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STEPPING OUTSIDE: THE SHIFTING SUBJECTIVITIES OF POST-
ROMANTIC POETRY

BY

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Thesis

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“Stepping Outside: The Shifting Subjectivities of Post-Romantic Poetry”

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Abstract:

This investigation traces the arc of fracturing and exteriorizing subjectivities in the post-Romantic poetics of Modernism and Postmodernism, ultimately considering the state of contemporary Postmodern subjectivity after the Language Poets.

Focusing primarily on T.S. Eliot, John Ashbery, and Christian Hawkey, the thesis argues that the I/Other split associated with Romantic poetry’s idealized Othering of nature performs a major shift with the interiorizing fragmentation of the speaker(s) in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The anxiety produced by this claustrophobic, internal splitting of voices reaches critical mass in the chorus of difficult-to-trace speakers of “The Waste Land,” causing a breach of interior containment which projects the internal polyphony of voices outward. John Ashbery continues this exteriorizing polyphony, as evidenced by his ruminations on the surfaces of representation and his dispersal of subjectivity through the use of pronouns. With one foot moving forward into the post-structuralist avant-garde and another nostalgically reaching for Romantic unity, Ashbery represents the messy progression of post-Romantic innovation. By the time of Christian Hawkey’s *Ventrakl*, the anxieties relating to the death of the contained, Romantic self have lessened with distance, but the legacy of Language poetics (which took the de-authoring, exteriorizing arc to its logical extreme) has left contemporary innovative poets with the challenge of reclaiming human subjectivity without ignoring complications raised by generations of problematizing experimenters. By “collaborating” with dead poets and creatively “translating” foreign language texts, writers like Hawkey are seeking a “middle voice” that retrieves the human element while challenging the myth of a unified self.

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Introduction

Using T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as the starting point and Christian Hawkey's recent *Ventrakl* as the terminus—with John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* placed neatly in between—we can note that Eliot, Ashbery, and Hawkey represent exactly one century of drastic changes. Hawkey's experimental "collaboration," *Ventrakl*, was published exactly thirty-five years after John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and exactly 100 years after Eliot began writing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The litany of marvels and horrors occurring between 1910 and 2010 hardly needs to be recounted here, but suffice it to say that the scales of warfare, technology, urbanization, and media communication have grown exponentially, and these profound cultural changes have had their effect on how we view ourselves and how these selves encounter others. Unsurprisingly, the speaking I of poetry reflects these changes and continues to adapt, as it has for centuries.

All subsequent Anglophone poetries have had to negotiate their relationships to the ubiquitous, latent echo of the Romantic poets. This negotiation gets exponentially trickier when mediated through later movements' reactions. This is to say that by the time one is reacting to a reaction to a reaction (ad seemingly infinitum), one's exact orientation within the mess of reactions is nigh impossible to reckon. For instance, Modernism, at least through my retrospective reduction and Eliot's example, gathers much of its definition from its simultaneous resistance-to and mimetic furthering-of Romanticism's aesthetic and existential tenets. Postmodernism, then, in its reaction to its precursors' own complicated reactions, adds yet another layer to the untidy bundle.

Romanticism hardly dropped, fully formed, to Earth without influence. It, too, was the product of endless visions and revisions. Joel Fineman has persuasively argued that Shakespeare's sonnets introduced a new complication into the subjective speaker of English lyric. Shakespeare's influence on his successors is, of course, still apparent today, and was certainly essential to the Romantic aesthetic, as illustrated by Keats' insistence on having Shakespeare's texts near him every time he wrote. But I have to pick a starting point, and the poetry at the time of the Industrial Revolution—with its responses to the modernizing innovations that have so radically influenced our sense of distances, interiority and exteriority, and subjectivities—seems like a fitting antecedent, a necessary anchor. Admittedly, any group definition is going to be at least somewhat artificial and simplistic; any notion of generational legacy/curse is going to reveal more of a sloppily interconnected continuum than a direct ancestral arc; and, of course, any supposed “tenets” of said dubiously defined groups are going to be consequently artificial and simplistic. Caveats noted, there does seem to be something essential to Romanticism that's hung on through the years.

Marjorie Perloff, in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, argues that the essential remainder from Romanticism can actually be divided into two twin legacies: one strand traceable back to Baudelaire, the other to Rimbaud. “Whereas Baudelaire and Mallarmé point the way to the ‘High Modernism’” of Yeats, Eliot, et al, “it is Rimbaud who strikes the first note of that ‘undecidability’” found in Stein, Pound, Williams, et al, “an undecidability that has become marked in the poetry of the last decade [the 1970s]” (4). For the sake of my focus, I'll simplify her bifurcated lineage to: 1) a Baudelarian strand connecting French Romanticism to Eliot's brand of Modernism, and 2) a Rimbaldian strand veering away from Eliot (through Modernists such as Stein) to Ashbery.

Responding to Rimbaud's famous claim, "Je est un autre," Perloff argues that the Rimbaudian strand more drastically departs from English Romanticism: "If the 'I' becomes 'another,' the Romantic dualism of subject and object is resolved; the self no longer contemplates nature but becomes part of its operational process" (60). While I think that this too readily pronounces Romantic dualism resolved (and that the distinction is both helpful in its contrast of Eliot and Ashbery and too absolute in separating them), I think that it can be extracted into a useful generalization that I'll diagram as such:

Romanticism → the self contemplates nature

Modernism → the self contemplates the self (or its fracturing selves)

Postmodernism → the self contemplates the self contemplating the self/selves

(One strand of) Contemporary Postmodernism → the self hybridizes with an Other to remove the veil of authority and create a new Outside self.

One central aspect defining each generation of poetry has been the character of the I. By following its (d)evolution, we can see vestiges and ancestral ghosts informing contemporary poetics. Entering conversations shaped and furthered by T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, and Jack Spicer (to name an impossibly non-comprehensive quartet), poets like Christian Hawkey and Elizabeth Robinson are taking their respective pliers to the wrought and rusted form of the I. By engaging in the construction of our cultural selves (and the language used to speak these selves), innovative poets are perpetuating and modeling a new resistance to both readymade modes of identification and the cultural, linguistic, and personal coercion enabled by such prefabricated senses of the I.

Picking up the trajectory of a general movement from the early modal subjectivity of Shakespeare's sonnets through the Industrial Revolution-resistant and Enlightenment-resistant model of a Romantic subject, I hope to trace its continuation to the idiosyncrasies of the speaking subject in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Focusing on three main poets, Eliot, Ashbery, and Hawkey, with a nod to contemporaries and/or counter-examples complementary in both time period and poetics, I hope to illustrate how the post-Romantic I has undergone a far-from-linear but demonstrative shift from the Inside to the Outside.

Romantic poets, in their resistance to both the Enlightenment's infatuation with Reason and the industrialized world's affront to nature, sought expression via the internal mediation of the imagination and the body's sensory absorption. Typically, this escape into the self comes in solitude, setting up a much-cited distance between self (poet) and Other (nature). Nature is important, but it serves as a channel for the contemplative mind—an external gift for the senses to translate inward into thought.

Eliot, vocally resistant to Romantic ideals, nevertheless propagated many of their aesthetic assumptions and tenets, resulting in an anxiety of the pluralizing voices of his speakers' inner monologues. Ashbery, though less explicitly anxious in response to his voices' pluralizations, furthered Eliot's fracturing of the I by willfully allowing the ubiquitous voices of his culture to speak his poems via a "surfacing" in line with Fredric Jameson's descriptions of Postmodernism. Christian Hawkey, perpetuating Ashbery's interrogation of the speaking self, uses de-authoring methodologies to disrupt the sense of "I," enacting a post-Romantic, post-Structuralist struggle against intrinsic or extrinsic organizing teleologies.

Each of these poets—simultaneously innovative and tethered to the traditions that preceded them—defies a neat, linear narrative of chronologic causality. In the movement from Eliot to Hawkey, however, it is possible to trace a dissolution of authority in the speaking I, a dissolution that seems to parallel an increasing skepticism in organizing systems (religious, economic, or otherwise) which conceive of human intelligence and intelligibility as a closed circle.

In arguing for a traceable continuum of exteriorizing subjectivities, I'm flirting with two possibilities I hope to resist: that a periodizing argument must necessarily reduce its examples to an absolute synecdoche; and that chronologic framing implies a one-way causality, displacing idiosyncrasies and contradictions in the messy movement of artistic (d)evolutions. I do not want my focus on Eliot, Ashbery, or Hawkey to seem to try and speak for—or ignore—contemporaries with drastically differing aesthetics and intentions. Readily admitting defeat in the face of a comprehensive representation of “Modernist Poetry,” “Postmodernist Poetry,” etc., I instead choose to focus on three poets with enough in common—in terms of methodology and engagement with subjectivity, specifically—to make their differences revealing.

1. Modernism: More than One I in Eliot

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” introduces T.S. Eliot’s engagement with the fracturing inner life of the Modern “hero.” The poem, first published in 1915, follows the conflicted, interior voices of its eponymous protagonist. Prufrock is prone to making grand rhetorical gestures and considering the weight of his potential powers (“Do I dare / Disturb the universe?”); at the same time, he is a deferential, balding little man, impotent and projecting images of limp passivity onto the world (the sky as “a patient etherized upon a table”).

This paradoxical hybrid of powerful private hero and powerless social cog is dynamic and reflects the social landscape, shaking off the Victorian era and building toward the first World War (Eliot began the poem in 1910). In Prufrock, we can observe the Modern Man—a peculiar specimen who is not handling Romanticism’s I-World Othering very healthily. The dissonance between the interior Prufrock’s delusional, if desperate, hubris and the oppressive demands of his external contemporary world causes real anxiety. The violent interior trauma—rending apart the Romantic, contained self—forces one to fracture, to become the You and I of a schizophrenic monologue.

In these splintered roles, one readies one’s self for the workaday performances (“to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”), putting on the masks of supporting roles (Prufrock insists that he’s not Hamlet; rather, some attending lord). Prufrock retains a lingering sense of a complete, Romantic hero with the assured agency of one who might fit the world into her/his aperture, to “squeeze the universe into a ball”; but the eyes of others leave him “pinned and wriggling on the wall.”

If we view the character of Prufrock as a catalyst for a more general anxiety between competing eras, the manifestation of anxiety as internally imprisoned subjectivities makes sense. While the juxtaposition of the interior to the exterior is not anathema to Romantic lyric, the cloistered concentration of Prufrock's frictive voices induces an effect with more irony, yet more immediacy, than his predecessors' contemplative musings. Eliot's use of subjectivity is also essential in revealing the anxiety specific to conflicting private/social performances. The initial address is in the rhetorical garb of a plea to the beloved, but, as the poem progresses, a beloved is never revealed, revealing, instead, only self-examining selves. If Prufrock were addressing an Other— be it a beloved, a distant friend, or idealized nature itself—then the speaker would have an outlet, a confidante. By responding to the external pressures via an inward address, Eliot's Prufrock is rejecting a reunion with the "beauteous forms" above Tintern Abbey (or the unguent salve of sweet memory itself)—denying an outward channel of rumination and, ultimately, comfort. The melancholia frequenting Romantic odes and meditations diffuses its catharsis and distancing through the Other. Though Wordsworth is also talking to himself in "Tintern Abbey," he routes the soliloquy through the calming beauty of nature. Though they begin in his head and end in his head, Wordsworth's ruminations, as they travel through the restorative energy of the Othered exterior, exorcise most neuroses and claustrophobic tensions. The release that might come from divesting one's solitary troubles onto an exterior—if only for awhile—is impossible for Prufrock. Wordsworth takes comfort in not only an exteriorized ideal of nature, but in the palliative assurance that the memories he and his sister share will endure—that memory itself turns time to his side. For Prufrock, Romantic escape f is

impossible, and the chambers of the sea, far from providing solace, become the scene of drowning.

“Prufrock” introduces a pluralization of the speaking self and carries the mounting tension caused by a swallowed chorus of internalized voices trying to get out. In “The Waste Land,” these issues burst out. The poem presents a more complex amalgamation of voices, settings, and literary and religious antecedents, forming a roiling montage of a poem. In “‘The Waste Land’: Ur-Text of Destruction,” Ruth Nevo describes the piece as “totally, radically nonintegrative and antidiscursive, its parts connected by neither causes, effects, parallelism, nor antithesis. It is a cinematographic *mélange* or montage of glimpses, gestures, images, echoes, voices, phrases, memories, fragments of speech, song, quotation, appearances, and disappearances” (98).

But the poem is not entirely uncentered. Resistant to neat narrative synopsis, it floats in and out of different scenes but maintains repeated thematic, imagistic, and historical continuities, many revolving around death, or at least lifelessness. Using “The Burial of the Dead,” the first of five sections, as an example, we can see themes of death and memory weave through sudden shifts in scene and voice. After an untranslated epigraph from Petronius’ *Satyricon*—in which the sibyl (who’d been granted immortality but not eternal youth) begs for death—the poem proper begins with an unidentified speaker lamenting the cruelty of April and the life-giving spring troubling the dead land. From here, readers quickly finds themselves swept along into memories of cafes and sled rides in and around Munich. The narrator, we learn, is named Marie (for now), and her memories are interrupted by the first strophe break, returning us to “the stony rubbish” of the waste land. Suddenly, untranslated Wagner swoops in and soon we’re back in memory—with dialogue now in quotation marks and without

reference—as the narrator confesses, “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence.” The poem jump-cuts again to “Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante,” with her pack of tarot cards. She presents the drowned Phoenician Sailor (and other cards that Eliot simply made up), warning, “Fear death by water.” One last strophe break and the reader is in The City (London’s financial district), referred to as “Unreal City.” A crowd crossing London Bridge is described with language lifted from *The Inferno* (“I had not thought death had undone so many”)—pairing the modern workers staring at their feet with the souls entering hell—when the speaker has a disturbing encounter with an acquaintance and the section ends with their anomalous amalgamation of dialogue, collected from many different literary sources (according to Eliot’s notes), the last being Baudelaire.

Described sequentially, “The Waste Land” may appear to be an impenetrable, arbitrary mess. However, as Perloff argues, “‘The Waste Land’ has, despite its temporal and spatial dislocations and its collage form, a perfectly coherent symbolic structure” (*Poetics*, 13). In subsequent sections the scene may abruptly shift from a high-class London parlor to a pub at closing time, or from the bank of the Thames to a sordid indoor tryst—barely consensual at best—between a typist and a “young carbuncular”; yet, the recurring classical references and their accompanying motifs permit a through-line of deeper narrative. Characters and situations are repeated. To wit:

- Philomel, a victim of rape by King Tiresius who was later turned into a nightingale, appears in a painting on the wall of a high-class woman in section two and quickly resonates with the coerced sex scene in the following section, the same scene in which the nightingale’s “jug jug” is sung;

- “Death by Water,” of which Madame Sosostris’s client is warned, is the name of the fourth section, in which a Phoenician sailor is drowned;
- the Wagner quote, from *Tristan und Isolde*, joins Germany, sailors, and doomed trysts with later sections;
- the grail legend, especially the character of The Fisher King, reappears, as does another meeting on the bridge, introduced by the repetition of “Unreal City”;
- the last section returns to a place where there is “no water but only rock” and where “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying,” bookending the poem’s sections in similar landscape and tone.

Removed from a sequential linearity, the parallel scenes and references form an amalgamatory cohesion that’s far from arbitrary. There is also the centering weight of geographic reference. The landmarks surrounding Eliot’s London office, The City around Lloyd’s, affix the roving references and scenes to a physically present place. Using the tangible foundation of his familiar neighborhood, Eliot begins to stack reference upon reference, story upon story. The effect is certainly one of initial defamiliarization, but “The Waste Land”—containing “a heap of broken images” in which the speaker seems to “connect / nothing with nothing,” carrying along “These fragments I have shored against my ruins”—persists in maintaining the memory of a whole, to which the broken ruins stand as monuments.

Just as “Prufrock” projects its protagonist’s limp social passivity onto the outside world by etherizing the sky (and opening the door to a transgression of the I/World split), “The Waste Land” also projects its pervasive theme of lifelessness and fragmentation outward. The external scenes of “The Waste Land,” though, display a more severe trauma, reflected in the more traumatic fragmentation of the subject.

Methodologically, there is conflicting tension in the role of the fractured voices: they push towards disunity in the heterogeneous sources; yet, counter-intuitively, the removal of easily identifiable speakers results in a somewhat unified poetic voice, revealed through the craft itself. The more impossible it is to attach “T.S. Eliot” to a consistent speaker, the easier it becomes to view the poem less as a vessel for one voice and more as a medium for the juggling of many voices by the deft hands of a single poet. The disembodiment that occurs in “Prufrock” gives way to an erasure of lines of source/voice demarcation, so that the enactment of metaphysical/corporeal tension is achieved through both content and form, through the use of pastiche or montage. With any given I linked to a cluster of literary, historical, and personal referents, the very idea of a self-contained I in an ever-shrinking world seems more and more absurd.

Attempting to parse out the apostrophes, Michael H. Levenson interrogates pronoun usage in “The Waste Land”:

Certainly we want to identify the "us" that winter kept warm with the "us" that summer surprised, and with the "we" who stop, go on, drink coffee and talk. That is how we expect pronouns to behave: same referents unless new antecedents. But if the pronouns suggest a stable identity for the speaker, much else has already become unstable. Landscape has given way to cityscape. General speculation (April as the "cruellest month") resolves into a particular memory: the day in the Hofgarten. And the stylistic pattern shifts. The series of participles disappears, replaced by a series of verbs in conjunction: "And went ... And drank ... And talked." The adjective-noun pattern is broken.

What can we conclude so far?—that a strain exists between the presumed identity of the poem's speaker and the instability of the speaker's world. If this is

the speech of one person, it has the range of many personalities and many voices.
(“A Genealogy of Modernism”)

Beyond the general pluralization of voices represented formally, there is one specific scene that resonates with the internal apostrophe of “Prufrock.” In “What the Thunder Said,” the final section of “The Waste Land” (after a strophe-long lamentation on the landscape’s lack of water), another jump-cut introduces a new set of unnamed characters, one addressing another:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

—But who is that on the other side of you?

Prufrock’s You and I is further complicated to an I/You/The Third. Whereas Prufrock was internally addressing himself, the speaker in “The Waste Land” is now addressing an unnamed Other and a peripheral third. By not defining the addressee, again, Eliot revisits the internalized tension of Prufrock’s impotent address, but this time the pressure has forced a breach. Rather than diluting itself through a cleansing exchange with nature, the internalized pressure of composite speakers infects the previously Othered arena of nature. In short, the fracturing self is now appearing in the external world, if only from the periphery.

The encroaching proximity of the formerly discrete and sacred realms of interior and Other (along with the very real fear of mechanized, embattled modernity) allows for

the Romantic splitting of Self and Other to reach its crisis. It allows a man to sing a love song to himself. And this serenade is far removed from Whitman's girded yawp, though it certainly contains multitudes. It is fractured, discordant, and self-interrogating. In her diary on May 25, 1940, Virginia Woolf described Eliot as "a very self centered, self torturing and self examining man," and it is this uneasy examination (of himself, of his art and, by extension, of us, the readers) which provides the anxiety that fuels his disunities—fragments of self with no unified whole to return to. In "T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide," David E. Chinitz sums it up: "Eliot was a compulsive self-fashioner and a deft one, but the selves that he fashioned were not merely facades concealing some shrouded essential self" (175). The impossibility of unearthing an essential self was a traumatic revelation. It's not an idea that dies easily. In a post-Romantic world shrinking its previous distances with the far reaches of technology and world war, the desire for a stable, essential, singular self was at great dissonance with its environs. This rift caused real anxiety.

Eliot's "I," "You," and "Third" are all double parts (triple parts, etc.) of the contained Romantic I he worked so hard to outpace. By projecting the unstable elements of its person outward into another addressable form, Eliot's speaker moves beyond the ruminative inner turmoils of the Wordsworthian speaker and enters a new model of neurotic, outwardly articulated, self-address. The outward articulation, in turn, helps represent the messy world in which it was written. In his poem "Seasons on Earth," Kenneth Koch, with a characteristic half-wink, claims that "The Waste Land," in its confusion and splintered mess, "gave the time's most accurate data."

If we accept the premise of Perloff's twofold path, then the fragmenting subjectivities of Eliot lack a certain "undecidability," by nature of his inclusion in the

Baudelaire camp. She argues, “In Rimbaud, the Romantic distinction between subject and object, a distinction that persists in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot, collapses” (59). I argue that Eliot’s innovative methodology contains its own undecidability, one resistant to Rimbaud’s legacy, but nevertheless covertly influencing his experimentation, especially in “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land.” Eliot casually dismissed much of Rimbaud’s legacy, from French skeptical anti-authoritarian theorists to Dada. Eliot, famously reverential of his own tradition, is less laudatory about others’. In “The Lesson on Baudelaire,” written at the same time he was finishing “The Waste Land,” he writes:

With regard to certain intellectual activities across the Channel, which at the moment appear to take the place of poetry in the life of Paris, some effort ought to be made to arrive at an intelligent point of view on this side. It is probable that this French performance is of value almost exclusively for the local audience; I do not here assert that it has any value at all, only that its pertinence, if it has any, is to a small public formidably well instructed in its own literary history, erudite and stuffed with tradition to the point of bursting. (144)

Later in the same piece, he chimes in on Dada and the role of morality in poetry, a preoccupation that will soon start to pull him away from poetry and toward religiously tinted cultural lecturing and drama. He opines:

Whatever value there may be in Dada depends upon the extent to which it is a moral criticism of French literature and French life. All first-rate poetry is occupied with morality: this is the lesson of Baudelaire. More than any poet of his time, Baudelaire was aware of what most mattered: the problem of good and evil. (144).

Eliot, it would seem, would approve of Perloff's designation. It's important, however, not to let Eliot's differences from the Rimbaudian strain of Perloff's schematic suggest that his poetry was a reversion to easier modes of subjectivity. Levenson argues that, given the use of perspective in "The Waste Land":

Any unity will be provisional; we may always expect new poetic elements, demanding new assimilation. Thus the voice of Tiresias, having provided a moment of authoritative consciousness at the centre of the poem, falls silent, letting events speak for themselves. And the voice in the last several lines, having become conscious of fragmentation, suddenly gives way to more fragments. The polyphony of *The Waste Land* allows for intermittent harmonies, but these harmonies are not sustained; the consistencies are not permanent. Eliot's method must be carefully distinguished from the methods of his modernist predecessors. If we attempt to make *The Waste Land* conform to Imagism or Impressionism, we miss its strategy and miss its accomplishment. Eliot wrenched his poetry from the self-sufficiency of the single image and the single narrating consciousness. The principle of order in *The Waste Land* depends on a plurality of consciousnesses, an ever-increasing series of points of view, which struggle towards an emergent unity and then continue to struggle past that unity.

(Genealogy)

On the other side of that unity blow the seeds of Postmodernism.

2. Postmodernism: Ashbery and the Reflection Once-Removed

—with a segue via Gertrude Stein—

At around the same time that Eliot was finishing up “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Gertrude Stein was sending *Tender Buttons* into the world. While Eliot was foregrounding Baudelaire’s moral standing, Gertrude Stein was indeed more comfortable taking Rimbaud’s lead in challenging genres and the subjectivities they contained without occupying herself explicitly with morality. With her radically playful senses of the speaking self, Stein famously wrote autobiographies from others’ perspectives and composed synaesthetic verbal portraits of others, most notably Pablo Picasso. The influence of Modernist painters on her writing and her life is well-documented, but the effect of the style’s rupturing of monolithic perspective—eschewing figurative realism by rendering multiple, irreconcilable perspectives simultaneously—is vital to her ventriloquism and our present discussion. By “completing” a portrait of Picasso and writing her autobiography through the proffered perspective of her life-partner, Stein made something of a career out of complicating the transmission from interior subject to external object. Whether engaging the medium of poetry, (auto)biography, novel, opera, or play, Stein relentlessly interrogated the assumptions (often patriarchal and involving “mastery”) behind each form. Constantly questioning without seeking an essence, she acted as something of an anti-Heidegger.

More good-humored and probably more dramatically deviant than Eliot’s attack on the single self, Stein’s writing often gets lumped in with a generalized Modernist response to the wars. Certainly, there are similarities in their contexts (American ex-

pats in Europe around the time of the wars) and innovation. Certainly many artistic groupings are applied retroactively and for the sake of neat narratives. Still, I'm interested in the fact that many articulate critics insist on pairing Eliot and Stein based on ideas of fracturing, but few correlate (despite their differences in tone and reference) their use of the role of artist/speaker to problematize their own pulpits. Both are commonly viewed as auteurs, strongly-voiced virtuosos of their respective poetic angles; yet, their adoption of split personalities—or wholly separate, untenably coexistent personalities—is arguably more subversive than the collage/montage/associative-amalgamation methodology of their poems. Too easily, they're relegated to the lauded roles of formal innovators and denied the dubious honor of publically challenging the viability of an entire pronoun.

Stein's similarity to Eliot may be less obvious—and, indeed, weaker—than her connection to John Ashbery (just as Ashbery's similarity to Eliot may be displaced by an allegiance to Stein's brand of Modernism), but this is where I hope to complicate Perloff's bifurcation. Just as Eliot's apostrophic soliloquy is an adaptation of a previous movement's staging of subjectivity, so too is John Ashbery's idiosyncratic reinvention of the poetic speaker. His speakers' self-negations may seem familiar to a reader of "Prufrock," and the difficulty of placing the source of each voice recalls "The Waste Land," but Ashbery takes Eliot's disjunctive methodology and runs with it to a new level of subjective defamiliarization. While the reader of "The Waste Land" may have to parse the geographic and literary references to construct the stacked world that Eliot is alluding to, a bit of leg work will typically solve the riddle. Ashbery's manifold voices, however—even when they have a discernible source to pursue—most often elude logical connection. Often preferring associative intuition over directive narration, Ashbery's

poems mimetically conjure the polyphonic din of the late twentieth century while scrutinizing the modes of representation and perception being practiced by its citizens.

Ashbery's poetic persona is most often described as that of a chameleon: his use of pronouns as interchangeable pieces in a vast Postmodern speaking apparatus (including centuries-old references and contemporary advertising detritus side-by-side) allows his speakers to report from all vantages in the messy web of late twentieth-century communication, "until no part / Remains that is surely you" ("Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror").

An established art critic before breaking through in poetry, Ashbery often revisits aesthetic issues, referencing his own creative impulses as well as his reservations. His most influential poem, the title poem from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, is a sustained investigation into seeing and representation. Though less disjunctive in voice than many other Ashbery poems, it stands as an invaluable example of his Postmodern ruminations. In the way that Wordsworth may contemplate a river or an abbey, Ashbery contemplates a sixteenth-century painting. They are both using the external referent as a channel for self-reflection; however, instead of representing a metonym for some essential aspect of nature—as a sun-gilded river valley might stand-in for the roiling movement of memory or the golden touch of friendship on the soul's swelling song, etc.—Ashbery's painting represents the surface, illusory aspects of representation.

Enmeshed, like so many of his New York School compatriots, in the avant-garde visual art scene, he (like Stein) brings a sense of what is possible in other media but lagging in the lyric. His syntax and tone are signatures, but so is his noticeable lack of a signature I through which to rein in the scattershot voices of his progressively more chaotic cultural environment. Less traumatized and more curious than Eliot in the

company of the fracturing self, Ashbery deputizes his fragments and sends them out into the world to report on what is being said, whether in academic lecture halls, art magazines, or advertising jingles.

In an interview with *New York Quarterly* in 1972, it is suggested to Ashbery that many of his poems relate the effect of “talking things out, of trying to say things in a lot of different ways,” to which he replies, “Yes, ‘the madness to explain’ that I mentioned in one poem. And not only the talking things out but the hopelessness of actually doing this.” This modification (that his poems are not only enacting a conversational attempt to “talk things out,” but that the inevitable impossibility of the very pursuit is essential to his poetics) helps to illuminate a central theme that runs through *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: representation, with all of its idealized aesthetic potential to communicate, contains in its mechanisms the very “spars” that make pure or “complete” communication impossible. The anxiety of attempting communication and expression fuels his many tangentially related conceits and meditations, ultimately working towards a qualified acceptance of limitation in opposition to silence or despair.

As Postmodern as his distrust of communication is, in the same *New York Quarterly* interview Ashbery casually admits, “All my stuff is romantic poetry.” Though his mouth may well be curling towards a smile as he says this, the cognizance of (and resultant self-consciousness about) his place in a literary tradition pushes Ashbery, as he’s done before, to look back at his forbearers. Considering Parmigianino’s self-portrait central to his poem, Ashbery immediately begins to qualify and interrogate the artfully distorted attempt at self-representation, describing it as “the reflection once removed” and seeing in it a restlessness he attributes to the artist’s confined soul. Part of the confinement comes from the codependency of art’s experiential promise. A painting, as

a form of visual communication, is incomplete as an isolated surface. It is only completed in its viewing. Similarly, a poem can only be completed in its reading or an apostrophe only completed in its reception. The dialogical ideal of shared experience (manifest and transmitted through art) leaves the soul “kept / In suspension, unable to advance much farther / Than your look.”

This reliance on the other begs for a shared connection, an objective point of contact through which true, essential, Romantic communication (as sought by Ashbery, despite its impossibility) is hunted. Whereas Prufrock’s detention in his own head causes anxiety and dread—as he’s still sublimely close to the dream of the full self—Ashbery’s desire for pure communication seems more wistful. Certainly, there is a sadness underlying lost dreams of communicating. If no longer an outright crisis, at the very least the notion of a restless, pitiful, captive soul bound in its artistic expression sets up a depressing proposition. Looking at the painting (and therefore, we extrapolate, broader notions of art, representation, self-mythologizing, etc.), Ashbery says, “It is life englobed.” With Ashbery’s characteristic interchangeability of pronouns, the antecedent of “it” here (which will be amplified to a crescendo of *its* later in the poem) is open enough to be provocative. The referent is further removed when the “globe,” ostensibly referring to the convex mirror used by Parmigianino, starts to take on less literal implications. “One would like to stick one’s hand / Out of the globe, but its dimension, / what carries it, will not allow it.” The dimension of the mirror, or the very characteristic that enables the “great art,” is the same characteristic that prohibits a connection outside of its borders.

This self-prohibiting feature of art is furthered with the image of light, specifically a “perverse light whose / imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its / conceit to light

up.” The notion of self-dooming pursuits, terrifying enough when limited to artistic expression, begins to take on a broader existential terror when applied beyond the form of art to the realm of general human experience and communication. Following this trajectory unchecked, we readers would be shot straight into nihilistic defeat, saying to ourselves, “Communication is simply not possible, representation is a hoax. Go home and put this book in the outhouse so it has some value. Good night.” But Ashbery, as is his wont, amends his trajectory.

Deciding that there is no soul after all, that the artist’s eyes show only surface, Ashbery then decides that “the surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist except what’s there,” uncannily voicing a Jamesonian description of a depthless, mirroring “intertextuality” that problematizes affect and emotional resonance. Richard Stamelman describes the poem as:

an ekphrastic re-presentation of Parmigianino’s self-portrait and at the same time a radical criticism of the illusions and deceptions inherent in forms of traditional representation that insist on the ideal, essential, and totalized nature of the copied images they portray. Whereas portraiture has consistently been regarded as a “meditation on likeness,” in Ashbery’s hands it becomes a meditation on difference. (608)

Resigning her/himself to the surfaced nature, the speaker admits this difference, the loss of the ideal, “Even though it seems likely that each of us / Knows what it is and is capable of / Communicating it to the other.” By relinquishing the dream of complete knowledge and pure communication, one can “Push forward ignoring the apparent / Naïveté of the attempt, not caring / that no one is listening.” One can’t be complete, can’t experience everything. And here, in the gallery of promised, impossible ideals,

Ashbery turns on Parmigianino, suggesting that we should take these gestures of mimicry, of “aping naturalness,” and use them as kindling.

Accepting, or at least grumpily acknowledging, the inevitability of self-mythology and the incomplete self, the Postmodern self can let go of the ideal of comprehensive life—that just the right sunset or walk in the garden can make one complete. “Each person / has one big theory to explain the universe / but it doesn’t tell the whole story.” Forgetting the whole story, we can focus on “the peculiar slant” of light (evoking Dickinson’s “Tell the truth...”). The Romantic idealist, “imagining / He had a say in the matter,” awakens in the perpetual and inescapable present, the “recurring wave of arrival,” where “one is always cresting into one’s present,” which is “the present we are always escaping from / And falling back into.”

The recurring wave of arrival that more or less keeps us perpetually in the present is in direct conversation with Fredric Jameson’s claim that a troubling characteristic of postmodernism is its lack of a sense of history. In *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, James Longenbach argues:

Just as Eliot wanted to see a dynamic interchange between tradition and the individual talent (‘the present only, keeps the past alive,’ said Eliot), Ashbery is interested in the past only inasmuch as it is continuously modified by innovation. Art emerges from this argument not as a singular achievement but as an ongoing process of discovery: to move forward, it will accept whatever it can use. (88)

As we travel through Ashbery’s lines—which, separated from narrative time, enact a recurring wave of arrival, sometimes enjambment by enjambment—we follow a mind moving forward into the Postmodern world of surfaces and no history, while simultaneously suffering the pull of the past. It is important, though, to distinguish

between 1) a reluctant departure from long-held beliefs about the nature of subjectivity and communication, and 2) someone giving up on the idea of inter-subjective communication at all. When he notices that the painted eye contains no soul, just the surface coating of paint, he acknowledges that we have no soul to hand another, only the medium of expression at hand. The illusion of the soul is rendered by a dot of light paint, approximating the sparkle in an eye. So too are our words coarse approximations of some intangible interior. The painting is a vehicle for something that cannot be viewed, cannot be touched, so we're left with the paint, with the words. Reminiscent of the move from figurative mimicry in painting to an abstraction that foregrounds the materiality of the medium, Ashbery's simultaneous use of pronouns and the resultant confusion of indeterminacy suggests both the impossibility of direct, meaningful Postmodern connection and his tenacious insistence on attempting connection nonetheless. Ashbery argues:

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

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror captures some of Ashbery's more contemplative poems, and foregrounds aspects of his Postmodernist thinking. More representative of Ashbery's meandering line than the title poem, and more directly in discourse with some of Eliot's work, is a poem like "Hop o' My Thumb":

The grand hotels, dancing girls
Urge forward under a veil of "lost illusion"
The deed to this day or some other day.

There is no day in the calendar
The dairy company sent out
That lets you possess it wildly like
The body of a dreaming woman in a dream:
All flop over at the top when seized,
The stem too slender, the top too loose and heavy,
Blushing with fine foliage of dreams.
The motor cars, tinsel hats,
Supper of cakes, the amorous children
Take the solitary downward path of dreams
And are not seen again.

What is it, Undine?
The notes now can scarcely be heard
In the hubbub of the flattening storm,
With the third wish unspoken.

I remember meeting you in a dark dream
Of April, you or some girl,
The necklace of wishes alive and breathing around your throat.
In the blindness of the dark whose
Brightness turned to sand salt-glazed in noon sun
We could not know each other or know which part
Belonged to the other, pelted in an electric storm of rain.
Only gradually the mounds that meant our bodies

That wore our selves concaved into view
But intermittently as through dark mist
Smear'd against fog. No worse time to have come,
Yet all was desiring though already desired and past,
The moment a monument to itself
No one would ever see or know was there.

That time faded too and the night
Softened to smooth spirals or foliage at night.
There were sleeping cabins near by, blind lanterns,
Nocturnal friendliness of the plate of milk left for the fairies
Who otherwise might be less well disposed:
Friendship of white sheets patched with milk.
And always an open darkness in which on enamel
Cries over and over again: Ariane! Ariane!
Was it for this you led your sisters back from sleep
And now he of the blue beard has outmaneuvered you?
But for the best perhaps: let
Those sisters slink into the sapphire
Hair that is mounting day.
There are still other made-up countries
Where we can hide forever,
Wasted with eternal desire and sadness,
Sucking the sherbets, crooning the tunes, naming the names.

Using the name of a French folktale (involving a resourceful little scamp who tricks an ogre into murdering its own children), “Hop o’ My Thumb” stands as an interesting successor and counterpoint to Eliot’s allusion-rich constructions. The title may lead a reader to approach the poem with certain expectations, none of which are likely to be met in the text. Enough thematic repetition enters to suggest unified movement (“Undine,” referencing a German fairytale; “Ariane,” the French variant of Ariadne, who led Theseus from the minotaur and traveled to Hades only to drown, alone; “the plate of milk left for the fairies”), but it’s hard to read it as a poem essentially “about” fairytales, or “about” anything. Mixed in with myth and folklore are motor cars and sherbets. Milk seems to reappear, as do dreams, but what do we make of this? Also stirred in are moments of casual uncertainty (“this day or some other day,” “you or some girl,” “we could not know each other or know which part / Belonged to the other”) and hints of the more philosophical tone of “Self-Portrait” (“The moment a monument to itself”). One could posit readings. The poem itself is perhaps representing a labyrinthine puzzle, one in which the reader is left calling out, “Ariane! Ariane!” There is a connection to the character, Hop o’ My Thumb, who left trails of string and bread crumbs to keep from getting lost. Perhaps the dreams referenced throughout are hints that the poem itself is a dream, or dreamlike. Perhaps the inability to know each other or know which part belonged to the other is an *ars poetica*? Any of these could be true, or partially true, but it seems impossible that any are comprehensively true. “The Waste Land” certainly requires a suspension of one’s urges to traditionally “make sense” of a poem, but it seems to invite a reader to make the connections, revealing a deeper underlying meaning. “Hop o’ My Thumb,” on the other hand, seems to invite a reader to give up on searching for the code to deeper underlying meanings. The syntax is neither

as experimental as Stein's nor as "poetic" as Eliot's, and the seemingly straightforward nature of his lines has a strange effect. Perloff argues that with Ashbery, as with Rimbaud, "the reader understands what is being said but not what is being talked about" (*Poetics*, 59).

As part of his grand plan to defamiliarize, Ashbery regularly introduces conventionally "unpoetic" objects onto the page to see how the framing of "poetry" might affect its reception. In *Radical Artifice*, Perloff compares this feature of Ashbery's work to the readymade art most associated with Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp—in presenting quotidian or "vulgar" objects (such as a snow shovel for "In advance of the broken arm" and, most notoriously, a urinal for "Fountain") to the consecrated art altar of the gallery—challenged not only how viewers regarded the space of the gallery (and thus the definition of art), but also how they regarded the mundane objects in their unconsecrated contexts. Focusing on Ashbery's "Lecture on the Weather," Perloff posits:

If the readymade is an 'ordinary' industrial object, the 'lecture on the weather' is a fabricated, simulated natural event. If the readymade turns a useful object (urinal, bicycle wheel, snow shovel, bottle rack) into an impersonal work of art, the 'lecture' on weather turns the simulated event into one that behaves like a real one, causing the audience to take shelter from the cruel elements. Finally, if the readymade was appropriate to its modernist moment, a witty critique of 'high art' pieties and of prejudices in the early twentieth century, works like *Lecture on the Weather* are nothing if not appropriate to our moment, calling into question as they do our preoccupation with the lecture format—not only university lecture, of course, but any 'address' A makes to B and C, whether on radio or TV, whether formal political address or the promotion of a new cosmetic product. (27)

By defamiliarizing the sense of what belongs in a poem, Ashbery expands the possibilities of the art-form and the possibilities for the speaking I beyond the breeching containment of Eliot's Prufrock or the underlying narrative connections between references in "The Waste Land." Perhaps his most identifiable move is the shifting use of pronouns, resulting in an indefinite sense of who is speaking, or how many. Perloff suggests, "There may be a number of characters in his poems; on the other hand, 'I,' 'we,' and 'you' may well refer to the poet himself" (*Poetics*, 12). Perloff goes on to suggest that this decision distances Ashbery from Eliot: "To use, as does Ashbery, shifting pronouns and false causal connectives is itself an implicit commentary on the nature of identity and causality. Here intertextual relationships become especially important: we read an Ashbery against an Eliot or an Auden" (34). Longenbach pushes back against an absolute distancing of the two poets, arguing:

Even if [Ashbery's] poems seem (to those who accept postmodernism's progressive narratives) more "advanced" than Eliot's—more open to demotic language, more accommodating to popular culture, more suspicious of the lyric's unified voice—the poems are nonetheless unthinkable without Eliot's example. (88)

Again, as useful as it is, I'm challenging Perloff's distancing here to suit my own purposes. Tracing the exteriorizing trend of subjectivities from Romanticism to the present day, Eliot breaks important new ground and Ashbery opens it further. Moving from "Prufrock" to "The Waste Land," Eliot splits the Romantic I into a You and I before expanding it to the peripheral ghosts of an exterior world. He also casts a much broader net for references and lets the references enter abruptly and leave without warning. Ashbery continues both of these complications. Eliot's I, You, and the Third becomes I,

You, Her, Him, and It. The disjunction of Eliot's sources is increased in Ashbery also. Sometimes line by line, the speaker, setting, and "plot" of the poem are mysteries. Refusing even nostalgia for the stable I, Ashbery challenges the reader to receive a poem in an unfamiliar way. As Longenbach suggests, "An increased self-consciousness about the rhetoric of authenticity should free us to explore a wider variety of rhetorical stances" (*Modern Poetry*, 100).

As Postmodernism privileges surfaces over essences and splintered distances over unified proximity, Ashbery's poetry is hoping to use his self-conscious skepticism about authenticity to approach new rhetorical stances without reverting to an inward-cycling solipsism. Dagmar Martha Zuefle argues:

Ashbery is left wanting to affirm the poet's constructs but aware of the fictionality of these constructs and the subsequent pitfalls of isolation and solipsism. He deals with this potential impasse by exploring the moment between creation and decreation (and between decreation and creation) [...] As systems are either coming into being or being destroyed, he ponders whether the poet's role is to participate actively in the creation/destruction or to remain passively in a state of receptivity, recording (however faultily) the acts of creating and destroying. (10-11)

Caught between the poles of active/passive, creation/destruction, earnestness/irony, Romantic/Postmodern, self/others, Ashbery often attempts to have his cake and eat it too by transcending the dichotomous paradoxes. Liminality, then, becomes essential to Ashbery's poetics.

In his chameleon mobility of identities and reference, Ashbery speaks to the difficulty of autonomous cognition in the polyphony of voices surrounding the late twentieth-century artist-citizen. But, incorrigible Postmodern Romantic that he is, the poetic wrangling of these disparate, slippery voices often dares Ashbery to elucidate, or at least point towards the possibility of, a greater whole. Lawrence Kramer argues:

Because they almost never identify their subjects, Ashbery's poems affiliate themselves with each other more readily than they do with reality. Read together, they appear to join seamlessly into a single, endlessly fertile meditation. Every utterance thereby becomes a momentary reflection—a synecdoche, a potential center—of an instated visionary whole. (337-338)

Reminiscent of Eliot's juggling hands in "The Waste Land," Ashbery's consistent use of an inconsistent speaker allows for an overarching connection that manages to maintain a recognizable poetic "voice" while conjuring and conducting distinct, detached "voices." Grace Schulman argues that, "confounded by surface impressions, [Ashbery] sought to achieve wholeness of self by isolating a fragment of sensory experience" ("To Create the Self"). Schulman also suggests that Ashbery's poetry is "based on genuine vision and on revelation through clouds of distress and exile," and that, after his meditations in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery's speaker looks around at the world and "sees its fragment made whole by the creative act." She references, too, Ashbery himself, who says in *Three Poems*:

Yet so blind are we to the true nature of reality at any given moment that this chaos—bathed, it is true, in the iridescent hues of the rainbow and clothed in an endless confusion of fair and variegated forms which did

their best to stifle any burgeoning notions of the formlessness of the whole...this chaos began to seem like the normal way of being.... (59)

While I think that Ashbery's polyphonic world, in enacting the chaos that seems like the normal way of being, relates more of the crisis of contemporary amalgamated consciousness than is implied in the snippets from Kramer and Schulman, I do agree that the crisis itself stems from the relationship between the fragment and the whole. In Ashbery's case, then, the liminal space he seeks is one that can move between the daily fragment and the surface noise towards some prolonged depth or unification of being, succumbing fully to neither.

Ultimately, beyond aesthetic concerns of craft and general engagement, Ashbery's underlying impulse seems to be an attempt at making multiple realms one, to condense the multitudes and fashion a channel through which to communicate with another person amid the ringing din of the divergent seas.

In a time of globalization—when voices, nations, and people are in ever-closer proximity and co-dependence—the idea of discrete, essential identities seem more and more mythological (or at least remarkable, worthy of a case study). These at-least-partially-mythologized identities are, in turn, often referenced for either political gain or commercial commodification. In such a world, transcending murky, imposed identities in order to locate and isolate one's authentic "self" seems an increasingly noble and unlikely proposition. In a (sort of) post-Romantic and (kind of) post-Modern poetic landscape, wherein religious rewards have been displaced by crises of orientation, those hoping to exert influence over their subjecthood have a hard road to hoe. This difficulty in negotiating prescribed binaries—the conventional and the transcendental; the chaotic and the quotidian; the I, You, and We—can be dismissed as obscurantist or opaque, but,

as Charles Altieri argues, “The point is not that language fails but that language succeeds by bringing us to a sense of its inherent limitations” (114).

3. Translation as Necromancy: Hawkey, Robinson, and the Between Voice

—with an introduction by Jack Spicer—

Just as Gertrude Stein makes for an interesting pairing for Eliot, with her drastically different style, so too is Jack Spicer a curious partner for Ashbery. Though Spicer died a decade before *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* would be published, he was only two years older than Ashbery. Determinedly loyal to his status as a Bay Area resident, Spicer is far away from Ashbery in terms of both geography and scene; yet, in Perloff's league, he would certainly choose Team Rimbaud (he even wrote "A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud"), and thus Team Ashbery. He is certainly innovative—playfully, fearlessly so—but his eccentric poetics contain strong classical echoes of the muse and the oracular force of inspired dictation.

Identifiably Romantic in its pursuit of possession by a greater artistic force, Spicer's dedication to dictation nevertheless demonstrates pronounced post-Romantic characteristics. In 1965, he gave the first of a series of lectures in Vancouver on what would have been Yeats' 100th birthday. He began by describing the old Irish medium's automatic writing as being "the first thing since Blake on the business of taking poetry as coming from the outside rather than from the inside." Yeats is exemplary of Spicer's idea that poetry is beyond the self, that "instead of the poet being a beautiful machine which manufactured the current itself, did everything for itself—almost a perpetual motion machine of emotion until the poet's heart broke or it was burned on the beach

like Shelley's—instead there was something from the Outside coming in" (*The House that Jack Built*, 5).

As an example of this phenomenon, Spicer references Cocteau's *Orphée*, wherein lyrical lines are delivered to a poet via the radio of a supernatural automobile. This conceit—of the transmitter, conduit, host poet—is central to Spicer's poetics. While his insistence, signaturely stubborn, that the poet's role as a conduit is more or less unqualified may seem willfully and simplistically absolute, he's quick to point out that our social and cultural "furniture"—our idiosyncrasies of language, our personal and collective memories, our world's current dramas—necessarily influence the form of our dictated poems. The Martians, after all, wouldn't find speaking through us in an alien tongue particularly useful when it came time for us to effectively receive the message. As Spicer puts it, "If you have a cleft palate and are trying to speak with the tongues of men and angels, you're going to still speak through a cleft palate. And the poem comes distorted through the things which are in you" (*House*, 7-8).

In a typically off-handed and provocative metaphor, Spicer illustrates the importance he sees in writing a poem without diverting attention to the connections that may be forming by claiming that "you have to kill your animal before you stuff it, and looking at it is the stuffing of it" (23).

The first book to employ his eccentric methods was *After Lorca*. Published in 1957, it is ostensibly introduced by Federico Garcia Lorca, who died in 1936. Spicer, via Lorca's prosthetic voice, explains the project:

It must be made clear at the start that these poems are not translations. In even the most literal of them Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which completely change the

mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it. More often he takes one of my poems and adjoins to half of it another half of his own, giving rather the effect of an unwilling centaur. (Modesty forbids me to speculate which end of the animal is mine.) Finally, there are an almost equal number of poems that I did not write at all (one supposes they must be his) executed in a somewhat fanciful imitation of my early style. The reader is given no indication which of the poems belongs to which category, and I have further complicated the problem (with malice aforethought I must admit) by sending Mr. Spicer several poems written after my death which he has also translated and included here. Even the most faithful student of my work will be hard put to decide what is and what is not Garcia Lorca as, indeed, he would if he were to look into my present resting place. The analogy is impolite, but I fear the impoliteness is deserved. (*After Lorca*, 107)

The book itself is made of two distinct sorts of poems: “translations” of Lorca poems dedicated to friends (including an inspired gesture—enacting the postmodern translator’s muddled “self”—wherein he dedicates one translation “for Jack Spicer”); and four epistolary poems addressed to Lorca himself.

The second letter, a typical amalgamation of confessional disclosure and sure-hearted poetics, begins:

Dear Lorca,

When I translate one of your poems and I come across words I do not understand, I always guess at their meanings. I am inevitably right. A really perfect poem (no one yet has written one) could be perfectly

translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary.

It is very difficult. We want to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion of the poem—and yet the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it, short-lived and tenacious as barnacles. And it is wrong to scrape them off and substitute others. A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body. Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it.

The letters' blending of ironic, unabashed formal cleverness and revealingly melancholic earnestness resonates with Ashbery's work and help point a way forward for poets, raised on Postmodernism, who hope to take both conceptual and emotional risks.

Predicting Hawkey, the third letter in *After Lorca* ends:

Even these letters. They *correspond* with something (I don't know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparently as that lemon corresponds to this piece of seaweed) and, in turn, some future poet will write something which *corresponds* to them. That is how we dead men write each to each other.

Spicer's collaboration with a dead man, playful as it may seem, is serious in its challenge to the assumptions of a stable I. Innovative lyrical poetry has allowed its writers to interrogate the I that we take for granted; to translate subjectivity beyond the stable I of traditional, authoritative expression or narration. This translation of the speaking subject is engaged even more nontraditionally by Christian Hawkey in

Ventrakl. Like Spicer, Hawkey utilizes the inherent complications of translation to enter a muddled netherspace between living poet and dead, “translated” poet.

Ventrakl, willfully embraces cross-cultural ignorance, appropriation, collaboration, and methodological experimentation in order to disrupt the inviolability of authorial ownership. In his introduction, Hawkey describes the project, published in 2010, as “a collaboration with the German poet Georg Trakl, who died in 1914” (6).

Picking up threads left by *After Lorca*, Hawkey uses source material left by Trakl to instigate an inventive attack on the idea of authorial ownership. According to Hawkey:

Our bodies, our heads, our skulls, the holes in our bodies and skulls are voice chambers, sound chambers, wherein our own voiced selves and the voiced selves of others constantly enter and exit, and are changed by our bodies upon entrance, exit. Consciousness, at least metonymically, is voiced, and the voice, as Mladen Dolar has suggested, is less a vehicle for “self-presence” than a void, a blank space at the site of intersection. (5)

To ensure that his new “collaborative” text was sufficiently defamiliarized—moved far enough away from the recognitions in both Trakl’s source text and his own idiosyncratic poetic voice—Hawkey implemented a series of restraints, removals, and chance operations. As he explains:

Sometimes, inspired by a procedure invented by the poet David Cameron, I typed into Microsoft Word a Trakl poem in German and used the spell check program to produce an initial draft. Other strategies involved typing the poem into an online translation engine and then translating the poem back and forth, line by line, between English and German; or shooting, with a 12 gauge, an open Trakl book from a distance of ten feet, then

translating, with a dictionary, a remaining page of perforated text. Still other poems were generated by working from a book of Trakl's poems which I had left outside to decompose over a full year in a glass jar filled with rainwater and leaves and mosquito larvae until its pages, over time, dissolved into words, pieces of words, word-stems, floating up and rearranging themselves on the surface of the jar. (8)

Hawkey argues, "To read a poem is to allow a text and its voiced accents (timbres, tonations) to unfold within one's reading voice, thereby forming a loop, a voice-over—a between voice" (6).

Examining one of his homophonic translations, we witness Hawkey's balancing act between the danger of defamiliarizing language past the point of coherence—a la speaking in tongues—and the danger of over-directing the translation toward meaning.

Dust Rounds

I saw dust mites lurch through deserted rooms.
I saw a tungsten-blue blossom on her sternum.

A plot licks stillness. Dumbness fevers
The last albumen effigies of a miniature world.

Only geese with kindness shimmer
And, once blasted, fall in red blurts.

Down a loneliness-stick inner spangles
Issue tears, and we in unguent failure

Are drawn to this spinsterish ant-light.
Note, for example, the red eyes of sumptuous porters.

The orphans shouting at fences. How they glisten,

At night, with the dimwit mien of an alien order.

As with “The Waste Land,” the poem may at first seem to be an arbitrary mess. Surveying all of the homophonic translations, however, a lexicon starts to be established. Within the twenty homophonic translations, the word “voles” appears seven times, as does the word “orphan”; “sternum” appears six times; “ants,” “mittens,” and “gelatin” each appear three times, etc. While still erring on the side of unintelligibility when compared to the classical allusions of Eliot, Hawkey is clearly not handing over meaning-making duties to a purely random device. I’m not including any source texts, since Hawkey doesn’t include them as part of the project, but I imagine that strictly following one’s ear would likely lead to less syntactically complete lines. With some words, such as “orphan” and “sternum” relating to motifs Trakl actually used, Hawkey seems to prefer a challenge over dogmatic rigidity. Beginning a poem titled “Dust Rounds” with the arresting image of dust mites lurching through deserted rooms, Hawkey manages more initial thematic consistency than “Hop o’ my Thumb.” With provocative objects such as “the last albumen effigies of a miniature world,” the “dimwit mien of an alien order,” and “spinsterish ant-light,” he moves beyond purely reactive sound games. Indeed, a couplet such as “Only geese with kindness shimmer / And, once blasted, fall in red blurts” could sound at home in any number of less conceptual pieces. By “collaborating” with Trakl, Hawkey chooses to trouble his agency, not remove it.

Picking away at the I, Hawkey brings it towards thinghood in a way recognizable in Language Poetics decades earlier; but he maintains the empathetic intimacy of a speaking I while simultaneously defamiliarizing the autonomous monovocality we’ve come to expect. Language Poetry was, in some ways, the extreme logical apex of the urge

towards de-authoring, deconstructing, or dispersing a coherent, expressive I. Implementing radically de-subjectifying methodologies, some Language Poets would use oblique strategy exercises, random-number generators, or other non-intuitive mechanical means to attack the assumed necessity of subjective influence. Though somewhat reminiscent of surrealist parlor games or OULIPO prompts, Language Poets generally veered away from the playful, generative spirit of surrealism and toward a more theoretical fidelity.

In his collection of critical essays on language poetics, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Bob Perelman provides a handy periodizing summary of the Language Poets' context:

The aesthetics of [the] mainstream are not without variation, but generalizations are possible, and were certainly made, polemically, by those involved in the formation of language writing: the mainstream poet guarded a highly distinct individuality; while craft and literary knowledge contributed to poetry, sensibility and intuition reigned supreme. The mainstream poet was not an intellectual and especially not a theoretician. Hostility to analysis and, later, to theory, were constitutive of such a poetic stance. In this situation, modernism was no longer especially important. (12)

While the easiest traits and reductions of modernist poets were maintained, Perelman argues, "the more basic facts of modernism were shunned. The poet as engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political and social purposes—these would not be found"(12).

Perelman points out that the Language Poets were not uniform in their aesthetics, had sharp contradictions, and didn't always even have the banner of a name

retroactively applied to many of its members. These are all traits shared with Modernism (à la Perloff's divided lineage). While modernism was opposed to Victorian excess and its written manifestation as neoclassical verbiage, Language Poetry was opposed to institutionalized academic post-confessional individualist epiphany poem.

Perloff quotes Ashbery as admitting, "I guess I don't have a very strong sense of my own identity and I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps to produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry which I again feel is a means toward greater naturalism" (63). So Ashbery, the author of self-described Romantic poetry, is trying to move toward greater naturalism. Hawkey, in possessing/being possessed by a dead man, is attempting to denature the "natural" processes of collaboration and generation. If Ashbery's work in the 1970s worked increasingly toward surfacing—letting the medium of the art (paint, words, etc.) be foregrounded rather than an implied depth of "soul" or innate "poetic" meaning—the Language Poets achieved as near a surfacing as one could imagine, and now the Contemporary Postmodernists are searching for ways to reintroduce human subjectivity without compromising the hard-won elasticity of perspective afforded by earlier Postmodern innovators. Even if the methodological eccentricity of Hawkey's project seems a direct borrowing from certain Language Poetics, he noticeably errs on the side of "poetic" meaning-making, atmospheric construction, and identifiable voice.

Clearly in conversation with *After Lorca* (Hawkey even cites Spicer's line from the introduction: "The dead are notoriously hard to satisfy"), *Ventrakl* is a bigger and messier project. At 149 pages, it is three times longer than its predecessor. As compared to the two main types of poems implemented in *After Lorca*, *Ventrakl* contains homophonic translations, ruminative responses (often in prose) to photographs, literal

translations, a chronology, color-themed centos, diagrams, séance interviews, lists, quotes from others (Benjamin, Spicer, et al), and elaborate dictionary entries. The collage of poem types (the ekphrastic role of the photographs especially) represents a manifestation of Hawkey's desire to move beyond subjects, forms, media, and the senses.

While less disruptive of each sentence's stand-alone intelligibility, Hawkey's centos challenge the line-to-line intelligibility of the standard narrative poem. Consider his cento of Trakl's references to the color white.

WHITETRAKL

*A fountain sings. Clouds, white and tender along the edge of night, white birds
Fluttering up the wandering boy's white nightgown.
A white stranger steps into the house. The city's white walls keep ringing.
Softly a white night drifts in
And myrrh blooms silently over the white eyelids of the dead. We meet
With shepherds and white stars. We drink
The white waters of the pool. Mother even carries an infant in her white moon.
Yet more radiant is the white stranger, a white shirt made of stars,
Or, on a cold night, the white cheeks of sisters, their white eyebrows, white
heads.*

Less confrontational in its repetition than some of Stein's more percussive pieces, the tension building between the disjointed, though often elliptically lyrical, enjambments

and the reliability of “white” on each line make for a more nuanced challenge to the epiphany poem. Not wholly dissimilar to the homophonic translations in the unexpected loveliness of some of the permutations, the centos more directly challenge Hawkey’s claim to authorship. In an era of internet mash-ups and music sampling, he assumes something of the role of editor—Pound to Eliot’s rhyming lines in “The Waste Land.”

Counter-intuitively, these gentle, occasionally lovely centos more fully engage the liminal space that all of our Postmodern poets seem to be seeking. What Hawkey refers to as “a between voice” or “a void, a blank space at the site of intersection,” poet and translator Johannes Goransson names “the Deformation Zone.” This liminal space of intersecting subjectivities (languages, contexts, etc.), opens up an arena wherein the speaking I is transformed, and so, too, the You.

But Hawkey’s experiments are not without their risks, and *Ventrakl* has received criticism for its assumptions and stated goals. In “Translation as Summoning: Christian Hawkey’s *Ventrakl*,” Brian Henry argues:

Trakl’s “power” is illusory, projected by Hawkey even if felt by him. Trakl is not, cannot be, holding a small a camera. He cannot be turning a lens back onto the photographer. Hawkey’s gesture here, his desire to animate Trakl, transfer authority to Trakl, or at least share authority with him, is bound to fail, yet does so poignantly.

Circling around the ideas of necessary failure and the impossibility of comprehensive objectivity (which are symptomatic of not only translation, I argue, but of Postmodern attempts at representation), Henry goes on to argue, “*Ventrakl*, then, is a book of holes—holes in biography, holes in the poems’ transference from one language to another, holes in the poems themselves (as when Hawkey apparently prepares a

translation with a shotgun).” In “Who Is Writing Is the Translator,” Paul Legault decides that, rather than holes, it is a book of interruptions, arguing, “*Ventrakl* is obsessed with the idea of translation (and its discontents). It interrupts itself so consistently with critical theory on the subject — not to mention archival photographs, imagined interviews, and poems — that you soon realize the book is entirely composed of interruptions.” Henry argues that the project “can seem more appropriation than collaboration. Aesthetically, some of Hawkey’s homophonic translations substitute a veneer of strangeness for real strangeness; rather than foreignize, they domesticate; rather than unsettle, they seem quite comfortable within the contemporary American poetic idiom.”

Indeed, *Ventrakl* is problematic. Though Hawkey challenges normative notions of authorship, collaboration, and translation, the book is part of the commercial world and sold as the work of one author. Regardless of its theoretical questioning of ownership of the “I,” *Ventrakl* is sold for money, under Hawkey’s name, and is gaining him the dubious “cultural capital” that comes from publishing a much-discussed book through a respected press. Still, despite its problems, *Ventrakl* offers a singular exploration of contemporary permission and cross-cultural, cross-generational meaning-making.

Part of this singularity comes from engagement with translation. Translation may seem simple enough, but the necessary non-interchangeability of languages insists on a translator’s use of creativity and, therefore, a blurring of the line between writers and an interrogation of how we make meaning and equate relationships between languages and people. In his translator’s notes to Aase Berg’s collection *Remainland*, Johannes Goransson argues that, confronted with the difficulties of translation, “we are forced to

accept the possibility that all the words could mean more than we will ever find out—or they could all be sheer nonsense.” Though translation has been going on as long as distinct languages needed to cross their respective barriers, contemporary approaches to translation appear to offer this most postmodern of choices: profound subjective surfacing (the incomplete fragment) or “sheer nonsense.” Singular in its specifics, translation offers a microcosmic magnification of broader Postmodern concerns. Goransson closes his notes by claiming that “Berg’s poetry shows that everything is reference, everything is translation. She sets the entire language in motion, and shows how every language may be foreign, even to its native speakers.” This sense of defamiliarization is essential to transcending the static I of the commoditized self.

Jameson argues:

My sense is that this is essentially a visual culture, wired for sound—but one where the linguistic element (for which some stronger term than “standardization” needs to be invented, and which is in addition marbled by the worst kind of junk-language, such as “life-style” or “sexual preference”) is slack and flabby, and not to be made interesting without ingenuity, daring, and keen motivation. (299)

Hawkey’s project has its faults, which accompany its daring. Translation theorist Susan Bassnett describes the difficulty in categorizing even the process of translation, as some refer to it as an art, some a craft, some a science, and how “Horst Frenz even goes so far as to opt for ‘art’ but with qualifications, claiming that ‘translation is neither a creative art nor an imitative art, but stands somewhere between the two’” (*Translation Studies*, 14). This categorization itself enacts a mode of hierarchical commoditization wherein engagement with a piece of art is transformed into a productive action that

needs to have a systemic value placed upon it. An idea central to translation studies, that there is no real equivalence between languages, may help explain why translation (and methodologies playing with or partially adopting many of its ideas) allows for such innovation in the face of capitalistic attempts to singularize, name, and copyright the author or “owner” of a text. In capitalism—wherein money is omni-equivalent, everything’s value is quantitative in standard currencies—acknowledging the impossibility of such equivalencies is radically disruptive.

I’m interested in how Spicer and Hawkey willfully remove many of the checks traditionally employed for a “faithful” translation. By occupying the seat of a translator, they both adopt a number of complicating methodological constraints and take cultural and aesthetic risks. In both *After Lorca* and *Ventrakl*, the authors divest themselves of clear, non-collaborative autonomy and, in collaborating with dead poets, investigate how faux/restrained translation projects can singularly challenge normative ideas of authorial ownership.

Wordsworth largely did away with the You of a beloved in his investigations of personal memory, concerning himself mostly with a younger William Wordsworth. Eliot continued the Romantic turn inward, swallowing the You, and began confusing the You with the I, allowing for the interiorizing to begin a move away from a contained essence. Ashbery continued this continuation, scattering the pronouns to the winds. Spicer, and then more so Hawkey, adopted Eliot’s interiorization of the I as well as its split, but—in their “collaborations”—created a second self, the split You, which mirrored the interiorized complication. By addressing their dead collaborators, they are addressing themselves through the ventriloquism of the Other, conflated with the I. They are doubling the I by taking on a “partner.” By unraveling the boundaries of singular

authorship, they are bringing the I into the You. The You, also, as in Buber's theory of intersubjective co-dependence, is bringing in the I. We could call this the We Formula. When the internalized I and You are no longer mere anxious aspects of self, as in Eliot's Eliots, but give over autonomy to another (if dead) author, the entire apostrophe is restructured. Even when Ashbery explodes the speaking I of his poems into plural pronouns, there is still the assumption that one John Ashbery is behind the plurals. When Hawkey conflates himself with Georg Trakl, when the source of a text is impossible to isolate, a new layer of assumption is disputed. An exponential furthering of Eliot's Modernist, fragmented self, the Contemporary Postmodern self, translated and collaborated beyond easy identification, contains fragments surrounding fragments surrounding fragments.

Of course, Hawkey's way is not the only way to complicate collaboration with the dead. Elizabeth Robinson, in her book *Also Known As*, initiates contact with the work of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. In Robinson's words, "I was curious here to explore the opportunities and limitations of persona(e): it is widely known that Pessoa himself wrote under a series of 'heteronyms.' Thus I undertook to write in the persona of an author who was himself writing under the guise of multiple personae." As she theorizes in the poem "Anti-Anatomical Conclusion, or Stealing the Trespass from the Thief":

One might pick a lock and that's a way to blur the doorway's sense of exterior and interior. Someone is breathing, there, in unsecured space. Pursuing the free movement of air through these passages, while the air, without remark, generates itself. Lung's moist reception.

Though less “collaborative” in its textual appropriation and less literal in its handling of the source material than Hawkey’s project, Robinson, surrounding herself with mirrors and installing mirrors inside of her mirrors, is shattering the 1:1, I:I notion of persona and inviting its void to occupy an unsecured space. When personae are impersonating personae of personae, who’s to tell which mirror is reflecting which reflection of which reflection? Eventually, the source of the reflection becomes indistinguishable from all of the resultant replications, distortions, and multiplying forms. The I becomes the You becomes the We becomes “Elizabeth Robinson” becomes “Elizabeth Robinson-as-Pessoa,” etc. The very act of naming is essential here. In “Alias Revisited,” Robinson asks, “What kind of marking is made on the air / between two bodies // when a name is re-formed to it?” When each image, reflection or no, gets a name and a voice, we may start to approach a Lauterbachian land of complete fragments. Never one to shy away from the Method school of poetry, Elizabeth signed my copy of *Also Known As* thusly:

For BJ
with most
warm regards
from
Elizabeth Robinson
&
Fernando Pessoa

When asked about her methodology in an exchange of emails, she explains the possibilities of lateral movement and lyrically non-normative engagements with narrative:

As for *Also Known As*, I really didn't have a methodology. I would say that I muddled my way through a series of permissions. Definitely Spicer's willingness in *After Lorca* to mistranslate, translate posthumously written poems, affix half a translation to half of a Spicer poem influenced

me. I guess I think of the conventional take on the persona poem to be narratively linked: here is the story of an individual and now I will inhabit it. Spicer and Pessoa suggest movements that are much more lateral: the linearity of narrative is nicely disrupted if you can shift among multiple personae or layer personae on personae so that the very idea of a speaker is muddied. In my mystical way, I am always interested in "presence" and the ways that can blur into and out of persona. I guess I just think that in any given poem there are always multiple voices at play.

Robinson performs a fracturing of the I that speaks not only to the generative potentiality of a disrupted subject, but to the impossibility of the full self, an impossibility that informs Spicer's and Hawkey's inhabitations of poetic corpses. These inhabitations echo Ann Lauterbach's idea of the complete fragment. Lauterbach, in *The Night Sky* (a collection of essays and talks given over two decades), returns again and again to ideas of fragmentation and peripheral perspective as liberating incompletions. "Poetry protects language from serving any master," she argues. "One can see better from the periphery than from the center" (3). Lauterbach explicitly pits her sense of fragmentation against the fragmentation of Stein, Eliot, and Pound—a group-able set, she argues, with a common sense of fragmentation which "laments a lost whole" (42). While Ashbery's poetics influenced her own, I argue that Lauterbach is actually arguing for more of a remove from the Romantic notion of self than Ashbery (at least in his work from the 70s) allows himself. Ashbery's fragments speak to each other, but often in the ghost shadow of the absent whole. In her retrieval of the (Post)Modern self's fragmented composite, Lauterbach argues that fragments should be considered in relation to other fragments; not in relation to some lost whole. Part of why we can never

be whole rests in our conflation of truth/knowledge/experience and being/presence. If we can't be everywhere, we can't know everything, we can't be complete. Our subjectivity is, in many ways, synonymous with our situatedness. Lauterbach suggests that "thoughts take on different meanings depending on where they are situated (otherwise, we would cease to read and write) just as we take on different aspects depending on with whom we are conversing" (4). This broad argument about knowledge and experience—an ontological and existential juggernaut of a framing—homes in on the subjectivity I've been poking here. According to Lauterbach:

The crucial job of artists is to find a way to release materials into the animated middle ground between subjects, and so to initiate the difficult but joyful process of human connection. This is not only the relation of a given self to a given other, but to show how that relation might move further to a consciousness of persons and publics beyond our familiar horizons (6-7).

Conclusion

So what?

Challenges to the authority of a contained, speaking I have probably been around since at least the stories told in pre-history, certainly in the teachings of classical Greek thought, and have persisted since. Fineman argues that a new subjectivity was introduced in Shakespeare's sonnets, and this subjectivity developed its thorny, varied characteristics over the following centuries. In the early nineteenth century, Shelley insists, "Each is at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained." A century later, Pound famously claimed that "points define a periphery," directing the attention a little from the center-self to the outlying limits that define the center (the still point of the turning world?), but still maintaining a centered self around which all understanding orbits, even if that central I begins to fracture and wander. Ashbery begins to inhabit the periphery of the wandering I, dreaming of a center while becoming increasingly skeptical of its likelihood. A generation later, Hawkey and Robinson are actively attempting to Other the self further, to merge I's with dead centers, to redefine the entire schematic again.

So what?

Language Poetry took the desubjectification implicit in the postmodern avant-garde and ran it to its logical extremes, de-authoring poetry via methodologies of mathematical rigidity and chance operations, among others. Today, writers like Hawkey and Robinson are reintroducing a subjectivity mediated through "collaboration"

and intentional subverting of a 1:1 exchange across selves, cultures, and ideas. Divesting themselves of monovocal agency, they are nevertheless retrieving some of the human error (aesthetic ordering, revision, intuition) eschewed by the extremes of Language Poetics. They are reclaiming humanity!

So what?

So, of course, any investigation into the constraining aperture of the constructed self is more than a question of poetic style or general aesthetics. Such rigorous cultural students as Judith Butler and Arjun Appadurai make compelling arguments that our ability to step outside of our easiest viewpoints is integral to transcending the same weary binaries perpetuated by politically charged histories between a) those in positions of power over our wider narratives and b) those subjected to the limited agency of the myopic “I.”

In discussing globalization and global inter-dependency, Arjun Appadurai urges using “perspectival constraints” to honor the subjectivity of all imposed orders. In poetry, what is a perspectival constraint if not the pronoun, the author’s chosen seat? Appadurai views scapes the same way that Michel de Certeau approaches cities-as-sentences: using scale, mutability, fluidity to flesh out the dimensions of our environments—not in the pursuit of a comprehensive “mastery” of our surrounds, but rather to more fully debunk the wish for objective control latent (and, in fact, encouraged) within fixed perspectives.

Judith Butler argues that the dynamics of the apostrophe are more than mere semantic play; more, in fact, than responsible world citizenship—they are a matter of existential crisis: “If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address” (*Precarious Life*, 139). Butler’s *Precarious*

Life wonderfully investigates the inherent powers of apostrophic dynamics, particularly focusing on the role of a “we” in times of grief and the dangerous power of using the I/You split to enable an Othering of the You that preemptively strikes against the collective experience of empathetic mourning and shared identification. To be sure, there is an entrenched political component within the I→You negotiation. As Butler argues, “Dissent is quelled, in part, through threatening the speaking subject with an uninhabitable identification” (xix). We are all, always, performing and enduring identity construction. This construction of an I is inextricable from the influence of the many “You”s it encounters, be they other people, social structures, or alternate versions of the self. To simply accept the identity we are handed (“American,” “male,” “capitalist,” “liberal,” “essay-writing über-nerd,” “self-deprecatingly self-referential sycophant,” “postmodern poet,” etc.) without inspection is dangerous indeed.

Lauterbach tells us that instability and incompleteness are immanent in our constructed identities, and that these identities are necessarily fragmented and responsive to situation. The reverse is true also: by creating new selves, we create new situations. Butler adds that there are norms of recognition inscribed in the role of “subject.” So, when Eliot stages a mono-harmony of doubled selves, Stein practices her ventriloquism, Spicer is possessed by the signal, or Ashbery deputizes his army of mimetic fragments, the norms and capabilities of speech and recognition are slowly altered. When a generation or three later, Hawkey’s soaked, buckshot pages, his assured dismantling of his own mouth, and Robinson’s hyper-literate costume party continue to blur the sense of exterior and interior, their work is truly modeling new ways of considering the world, the Other, the You.

Martin Buber, in his well-known mystical treatise, *I and Thou*, describes, among many other things, a co-dependency inherent in apostrophe: “When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too” (54). Reciprocity is essential to the survival of both poles of the address. “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You” (62).

This reciprocity becomes more suggestive when we realize that apostrophic identities are fluid, and that the fluidity is not just between the I and the You. It is inevitable, in Buber’s apostrophic schematic, that a “You” regularly becomes an “it.” “The sublime melancholy of our lot,” he calls it (68). I argue that an I also becomes an “it,” especially when the role of the speaking, poetic I is performed so complacently that its reflexive performer forgets that she or he is performing. This forgetfulness—this absent, *de rigueur* recital—arrests the dynamic potential of poetic voice and, therefore, the possibilities of social and cultural engagement and agency. It is in this defamiliarizing of the contained, speaking self that Postmodern (and later) poetry has found increasing guidance.

By exercising the ability to inhabit new subjectivities, these poets are showing us how to build new muscles for the exhaustive quotidian practice of contemporary identity construction. While we may have more opportunity in the digital age to reinvent ourselves nightly, the profound effects of broader cultural systems on our identities are incalculable. Hopefully skeptical of the manipulative potential of imposed and reductive binaries, we may realize that we are neither fully at the mercy of outside pressures nor possessing full self-determination and agency of identity. Butler argues, “When we are speaking about the ‘subject’ we are not always speaking about an individual: we are speaking about a model for agency and intelligibility, one that is very often based on notions of sovereign power.” She continues, “The ‘I’ who cannot come into being without

a 'you' is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the 'I' nor with the 'you'" (45).

To defamiliarize the I, the Contemporary Postmodern poet continues to explode the nostalgic dream of the contained self before picking up the fragments, dusting them off, and seeing what they have to say for themselves. By embracing this plurality of open, responsive selves, we are effectively burying the mythological fullness of subject and object. It's a necessary internment. Get out your casserole dishes, get ice for the whiskey. Once buried, even memorialized in pageantry and song, we can start banging our new martial heartbeat into the "resonant hollowness of a fractured, verbal self." It's a hard dream to give up on, but saving its seat at the table isn't going to feed anyone. It's like burying a dead pet: order a discount taxidermy kit online and preserve it in any pose you most fondly remember, but it's not going to play catch any longer. Time to go to the pound and pick a whole new litter of mutts to start ranging and marking the shifting streets of Contemporary Postmodernism. The full self is dead. Long live the full self.

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