s poem, is to cleave to a new mode of belonging, a primal rootlessness, *sans racine*, that is also deeply Jewish.

Maurice Blanchot’s well-known commentary on the scene of this myth has layered over its suspect gender dynamics with a kind of supra-poetic acclamation.

Orpheus has gone down to Eurydice: for him Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead. She is the instant in which the essence of the night approaches as the Other night. Orpheus' work does not consist of securing the approach of this "point" by descending into the depth. His work is to bring it back into the daylight and in the daylight give it form, figure and reality. Orpheus can do anything except look this "point" in the face, look at the center of the night in the night (99).

Karen Jacobs notes of this commentary that it “can be understood as a kind of retrospective metanarrative” that situates writing, not within the framework of loss, but of Orpheus’ gaze.¹³

When Orpheus looks back to Eurydice, his gaze erases her; she turns into a ghost. But this absence persists, becomes more powerful, and haunts, indeed, comes to inform the basis of poetic utterance for Blanchot, who reads this erasure as “the source of all authenticity.” Jacobs is particularly illuminating on this point, reading Blanchot’s enfevered rhetoric about the transformational violence contained in the Orphic gaze as a brutal “elision of the body which underpins its celebration of failure and loss” (EM 93). This destruction of personhood in the

¹² Paul de Man asserts that Rilke’s main concern in this poem is with a turn to radical inwardness, not as a retrieval of spiritual potential as such, but rather as what “designates the impossibility for the language of poetry to appropriate anything, be it as consciousness, as object, or as a synthesis of both” (AR 47). This is certainly Palmer’s line. The poem is haunted by absence, by the difficulty posed by a language emptied by modernism’s aesthetic failures and by the historical collapse of culture.

¹³ Jacobs, *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture*, p. 1.

name of the poetic is the very atrocity Palmer's poem attempts to redress, by giving Eurydice a voice. History, the crisis of what happens, the suffering and destruction of the subject, comes forward in her spectral person as she testifies on her own behalf, even if it is only the murmur of disincarnate lips.

Eurydice becomes Orpheus' double, his uncanny Other; in a sense, she is the book he cannot write and yet is doomed to write over and over, the empty book of her absence. It is through this twinning and its subsequent scission that Palmer writes the disaster; the event of Orpheus' eloquence stems from the final loss of Eurydice, confirming Benjamin's dictum that all forms of culture are inextricably bound up with underlying acts of barbarism. Yet how eloquent is Palmer's Orpheus? In fact, he remains silent while Eurydice recites a devastating litany of counter-poetic negation from the other side of living, the other side of history, the loser's side, where song has broken apart, things have become unsayable, looking is unbearable, and stories unthread their narrative unity. Eurydice's loss – her refusal, her deliberate turning back, as in Rilke's poem, but also H.D.'s earlier poem – represents the hermetic counter-turn for Palmer, the unsaying which refutes the Orphic contract with identity. Eurydice's ghost speaks the poetry of the disaster, but its messianic consolations, if any, are as small as they are grim.

I want to place this image of Eurydice as ghost alongside Giorgio Agamben's conception of the messianic remnant in his discussion of the liminal status of the survivors of Auschwitz. Agamben locates the messianic remnant in the impossible space between the not-yet departed and the still-to-come. "The aporia of messianism," he observes, "signifies the non-coincidence of the whole and the part ... messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity, but rather the disjunction that divides them, so the remnants of Auschwitz – the witnesses – are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them"

(*Remnants* 163-64). In Palmer's haunted poems we can think this description of an in-betweenness that both divides and joins as pointing toward a conception of the poem as the always aporetic and emergent event, fraught with the contingency and fragility of being, contesting the larger state of emergency that has overtaken it. What struggles to persist, then, in his work is not so much modernism itself as its messianic remnant.

A poetry of messianic remnants does not rescue culture from the disaster anymore that it can stand outside culture. It, too, is part of the disaster; it, too, has suffered catastrophe. This is the infamous aporia of poetry after Auschwitz. What Palmer undertakes is the urgent task of bringing to light these remnants in order to keep the disaster in mind. This kind of poem is not a vehicle for lyrical expression, but an instrument for combating cultural amnesia; the continual barbarism of forgetting and the naturalizing of the state's "state of exception." The poems achieve this by interruption, both at the level of the line, where syntax is torqued to disrupt our habits of reading, and at the level of cultural expectations for the poem, where they interrupt received notions of what "the aesthetic" and aesthetic experience should look like. Rejecting the model of the poem as a set of passive descriptions for ornamenting experience, Palmer strives for a poem that will stimulate, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' provocative phrase, an "ontological arousal to thinking itself" (*Blue* 195). This kind of poetry brings together Pound's ideas about how a modernist poem should operate as a method for producing "Luminous Detail," that is, as a close processual engagement with the event, with Blanchot's notion of worklessness, or the radical openness of a work that makes the event of the work (with all its anxieties, doubts, and scissions) central to the experience of it, rather than the polished dollop of aesthetic narcotizing that is actually inimical to and suppressive of experience.

Art after Auschwitz, as Adorno sees it, if it is to restore the radicality of experience, must disrupt ideology's production of identity. It must be enigmatic, in the dark, endarkening, as Robert Duncan, one of Palmer's mentors, would say. It must resist even beauty, or especially beauty, whose imperiled slide toward commodity threatens art with irrelevance. Palmer's great poem "Untitled (September '92)," from 1995's *At Passages*, opens on this note:

Or maybe this
is the sacred, the vaulted and arched, the
nameless, many-gated
zero where children

where invisible children
where the cries
of invisible children rise (AP 73)

The tentative beginning – "Or maybe" – coming *in media res*, after long searching, gives over to a plaintive sense of mourning that is also a powerful echo chamber: the plaited repetition of so many *i*'s linked in a sonic chain of causality that acts as both invocation and commemoration.

Midway through this poem, we read:

And at Lateness we say
This will be the last
letter you'll receive
final word you'll hear

from me for now
Is it that a fire
once thought long extinguished
continues to burn

deep within the ground
a fire finally acknowledged
as impossible to put out (AP 74)

Lateness is positioned in the poem not as a time past reclamation, but as a station, or place, where saying, though constrained to the point of only being able to utter farewell, is still allowed.

The fire that continues to burn is the very sign of lateness, the mysterious force that produces it

and which may be read as both a mark of the disaster and the hope of late modernism to still say the messianic, which is “impossible to put out.” Here Palmer deftly collocates critique with symptom, symptom with cure. The poem closes on a ghostly note:

gate whose burnt pages
are blowing through the street
past houses of blue paper
build over fault lines
as if by intent (*AP* 75)

The image of the gate as a burnt book drifting through a city made of paper calls to mind the ashes of the Holocaust, but may also be an allusion to the Jewish tradition of “the burnt book,” a practice that opens up space for the books yet unwritten, a messianic gesture toward the still-to-come.

As the title suggests, *At Passages* is situated somewhere between Duncan’s open-ended serial poem, “Passages,” on the one hand, and Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, on the other, that is, between the open striving for a Romantic, hermetic spirituality and the conception of cultural activity as an unconscious carnival which plays out at the most trivial levels of the everyday. Equally, though, “at passages” suggests a continual process of discovery, of being, as Celan says, “enroute,” the poem always moving toward the unknown other, into the dark, against the grain. This commitment to the unknown marks Palmer as a gnostic poet (with a small ‘g,’ to denote it from historical Gnosticism of the first centuries CE) in a line descending from Duncan, but equally inflected, as I have shown earlier, by the skepticism of Wittgenstein and Oppen. The gnostic impulse in Palmer is deeply informed by the ethos of Objectivist poetry which, he writes, “must not be confused with either scientific or moral objectivism. It is closer instead to a notion of integrity, in the sense of wholeness, retaining faith, as Oppen would say, in the possibility of

reference even when faced with the unspeakable and apparently unrepresentable event of our century” (AB, 231).

In his groundbreaking study of Robert Duncan, Peter O’Leary discusses the poet’s investment in historical Gnosticism as a model for poetic praxis. “A generic term,” he writes, “for different religious movements of the first century of the common era,” historical Gnosticism “professed that salvation from the wretchedness of material existence could be attained through gnosis, meaning simply ‘knowledge’” (GC 29). Likewise, Norman Finkelstein, in the fullest consideration of Palmer’s spiritual project written so far, describes his work as:

on the one hand, hermetic, dream-like, portentous, ritualistic, and *mysterious*, a kind of postmodern kabbalism based on a withdrawal or distantiation of meaning, as in the Lurianic notion of *tzimtzum*. On the other hand, it is obsessed with codes, signification, the connection and disruptions between words and things in the contemporary world of the simulacrum (OMV 142).

The messianic turn in Palmer can be located in his ambivalent, but nevertheless devotional, kenotic poetics. It is a gnosticism which values process over outcome, questions over answers, and so is necessarily messianic since the object of the knowledge quest is always kept deferred. Palmer’s gnostic bent derives in large part from Robert Duncan, whose impact on Palmer is as large as that of the Objectivists. Palmer’s gnostic yearning sees language, rather than the world, as occulted, hidden, and the source therefore, of both productive mystery, in the sense of potential revelation, and generative confusion, a scattering of meanings which paradoxically contain the potential to enrich the way things mean.

The Burnt Book

The burnt book is the figure *par excellence* of textual kenosis. The frequency with which it occurs in Palmer’s poetry readily attests to his commitment to write outside the conventional response to the inadequacy of art after the Holocaust. Nerys Williams accounts for the book’s

pervasive presence by explaining that “the figure of the book in Palmer’s work gestures to a body of early European lyricism” (*Reading Error*, 94). While certainly true, the book signifies a great deal more than that. In his interview with Paul Auster, Edmond Jabes articulates a conception of the book as a self-erasing instrument:

The Book that would have a chance to survive, I think, is the book that destroys itself in favor of another book that will prolong it ... it takes place because of the questioning. It is a matter of saying at each moment, that isn’t enough, I have to go further ... the book carries all books within itself, and each fragment is the beginning of the book, the book that is created within the book and which at the same time is taken apart (*Sin of the Book* 22).

The troubling yet ultimately empowering ideal of a self-erasing book capable of continual renewal receives compelling treatment in Palmer’s poetry, animating its deepest desire for a form of language that is at once Orphic and hermetic, that can simultaneously proclaim and cancel itself.

As a modernist trope, the book does not begin with post-Holocaust writers, nor is it rooted solely in the deconstructive turn to the indeterminate. Behind both of these conceptual strands stands the work of Mallarme, who radically restages the poem as a typographical theater composed in the unit of the page in “A Throw of the Dice” (1897). For Mallarme, the book is elevated to a “spiritual instrument” whose purpose is to contain the entire world.¹⁴ Yet for all its seeming heresy, Mallarme is merely making explicit the logic of the theory of divine signatures initially underwritten by the doctrine of correspondences and promulgated by Paracelsus and Jacob Boehme. The Book as the site of revelation, in which the signature of each thing radiates its double aspect, at once identifying with the material object which it is and the etherial sign that enscripts it, strives to reconcile the material world with the conceptual form that engenders it.

Textuality as mirroring process of reality confirms and amplifies the circular economy of sign

¹⁴ See “As For The Book” in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, NY: New Directions, pp. 80-81. “All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book ... man’s duty is to observe with the eyes of divinity.”

production.¹⁵ This process is especially made evident in Palmer's poem for Jerome and Dian Rothenberg, "A Dream Called the House of the Jews."

In his anthology of Jewish poetry, *The Big Jewish Book*, later reprinted as *Exiled in The Word*, Rothenberg recalls in the preface how the idea for the book came to him in a dream.

I was in a house identified by someone as THE HOUSE OF JEWS, where there were many friends gathered, maybe everyone I knew. Whether they were Jews or not was unimportant: I was & because I was I had to lead them through it. But we were halted at the entrance to a room, not a room really, more like a great black hole in space. I was frightened & exhilarated, both at once, but like the others I held back before that darkness. The question came to be the room's name, as if to give the room a name would open it. I knew that, & I strained my eyes & body to get near the room, where I could feel, as though a voice was whispering to me, creation going on inside it. And I said that it was called CREATION (RPSJC 33-34).

"A Dream Called 'The House of Jews'" pays homage to this dream while at the same time appropriating it for Palmer's characteristic scenario in which ambiguity and uncertainty both imperil the substance of the word, and rescue it in the form of a ghostly after-presence.

Many gathered friends many friends maybe everyone
 Many now and then may have entered
 The ivory teeth fell from her mouth
 The typewriter keys
 Many fell then at the entrance
 Many held them
 Many fell forward and aware
 Various friends gathered at the entrance
 Some held back
 The room contains a question
 Many said now before then this then that
 The room contains a question to be named
 He said *I will tell the book the dream the words tell me*
 The room is not the place or the name (CA 13)

The poem opens with a gathering, the scene, perhaps, of a party or reception. This is immediately qualified, however, with the uncertain acknowledgement that many "may have entered." A kind of electoral allotment is in play, with the called, or the chosen, entering, or being allowed to

¹⁵ For a full consideration of the doctrine of the signature, see pp. 33-80 in Giorgio Agamben's *The Signature of All Things: On Method*. NY: Zone Books, 2009.

enter, only to fall into a confusion that is more of a linguistic predicament than anything else. The disquieting surrealist image of ivory teeth falling from an unnamed woman's mouth, teeth which could also be piano keys, instruments for making music, but instead are identified as typewriter keys, underlines the overall sense of slippage and dream logic that governs the poem's dynamics. The conjoining of musical notes with letters of the alphabet moves this moment beyond the merely surreal, though, pointing not to frissons of the unconscious, but to the technologies for producing cultural forms of inscription.

The "many" then becomes a confused referent. Is it the guest, or the keys, who are falling at the entrance? Why do some gather and other hold back? The confusion comes to a stately head. "The room contains a question to be named." The process of election by which the many were first asked to gather is doubled here – a classic Palmer move: how will the many, or the poem, name this question? In other words, the naming of the question becomes the central question of the poem. Through this repetition, this doubling, the ideas of inclusion and exclusion which the poem has thus far entertained move into another register, where the terms of execution take on metaphysical stakes.

To enter this room, as the many do, or appear to do, is to enter into the domain of the question and its naming, which is a region of uncertainty, of questioning the status of the question. This, I think, could be read as a classic hermeneutical posture, which is to say, a classic Talmudic situation in which the primary matter is not the answers, but the questions, and not even the questions, but the way in which the questions are framed. What does it mean that a gathering such as this is marked by the loss of the tools for writing, which are also imagined as the tools for speaking or the instruments for making music? There is a circular logic in the line "I will tell the book the dream the words tell me" (14). These words tell the speaker the dream that

he is already dreaming. But the book is that which is already written as well as the future book still being written.

As for the House of Jews, it is the House of the Book, which is the house of the room of the question: the question of the text. The House of Jews is also a house of exiles; a gathering place for the diasporic community which forms after its expulsion. For both Finkelstein and Williams, this poem enacts a drama of nostalgia for a lost emblem of unification as well as a play of “disturbing and violent images” (RE 97). Finkelstein goes so far as to dismiss this poem as an expression merely of nostalgia, citing his “omnipresent references to books, words, grammar and so forth” as a sign of “anxiety” over their loss of authority.¹⁶ He traces Palmer’s mistrust of Duncan’s mystical faith in words to Jack Spicer, a constant critic of Duncan, but it seems equally likely that Oppen also supplied Palmer with this enabling mistrust. (Palmer, it should be noted, has written two essays on Oppen and the Objectivists; none on Spicer). The same concerns with questions, with circular logics, with repetitions and doubling, appear in both “Notes for Echo Lake,” “Baudelaire Series,” and, more recently, run through the books *At Passages*, *Company of Moths*, and the title sequence of *Thread*.

But before I turn to these poems it seems worthwhile to linger a moment over the issues raised by “The House of Jews.” Is Palmer asking for cultural affiliation here? Or merely citing Judaic textual practice as a model for his kenotic poetics? The question the room of the dream poses reiterates the Talmudic understanding of the Broken Tablets: the second set God gives to Moses does not repair the fragments of the first, but rather preserves their break. As Hans Jonas

¹⁶ Finkelstein ascribes the title “House of Jews” to an Irving Petlin painting, yet overlooks the reference to the Preface of Rothenberg’s *The Big Jewish Book*. To be fair, these claims come from Finkelstein’s first assessment of Palmer, where he seems somewhat annoyed at his appropriation of Jewish tropes. Finkelstein’s more recent pieces on Palmer sound a much more generous and balanced note. See “The Case of Michael Palmer,” *Contemporary Literature* 29.4, 1988: 522-523 and Chapter 4 of *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry*. Iowa UP, 2010.

notes in his assessment of the threat posed to Greek ontology by the Hebrew Bible: “there was an anti-metaphysical agent in the very nature of the Biblical position that led to the erosion of classical metaphysics, and changed the whole character of philosophy ... the Biblical doctrine pitted contingency against necessity, particularity against universality, will against intellect” (qtd. in *Slayers of Moses*, 27-28). Historical contingency, the crisis of temporality, haunts the efforts of the poem to grapple with the disaster. The question which Palmer’s poetry confronts is how to go on writing meaningfully after the disaster, how to recover from the name the substance which it has erased, under conditions more dire than Hegel could ever have imagined, conditions in which Derrida can say, in answer to Heidegger’s notorious silence about the Holocaust, that “Cinder is the house of being” (C 41). If language has been damaged, something yet remains in it that is capable of signifying. The model for such writing draws its fragile power from the burnt book, written in the house of the Jews.

According to Marc-Alain Ouaknin, the Burnt Book occupies an important position within Jewish religious practice. Far from being an emblem of the tragic history of the Jews after the Diaspora, which witnessed the burning of entire libraries, chiefly the Talmud, the Burnt Book embodies redemption through negation. The tradition of the Burnt Book begins with Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, a Hasidic master of the 18th Century, who instructed his disciples to burn his masterwork upon his death since its contents could prematurely bring about the coming of the Messiah to a wholly unprepared humanity. In his study of Charles Reznikoff, Stephen Fredman writes that “the burning of the book is not primarily a tragic sign of anti-Semitism but rather a necessary sacrifice for the continuity of interpretation” (MA 43). As he goes on to explain, Rabbi Nachman ordered his book destroyed “because of the dangerous power of its esoteric teachings and also because of a tradition that holds that books must be burnt or lost to make room for

future books” (MA 43). The Burnt Book can be read, then, as an exemplar of messianic intervention, a textual caesura or interruption that delays the coming of the Messiah but only insofar as that delay holds an obscure power to redeem the present.

Ouaknin places the Burnt Book within the older tradition of Judaic practice which maintains that the chief struggle in the Torah is not about theism overcoming atheism, but about theism succumbing to idolatry, so “the Text which is the primary relation to God, must not turn into an idol” (BB 65). This repudiation of idolatry calls to mind Palmer’s insistence that the poem not be suborned to the expression of ego-driven desires for stability, but act as a process of discovery. Ouaknin’s reading places the burning of the book outside anti-Semitism and within the protective practice of necessary sacrifice on behalf of the continuity of interpretation, a guarantor, in fact, of midrash, and thus, of cultural life itself. For Ouaknin, the Burnt Book names several traditions in Judaism: 1) the book destroyed by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav in 1808; 2) the quandary between two forms of duty or piety as discussed in the Talmud: a fire breaks out on the Sabbath and the question arises: what should be done about the books? Should they be saved? Or allowed to burn? 3) the esoteric symbol dividing the hidden and the revealed, the veil that masks and reveals meanings; 4) the notion that the book only comes into being “through its withdrawal, through its effacing, its burning, which, simultaneously, it ‘signifies’” (xii)

Writing of what he calls The Book of Destruction, or *Sefer Hashoah*, a fictive meta-book of the Jews after the Holocaust, Geoffrey Hartman supports this notion as well, commenting that:

what has been broken and lost is the pastoral sensibility itself, that the war and the Shoah have swept it away also ... our *sefer hashoah* will have to accomplish the impossible: allow the limits of representation to be healing limits yet not allow them to conceal an event we are obligated to recall and interpret, both to ourselves and those growing up unconscious of its shadow (*Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander 334).

In a similar key, Blanchot says of Mallarme that:

The book that collects the mind collects an extreme capacity for rupture, a limitless anxiety, one that the book cannot contain ... a movement of diaspora that must never be repressed but instead preserved and welcomed— where dispersion take on the form and appearance of unity (*The Book To Come* 234-35).

The logic of the book, therefore, requires that it not merely provide a mimetic account of totality, nor even seek to replicate it, but instead, and impossibly, completely supplant the world with the materiality of the text. This hubris is consistent with the project of the book as envisioned by Blanchot and it's one which Palmer has heavily invested in, too, if in considerably more complicated and contestatory ways. Derrida amplifies this point in his comments about Celan:

Ash, this is also the name of what annihilates or threatens to destroy even the possibility of bearing witness to annihilation. Ash is the figure of annihilation without remainder, without memory, or without a readable or decipherable archive ... the life of language is also the life of specters; it is also the work of mourning; it is also impossible mourning. It is not only a matter of the specters of Auschwitz or of all the dead one may lament, but of a spectrality proper to the body of language. Language, the word—in a way, the life of the word—is in essence spectral (Sov 68/103).

The *Burnt Book* after Auschwitz gathers up all these meanings while emphasizing the ongoing need for a principle of destructive renewal: a necessary clearing out that allows for future possibility, indeed, is the very stake by which the idea of the future itself is set. At the same time, it points always to the exhaustion of the purely literary and to the innate poverty of language in the face of the annihilation of the experience. To survive such disaster, language must become messianic, a form of undergoing figured as perpetual delay and signed in tropes of absence and silence.

The idea of the book inevitably tends to act as a fetish for the theological. This is why, according to Ouaknin, “the Text, which is a primary relation to God, must not turn into an idol” (60). And this is why for Palmer the poem must be written in the margins, as a non-poem, an

anti-poem, a counter-poem. “The book is burnt,” Ouaknin states, so that it “becomes margins, empty space—which creates the absolute separation between man and God” (299). Of this kind of writing in the margins and against the poem-as-such, Finkelstein writes: “that separation, that space, is the space in which Jewish writing occurs ... it defines a radical Jewish poetics” (RP 241). While it would be reductive to name Palmer as a Jewish poet, his affinity with Jewish messianic tropology is strong. Palmer’s *Burnt Book* acts as the double of the book. Written in ash as well as ink, it is a book is always on the way to being finished and yet can never be completed. This state of unfinishedness interrupts the Orphic principle of self-identity which insists that A must always equal A.

For Palmer the crisis of the book as a legislating authority arises from the loss of its ability to encompass a world. But this downfall is not the occasion, as with Mallarme, the first dreamer of a modernist total book, to inscribe a system of empty runic figures. Palmer’s burnt book still bears the legible traces or remnants of an ethical impulse to connect. The book is not merely an object for binding its own arcane system together. It is not merely the testament to an eloquent, if outdated, series of constructions and elegant misprisions, rooted in error, but yearning for some higher truth. What survives in Palmer’s book is the desire for the book as an object that is true to both the experience of unity and the experience of confusion. Palmer’s book is suffused with a melancholy knowledge that its dream of legibility will always be ill-fated, carried astray by the properties of signifying itself, its erratic propensity for multiplying surplus meaning. So, in various poems we read of books that are ruined, indecipherable, subsumed into other objects, or simply burnt.

Look this figure half-hidden is not a book
 This mirror-house is not the book
 This photograph conceals a book ...

They are so tired of the book
The pages tell us so ("Dear M" CA 86).

This is Paradise, an unpunctuated book
and this is a sequence of laws ...

This is Paradise, a mildewed book
left too long in the house ...

This is the paradise of emptiness
and this the blank picture in a book ("The Theory of the Flower," CA 111).

This is the sonnet
and this its burning house (First Figure, CA 116).

We offer a city with its name crossed out
to those who say we are burning the pages (AP 26)

Though the last lines in this grouping are from "Seven Poems Within a Matrix of War," written as a response to the Gulf War, the overall sense marking all these excerpts is one of weariness and inattention, in which the beauty of the after-image strangely lingers within the penumbra of destruction or undoing. This tension, the poem's painful aporetic position, serves as a powerful device for conjuring a counter-form of connection, a connection by way non-connection. For Palmer, the figure of the book – and its network of Judaic allusions and connections, both intact and severed – offers a way to write outside the catastrophe of history, not with a view toward some imagined purity or objectivity, but with the aim of keeping language in a state of restless uncertainty, a state of ceaseless self-questioning into its foundational claims to clarity. The dispersal of the subject is re-gathered as a new subject for poetry so that whatever has been lost, destroyed, or repressed is made visible again, even if only by gesturing toward its absence, by suspending the traditional business of the lyric poem, the reifying affirmation of selfhood. This suspension, or negation, of affirmation is achieved not only by the rigorous undermining of the most basic forms of speech which his poems employ – "we spoke in the zero code/system of

assemblage and separation”¹⁷ – but also through an extensive citationality, by the wholesale absorption of other texts into the poem. This citationality by no means reduces Palmer’s poems to mere games of deciphering hidden references in a kind of vulgar hermeticism. Neither does it act as kind of encyclopedic testimonial, as with Eliot or Pound, where references are either made to serve a quixotic theory of historical determinism, as in Pound’s case, or showcased as ornaments in a gallery of nostalgic memes, as with Eliot.

While it can hardly be characterized as being in some way “Jewish,” this commitment to exploratory poesis is nevertheless shared by both Edmond Jabes and Paul Celan, each of whom is a major influence on Palmer. For Jabes, the provocative and urgent coupling of writing with Judaism is central to his work.

The difficulty of being Jewish ... is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out ... First I thought I was a writer. Then I realized I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished the writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word (BQ1 122, 361).

This identification of writing with Jewishness poses some problems, however. Marina Tsvetayeva may claim, in “Poem of the End,” that in a Christian world, “all writers are Jews,” suggesting that both groups share affiliation through their status as exiles and oppressed minorities. For a non- Jewish writer like Palmer such a claim may runs the risk of philo-Semitism,¹⁸ yet what it actually offers is a language for framing the lyric after the disaster.

Palmer’s 1986 essay, “Counter Poetics and Current Practice” lays out much of his thinking on the subject. Writing of Celan, he says that he is “writing in a language destroyed by fire, the speaker destroyed by fire” (AB 255). To write in such a language requires the poet to write against language’s tendency to reify. As Celan himself explains it in his famous address,

¹⁷ In “Sun,” from *Codes Appearing*, NY: New Directions, p. 216.

¹⁸ Sarah Hammerschlag takes up this problem in her account of Lyotard’s philo-Semitic book, *Heidegger and “the jews”* in her groundbreaking work on Jewish figurality in post-war France, *The Figural Jew*. See pages 7-11.

“The Meridian,” a “breathturn” must occur in the poem as a kind of caesura, a resistance, almost, to the poem that occurs as a counter-word, a form of negation. Celan leads up to his declaration on behalf of a necessary estrangement with a fanciful figure: “A man who walks on his head sees the sky below, as an abyss” (CP 46). To risk such a vision, with its circus-like contortion, is to risk entering “strangeness and distance ... for the sake of an encounter.”

Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn? ... it is perhaps this turn, this *Atemwende*, which can sort out the strange from the strange? ... perhaps after this, the poem can be itself ... can in this now art-less, art-free manner go other ways, including the way of art, time and again? ... the poem has always hoped ... to speak on behalf of the *strange* ... *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other* (CP 47-48).

The idea of the “altogether other,” of counter-word that speaks the strange, is one Palmer takes up and runs through a series of reverbs and echoes in his poems as well as interviews and talks, citing the phrase “counter-practice” or, most recently, as the subtitle for the series “Thread,” “stanzas in counterlight.” The counter-word, or “word-against,” can be understood in both this and a Wittgensteinian context as a word or poem against understanding, against, that is, the closure of the distance necessary for insuring the primacy of the other’s difference. For Palmer, that other includes language itself, which must be not be *used* poetically, as though it were a commodity, but carefully engaged through a series of approaches and retreats. The counter-word pushes back against the totalizing and homogenizing effects of discourse-as-usual. Hence, the obsessive revisitation and reworking of the tropes for absence, emptiness and silence throughout his work.

Susan Handelman notes that the modern writer often shares the Jew’s historic condition of being an alien in exile (*Sin of the Book*, 57). Palmer inhabits this state of exile not by belonging to any persecuted minority or social group, but by his devotion to a counter-writing, a writing that draws its strength from its very weakness by resisting absorption into false

reconciliations. To write, for Palmer, is not to solve a problem or answer a question. It is, instead, to dwell with the problem; to write into the question of disaster in a way that does not diminish or mitigate its damage, but rather takes up that damage as the starting place of writing. This is practice consistent with and indeed derived from Jewish models of textuality, of which the primary example is that of the Talmud, a body of scholarly interpretations and interventions into the Torah that can also be said to interrupt the sacred text by continually calling it into question. This process crystallizes in Palmer's figure of the book. For Palmer the book is not so much an image, though, as a process. Its action, like that of a poem, moves in two directions at once: as an encyclopedic compendium it promises plenitude, while as self-unwriting text it continually verges on dissolution. The book as poetic construct takes on a messianic charge since only by destroying meaning can the promise of meaning be kept. This apocalyptic logic is behind the Talmudic notion of the burnt book, but, as Fernando Baez reports, it is also a widespread cultural attitude "By destroying, we ratify this ritual of permanence, purification, and consecration" (99). With their continual play on the range of possible meanings that can be derived from words, as well as their dialectical shuttling between presence and absence, fullness and emptiness, affirmation and negation, Palmer's poems enact the dynamics of the burnt book's creative kenosis.

Thus, in "Untitled (kN)," from *At Passages*, the poem revisits yet again the primal scene of the book, but this time in a register of hopeful, if still guarded, affirmation. Having been destroyed, the book now returns as a welcoming, if enigmatic, catalogue, shifting between a bird book and "a book of streets and names." In the form of the most basic indexes, an atlas and a survey of species, both books hold the promise of re-initiating the reader into a child-like sense of wonder.

Press you hands everywhere said the songs
To each other back and forth

There's a book infinite as scissors
There's an irreparable book

A fragment like an arm
Let's make a week of eight days

Each one the last to itself
Each a book uttering a phrase

And each the remnant of one page
From a bird book, a forgotten book

Of intervals, a lost book
Run your fingers down the page (LB 242).

Here the book becomes a sensual object, inviting touch even as it seems to hover on the edge of dissolving. The book is what makes an expansion of time possible, a week of eight days, "each a book uttering a phrase" so that time and the book are mutually intertwined. At the same time, the book is as "infinite as scissors," implying the potentiality of the written sign to endlessly replicate meaning through a process of incision or caesura.

If the world exists in order to end up in a book, as Mallarme proposed, then this heretical project is itself subject to instability. Palmer's poem "The Words" (*Company of Moths*, 2005) is one of many that traces just such an erratic arc. After opening with an image of "birds with bones of glass," and the hope that "the terror will end/in a flowering tree in July," the poem takes up the figure of the book again:

The book with mottled spine,
all possible information inside:

Riemann hypothesis resolved,
the zeta and zeros, entry 425;

The Paradox of the Archer
on the succeeding page;

the lost language of moths
a little further along.

Slow wing beats of owls
down the book's corridors.

Sky a cadmium yellow
from the fires to the north.

They seem to follow us, the fires,
as page follows page.

The bones, the birds, the glass, the light, the primes;
book, words, zeros, fires, spine.

The organization of roughly four-stressed lines into couplets gives the poem the distinctive symmetry associated with the book as it is described: a spine carrying words and zeros in a regular procession, an impression re-enforced by the strong end rhyme of the final couplet. The poem, like a book, closes shut with a snap.

The images of flight – moths, owls – suggests the ephemeral, or nocturnal, nature of knowledge; Hegel's owl of Minerva taking wing at twilight, always arriving too late. How to classify this poem's work? It is not quite allegory, yet it tends strongly toward an allegorical reading. Neither is it a species of late, post-Symbolist poetics, as much as it may call to mind Mallarme. The simplicity of the diction, the care given to cadence, places it within a late Objectivist orbit. Yet Palmer's enigmatic turns – the birds with bones of glass – mark it as belonging to the postmodernist hermeticism of Robert Duncan. Perhaps the most accurate term that will serve here is "Gnostic objectivist."

At the same time, the book of the poem appears to gain its authority partly through its threatened destruction by a fire which mimics the action of turning a page. It is almost as if the fire is reading the page, reading it by burning it. This is one way, certainly, to view the resolution

of the Riemann hypothesis, a famous mathematical problem first proposed in 1859 and to date unsolved. The final verbless stanza gathers all the primary elements of the poem into two lines joined by a semi-colon. The symmetry is even more pronounced here as each term in the first line enjoys a counterpart in the second, inviting a binary association between each set.

Bones/book; birds/words; glass/zeros; light/fires; primes/spines – each of these couplets within a couplet doubles the idea of the book as something that simultaneously coheres and interrupts itself. A book is already a set of bones; the words take flight like birds; the transparency of glass is also a form of emptiness; the light generated by a fire is potentially destructive; and the prime numbers of the Riemann hypothesis constitute spines in as much as the foundational is finally beyond our knowing. Palmer's kenotic poesis plays on Jewish textuality. What the unknowability of the Riemann hypothesis confirms is the Kabbalistic conception of creation itself as expressed in *Sefer Yetzirah*, or Book of Formation. There the semiological model of the world – that the alphabet is the source of its secret code or grammar – finds expression in the notion that God made the world from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alef-bet.

Twenty-two letters He engraved, hewed out, weighed, changed, combined, and formed out of them all existing forms, and all forms that may in the future be called into existence (338).

In Palmer's most recent work, this idea is borne out through the trope of the thread. *Thread* might be taken as yet another iteration of Jewish textuality, specifically, midrash.

Palmer's notion of writing as a "thief's journal" (echoing Jean Genet)¹⁹ as he puts it, likewise points to a conception of an unowned language, a language composed not of self-contained crystalline nodes, but of threads, weaving together a deeply citational "counter-lyricism" of the poem, one that includes multiple unattributed texts as a way to write against the notion of the personal voice's centrality and its fetishizing of originality. (Or as he remarked

¹⁹ In "From The Notebooks," p. 341, *19 New American Poets of the Golden Gate*, edited Philip Dow, 1984.

more recently, “Yes, many ghosts in this maison de poésie!”).²⁰ Such writing against the naturalistic grain is necessary if the poem is to invest its energy in a process of what Palmer calls “active discovery—a place of primary knowing and acknowledgment in language—a thing resistant to conveniences and guarantees, those strategies of effect, affect and device critics tend to be soothed by.”²¹ This counter-lyricism (or counter-stanzas, as Palmer subtitles the poem sequence “Thread”) works toward a poetics of what Adorno calls “the non-identical,” a term he uses to denote the absolute otherness of difference that prevents oppositions from collapsing into the amnesia of false reconciliation, or what he calls “the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” (*ND* xx). By rescuing the poetic strategies of quotation, caesura, and parataxis from their status as novelty devices that symptomatically reproduce mere shock effect, Palmer recharges the poem with a cognitive acuity and moral audacity that attempts to speak to the disaster and the disaster’s scandal.

“Thread—Stanzas in Counterlight” closes Palmer’s most recent work²² with a series of eighteen poems that combine the procedures of tikkun and midrash, repair and citation, or, repair through citation. Among other things, the poems which make up “Thread” task themselves with locating the enigma of the event through a series of intimate encounters with the dead and with delicate disquisitions about the poem’s ability to set its own privilege of witnessing the event at risk. In this series, which brings together reflections on the possibility of art with elegies to departed companion writers such as Robin Blaser, Gustaf Sobin, Alexei Parshchikov, Roberto Bolano, and Mahmoud Darwish, Palmer’s citational poetics presses the device of doubling into a much more intimate and open register than has been sounded in his previous work. These

²⁰ Personal email from Palmer, 9/29/10.

²¹ From “Nuages-Further Notebook Selections” in *Ironwood24*, Fall 1984, 174-182.

²² *Thread*, New Directions 2011. N.B. the manuscript of this book, obtained from the publisher, is unpaginated. All material drawn from it will be marked accordingly as u.p.

“threads” are addresses, colloquies, homages, haunted questions that crystallize Palmer’s concerns for the art as a site for making counter-meanings, the micro-resistances that push back against the crushing sense of fatigue born of suffering and slaughter. As he writes in the 12th poem of the series:

Nighthawk and sun-bird
Who will tell of it

Shore’s eyelid, earth’s rim
light from extinguished stars

bathing us
in time’s wake

time’s long
stream of slaughter

and song
Some love

the one more
some the other (*T u.p.*)

The poems of “Thread” carry an ache in them that is palpably the ache of late style, which in Palmer’s case is not marked by the intransigence of his earlier work and its resistance to absorption, so much as by a desire for the radical simplicity of song and a turn to the vulnerability of more direct statement. “Time’s long/stream of slaughter//and song” condenses his long wrestling with the dialectic; it bears an urgency for song’s deictic power to say the moment of Now-Time with its insistence on clarity, Oppen’s cherished light that illuminates as it formulates a world. In “Baudelaire Series,” Palmer writes:

What if things really did
correspond, silk to breath

evening to eyelid
thread to thread (CA 170).

The persistence of thread's allure as a constellating trope, its ability to articulate a grammar of correspondence between unlike things, forms the core of Palmer's conception of language and its polymorphously perverse power to link the disparate.

In "Thread," Palmer is less and less the gnostic disciple of Duncan, less and less exercised by the hermetic landscapes of the master and ever more committed to a form of writing that speaks to an idea of the immediate. Yet this immediacy is not the immediacy of experience, but of dream: the dream of the poem to speak melody as if it contained all knowledge of suffering. What this translates into is a poetry of exquisite allegorical complexity, as far from Oppen as could be imagined, yet hewing to his example of austere minimalism, the sense that each word must be arrived at only after long struggle. This is what late style looks like in Palmer.

Along the corridors
of the invisible world, Raúl,

gardeners raise such flowers
as need no light

such flowers
watered by voices

as need no eyes
to be seen (*T u.p.*)

In this poem to the Chilean poet Raul Zurita, whose most well known work, *Purgatorio*, recounts the nightmarish imprisonment the poet suffered under the Pinochet regime, the invocation of "the invisible world" where "flowers need no light" but are instead "watered by voices" for the eyeless attests to the necessity of an inner, allegorical landscape where poetic language can still radiate, free of tyranny and oppression. "The invisible world," one might say, is the place where the disaster is rewritten in a language that translates suffering into the spectrum of recognition.

The threads which Palmer takes up and weaves together here are those that have run through his work all along. The need for writing “in the dark” while asking, always, “How can one write

beauty of the world?” when that world seems like little more than one state of emergency following another and where some love slaughter more than song. To thread, then, is to work midrashically, for these poems take up Palmer’s abiding concerns with the necessity for dispersing the subject and the concomitant counter-struggle to preserve its singularity, if only as a remnant. In “Thread,” the figure of the book appears once more as a messianic object, imbued with the melancholic properties which enable it to braid together now with then, here with there, in a suspension of time where the words of the dead are spoken as one’s own even as the dead speak through the lips of the living. This chiasmus in many ways defines Palmer’s project, his self-erasing desire to dissolve and connect, forget and remember, to “add yourself jubilantly, and erase the score,” in Rilke’s words, a method which insures the integrity of the damaged subject as itself and not as the subsumption into a re-valorized self within the economy of the disaster.²³

The idea of the thread runs throughout Palmer’s poetry, appearing at various points as a way to emphasize the poet’s commitment to a project built from “threads of speech and constellations of sound ... rather than a single, unitary voice” (*New Poets of the Golden Gate* 341). Likewise, the opening of “Baudelaire Series” speaks of “the mechanism of the larynx/around an inky center/leading backward-forward//into sun-snow/then to frozen sun itself/Threads and nerves have brought us to a house” (S 9). And in “Thread,” this notion of constellated seriality comes powerfully to the fore as a way for language to adduce “the sacred, the vaulted and arched,” the hallowed, the haloed, “The Gate of Public Words,” as he puts it in “Untitled Sept ’92,” under which the reader is asked to gather.

²³ *Sonnets to Orpheus, Part Two*, Rainer Maria Rilke, p. 85. Translated by Edward Snow. NY: North Point Press/FSG, 2005.

Under the sign of the alphabet
 the rain fell up the
 bodies in the quarry spoke
 of the Lord's great hunger
 and the Lord's blackened tongue

and they chanted the secret
 names of the Lord
 one by one

And the rain fell up the
 bodies in the quarry danced
 and the sky filled with sand
 the color of rust

The blind boys sang
 and the dead men danced
 and the deaf men heard their chants (*T n.p.*)

The stream of inversions and reversals, perhaps deliberately verging on a parody of classic blues tropes ("the blind boys sang") calls up a poesis whereby the alphabet is endowed with the power to repair the broken world, not through the bad faith of claiming to make it whole, but by testifying to its brokenness. "Thread" emphasizes the need for this negational affirmation, once again, in the recurring image of the book.

It is the role of the lovers to set fire to the book.

In the palm garden at night they set fire to the book
 and read by the light of the book.

Syllables, particles of glass, they pass back and forth in the dark.

The two, invisible - transparent - in the book,
 their voices muffled by the book.

It is the role of the lovers to be figures of the book, the
 illegible book,
 changing as the pages turn,

now joined, now clawing the fruit from each other's limbs,
 now interlaced, now tearing at throat and vein,
 then splayfoot, then winged, then ember,
 as the music of the book,
 rustling through the palms,
 instructs (*T* n.p.)

"To be figures in the book," even as it burns, even as its burning illuminates the words on its pages, is to vouchsafe the constancy of "the invisible world," where the poem is continually doubled, continually echoes in a gallery of citations and counter-citations. The book, Palmer understands, will always be "illegible;" its burning at once a source of erotic illumination and obscurity; a figure of music alternating between the "splayfoot" and the "winged" and written in an alphabet of intimate grammar whose transparency is also the face of the invisible, "the muffled." It must be that which, even in its plain saying, remains hidden, a zero of logic "rustling through the palms."

The epigraph to "Threads" is instructive in this regard. Taken from Rene Char, it reads: "Two hands, full of fervor, from the labyrinth with its twin openings, spring out." Here the theme of doubling announces itself yet again.²⁴ The path to lyric utterance after the disaster can only be accomplished by this perverse logic of twinning, of a counterpath taken through the poem by which the poet "wrote even while dying/of time erasing time" (*T* u.p.). For time to erase time is perhaps the very crux of the messianic: the place where chiasmus is also caesura, where the doubling of the temporal refolds and unfolds a writing against the grain. "Thread—Stanzas in Counterlight" performs a kenotic intervention that unsettles and redistributes the act of reading.

²⁴ Rene Char, *The Brittle Age and Returning Upland*, p. 47. Trans. By Gustaf Sobin. Denver: Counterpath Press, 2009.

It enacts Benjamin's call for an interruption of the language of power while affirming lyric's musicality from the other side of the breath turn.

Chapter 4—"The beyond is in the surface": Rachel Blau DuPlessis' Midrashic Poetics and The Angel of History

Midrashic Poetics

By now, two substantial threads have emerged in this study. The first has to do with the ambiguous relationship of postwar Objectivist poetry to Judaism. How does the former think through its project of recovering experience from the reifying effects of disaster via the messianic tropes of the latter? The second touches on how each poet writes the disaster by writing writing, as it were.¹ Put another way, all three poets considered here foreground a certain process of writing, call it broken writing, ruined writing, as a model for engaging the disaster. When writing will be that which is discontinuous, heavily paratactical, with an emphasis on its own elision and the autonomous silences residing within those elisions, then and only then can it escape the strictures of a self-congratulatory poetics, with its celebration of the bourgeois subject, and write the disaster outside the force field of cultural amnesia, or what Adorno calls "the inherent falseness" of works of art, that is, their failure to critique their complicity in the prevailing power structure.² This silence, though, should not be taken for a sign of passivity in the face of historical catastrophe, as a kind of resignation of literature's power to represent reality. Rather, it is indicative of a new aesthetic structure committed to writing as a process of estrangement.

With regards to the first thread, Rachel Blau DuPlessis³ leaves the reader in no doubt about where she stands. Citing Yosef Yerushalami, she declares that she is a "godless Jew," that

¹ My awkward locution here is a nod to one of DuPlessis's acknowledged models, Robert Duncan. See "Writing Writing," a series of Steinian-influenced poems from the early 1950s that sound uncannily like Blanchot. "To overcome writing in writing." *Derivations: Selected Poems 1950-1956*. Pg. 41. London: Fulcrum, 1968.

² "On Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes to Literature*, v. 1, 39.

³ When finished, *Drafts* will consist of 114 serial poems – some of no more than a few pages; others considerably longer. To date, the four volumes published are: *Drafts 1-38, Toll; Drafts 39-57, Pledge; Drafts 58-76, Torque*; and

is to say, a secular Jew (SJRPD 201). But what does it mean for DuPlessis to claim Jewishness while rejecting Judaic religion? The answer is hardly mysterious. As she herself puts it, Judaism needs to be understood not as a religious affiliation, but in terms of a more dispersed “structure of feeling,” the term Raymond Williams uses for the category of cultural experience in which communal particularity announces itself (201). For DuPlessis, a Jewish structure of feeling is characterized by a set of tropes central to “general cultural literacy in Jewish material.” These include diaspora, exile, nomadism, the messianic, an emphasis on textuality, and sense of the daily as sacred.

Williams defines this admittedly slippery idea of structures of feeling as a distinct set of practices specific to a particular lived moment. He uses the term to designate the elusive but palpable emergence of “changes of presence” in the moment of their coming into being, of “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.” The important point, he emphasizes, is that structures of feeling are at variance with “the formal or systematic beliefs” they derive from (ML 132). They consist of “affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (ML 132). Williams’ term attempts to straddle an awkward gap between seemingly rigid binaries. I take its larger point to be that few people behave or affectively respond to daily experience in perfect agreement with their professed beliefs, but engage the world as they find it. As a description of boundary crossing it lends itself to investigating the links joining the Objectivist nexus to the Jewish tropes which mark secular post-Holocaust poetry.

Drafts 77-95, Pitch. A final volume, tentatively titled, *Drafts 96-114, Surge*, with publication expected in 2012, will add 19 additional poems, a number of which have already appeared in print and online journals, including several that combine text with collage art. A special feature devoted to DuPlessis’ work, the first of its kind, edited by myself and including essays by Ron Silliman, Ann Vickery, and Alan Golding, will appear in spring 2011 in *Jacket 2*, a poetry web journal based at the University of Pennsylvania.

For DuPlessis, a Jewish structure of feeling offers her a way to think from inside Judaism while at the same time remaining outside it. A postwar Jewish structure of feeling (which might be said to run through Oppen and Palmer's work as well) presents a kind of permeable membrane that allows a secular Objectivist poetics access to sacred categories of thought and experience which in turn it can employ for historical redemptive purposes as it engages the writing of the disaster. The conditions which the disaster imposes on Objectivist poetics, and poetry at large, are overwhelming. As she asks, "what art is possible after disasters; how we can live in a world in which both Enlightenment consolations and fundamentalist consolations are horrifying, monstrous" (BS 197). Her conclusion is nothing if not Adornian: "The only poem for our time is something that refuses poetry" (197). The negational poetics of *Drafts* means that "the poetic" must be achieved by means other than lyric expressivism. This entails a writing against the grain of both personal voice and the consolations of closed form. At the same time, however, DuPlessis' commitment to finding a feminist praxis that is not voice-based and which rejects the reproduction of gender relations, as she puts it in her essay, "Otherhow," leads her to "construct a counter poem" in which voice is still present, still available, but only as one node in a larger constructivist constellation that includes numerous other strands and inflections of thought (PG 149).

In what follows in this chapter I will examine how this constellative poetics enables *Drafts* to overcome, or write beyond the apparent cul-de-sac which the Holocaust presents for poetry. First, I will investigate the midrashic poetic procedures of *Drafts*, giving special attention to her own prose commentaries on their logic while briefly visiting the role of the Derridean trace in her work. Next, I will offer an overview of the first volume in the series, *Drafts 1-38: Toll*, in which I map out a great many of the poem's dynamics and thematic concerns. I will

conclude with an extended discussion of “Draft 52-Midrash,” DuPlessis’ dialectical interrogation of Adorno’s Auschwitz maxim.⁴

Drafts is a poem that takes up the task of “writing beyond the ending,” as DuPlessis put it in her groundbreaking 1985 critical study. To write beyond the end for 20th Century women novelist and poets ranging from Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein to Gwendolyn Brooks and Adrienne Rich, DuPlessis argues, is to employ narrative and lyrical counter-strategies that enable female subjects – and by extension, female agency – to overcome the social strictures of plots which require them to attain the straitjacketed fulfillment of either marriage or death. Form is integral to this contest with patriarchal structure, whether it is employed through a deformational mimetic strategy where prevailing modes like the sonnet, as used by Brooks, undermines white hegemonic culture in subtle ways, or through the more radical means of Stein’s repetitions and fragmentations. *Drafts* accomplishes this counter-writing practice through a commitment to midrash. The recursive mechanism of midrash challenges not only fixed bodies of doctrine and opinion, but the very idea of a stable form of subjectivity that exists by some immutable law of self-resemblance. Midrash, as a specifically literary practice, introduces multiplicity into the play of poetic language. The elaborate use of citational endnotes and cross-referencing that marks *Drafts* in one sense as a poem that unabashedly incorporates the devices of scholarship (thereby breaking down the wall separating the poem from its body of commentary) also incites the reader to engage its logic as a non-linear, constellated structure.

Geoffrey Hartman, in “Midrash and Literature,”⁵ makes a strong case for viewing midrash as a principle of creative paratextuality, one which, moreover, is fully alive to the

⁴ Space does not permit a discussion of “Draft 85-Hard Copy,” but I want to note nevertheless its importance for DuPlessis’ project. A poem in 38 sections, “Hard Copy” is both a response to and a writing through of her mentor Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous.”

⁵ Journal of Religion, Vol. 74, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), pp. 338-355.

nuances of the Derridean trace. Midrash is a species of criticism that strives for a restitution with the original text by extending or re-envisioning it. “Midrash,” he writes, “is not satisfied with the text as it stands. It looks for more of the original in the original” (M&L 344). Moreover, for Hartman, midrash places imagination in the service of memory, rather than the other way around.

That Midrash is not satisfied with the text – in the sense that it wishes for something more, not something different – means that its labor of the negative can be very daring. Gaps or obscurities, everything that could be characterized as indeterminate, are emphasized before being resolved by one interpretive or interpolative davar after another (345).

This dissatisfaction with the text expresses an impatience with closing off meaning. A text is never just a text alone. It only truly becomes textual through the intervention of a supplementary text. Textuality is ongoing, a dynamic process of intervention, interruption, and inter-writing. Midrash exemplifies and embodies the aporia of textuality: that all texts are always already provisional, and so implicated in one another. Because it uncouples the text from the idol or fetish of subjective unity, productively destabilizing or reconfiguring it, midrash turns the deferral of meaning into the messianic redemption of the text. It militates against reductionist reading practices, privileging cognition or settled meaning. Besides midrash, *Drafts* accomplishes this heterogeneity through seriality.

DuPlessis’ conception of seriality derives from and expands on George Oppen’s. As she explains, citing one of Oppen’s letters: “To write poetry, as Oppen said, to control ‘the sequence of disclosure’ by segments that have a strong relation both to melos and to meaning: ‘separating the connections of the progression of thought’” (BS 199). It’s worth recalling her remarks on Robin Blaser’s poetry in this context, quoted earlier:

Poetry is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units precisely chosen, units operating in

relation to chosen pause or silence ,, segmentivity – the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments—is the underlying characteristic of poetry ... in the serial poem, montage is method ... [it] can depend upon self-citation, treating even one’s own words as estranged and odd chunks of surprising material (RPW 291).

Seriality, then, as DuPlessis uses it, makes more explicit the connection between Objectivist practice and Jewish thought. The serial poem is ideally suited for midrashic procedures.

At times, the sheer scale of *Drafts*, with its near endlessly recursive Deleuzean folds and loops not only verges on the overdetermined, but threatens to regress into the fatal totality that was the undoing of Pound’s *Cantos*. But to borrow an image for film criticism, *Drafts* delicately sidesteps this pitfall by balancing the tension between macro and micro, or what Manny Farber famously termed “white elephant art vs. termite art.” In his seminal 1962 essay of the same name, Farber derides the pretensions of both the arthouse film and the work of prestigious Oscar-baiting studios, which he ridiculed as “masterpiece art, reminiscent of the enameled tobacco humidors and wooden lawn ponies bought at white elephant auctions decades ago” (NS 136). By contrast, he favors termite art, an art “that always goes forward eating its own boundaries” (NS 135).⁶ This is also a good description of Objectivist poetics. *Drafts* shares something of this termite spirit, which Farber characterizes as “buglike immersion ... concentration on nailing down one moment without glamorizing it” (NS 144).

Certainly DuPlessis forgoes lyrical flourishes, though she is perfectly capable of writing sequences of astonishing verbal music, as in “Draft 37–Praedelle,” which I discuss below. Yet the lyrical moment, the moment of epiphany, of transcendence, is not what she is after. Her concern is with the larger patterns of how language penetrates, shapes, and is distorted by history and not with “writing the personal,” as she puts it. *Drafts* is predicated on a rejection of the

⁶ Farber names *Citizen Kane* and *La Notte* as examples of white elephants, while comparatively off-the-cuff films like *The Big Sleep* exemplify the termite ethos.

personal, expressive lyric, what DuPlessis calls “the notion of having a voice ... of establishing a consumable personality complete with pix, of engaging in self-revelation” (PG 172).

Drafting Memory

For a poem entitled *Drafts* – one that consciously situates itself at the crossroads of the provisional and the revisional – the idea of the poem as draft is especially appropriate. What becomes clear in reading *Drafts* is that DuPlessis has created one of the most sustained and magnificent meditations written by a contemporary poet on loss, presence, and the haunting persistence of language to redeem what has vanished. *Drafts* confronts the reader throughout with variations on the same basic question: “What, then, is the size of the loss?” “The loss” may be read on many registers, but it is the argument of this chapter that the primary, the dominant, mode of loss in *Drafts* stems from the Holocaust. This presents DuPlessis with an excruciating problematic. Is the loss to be read solely in terms of psychoanalytic trauma theory? Or does it compel her to identify with and take up the spiritual anguish that is the outcome of such a catastrophe? Perhaps it would be nearer the mark to say that, for her, all pleas to transcendence vanish in the annihilating crush of such a horrific history? And not stopping there, but to assert even further that this is the logic of history, as Adorno and Horkheimer attest – the inevitable end-product of Enlightenment reason?

Du Plessis has written that “the problem of memory is the largest motivation for my poetry” (BS 210). This problem has led her to adopt her midrashic structure so that by means of “doubled and redoubled commentary, poetry with its own gloss built in” she could write beyond the ending offered by the perfection and selectivity and purity of the lyric (FN). “In the poem,” she recalls, “I found that I was building the space of memory or a replica of its processes.” This

space of memory, best encoded through the midrashic principle, is for DuPlessis inevitably as space of “repressed and barely articulated grief.” Her comments on how collective memory enters into and shapes *Drafts* are worth quoting at length since they get to the core of DuPlessis’ writing of the disaster.

Begin with Middle Passage or the ridding and near-extirpation of many First Nations and indigenous peoples during the colonial expansions of Europe. Begin with the Armenian genocide, begin with the Belgian depredation of the Congo, or begin with the Holocaust. Begin with accelerating firestorms of aerial bombardment ... begin with the deaths of diversity – biodiversity or linguistic diversity. Begin wherever you want ... begin with modernity (BS 214).

This grim roster of atrocity begins to get at the question of the size of loss and exemplifies Benjamin’s stinging analysis of history: “The concept of progress,” he insists, “must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe” (AP, 473). Historical disaster takes shape as a traumatic shock, but is not finalized until it has been effectively absorbed into a narrative structure that elides that trauma. For Benjamin, true progress can only announce itself as a disruption of all this, rather than its affirmation. “Progress has its seat,” he writes, “not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences” (AP, 474). Interference – interruption in the form of heteroglossic modes and genres (elegy, ode, autobiography, criticism, conversation) – is what drives the midrashic project of *Drafts*.

DuPlessis further comments that, “Abrahams and Torok’s concept of the ‘transgenerational phantom’ may explain why someone like myself, two generations removed from direct and intimate ties to European Jewry, speaks a poetry haunted by the ghosts of ghosts” (BS 214). But if a midrashic poetics of memory is an incitement to commune with ghosts, it is not a passive reception. Rather, ghosts – in the agency of the letter as well as the blood-stained past – are part of a process of conjuring an otherness that contests binaries and overturns the idol of the unified subject in lyric. *Drafts*, DuPlessis writes, is a poem, or a series

of poems, that attempts to “appropriate the sound, music, and nuance of the lyric [while criticizing] the issues of beauty, unity, finish, and female positions within these ideas and to instead articulate the claims and questions of Otherness—not as a binary to something else but rather as a seam opening inside existence” (BS 215).

The question of the size of the loss entails both a matter of scale as well as the anxious hope for repair. It is a question whose meaning emerges only through its repeated asking as the poem engages on multiple levels with the aporetic knot of memory, disaster and language. As DuPlessis herself comes to realize, in a characteristic moment of self-interrogation occurring roughly midway through, the logic of the entire sequence gradually evolves into a conflicted elegy for time itself. Conflicted, because the very notion of genre is one of the things *Drafts* so ably and provocatively contests. “Being polygeneric,” she wonders in “Draft 13: Haibun,” “why did all your work behave as elegy?” “Draft 17: Unnamed” provides a partial answer:

It is not elegy
 though elegy seems the nearest category of genre
 raising stars, strewing flowers (Toll 117).

And a little later, in “Draft 19: Working Conditions,” she reflects:

For disappearance is the subject
 of whatever I do.

If not disappearance,
 then what is here (Toll 127).

“What is here” is both the full run of experience that the synaptic range of the poem is capable of registering in a dazzling variety of pitches and timbres and its ineluctable evaporation, which leaves in its wake fragments and debris for the poet to take up as theme, ruminate over, turn to song.

The scale of *Drafts* is monumental; its focus anti-monumental. As a working prospectus of the poem's method, the title militates against any of the grander schemes for incorporating history and myth that Pound and Olson sought to bring to their own work. At the same time, *Drafts* points back to the *Cantos*, as well as Duncan's *Passages*, taking up their collagist, serial methods for conveying the multi-juxtapositional character not so much of history as of language and interiority. That both are conceived of as processual, folded in on themselves, looping and spiraling forwards and backwards at once, is the coiling paradigmatic tension that DuPlessis explores with a deft and subtle combination of Objectivist precision and Romantic expansion. Reading *Drafts* in toto this way – and one of the operational codes at work in the poem is that such a reading will always be incomplete – the argument between Objectivist minimalism and Romantic maximalism seems less fraught. Zukofsky's notion of sincerity as faithfulness to perception is one which DuPlessis clearly embraces. Within the same embrace, however, DuPlessis gathers Woolf and H.D., both of whom, in their own work, chipped away exactly at the pretense literature makes of owning and subordinating the real, challenging the ways writing is ideologically embedded by complicating how the subject is constructed through language. DuPlessis sees that the claims literature advances for purity of method come forward out of an anxious desire to insure its own authority. One of the key ideas in *Drafts* is that perception, like memory, can never be pure, much less precise, in an anatomical sense, but because of its openly reciprocal nature will always run the risk of being blurred and contaminated by language. This epistemological instability figures prominently in the poem's consideration of the fragmentary character of memory.

Memory, for DuPlessis, is a kind of midrash, and in *Drafts* it takes on a distinctly feminist valence.

And memory, they say, is the “mother” of the muses.
 And mother is the instruction not to speak,
 to speak partly, to speak euphemisms,
 or mesmerizing euhemerisms. To
 speak half-dead to the undertext, to sever notice
 wantings,
 to swallow mourning
 to swallow the burning over and over so
 that tubes and lobes are scarred with
 stig-matter (Toll 74).

That the source of memory enables speaking while being denied the chance to speak itself is one of the bleak ironies DuPlessis exposes in her examination of women’s place, or lack of place, as speaking subjects in history.

The condition of work being struggle in time.
 With loss.
 And with random findings.

I resisted initiations
 into “virile pieties,”
 which were everywhere, nevertheless.

But the rage of the mother
 is an unsolved problem
 in language (Toll 124)..

Like H.D. before her, and like Anne Waldman in *Iovis*, Alice Notley in *The Descent of Alette*, or Lyn Hejinian in *The Fatalist*, to name three contemporary women poets working in the long form, she stages *Drafts*, in part, as a vehicle for reversing the polarity of the valorizing scene of language played out by the ur-bard Orpheus and his repressed muse, Eurydice. Equally important to the poem’s sense of a feminist midrash is the way DuPlessis incorporates whatever comes along by way of input: snippets of poems and essays (her own and others), dreams, remarks made by her children, conversations with friends, students, and colleagues. The range is generous in its inclusivity, demonstrating the need for gaining a reading competence in the

conversations that make up our lives, and illuminating the value of what is lost through the precision of what we say about loss.

Part of the question of memory is the question of how to make time visible, and that, says DuPlessis, is possible only by viewing time's debris, the trace of its presence. Here, as throughout *Drafts*, the epigraph from Zukofsky's "Mantis: An Interpretation" resonates. "The ungainliness of the thing needed saying." How can the poem find a form for the ungainliness of life? *Draft's* response is not to write an epic poem that contains history, but to recognize history, both public and private, as a *mise en abyme*, leveraging its suppressed polyvocality in order to challenge the social structures for producing memory. Following Oppen's decision to choose "the meaning of being numerous," DuPlessis has staged in *Drafts* a profound refiguring of the grounds for writing a long poem. Oppen's melancholy, yet liberating, assertion of "the shipwreck of the singular" provides a methodology for poetic form that relies on multiple, rather than totalizing, vectors. For DuPlessis it makes possible a plurality of saying that is not so much a form per se as a way to think form inside of the poem.

"The work is work, however,
and one is always in the middle of it.
For that reason, 'creation' is not creation" (Toll 48).

The revolution of form in contemporary innovative poetry is conceived in *Drafts* as a continual shaping of the poem in media res. Form is not merely some conventional template for expression, but a "theater of the page," as she calls it at one point, an active space that produces its own laws as it goes along. In this way it deliberately refuses the suasions of lyric, is pointedly and ungainly anti-lyrical, in fact. *Drafts* shares more in common with Adorno's conception of the essay as form which "erects no scaffolding and no structure ... [its] elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field" (NTL, v.1 13).

Because all saying is a saying again midrash becomes the exemplary model for a poetics of fragment, repetition, and reticulation. Inside such a *mise en abyme*, what can the poet do? How can she say at all, if Orphic nomination is so vexed, and the saying of things as they are avails the pink guitarist very little, if at all? I think this is why elegy is such an important node of organizing the poem's energies in *Drafts*. Not so much the classic work of mourning and lament, elegy here functions as a radical procedure for articulating the phenomenology of experience as it is felt and lived in the moment. The order of the world in *Drafts* may be predicated on loss, but it's a loss that's redeemed by its being folded over into a capacious, labyrinthine process of response that turns the never-ending occasion of depletion into a recurring event of plenitude. DuPlessis's notion of the fold recalls Deleuze's comment that "the problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity" (4).

And *Drafts* is indeed baroque in its dizzying devotion to serpentine replication. Like Rilke, whom she invokes, DuPlessis's idea of elegy means staying one step ahead of departure. But whereas with Rilke one still feels the anxiousness behind the calm his poetic pre-empting hopes to acquire, in DuPlessis the event of departure, or loss, is something to be lived inside of as the most constitutive element of our daily sequence. Midrash, in this broader sense, becomes the method for re-inscribing loss on both a public and an intimate scale. To write at all is to practice midrash as part of the quotidian effort of assessing and reclaiming portions of time's debris. Elegy is not what memorializes a meaning – it produces that meaning in the first place.

DuPlessis undertakes this task with an eloquent, sometimes mournful, sometimes joyous, flourish. In "Draft 6: Midrush," she situates the chain of citation and self-citation that comprises memory and identity in the larger conversation we carry out with the dead, and of which *Drafts* is the still moving inscription:

Walk thru the living
 say the dead
 our rustling voices
 strain
 more westerly words

+ + +

It is they that speak
 silt
 we weep
 silt
 the flood-bound
 written over and under with their
 muddy marks
 of writing under the writing

+ + +

Or midrash —
 overlaying stories so,
 that calling out the ark, it's
 Noah hails and harks
 new name and number
 for
 what stinking fur and tuckered feather-fobs
 did clamber forth
 disoriented. Cramped. Half-dead (Toll 36-37).

Silt as speech. Speech as silt. The dead speak us as we struggle to learn how to say the dead. The theme is echoed much later, in a more playful key, in “Draft 32: Renga,” where “at edges, everything’s midrash ... midrash piled on midrash.” Midrash becomes more than a scriptural hermeneutics, but the dialogical principle underwriting speech itself. Or, as she writes in “Drafts 21: Cardinals,” “a disorder of memory is memory itself.”

under or blunder?

memorized of mesmerized? } Your Call

oculist or occultist?

annotated or anointed? (Toll 201).

The one or two letters by which we distinguish one word from another means that meaning may turn on the slip of the fingers on a keyboard, on a garbled transmission or reception, on the constantly intruding static interference inherent to all communication that is itself a kind of coded message. One way to read this polyvocal disarray is that language is a process that is constantly going off the mark. The compulsion to self-elegize whatever goes missing is the poem's acknowledgment of this problematic, and its deeper participation in it.

In *Drafts* elegy is empowering, not merely a marker of sorrow, but a revelator of the foundational dynamics of emptiness. Remembering the loss of a wristwatch ("Draft 15: Little") leads the poet to reflect on the broader anxieties fomented by a sense of temporal disorientation. She feels oddly "exposed" and dreams of missing her stop. We understand her to mean a bus or subway stop, but the phrase also carries the implication of a final stopping that can't be located inside of time. Like Bernard in Woolf's *The Waves*, the poet in *Drafts* resolves to go on speaking right through the stopping place of speech, whether it is thought of as death, as Woolf does, or, as DuPlessis sees it, that ultimate vanishing point where the limits of the self are staked out by the interpellating constraints of ideology, that boundary where the poet challenges her status as something spoken in order to become someone speaking. The disappearance of the watch produces a trace, or shard, for the poet, one that she fiercely owns, and that is resistant to any attempt to determine it.

Not hero, not polis, not story, but it.
 It multiplied.
 It engulfing.
 It excessive.
 "It" like X that marks the spot, that is the spots,
 an ever wily while, a wilderness of hope.
 The spot of almost hopeless hope.
 Can barely credit it.

Thus my voice is empty, but I speak and sing

only of this.
 The undersentences
 that rise, tides of sediment, the little
 stuff agglutinating in time, debris
 I sing.
 Cano,
 Cannot not do it so (Toll 102).

Emptiness here functions much as the *khora* does in both Kristeva's and Derrida's readings of it, as a formless space of the unspoken that authorizes a deeper speaking of being's magnitude. By crafting a receptive response to what is continually vanishing, the poet affirms the value of the vanishing by encoding it into the script for living.

 That fragments are "conspicuous"
 oracles. That the veil of mist behind which stars
 shimmer and show
 was, in fact, the Milky Way itself, not clouds at all,
 nor close;
 That the diasporic
 scattering, scattered even in the "home"

 talmudic
 aura of endlessly welling commentary

 folding and looping over (Toll 130-131).

The dialectical operations of loss and memory in *Drafts* give rise to a diasporic conception of memory and language, so that the poem's task becomes one of re-gathering and re-calibrating the scattered, shattered meanings of words and phrases, their power to signify the human deranged by ideology and oppression. *Drafts* not only shifts back and forth with nimble celerity between "children's clothing/factory-stitched by children," and, say, the apples painted by Charles Demuth, but takes for its subject the very performance of that shifting, the unsettled and unsettling vectors of everyday consciousness. That the task of articulating a response to the total experience of living and writing is also an impossibility is not seen by DuPlessis as an impasse, but rather a powerfully productive aporia. "Form," as she notes, is "experienced struggle." The

irresolvable character of language is a hallmark of much postmodern poetry, but few poets have invested this conundrum with such a rich sense of possibility and even joy.

Drafts is a poem in search of a messianic form, a form capable of embracing anything. At the least, it will be provisional, open-ended, and organized around process rather than closure. It will employ a paratactic rather than a hypotactic structure. It will see the alphabet (as in “Draft 12: Diasporas”) as a system of bewilderment, rather than a technology of control, a displacing force as much as a stabilizer of identity and belonging. In this scene, the poet seems to be weighing the difficulty of words to say anything at all simply with the inevitable erosion by the elements of gravestones or tumuli.

Wordlessness whirlwinds words
at that limen, articulating multiples
that cannot even be attached or
arrived at to greet, so foreign and distant, and
so near and constant,
the sets were experienced as one confusion.

These spaces of dispersion
are marked with bourns
which disappear amid the fields of scree
as stones.
So gifts are swallowed up by gifts.
Even erasure is erased.
In this, what residue remains? (Toll 81).

One of the great achievements of this poem is that it recognizes that any honest phenomenology of experience must go beyond problematical valorizations of presence and take into account the never ending depredations of loss. A post-structural categorical imperative will be one that gazes out at the entangled landscapes of beauty and deformation and sees how oppression and liberation play themselves out everyday at the smallest levels, even down to the very word choices we make.

In “Draft 37: Praedelle,” DuPlessis’s employs a bold utopian sound-scheme that is a kind of ode to the topographical fold of place and name. Resonant with Hopkins’s usage of sound, the poem advances music as a principle of ontological relationship, the way birdsong, say, will rhyme with a cloud, or:

Folds fall in laban-notation
 from one to the other
 striping the absolute
 excitabilities of their billow (Toll 257).

This is perhaps the other major axis of organization in *Drafts*, the constellated interconnectivity of language responding as a web does to the least vibration in a behavior similar to what chaos scientists have dubbed “Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions.” The word is conceived of as the vector for multiple forces and causalities, the chiasmatic locus of many intersecting trajectories, all in play at once. But beyond these concerns — or, rather, in tandem with them — what truly delights about “Praedelle,” as with so much of *Drafts*, is its marvelous roll of song. It begins:

Hard. The dure of tradurre.
 Wide low arcdeep fields,
 houses dotted, ho detto,
 with shadow. And sun stark (Toll 255).

And ends, stirringly, on a Keatsian riff:

The or of every rift is ore
 the eithers also ores.
 There are twin rivers rushing wide
 that flow apart to lodestar shores (Toll 260).

The exactness of pitch and the percussive play of consonants set against the dilating and contracting rhythm produces a heady, headlong music. With great finesse, DuPlessis keeps “Praedelle” in continual suspension, giving us the just slightly off-balance sense of an open-ended series running up against the imminent threat of closure, and all of it contained in the

vibrant force-field of these crisp and lively quatrains. Here, as throughout the poem, her paronomasia acts as a device for eliciting the sensitive connections between words and our physical response to them. Keats' injunction to load every rift with ore becomes for DuPlessis a canny materialist procedure for reading the subtle possibilities suggested by the humblest of conjunctions like "or." DuPlessis's laddered music and tripping cadences read like something from a lost bestiary of The Word, breaking across the page in terpsichorean pageant — the sinuous recoil and redoubling curve of assonance and dissonance flickering in alternate bursts of lyric music and compressed exposition.

What gradually becomes apparent in reading *Drafts* as a whole is the surprising extent to which it operates on a messianic register. Explicitly, the messianic may be located in the many passages of "utopian anger" addressing social injustice and feminism. What is implicitly messianic in *Drafts* is form itself — which is never simply form as such, inert and static, but the actively ongoing search for apprehending form. In this sense, DuPlessis's approach calls to mind Franz Rosenzweig's rebuttal to the fetishistic cult of facts by proposing what might be called the poetics of "And." Because it is contingent, interlocutory, ongoing, "and" is the exemplary messianic utterance. It provides the basic suturing morphology of language and memory.

The articulation of previous silences,
the invention of memory, *and, and but*
the hole, again I said hold,
I have in my head (Toll 93).

"And" demolishes the period at the end of the sentence, morphs it into a comma, a colon, because it knows there can be never be an end to saying. Because the sentence, the line, is always en route. Rosenzweig calls it "the basic word of all experience." Rosenzweig's concept of *Sprechdenken*, or speech-thought, which he outlines in *The New Thinking*, illuminates DuPlessis's bricoleur method as well:

Speech is bound to time and nourished by time, and it neither can nor wants to abandon this element. It does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its cues from others ... whether that other is the one who listens to a story, answers in the course of a dialogue, or joins in a chorus (260).

To take up such a form of thinking in which pre-conceptions are placed in abeyance, says Rosenzweig, means that “we must wait for everything, that what is ours depends on what is another’s.” *Drafts*’ open-ended structure built around the midrashic principle of continual inquiry and self-interruption, epitomizes the logic of “and.” The poem is always remembering, always looking ahead, yet never finished. This is made especially evident in section 27 of “Hard Copy” (*Pitch*), her homage to and revision of Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous.”

“Hard Copy,” as the title implies, writes through (or beyond) “Of Being Numerous” through each of the latter’s forty sections. It is at once an audacious act and a moving tribute to engagement with her mentor. In section 27 of Oppen’s poem, he swerves aside from the main movement of the poem’s consideration of how to balance the necessity for community with the needs of the individual to examine the role of poetry. “It is not,” he asserts, “a question of profundity but a different order of experience. One would have to tell what happens in a life; what choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what happens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and therefore what art is” (NCP 180). He concludes that “one must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads/in his hands,/He must somehow see the one thing.” DuPlessis’s “response” is worth noting for, both for its similar sense of strong commitment – that poetry can make a difference – and her doubt that perhaps it might not, after all.

How to make the
confrontation spoken by poetry offer the force
of an intervention – so that one feels the whole

differently. Beyond one, but inside one.

How to talk about the level of art as ground and arousing. As

compassion, empathy, resistance. As respect for the unknown,
 even the unknowable. As entrance into the intricacy of
 languages and structures, into the mesh of musical grammars.
 How to move beyond the “technology of solutions” by making
 analysis itself a verbal saturate. How to produce resonance.

So I began writing into the poems
 I put words deep into the poems
 As into a tunnel

to speak point black (Pitch 62).

The differences between DuPlessis and Oppen are telling here. Where Oppen emphasizes the necessity of unity – to “see the one thing” – DuPlessis advocates a form of double-consciousness, or dialectical process, capable of negotiating the tension between that what is external and internal, unfamiliar and familiar. The “and” of poetry, especially of a midrashic poetry that is never too long settled in its own movement, is a kind of bridge. But it is also a way of speaking “point black,” of affirming the power of the negative.

Poetic speech must resist arriving at some final stopping place since arrival forecloses the possibility of hope that is the eternal messianic, “the wilderness of hope” that, for DuPlessis, arises from the recognition, the hold, of emptiness. Emptiness, as something present yet unpronounceable, is integral to *Drafts*’ sense of the messianic.

The “unsaid” is a shifting boundary
 resisting even itself.
 Something, the half-sayable,
 gone speechless. Or it can’t

and Inbetween

what is, and
 that it is,
 is ☯ Inside

..... an offhand
 sound, a howe or swallowed
 shallow. Sayable sign

of the un-.
(Toll 75).

The Unsaid as the inside of speech comes forward as the inarticulate sign of the messianic, of the effort of the poem to enunciate the impossible, “the very word” itself, which is like a bell to toll, as DuPlessis, cleverly eliding the word “forlorn” from Keats’s line, has it in her first epigraph. But what sort of toll is it?

In the remarkable “Draft 33: Deixis,” DuPlessis takes up the problem of language’s ability to point toward a referent, to confer meaning at all by way of spatial tropes.

call this the matrix of the unallowable, or, perhaps indifferently, say
loss

call this the problem of the dead

call it the toll

It is the space of poetry (Toll 234).

“Toll” here suggests both a call to awareness and the cost incurred for some experience. *Drafts* deliberately links the two, then goes on to introduce a third term to the dialectic, restitution. One way to think of the poetics of the ethical being proposed here is to say that the eye must make restitution for what it sees, what it points to — not because seeing is a form of damage, but just the opposite: because it is a form of representation and response — of responsibility. The eye makes restitution by recognizing the context for that which it initially singles out. Likewise the word is under an obligation to pay out of its available funds for expression a certain toll for its deictic directions, for speaking at all. That the fund is never quite enough, and yet somehow always more than enough, not quite equal to the cost incurred by saying, and yet abundantly wealthy in the possibilities for such a redemptive saying, is the poetic Moebius strip *Drafts* travels over. Benjamin’s concept of progress as a series of “moments of interference” might best

describe DuPlessis's method — she interrupts the poem so often that gradually we begin to feel that it's nothing but interruptions. Continuity, *Drafts* implies, is accomplished only by way of discontinuity. This kind of ultimate contingency, for a poet like DuPlessis, is not a cause for confusion, but rather an occasion to celebrate the liberating prolixity of language's endlessly reticulating procedures for form. Far from standing as an idle container for ideas, form exists as a profound mystery since its articulation is the articulation of the mind moving through and apprehending itself. *Drafts* delights in initiating and disbanding formal alignments in order to keep a deeper pact with form itself.

"Toll" also calls to mind Heidegger's gnomic suggestion that "language speaks as the toll of stillness,"⁷ which is a suitably elegiac one where *Drafts* is concerned. "Draft 38: Georgics and Shadow" takes up this theme and folds it back over on itself in a provocative dialogue the poet stages with herself — or is it the poem itself that is doing all the talking here?

What did the work demand?
What did the work demand?

The knot.
That the question be asked.

*

Nothing is inside the work, but everything is. The stillness of things not still.
To say is, is, is again and again, very simple, very painful.

Absolute toll.
Every word teeming and bereft (Toll 261-62).

The midrashic principle again: a question can only be answered with a question because an answer would mark the close of response.

This rejection of closure is not only a rejection of traditional aesthetic values, like the personal voice, but takes on an important value for a feminist poetics that seeks a way out or

⁷ *Poetry Language Thought*, 207.

around the dominance, in poetry, of specifically male voices. Writing beyond the ending means not only a going beyond patriarchal discourse, but also, for DuPlessis, her masculine models, Pound and William Carlos Williams.⁸

By rejecting closure, or rather, by electing midrash, *Drafts* makes an important turn toward a new way of writing the ethical. Poetic language can now take up a dialectical encounter with the distortions and erasures of history and in particular, with the ongoing meaning of the Holocaust. Walter Kalaidjian's reading of *Drafts* is particularly instructive on this point. For Kalaidjian, DuPlessis's engagement with the challenge of "poetry after Auschwitz" involves "the urgent ... question of the ethics of poetic form. What manner of poetics, that is, can testify to that which for the secondary witness is not only unknown but ever at risk, as Adorno reminds us, of barbarous reification" (EM 89).

Kalaidjian's reading of *Toll* is compelling on this point. "Not only does [DuPlessis'] repeated questioning of her writing's Jewishness imply its overdetermined textual status, but her passive phrasing in regard to composing her poetic midrash – 'there have appeared' – signifies on the phantom haunting of the Jews in Derrida's phrase in *il y a la cinders*" (EM xx). He places her efforts to write of the enormities surrounding the postwar legacy within the tradition of the *via negativa*. "Poetic form in *Toll*," he writes, "advances beyond the example of encyclopedic modernism by inflecting its collaged, visual surface through the phenomenological registers of the phantom trace." "Draft 87-Trace Element," (from *Pitch*) offers an exemplum of this negational poetics and at the same time is responds to Kalaidjian's reading as well as to one of the central ghosts haunting *Drafts*, Ezra Pound.

⁸ DuPlessis' "intractable" dissertation, *The Endless Poem* (1970), focused on *The Cantos* and *Paterson* and how Imagism generated the long modern poem. See *Blue Studios*, p. 211.

As DuPlessis writes in her essay on composing *Drafts*, “Inside the Middle of a Long Poem,” “*Drafts* was involved with Pound from its inception ... I wanted to make an alternative *Cantos*, a counter-*Cantos*.” The poem as a whole can be taken as a rejoinder to Pound’s “scandalous remark,” made with reference to Eliot while Pound was in Italy in 1942, that “not a jot or tittle of the Hebraic alphabet can pass into the text without danger of contaminating it” (BS 250). DuPlessis goes on to say that:

Mine is a poem that ... speaks of the dilemmas of writing upon, or after, the deaths of those to whom Pound addressed the possibility of “antisepsis” or a “cleansing” social purgation. My work begins in the long aftermath of the destructive underside of modernity (BS 250-51).

Yet “Draft 87—Trace Elements,” from *Pitch*, the fourth installment of *Drafts*, begins by adumbrating the nuances of the spirit’s passage into the letter, a theme familiar from Susan Handelman’s observation, in *The Slayers of Moses*, that “literary criticism has become a kind of substitute theology” (SM xiii). For DuPlessis, as for Derrida, the trace enjoys a curious state of existence – simultaneously canceled out, yet still part of the count, part of what makes up the total chain of signification. In Derrida’s lexicon, trace names the mark, or smudge, which remains even after the logocentric dream of recovering an original or foundational point of reference outside the sign system has been erased. These traces linger, ghost-like, haunting philosophical systems, history, and languages alike, fueling them with the desire for an unattainable goal of recovery. The trace is what remains of metaphysics’ perverse longing for a closed, regulated system, one undisturbed by that other Derridean term, play. Trace comprises the very core of *différance* since it operates according to the logic of the recoverable origin, the foundational pivot, the metaphysical cornerstone. Derrida is emphatic on this point. “The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is

no absolute origin of sense in general” (OG 65). The trace places the idea of origin under erasure, as Derrida argues, destabilizing its claims to authority, rendering it, in effect, porous.

The trace, then, is what haunts every sign, and indeed, the entire logic of every system of meaning or signification. But this haunting is more than a phantom of discredited metaphysics. It marks the affective and ethical path of loss both at the level of memory and of history. The opening of the poem approaches the idea of trace from a variety of angles.

The trace is
a hold/a hole
of evanescence through which
travel small powerful things,
impotently, earnestly, but, and,
whether, what if underlying them.
Traces of what happened
commend your attentiveness to the almost invisible

*

Or trace exists before all this ...
Incipient emptiness of a living void.

*

Or trace indicates almost meaningless
propulsions of smudge and grit
dragging vestige, graffito and spoor (*Pitch* 78-79).

Gradually, these metaphysical considerations give way to tracing the shadow of trace through history in order to “illuminate the breakage” (P 93). “For traces caused by enormous historical crimes//one thinks, unthinks, and thinks again.//Molecules remain in air. We breathe each other in.//This is not consolation” (P 101).

What was it? What did you want?
“how to tolerate an inconsolable instant ...”

that has spread its wings
the spiral of gravel kicked out underfoot

and the charred book
the meltdown of page in the world's greatest age

the Age of Ash we are
the alloy of (P 102).

Finally (not finally, though) trace implicates us all in its melancholy and guilt.

Trace is evidence.
It is a blurry mark of what we should have known
and did,
a melancholy reminder
remaining unresolved

Trace offers flakes of the unimagined

and unimaginable so we can

continue, fully unable to imagine it.

Or unimagine it (P 104).

The turn in the poem comes by reflecting on how the poem can also, with its ceaseless process of associations, imagine a poetics of the trace that locates in “the flakes” – the shards, the rubble, or just the minute particulars of the daily – the possibility of encountering the beyond of the unimaginable, with its challenges to take up the messianic potential of the negational, while at the same time activating the power of the poem to re-link language continually through yet another chain of signifiers.

One word, with its history, its specificity, its residues,
The scintillation of its distractions can open a universe
Of connectors. That poetry
Being words is like this, that poetry is made of trace phonemes ...
That speak, do speak with palimpsested distinctness (P 107).

The power of the trace takes on recursive properties, investing language with a messianic explosiveness that can cut through the scar tissue of history. “The trace emanates the trace! .../trace is inscribed everywhere/and the world is trace,/but without a reader” (P 108). The

danger here, for DuPlessis, is that trace edges uncomfortably close to a surrogate for spirit or some other reifying abstraction. She pulls back from this position by ruefully acknowledging that “we are custodians of the meanings/we make of world./It is circular,/this argument, if it is one,/but to pine/is ridiculous./This is/trace at its best” (109). The epitome of trace, in this view, is that it returns the reader to the world with a new sense for the potential of as yet unmade connections. “Let the shard become readable by/jaggedness and by piecing,/let letter engage its crowns/let black be luminous with luster” (109). DuPlessis’ shard is not, like Oppen’s, indestructible. Rather, it opens itself up to the possibility of further damage. These injunctions desire an incantatory contamination.

For DuPlessis, the trace inverts the hierarchy between outside and inside, supplement and origin, or, more specifically, between midrashic commentary and original text. In *Drafts*, there is no original text, no founding principle except that of the midrashic trace, the ever-circling return to itself in a process that generates yet another poem, another commentary on the process. This potentially endless procedure of reiteration is given a vivid and witty turn at the close of “Trace Elements,” which invokes as a model for such a poetics Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers.

All serifs are seraphim: such is faith in the letter.
 Such is the force of the word.
 The faith is touching.
 In every alphabet
 in every technology of memory—
 knots, rocks, dots, rhymes,
 codes, rites,
 monuments and books—
 in that shockingly endless tower built
 of the balances and loops of wire
 ceramic shards set in cement, and mirrors, too,
 extendable yet poised in mutual
 enjambment—
 oh.
 There is no verb in this sentence (P 109).

The verbless sentence, brought up short in a characteristic self-commentary, only gains, not loses, its momentum by this seemingly spontaneous interruption. While this gesture, which comes to mark *Drafts* more and more as it progresses, borders on, or flirts with, the arch, the idea of a verbless sentence, a fragment or kernel of a sentence, sustains itself on the strength of the dialectical suture joining the serif of letters to the seraphim who sing endlessly the praises of the Most High. But it is not spirit that has not passed into and animated inert matter. Quite the opposite, matter itself is made to sing, through its miniscule letters and the typographical details of the alphabet.⁹

The trace is valedictory. But it also points the way to thinking the messianic, which is a thinking about time and memory. “Memory,” according to the Baal Shem Tov, “is the secret of redemption.”¹⁰ But the recovery of memory is itself an endless operation. So *Drafts* can never accomplish its own redemption since the poem is also always forgetting – writing over or through, smudging, erasing, revising – what it has already written. The compulsion to say things over, to repeat themes in different keys and tempos, to re-modulate the rhythms of loss and recovery, suggests that perhaps we must somehow begin to think of form itself as redemptive activity. In the final section of this chapter I will examine in detail DuPlessis’ concept of an activist poetics of form.

Adorno, Midrash, and The Angel of History

“Draft 52: Midrash” (from 2004’s *Drafts 39-57, Pledge*) is DuPlessis’ most concentrated engagement with the vexing question posed by Adorno of how to write poetry in the wake of the Holocaust. For Adorno, as we have seen, all products of culture (and not merely poetry) are

⁹ “All serif are seraphim” recalls Lacan’s famous quip that “the letter killeth while the spirit giveth life ... but we should also like to know how the spirit could live without the letter” (*Ecrits: A Selection*, 158).

¹⁰ Quoted in Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Indiana UP, 1991, pp. 149-153.

contaminated by the Nazi program of genocide. This line of thought needs to be understood both in terms of the arguments Adorno laid out with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* about the unintended yet logical consequences of rationality and the pursuit of ordered progress, and Benjamin's claim that dialectical thought must work to free barbarism from its position as civilization's repressed other and understood as that which enables civilization.

After citing Adorno's Auschwitz dictum in the original German, then providing the full quote from his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" where it occurs, "Draft 52: Midrash" opens with following lines, which comprise the entirety of the first of its 27 sections:

Poetry/ Auschwitz/ barbaric.
Oblique triangle.
Also
human litter
has not ceased/ to be/ created (P 141).

At first glance, "litter" seems a curiously muted, almost neutral, term of description, quite inadequate to the representational demands exacted by the crisis of postwar disaster. Yet its almost casual air of dismissal is just what makes it so powerful in this context. The human being has been reduced by the forces of history – war, exploitation, oppression, exile – to nothing more than roadside rubbish. This is the legacy of Auschwitz.

"Draft 52-Midrash" is DuPlessis' explicit attempt to come to grips not so much with Holocaust itself, a theme that shadows much of the early sections of *Drafts*, as Walter Kalaidjian demonstrates, but rather with Adorno's bewitching pronouncement, which has seemed to some poets to cast a malediction on poetry, threatening to rob it of its potency and legitimacy. Accordingly, the initial sections of "Midrash" read as baldly didactic arguments with Adorno. This approach is very much in keeping with DuPlessis' all-inclusive strategy, which embraces and juxtaposes dissimilar rhetorical styles and registers. "Midrash" exemplifies this process, for

it is also a poem about thinking through what it means to write such a poem – one that is both a working through of Adorno’s challenge and a meditation on the poetic (and emotional and intellectual) resources required for such a task.

Each of the following 26 sections of “Midrash” takes up or revisits some new aspect of Adorno’s dictum and the variety of responses it produces. The serial approach of the Objectivist, the segmentivity of gapped sequence, as DuPlessis describes it, that is ideally suited for the micrological sifting of the ruins, also makes available a dialectical procedure for turning over and over the aporia of failed culture (as explained in Chapter 1). So, for instance, sections 2 and 3 take up the question of why Adorno singled out poetry as the index of cultural failure without seeing fit to include other forms such as the novel, painting, or theater. This is something of a red herring, since, as more than one commentator has made clear, poetry for Adorno stands in for all other high cultural activities.¹¹ This line of thought leads DuPlessis to consider another possibility. If culture has failed, then the poet must “write a poem that fails” (*Pledge* 143). This is precisely the line Adorno takes in his essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* and a point he emphasizes over and over again in *Aesthetic Theory* – that the work of art, after Auschwitz, must reject the obsequy of mimesis and strive instead to become autonomous.¹² The poem that fails must fail in a particular way, not as an aesthetically under-realized object, but as art that resists the reifying pressures of culture and the temptation to traffic in an easy and self-congratulatory species of protest and calls for reform, calls which inevitably, in both Adorno’s and DuPlessis’ view, slide back into the reifying principle they set out to cancel in the first place. Borrowing from Adorno’s essay “Commitment,” she observes of Oppen that, after an early life devoted to political

¹¹ See Detlev Claussen, *Theodor Adorno: One Last Genius*, p. 114 and Gerhard Schweppenhauser, *Theodor W. Adorno, An Introduction*, Chapter 8, “The Failure of Culture,” for more expanded discussions of this topic.

¹² “Realism, which does not grasp subjective experience, to say nothing of going beyond it, only mimics reconciliation.” NTL v.1. p.250.

activism, his “commitment . . . migrated into form.” The same could be said of her own work. *Drafts* magpie/midrashic virtuosity, its restless dialectical harrying of its own lines, signals its own commitment to Objectivist form in which, as DuPlessis notes, “technique is the test (and text) of a person’s sincerity. This makes an ethics of writing emerge simultaneously with the making of language” (BS 210).

The issue of an ethics of writing forms the central concern of “Draft 52-Midrash,” a poem that occurs at roughly the midway point of the series’ projected 114 poems and can be said to act as a pivot for the larger work overall. The actual center of the poem, which closes the volume *Drafts 39-57, Pledge*, is the final poem of that book. It’s worth noting that “Draft 57-Pledge” restages or revisits every single poem in the series written up to that date. So, for “Midrash,” the gloss opens on a devastating note: “History blows us all/against a wall/of flame and mortal air” (*Pledge* 218). It goes on to ask if the continual disaster of history can “offer any clarity/on the failure to make good —.” And then, after Rilke’s famous opening lines in *Duino Elegies*, it poses one last question:

If I were to cry out
the questions why or how or
who would hear us —
I’d say the only ones to hear this
are ourselves.
Therefore it is scrupulous to listen.
especially to shadows (*Pledge* 219)

The *cri de couer* gives way to the sobering rejoinder of the Objectivists that in times of crisis “it is scrupulous to listen.” But, as the poem asks in section 6 of “Draft 52,” “Does poetry ignore crisis/trump up event/say policy does not matter to it/accept the normal/prettify hegemony?” In other words, if lyric is merely the tool for maintaining the idol of the bourgeois subject, is it nothing more than ornament? How can it become an agent of cognition, a force for messianic

intervention into the homogenous empty time of historicist ideology's amnesia, its "me-so-pretty" hegemony?

The rest of this intricate poem sets out to answer that. Not once, but several times, and through differing turns, returns and registers. I will not touch on every section's turning and tuning of this question, but instead, hop-scotch about among the most striking instances of response. The "Auschwitz topos," a phrase I use with some trepidation since it leaves me open to Adorno's accusations about reducing the issue of civilization's doom to mere "idle chatter," opens up to include a broader range of meanings and associations. Auschwitz is more than Auschwitz. It is the history of modernity's atrocity – Hiroshima and Nagasaki, too. Or as DuPlessis sums it up: "The hope of modernisms and the facts of modernity" (P 145). This contradictory pressures of this condition, where history overwhelms aesthetics, incriminates everyone.

Anyone and everyone stands poised there
in the event.
What, then, is the size of the loss?

Beyond unrecoverable.

To be beyond even unrecovery is to exceed not just every known limit, but, as Blanchot would say, the very idea of limit itself. The scale of the disaster sweeps away all thought of rescue and every hope for a return to the status quo. "Since the disaster always takes place after having taken place," writes Blanchot, "there cannot possibly be any experience of it" (WD 28). The disaster here is not understood to belong to the domain of Freudian trauma, but as the event which dissolves the unifying power of experience itself, even the ability to undergo experience. Yet Adorno's "idle chatter" threatens the fragility of what persists after Auschwitz and, as DuPlessis writes, "we enter the darkness of this dark/without assistance from conventions like

elegy” (P 145). So acute is the disaster’s force that it robs conventional forms of response to loss, such as elegy, of their power to console. “Therefore no poetry. You cannot get off this hook/with lyrics trading in transcendence and turn” (P 145). After “Midrash’s” initial skepticism and challenge to Adorno, the kind of reactionary denial where most poets stop, DuPlessis moves more deeply into what it means to write barbarically, to be morally complicit with culture’s auto-destruction. In the totally administered world, which has become “an open air prison,” even the poem (especially the poem, since it still blindly believes in its own undamaged privilege) becomes an instrument of radical evil, a mean for increasing the subordination of people to System.

Therefore — to write poetry thinking you had words for
anything at all, after these particular policies and practices
is ridiculous—hard to approach the right nuance,
is inadequate, a misapplication of understanding,
self-congratulatory, narcissistic, overweening,
prettifying, or could even say
“barbaric.” It was a word chosen for rage (P 149).

It becomes apparent here that DuPlessis is both thinking through Adorno, taking him in earnest, and ventriloquizing him, trying him on for size the better to grasp the historical specificity of a moment in 1949 when he writes the essay that he will become best known for. Yet what it can mean that a thinker who dares to think through the full implications of the Holocaust is vilified and labeled infamous while the event itself still calls out for the work he has undertaken?

“Drafts 52-Midrash” attempts to take up this thorny perplex, yet, partly in the spirit of the poem’s guiding principle and partly out of frustration, the reiterated sense of vexation starts to stall out. The circling of the poem begins to fall into itself – becomes centripetal, rather than centrifugal. When DuPlessis, in a dramatic moment of confrontation (not so much with Adorno himself, but his maxim), compares the supposed ban on poetry to Abraham’s command to

sacrifice Isaac, the tensions animating the encounter (the thinking through) reach a delirious fever pitch.

It is an act of mourning
To cut off
What is important to him –
Poetry –
As if to sacrifice Isaac
to walk the choked road
To bind one's closest bond ...

Adorno! Desist!
Put down your knife!

Have I been taken in the role of angel?
Perhaps I should not write poetry (P 151).

But was Adorno ever threatening to murder poetry in the name of some higher law (the dialectic, for instance)? Perhaps this question is less important than asking how it is that DuPlessis comes to read Adorno's statement as constituting a ban, or in Gerhard Schweppenhauser's phrase, as if he had issued "a kind of negative-theological commandment ... 'Thou shalt not write a poem after Auschwitz'" (TA 138). As I've by now made exhaustively clear, one reads Adorno un-dialectically at one's peril. But perhaps DuPlessis is not so un-dialectic as at first appears. "Is this midrash on Adorno done?" she asks a little later on in the poem, "No./Midrash is never over/being neither lost nor won" (P 155).¹³

And in the spirit of midrash, the poem takes up Adorno's own language to read him, in this case, the well-known conclusion of *Minima Moralia*, where he boldly writes, following

¹³ In yet another gesture of self-glossing, the final section of her contribution to *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* characterizes "Draft 52-Midrash" as taking up Adorno's dictum as "an important spiritual talisman to this ethical-political nightmare and its challenge to art" (221). The poem's twenty-seven sections, she notes, "contain one more than our alphabet," and while she does not cite the allusion explicitly, this can only refer to Ron Silliman's theory of the New Sentence, laid out in the book of the same name: "The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be" (92). It is just such an extra-linguistic, but material, space that brims with the kind of messianic potentiality for a post-Holocaust writing that both Adorno and DuPlessis envision as a non-reifying, non-idealizing, micrologically contingent and capable of engaging the crisis of representation.

Benjamin, that the only counter to despair is to see things “from the standpoint of redemption.” “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (MM 247). DuPlessis makes this language her own, breaking it into short lines, each enclosed with quotation marks, so that the familiar text appears distorted, already performing its micrological task of attending to the ungainliness of the estranged.

This ungainliness is precisely what Lyn Hejinian takes to be one of Adorno’s meanings. For Hejinian, the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz “has to be taken as true in two ways ... first, because what happened at Auschwitz ... [rendered] all possibilities for meaning ... suspended or crushed.” And second, and more importantly, because the event of the disaster enjoins poets “*not to speak the same language as Auschwitz* ... poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied) by foreignness—by the barbarism of strangeness” (LI 325-26). This highly useful recuperation of poetic potentiality lends itself to a reading of the final, powerful sections of “Draft 52-Midrash.”

In half-wounded syntax, grid, fragment,
 chunk chord and collage, make
 things to say things
 by a “venture into the dark ‘flat’ side of their harmony”

*

The beyond is in the surface.
 Walking through the dead as partly dead
 — it must only be
 an impossible draft of half-built, half-crumbled
 all-suspicious poetry.

*

Forget transfiguration

forget frisson
 while it is impossible, think you are going
 beyond any pattern in the aesthetics we know

forget “point” or end
 try maybe
 gridded series of embeddings and strange angles;
 prime the lines with bolts of dark

Over and over. While a portion of this may be called “art”
 it is difficult to give a name to the rest of the portions (*Pledge* 157).¹⁴

These almost heraldic lines embody the very qualities they name as necessary for a post-Auschwitz poetics while laying out the map for *Drafts*’ own construction – a poem that enfolds the personal lyric inside a reticulation of grid and fragment, surfaces and incomplete memories, suspended in the serial force field of messianic interruptions and midrashic reconnections. They articulate the need for art’s unquestioned autonomy even as they acknowledge both the difficulty of such a task and its utter strangeness. What are these other portions, which are not art, and which resist naming, yet are integral to the procedures for a viable poetics of the disaster? Messianic shards seems too rarified a label. Perhaps remnants is more apt. Remnants and scraps, at once intransigent and no more substantial than smoke, they persist, as memory does, not in the form of witnessing, but merely in the form of persisting itself. “One little scrap where something is./Incommensurate” (P 157). It is that “incommensurate” which becomes the true subject of the poem that writes the disaster and on which so much depends. “The beyond,” or transcendence, perhaps even something less than that, but still capable of offering a muted redemption, is not

¹⁴ Though there is no mention of it in the book’s exhaustive endnotes, these lines seem to be in conversation with section 27 of Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous”: “One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads/in his hands./He must somehow see the one thing;/This is the level of art/There are other levels/But there is no other level of art.” Oppen’s Old Left affiliations, as well as his rejection of the avant-garde, undercuts the larger claims of this poem, or rather, places them in a key of resignation instead of hope. Whereas DuPlessis embraces the need for a poetry that is heterogeneous, capable of responding to the dimensions of historical loss.

located in the depths or the heights, but right here and now, on the surface of things and the traces they leave of their presence after they are gone.

The presence of what is gone – the trace – may be traumatic aftershock; or the whisper of something else. Following Gershom Scholem’s account of angels who exist only for so long as it takes them to utter the praises of creation, Benjamin conceived of an angel of history, a witnessing agent to the folly of progress (or the progress of folly) as it moves through the chain of catastrophes called history. But this angel is also a victim of progress, blown helplessly backwards into the future, which it is prevented from seeing by the tidal surge rushing out of the past, pinning it in place. In DuPlessis’ secular Judaic poetics, a different sort of angel of history emerges, one inflected with the double-stranded virus of feminist agency and midrashic textuality. This angel is the principle of poetic midrash, of continual intervention and revision, and by its agency the past is revealed, not as it was, not as it is, but as it must submit itself: re-read and carefully interpreted. In other words, as it is *made*.

In one sense, of course, midrash is an effort to guarantee the past’s unbroken link with the present. But as DuPlessis employs it, it also acts as a probing of the very premises for such an operation. Midrash acts on behalf of otherness, opening up the seam inside, as DuPlessis puts it. Part of keeping open a continuous link to the past requires asking what continuity means and whether the past is best served by maintaining it as it has been transmitted, or interrupting it, subjecting it to “strange angles,” (or angels?) to the perspective that will yield a messianic light, in Adorno’s phrase. Midrash is an ethical intervention in how meaning is constructed, and this, I argue, is what sets it apart from the modernist collage as practiced by Pound, which seeks to establish a universal value for meaning (Kung to Malatesta to Adams; Tinkers to Evers to Chance). To risk a generalization here, collage is the practice of juxtaposing language from

different texts and genres, importing it with or without attribution or quotation, in order to produce a frisson of style (as in ironic counterpoint) or a shudder of historical recognition. As Pound uses it, though, differences between texts and historical eras are elided for the sake of unity. The emphasis is decidedly didactic. Richard Sieburth's lucid discussion of Pound's method concisely sums up this strategy: "Pound's paratactic ideograms ... aim instead at pulverizing the syntax of narrative, at erasing transitions, at opening up intervals and breaches by a constructivist technique of collage or jumpcut montage that serves to isolate the sign thus exposed" (48). This isolation of the sign, however, is not used to liberate it from the stratum of historical forgetfulness, but is instead yoked to the fetish for locating and universalizing similarities across texts and eras.

Where midrashic poetics differs from collage is in its careful maintenance of the dissimilar, its refusal to collapse distinctions and its insistence on keeping in play the dialectical tensions of textuality. DuPlessis' midrashic poetics follows Zukofsky's injunction to think with "things as they are, intact, without violence." Benjamin saw the angel of history as only able to mutely testify to the disaster of progress, but DuPlessis makes it an active participant in the struggle "to see really what was going on," as Oppen puts it in *Discrete Series*. As textual intervention midrash charges the poem with the revisionary power to see history again, and to address its hurts by breaking open the falsely homogeneous narrative of the past by which the present constructs its agenda.

Coda: The Promises of Negation

In his late essay, “Commitment,” Adorno revisits his pronouncement on Auschwitz, not so much to revise it as to place it in dialogue with its own resistance:

I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz; it expresses, negatively, the impulse that animates committed literature ... But Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s rejoinder also remains true, namely that literature must resist precisely this verdict, that is, be such that it does not surrender to cynicism merely by existing after Auschwitz. It is the situation of literature itself and not simply one’s relation to it that is paradoxical (CLA 251-52).

That literature must resist itself if it is to be truly committed to the task of addressing historical trauma is the challenge facing a messianic poetry of disaster. Poets must write in a language that subverts, refuses, or negates the easy symmetries and assuagements of a positivist rhetoric that melts the poem into an idol – the place where investigation stops in order to admire its own reflection. The combination of Jewish textuality, with its emphasis on midrash, diasporic or deferred meanings, and the *via negativa*, with an Objectivist aesthetic of constellation, parataxis, and caesura equips messianic poetry with an idiom for overturning the internal impulse of all artworks to achieve what would only be a specious unity, one that betrays the experience of disaster. Charles Altieri is persuasive on this point: “Objectivist sincerity,” he notes, “can be understood as a commitment to resist two different kinds of closure – one rhetorical and the other formal ... this sincerity demands pursuing what I call an eloquence based on the resistance to eloquence: lyric speech becomes personal and resonant to the degree that it manages actively to resist the temptation to lyric self-staging basic to romantic ideals of the poet” (ON 302). Such negational strategies deregulate the normative function of cadence and measure by focusing on the invitation by silence to pierce the poem’s semantic carapace with the alien starlight of semiosis. While all poems, in a broad sense, can be said in some way to arrest or suspend time through the modulation of syntax and rhythm, messianic poetics pushes this practice right to the

edge, militating against the comforts of a poetics bent on insuring the replication of the ever-same of the mythic subject.

The logic of such a militant, post-secular ethics urges a thinking through of the ruins of form in the hope of achieving what Altieri bravely calls “a grammatical vision of social interdependency;” a poetry, in other words, that dwells within contingency without giving up literature’s claim to moral thinking (PN 110). What Altieri refers to as contingency – the acknowledgement that universal judgments are prohibited by the destruction of grand historical narratives – is yet another way to understand Oppen’s “meaning of being numerous.” Contingency invites a messianic poetics. The crisis of late modernity involves a heightened sensitivity to the fragility of the temporal, coupled with a call to messianic intervention by the poem that can rescue experience from its subduction by ideology.

This interventional impetus of the messianic rethinks the temporal within a horizon of lateness. By lateness I do not mean some entrenched, rearguard position of resignation. Likewise, since I am treating an older generation of poets, my provisional description here is not in dialogue with Christopher Nealon’s “camp messianism,” his coinage for the methods of a younger group of post-Language writers attempting to come to grips with the apocalyptic anxieties of what he calls “late-late capital” (MC 140). Nealon’s diagnosis of camp messianism in poets like Lisa Robertson and Joshua Clover places the response to the recent crisis of capital under the sign of rubbish, or “superseded waste product” (140): the messianic, which once brokered a sincere model of resistance, has now been subsumed into the general grab bag of empty postmodern cultural gestures, to be appropriated as camp – a form of resistance that, while certainly valuable, stakes its weak authority on pastiche and etiolated ironic postures. It does not adequately map on to the response of the poets I’m concerned with here. Nealon’s reading seems

to me to skirt rather too closely to an outmoded first-wave, or vulgar, postmodernism's embrace of entropy that characterized it during the period running roughly from 1960 to the late 1980s.

Late modernism, which I use here as a deliberate anachronism, forces us to rethink not just the commonly agreed upon scheme for periodizing modern literature, but how periodizing takes place, what it seeks to elevate and what it actually represses. Late modernism, I argue, is modernism without modernism, a modernism, in other words, that shifts its focus from cultural teleology to ethics, from theology to secular messianism, from structures of totality which favor a metaphysics of presence to an aesthetics of pattern, emergence, contingency and dispersal. These qualities are to be understood as distinct from postmodernism's value structure, with its emphasis on irony and entropy. Lateness (both as a period marker and praxis) is not belatedness; it is not a form of despair over the erosions of time, but a commitment to what remains. As such it enables the poem to work in the limited, negational manner described by Adorno: "The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom" (ND 18). Lateness's utility as a category of cognitive possibility comes from the resilience with which it engages contingency. A late poetry is a poetry of the interruptive; its incursions into linear, capitalist time stand as the exemplary need for productive estrangement.

If periods start as breaks and breaks turn inevitably into periods, as Fredric Jameson avers in *A Singular Modernity*, then lateness is the awareness of this position within the dialectic. Lateness induces the thought of messianic: the recognition that redemption from historical amnesia resides in the poetic power to achieve a breakthrough from homogeneous discourse. It should not be read as the last station before finality, but as the power of the promise, of the still-to-come, the not-yet, as Ernest Bloch puts it, for it writes to save language from the colonizing

predations of power and the desire to let otherness speak for itself, maintaining its sovereign identity.

The meaning of being possible, to paraphrase Oppen, hopes not for the restoration of some lost sacred order, but for an attention to the profane order of ordinary happiness. This happiness is not to be thought of as the satisfaction of all creature wants, nor as the triumph of love, even, but as the intense devotion to the particular in the here and now. Happiness is what happens, as Lyn Hejinian writes: “Happiness is a complication, as it were, of the ordinary, a folding in of the happenstantial ... like the commonplace, it has no plot” (LI 371). Or, as she develops this idea in her poem, *Happily*:

Constantly I write this happily
 Hazards that hope may break open my lips
 What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
 to doubt it would be a crime against it
 I sense that in stating “this is happening”
 Waiting for us?
 It has existence in fact without that
 We came when it arrived
 Here I write with inexact straightness but into a place in place
 immediately passing between phrases of the imagination
 Flowers optimistically going to seed, fluttering candles lapping
 the air, persevering saws swimming into boards, buckets
 taking dents, and the hands on the clock turning—*they*
 aren’t melancholy (H 3).

For Hejinian, “the good is the chance with things that happen that inside and out time takes (H 10). This seems to revise Benjamin’s notion of happiness in important ways, since happiness is a condition he defines, in the Second Thesis, as being “indissolubly bound up with the image of

redemption” (Illum 254). Yet in his discussion of the figure of “Agesilaus Santander” (which Scholem parses as an anagram for *der Angelus Satanas*) Agamben locates a counter-tendency in Benjamin’s idea of happiness: “[The angel] wants happiness,” writes Benjamin “the conflict in which lies the ecstasy of the unique, new, as yet un-lived with that bliss of the ‘once more,’ the having again, the lived” (qtd. in Agamben, *Potentialities* 138). Agamben goes on to develop this idea by arguing that what Benjamin’s concept of redemption really involves is not the restoration of the past to its true dignity – an approach which Benjamin derided as “heritage” – but “an interruption of tradition in which the past,” Agamben argues, “is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all ... to redeem the past is to put an end to it” (P 153). This claim forces me to revise and clarify the way I’ve been using the idea of redemption throughout my dissertation. What is rescued by messianic poetics is never the past as such, but only the present as it comes to be, only the structure of the promise it always already contains. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben identifies the contingency of this promise as both negational and affirmative, the event as the offer of impossibility and possibility:

Contingency is not one modality among others, alongside possibility, impossibility, and necessity: it is the actual giving of a possibility, the way in which potentiality exists as such. It is an event (*contingit*) of a potentiality as the giving of a caesura between a capacity to be and a capacity not to be. In language, this giving has the form of subjectivity. Contingency is possibility put to the test of subject (RA 146).

It is the possibility of the subject’s speech, in other words, that places it at the risk of the impossible. This is the crux where messianic poetics rescues language and with, the trace of experience.

Experience is both what happens to us, and how we attend to it, in the micrological ambits of our own lives. Such a process asks for a commitment to sincerity, to the lived details of life as it unfolds. This is how form, rather than content, answers to history. And it is especially

how a messianic poetics of negation registers the event of living not as being (ontos) but as time (ereignis). By negating the false seamless proffered by continuity, the messianic poem intervenes in and radicalizes the experience of time, rescuing it from the regulatory metrics of capital and modernity. It uses form to *think in time* rather than meditating *on* time's passage, which reduces it to a fetish. It recognizes that the answer to loss is not the ever-superseded new, but the other, the strange; the unassimilable difficulty of form itself. These are the imperatives, as I see it, to which a messianic poetry of disaster must adhere to.

Yet to argue, as I have here, that American poetry after Auschwitz undergoes significant changes solely due to that event is too sweeping a generalization. What I hope to have done, at the very least, is to show how the quarrel with Adorno has proven him right in this much at least: that poets cannot write as they used to before the Holocaust, before "the abyss opened up before us," in Hannah Arendt's trenchant phrase (54). The poets who identify with modernist radical aesthetics have amplified its formal procedures into a sharp critique of disaster culture, whether locating it in the ongoing shockwaves that still radiate from the Holocaust's epicenter, or through the various wars, genocides, and calamities that are the direct result of Cold War policies and which, since 1989, have erupted on a global scale in the form of fierce sectarian conflicts and the aptly misnamed "war on terror." Anson Rabinbach ruefully acknowledges as much when he notes that contemporary genocides and "ethnic cleansing" do not require a state apparatus to set them in motion; "passionate hatred and enthusiastic participation" are enough. The Holocaust, he argues, can no longer occupy the apex of the pyramid of atrocity. Yet our position is such that we cannot measure other atrocities without reference to it (CM 61).

Moreover, a recent spate of natural disasters – including the Indonesian tsunami (2004), Hurricane Katrina (2005), the BP Deepwater Horizon Gulf oil spill (2010), and the Japanese

earthquake and subsequent reactor meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi (2011) – have emphatically underscored the primary dilemma facing late capitalism which sociologist Ulrich Beck has labeled “the risk society.” As modernization continues to introduce powerful new technologies it also exposes us to ever more dangerous forms of risk that are the result of the unforeseen consequences of technological progress. In this view, the future, traditionally the site of hope, possibility, and redemption, becomes a source of profound anxiety, while progress itself, as Benjamin observed, is no longer the answer to catastrophe. It has become the catastrophe. The disaster in all its forms has become the cultural horizon inside of which poetry must articulate its place.

Given such dire conditions, the turn by poets to what Barbara Gitenstein calls “apocalyptic messianism” is easy to understand. Like Scholem, Gitenstein sees this dynamic as a response to historical pressure, placing its literary enactment in a group of contemporary Jewish-American poets who include Jerome Rothenberg, David Meltzer, and Jack Hirschman. In her reading, each of these poets epitomizes a broader trend of Jewish textuality: to read history backwards from the eschatological event that finally governs the logic of everything that has unfolded prior to its advent. This redemptive move allows them to stage messianic intervention as a reclamation of ontology: apocalyptic thinking is merely a way to keep alive a relation to the sacred.

For all poets writing after 1945 the situation is equally fraught, equally complex. As James Breslin has argued, the emergent turn to the then still liquid condition of postmodernity is marked above all by a wholesale dissent from modernism and a breaking of style that leads in multiple directions. For Breslin, it arises out of the realization among poets that a certain kind of realism must make itself felt. The turn to non-totalizing form is a response to the demands for

complete fidelity made by bitter experience. “Poetic authority,” he writes, “was located not in the cultural tradition but in the literal reality of a physical moment” (FMTC 60). This effort to ground poetic authority in its original immediate context asks that “non-totalizing forms” correspond in non-colonizing way to “familiar realities.” The poets he has in mind here, oddly enough, are Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, and Adrienne Rich. Each of them are undeniably innovators, but in my view much of that innovation, drawing on a reformulation of subjective experience, fell back inevitably, at least in the case of Lowell and Ginsberg, into an embattled sense of survivalist promotionalism.

It remains for poets committed to an impersonal idiolect to rescue language from the solipsistic clutches of a vacant paternalism. Adorno’s comments on Celan’s inorganic language are apposite here. “Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language. It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. The last rudiments of the organic are liquidated” (AT 322). The idea of such a posthumous language is consonant with Adorno’s comment that: “Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it” (ND, 320). The disaster taps into the deepest veins of the apocalyptic imagination and this is why it must be considered in light of the messianic, which is itself an apocalyptic mode of thinking. The messianic as a rescuing agent, as that which drives a wedge between the present and the past, or the present and the future, as a site of still unsullied potential, cannot be thought of apart from the apocalyptic imaginary, which envisions history as decay rather than fruition, but always with the forlorn hope of something on the other side of destruction.

The three poets I will turn to briefly here – Michael Heller, John Taggart, and Rosmarie Waldrop – all work, to one degree or another, in the late Objectivist nexus, sharing a common set of values about impersonal language and a similar dedication to the messianic potential of poetry. Working from a diasporic “ground of no-ground,” as he calls it, Michael Heller has been engaging this crucial question with extraordinary probity across several books, confronting the dimensions of historical disaster, whether in terms of Jewish diaspora or secular totalization, with a poetics of what I will call here *active melancholy*. Active melancholy is the opposite of metaphysical requiem and resignation. It means sifting through the rubble for fragments laden with redemptive potential. Undertaking an active melancholy of micrology provides a response to radical evil, that is, to the totally administered society. As Jonathan Flatley explains: “some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world” (1). Heller’s melancholy often strikes a sorrowful note, but it’s far from pensive. Instead, he uses it to interrogate the losses and sorrows of history in order to produce a secular messianic poetics that saves the meaning of being human from the ruins of history. If the meaning of postmodern history is that we are all diasporic now, then the angel of history hovers over the poem with the hope that it may bear out of catastrophe the saving remnant of that which has failed.

The note Heller sounds in so many of his poems is of the ache inside the word, the aloneness of logos in the lateness of the hour. Concerned with recuperating what’s been lost, these poems articulate with remarkable sensitivity the manifold pressures of a presence – what is here, then gone – that bathes us in its aura even as it cancels itself out. Grace, a force generated by the poem’s willingness to interrogate and recover absence, however fitfully, is as good a word as any for what makes this continual diminishment bearable. As he asserts in “Aphasia,” the final

section of “At The Muse’s Tomb,” truth itself no universal category, but a momentary perception that floods us like a brief flare.

Bleached one, O muse, I think of you, your silences where the throat catches on emptiness, *that free flight into the wordless.*

O teacher, the sky’s light is fading, and I have sought that one place, speechless to the moon, an omen blossoming at its own edge, a bizarre portraiture in the rush of things portentous.

Bleached one, what was strategy?

What was truth?

The plangent lucidity, the glass through which the light flowed (EF 138).

Or perhaps grace is only another name for aphasia. Perhaps it bleeds off from that affliction, that is the poem’s true inner condition, an engendering pathology that structures all utterance so that whatever is most beautiful will always carry the imprint of its own maimed confusion, revealing in its ungovernable play the blurring of signifiers and signifieds the way glass admits and filters light.

Heller realizes that among the many registers for our sense of solitude amidst the numerous perhaps the most poignant is that of being alone in language, a flaneur of its endless twilight boulevards. This feeling of isolation is the exact opposite of a collapse into narcissism. On the contrary, it comes about as a response to the pressures of history and the burdens of transmission, a burden which Jewish poets of the past one hundred years have registered keenly in a variety of ways. In “Incontinence” he writes:

and thought itself
catches on the nothingness

the broken open-
ness of space

that finds us

most ourselves (EF 12).

Inside the caesura of such a brokenness Heller has built a home for human longing, its finitudes and its hunger for the beyond that both encloses and exposes it. By entering this nothingness, which is the constitutive risk of already dwelling on the earth – call it the burden of consciousness or the task of history – we take up the needfulness of futurity itself. Poetry arises from this emptiness, pressing on us with the weight of a response we are continually learning to form.

There is a simplicity and a humility that scores Heller's work deeply; the grain of words themselves etched with the patience of the person who lives in the shadow of language's unfathomable mercy. To measure the pulse of that mercy, its quietudes and its seizures, is to utter a kind of heartbreak of redemption. Heller achieves such power with extraordinary economy, as at the end of "A Night for Chinese Poets:"

Messenger of the conjure-god, my bed's sweet
Ghost. I want to cry like one possessed
That this emptiness bears a shred-end of you
Into the room, that the heart is no less
For the page alone (EF 94).

Or again, at the close of the haunting "Water, Heads, Hamptons," the note of mercy is heightened to a spare, yet radiant, sense of abundance, a gratitude, almost, for what we are given to hold and to say.

Objects, you
no longer offer up yourselves for ceaseless dictation,
no language anyway, our mouths are on each other.
Some lord of silence rises with stars and planets (Ef 109).

The end of speaking is never the same as its absence. Even the absence of language signifies to a mute presence. Silence arises as the necessary condition for utterance, but all the utterance in the world can never efface the silence. And utterance, even when ceased, goes on affirming the grace

of silence to say us at our most intimate, in the erotic colloquy of two faces proffering to one another a regime of tenderness, as Levinas would call it, performing the a profane radiance. Our aloneness in language and the redemptive resonances it puts into play is reiterated in Heller's moving elegy for the late Armand Schwerner, "Winter Notes, East End."

a dog howls, and self-knowledge is suddenly
the heat of an immense banked fire. Gone now,
names sequent to things unnamed. The blank page
no mystery. Composition is, composition is ... (EF 165).

What we go to the poem for, Heller suggests, is not only the music of the words and the freight they carry, but the pauses in the poem's breathing that mean a continuing, 'the relieving aura,' as he puts it, that lifts the voice in love past concept and into – what? The field of the open, of its radical disclosures, its apertures enunciating the work of composition as a mode, not of writing, but of being? The place where we find 'the nothing full,' where pleroma and void conjoin in a chiasmus that crosses grief and elegy with love and a voice reciting in the night.

Heller's work describes the arc of a transfiguring melancholy, a sadness of the sinking west and its great cities where ruin, as Benjamin said, may be experienced as pleasure. But the pleasure of these poems is not the quick gratification of some passing sensation. At once grave and uplifting, these poems are serene meditations on time, decay, and loss that recover from the ruin a repletion that is also a recognition of our necessary incompleteness before the world and language. Out of the slippery weave of words and the multiple registers of eros they seek to secure some sense of stability against the perpetual undertow of events, of the listing body and the slow fade of memory. They suggest, in the most elegant way, that form is perhaps nothing more than the continual enactment of our anxiety about time and an ongoing redemption of the silence that enfolds us even as we lie to within it.

In much the same way, John Taggart insists that “the history of poetry in our century is only superficially the history of the struggle to make it new. More enduring is the struggle to regain the definition of poetry as spiritual ascesis” (SD 23). To accomplish this, poets can either immerse themselves in spiritual literature, he suggests, or immerse themselves in language. Taggart has pursued the latter course. Taggart pursues this quest forcibly in his homage to John Coltrane.

In his quest for a messianic poetics, Taggart imports the modalities of late modernist jazz into a poetry of radical repetition that is also deeply political. The question of “how to stay alive,” as he puts it in his essay on how he discovered jazz (SD 188) is also the question of how to write a poem. How to sing a song. How to keep the human in front of, apart from—counter-to—the damages inflicted on it by a cancerous social order. By radical repetition I mean a form of writing whose excessive use of refrain and re-iteration creates a musical ex-scription, a poetry that builds its energy outside of and in opposition to the traditional modes for listening and receiving meaning through its emphatic use of sound. Radical repetition pushes against the grain imposing severe demands on the listener/reader till the poem teeters on the verge of semantic collapse. Here are the first two stanzas of “Giant Steps”:

To want to be a saint to want to be a saint to want to
to want to be a saint to be the snake-tailed one to want to
be snake-tailed with wings to be a snake-tailed saint with wings to
want to be a saint to want to awaken men from nightmare

To go down to raise to go down to raise to go to go down the
ladder to go down as taught as dance steps taught by the master as
taught to dance to step-dance to dance with giant steps to go to dance to
step-dance to dance with giant steps as taught by the master to
dance to go down the ladder to go down to raise men from nightmare (IM 44).

“Not to reproduce a sound but to use it as a general principle to make another sound.” (IM 101), he writes, further noting Augustine’s stress on repetition as a pedagogical device: “a mode of

assuring the seeker that he is on his way, and is not merely wandering blindly through the chaos from which all forms arises” (IM 104). What is crucial for Taggart’s is how repetition produces difference, rather than monotony. To repeat a phrase, a word, a line is not to collapse or narrow distinctions between the terms of repetition and the rest of the poem. On the contrary, it is to drive open a wedge, a caesura or intervention into the reader’s perception of time and duration. Repetition distends the poem, elasticating its tensions, ex-scribing the poem outside of the boundaries of traditional reception, solely through the use of sound.

“Giant Steps” is a poem that dreams of – and urges – a breakthrough. This breakthrough is induced by rhetorical means – by repetition and internal anaphora. To speak of breakthrough, that elusive and much-abused state of quietude via rupture, means, in Taggart’s case, to speak of an explicitly material mechanics of the poem. Of repeated words and phrases inducing a kind of lucid vertigo. The poem as echo chamber. Taggart’s poetics might, after the title of one of his more taxing works, be called a poetics of the standing wave. A standing wave occurs when a wave remains in a constant, or stationary, position, due to an oppositional flow to the medium it is traveling through. Picture an oscillating wave of water in a small pool where the energy of the wave does not dissipate, but maintains a constant undulation. Unlike say, a contemporary such as Michael Palmer, who has made tropes of silence and negation central to his poetics, Taggart strikes me as boldly and unequivocally affirmative: cataphatic rather than apophatic. A more apt analogy drawn from mystical discourse might be to the spells and incantations of shamans, or to the yogic breath cyclings practiced by the Eastern Orthodox sect of hesychasts, the most well known example of which is the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer, familiar to readers of Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, and elaborated on in the anonymously-authored Russian text, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, derives from Paul’s command to the Thessalonians: “pray without ceasing.” The prayer

itself is quite simple: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (WP 10). As the spiritual advisor of the unnamed narrator explains: “The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart” (WP 8).

“*With the lips.*” The practice of prayer may eventually take internal root, but first it must start with the lips, in the body, not the spirit, as an uninterrupted form of speech. It’s spoken, sung, chanted – *played*, without ceasing, as Coltrane might say. What links the Jesus Prayer to Coltrane’s sheets of sound to Taggart’s artful cycle of repetitions is not, I submit, *mystical as such*. It’s sound waves. “All sounding bodies,” the great German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz states, “are in a state of vibration ... any series of impulses which produces a vibration of air will, if repeated with sufficient rapidity, generate sound. This sound becomes a *musical* tone when such rapid impulses recur with perfect regularity and in precisely equal times” (SW, 76). A poetics of the standing wave is deeply material, thick with embodiment. Taggart’s use of repetition, his control of cadence, generates an ecstatic “density of texture,” whose thickness and complexity, whose continuous flow, is corporeal, not hypostatized. Taggart’s affiliation with Zukofsky is strong here. His brand of sound-based poetic draws on Objectivist principles of close attention but translates them into acts of intense rhythmic structure. Such poetry is messianic in the sense that it abjures the abstractions of transcendence in favor of redeeming the historical moment through the phenomenological detailing of “things as they are.” Thing as they sound.

Taggart wants to intervene in history’s nightmare. It may seem perverse to cite Adorno in this context, for whom jazz was only part of the phantasmagoria of modernity, a lulling background music of “perennial sameness” that provided only a “counterfeit freedom,” as he

called it. Nevertheless, it's worth considering some other remarks he made on music since I think they speak to Taggart's jazz poetics. In his beguiling fragment on music and language, Adorno notes that:

the language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality. It contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings (Q 2).

This naming of the Name as such, a concept Adorno borrows from Benjamin's early essay "On the Language of Men and Language as Such," is only an idea of the divine, a stand-in for an absent grace. In other words, secular messianism is the theological writ small, the vantage point by which a poetics that contests history can leverage some fragment of redemption.

"The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" writes Marx, or as Fredric Jameson glosses it: "History is what hurts." What an Objectivist jazz poetics promises is the messianic hope in the detail of living and the careful attending to that living, rather than a faith in grand utopian schemes. Its focus will be for the care of the person caught within the rip-tide of history; its energies committed to breaking the hypnotic spell of culture here and now, rather than toward some ultimate endgame. It is a poetics of intervention that acknowledges, in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but bends toward justice," while at the same exercising a suspicion of all grand rhetoric. For Taggart, writing two decades after Coltrane and well after the crest of the civil rights movement, "to want to be a saint ... to dance with giant steps as taught by the master," is to take up the challenge of peace on earth as historically active, rather than quietist. Like Coltrane, Taggart wants to stay alive, alive inside the song that has the power to "raise men from nightmare."

Rosmarie Waldrop's messianic poetics takes a more playful and at the same time, oblique, approach to historical inquiry. *Driven to Abstraction*, the final sequence in the book of the same name, is predicated on the most abstract of questions: what is the value of zero? Is it nothing? For answer, this poem provides a kind of survey of the kind of cultural work zero performs, and the multiple and fructifying ways it signifies, running the gamut from plenum to kenosis. While poetry is cognate with the ground of the unsayable, its plenum of zeroes spilling over as the possibility for speech.

Waldrop's constellation of zeroes – beginning with “Zero or, the Opening Position” – reads like a history of the metaphysical comedy of negation, its failures and its hopes – from its role in constructing cosmic architectures to its use in everyday finances. It is a poem about nothing, the nothing of the mystics, of either the *via negativa* of Pseudo-Dionysus or the *khora* of Derrida; it is a recitation of zero and its curious history as a concept: the absence that gives the calculation of positive value its currency. Waldrop traces zero's migration into the West from medieval Arabic mathematics and its subsequent role as a placeholder for the underlying, the foundational that is anti-foundational, “zero, the corrosive number,” as she calls it, without which nothing counts.

Nothing. Zero. Absence of things, of signs. Unnatural. Hover in the same space and identical as twins. Point nowhere and like poems mean but what they say. And are but what is not. A source of horror for some, a commonplace in our speech that juggles degree zero, zero countdown, zero-sum-game and ground zero with zero option (DTA 117).

Absence, signed by zero, is what enables language at all, for Waldrop, even as it continually threatens to undo and collapse meaning's ability to mean. Zero is the empty knot at the center of every calculation. The absent present that permits speech to conjure spirit, the ghost inside every word and number. A form of grace or is it haunting that blows through every economy, the wind

of circulation making the invisible tangible even as it drains the real of substance in the name of meaning.

“Zero or, Opening Position,” is really a suite of interlinked meditations, each one taking up some particular historical, cultural, or philosophical aspect of the concept of zero and its passage into the very core of Western epistemology (though it could be argued it was always already there, from Plato’s *Parmenides*, at least). There are poems on money – both bank and paper; on Vermeer and Montaigne and the *ayn sof* of the Kabbalists; on Meister Eckhart, modern cosmology, the hermetic lore of nothing, and King Lear’s nothing, which strives to pierce his own blindness and is finally reckoned in blood. If all this sound too *abstract*, Waldrop reminds us that zero is also profoundly intimate, a richly embodied experience.

Impossible to picture nothing. Even in a mind where unicorns roam whose bodies crumble before the light. Always I find myself hiding somewhere near the edge.

It’s not that nothing can come from nothing. Is it vanity, the delirious power of zero? Its exuberant potential? Of vanities? Its manufactures (and without hands) an infinite of numbers we can barely imagine.

And what profit has a man? Or, for that matter, a woman? Who loves the damp detour of the body? How, among, the infinite numbers – exceeding the grains of sand that would fill the universe – will they know each other? (103).

The tenderness that haunts the precinct of zero casts a lonely, auratic light here. Zero is at once the inexorable, yet phantasmal, structure of capital’s brutal empire, and the numen of plenitude that shines when one body touches another, the place where eros redeems, if only for a moment, the depredations of history. In Waldrop’s catalogue, her bestiary of 0, it is everything and nothing, emptied of all potential and replete with the full range of signification and agency.

And yet. At the bottom of any thing I find a word that made it. And I write. Have made a pact with nothingness. Make love to absent bodies. And though I cannot fill the space they do not occupy their shadows stand between me and thin sky (132).

In the end, this is not the work of an ironist at all, but of a poet devoted to the thrill of language's endless permutations. "Driven To Abstraction" offers the deepest affirmation of how the poetic is wedded to the body's tendrilled affiliations, its desires to connect across the void and against the heartbreaking limit of mortal distances and the threat of their continual erasure, stayed only by a messianic insistence on the powers of speech.

Though frequently unacknowledged, particularly by poets themselves, form is always an argument about history; a struggle to achieve a moment of resolution from out of the cross-welter of cultural turmoil and inner conflict. To deny this is to misconstrue the very basis of language as a social force. Though theology is no longer available for rescuing history from trauma, it cannot be abandoned completely since only through its language, its tropological resourcefulness, can poets after Auschwitz effectively write the incompleteness that is both the problem of our past and the question of our happiness. In *Fragments of Redemption*, Susan Handelman suggests that what links Rosenzweig, Scholem, Benjamin, and Levinas is "a kind of 'messianism' [that] exists as the pulling of thought toward its other, toward some interruptive force that can break through the violence and cruelty of immanent political history" (FR 338). This is manifestly the work of messianic interruption undertaken by each of the poets here. "Only a god can save us now," Heidegger, late in life, wistfully opined. Poetry is not that god. It cannot save the world. But, *pace* Auden, who nevertheless insisted on the power of praise, that does not mean it makes nothing happen. Poetry saves language from becoming enslaved to abstraction, from its dehumanizing proclivity for a positivist rhetoric that elides difference, and above all, from its politically and socially coerced erasures of historical memory. Poetry saves language so that it might keep alive the promise of the world's potential.

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