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## About this Volume

This volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* includes an editor's introduction by Lisa M. Steinman, essays by Charles Altieri, Robert Kaufman, and Ellen Keck Stauder.

In this volume, three divergent critics—representing Romanticism, contemporary poetry, and more formal concerns, such as prosody and rhythm—present analyses of five contemporary poets viewed in relationship to several different strains of Romantic practice or theory.

Charles Altieri reflects on Wordsworth, Arnold, Williams and the contemporary poetry of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. Robert Kaufman discusses the problematics and uses of Romantic difficulty from Kant through Benjamin, Adorno and the Frankfurt School, to the work of Barbara Guest and Michael Palmer. Finally, Ellen Stauder explores how Mark Doty, through his use of description and affect, construes and reconstructs the poetry of Keats. All three essays make creative conjectures as to what Romanticism looks like to actively producing poets right now, as well as what constitutes the most compelling contemporary poetic practices.

Romantic poetry, these essays show, has in one way or another set the agenda for contemporary poetics, bequeathing multiple, and somewhat conflicting, legacies to twentieth-(and twenty-first-)century poetry. These essays show that the often disharmonious conversation in which they are engaged is Romanticism's chief legacy to contemporary poetics.

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## About the Romantic Circles Praxis Series

The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** is devoted to using computer technologies for the contemporary critical investigation of the languages, cultures, histories, and theories of Romanticism. Tracking the circulation of Romanticism within these interrelated domains of knowledge, **RCPS** recognizes as its conceptual terrain a world where Romanticism has, on the one hand, dissolved as a period and an idea into a plurality of discourses and, on the other, retained a vigorous, recognizable hold on the intellectual and theoretical discussions of today. **RCPS** is committed to mapping out this terrain with the best and most exciting critical writing of contemporary Romanticist scholarship. The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** was formerly known as **Romantic Praxis: Theory and Criticism**. The name was changed in November 1999.

## About the Contributors

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# Romanticism & Contemporary Poetry & Poetics

## Introduction

Lisa M. Steinman, Reed College

1. When I began soliciting essays for this volume on Romanticism and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, I had in mind that I would invite those whose interest in poetry stretched from the early nineteenth- to the early twenty-first centuries, while trying to include at least one person best known for their work on Romanticism (like Robert Kaufman, who has already appeared in an earlier volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis*), one person best known for work on modern and contemporary poetics (like Charles Altieri), and someone whose work on poetry might not usually be characterized in terms of periods (like Ellen Stauder, whose work often concentrates on prosody, rhythm or sound and, as here, on ekphrasis).
2. I anticipated that I would find a range of contemporary poetics and of romanticisms invoked, and this expectation has been fulfilled. If not as much as I had anticipated, contemporary poetry and poetics turns out to be a mixed bag, from Mark Doty (who might appear more "scenic" or "mainstream") to Barbara Guest ("New York School") and the early poetry of Michael Palmer ("San Francisco Renaissance"), the latter two both also sometimes linked with experimental or LANGUAGE poetry although the work is quite different from that of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. Stauder quotes Doty's sense of his distance from the other poets: "The aesthetic is not now and never has been autonomous. If it were, no poetry would be possible but language poetry, which denies the validity of representation and questions the very notion of subjectivity." Yet, between them, these essays lay the groundwork for further investigation of the affiliations between Doty's poetics of description, the ironic in-motion form of one strand of postmodern poetics, and the skepticism about "aboutness" (or perhaps the quarrel over what "aboutness" entails) in Hejinian's and Scalapino's version of postmodernism.
3. True, Doty's *Atlantis* opens with the question: "What is description?" (which he aligns with both desire and representation as well as with letting "the world help write the poem") while *Sight* suggests that "description as what people will like is not the way the thing (the event or writing) *is*" (Scalapino's preface), taking instead as its project "elaborating problems in phenomenology but not in description" or placing emphasis "not on the thing seen but on the coming to see" (Hejinian's preface). Still, both claims are that poetry concerns what *is* and that 'what is' involves the meeting of a subject with the world, a meeting enacted—or described—in terms of sight. As reading the three essays here together intimates, there are in this apparently heterogeneous group of poets and poetic practices common questions, questions that come to us through Romantic constructions of and practices in the lyric.
4. Of course Romanticism itself is even more variously—if in each case self-consciously—constructed here, with the variations in part dependent on the contemporary practices each of the three critics explores. Kaufman's essay looks back to (and forward from) Kantian aesthetics, suggesting that romantic difficulty, even if by default, underwrites—and is continued by—modernist and postmodernist experimentation, while using poetic difficulty to interrogate the concept and uses of other forms of difficulty: social, cultural, and critical. Altieri's exemplary Romantic poet is Wordsworth (or, rather, several Wordsworths, thus making explicit the different characterizations of Romanticism in play) from whom he traces an historical progression through Arnold and Williams to Hejinian and Scalapino, while Keats—who also loiters if un-named in Altieri's essay—is featured in Stauder's essay, which is less interested in genealogy than with taking up Romantic questions in a contemporary vein.

5. If we have here, then, three divergent analyses of at least five contemporary poets viewed in relationship to several different strains of Romantic practice or theory, nonetheless all three of the essays note and resist, either tacitly or explicitly, the ways in which Romantic poetry has been caricatured: Doty (and Stauder) for instance confront the possibility that the use of Keats will seem "naive"; Kaufman challenges the assumption that the lyric inherited from the Romantics is by now "hopelessly naive, escapist, and self-deluding," distinguishing between romantic lyric and conventional neoromanticism; while Altieri examines in detail how Arnold's Wordsworth constructed a romantic subject against which modernism rebelled, even as Wordsworth (the *other* Wordsworth, if you will) might be seen as "the godfather of at least one strand of contemporary radical poetics because of how he enables us to escape the lyric heritage that Victorian poetics imposed upon him." It seems that both Romantic practice and the caricatured ghosts of Romanticism continue to haunt contemporary poetics.
6. The larger questions raised here then include the question of what Romanticism looks like to actively producing poets right now, as well as the question of what constitutes the most compelling contemporary poetic practices and why they are compelling. This leads to the question Kaufman raises (by way of Cocteau): "Poetry is indispensable—if [we] only knew what for." Ultimately, the uses of poetry are addressed, if in quite different ways, in all three essays here. While Stauder shows us Doty's poetics defining itself against what he sees as aesthetic autonomy and embracing a "given" that is more material (and bodily) than sociopolitical, Kaufman concentrates on the problem of how the aesthetic and the sociopolitical might be intertwined (by way of the feelings), complementing and giving voice but not rise to one another; Altieri, on the other hand, concentrates on what exactly feeling *is* and so—focusing on feeling and on transpersonal affective sites—suggests that Wordsworth gives poetry "a powerful social agenda that *need not* be connected to any specific political one." There are points for further discussion here, but more disagreement about which practices—poetic and critical—exemplify what, than about the centrality and communicability of feeling and of the problematic world (or of the problematic nature of seeing the world feelingly) in poetry.
7. Indeed, all three critics converge in posing such questions about the uses of poetry, about what poetry does (to or in writers, readers, and cultures)—drawing on different vocabularies but fundamentally revisiting debates about the lyrical "I" and questions of agency and freedom as well as focusing on the indispensability of affect in poetry. In the process, all three explore the way poetry negotiates (or, to be more precise, blurs) the boundaries between "self" and "world." Of course, the status of the personal and the collective is variously defined, and the "world" is associated, equally variously, with the physical, the social, or the sociopolitical. Still, whatever the self or the world may be, poetry after Romanticism is still seen as expanding or recasting the borders between what Stauder images as material presence or absence and a language of ideas (or "the given and the made") and what Kaufman calls "objective-conceptual knowledge (or the objective world to which conceptual knowledge is meant to correspond) and the subjective human capacity for a critical agency that would be more than arbitrary in relation to objective knowledge of existing reality" or, locating the problem in a slightly different way, between intellection and sense-experience. Altieri explores not simply the relationship between fact and imagination or sensation and imagination (along with self and language) but the difference between what poets thought and what their thinking made possible.
8. Obviously there are here different answers to the questions raised, even different assumptions about how (or under what aspect) fact, thought (or thinking), sensation (or feeling), and imagination come together in poets, readers, or the formal arrangements of language in poems. Moreover, the range of contemporary poets and poetics shown to inherit or reinvigorate the most challenging aspects of "a" Romantic legacy suggests that Romantic poetry—while still one way or another setting the agenda for contemporary poetics—has bequeathed more than one legacy. At the same time, these essays forge a sense that the very nature and fact of the not always harmonious conversation in which they are engaged *are* Romanticism's legacies to contemporary poetics; the essays uncover too a shared sense

that speaking of affect is neither naive nor easy (and remains central to any discussion of why poetry is indispensable). Finally, to drag Yeats into the conversation somewhat unfairly: there seems to be some common ground, some agreement that the fascination with what's difficult not only does not dry up but may compose the soul.

### **Works Cited**

Doty, Mark. *Atlantis*. New York: Harper, 1995.

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# Romanticism and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

## Darkness Audible: Negative Capability and Mark Doty's "Nocturne in Black and Gold"

Ellen Keck Stauder, Reed College

1. In the poetry issue of *The Paris Review* for spring 2000, the editors announced a special feature for the issue: selected drafts of works-in-progress by prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets commented on by contemporary poets. This feature was occasioned by a tour the editors took of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, to whom they had sold the magazine's archives. Each contemporary poet was assigned one manuscript for comment "in general and in respect to their own work" (Plimpton 21).<sup>[1]</sup> No principles of selection are given in the editorial notice; however one cannot help but think that the choice of the opening of Keats's "Endymion" for Mark Doty was a prescient one. Keatsian issues run deeply throughout Doty's work in both poetry and prose. For instance, towards the end of his most recent prose book, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Doty admits that his arguments about the importance of Dutch still life paintings, on which he has lavished such elegant attention, might be seen as out-of-date, in much the same way that Keats's emphasis on the endurance of beauty might be regarded as naive in a post-structuralist, anti-essentialist world. Though Keats is not directly named in this passage, the emphasis on beauty, and in a later part of the passage, on "meaning through wordlessness" and the timelessness of things "permanently caught in time" (SLOL 66) brings us close to the world of Keats's odes. Doty recognizes the potential criticism of his work and offers a brief defense:

I know that all of this might be taken as precious, a hymn to so much useless beauty, in an hour when the notion of beauty is suspect—when it seems to suggest a falsely bright view of the world, or a narrow set of aesthetic principles related to the values of those in power, an oppressive construction.

And indeed it might be so, were what matters about still life simply confined to the museum, if these paintings were solely self-referential, removed from the world, an elaborate language of hymns to themselves. If they elided death, the fact of our quick transits in time.

But still life is about the given. (SLOL 66)

At one level, this explanation satisfies but at another, it raises questions: how do these paintings move beyond the world of the museum? How do they avoid self-referentiality? To what do they give honor beyond themselves? If they manage not to elide death, how then does death figure? What is the "given" these paintings are about? And finally, how are these questions relevant to Doty's poems, which he sees as analogous to the work of these still life paintings?<sup>[2]</sup>

2. To get at these questions, I want to go first to Doty's commentary on Keats, looking at the way the poetic process is figured as a conversation between the given and the made but also between the dark, unconscious world and the active, intellectual world of the will. To understand the workings of the given, associated both with the unconscious and with death, I turn to recent work by Daniel Tiffany on the role of obscurity in poetry. This will allow me, in turn, to consider in detail Doty's "Nocturne in Black and Gold," the penultimate poem in his 1995 book, *Atlantis*, which explores leave taking in the form of an embodiment of shadow. Beginning with its epigraph from St. Augustine, "Shadow is the queen of colors," the poem investigates the color and substance of shadow or nothingness via an

engagement with three sources: Whistler's painting, after which the poem is titled, Keats's notion of a happiness of the moment, and the figure of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

- Doty's comment on the beginning of "Endymion" is only a page and a half long with two additional pages of illustrations, one of the first manuscript page of Keats's poem and the other, a deathbed portrait of Keats by Severn, addressed to John Taylor from Rome, January 21, 1825. Brief though the commentary is, it gives us certain clues about these large-scale questions of beauty and about how Doty's reading of Keats is relevant for his own poetics. The gist of the commentary is the idea that the "process of drafting a poem is . . . a conversation between what arises and what's willed, between the given and the made" (233). Doty traces this conversation through the opening lines, noting first the boyish self-confidence of Keats's handwriting, which announces his epic ambitions, followed by the unblotted first lines, lines that show no hesitation or reconsideration. As Doty notes, "These first lines have the quality of swimming up unbidden out of the dark, arriving startlingly whole, alive with 'quiet breathing'." These qualities lead him to conclude that "these words have been said, again and again, first in the chambers of maiden thought, subtlest inner speech beginning to find its form in the muscle of the tongue and jaw, in the ear . . ." (233). It's worth noting here the relationship between what Keats's beginning lines actually say and Doty's sense of their etiology. Keats insists, in these famous lines, that beauty will survive, even increase in magnitude, in the face of nothingness: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever: / Its loveliness increases; it will never / Pass into nothingness" (1-3). In locating the origin of this poetry in the dark, aligned with the physical, almost pre-linguistic production of speech, Doty in effect sees poetry as arising from the very nothingness which Keats's things of beauty are meant to triumph over. One is left to wonder whether the origin of poetic speech in this darkness is not essential to the way the beauty it becomes resists the return to these origins, a point I will return to shortly.

- Keats's next lines elaborate how the shapes of beauty resist darkness:

Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing  
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,  
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth  
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,  
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways  
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,  
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall  
From our dark spirits. (6-13)

- Doty traces in these lines the shift from Keats's confident beginning to the first instances of the maker at work in revision. The first evidence of major reconsideration in these lines, the first interruption of the flow of the given, occurs at line 10 where "days" replaces "ways"; shortly thereafter Keats more boldly crosses out a line and two half lines. Doty sees this corrective passage as one that comes "as if in response to this incursion of darkness, and to the poem's brief list of those glooms that beauty resists. . . . Here is the first visible sign of Keats the technician making adjustments in the stream of music that intuition produces" (233). As Doty notes, Keats's instances are both "celestial and earthbound," external as well as the internal workings of the imagination. He concludes his brief excursion through "Endymion's" opening lines by summing up their prevailing movement: "Where the poem began in a great claim—a given one, welling up in clear firm penmanship out of the darkness of unconscious song—now it has moved toward an even larger one, held up to us in the light of conscious making" (235).
- This interchange between the given and the made that Doty sketches out in Keats might be understood to reproduce, in a different vocabulary, a notion of the lyric articulated by Blanchot and recently given new form in an essay by Daniel Tiffany, "Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic



Obscurity." Tiffany looks at the relationship between philosophical materialism and lyric poetry, particularly the problem of literary obscurity. He takes riddles as a paradigmatic case study of the obscurity of lyric in general. The riddle "simultaneously illuminates and obscures its object" (80), allowing the object to speak, yet veiling its identity in mystery through language itself. Tiffany turns to Blanchot's theory of literature in order to understand the obscurity or darkness of both objects and lyric poetry. In "Two Versions of the Imaginary," Blanchot argues that there are two versions of the image (or the imaginary), the ideal and the material. These are produced by the way that literature negates the world. Tiffany points out that this idea has its origins in a Heideggerian notion of the world, specifically,

as the effect of a primary negation and idealization of 'things,' resulting in the mediated phenomenon we call the 'world.' Literature—and more precisely the literary image—thus constitutes a second moment of negation, destroying the world as we know it and exposing us to what cannot be fully grasped, that is, whatever exists in a purely ideal or purely material state. The two versions of the imaginary (namely, the two aspects of the image) therefore correspond to whatever precedes the world (things) and to whatever comes after the world (ideas), both of which are equally remote from understanding. (83-84)

In distinguishing between the "ideal, transparent and meaningful aspect" of language and the material, "obscure and meaningless" (84) aspect, Blanchot emphasizes the way the material image is connected to the figure of the cadaver. As Tiffany demonstrates, the strangeness of the image is parallel to and figured by the strangeness of the cadaver.

The cadaverous aspect of the image is the remains of the world after its negation by words: 'what is left behind is precisely this cadaver, which is not of the world either—even though it is here—which is rather behind the world . . . and which now affirms, on the basis of this, the possibility of a world-behind, a return backwards.' The analogy of the corpse thus depicts the resistance to understanding—the *backwardness*—of the orphic measure and of things prior to the 'world.' (84)

Though the cadaver, for Blanchot, exists on the side of the material rather than the ideal image, he does not regard it either as a thing or as an object. Instead, "the corpse is continually transformed by 'infinite erosion' and 'imperceptible consumption,' properties that emphasize its partial and unstable identity and that help to explain its aesthetic allure" (84). The beauty of the corpse is signified as a "'luminous formal halo'," its substance at once palpable and an invisible irradiation, beautiful and yet indistinguishable from "what exists prior to, or behind the world" (85).

7. Turning back now to Doty and Keats, we might say that Doty's characterization of Keats's opening lines as "swimming up unbidden out of the dark" (233), as a physical gesture, locates Keats's poetic origins clearly on the side of Blanchot's material image. Throughout his work Doty repeatedly traces the incursions of darkness, gloom and obscurity as they push against the shapes of beauty, suggesting that these powers are ultimately not mortal opposites but partners in a single project. The conversation between the given and the made, the material and ideal aspects of the image, inevitably turns to the backwardness of poetry itself, to the Orphic glance back towards the "essential night" (84), which is contained moment by moment within and by the measure of language. Curiously, and perhaps by no decision of Doty's, his brief Keats essay is accompanied not only by the illustration of the manuscript page but by Severn's deathbed portrait of Keats.<sup>[3]</sup> Keats's head is clearly surrounded by a halo, seen as a dark shadow behind his head. Alternatively, since Keats's head is curiously disembodied (though his body is faintly outlined), one might view the whole whiteness of the surrounding page as a kind of second halo. In any case, the text and its illustrations give the impression that the conversation between the unwilling and unconscious obscurity of the given and the made takes place not only within Keats's

text but in the relationship between the two poets, in the very act of reading itself.

8. From *My Alexandria* (1993) forward, each of Mark Doty's books has, at some level, attempted to deal with the illness and death of his lover, Wally Roberts, in 1994. *Atlantis*, published in 1995, is a book preoccupied with a particular stage in this process, the coming death and the questions attendant upon that anticipation—what's the nature of the body, the meaning of death, the future, the nature of constancy and change, the significance of gesture, the efficacy of language and the place of beauty. The final section of the book turns explicitly to the problem of description, an issue already identified in the opening poem of the book, "Description," which concludes: "What is description, after all, / but encoded desire? // And if we say / the marsh, if we forge/ terms for it, then isn't it // contained in us, / a little, / the brightness?" (5). The question marks are telling and they help underline the skepticism stated earlier in the poem about the validity of the time-honored claim that one understands the universal through the particular. In contrast, the speaker writes: "what I need to tell is / swell and curve, shift // and blur of boundary, / tremble and spilling over, / a heady purity distilled // from detail" (4). Indeed, this middle ground, between universal and particular, the realm of details on the boundaries and margins of definition, is what Doty explores at length in *Atlantis*, spurred on by the sense that description is the only possible activity in the face of coming death. As he writes in "Two Ruined Boats," "Description is itself a kind of travel, / and I can study all day in an orient / of color. . . . // That's all I can do, describe. // I've nowhere else to go, nothing else / to make" (90). The final section of the book, beginning with "Fog Argument," and including "Nocturne in Black and Gold," examines the poetics of description, especially the "gorgeous disarray" (91) of conditions of dissolution or marginality. Doty sees into that veil "between this life and the next, / now and ever" (101), his acts of description marking the temporal locus of the body, even as it moves into a nowhere, an obscurity, that is, by conventional definition, beyond language.
9. The geography of these poems is rife with the "infinite erosion" and "imperceptible consumption" that Blanchot and Tiffany associate with the cadaver. The first section of "Fog Argument" talks about the speaker's all too self-assured assertion that "Of course I know it [the salt marsh] ends" and his observation that from his vantage point, "here," the "blond acres / vanish at the rim // into the void, / a page on which anything // might be written, / though nothing is" (83). This site, the vanishing rim, is significantly, a site of writing, at once identified as such and thwarted. Similarly, in the second poem of "Fog Argument," "Beach Roses," Doty uses the image of the luminescent white sea roses, layered over a picture of clouds broken into "fourteen gleaming islands / hurrying across a blank plain of sheen: / nothing or next to nothing // —pure scattering, light on light, / fleeting" (85). The obscurity of death, its precise onset as indefinite as the white roses—"when they are almost nothing, / only a little denser than the fog, // shadow-centered petals blurring, / toward the edges, into everything" (85)—is here given, like Blanchot's cadaver, a halo, a sheen. Rather than fending off death, Doty moves ever further into the beauty of this void. Having looked with the reader into the penumbral sheen, Doty dares the reader to "talk / as if death were a line to be crossed." Then, instead, he urges: "Look at them, the white roses. / Tell me where they end" (85).
10. Having provided some context for "Nocturne in Black and Gold" within this suite of poems, I want to turn to the poem itself. The title is indebted to Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold,"<sup>[4]</sup> subtitled, "The Falling Rocket." It was Whistler's most famous painting because of the controversy it aroused, stemming from Ruskin's derogatory comments about it and the subsequent lawsuit. Whistler exhibited the painting at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 and Ruskin's response, recorded in *Fors Clavigera*, was highly inflammatory: "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (Holden 38). Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, winning the case; however, he received only a farthing in damages, far too little to cover his hefty legal costs and he was forced into bankruptcy. The painting takes as its subject the fireworks display in the Cremorne Gardens in London. On a representational

level, Whistler frames the central fireworks explosion, to which the eye is immediately drawn in a strong vertical thrust, with a tree on the left and three onlookers painted in the foreground. The area surrounding the figures is painted in warm tones that are visually echoed by the fireworks (Harden; Holden 38). However, the dominant tonality of the painting is the nocturnal black and grays of the evening in smoke and fog-like atmosphere.

11. Though Doty does not name the Whistler painting until the end of the third stanza, the opening description could easily apply to any number of Whistler paintings:

Tonight the harbor's  
one lustrous wall, the air a warm gray  
—mourning dove, moleskin, gabardine—

blurring the bay's black unguent. (1-4)

In the preceding poem, "March," the speaker refers to some gulls on an icy pond as posing "for Whistler, a composition in twenty aspects // of gray" (24-25). "Nocturne" starts from a similarly painterly situation, a space where Doty composes the warm gray air through material textures, "mourning dove, moleskin, gabardine," more than through colors per se. Or, put differently, color here is never abstract, but is always a feature of bodily presence. The bay itself is "black unguent," suggesting a sense of thickness, of paint as gooey and substantive as ointment. As Doty notes a few lines later, the viewer can barely make out any objects in the "Nocturne," "or rather there are no solids, // only fields of shimmer/ fitful integers of gleam, / traces of a rocket's shatter, // light troubling a shiver of light" (12-16). The very substance of the black and gray paint, a substance characterized by its activity, its shimmer and gleam, make it possible to imagine the harbor as "one lustrous wall," a type of vision that Whistler clearly sought in his paintings and that Doty was drawn to both in the sheen of white sea roses and the glimmer of a night canvas. Black and white, whether Keatsian halos, or the textures of the natural or painterly worlds, figure not so much as opposites as constantly shifting negative space for a single engagement with a looking into the void.

12. Doty calls attention to Whistler's ideas of painting in this opening description; the "one lustrous wall" acts as both the painterly canvas and the harbor scene at hand. Two aspects of Whistler's painting practice and theory are relevant here: his foregrounding of darkened light as a way of eliminating superfluous detail in favor of major shapes and his definition of the canvas as a two-dimensional surface, i.e., as a "lustrous wall." These and other ideas about what painting should do were part of Whistler's reasons for undertaking the lawsuit against Ruskin. The trial provided him with an opportunity to put before the public his ideas about art. During the trial he did not refer to his paintings as such but called them "'arrangements,' 'nocturnes' and even 'a problem that I attempt to solve'" (Harden). Rather than seeing the canvas as defined by linear perspective, carefully arranged receding planes, and clearly defined objects, Whistler asked that the viewer imagine space as the two dimensional surface of the painting. A third dimension could be suggested beyond the picture frame, "but the artist's primary job was to organize flat shapes on this flat surface" (Holden 17), a conception that makes the canvas into a type of poetic page. The result was a highly organized geometry that used the four sides of the canvas and the linear features of objects on the canvas to create an "arrangement" that allowed the beholder to perceive a dynamism of shapes in relation. The monochromatic effect of these nocturnes, ostensibly almost entirely of grays and blacks, but which are actually made up of many tiny daubs of color, read out all distracting detail in favor of a movement of large shapes. This effect is true even of his more radical portraits, of which he wrote: "'As the light fades and the shadows deepen all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses: the buttons are lost, but the sitter remains; the garment is lost, but the sitter remains; the sitter is lost, but the shadow remains; the shadow is lost, but the picture remains. And that,

night cannot efface from the painter's imagination'" (quoted without attribution in Holden 16). This passage suggests not only Whistler's ambition to rid painting of conventional subject matter and detail but also that the painting, finally, has the stubborn capacity to endure because of its reduction to the facticity of its material existence. Whistler conceives the act of painting as fending off "night." While Doty may be less certain of art's ability to triumph over night, he is clearly, like Whistler (and Keats), drawn to the surface or page gleaming in darkness on the brink of dissolution.

13. The speaker closes out the description of Whistler's "Nocturne" with a move that takes us from the descriptive, visual surface to a state of consciousness, a move that would, no doubt, have been much to Whistler's liking since his expectation was that his audience should be much more active viewers of his paintings than of conventional art works. "If the painting will not reach out and collar him, then the viewer must step forward—into the picture, if you will—and immerse himself in its atmosphere" (Holden 16). This is exactly what the next few lines enact: "Fogged channels, a phantom glow / on the face of this harbor, // midway between form and void, / without edges, hypnagogic" (17-20). The speaker here not only enters the painted scene, the "fogged channels," he enters the middle ground between form and the void. The canvas, like the cadaver, creates a luminous formal halo, allowing us to see into the darkness of death.
14. Turning from impressions of Whistler's canvas, Doty's speaker in "Nocturne" addresses the reader, making the language of night into an act of listening (one cannot help but hear the echoes of "Darkling I listen . . ." from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"): "Listen, I carry myself // like a cigarette lighter / wrapped between hands in the dark / and so feel at home in the huge // indefinition of fog, the same / sort of billowing I am: charcoal, black on black, / matte on velveteen, a hurrying sheen // on gleaming docks" (21-28). The speaker locates himself, not over against the dark, but within it, part of its indefinition and billowing, but also as a light within the darkness. This indefinite place is also presented as a series of textured surfaces, again connecting the speaker's experience with Whistler's characteristic canvas constructions and to the act of making itself.
15. The act of listening in the dark takes the speaker directly into Keats who seems to emerge unbidden from the shadows, as if the act of gazing into the darkness brought him to the surface. Juxtaposed to the conclusion of the Whistler description, Keats arrives midway through line 28: "on gleaming docks. Keats: *If a sparrow / come before my Window / I take part in its existence // and pick about the Gravel*" (28-31). The Keats quotation comes from his letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated November 22, 1817, a letter preoccupied with the relation between truth and beauty. Towards the conclusion of the letter, Keats turns to the question of worldly happiness, asserting that it cannot be counted on. "I look not for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existince [sic] and pick about the Gravel" (I: 186). Doty's speaker takes this assertion as a principle, almost a justification, for an argument against the fear of death. Having arrived, via Whistler, at a self-definition parallel to the indefinite billowing of the fog, he argues via Keats that if one immerses oneself in whatever appears before one at the moment, it shall be sufficient for the moment. Perhaps Keats would have been more comfortable with the notion that the moment would be filled with sunsets or sparrows; nonetheless, Keats's own poetry and letters make it clear enough that he did not eschew entering the darkness of a given moment. Indeed, it is a hallmark of the highest poetic gift, defined by Keats in his letter to George and Thomas Keats written a month after the letter to Bailey, as Negative Capability, i.e., "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (I: 193). Such uncertainty leads, for Keats, not to pessimism or skepticism but to the conclusion "that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." [5] Doty prolongs his moment of being in dark uncertainty into an extended meditation on the beauty and allure of this moment. "Having been a thousand things," he asks, "why not be endless?" (36-37). The answer is given by one of the great performers of the dark,

## Mozart's Queen of the Night.

16. For Doty, the Queen of the Night, besides inhabiting the shadows, is important as a vocal performer. In a 1994 interview with Mark Klein, Doty talks about his fascination with divas and drag: "In Wayne Koestenbaum's book *The Queen's Throat*, he talks about the diva—that diva-dom has nothing to do with one's gender, that it's an attitude, a kind of fabulousness, a grand vocal performance" (Klein 131). He gives as an example of how the diva has influenced his work another poem from *Atlantis*, "Couture." But "Nocturne" is, in a more complicated way, also about grand vocal performance with the Queen as a kind of Orpheus figure in drag. As such she occupies the roles of both Orpheus and Eurydice, acting as the subject of song and the song's singer as well as the unseen denizen of hell's depths and night's self-proclaimed beholder. Like Blanchot's cadaver, the Queen is a figure constantly teetering between erosion and consumption, pointing towards "what exists prior to, or behind the world" (Tiffany 85; see paragraph 5 above). Her vocalization of the night, of shadow, allows her to be, ultimately, not only the Queen of the Night but, as Augustine would have it, the queen of colors. To see how and why this happens requires several steps.
17. Within the context of *The Magic Flute*, the Queen is clearly aligned with the forces of the dark side. Yet her second act aria to which Doty refers is one of the most treasured standards of operatic literature, full of vocal complexity and demands, as well as beauty. Evil or not, the listener cannot help but be transfixed by the Queen's powerful and passionate song. Her work for the dark forces also has important gender overtones. In the mythology underlying the opera's story, the Queen fights on the side of a matriarchal social order entailing husband sacrifice. She willingly sacrifices successive husbands in order to guarantee the successful enthronement of her daughter, Pamina. Not surprisingly, this state of affairs is not allowed to continue and the matriarchal order is broken by a rebelling husband. Sarastro takes the precaution of protecting Pamina, the matriarchal heir, so that she will wed his successor, "thus re-establishing the old link between night and day on a new and proper patriarchal footing" (Mann 2). To be sure, the defeat of the Queen does not mean the eradication of female beauty and power but rather its "proper" placement within a social philosophy emphasizing "stability and tolerance and discretion." The Queen will "not be destroyed but merely changed" (Mann 3).
18. Doty's interest in the Queen stems from both the given and the made. Her essential alliance with the pre-linguistic, pre-civilized matriarchy (as a kind of eighteenth-century Fury) aligns her with the unbidden darkness of the given, while the Queen's (and Mozart's) musical virtuosity creates a highly crafted voice that powerfully and unabashedly sings of the dark underworld. In other words, she is like Eurydice who is, according to Blanchot, "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" (99). But she is also like Orpheus in her containment and expression of that night through the order and "measured space" (Blanchot 103) of her song. Her Act 2 aria open with these words: "The vengeance of Hell boils in my heart; / death and despair flame around me!" (Schikaneder). The Queen gives us, if not darkness visible, then at the very least, darkness audible.
19. In vocalizing darkness audible, the Queen has much in common with the black drag queen vocalist of "Chanteuse" from Doty's 1993 volume, *My Alexandria*. Though not ostensibly a poem focused on night or nothingness—indeed the only blackness is the singer him-/herself—the poem plays repeatedly on the refrain, "name the colors." In a reversal of "Nocturne" the Augustinian shadow is approached here through color and the shadow is the looming possibility of the failure of self-invention and memory. The drag queen sings against or into this shadow:

As she invented herself, memory revises  
and restores her, and the moment

she sang. I think we were perfected,

when we became her audience,  
and maybe from that moment on  
it didn't matter so much exactly

what would become of us.  
I would say she *was* memory. (97-103)

The chanteuse and the Queen of the Night occupy unstable gender positions, in both cases exposing the cultural rather than natural underpinnings of gender categories. At the same time, their play with, even erasure of, gender boundaries is a form of negative capability that is psycho-social as well as artistic. By the end of "Chanteuse," the speaker emphatically and possessively names the features of the city the singer has restored to him through her song/memory, but the list includes the singer's very self, characterized as both false (an illusion) and splendid. The language seems to anticipate "Nocturne in Black and Gold" in its description of the haze, glow and skyrockets of the cityscape.

. . . my Alexandria,

my romance, my magnolia  
distilling lamplight, my backlit glory  
of the wigshops, my haze

and glow, my torch, my skyrocket,  
my city, my false,

my splendid chanteuse. (108-114)

This vocal performance has harnessed the details of memory and made them into song but, at the same time, one cannot help but realize that the steady accumulation of detail, reminiscent of the Kantian sublime, verges constantly on dissolution. The emphatic "my" plays against the sense of threatened dissolution beyond the edges of the vocal moment. Similarly, Doty describes the Queen of the Night as a voice so spectacular that "this isn't a voice at all; / she's become an instrument, an instant's pure // erasure, essence slipped / into this florid scatter" (43-47). Just as the magnitude of the sublime comes from the unrealized threat of obliteration, the Queen's vocalization of night is so complete as to exceed voice itself. She enters a realm of boundlessness which the speaker, a few lines later, tries on "like mutable, starry clothes" (59-60). The erasure of voice brings with it, not a disappearance but the embodiment of this night or nothing. Though the Queen's voice is a "dizzying pour / . . . a voice becoming no one" (68-69), and "no longer even human" (76), it's also "a gilt thread raveling/ in the dark" (77-78).

20. "Evanescent / and indelible" recalls Blanchot's language for the cadaver who is continually transformed through "infinite erosion" and "imperceptible consumption" while wearing the luminous halo, here suggested through the "gilt thread" of the Queen's voice. To be contained by the formal song means that this night, which is inherently boundless, is itself enclosed and bound, directed by the powers of order and law. Orpheus's real freedom, Blanchot argues, comes in his gaze which breaks these codes, setting night into its full boundlessness. Through this act, Orpheus is no longer concerned with his work or himself. "In this decision, the origin is approached by the force of the gaze, which sets free the essence of the night, removes concern, interrupts the incessant by revealing it: a moment of desire, unconcern, and authority" (Blanchot 104). It's important not to underestimate Blanchot's claim here. He argues not that song is a compensatory gesture for the loss of the beloved and the immersion

into the "other" night but that Orpheus's gaze, his unconcern, entails precisely a forgetting of the work. "Orpheus' gaze is Orpheus' ultimate gift to the work, a gift in which he rejects the work, in which he sacrifices it by moving towards its origin in the boundless impulse of desire, and in which he unknowingly still moves towards the work, towards the origin of the work" (102-103).

21. Just as Orpheus's gaze back at Eurydice is a kind of forgetting, Doty's imagined drag performance of the Queen of the Night is at once an act of erasure or forgetting and an act which consecrates his desire for his beloved. Through this song the poet both names the loss of the beloved, his erosion into nothingness, and, through a complete vocal erasure, gives up his own work / poem. Freed of himself, the speaker can finally do what the poem from the outset has been about—take leave of his lover. With the poet freed of his own concern, the sacredness of desire is given back to itself (see Blanchot 104). Indeed, the speaker turns directly from the vocal vanishing of the Queen, "at once evanescent / and indelible," to a direct address to his beloved: "Love, // little pilot flame, flickering, / listen: I've been no one / so many times I'm not the least afraid" (97). While the earlier, "Listen," at line 21 seems to be addressed to the reader, and only retrospectively to the lover, here the address is unambiguous and the description of the boundless place of death is no longer frightening.

No one's here,  
or hardly anyone, and how strangely  
Free and fine it is

to be laved and extended, furthered  
in darkness (91-95)

The claim is a call to death, a call to freedom, a call to origins, to a "here" that is "*unfettered / freshness, atmosphere / and aria, an aspect of fog, // manifest, and then dissolving, / which you could regret / no more than fog*" (98-99). This is the place of negative capabilities, a living manifestation and dissolution without the impulse to resolve the erasure of distinctions.

22. Having articulated the bay's claim, the speaker closes with his own directive to his lover:

A brave candling theory  
I'm making for you,  
little lamplight; believe,

and ripple out free  
as shimmer is. Go.  
Don't go. Go. (106-111)

The lover, now figured as the lamplight, a transformed version of the "ghosts of lamps" (6), the cigarette lighter (22), "the trawler's winking candles" (54), and the "gilt thread" (77) from earlier passages in the poem, is set free like shimmer. The opening of the poem locates lamplight within the darkness of the "lustrous wall," which is the subject of Whistler's painting as well as the canvas or page itself, both the scene of the poem and the place of writing/painting/singing.

23. These flickering lamps, the lamps of memory gained by living in the forgetfulness of the darkened glance, achieve by the poem's end a sense of intimacy restored, similar to the effect Doty sees in his much beloved Dutch still life paintings. He calls the world of these paintings the realm of the "ordinary sublime":

Sometimes I think these paintings seem full of secrets, full of unvoiced presences. And surely one of their secrets—somewhere close to their essence—lies in a sense of space that

is unique to them. These things exist up close, against a background of burnished darkness. No wide vistas open behind them, no far-flung landscapes, no airy vastnesses of heaven. This is the space of the body, the space of our arms' reach. There is nothing before us here we could not touch, were these things not made of paint. The essential quality of them is their nearness. (SLOL 55)

Like the Dutch paintings, Whistler, Keats and Mozart use the canvas, the poem and the song to create a space of burnished darkness. While one might say the scope of Mozart and Keats is larger than the subject matter of the Dutch still life paintings, Doty nonetheless mines their darkness for a similar intimacy through an Orphic erasure of identity that creates the possibility of memory. Doty argues that Dutch still lifes are much more like poetry than they are like portrait painting. In contrast to portrait painting where our seeing stops with the eyes of the painting's subject, in still life "there is no end to our looking, which has become allied with the gaze of the painter" (SLOL 51). While physical death means the end of gazing at the beloved in an immediate sense, the speaker's vocal erasure, resulting from his gaze into darkness, relights the lamps of memory. The wavering commands that conclude the poem, "Go. / Don't go. Go" (110-111), much like the triple "Adieu" of "Ode to a Nightingale," suggest neither indecision nor regret but a living in uncertainty.<sup>[6]</sup> Doty's *Atlantis* volume is full of images of such burnished surfaces. As he makes clear in his poem on Van Gogh's "Four Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down," the nocturne of the given and the "argent and gold" of the made create the shine, the burnished darkness, the luminosity "of what's living *hardest*" (35).

They are a nocturne  
in argent and gold, and they burn  
  
with the ferocity  
of dying (which is to say, the luminosity  
  
of what's living *hardest*). Is it a human soul  
the painter's poured  
  
into them—thin, beleaguered old word,  
but what else to call it?  
  
Evening is overtaking them.  
In this last light they are voracious. (26-35)

The darkness audible of "Nocturne in Black and Gold" and the burnished darkness of these paintings is the nexus of the given and the made, the constructed, formal language built always in the face of mutability and death. The necessary, Orphic sacrifice entailed by the poet's negatively capable gaze into nothingness, far from enervating the poet, brings him most fully to beauty and to life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts are by Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Burns, Byron, Heine, Keats, Poe, Pope, Swinburne and Tennyson. The commentators, besides Doty, are McHugh, Hudgins, Kizer, Longenbach, Simic, C. K. Williams, Corn, Graham, Howard, Hollander, and Hecht.

<sup>2</sup> In a 1998 essay replying to Harold Bloom, Doty argues against a notion of aesthetic autonomy: "The idea of aesthetic autonomy is a fantasy. It's like going into a flower shop and believing that the flowers you buy have no qualities but color and shape, that they exist only to be arranged. The flowers have a local habitation and a name; they grew in specific places; they have characteristics, relations, histories. In their fields and their foliage, in their particular situations, the flowers are elements of a world. Who named them, hybridized them, grew them, sold them? Who owned the land? Who decided which were desirable? The flower arrangement is pretty, but the poetry resides in the whole complicated story, the web of relations.

The aesthetic is not now and never has been autonomous. If it were, no poetry would be possible but language poetry, which denies the validity of representation and questions the very notion of subjectivity. To represent is to enter into a pact with the devil, with the powers of this world: it is to let the world help write the poem." ("Here in Hell")

<sup>3</sup> Severn's deathbed portrait of Keats can be seen on at least two web sites:

- 1) <http://englishhistory.net/keats/images/death.jpg>;
- 2) <http://www.bl.uk/whatson/exhibitions/keats.html#portrait>.

<sup>4</sup> The Whistler painting can be viewed on the internet at several sites but two particularly good representations are:

- 1) <http://www.dia.org/collections/amerart/tonalism/46.309.html> [the Detroit Institute of Art site, where the painting is housed]; and
- 2) <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam312/gallerys/amart3a.html>.

<sup>5</sup> In a 1994 interview, conducted close in time to the finishing of the *Atlantis* manuscript, Doty talked about Negative Capability in relation to AIDS and writing. "The real shift happened when it became not a subject for me, but a part of my subjectivity, a part of my daily life. To the point that I began to see AIDS almost not as a thing in itself. Is AIDS a thing? It means so much to me that it's not even a word, that it's an acronym and therefore has a larger negative capability, as Keats put it" (Klein 21).

<sup>6</sup> For a far-reaching discussion of the ghostly leave takings in Keats's odes, especially their connection to *Hamlet*, see Kaufman, pp. 372-377. I am also indebted to this article for Kaufman's very persuasive demonstration of the ways that "constructivism exists in dialectical tension with negative capability" (371), a notion I have tried to pursue here using a somewhat different vocabulary, and for his demonstration of the ways this claim has broader critical resonances with respect to the relationship between formalist and Frankfurt school criticism.

# Romanticism and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

## Sociopolitical (i.e., *Romantic*) Difficulty in Modern Poetry and Aesthetics\*

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1. Modern poetry is *difficult*; that's perhaps the most familiar characterization of those modernist and postmodernist poetries committed to thematic and—especially—formal experiment. But if this judgment seems like old news (and it is), try the following experiment of your own, if you haven't previously done so: In your next encounter with people whose primary work doesn't involve literature or the arts, and who ask with genuine interest what period or area of literature you "specialize in," tell them, whether it's true or not, "modernist poetry." To be sure, various periods and genres in literary history seem foreign or obscure to many intelligent and/or educated people in the culture at large. Nonetheless, admittedly unscientific but not entirely random surveys indicate that almost any period-and-genre answer other than modernist poetry (Renaissance drama or poetry; the novel since the early eighteenth century; romantic or Victorian literature in general; etc.) results in far more interested or at least polite questions than does the response "modernist poetry." For "modernist poetry" still tends for many common readers to represent prior frustrated or pointless experiences with what appeared to them as a willful aesthetic obscurantism, an unjustifiable foregrounding of difficulty that turned the perhaps already-intimidating enigma called poetry into a downright hostile wasteland of entirely impenetrable meanings.
2. There's lots to say about such perceptions, and lots of poetry and criticism has tried to say it. Consideration of how the questions at issue relate on one hand to romanticism and on the other to modern American poetry usefully delimits what could become an overwhelmingly large subject. And even this narrowed scope will require still-tighter focus, not to mention some necessarily brutal compression, in order to avoid book-length treatment. By way of beginning: it's of course the case that to those accustomed to reading and working with romantic literature, difficulty does not seem a quality or characteristic specific to modernism. Yet it remains true that much modernist and postmodernist poetry takes as its point of departure an image or caricature of high romantic poetics that stresses the latter's apparent emotional immediacy, over-earnest sincerity, authenticity, and gushy, melodious feelingfulness; that stresses, in a phrase, the risks inherent in *lyric address*, which for countless twentieth-century poets and critics is simply and balefully synonymous with romanticism and its presumably transparent "I." But an alternate view has always been present within experimental modernism and its aftermaths, a view that difficulty and complexity are actually the *raison d'être* of romantic lyric, and that the real complexities of romantic lyric explicitly or by default underwrite modernist experimentation (an experimentation that in its turn honors romanticism's unprecedented insurgencies precisely by avoiding the temptations of an easy, conventional neoromanticism).
3. To put things this way is already to distinguish between key strains in contemporary American poetry. And within the poetries most often treated under the rubric of *experimentalism* (as opposed to what is usually discussed as, for lack of a better term, *mainstream* poetry), there has for the last two or three decades been a rough division between "Language" poetry's critique of the allegedly "bourgeois-aestheticist" character of romantic and postromantic subjectivity, and, on the other hand, the practice of an exploratory poetics for which experiment is virtually synonymous with the stretching (rather than the abjuration) of lyric subjectivity. For this latter grouping—and for reasons to be addressed below—lyric practice, far from eschewing difficulty and complexity, is instead a militant commitment to them. The governing notion here (invented for modern purposes precisely in romanticism) is that lyric undertakes literary art's go-for-broke artistic and aesthetic effort. On this view (whose progressive and

radical adherents include but are hardly limited to Kant, Marx, Engels, and the Frankfurt School), lyric attempts simultaneously to make song think and to make thought sing, in such a way that the boundaries of extant conceptuality are formally extended through the critical experience of this emotional-intellectual complex; the formal process of the experience itself enables the emergence into view of materials for what can become the post-aesthetic construction of new concepts (and for the construction of new social dispensations that might correspond to them).

4. The best, most critically responsible way to develop these ideas would be patiently to survey the romantic and anti-romantic, lyric and anti-lyric poetics at work inside a representative number of contemporary American poems. This essay will shirk that more immanent, aesthetically committed, and systematic manner of proceeding (though it will finally engage in the close reading of some important poems), because I want to take up a related matter that has profoundly informed these debates within poetic experimentalism (and which has also informed the debates between experimentalism *tout court* and mainstream poetry): namely, the place of difficult "theoretical" concepts and discourse in contemporary poetry and the arts. Controversies about the difficulties of the last few decades' theoretical discourse—controversies over how much, if any, of the difficulty in theoretical writing is necessary or justifiable or is, on the contrary, merely evidence of bad prose—have migrated with force into the poetry world. One can say somewhat schematically that experimental poetry has, from its own perspectives and for its own needs, been attracted to a good deal of the philosophy and critical theory so popular in academic circles. This has frequently led to mainstream charges that contemporary experimentalism has simply made difficult theory into regrettable poetry; and it has more perversely seemed to mean—so the mainstream arguments go—that even good theory causes indifferent or bad poems (with most twisted honors perhaps being won by the *bad* theoretical writing that engenders exponentially bad poetry). As for the discussions within experimentalism itself, one finds a reprise of the same old back-and-forth about romanticism (though keyed to standards of sophistication now often taken from recent theoretical discourse rather than—as was once the case—from modernist poetry): Is the lyric-romantic legacy simplistic or complex? Is lyric hopelessly naive, escapist, and self-deluding, or an inherently difficult enactment of a theoretically articulated dance-tension between intellection and sense-experience? Is it more difficult or valuable to transform theoretical precepts into richly-textured poetic form, or to forego such comforting "aestheticist" pleasure and baldly "bare the device" by having the poem use theoretical language and ideas in a relatively direct, undigested—and thus, aesthetically subversive—manner?
5. At all events, the task of this essay will be provisionally to reroute both paths that these debates have lately tended to take. Rather than examining how the difficulties of theory may have nurtured or contaminated recent poetry, or how language or style that might be appropriate for experimental poetry has liberated or gummed up critical and theoretical prose, I'd like instead to think about how modern and contemporary poetry may offer invaluable means for distinguishing between necessary and spurious difficulty—not only and most obviously in art, but in theoretical and critical writing themselves. As will continue to be evident, the modern controversy over kinds of difficulty in art, and over how we experience and judge them, is a genuinely romantic legacy, and—inseparably from the ongoing question of lyric—it is perhaps the mode in which romanticism most powerfully continues to inflect today's American poetry, aesthetics, and criticism.

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6. But it probably needs to be said again, if a bit differently: That the notorious difficulty of modernist poetry could provide a critical purchase on recent debates over difficult academic prose seems pretty dubious. Or worse; the suggested relationship to poetry might prove congenial to those who overhastily assert that much of contemporary theoretical discourse in the humanities, pretending to describe

sociohistorical reality, actually commits egregious crimes of genre with every line it writes: Texts that would otherwise be recognized as impressively bad prose-poems instead pass for something called theory (or theoretically-informed analysis). That is, when liberal and Left commentators have criticized the fashion for what is seen as needless obscurity or difficulty, the charge of inappropriate or adolescent literariness is often implicitly or explicitly in play. (I'll leave aside the somewhat different lines of critique found in conservative and Right attacks on today's academic discourse.) And at least among liberal and Left critics, such charges are generally not made from a Socratic-Platonic stance of hostility to the idea that mimesis (artistic representation) might have a right to participate in, or might have a real contribution to make towards, knowledge claims. Rather, what is expressed is an essentially Enlightenment and progressive notion that useful presentations of social, political, historical, and cultural reality should be offered in as clear and communicable a manner as possible—so that the greatest possible number of people can share in such knowledge (and so that they can, should they so decide, attempt to use that knowledge to change the world).

7. Poetry may be inspirational, but it's usually not been thought to provide objective, empirically verifiable facts that can be shared or transparently communicated. And ever since romanticism, the communicability even of poetry's inspiration has been questioned, precisely on the grounds of whether self-consciously difficult modern art can convey anything of consequence to a broad (and hence potentially world-changing) audience. That was already the crux of a century-long Left debate before anyone had ever heard the names Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray, Foucault, Kristeva, Benjamin, Adorno, Zizek, et al. It might thus prove useful, in revisiting that debate and examining its relevance to discussions of contemporary academic prose, to consider a telling literary instance that arises in a decidedly unacademic setting. Though the issue scarcely appears in the film's reception history, Martin Ritt's *Norma Rae* (1979) meditates on, and in subtle ways highlights, the meanings of poetry's difficulty, and it does so while trying to communicate broadly about socioeconomic, political, and cultural struggles. You may recall that *Norma Rae* is a fictionalized account of the effort by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) to organize the then-largest textile manufacturer in the South, the J.P. Stevens Company. (Years after the film's release, the ACTWU merged with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union to form UNITE, the Union of Needletrade and Industrial Textile Employees). The film's fictional protagonist, Norma Rae Webster, is a composite of several women workers who had participated in attempts to organize J.P. Stevens, most notably, Crystal Lee Sutton.[\[1\]](#)
8. One night, after she's thrown in her lot with the union and is working round the clock for its cause, Norma Rae browses through union organizer Reuben Warshowsky's volume of Dylan Thomas's poetry. She asks if Dylan Thomas is "hard to read," and—finding that Thomas *does* seem difficult to understand—asks, "Why should I bother?" Reuben casually but pointedly responds, "Maybe he has something to say to you." Their repartee furthers not only the film's leitmotif of the social import of advanced levels of literacy, of opportunities for education that for the working class have tended to go hand in hand with the conquest of some measure of industrial democracy and economic justice; the conversation also reiterates the film's earlier, insistent focus on the difficulty of understanding *words* (and, in turn, the difficulty of finding words that will communicate ideas that unquestionably need to be communicated): Standing outside the plant and passing out union literature early in the action, Reuben had heard a then-uncommitted Norma Rae call out to him, after she had glanced at his proffered leaflet, "Hey, there's too many big words; if I don't understand it, they [her fellow workers] ain't gonna understand it." The next time Reuben had given the still-undecided Norma Rae a leaflet, he'd furthered the same banter and theme: "I took your advice; I think I got it down to two syllables." "One's better," she had parried. Yet finally it will be the two syllables of one word, which she's defiantly written on pasteboard and held high for all inside the plant to see —*UNION*—that causes the workers to stop their machines and that gets Norma Rae accosted, fired, arrested, booked, and jailed. Terminated and therefore technically no longer an employee eligible to vote for the union, Norma Rae concludes the

film standing outside the factory gates with Reuben, overhearing the jubilant shouts that tell of the union's election victory by vocalizing — by *chanting* — that two-syllable word, *union*. The film then ends with Reuben's promising, at their parting, to send Norma Rae the volume of Dylan Thomas; she tells him not to bother — because she's already gone out and bought her own.

9. Now, Dylan Thomas is hardly an exemplar of modernist esotericism. On the contrary, precisely the combination of his perceived accessibility even amid moments of alluring obscurity, his able reconjunctions of traditional notions of bardic romantic oracularism and lyric mellifluousness, his progressive sociopolitical stances, and, of course, his hard-drinking image, led to Thomas's popularity in activist trade union, Left, and Marxian circles in the UK and, to a lesser extent, in the U.S.<sup>[2]</sup> That's why it's so intriguing that Ritt and the film's screenwriters (Harriet Frank, Jr., and Irving Ravetch), well aware of this tradition of Left Thomas-reception, nonetheless make Thomas into a sign of *difficulty*. As *Norma Rae* retells a classic Left-Enlightenment scenario (in this case, via an encounter with Thomas' poetry), hard-won literary education or aesthetically-articulated insight parallels, or somehow even contributes to, hard-won victory in social struggle. But, significantly, the film's conclusion doesn't erase or resolve the question of why either contest (aesthetic or social) has been hard-won, which is to say that it doesn't erase the question of difficulty. For what ultimately persists is the difficulty — indeed, the seeming impossibility — of the neat integration of realms or levels of experience, thought, and action.
10. Having given almost everything to the organizing struggle, having been the key activist *in* that struggle, Norma Rae finally finds herself standing literally outside the struggle's central physical and material location. As the film closes, she's outside the factory grounds, banished not by a defection from class struggle to literary delectation but by the company's retaliatory action for her having voiced, written, and inspirationally communicated the union's message; and as she ever more definitively links herself to Dylan Thomas and poetry, she now — in a charged inversion of the old J.S. Mill formulation — can only "overhear" the triumphant public celebration of her fellow workers back inside the plant. It would be exactly wrong to see this emphatically literary and aesthetic "overhearing" as what is today typically (and, far too often, facilely) stigmatized as "bourgeois, self-cultivated transcendence," wherein a literary or aesthetic "ideology" of autonomous separation supposedly trumps committed engagement with material, sociopolitical reality. Because in the most rigorous, tightly-constructed manner, the film has ensured from the start that the literary and the sociopolitical constantly articulate, without ever determining, each other. Neither causes the other; neither demands an escape from, or triumph over, the other. Instead, the film manages to do what critical aesthetic semblance — critical mimesis, critical artistic representation — does when it's really working: It makes the audience *feel*, as an apparent intellectual-emotional insight (parallel, here, to Norma Rae's own insight), that the aesthetic and the social necessarily comprehend, translate, or, on some ultimate level of the characters' own experience, voice one another. In that sense, aesthetic experience undertakes the difficult task of making or fortifying subjects' felt capacity for transformative relationships with, and to, conceptual knowledge (and to the empirical world to which conceptual knowledge corresponds). It is among *Norma Rae's* most remarkable decisions that the film chooses at once to allegorize and enact just such artistic-aesthetic ambition — this film's own ambition — through a subtle yet profound cinematic conjuring of the theme, image, sound, and felt presence of lyric poetry.
11. As usual, the issues are more than academic. I first saw *Norma Rae* at the time of its initial release, at a moment of embarking upon what I'd assumed would be a permanently postliterary trajectory, one that, as it turned out, *did* occupy the better part of a decade spent in law school and as a fledgling labor lawyer. The fervent debates over *Norma Rae* (its basic authenticity; its decisions about addressing "ultimate" matters of sociopolitical causation; its chosen modalities for representing workers' at-the-machine, in-the-meeting-hall, and at-home experience, not to mention issues of race, gender, and regionalism; its overall approach to the cinematic means and relations of artistic production; etc.) that

I'd avidly followed in film, art, and political journals in some ways paralleled, and in some ways split off entirely from, the astonishing reception the film enjoyed (immediately and for an impressively long time thereafter) across wide sectors of labor and in the labor movement itself. One could point to various American films that, at least as courageously and perhaps even more militantly, narrate labor's story (*Salt of the Earth* and *Harlan County, USA* come immediately to mind, though their genre and historical differences from *Norma Rae*—their respectively semi-documentary and documentary character, along with the McCarthyite context informing *Salt of the Earth's* production and distribution battles—distinguish them from *Norma Rae*). But quite simply, virtually no other American post-McCarthy labor film seems so effectively to have reached its intended potential audiences: namely, people currently experiencing, or likely to experience, organizing drives in their own workplaces.

12. The rapidity with which *Norma Rae* became a touchstone, and then the ways it sustained that status, not only within the labor movement but also for unorganized workers, was little short of remarkable. An extraordinary number of those who have worked in the labor movement, or in government agencies or independent organizations involved with labor, or in occupational safety and health and related areas, have testified to this phenomenon. Within a year of the film's release, the number of workers who began explicitly referring to or riffing off the film's story and dialogue (during union campaigns, all the way to the sort of National-Labor-Relations-Board election portrayed in *Norma Rae's* penultimate scene), was unprecedented—as, again, countless participating workers, as well as union, management, and Labor Board representatives, have noted. (I vividly recall experiencing this personally, and recall hearing scores of labor-movement and Labor Board colleagues from around the country report—in a process that spanned years—about having witnessed near-identical instances of *Norma-Rae* invocation, allusion, and applied interpretation, quite frequently on or near the shop floor.) Perhaps more remarkable is the fact that by all accounts this phenomenon continues today, twenty-three years after the film's release. And although Crystal Lee Sutton had vigorous disagreements with the film's portrayal of the character that was based in large part on her, it is also the case that *Norma Rae's* long afterlife has created successive waves of interest in Sutton's biography and activism; in response, Sutton has continued as a notable presence in labor struggles around the country. She was, for example, one of the keynote speakers at a June 2001 march-and-rally in Columbia, South Carolina that was called to defend the Charleston Five. (The Charleston Five are activist members of a largely African-American local union in the International Longshoremen's Association, against whom an extremely conservative South Carolina state attorney general brought Riot-Act charges after a Charleston judge had refused to enjoin or otherwise curtail their picketing activities in a 1999 labor dispute.) Meanwhile, in a striking number of cases, the *Norma Rae* references made by workers (and by union representatives) have involved the question of the character Norma Rae's *reading*, of the way that her burgeoning literary interest functions as a dynamic sign, so to speak, of her participation in the fight to secure some measure of a simultaneously collective and personal autonomy.
13. One could say that the powerfully-felt significance of Norma Rae's poetry-reading is a palpable, yet difficult or complicated thing for working people to explain; but the truth is that it's an inherently difficult thing for anyone to explain. It bears emphasizing that it's not the matter of seeking to attain factual knowledge in relation to sociopolitical struggles that's so complicated; however hard certain facts may be to come by, and however complicated are the particular facts themselves, the necessity of *getting them*, and the problems caused when they're unavailable, are pretty obvious. What's more difficult to express is why people's own *aesthetic* experience can seem so dramatically to be at stake in social, political, and historical matters. Indeed, this difficulty of stating (let alone in a descriptive and accessible vocabulary and form) just how and why such things can feel like they are so inextricably related is one of the oldest conundrums of literary and aesthetic theory. The enigma is so persistent—and has been so central to politically-intended art and criticism—that one begins to understand the paradox of the orthodox Marxian critic Ernst Fischer inaugurating his most important literary-aesthetic work by quoting, with surprising and disarming approval, the emphatically uncommitted artist Jean

Cocteau: "Poetry is indispensable—if I only knew what for" (qtd. in Fischer 7). Well before asking the question of whether difficult *writing* might best present the difficulty of this difficult subject matter, one might observe that there has often enough been a rough consensus about the difficulty *of* the subject matter: the difficulty, that is, of understanding and articulating the aesthetic's status—as individuals and collectivities experience it—vis-à-vis the sociopolitical and the historical.

14. Precisely such difficulty has been theorized (from the romantic era of Kant's third *Critique*, to the modernist period of Benjamin, Adorno, and the Frankfurt School—and beyond) as the central problem of modern art and aesthetic theory. Generally speaking, in these theorizations of what Kant had initially understood as a "reflective aesthetic judgment" paradoxically synonymous with estrangement and defamiliarization, the aesthetic has been grasped as the felt-as-necessary (but notoriously difficult to account for) "bridge" between nature and freedom, cognition and morality, theoretical and practical reason, fact and value. In short, the aesthetic wants to bridge objective-conceptual knowledge (or the objective world to which conceptual knowledge is meant to correspond) and the subjective human capacity for a critical agency that would be more than arbitrary in relation *to* objective knowledge of existing reality. The key notion is that aesthetic thought-experience, while feeling itself to be cast in or aiming for conceptual ("objective" or objectively-oriented) thought, is not yet substantively-objectively conceptual. In proceeding via the *feeling* that it is objective (that it is keyed to judgments that could be universally shared), aesthetic thought-experience maintains the form—but only the form—of conceptual thought; this formality in relation to substantive conceptuality makes the aesthetic effectively quasicontceptual. The inherently experimental exercise of that "formal" experience can produce, to paraphrase Kant, a wealth of thought-emotion that cannot be reduced to any determinate, presently-existing substantive concept, and that thus can allow for the emergence or reconfiguration of the materials for a subsequent, postaesthetic construction of *new* concepts and the sociopolitical dispensations that would correspond to them.[\[3\]](#)
15. It may be ironic that some recent defenses of apparent difficulty in academic writing have turned for support to Frankfurt School texts, because Frankfurt briefs for the necessary difficulties in postromantic and modernist art, and in critical theory, actually tend to apply or extend all those initial Kantian-romantic concerns about truth, objectivity, and universality in ways largely inimical to most Left postmodernist discourse. But this in turn leads us to inquire anew about why Benjamin's and Adorno's modern-Marxian restatements of indubitably romantic ideas so often make poetry—lyric poetry in particular—a special case within a Marxified Kantian view or theory of how art and aesthetic experience attempt the difficult task of *bridging*, and the task of stretching (or stretching past), the bounds of extant concepts (of gesturing toward the construction of new concepts that would be more than instrumental but also more than arbitrary). (Here I can only assert something that will receive full elaboration elsewhere: Contrary to so much of contemporary Marxian and Marxian-inflected theory's "anti-aestheticist" hostility to aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment, Marx himself intentionally marshals the aporetic but by no means paralyzing structure of Kantian reflective aesthetic judgment precisely for the "theory of *praxis*" announced in his *Theses on Feuerbach*.) For the romantic and postromantic traditions of poetics in which Benjamin and Adorno participate, modern lyric ambition stands as a, or even *the*, high-risk enterprise, the "go-for-broke-game" ["*va-banque-Spiel*"], of literary art: The lyric poem must work coherently in and with the medium—language—that human beings use to articulate objective concepts, even while the lyric explores the most subjective, nonconceptual, and ephemeral phenomena. This theoretical or philosophical difficulty, concerning how simultaneously to think objectivity and subjectivity, also arises practically as lyric's great problem of form-construction: How—with language alone as medium—to build a solid, convincing artistic structure out of something as evanescent as subjective song and how, in the bargain, to delineate or objectivate the impressively fluid contents of capitalist modernity? How, spontaneously yet rigorously, to make thought sing and to make song think? For the Frankfurt School critics, romantic and postromantic lyric dramatizes with special intensity modern aesthetic quasicontceptuality's more general attempt to stretch conceptual



thought proper; this special intensity arises from lyric's constitutive need musically to stretch "objective" conceptual thought's very medium, language—to stretch it quasiconceptually all the way towards affect and song, but without relinquishing any of the rigor of conceptual intellection.<sup>[4]</sup>

16. Benjamin and Adorno go on to argue that high capitalist modernity and its unprecedented acceleration of the abstracting processes of commodification (the "reification" not only of objects, products, and people, but of thought and language themselves), along with the concomitant "loss of aura" (the collapse into immediacy of a previously charged, critically enabling, auratic-aesthetic *distance*) require that Kantian-romantic aesthetic difficulty—the difficulty of grasping and negotiating the transition between types of knowledge and realms of experience—be supplemented. What, in a later, faster, and technologically more complex modernity, is Kantian-romantic difficulty to be supplemented with? Apparently, with a lot *more* difficulty: more difficulty within art, and within the judgment, interpretation, and criticism that art calls forth; and all this for the purpose of accurately conveying the problems bedeviling the attempt critically to cognize an increasingly opaque modernity. And as far as Benjamin and Adorno are concerned, a crucial chapter in this modern aesthetic-social history involves Charles Baudelaire's barely postromantic lyric poetry, where romantic lyric's presumed condition of possibility—the availability of an auratic, reflective experience that in its turn makes possible a noninstrumental, potentially emancipatory capacity for constructing new conceptual-objective knowledge—seems to have disappeared. Hence the Frankfurt focus on Baudelaire: Baudelaire, who for his subject "ch[oo]ses the modern itself"; who abjures or scorns an already-known socio-literary language, so that his "lyric poetry is a slap in the face not only to the *juste milieu* but also to all bourgeois social sentiment," yet whose "tragic, arrogant mask" of advanced technique is nonetheless—indeed, is in consequence—"truer to the masses" than conventional "poor people's poetry" (and this because Baudelaire's experimentalism proves capable of bringing into aesthetic experience the new historical reality unavailable to a conventional poetics, a conventional poetics effectively if unwittingly determined by reigning concepts of what social conditions are or have been) ("On Lyric Poetry and Society" 44, 45-46; "Rede Über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" 87, 89-90).<sup>[5]</sup> The much-vaunted Frankfurt preference for modernist artworks of great complexity is the preference for a Baudelairean art still intent on risking experimental enactments of romantic aura together with mimetic reflections on postromantic modernity's most anti-auratic, advanced technical-productive developments. This is a preference for an art that, while refusing to give up romantic aura's ghost (which is to say, while continuing its attempts to differentiate itself from reification and the reified communicative discourse that have tended to vitiate aura), also views productive and technological modernity as having become part of art's very materials.<sup>[6]</sup>
17. To say this much is to say that the Frankfurt School's reputation for difficulty (a reputation that is not the only source, but is certainly *a* crucial source and touchstone in today's debates about academic prose) is best understood in relation to the Frankfurters' romanticism-derived emphasis on the aesthetic. And while this clearly involves the taking up and foregrounding of self-consciously difficult artworks of the Baudelairean line — and of a properly aesthetic critical prose aiming stylistically to dramatize the defamiliarizing experience of the artworks at issue—it is not only artworks themselves that constitute the aesthetic sphere. Benjamin's and Adorno's attempts to contribute to Marxian-derived projects that seek historically, sociologically, economically, and politically to grasp capitalist modernity are always to some extent broached through an aesthetic insight that is prior to, or broader than, their experience of individual artworks or of artistic tradition more broadly. This ur-aesthetic and romantic inflection informs their criticism not merely because Benjamin and Adorno are from virtually their earliest years profoundly and preternaturally aesthetic thinkers and writers; nor does it occur because of some belief they hold in the sheer superiority of aesthetic modes of thought and presentation.
18. Rather, the crucial point is that Frankfurt analyses of sociohistorical phenomena tend to concern themselves with human subjects' abilities critically to take in and respond not only to the local but

especially to the larger systemic situations that confront them. This capacity for reflective and potentially activating response is conceived as the possibility of an act of understanding that would proceed in a more than merely instrumental, *and* in a more than merely arbitrary manner; that would proceed, in other words, in a manner directed toward meeting at least the minimal requirements for critical agency. In the quite Kantian-romantic tradition that those in and around the Frankfurt School generally share, the precise designation for such thought-experience (where subjectivity itself tries critically to understand its animating, quasicontceptual relationship to concepts and objective entities like capitalist society) is *aesthetic*. An aesthetically-generated or informed approach is by no means the only valid path that one could or should take when examining and writing about social phenomena. But for the Frankfurt School's modernist extensions of romantic theory, the aesthetic *is* by definition the key modality for the investigation and enabling of *subjective*, critical human capacities to process intellectually and emotionally (and to work transformatively with) the overarching *objective* structural realities of modern society.

19. A number of conclusions would seem to follow. First, Frankfurt-School commitments to difficulty do not imply that economics, history, sociology, political science, and the theories attendant on them (and on adjacent disciplines) should be characterized willy-nilly by difficult and/or aesthetically-inflected writing. For the Frankfurt School, the aesthetic's difficult modalities *can* challenge one-sidedly positivist analyses in which a crucial subjective element may have essentially been ignored or banished; Frankfurt studies in fact often dedicated themselves to correcting such positivist one-sidedness. But this means that there is no warrant for believing that difficult academic or theoretical writing is inherently required, advisable, or even justifiable, much less inherently progressive or revolutionary. In short, the justification for difficult writing depends on the materials the writing seeks to present, and on judgments about one's intended audience for the presentation. (In that light, perhaps too little attention has been paid in the United States to the ways in which members of the Frankfurt School—even those most identified with "Mandarinism"—while trying to remain faithful to the complicated concepts and theories they were developing, nonetheless attempted regularly to modulate their discursive registers and to pursue opportunities to address non-academic audiences via the mass media, most notably, radio and newsmagazines.)<sup>[7]</sup>
20. Even where complex modern artworks are not the central concern, if the materials under study nonetheless contain an important aesthetic element—if the materials are in significant part composed of or oriented towards human beings' attempts subjectively to imagine their way into the assimilation and potential re-formation of concepts that correspond to objectively-existing social phenomena—then modalities of aesthetic difficulty may well be called for. And if one traces the course of various Frankfurt disputes—even or especially those between Benjamin and Adorno, over technical-mechanical reproducibility and over the need simultaneously to engage the questions of aura, economic structure, and the aesthetically-stimulated reconfiguration of materials for the construction of new concepts—it turns out that all those difficult dances with aesthetic subjectivity, quasicontceptuality, and the not-yet-formed concept are meant to serve an expanded, noninstrumental notion of "objective" conceptuality and reason. This is, in effect, the project quietly hinted at in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and more explicitly articulated in *Negative Dialectics*: an imagining of the ways in which Enlightenment conceptuality or reason might examine and critique itself and its own tendencies towards sheerly instrumentalist and identitarian thought; an imagining of the ways in which conceptuality might cease to repress those areas of experience and reality left behind after they've been conceptualized; in sum, an imagining of how scientific (or scientific-objectivist) conceptuality might remain in dialogue with aesthetic quasicontceptuality, with the thought-mode that stands formally for the materials or areas of experience that conceptuality tends to leave behind after having intellectually "dominated" them. As I've shown at length elsewhere, Adorno's and Benjamin's debate over the latter's essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"—their debate over competing versions and approaches to lyric aura—is actually a debate over the possibility of continuing to expand

conceptuality beyond determinist parameters. Significantly, that debate leads Benjamin not only to write his brilliant "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (with its animating and fruitful tension between the disappearance of romantic lyric aura and an artistic-critical re-posing of aura precisely in aura's wake). It also—on his own account—directly leads Benjamin to think and write a romantic-messianic critique of linear, deterministic "progress" and its presumably unbroken "continuum of concepts," a critique that will be known as the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" ["Über den Begriff der Geschichte"] and that will become a key source-text for later Frankfurt efforts to understand, critique, and transform Enlightenment conceptuality and reason (from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* all the way to *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory*, and *The Aesthetic Dimension*).<sup>[8]</sup>

21. As far as Benjamin, Adorno, and their cohort are concerned, all these ideas depend in part on a criticism that takes care to write some very precise, concrete, crackling prose. The desideratum stems at least in part from Benjamin's theorization (which Benjamin often repeats and which Adorno constantly echoes) of the *constellation* and *force-field*. Contemporary theoretical discourse rightly understands the theory and practice of the constellation as an intellectual attempt nondeterministically to identify and dynamically connect elements (historical, socioeconomic, cultural) that are not initially given as relational, but that, when animated—constellated—into conjunction create or reveal a signifying force-field. That force-field for its part illuminates the larger social reality whose elements have been brought together in affinity and tension (rather than in a misleadingly integrative totalization) to make the force-field visible in the first place. After our previous discussion, it may not be surprising to recall that one of the Frankfurters' key models for understanding *how* concept-expanding constellations of critical thought are made, and for how force-fields are created, is art: not least, the "go-for-broke" art of lyric poetry, with its special relationship to conceptuality's basic medium, language. And while Benjamin and Adorno emphasize the need for criticism to learn *aesthetic* lessons from lyric's manner of constructing constellations, they nonetheless inveigh against an *aestheticist* identification between criticism and lyric; they caution against self-deluding modalities in which the critic tries to write as if he or she were a poet working (even if dialectically-critically) with aesthetic semblance [*Schein*]. From a Frankfurt perspective, critical writing that invokes the concepts of the constellation and force-field asks to be judged by standards as rigorous as those that Benjamin and Adorno apply to lyric poetry and other forms and genres of art.
22. In Benjamin's and Adorno's view, artworks are to be judged by how well they accomplish their difficult constellative task of formally enacting art's determinate indeterminacy, art's exact but capacious—and sociopolitically enabling—ambiguity (a "precise ambiguity" that must be, *à la* Coleridge, spontaneously enacted or forged anew with each work, yet that also springs in some general way from the fact that art pushes toward an expanded conceptuality while itself remaining quasiconceptual). Criticism likewise seeks, with a matching recourse to experiment and precision, to construct constellations of critical thought; but unlike art, criticism seeks to do this essentially without semblance. Criticism *conceptually* articulates the contributions *toward* an expanded conceptuality that art has generated *mimetically*, nondiscursively. Criticism thus follows art in open-endedly and nondeterministically constructing constellations that are in no way pre-given; but criticism's precisions finally seek to enunciate conceptually what art has, in accord with its own character, quite precisely constructed as quasiconceptual.<sup>[9]</sup>
23. At any rate, criticism's profoundly aesthetic dimension, which stems from its affinities with artistic practice and aesthetic theory, becomes ever more evident when one considers Benjamin's often-stated specification of what, within criticism, constellative form requires, of how and why it creates a force-field (and this is a specification Adorno will time and again make his own): in writing that seeks to present constellative critical thought, each sentence should point back—formally and substantively—to a constantly-moving center from which that sentence has all along radiated. That's no small task; in fact, it's pretty damn near impossible, as it perhaps would figure to be, given that Benjamin develops

this ideal of exact, imaginative, in-motion form largely through his formidable engagements with the formidable artists of the Baudelairean lyric counter-tradition. Benjamin's formulation also stands as one of the great modernist, constructivist reimaginings of that familiar old lyric-aesthetic friend whom it thereby radically reinvents: romantic organic form. In Adorno's musical formulation, such constructivist reimagining of what is still really organic form appears, in advanced modernity, as the simultaneously dissociative and structural principle of dissonant composition.<sup>[10]</sup>

24. This would be the moment to turn, from the sketching of overviews and principles of romantic and modern poetics, towards treatment of concrete examples from Benjamin and Adorno: towards a detailed engagement with their discussions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry and the other arts; and then, towards coordination of such a treatment with fuller consideration of contemporary academic theory's attempts to apply or enact these Frankfurt notions of difficulty that owe so much to romantic and modern poetic history. Limitations of space unfortunately make it impossible to do all that here; and they likewise prevent me in this essay from satisfactorily taking up one of the most significant challenges that Benjamin and Adorno set for themselves and others: that criticism about aesthetic or aesthetically-informed matters should immerse itself in the problems of contemporary art, including the art of poetry. For now, the most minimal gestures in that last direction will have to suffice, and to serve as a provisional conclusion about the historical connections between romantic and twentieth-century approaches to poetic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical difficulty.
25. "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties" ["Baudelaire hat mit Lesern gerchnet, die die Lektüre von Lyrik vor Schwierigkeiten stellt"] ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 155; "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" 607). Benjamin took his life within two years after writing that well-known first sentence of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"; Adorno for his part spent a good portion of the next three decades trying to unpack and trace the meanings of those *difficulties* for—and in—the modern art that succeeded romanticism and postromanticism. The two short texts presented immediately below come from later moments of the history Benjamin and Adorno had been investigating; these texts are separated by almost thirty years, and are authored by two of the United States' most important contemporary poets, both of whom, though they belong to different generations, are known for their filiations with the *longue durée* experimental traditions of romantic and modern lyric (and for their more-than-passing interest in what Frankfurt School aesthetics has itself meant for post-1945 poetry). Indeed, it cannot be gainsaid that these texts are by artists who are known for both the musicality and difficulty of their work, and who have always taken pains to underscore their poetry's links to romanticism and romantic difficulty. If the following texts seem far from mainstream or direct styles of lyric address, they nevertheless take up the same romantic problem (albeit very much further along the continuum) that Norma Rae discovers and voices in her fraught initial encounter with the nontransparency of even a Dylan Thomas lyric. First, a passage from Barbara Guest's book-length poem *Symbiosis* (2000), a work made in collaboration with the painter Laurie Reed:

The difficult! aathe difficult!

loosen the ropes that entangle it,

aaatear them down from the mast!

□□□□ The schooner off its route,

□□□□□ *adios* to the bird of prey,

aafflies in another direction, the nineteenth  
century

aawears a plaid cap. [\[11\]](#)

26. Guest—now in her 80s—is one of the original members of the "New York School" of poets; the New York School has, of course, been made almost synonymous with the advent of postmodernism in American poetry (though it is significant that Guest, often deemed the School's most aesthetically fearless and formally uncompromising artist, is also thought of as its most relentless *modernist*, and hence as its best candidate for matching, phrase by phrase and layering by layering, the formidable complexity and difficulty in the earlier modernisms of a Pound or Olson). Here, characteristically, she swings with such grace of musical phrase and gentle backbeat that the gravity of her subject seems to register only recursively. Playfully and exclamatorily turning "difficult" from adjectival description into a substantive that is then itself made to signify a quality or state of being, Guest uses both sound values and the suspended pause of the page's blank space to make "difficult!" virtually chime with "entangle it." She sets the pleasing suggestions of sonic and visual affinity in intriguing tension with the perhaps paradoxical command to loosen the bonds that entangle "the difficult" (disentangled, will Difficulty Unbound prove more—or less—difficult? Will it move farther from, or closer to us? What of the fact that the ropes entangling it seem to be made of these verse-lines themselves?). Meanwhile, the increasingly complicated—yet increasingly mellifluous, sensually serpentine—commingling of pleasure and problem seems to suggest a triangulation of the present moment (the contemporary perils and beckonings of song and thought) with two crucial earlier moments of history (and of literary history): Homer singing about Odysseus' self-torturing attempt to know the sirens' song without being fatally dashed against the rocks; and the deathships' mascot-albatrosses in the flights of Coleridgean and Baudelairean song.
27. If Guest implicitly shades in the Homeric instance as the ancient or archaic foundation-stone in this structure of music-and-dilemma (a structure which yields, among other things, *musical dilemma* as both artistic and social problem), her more charged historical gesture casts the Coleridgean and, especially, the Baudelairean instance not just as absurdly outdated ("the nineteenth/ century/ wears a plaid cap") but as positively archaic in their turn. Indeed, for the nineteenth-century or Baudelairean *flaneur*-figure, with all its cool-culture cachet (not least in its repeated rediscovery and celebration during the last three decades of poetics and criticism), to be pictured *now* in a plaid cap is playfully but insistently to have the "fli[ght] in another direction" operate to make "the nineteenth/ century" (whose very enjambment conveys its being reduced to pieces of itself) *more* archaic than the *Odyssey*. Or, perhaps more devastatingly, it is (in line with Benjamin's analysis of what had once made Baudelaire so modern) *our* moment that is archaic and the Homeric which is modern, while the presumably modernist-archaic epoch of *flaneurisme* (so imbricated, in Benjamin's thinking, with the emergence of both modernism and Marxism) has become that trivial thing, the simply quaint or comically outdated: "a plaid cap." The exacting construction of syntactical indeterminacies drives home the poem's exploration of the ambiguous cross-directionality of the phenomena at issue, quite pointedly on the

model of ships crossing in the night (is it that "schooner" or "the bird of prey" that actually "flies in another direction" and gives us to understand the plaid-cap nature of a nineteenth century that will apparently last just as long as postmodern celebrations of it—celebrations, that is, of a certain aesthetic-political *flaneurisme*?). In any case, Guest's stripped-down but sinuous lyric, re-accessing the oldest and most troubling riddles in both poetic and sociocultural history, works from a longstanding and recognizably romantic nexus of music, meditation, and difficulty to ask again about what has changed and what is new—and about how to ask that question itself.[\[12\]](#)

28. And here is the poem "for," from "The Brown Book" section of Michael Palmer's 1974 volume *The Circular Gates*:

for . . .

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; it's her  
small and dead behind the roses  
better left alone; we wander around the park  
and out of our mouths come blood and smoke  
and sounds; small children and giants  
young mothers and big sisters  
will be walking in circles next to the water

Palmer—one of the most-admired poets writing today in English (a status recently codified by former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass' poem "The Palmer Method"), and a member of the Chancellors' Board of the Academy of American Poets—began to come to prominence in the early 1970s, as a new voice extending aspects of the experimental lyric practice of the "San Francisco Renaissance" (most associated with the great later-modernist yet unabashedly romantic Robert Duncan, to whom Palmer was extraordinarily close until Duncan's 1988 death). *The Circular Gates*, with its epigraph from one of the volume's abiding presences, the great Left, modernist poet César Vallejo ("*Toda la canción/cuadrada en tres silencios*" ["All the song/quartered in three silences"]), was one of Palmer's first books.

29. "Coffee/ childhood" is indeed "difficult but not impossible" to wrap one's mind around; the two don't tend logically or sequentially to go together. Except that they do, retrospectively: in the aftermath of thought-provoking, madeleine-spiked cups of coffee that fuel the view back towards the past. Such retrospection here moves somewhat eerily, if not surprisingly, into nostalgia for lyric's own vulgar-modern roots; it moves, that is, to echoes of Dante's "wood" and haunted-forest birdsong and common tongue. Yet poetry's historical lyricizations of birdsong also appear here as the object of critique, a self-mockery at once gentle and unsettling, as the straightforwardness of Palmer's language not only undercuts any possible divineness in this comedy but also shifts quite explicitly to the language of parody and cliché: "makes you blush/ and so on"; and then, disturbingly, we pass from parody to something noirish, violent, troublingly ambiguous (is the "her" of "her/small and dead behind the roses" a girl, a woman, the bird, overly-romanticized birdsong in modernity, institutional-cliché birdsong?). In its direct and slightly clipped and then periodically more expansive rhythms and diction, the poem moves from enunciations of imagistic strangeness towards full-blooded Surrealism: towards "mouths" "out of" which emerge "blood and smoke" (and, only at that point, out of which also emerge audible articulations—"sounds"); towards a pairing of "children and giants" that turns what otherwise might merely be a slightly asymmetrical coupling ("young mothers and big sisters") into a jointure that helps unfold an arresting other-logic.

30. Progressing through vocabularies of estrangement and parody and dissonant critique, and with a start-and-stop irregular metrics that nonetheless makes felt a coherent rhythmic expansion and contraction of thought, Palmer's almost-deadpan delivery yields weavings and phrasings that stretch from a classic Surrealism to his own, remade-again language: of fable, Grimms fairy-tale, philosophical meditation, singsong nursery rhyme, Webernesque condensation. With the final line's return to an expanded length we catch up to find we've all along been treading a homeopathically artificial path, a classically romantic process that has, paradoxically, had us traveling backwards-forwards towards breath-song's circulations around nature's life-source: ". . . small children and giants/young mothers and big sisters/will be walking in circles next to the water."
31. Much more is at work in these ten lines, and those additional elements could be felt without specialized knowledge of poetic history. But such knowledge *would* help one better describe the virtuosic formal layerings that contribute decisively to the reader's sensing of a charged and ghostly echolalia. For Palmer has pillaged and translated the majority of these lines from Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations*, adding crucial components to them, torquing them differently, and—perhaps most ambitiously—imagining and working out the sedimented form- and content-effects that will carry over or be created when he re-replaces Rimbaud's already modernist prose-poem passages into still-more-modern *verse lines* (in ways suggesting that, at however subterranean a level, the formal transposition or retranslation is itself crucial in order to convey not only estrangement, but also—and equally a reimagining of romantic vocation— song's self-renewal, melody's altered, stagger-step yet weirdly elegant re-emergence from song's wake and its own self-critique). If experimental lyric's re-posing and exercising of such formal aesthetic dynamics and capacities can indeed prove "difficult but not impossible," it may also, through its work, help demonstrate—or stimulate—a critical subjectivity that asks about how to know the coordinates of a much-changed world, and about how to refashion knowledge-processes themselves.<sup>[13]</sup> With such necessary, and necessarily complex explorations, contemporary poetry rededicates itself to what an earlier stage of modernism had likewise taken from romanticism: a commitment to the challenge—at once aesthetic and sociopolitical—of what is difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> For a quick rehearsal of the film's background and the labor history it tells, see Jackson 180-193.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful, essentially orthodox Marxian recounting of this Thomas-and-the-Left history, see Paananen, "Dylan Thomas As Social Writer: Toward a Caudwellian Reading."

<sup>3</sup> For discussion see, for example, Cascardi, *Consequences of Enlightenment*; Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*; Caygill, *Art of Judgment*; and Kaufman, "Red Kant" and "Negatively Capable Dialectics."

<sup>4</sup> See Adorno's quite Benjaminian "On Lyric Poetry and Society," 44, 43; "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft," 87, 85. For more on the history and theory of Benjamin's and Adorno's approaches to lyric, see Kaufman, "Aura, Still" and "Adorno's Social Lyric, and Literary Criticism Today: Poetics, Aesthetics, Modernity."

<sup>5</sup> Adorno here again seeks to telescope Benjamin's prodigious although largely uncompleted writings on Baudelaire into a few pages.

<sup>6</sup> For sustained treatment of Frankfurt-School analyses of the Baudelairean counter-tradition in modern lyric, and for Benjamin's, Brecht's, and Adorno's surprising later indications that lyric aura might have a renewed, progressive role to play in contemporary poetry and theory (*after* lyric's apparent supervention by mechanical-technical reproduction or reproducibility), see Kaufman, "Aura, Still."

<sup>7</sup> While Herbert Marcuse—and the Benjamin of the mid-1930s—would be obvious instances, the case is perhaps best made by considering the most ostensibly Mandarin of the Frankfurt critics; in that light, see, for example, the May 5, 1969 interview with Adorno that appeared in *Der Spiegel* under the title "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm," trans. Gerhard Richter [the literary critic, not the painter] under the title "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno."

<sup>8</sup> See, again, Kaufman, "Aura, Still" (esp. 73-74, n.46). For a valuable consideration of how the triangulated crises of aura, experience, and conceptuality inform an always-implicit ethical theory in Adornian and Frankfurt thought, see J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*; "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire," and "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire." See too Adorno, Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928-1940* (138 ff., 364 ff., and 388 ff.); in English, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* (104 ff., 280 ff., and 298 ff.). Finally, see Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"; "Über den Begriff der Geschichte."

<sup>9</sup> For a simultaneously comprehensive and succinct meditation on these ideas about constellative form in critical writing—and for an identification of Benjamin as the greatest theorist and practitioner of such writing—see Adorno, "The Essay as Form"; "Der Essay als Form."

<sup>10</sup> For an extended discussion, see Kaufman, "Aura, Still" (esp. 74-79).

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Guest and Laurie Reid, *Symbiosis* (n.p.). Guest's recent work also includes the Adorno-invoking *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature* and *If So, Tell Me*; see also her *Stripped Tales and Quill, Solitary, APPARITION*. These and other volumes of Guest's poetry have been published by smaller presses whose books may sometimes prove difficult to find. I should therefore add that most of Guest's work—and that of other poets often associated with experimental traditions—is available through the (non-profit) Small Press Distribution, the leading such distributor in the United States, at 1341 Seventh Street, Berkeley, CA 94710, (510)524-1668 or (800)869-7553, fax (510)524-0852, orders@spdbooks.org, <<http://www.spdbooks.org>>.

<sup>12</sup> For more specific treatment of Guest's relationship to the early and continuing reception of Frankfurt School aesthetics in the United States, see Kaufman, "A Future for Modernism: Barbara Guest's Recent Poetry."

<sup>13</sup> For some of Palmer's more recent work, see *At Passages; The Lion Bridge: Selected Poems 1972-1995; The Promises of Glass*; and *Codes Appearing: Poems 1979-1988*. For an example of Palmer's thoughts on the dialogues between Frankfurt aesthetics and contemporary poetry, see his "Some Notes on Shelley, Poetics, and the Present" (an essay that might best be read in relation to his *Sun* and *At Passages*). For a very helpful discussion of Palmer, see David Levi Strauss, "Aporia and Amnesia."

# Romanticism and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

## Strange Affinities: A Partial Return to Wordsworthian Poetics After Modernism

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### I.

1. Almost thirty years ago I made what I thought was a convincing argument contrasting Wordsworth's aesthetics of immanence with Coleridge's "symbolist" poetics.<sup>[1]</sup> In doing this I hoped to show how many aspects of what then seemed postmodern had a very different lineage from the symbolist values that had shaped modernism. Now I have to recognize several problems with that argument, but, as is the way of thirty year retrospects, I remain convinced that at core I got something right—if not about sixties postmodernism than about a strand of contemporary poetics that I find given exemplary articulation in Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's collaborative text *Sight*.
2. My major mistake was in treating Wordsworth as only a poet of immanence. I did so in order to evade criticisms of Wordsworth's egotistical sublime, and so also to evade the heritage of confessional writing against which my postmoderns were attempting to define themselves. But I got two things wrong. First, there is no evading the egotistical sublime in Wordsworth: being able to exult in the "I" and so to feel its expansiveness was for him a central aspect of immanence. As we see in the great crescendo at the center of "Tintern Abbey," immanence for Wordsworth consisted in being able to feel paratactic syntax expand to include within lyric celebration the furthest reaches of the poet's exalted speech. Immanence meant that even this reach of spirit could be as grounded in natural process as the meanest thing that blows. Second, I was wrong, or at least terribly limited, about why it might matter to pursue immanence. I was driven by the need to find conceptual structures that could simultaneously justify what poets pursued and be justified by what they accomplished. Now I think one has to handle concepts like poetic immanence somewhat differently. The crucial fact is not what the poets thought but how their thinking made possible certain ways that language could be charged with affective intensity and so take on exemplary affective resonance.
3. Now I hope that by addressing these mistakes I can provide a more accurate and more consequential picture of why Wordsworth matters for the study of twentieth-century poetry in general and especially for contemporary concerns with how twentieth-century poets could use language to establish and celebrate new ways of realizing immanent values. Wordsworth matters first because of the curse that the egotistical sublime was to become. High Victorian poets could not be content unless their speakers could take on personal stances dignified by Wordsworthian high eloquence. But they could no longer marry that eloquence to processes of sensation or to modes of symbol making. So the affective basis for self-projection came increasingly to have little but the poet's imaginary identification with the role of poet as sustenance for lyric eloquence. Here I will use a short poem by Matthew Arnold to illustrate features of self-projection that become even more striking in overtly Wordsworthian poems like "The Scholar Gypsy." Then I will show how modernist rejections of romanticism might better be seen as repudiations of Victorian versions of the romantic subject that had lost the possibility of keeping the ego continuous with sensation.
4. My second mistake now has to enter this story. If we deal with immanence primarily as a structure of ideas we simply cannot get back beyond the modernist rejection of Victorian versions of the

Wordsworthian ego (which also all too often after 1815 became the actual Wordsworthian ego). Arnold's versions of Wordsworth may have destroyed for the foreseeable future the possibility of a poetry based on explicit value schemes (in contrast to a poetry that composes values by how it inhabits particular ways of attending to and composing experience). But if we treat the poetics of immanence as primarily an emphasis on particular ways of getting as much of mind as possible made continuous with the senses, we can see that the anti-symbolist moderns and their heirs had to reinvent, sans egotistical sublime, what Wordsworth sought as his means of resisting the corrupt modes of feeling basic to social life. Wordsworth is the godfather of at least one strand of contemporary radical poetics because of how he enables us to escape the lyric heritage that Victorian poetics imposed upon him.

5. Wordsworth can directly speak to contemporary imaginations because he so tightly weaves the ego into elaborate textures of sensation, then treats language as itself so affectively charged that it simply continues sensation by other means. Moreover, by stressing sensation as one locus of self-consciousness, Wordsworth also made it possible to imagine at the other end of the ego, in effect, how poetry might move beyond the individual subject to the direct modeling of interpersonal subjective states. If the sensations can be rendered so as to be shared, and if language is woven into the sensations, then the affects built out of that weaving become available for anyone who can fully assume the role of speaker of that specific linguistic formulation. By showing how our affective intensities are grounded by the modes of attention we adapt, Wordsworth also gives poetry a powerful social agenda that need not be connected to any specific political one.
6. In order to develop this story, I will have to presuppose an audience willing at least to entertain my description of Wordsworth without demanding further elaboration. I want to put all my emphasis on the path leading from Victorian versions of the lyrical speaking ego to contemporary fascinations with the entirely embodied authorial sensibility. Therefore, I will rest my case on three examples that I hope get to the structural core of how our intimate psychological energies can be differently distributed. Other poets, and other poems by my authors, obviously will distribute these investments somewhat differently, but I hope my examples provide the basic terms for characterizing these differences. For Arnold I concentrate on his "Isolation. To Marguerite" because this poem concisely makes visible both the power and the problems involved in seeking Wordsworthian affective satisfactions for the lyrical ego without Wordsworthian grounds. In this poem Arnold tries to build a plausible lyrical self by substituting for a failed love a projected identification with a nature now reduced to analogues for the poet's own loneliness. Ultimately even that projected affinity collapses into self-defensive fantasy as poetry yields itself entirely to shoring up ego-defenses under the guise of lyrical sensitivity. Then, once we see how slippery the lyrical ego can be, we are in a position to appreciate why modernists were so leery of "emotion" and so eager to replace that emphasis with the lyric exploration of "feeling," an exploration whose fundamental possibilities I think took shape in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. To exemplify what modernists tried to make of this turn from emotion to feeling I will turn to two short lyrics by William Carlos Williams.
7. Finally, I will take as my representative contemporary text a brief section of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's *Sight* because this text implicitly argues that Williams severely limits the domain of feeling by subordinating its fluid aspects to the powerful objectifying will of the artist as composer-antagonist (see Williams 186). From the perspective of contemporary radical or investigative poetry, composition is not so much a lonely forming of nature as it is a means of exploring transitional sites intensifying complex interrelationships between sensation and imagination. In effect Hejinian and Scalapino reexamine the nature of feelings and find there resources for a model of authorship quite different from Williams's. They present composition not as the lonely giving shape to formed structures of sensations but as a reflexive means of intensifying complex interrelationships between sensation and imagination. My argument then takes the form of a historical progression. For each model depends on its predecessor for its urgency and for its self-definition. Yet it is also quite possible for each of the models

to be isolated as one possibly representative rendering of affects important for contemporary life.

8. We need a few fundamental rough definitions in order to create a working vocabulary for dealing with affective energies within lyrics. Affect is for me the most general category for talking about how we find ourselves caring about our involvement in particular situations. Affects can be defined as states of the body experienced as inseparable from the presence of imaginary projection. This distinguishes them on the one side from sensations, which involve simple awareness of bodily states, and on the other from beliefs, which can be articulated without relation to bodily states at all. Sensations can trigger imaginary projections, but imagination is not central to their modes of appearing for us. Consider the difference between noticing a bird and noticing that the bird's way of pecking reminds one of a certain person or state of mind. Then think of making some argument about the bird, for example that it is a finch, not a hummingbird. Here imaginings might be present, but the discipline involved requires framing and testing them, not exploring where they come from and how those energies might generate additional connections. Affects often involve reasoning, but we do not expect reasoning either to cause them or to direct them. Even when reasoning controls our actions, it might not control the affects. I may believe on rational grounds that I should not hit a person a lot bigger than I am, but I may well stay angry and resentfully plot another form of revenge, now the more elaborate because my anger is mixed with shame at my weakness.
9. Once we establish a general link between sensation and imagination at the core of affectivity, we can then distinguish two basic kinds of imaginary projection, and hence between two basic structures of affect, which I will call feelings and emotions. Each mode of imagining in turn involves a different approach to agency, differences that prove central in making the historical claims I will propose. With emotions the imagination is synthetic. It projects causes, attaches itself to objects, and projects courses of action or structures of desire in relation to those objects. That is why emotions tend to take place in terms of plots and to be correlated with the work of cognitive inquiry. When I am angry with someone, I imagine performing an action in relation to the person. More important, this practical orientation positions me toward two kinds of possible knowings. I have the potential of understanding something about myself because of how I plot the anger, and I am likely to recognize certain features of the person that I might not were I not invested in what might fuel or diminish the anger. (But my investment can also lead me to distort the importance of those traits I do see because emotions want to be fed as much as they want to find resolution.)
10. Feelings can occur as aspects of emotions. But their fundamental structure is quite different. With feelings, the imagination is participatory, not synthetic. Feelings are much more a matter of the moment than are emotions. Rather than seek their cause we simply attend to the qualities of appearance that they make possible. Consequently feelings appear usually as if they simply were extensions of the sensation. They are not parts of plots but of processes set in motion by the energies that metaphors bring into relation with the sensation. Even the simplest feelings, like hunger, are projections into sensation. Feelings come closer to the aesthetic when sensation tilts toward some kind of fascination and partial identification for which no plot seems plausible. Think of kinetic art, where simple magnetic charges affecting filament-like tentacles seem inseparable from minimal but fundamental desire. Or we might note the transition between watching the bird I referred to earlier and recognizing with Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper" how the bird's activities take on anthropomorphic qualities.
11. These two directions of the imagination also enable us to make useful distinctions between moods and passions, the other two basic types of affect. Moods are not quite feelings but they establish conditions in which feeling tone becomes a pervasive force. Here feelings are no longer attached to objects. Instead they seem continuous with some overall state of the subject. But the continuity is insistently not one for which we can provide a narrative, perhaps because moods seem pervasive and so have no clear beginning and ending, only extension and duration. Passions on the other hand are something close to

super-emotions. They are affective states circulating around plots within which the status of the I is put substantially at stake. Love is a passion because it defines who I am or who I want to be. Similarly civic emotions like pride and consideration are usually passions, while emotions exhausted in particular situations clearly are not passions. Momentary anger for example can be distinguished from the passion of abiding hatred; lust from love.

12. Making these distinctions has its ultimate payoff in showing us how different emphases among the affects emphasize substantially different orientations toward subjective agency, and hence toward how values get constructed and pursued. And it is the differences in agency that will underlie the historical tale I want to tell about poetry. On the most general level we can say that emotions and passions invite Lacanian analysis, since their objects are constructed for the imagination, and the stakes involved shape what kinds of identities we can postulate and pursue. Moreover this mode of imagining cannot be easily reconciled with those who want to treat emotions as allied with reason. Emotions do establish salience and do help us make perceptions relevant to our actions and plans. But they do so always with an urgency and sense of significance bringing to bear representations that are not quite subject to reason, at least not without destroying the very affective charge that reason seeks as its supplement. Feelings and moods on the other hand tend not to rely on projections about ourselves as having specific identities. They stress dependencies on what we respond to, and they provide investments that bypass epistemic culture's usual ways of establishing meaning and importance. If emotions invite Lacanian analysis, feelings invite Levinasian ones in which we are aware that we are not the source of consciousness but are in a response mode, open to an otherness that exercises influence upon us.
13. We can build upon these general differences to isolate three particular arenas in which these contrasts play themselves out by creating a complex variety of psychological orientations—all of which become resources for poetic experiments. For example we have to keep in mind the relevance of classical oppositions between the passive and the active dimensions of affective life. At one pole we treat the expressive action as fundamentally symptomatic, at best a passive response to forces from beyond the self and at worst a drastic displacement or evasion of what observers might conclude that one is actually feeling. At the other pole expression becomes a triumphant articulation, getting clear on something that has been bothering a person or breaking through so that the agent manages to participate actively in complex sets of emotions. Affects can dominate agency and affects can enhance an agent's sense of power and commitment. Second, we can cast the active-passive distinction in spatial terms to characterize how borders of the subject are constantly being negotiated. Some affects create states of intense concentration: the self becomes the only active force in an indifferent environment. Other affects distribute energies and investments so that personality seems almost irrelevant: what matters is how one experiences appearances taking on fresh vitality leading one to dwell imaginatively beyond the self. Finally, it is often crucial to distinguish different kinds of borders or passages among agents. Some affects are presented as entirely specific to the subject: in experiencing this way I recognize only my own distinctive commitments. But many others have a very different structure. Think of religious emotions, or the feelings we experience in crowds or audiences, or those around natural scenes that move us because what they offer seems available for everyone. Part of the power of art is its capacity to explore the degree to which we can participate intensely in emotions not by sympathizing with characters but by our direct awareness of the site of emotion as itself public, and perhaps more stable and enduring than any of the agents who experience it in given moments. Making that sense of transpersonal affective site a basic source for artistic experiment seems to me one of the great accomplishments of modernist abstraction, although the emphasis has always existed in music.
14. I present this abstract picture as a tentative grammar for appreciating the range for experiment that our affective lives afford artists and writers. Once we know where to look, we can shift much of the energy we have been putting into interpretation, the postulating of meaning and purpose for actions, into the exploration of who texts ask us to become if we participate in their particular ways of fusing sensation

and imagination. Now then I can turn to exploring how that participation might take place in three quite distinct poems, the sequence of which I hope has some metaphorical force as literary history.

## II.

15. Arnold's "Isolation. To Marguerite" is to me the quintessential Victorian poem, intensely moving in its self-evasions and depressingly challenging to Modernists eager to escape the processes of self-absorption it embodies:

We were apart; yet, day by day  
I bade my heart more constant be.  
I bade it keep the world away,  
And grow a home for only thee;  
Nor fear'd but thy love likewise grew,  
Like mine, each day, more tried, more true.

The fault was grave! I might have known,  
What far too soon, alas! I learn'd—  
The heart can bind itself alone,  
And faith may oft be unreturn'd.  
Self-sway'd our feelings ebb and swell—  
Thou lov'st no more—Farewell! Farewell!

Farewell!— and thou, thou lonely heart,  
Which never yet without remorse  
Even for a moment didst depart  
From thy remote and spheréd course  
To haunt the place where passions reign—  
Back to thy solitude again!

Back! with the conscious thrill of shame  
Which Luna felt, that summer night,  
Flash through her pure immortal frame,  
When she forsook the starry height  
To hang over Endymion's sleep  
Upon the pine-grown Latmian steep.

Yet she, chaste queen, had never proved  
How vain a thing is mortal love,  
Wandering in Heaven, far removed.  
But thou hast long had place to prove  
This truth—to prove, and make thine own:  
"Thou hast been, shall be, art, alone."

Or, if not quite alone, yet they  
Which touch thee are unmating things—  
Ocean and clouds and night and day;

Lorn autumns and triumphant springs;  
And life, and others' joy and pain,  
And love, if love, of happier men.

Of happier men—for they, at least,  
Have dream'd two human hearts might blend  
In one, and were through faith released  
From isolation without end  
Prolong'd; nor knew, although not less  
Alone than thou, their loneliness.

16. We cannot summarize this emotion by any one label—if we could, there would be no point in writing the poem. Self-pity is probably the best general description, but we have to see the self-pity as also purposive, as an attempt to come to terms with the pain of being rejected as a lover. From my theoretical position then this poem invites us to participate self-reflexively in a process of negotiating the pain of rejection by the seductive ennobling promised by self-pity. Expressing such elaborate symptomatic self-absorption is no easy task. Yet Arnold accomplishes it magnificently, in the process establishing a paradigm for how the Victorian age used a theater of nobility as its means of managing the pains of the failures of nobility inseparable from that dream. But self-reflection is a dangerous instrument. Arnold may be Eliot's Hamlet, unable quite to get a grip on an emotion he is doomed to keep repeating precisely because his sense of self-worth depends on achieving closure. So an analysis of the affects in this poem helps us appreciate from the inside how a Victorian ego tries to build up its sense of identity through affect, and how in the process it reveals serious problems with the imaginary projections of agency inherent in that process. This analysis also shows us why Modernism had to pursue very different affective priorities, priorities that in turn require contemporary recastings of that modernist heritage.
17. In my view Arnold's is a great poem because it does not hide the raw pain and desperation underlying the text's effort to achieve resignation in self-pity. Even the basic structuring devices seem shaped by that pain. The poem opens with a remembered "we" instantly displaced into a needy "I" who has to serve as his own interlocutor. The poem is the mind's dialogue with itself trying to convince itself that this is nature's law for man. There are also two quite different past tenses, one caught up in the life now only remembered, and one, entering in the second stanza, that presents the speaker haunted by subjunctive possibilities that he has to fight off. Confronting those pasts is a bleak present threatening to swallow the future within it: "Thou hast been, shall be, art, alone." Being true to himself is inseparable from utter loneliness.
18. Yet Arnold's poem cannot stop with that absolute condemnation. Why? One reason is structural. The poem's first three stanzas move from the initial memory of a relationship to the pure acceptance of solitude, now having learned not to "haunt the place where passions reign." The last three stanzas go in the opposite direction, as if Arnold could not be content with the personal resolution without also universalizing the significance of his emotional state. Where stanza three ends by encountering the apparent truth of his personal plight, stanza five ends with an abstract generalization about that solitude. And even then the poem remains restless. It may have arrived at the truth but it has not yet contextualized that truth in a way that the ego can accommodate. So Arnold adds two compensatory complications. He can reach some connection with the unmating things that accompany his loneliness. And, more important, he can position himself by an elaborate contrast with those who though unmating still dream of two hearts blending into one. His dazzling play on the boundaries of what can and cannot be shared in loneliness makes his disappointment seem to him ultimately ennobling. After all *he* learns from his suffering. In fact he not only learns abstract truths, he also masters a new position for himself in relation to nature. He in effect learns to occupy its core, the one truly disillusioned person willing to



accept fully the loneliness to which we are all condemned.

19. My students find this final self-congratulatory move appalling. But, older and lonelier, I want to keep sympathy for Arnold while recognizing just how deeply self-deluding this bid for an ennobling lucidity is. In effect we have now to read the poem backwards, recognizing how much he works to secure a self-image and tracing the moves that in seeming to make this possible also make it almost reprehensible. We have to appreciate how a sense of pathos seems to haunt this particular self-expressive process. So rather than see the situation entirely through the speaker's interpretations we will shift to how the speaker goes about constructing the self that for him seems capable of providing a satisfying resolution to his pain. For that we should turn to those moments when the expressive activity tries too hard or falters—quintessentially in the poem's repetitions and in the central fourth stanza which I passed over in discussing the structure.
20. Why the repetitions? The first one is pretty easy to handle. Our speaker wants simply to say "farewell" to love, but he cannot because something important would not be resolved by that gesture. The obvious candidate for non-resolution is the state of his ego. The "might have known" is not a sufficient ego position from which to walk away. So he has to keep reworking the situation until it seems that it was not she who chose to leave so much as it was he who was helped to realize that he had given into illusion. She tested and brought to the fore his ability to live with a full grasp of loneliness as an absolute condition. So "farewell" opens a condition of dialogue with himself and enables him to relegate to a mistake his leaving his solitude for the life of passion. From this new perspective her act of breaking their bond becomes almost irrelevant. The important romance is with himself.
21. But there is not yet a self sufficient for him to cathect to in the way that he had cathected to her. To get to that lovable self he needs another, this time quite revealing repetition generating the fourth stanza. Here he moves beyond recognition to fantasy, so that he participates in the romance imagination at the core of passion, but only insofar as he becomes the focus for those romance energies. To accomplish this he recasts his shame at being rejected into shame at having given way to this very way of imagining in romance terms. Yet we also realize that the shame he postulates is not all the shame that he feels. For his mistake was less in yielding to passion than in putting himself in a situation where he could be rejected, where his own strange sense that one can treat the heart as duty bound might not be sufficient grounds for securing another's passion.
22. I cannot tell whether Arnold intended this level of exposure for his speaker. I suspect he did not. But his third repetition offers perhaps the most brilliant and most touching moment in this occluded drama. For at the end of the fifth stanza the speaker reaches his ultimate nadir—the realization of loneliness in past, present, and future. No wonder that this repetition seems somewhat different. Rather than simply echoing the previous expression this one seeks a slight escape: some companionship is possible. For this speaker, however, even that glimpse of weakness seems vulnerability, so we get a fourth repetition which uses the figure of happier men as his contrast to his own freedom from illusion. Partial concession makes possible absolute repudiation. And here absolute repudiation turns out to be both true for the speaker and false as an analysis of his situation. At his most intense acceptance of loneliness, the speaker is in fact desperately crying out for some kind of pity, or at least some recognition of a nobility that depends on his pain over these flimsy and needy contrasts. The poem's expressive intensity enables the speaker to assert an independence entirely belied by the rhetorical manipulations showing how badly he needs not only the posture but someone to convince of the posture. The I produced by passion seems an I desperately seeking a reflection, while in the process undermining the possibility of getting mirrored back what it wants to have seen.
23. History enters our story when we realize that our own readings quite likely echo those for whom struggle against Victorian poetry was necessary for survival. As readers become familiar with the poem

they have to experience the speaker's pathos along with his power. They are allowed the gestures of nobility only with an accompanying consciousness of all of the dependencies and pains such gestures must try to ignore. From this perspective then it is not surprising that Arnold's speaker becomes Eliot's Prufrock, forced to confront the displacing force of his own need for passions which might produce desired imaginary identities. Nor should it be surprising that one of Eliot's basic theoretical concerns was to make sharp distinctions between emotions and feelings, the former dependent on self-staging plots while the latter afford affects more closely woven into the rendering of sensations. In that concreteness one can hope for intensities and attachments much less bound to the illusory project of constructing individual egos.

24. For heuristic purposes, the best quick way to indicate what this cultural shift involves is to turn to the lyrics of William Carlos Williams. For much of the power of these poems consists in their knowing how to resist becoming vehicles of emotion, and hence of plots involving imaginary identifications.<sup>[2]</sup> In Williams readers have to learn to accept what the moment gives, and to have the discipline to engage the moment without attempting to build upon it. Correspondingly, Williams shows how and why modernist constructivism tries to keep the focus on how the art composes the event rather than on how selves interpret and transform affect into "meanings" and roles. The idealized imaginary individual self has to give way to the floating modes of consciousness that can be composed by an impersonal constructivist intelligence.

### III.

25. I will concentrate on two short poems, one stressing how the composition of feeling thrives in its refusal of emotional build-up and the other articulating Williams's very unArnoldian rendering of personal identity within the lyric. "The Young Housewife" opens with the speaker alone in his car passing a housewife who "moves about in negligee behind/ the wooden walls of her husband's house." The poem ends:

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in  
stray ends of hair, and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling. (Williams 57)

On the most general level the poem's energies are gathered in a contrast between what leads him to compare the wife to a fallen leaf and the sound of dried leaves marking his departure and somehow contributing to his smile. But I don't think we are intended to dwell much on this general level. The poem's energies are focused on the possibility of establishing concrete affective relations that depend on not letting the scene become metaphoric. Instead we have to let the juxtaposition of details do all of the work, without our irritable reaching for dramatic or thematic models.

26. Mention of "her husband's house" somewhat melodramatically sets the stage. In the first stanza everything is arranged, almost ceremonious. The second stanza then shifts to quite particular feelings

gathering around the ways that her body contrasts with that order. Each detail complicates the picture. Her shyness defines an attitude; her uncorseted fleshiness indicates a simple voluptuousness; and her stray ends of hair mark a minimal rebelliousness or at least freedom to be something other than her husband's possession. Yet her freedom is severely limited and not internalized at all, the freedom one might say of a fallen leaf, attractive in its pure contingency and marginality.

27. It is crucial in developing this picture not to let the details add up into some kind of traditional snap photograph rendered in words. The details can be made to cohere. But we honor them best by keeping a distance between them so that all seem stray hair momentarily taking a particular pattern. Each detail then peeks out at us like an aspect of the woman's spirit, unpossessed but also undirected and unable to reach out to passers-by or to return whatever desire the watching generates. And the watcher knows that the desire cannot be returned. Accepting that is part of the texture of feeling preparing for the speaker's final return to his own version of contingent and frustrated freedom. We have to ask why the speaker smiles as he goes away. But we also have to be satisfied with an explanation as partial as the speaker's knowledge of the woman he watches.
28. In some respects the smile is ironic, or at least ruefully accepting. Whatever elicits the metaphor of a fallen leaf turns out to be reduced to the actual dead leaves filling the street. Contingency reigns. But the smile also has a self-reflective dimension. The speaker finds satisfaction I think in recognizing the pure momentariness of his vision. His glimpse is not unlike her uncorseted presence, a slight escape from being possessed. Yet one can trust that freedom, just as one trusts the smile, so long as nothing more is asked of it. Any effort to base meaning on the scene or to expand the self's role would destroy this minimal freedom and reimpose the order in which husbands own houses and others comply with the rules of ownership. Any effort to make an emotion of this feeling would destroy what freedom is possible and put in its place a problematic self having to play out a doomed Arnoldian project of self-construction.
29. Williams's "Danse Russe" offers a more pronounced version of this effort to redistribute affective energies so that self is much less burdened than Arnold's by the need to rely on elaborate imaginative constructions. The speaker hypothesizes dancing naked in front of a mirror while everyone else in the household sleeps, singing to himself: "I am lonely, lonely/ I was born to be lonely/ I am best so!" "Danse Russe" ends:

If I admire my arms, my face,  
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks  
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not  
the happy genius of my household? (Williams 87)

30. I will confine myself to two observations about this marvelously intricate poem. One involves how the poem empties out the form of traditional emotions, the other how it focuses energy instead on something like the immediacy of feelings won by holding off the demands of the imaginary ego. Our speaker is clearly a solipsist, not unlike Eliot's Prufrock. Yet he has found an intriguing way of living with that solipsism. When he turns to himself in the conventional lyric space of self-possession, the only self he cares about is the one that manages not to be beholden to some examining eye or possessing spouse. Williams stresses the "not" because he is more interested in freedom or unsponsoredness than he is in attributing any clear judgment or even identity to his activity. This morning ritual is in the service of anti-identity, of being able to play out a momentary self precisely because he is beholden to no judges. And, as Gertrude Stein might say, perhaps sheer commitment to one's impulse without fear of judgment is precisely what it means to be a genius. But it cannot suffice

to base genius on negativity.

31. Hence the importance of my second observation. Williams's lineation is called upon to play a fundamental role in the poem. It has to provide affective intensity for a series of gestures that have little significant symbolic or imaginary force. These acts, *qua* acts, will not sustain a rhetoric of genius or even of lyric significance. But this lineation holds them over against pure banality just enough to let them emerge as capable of bearing attention and hence of becoming fascinating in their own right. What merely passes has the capacities to behave as if it composed a picture, to invite dwelling on different rhythms of attention, and to give the body a passing delight in its own ordinariness. Making all of that possible, without a plot or deep psychology or promise of consequence, may be just what genius has to do in our secular century and in the speaker's otherwise orderly domestic life.
32. Contemporary American radical poetics has obviously learned a good deal from Williams about resisting the culture's primary modes of symbolic and imaginary identification. Yet the various orientations within this poetic also have to establish substantial differences from his characteristic lyric gestures. From those perspectives Williams is far too scenic. The sensations basic to his poems are organized by a dramatic sense of the world, with insufficient attention paid to the affects organized within the activity of writing. We are asked to identify with phenomenological stances by embodied characters rather than with the authorial activity, even though the constructive force of that activity is quite pronounced. We feel the effects of lineation, but as an intensifying of the scene rather than as a presentation of authorial engagement. Correspondingly, radical poetics is not quite satisfied with how authorship is represented in Williams. He turns out to be at least as impersonal as the poet Eliot fantasized, with the author somewhat aloof from the perspectival energies organized within the work. No wonder that Williams projects the poet as composer-antagonist, standing out as a vertical force in a horizontal landscape. A new poetry would have to explore authorial subject positions more committed to challenging boundaries between subject and object as well as between subjects. The poet could not rest in the safety of the composer position but would have to risk the range of sensual attachments available for the medium of writing. In taking those risks it might be possible to stage writing as an activity with exemplary social force because it can envision a version of affect capable of organizing shareable resistance to dominant cultural habits for orienting affective engagement.

#### IV.

33. I cannot here survey various styles within the poetic position I am characterizing in such general terms. Instead I am going to focus on one particular example of work that foregrounds its own self-conscious responsiveness to the concerns about affect and authorship that I have been summarizing. On the topic of affects elicited by self-consciousness about writing there is no contemporary work more suggestive than *Sight*, a collaboration between Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. For the collaboration itself takes on all sorts of exemplary qualities. Most collaborations try to fuse authorial energies, and so in effect pursue a synthetic version of the Arnoldian ego. But by taking turns responding to one another's brief units of two or three paragraphs based on some aspect of sight, Hejinian and Scalapino take turns insisting on the pressure of differences that arise as each disposition expresses itself and as each contribution reorganizes the imaginative field the writing has to enter.
34. All the major LANGUAGE writers share this concern for foregrounding the activity of writing over the illusionary worlds it manages to project. Writing seems the thing in itself behind the appearances being reflected on the surface of our cave. But substantial differences emerge when we examine how this focus on writerly presence can fold affect into sensation and give the compositional energies exemplary

social force. Poets like Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, for example, take what we might call a fundamentally ironic attitude toward all expressivist ideals. They do not dismiss affect, but they also are very careful not to let ideals of intensity or depth seduce them into postures that lose sight of the irreducible writtenness, literal or figurative, of all our affective identifications. So they emphasize writerly engagement with and against the modes of affect inscribed in the social registers of our language. Instead of the mind's dialogue with itself, these poets stage writing as dialogue with those registers of language. Lyric energy resides in the efforts of intelligence to hear its situatedness and to develop a little freedom for itself and the community it addresses, usually in the form of ironic play ranging from fierce opposition to reluctant complicity.

35. Hejinian and Scalapino have other ambitions. While they share Bernstein's and Perelman's suspicions about the rhetorics of sensibility, their work has been more phenomenological, more attentive to writing as a direct engagement with the dynamics of sensation and the projection of intimate desire. With *Sight* I think they have discovered a marvelous vehicle for foregrounding these differences, primarily because the dialogue form gives the writing a literal stage on which to play out through textual time complexities pervading the personal and transpersonal aspects of expressive activity. To frame these differences I will begin with an extended passage from the "Introduction" to Hejinian's collection of essays, *The Language of Inquiry*:

This is not to say that poetry is about transitions but that "aboutness" (in poetry, but, I would argue, also in life) is transitional, transitory; indeed poetry (and perhaps life) calls conventional notions of "aboutness" into question. . . . The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. Poetry, therefore, takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience. . . . It is at points of linkage . . . that one discovers the reality of *being in time, of taking one's chance, of becoming another*, all with the implicit understanding that *this is happening* (*The Language of Inquiry* 2-3)

36. There are here three concepts at the core of a poetics that Hejinian and Scalapino share, even though their particular projects usually pursue quite different emphases and tones. The most fundamental belief is this insistence on a pervasive critique of conventional ideas of aboutness—not only in relation to how fictions portray worlds but also to how persons engage one another. Traditionally aboutness is conceived in terms of representations. Language pictures events and agents provide accounts of themselves. But if one emphasizes writing as the locus of affective events, then the feelings become literal states. Writing does not comment about what one is feeling but makes articulate the actual event of feeling as it takes place, or makes a place for itself.
37. Radical as this claim sounds, I think all the great modernists would sympathize with it, if not subscribe to it. Hejinian pushes the resistance to aboutness in fresh directions when she adds a second claim insisting that the event becomes a vehicle for the experience of experience. Here all descriptive and dramatic and ironic notions of writing yield entirely to phenomenological ones. Writing does not so much present a world as present the sensation of sensation or the experience of experience. This shift substantially alters what we can say about affect in poetry. For where Williams still locates affect in the rendering of a scene, and where Bernstein and Perelman tend to locate affect in various kinds of resistance to the public textures of language, Hejinian projects affect as itself the most fundamental of phenomenological states. Indeed one cannot imitate or describe the affects basic to lyric because the affects are inseparable from the qualities of self-consciousness one brings to the events taking place within the writing.
38. Finally, Hejinian suggests that this particular kind of affect has a distinctive social and ethical force

because as event, as happening, the writing so involves the self that what appears is to some degree or another different even from the intentions that got one going in the first place. The logic of event is inseparable from the logic that bases the possibility of ethical thinking on an irreducible responsiveness to the otherness of the other. For then we have no basis for imposing our own preconceptions. We are left only with the options of feeling our own emptiness or attempting to attune ourselves to the very processes by which that otherness emerges and takes on its own directions.

39. *Sight* seems to me a superb realization of all these possibilities because the affective texture is entirely woven into the structure of call and response. There are no imaginary selves invoked to explain emotions, since the affects only emerge at the intersection of selves. And there are no affects that the text gestures toward while keeping its aloofness. Hejinian and Scalapino share Williams's concern to keep the affects from taking on some separate reality apart from the specific modalities of perception and expression. But now the reality they do compose is not in some world over against the author but in the author's own articulated processes of sensation. Here the author is always already audience. Writing becomes a constant process of recognizing the presence of others, of positioning oneself simultaneously in relation to another person and to various topics that arise, and of working constantly at the boundary between understanding and misunderstanding or sympathy and turning away toward the recesses of private obsession. Moreover because this process controls an entire volume, the poets manage also to capture the importance of repetition as a concrete index of those feelings which seem fundamental or unresolved or obsessive to the individuals.
40. However the individual is not asked to explain or interpret those feelings, nor is the interlocutor invited to play therapist. Feelings are not expressed to be interpreted so much as to be pursued so that one finds where they lead and tests what transitions their articulation makes possible. In fact the text suggests that we most fully respond to others not when we try to find words for what has been said but when we treat the other's expression as a provocation enabling us to change directions and try other routes of engagement. This enables us to avoid attributing the kinds of causes that turn feelings into emotions and dialogue into therapy. Stressing writing as the locus of affect keeps the entire affective field fluid so that we are constantly aware of how our own self-reflection depends on what the presence of the other opens up for us. Friendship becomes a structure based on a dance of difference and realignment.
41. I have space only for one example, so I can illustrate only a very limited range of the complex play of writerly effects and affects made present within the text as a whole. The relevant sequence begins when Hejinian takes up an anxiety about the aesthetic being a means of evading the fact of actual wrecks. She tries to convince herself that instead of being an evasion this focusing of consciousness serves as a means of evaluation. But the two poets do not easily rest with that formulation. Memories of pain and fears of death occupy the text, until Hejinian turns from their dream-laden abstraction to the following passage, the only one in this section rendered as verse:
- One is happy in one's susceptibility to chance, accident, hazard
  - So a descriptive sentence (being an account of what unfolds to sensibility) may be precarious and must be careful
  - As something's happening
  - The sentence says so with felicity — that's what one might get when writing in sight with happy exactitude
  - In the realm of death, too
  - Each thing, no matter how happy in its word, is ('only') floated
  - In the realm of life, too
  
  - A hummingbird in the morning flies right up to me at the

42. I am moved in part by the ways that this passage resists my efforts to cite it as somehow a privileged example for the text. Each gesture here toward lyric closure suddenly lapses into something like prose, with its resistant wordly flatness and its utter openness to contingency. Hejinian probably wants us to feel how fleeting and ineffective our capacity for aestheticizing is in relation to the world of fact and disaster. Yet at the same time she wants that concern with aestheticizing to pervade the entire reflection so that we find ourselves strangely empowered by this particular overall attitude toward our own contingency and impotence. We sense the sensation of impotence and fear made articulate, so that we cannot rest simply in those all too standard states, but we have to explore the complexity of feeling which the self-consciousness brings.
43. Hejinian's refusal of elaborate metaphor keeps her close to Williams. But that proximity serves primarily to set off basic differences between his subtle play of dramatic affect and her concern for the sensation of sensation as itself affectively charged. In one respect she is even more respectful than Williams of the limitations fact imposes on imagination. Not only is there no synthetic work of the interpretive imagination, there is not even the faith that particular feelings provide moments of attention satisfying the speaker's desires. All the details up to the emergence of the hummingbird lead consciousness back to death and to chance. But the mind's play upon, or, better, within, those sensations opens a quite different space for feeling. (Relations between inside and outside are fundamental motifs in the volume as a whole.) We are asked to experience strange investments in the very process of recognizing the problems of chance, accident, and hazard. For "happening," "hap," and "happiness" become here closely allied. This effect is not mere linguistic accident, but neither is it a Heideggerian attempt to put authority in etymology. Hejinian wants to earn the connection by making the feeling for the one merge with the feeling for the other, as if the very conditions generating fear were inseparable from what makes for happiness. More important, one cannot read the poem carefully without experiencing the sense of constant movement between the registers of "happening" and "happiness," as if recognizing this fluidity could provide a basis for pursuing the satisfaction the poem seeks. Then we can speak of happiness without any need to speculate about moving from facts to values. Satisfaction comes not in what we believe but in how we go about processing our sense of what those facts involve.
44. Once we stress the feeling for feelings in the passage, many of its details begin to resonate, again without in any way being metaphorically transfigured. Notice how the second sentence has to bring some kind of concreteness to the initially vague and intuitively silly opening statement. Why is one happy in such susceptibility? Wouldn't one be much happier if there were no such problems? The resulting "so" has a lot of work to do in establishing an answer. But our grasp of the difficulties can lead directly to an appreciation of how the specific choices here respond to the pressure. The contrast between "may" and "must" echoes and reverses the syntax at the end of Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry": "It must/ Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may/ Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing." For Hejinian the specific permissions do not matter. Everything rides on the imperative to be "careful."
45. In my view this imperative both describes and enacts the overall texture of feeling that the poem sets against its fears concerning contingencies of all sorts. "Careful" refers to all those fears. The poem bears the weight of cares that constantly resist aestheticization. Yet "careful" also refers self-reflexively to the poem's efforts to embody a mode of activity that can be responsive to such weight. And this doubling of meaning prepares a specific model of reflexive action soon to be further elaborated when the relation of "happening" to "happiness" becomes explicit. That doubling in turn is framed by a more complex invocation of the way feelings or framing can pervade the effort at self-description. For Hejinian relies on the Stevensian resources of the "as," in order to show just what care can bring about.

[3] At first this "as" seems consumed simply in its temporal function: when something significant is happening pay attention to it. But my paraphrase seems to miss the mark on many levels. One might also say that the care is necessary because something is happening. But this reading also keeps the care simply as something parallel to the happening. I think we also have to see care as continuous with the happening, perhaps an adverb modifying the very conditions that allow the happening entrance to consciousness. "As" here thickens the sense of two orders at work—one descriptive and one involving the ways that the mind finds itself an invested participant in the very possibilities of description.

46. It is not a large leap then to the next line, where self-reflection becomes explicit and the sentences become visible actors on the scene. But here Hejinian produces another surprise. She is not willing to let the self-reference flow smoothly into the practical situation or have its realization constitute a moment of triumph. The sentence's power to abstract itself from the particulars returns consciousness to all the fears circulating around death. It too shares with these multiple meanings a frightening weightlessness. The very doubling of meanings linking hap to happiness and fear to concern also keeps present something like an awareness of the unbearable lightness of being.
47. And so we get our hummingbird. On one level, or better on all levels, this is just a moment of happenstance. Certainly no guardian spirit sends the bird and its hovering is not a symbol of grace. Yet the bird does take on many of the properties of grace simply because its concreteness brings all the strands of the poem into momentary coexistence. And that coexistence is insistently concrete. The bird's most important action is simply its manifesting its power to stay in the air. This cannot provide a thematic resolution except for something clunky and moralistic. Yet the bird does bring back the motif of care and establishes a situation where we see that not only words float in the air. And not all things that stay in the air need remind us (only) of death. The hummingbird offers a parallel to the poem's own effort to keep reflective distance while hovering very close to worlds exhausted by description. So its hovering participates in the same basic forces as the double meanings that prevent key terms like "happening" from being reduced to the world of pure contingencies. In fact this hovering so perfectly matches what the mind has been doing that it allows author and readers to engage in self-reflexiveness without postulating any kind of empirical subject. The hovering itself constitutes a version of engagement that all subjects can take as their own, without the mediation of personal plots.
48. Satisfying as it is, this moment too must immediately pass, here into Scalapino's reply with its intense questioning of the effort to let the hummingbird serve any kind of resolving function:

□ — even if she wasn't [past] where at dawn on gorges burning  
the tar — migratory labor on roads — as it being at dawn 'only' there

□ 'accident' of birds [that are] being in space. — singing too

□ only floating in the realm of life too — are they at [their]  
present and past (at the same time) — and separately

□ which is the space [them]

□ — the figures the same as space, no other phenomena —  
'something's happening' is this too

□ these blossoms purple-white-fringed blooming in the time  
away from them — and before — at the same time as 'one' is happy (97-8)

The abstractness that had existed only in affect organized by the doubleness of meaning now takes on something like an existence of its own. In fact the feeling of space as an abstracted floating becomes so intense that it works its effects on the very form of the sentence. This mode of consciousness seems to need these brackets because all claims about existence and identification have to be bracketed. Just as one hummingbird must become many, one moment of satisfaction must be placed in a larger context



where even the realm of life begins to float. Even the hummingbird gets abstracted into the bird song that dissipates into the atmosphere.

49. However even this level of abstraction generates a countermovement. The text modulates back to an awareness that in this space too "something's happening." For one is prepared to return to appreciate how blossoming flowers themselves offer something like a parallel to verbal abstraction, anchoring its ways of organizing sensation while itself taking on force as an overall field of relations. But Hejinian is not content. Her response repudiates all this abstractness for this prosaic passage:

□ The hummingbird is busy with the mass of sensations, 'up' and 'down,' advancing and receding, among cascades of accidental purple morning glories hanging (where they weren't meant to be) from a tree. (98)

50. Perhaps it is better to say what seems repudiation is really an effort to right a balance and to use abstractness as a frame for bringing the aesthetic back into the world, ironically where it too is not meant to be but where it melds perfectly with strange contingencies in nature.
51. On the basis of this new concreteness, now charged with affect, Hejinian's passage returns to abstraction, but this time with all the sensations of floating beautifully anchored—in nature and in the mind's appreciation of the kinds of composure self-awareness can bring:

□ Still the air sustains the sensation of relevance — that this is 'meant to be' — but the hummingbird flying about in it seems to go to one side

□ Then the tree acts as an 'anchoring point' so the garden has 'top' and 'bottom'

□ The hummingbird makes a 'correction' — backs

□ "I" am still, so this is a still — in motion, blooming, and fringed, in continuation

□ While this vocabulary, which is still, for seeing — another at the same time — we pass (98)

Here anchoring is inseparable from adjusting to how fluid movement creates a range of stills, each allowing for correction and readjustment.

52. Wordsworth haunts this passage, since it seems desperate for a resolution of the mind's needs in natural process. But Hejinian uses this dependency to keep the mind foregrounded and to re-appropriate nature into mind. What matters is not so much the scene as the sense of activity it rewards and returns as an emblem for what can be involved in the sensation of sensation. Wordsworth's glorious "I am still" in "Tintern Abbey" is followed by a long list of predicates, all there establishing credentials for the self as poet and interpreter of nature. For Hejinian the "I" appears only momentarily, to be quickly subsumed into a care for how the self's stillness provides a concrete focus for the use of a vocabulary of photography. The "I" manages a point of rest that is compatible with constant change. Contingency need not provoke the same anxieties as it did in the earlier passages because it is inseparable from the formation of a vocabulary for seeing and appreciating what engages our care. The fact that this scene must pass proves inseparable from an eagerness to go beyond it to other possible scenes and, most important, to other configurations of consciousness in which both the "we" and the fact of passing seem entirely acceptable conditions. And yet nothing has changed at all except how the writing comes to a different sense of its own sensations and grounds its thinking about that sense in its awareness of its

own resources.

53. The steps are simple ones. But the world we come to inhabit is a long way from the one oppressing Arnold's efforts to give individual meanings to what has to pass.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Logic of Post-Modernist Poetics." Since I am invoking my own past I should also evoke my own future since the readings and theory in this paper, but not the relation to romanticism will be coming out in my "Reading for Affect in the Lyric: From Modern to Contemporary."

<sup>2</sup>Eliot has a more complex model of feeling linked to sensation and association rather than construction. I explore the issue of affect in Eliot in my "The Theory of Emotions in Eliot's Poetics," forthcoming in a collection on Eliot edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy Gish.

<sup>3</sup>In my *Painterly Abstraction in Modern Poetry*, pp. 342-55, I offer an elaborate discussion of three functions of the "as" in Stevens's late poetry. One is the "as" of equivalence that links phenomena as occupying the same temporal or spatial framework: this happens as that happens. A second "as" is modal, connecting various qualities to each other: "this is as kind as I get." And the final "as" is aspectual. This "as" allows us to make distinctions among kinds of identifications or degrees of involvement: "he speaks by sight and insight, as they are." Hejinian adds a fourth function, the sense of "as" as "because." And she relies on a much plainer, less theatrical sense of these forces than does Stevens.