

**Lyric and the Rhetoric of the Serial Mode in Twentieth Century  
American Poetry: Figuring Voice in the Work of Spicer, Berrigan, and  
Ashbery**

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

RHETORIC

in the

Graduate Division

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

BERKELEY

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Spring 2012

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## Abstract

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Serial poetry has been recognized as an important formal category and writing practice in postwar experimental poetry, but the vital relationship between seriality and conventional aspects of the lyric genre has been obscure. After critiques of “lyric” that argue the term is politically suspect because it is linked to Romantic ideologies of the subject, new, historicized models of lyric emphasizing the functions and effects of voice have returned in recent criticism of Modernist and postwar experimental writing. Building on this recent criticism, this dissertation proposes that lyric rhetoric informs the turn towards the serial mode in poems by Jack Spicer, John Ashbery and Ted Berrigan. The serial poetry of these postwar writers makes lyric poetry function contextually, reviving the notion of voice. Seriality is best understood as a mode, not a form, that decontextualizes and re-contextualizes prior lyric fragments and allows poets to think about social relationships in terms of poetic ones, and vice versa.

Seriality has been discussed in criticism of Spicer, but has not been a key term in appraisals of book-length poems by Berrigan and Ashbery. Therefore my research offers seriality as a new perspective to understand these poets’ practices of citation, appropriation and generic mixing: methods of constructing their own poetic voices out of existing textual materials from traditions that they write themselves into. I argue that these practices of textual rearrangement and revision offer a model of historically responsive lyric that challenges assumptions about how postwar poets read lyric and imagine more engaged audiences for their own writing. Through analysis of the serial mode in poems by Spicer, Berrigan, and Ashbery, I trace the outline of a common poetic voice in different series constructed from diverse materials: an epistolary exchange, a recursive sequence of sonnets transformed by scissors and scotch tape, and a meditation about lyric that is written in diaristic prose. I frame my analysis with a critical discussion of “The New Lyric Studies” and modern histories of lyric genre by Marjorie Perloff, Mark Jeffreys, Virginia Jackson, Mutlu Konuk Blasing, and others. Lyric rhetoric and voice in the serial mode matters, I propose, to scholars of 20<sup>th</sup> century American experimental literature seeking to move beyond reductive conceptual oppositions that divide the field.

for  
J.E.D., J.R.D., K.F.  
J.D.S., J.G.C.

*“wind giving presence to fragments”*

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Introduction  
Reconceptualizing the Postwar Turn Toward Serial in American Poetry

I. Postwar Serial and the Lyric Problem

The issue of the following study is the role of rhetoric in a serial mode of long poem written by postwar American poets. My thesis is that serial poetry in the postwar period makes lyric poetry function contextually. By asserting a contextualized lyric voice, these serial poems critique an entrenched conception of lyric as a universal and foundational genre, but without entailing what many critics have called the postmodern “death of the lyric.”<sup>1</sup> I discuss three book-length writing projects written between 1950-75 by Jack Spicer, John Ashbery and Ted Berrigan—poets who played significant roles in west and east coast avant-garde writing circles. Spicer was an important poet of the Berkeley Renaissance and later in the blossoming San Francisco scene of the late 50s and early 60s, whereas Ashbery and Berrigan were at the center of the so-called New York School of poets. Though Ashbery took issue with the “school” designation, he was a pivotal figure of the nascent avant-garde scene, and since the 1970s has achieved international recognition. Berrigan is associated with the younger, “second generation” of the New York School that self-consciously styled itself as a community of poets in the 60s; like Spicer he remains something of a “cult” figure. The three decades after the Second World War mark a period of radical changes in the field of American poetry: the 1950s saw an explosion of literary avant-gardes that cultivated dedicated readerships comparable in scale and sophistication to those of poets published by the big trade presses; the 1960s saw the confluence of these groups with a more mainstream, politicized youth culture; and in the 70s, poets such as Ashbery, associated with “minor” and counter-cultural writing scenes, were championed by the academy, and won “major” literary prizes.<sup>2</sup>

The three analytical chapters of my dissertation explore the different ways that these postwar poets conceive of their serial writing as a rhetorically motivated practice of critique. In my study I focus consistently on the idea that the serial mode offers its poets a critical approach to aspects of the idea of “lyric.” In the midst of the changing literary terrain, each of these poets engages in experiments with poetic series that allow him to reflect on established ideas of lyric poetry, and to rethink its social function. These poets treat the lyric genre as a historical and contested concept—a discursive site for exploring versions of a critical poetic voice, and a polemical tool to encourage reading practices sensitive to issues of context. Hence, their investments in lyric are not only aesthetic, but also, and chiefly, pragmatic and rhetorical. In each of the serial poems that I discuss, however, “voice” is a complex and subtle matter, and often what produces notable tensions within the work. These serial works do not simply contain a critical voice that speaks in the poem, nor are they simply “polyvocal.” Rather, serial develops as a mode that is critical *of* voice, and foregrounds the voice’s generic contingency in order to accomplish other rhetorical ends. The serial mode also allows my poets to accomplish

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<sup>1</sup> For one example see Perloff *Dance of the Intellect*.

<sup>2</sup> Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980*, and “Poetry, Politics, and Intellectuals,” provide an overview of this transformation, as does Breslin.

other things specific to their own projects, but each of my readings relates these postwar serial poems to a core set of problems in 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas of lyric. The questions that follow are: 1) in what ways do postwar serial poets conceive of the serial as a mode of critical thought that engages these lyric problems? 2) How do their formal and generic features—often a mixture of elements borrowed from earlier Modernist and avant-garde works—reflect new attitudes about the social vocation of poetry in postwar contexts? 3) To what degree does the serial mode also assert a normative concept of lyric, or participate in a “lyric ideology” that the poets are blind to but that recent scholarship has brought into focus?

Although some critics have viewed postwar serial poetry as an overt rejection of lyric elements or an entirely negative critique of a “lyric ideology” that they reductively identify with Romanticism or New Criticism, the term “lyric” has conspicuously returned as the hinge concept in recent scholarly accounts of Modernist and postwar experimental writing. I will discuss this critical history in chapter 1. In line with recent scholarship, I recognize that ideas of lyric play an integral (and not simply negative) part in postwar serial poetics. Unfortunately the pivotal term “lyric” remains a historical and theoretical morass. Mark Jeffreys describes the “impossibility of stabilizing the definition of lyric,” and points out a troubling confusion that occurs when scholars of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry pretend to do so: “Indeed, the very act of writing about lyric as a marginalized or marginalizing genre necessarily trades, implicitly if not explicitly, on an assumption of the transhistorical definability of lyric. The risk of that assumption is blindness to the political and historical dimensions of those texts that do not fulfill expectations” (“Ideologies of Lyric” 203, 196-7). The situation he describes is evident in scholarship on postwar serial writing: by assuming that poets aligned with experimental or “neo-avant-garde” practices reject an ideological notion of lyric genre associated with New Criticism, scholars overlook the ways that the serial poets themselves may have understood the concept in a more open, political or historical sense. The assumption that I find troubling when serial—and other postwar experimental modes—are linked to what Marjorie Perloff has called the “death of the lyric,” is that lyric is presumed to be an “inherently reactionary genre” (Jeffreys 197). This, in turn, blinds critics to different valences that lyric can take within a serial mode, or conversely, that the serial mode can be fruitfully understood as a type of lyric. The very presence—not to mention centrality—of “reactionary” lyric elements in experimental poetry frustrates critical expectations about what experimental writing looks like, and what purposes it serves for writers and their audiences. Therefore my dissertation is sensitive to a basic problem: in order to understand the role that “lyric” plays as a critical category in postwar serial writing we must recognize that our own critical concept of lyric is confused—a marker of our own critical ideologies (Jeffreys 203).

The poems are full of examples that illustrate how a set of markedly lyric problems remains front-and-center in the postwar serial. Because the serial mode articulates individual parts into a larger iterative structure, it can treat a lyric speech situation—a stylized pronominal address—as itself something that is situated and resituated across different sections of the work. In effect, serial poems often treat the larger unit of the series as a social situation that a reader is drawn into, and the focus on lyric often foregrounds genre as overtly rhetorical: a sequencing device for producing consequences on readers and listeners. As an introduction to the problematic that my



dissertation explores, one example from Spicer's *After Lorca* stands out. On its first page, the book's "Introduction" describes the strangest feature of the work, which is the series of fictional letters addressed by Spicer to Lorca that are interspersed with the series of poems. The poems are themselves a strange mixture of Spicer's translations of Lorca and Spicer's own counterfeits. The "Introduction" explains:

The letters are another problem. When Mr. Spicer began sending them to me a few months ago, I recognized immediately the "programmatically letter"—the letter one poet writes to another not in any effort to communicate with him, but rather as a young man whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening. (*Collected Poems* 107)

The speaker describes a familiar rhetorical situation: addressing an audience while pretending to address another. Spicer's readers should immediately recognize the rhetorical ploy of his introduction itself, because the purported author of these words is "Lorca," who in 1957, when the book is published, had been dead for nearly 20 years. Like the letters that comprise Spicer's book, the introduction must be read rhetorically. However, readers might also recognize that the scene "Lorca" describes with the young man "whispering" his secrets to a scarecrow evokes a very famous scene of "overhearing" within the Western canon of literary criticism. Spicer indirectly references the dramatic scene that John Stuart Mill describes in an essay that has shaped definitions of lyric genre: "Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (quoted in Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery* 129). I have relied on the scholarship of Virginia Jackson—one of a group of contemporary scholars of lyric who offers an insightful critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century "lyric ideology" and concomitant practices of "lyric reading."<sup>3</sup> Her ideas have considerably shaped my dissertation because they have allowed me to understand the historical processes and practices of social interaction that are effaced by seemingly objective generic categories. Jackson argues that Mill's definition becomes ideology because it presents the lyric as a literary genre that transcends its own media, which is why in Mill's account the lyric speaker speaks as if he or she is not being overheard by the listener's ear or the reader's eye. Jackson explains, "As the most formally defined of modern literary genres, the lyric has been misunderstood as the genre most isolated from history—indeed, as the exemplary model of literary genre as a category separable from history" (55).

Spicer's introduction, scandalously cast in the voice of "Lorca," modifies Mill's account, however. Jackson emphasizes the way that Mill sharply distinguishes lyric poetry from rhetoric, but Spicer flags the notion of lyric soliloquy as fundamentally rhetorical. The reader learns to pay attention to fake soliloquy within the serial work from an introduction voiced by the ghost of real poet, so the "Introduction" itself asks to be read as another one of the "programmatically letters" that it describes. In other words, Spicer invokes Mill's distinction between speech spoken self-consciously and unconsciously before an audience—between *eloquence* and *poetry*—but troubles the reader's task of determining which texts within the series correspond to each category. Spicer is indeed using his first serial book to carry out a type of thinking about the lyric

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson and Yopie Prins set forth these ideas in their own programmatic statement of "critical lyric theory." See "Lyrical Studies."

itself, and moreover, in a play of voices that ask to be read both lyrically and eloquently, in turns. What comes under question, however, is the very issue that Jackson frames: what does it mean to read this poem *as* lyric? Within the context of *After Lorca*, can one make a distinction between “hearing” and “overhearing” the voices in the poems? Understanding Spicer’s maneuver as a reference to one dominant theory of the lyric poem seems to encourage critical reflection on reading his work as both shaped by and chaffing under Mill’s definition. Is he announcing to a reader that the serial poem contains not only poetry, but also “programmatically,” or theoretical content? “Lorca’s” statement, it should be recalled, refers specifically to the letters in the book: is the series of letters to be read as literary theory—precisely how many critics have read them? Conversely, is Spicer suggesting that these apparently epistolary texts, written in prose, should actually be read as lyric poems—precisely the way Spicer read personal letters to friends at public readings? In effect, the commentary that one voice in Spicer’s series (Lorca’s) makes on another (the voice in the letters) draws attention to the notion of lyric’s effacement of generic contingency that Jackson elaborately theorizes in her work: “when we read a text as a lyric, we consent to take it out of circulation and, in a sense, out of generic contingency” (56). It is only by forgetting Spicer’s impish framing game that we can take the work out of generic contingency, and read it *as* an example of any stable genre. Spicer’s rhetorical gesture, however, and his reference to a powerful current of post-Romantic lyric discourse, is subtler than critics have previously recognized, despite the important work of scholars such as Perloff, Jackson, Prins and Jeffreys. Spicer, Berrigan, and Ashbery, and other postwar serial poets that I do not discuss in my dissertation,<sup>4</sup> should be read as lyric poets in a more nuanced—which is to say, contingent—fashion. My dissertation offers a corrective to existing scholarship on postwar serial writing by reading these poets as lyric poets, while trying to avoid the blind spots of a reductive type of “lyric reading.”<sup>5</sup>

Spicer’s “Introduction” to *After Lorca*, illustrates the importance of understanding how both lyric and rhetoric are interleaved in postwar serial poetry. My reading should indicate that a purely formalistic account of serial poetry will fail to grasp the larger stakes that Spicer is after: using the sequential structure of the serial to shift readers’ awareness away from a poetics of representation, and toward what he saw as a more socially engaged poetics of speech pragmatics and address (Katz, “Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*,” 100). My dissertation begins by considering Spicer’s poetic “turn”: his

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<sup>4</sup> A book version of this project will extend my readings to a wider sample of postwar writers working in the serial mode. The most important figures that I would consider are George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Tom Raworth, and Alice Notely.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson suggests the difficulty of her critical imperative: “According to Mill, the circulation of poetry “on hot-pressed paper” is exactly what the generic conventions of the lyric cannot acknowledge—that is, the lyric can no more acknowledge its literal circumstance than can the actor, and is at the same time no less dependent than that actor on the generic recognition of the audience it must pretend is not there. Thus the difficulty of thinking about the lyric as implicated in historical contingency is that the discourse that surrounds the genre must admit without acknowledging the defining effect of that contingency” (Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery* 56). Following this logic, a serial poem that directs a reader’s attention to matters of generic contingency would no longer be lyric, but already that statement implies a transhistorical definition of the genre that Jackson herself critiques. Instead, the serial mode illustrates that postwar poets already recognize limits to the version of lyric associated with Mill and what Jackson and others call “post-Romantic theory.” My approach to the lyric dimension in postwar serial poems focuses on different rhetorical strategies that poets use to “admit without acknowledging” the contingencies of genre.

declaration in 1957 that he would no longer write “individual” poems, but rather would make only “serial poetry,” or what he called, “Books.”<sup>6</sup> Spicer’s turn towards the serial has been recognized as a signal event in the history of postwar experimental writing, but Spicer’s cryptic accounts of his serial mode have allowed his “turn” to be accounted for largely in formal terms, and his marginal status within the West Coast literary counter-culture has prevented more scholars from recognizing that his serial poetics share vital features with contemporaries who did not explicitly refer to their work as “serial.” While there is no doubt that Spicer’s, Berrigan’s and Ashbery’s work with long, poetic series should be understood in formal terms, seriality in their work is foremost a practice of writing that is defined by its open-endedness. Although my dissertation focuses on what is ostensibly a formal category that can be found in the work of numerous postwar poets, I treat “postwar serial” not primarily as a form, but as a mode. The mode is better understood by its diversity of poetic approaches to communicative moments or situations than with abstract concepts of form and formal evolution. Rather than try to hammer the other poets of my dissertation into Spicer’s definition of serial, which is itself a patchwork of part-theorizations, I will map a set of family resemblances between these different types of series.

I have selected texts from this group of writers not because I wish to expand a critical taxonomy of postwar, postmodern, or contemporary forms, but in order to understand what appears to be a common move toward a poetics of address that invites a particular practice of reading, attentive to the text as a mediated social interaction. The poets of my study write mixed-genre long poems that put different demands on their readers and listeners, and the threads that connect them are more conceptual than stylistic. Poems in the serial mode foreground eclectic formal and generic features in ways that can seem theatrical, and for this reason it is easy to overlook the fact that works that appear as different on the page as Berrigan’s cut-up sonnet sequence and Ashbery’s long prose meditation manifest similar poetics. Although Spicer is the only poet of my trio to explicitly define and theorize his serial poetics, it is possible to trace common threads through all three of their practices. The defining feature, which suggests the serial mode’s dialectical movement, is an unresolved tension between the parts of the series and the whole. Generalizing from Spicer’s work to describe a postwar “practice of seriality,” Rachel Blau DuPlessis characterizes precisely this feature when she describes the serial as: “a way of structuring a long, sectional yet lyric poem as a series of meditative leaps, paratactic in relation, and thinking or meditating serious issues without narration” (“Genius for Sale!” 198). Blau DuPlessis recognizes that the central tension of the serial is only partly a matter of the serial’s “sectional” form, which accounts for its “length”; the most important term in her definition is the conceptual category “relation,” which she attempts to clarify with a standard set of descriptors from criticism of experimental poetry: “paratactic leaps,” “rhizomic,” “without narration.”

If the parts or “sections” of a serial poem are a necessary formal element, I show that they take many shapes in practice. In Spicer’s work the tension is explicitly between individual poems that he designates lyric and other generic elements that contextualize individual poems. In *After Lorca* the tension, as I mentioned, is between a series of Modernist lyric poems ostensibly written by Lorca and translated by Spicer, and a series

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<sup>6</sup> A recent dissertation discusses the medieval sources of Spicer’s poetics, which inform his notion of the book and his political theology: Holt *In the Sense of a Lasting Doctrine*.

of fake letters that comment on the work itself, but that also ask to be read as poems—and also as love letters. The drama of the work is figuring who is speaking and in what mode, but also whom is being addressed. Berrigan does not theorize *The Sonnets* as a serial work, but in practice his treatment of the sonnet form reveals that he too turns towards the series as a conceptual horizon of composition. Berrigan understands his major innovation as a new approach to the traditional sonnet that reduces it to “14 one-line units” or “blocks” that can be rearranged into endless combinations (*On the Level Everyday* 82-96). While this treatment appears to be a purely formal reduction, in effect it allows him to shift his poetic labor from the effort of constructing conceits and arguments to a more open articulation of relationships between different moments in the series. The result that he obtains through his experimentation is a new tension in the relationship between the discrete “blocks”—individual lines, clusters of lines, and entire sonnets—and the entire work, which in theory could continue indefinitely. Working in this manner he treats the individual “sections” as shorthand for objects that surround him, and the serial mode becomes a way to articulate relationships between parts of his life. The “serious thinking” that Blau DuPlessis recognizes as part of serial practice emerges in the work’s innovative, non-narrative mode of autobiography, which suggests that Berrigan explores a *topos* of conventional lyric poetry by aggressively deforming a traditional lyric genre.

At first glance, Ashbery’s *Three Poems* does not appear to manifest the sectional structure of the serial mode. The prose form of the work and the apparent continuity of the speaker’s discourse makes the text seem a far cry from Spicer’s baroque practices of organizing books into sections that contain groups of titled poems—one Spicer book even mimics a scholarly textual apparatus and contain footnotes.<sup>7</sup> Despite being written in prose, however, Ashbery’s work foregrounds a voice that exemplifies the characteristics of “meditative” lyric that critics such as Perloff associate with “the codification of Romantic theory”: the voice in the poem is subjective, monological, introspective, and seems to exemplify Sharon Cameron’s conventional description of a lyric speaker that, “speaks out of a single moment in time” (Perloff *Dance of the Intellect* 158; Cameron 23). The serial tension in Ashbery’s work emerges not because the text is formally delineated into discrete sections, but rather because the discourse continually interrupts itself with digressions, non-sequiturs, and other linguistic “dislocations” or “accidents” that trouble the reader’s attempts to place the voice in a stable context. What seems at first to be a continuous flow of first-person speech develops a feeling of incredible monotony through heavy repletion of images, phrases, verbal tics, and syntactical patterns. Ashbery’s serial mode, which is experienced by the reader as a tension between communication and confusion, can be understood as a result of the writing practice that he developed for *Three Poems*: he intentionally writes the poem across many short sittings to give the sense that the work is “being written by a writer who is in a different frame of mind each time he sits down to write” (Poulin 255). Ashbery’s description of process illustrates why the “sections” that create tension within the series cannot simply be understood as formal units because there are no clear markers in the text that designate “each time” he writes. Attempts to specify a rigid formal taxonomy are bound to fail the serial mode not simply because stylistic diversity is a salient characteristic of these works, but because

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<sup>7</sup> I refer to Spicer’s “Explanatory Notes” in the “Homage to Creeley” section of *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*. See *Collected Poems* 249-280.

what I am calling “serial” is that element in the sequences of poems that is in a dialectical relationship with the “closure” of formal constraints.

## II. Chapter Synopsis

My selection of poets and serial poems avoids strict lines of filiation, and suggests the range and breadth of ways that postwar American poets have used series to think about social relationships in terms of poetic ones, and vice versa. My chapters discuss: 1) Critical problems associated with the term “lyric” in postwar experimental poetry and different approaches to the problem in contemporary scholarship; 2) Spicer’s *After Lorca* (1957), alongside personal correspondence, an early essay by the poet for the UC Berkeley literary magazine, *Occident*, and a book review for the *Boston Public Library Quarterly* on Emily Dickinson’s epistolary letters; 3) Ted Berrigan’s first book, *The Sonnets* (1964), in the context of a talk he gave at a “Sonnet Workshop”; 4) John Ashbery’s *Three Poems* (1972), and interviews he gave during the 70s about the project. Although Berrigan is younger than Ashbery and associated with the “second generation” of the New York School, my reading of *The Sonnets* precedes the Ashbery chapter because I wanted the project to unfold chronologically. The first chapter reads primary sources from the 50s, the second from the 60s, and the third from the 70s. My chapter on Spicer draws on research that I did in the Jack Spicer Papers at UC Berkeley’s Bancroft Library.

I selected only one poet (Spicer) usually associated with “serial” writing in order to demonstrate that the concept can be imagined more openly. Two of the poets of my study (Spicer and Berrigan) cultivated coterie audiences and openly address personal relations in their poems, so I was interested to see how a poet who dislikes coterie dynamics (Ashbery) understands the audience of his serial poem. Because Ashbery is also the most well known, I found it striking that he has not received more attention as a poet interested in serial mode, and another factor in my selection was that I wanted to indicate a new direction for his readers to pursue. Each text that I read occupies an important position in their careers—either as a transition point (Ashbery) or starting point that he distances himself from (Berrigan), or a transition point that he claims as starting point (Spicer).<sup>8</sup>

The primary conceptual thread that connects these projects is a shared interest in the *rhetoric* of poetic genres, and the problem of address. I explain in each chapter how this manifests differently as an interest in the real audience of the poem and in figures of the audience. Rhetoric is what leads the poets into the labyrinth of the series. To the extent that I can abstract a “serial poetics” that these works have in common, it is reflected in a materialistic and pragmatic understanding of language. More specifically, it is present in the way that they use the series to draw attention to intention and linguistic motivation: a tool for amplifying rhetoric. Sometimes the opposite is the case: the series marks off a textual enclosure to draw attention to the lack of motivation behind linguistic events: a frame for accidental speech.

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<sup>8</sup> Spicer was fond of announcing new beginnings. He liked to state his birthdate as 1946, the year he moved to Berkeley and met the friends that would form his poetry circle (Killian 11).

As I noted at the outset, generalizing about form is a difficult task within my selection of texts, resulting largely from how I have defined “serial.” The common impulse in each of these projects seems anti-formal as often as it seems formalist. Again, this points to rhetoric, and means that the formal elements of each serial project should be evaluated in the context of motives to produce effects on their audience.<sup>9</sup> A common approach to form can be seen at another level, however: the poets use the fractured form of the series to frame issues of form, which is why these serial poems also have offered critics sources for the poets’ statements of poetics. “Imagine this as lyric poetry,” writes Spicer in the midst of what appears to be a short, ordinary, free verse lyric. The deixis of Spicer’s “this” is intentionally ambiguous, however, because it appears as the only verse in the midst of a “book” called, “A Textbook of Poetry,” that is otherwise filled with prose. To decide what “this” refers to is already to take a position on what constitutes the horizon of the “lyric” poem: a position that Spicer reminds is always already occupied, albeit fraught with baggage that “imagine this as,” invites the audience to reflect on. Spicer’s gesture is polemical, and quietly antagonistic. His serial poetry is better understood in relation to this gesture, than in relation to any of the formal means by which he achieves it.

Because Spicer most clearly frames my problematic, he provides my point of entry into the three analytical chapters of the project. In my second chapter, I discuss the epistolary trope at the heart of Spicer’s first serial “book.” *After Lorca* marks Spicer’s turn to serial writing, and the prose passages of the text also contain what appear to be his first articulations of serial poetics. The prose, however, takes the form of a fictional letter correspondence which provides a template for Spicer’s later serial projects. My interest in the epistolary dimension was partly a response to the existing field of Spicer criticism. To date Spicer has been incredibly marginalized. Only one scholarly collection of essays has been published<sup>10</sup> despite attempts by scholars such as Michael Davidson and Peter Gizzi to ignite more academic interest in the poet’s work. The criticism that does exist focuses more on Spicer’s gnostic pronouncements about his poetics made at the end of his life, to the effect that Spicer’s most outlandish figures set the stage of critical debate. I argue that his early interest in problems of epistolary correspondence, which can be traced to his interpretation of Emily Dickinson’s letters and various experiments of sending letter-poems to friends, reveals a more terrestrial fact about his serial poetry. What appears to be a poetics of direct address—of addressing poems and letters to real people—is a strategy for encourage his reader to reflect on the contingent form of the poem’s genre and the conditions of “listening.”

My third chapter begins by asking what type of inaugural “career move,” *The Sonnets* was for Berrigan. I put his cut-up and collage technique of recycling old poems into new sonnets into the context of his coterie poetry scene. I intend for this chapter to respond to a symptom that I noticed in other essays about the sonnet series: critics recognize a strange tension between the “pathos and procedure” of the series, but generally focus on procedure and fail to grasp the pathos. This, I believe, is a legacy of the approach to avant-garde collage techniques that I discuss above. Critics have recognized that individual sonnets are conventional elegies, and that the book as a whole

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<sup>9</sup> I found Blasing’s earlier study about forms of rhetoric in postwar poetry very instructive (Blasing *Politics and Form*).

<sup>10</sup> Vincent *After Spicer*.

has a mournful tone. My argument is that the pathos of the procedure can only be understood when the work is read as a series, but that asks us to imagine different reading practices than critical close reading. Berrigan's minimalist notion of sonnet form turns the argumentative structure of a conventional sonnet "inside out." With the *volta*, or turn on the outside, each unit of the series makes its rhetorical appeal through a relationships with other lines and poems. The effect is that individual elegies are transformed into a serial elegy, and the figure at the center of the series is the character that dies in "Sonnet II": "Dear Berrigan. He died / Back to books. I read" (CP 29). It is notable that the poem announces Berrigan's death only to immediately resurrect him as another "reader": "Back to books" emphasizes that he reads from book to book on his desk, but also that the speaker of the poem exists as a reader in the same space as the poem-object itself, rather than in a transcendent position before or outside of the series. The sonnet's "turn" has turned into a practice of reading serially, which implies a different function of rhetoric in the series.

In the fourth chapter I read a book from the middle of Ashbery's career: *Three Poems*. The work has received significant critical attention as a poetic "meditation" filled with what seem to be statements of Ashbery's poetics. However, I approach the work in a different manner: it has never been read as a "serial" poem before. Following Vincent's suggestion to read Ashbery's "books" as serial "projects," I take a markedly different approach to the idea of seriality. My argument is that Ashbery treats the seemingly uninterrupted, first-person discourse as a mode of seriality itself. Ashbery makes comments in essays and interviews about his experience as a reader (of Stein) and a listener (of Cage and Webern) that suggest he is interested in producing similar serial effects on his reader. He does so by writing the poem as a diaristic series of linguistic "accidents" that lead up to what the book suggestively calls, "the lyric crash." The ambiguity of the phrase reveals a symptom of lyric ideology: "lyric" could either be an adjective or a noun. At the heart of my reading is T.S. Eliot's 1954 essay, "The Three Voices of Poetry," which tries to untangle three different voices in modern poetry that a reader "overhears": the lyric or "meditative," the rhetorical, and the dramatic. Ashbery's accidents, I argue, are best understood as a deliberate confusion, or crash of these three voices, which makes it impossible to untangle who is speaking to whom, over and over again. Ashbery's method of writing also torques Eliot's schema, because the speaker seems to proceed without any deliberate course: a literalized version of the poet being merely a listener who overhears his own voice. The effect is what Ashbery refers to as the "pathos of ordinary communication," which suggests an extreme take on the traditional lyric scene: language spoken as if *nobody* really were listening. Whether or not Ashbery's book crash's the lyric, as a critique of Eliot's "meditative voice," or is itself a lyric poem that crashes, is outside of the scope of his project: something that happens after the series ends.

## Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to many at UC Berkeley who offered support throughout my time as an undergraduate, and then graduate student in the Rhetoric Department. Firstly, to the Department itself for material support in the form of fellowships, summer funding, and teaching and research appointments. Maxine Fredericksen and Marcus Norman made many important things happen. Generous funding was also granted to me by the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and the Mellon Foundation. Mentors who encouraged me as an undergraduate to pursue my intellectual interests include James Martel, Felipe Gutterriez, and Joshua Clover. As a graduate student I am thankful to have made friends with David Simon, Travis Wilds, and Matt Eagan, who made the long journey a lot more interesting and enjoyable. The final version of my dissertation profited enormously from the helpful criticisms of committee members Eric Falci and Ramona Naddaff, and ideas for the project grew out of many nourishing conversations with my two chairs, Michael Mascuch and Lyn Hejinian. Each, in their own way, has offered me invaluable inspiration and encouragement to think across disciplinary lines in the decade I have been a student at Berkeley. Finally there are those who offered me unshakeable love every step of the way: my father, John Dingler, stepmother, Karen Ford, brother, Jeff, my best friend, James Harker, and my boyfriend, Josh Schoenfeld.



## Chapter 1 Lyric Rhetoric: The Opening of the Field

### I. Lyric Ideology: A Generic Impasse

In order to situate my contribution to scholarship on the postwar serial mode, it is necessary to review the confused status of the term “lyric.” The problem, as the critic and scholar Mark Jeffreys frames it, is that recent critics regard the lyric as an inherently reactionary ideological genre. In Jeffreys’ words, “Since the mid-1980s, the lyric has been stigmatized in Anglophone literary criticism because of its identification as the favored genre of the New Criticism” (“Ideologies of Lyric” 196). Yet in their attacks on this concept of lyric, such critics have created a distorted, historically inaccurate definition of lyric to replace it—as much a product of a critical ideology as the category they say is reactionary.

Marjorie Perloff is one Anglophone scholar who led the charge against the lyric, whose work exhibits the tendency Jeffreys describes. An example of how she defines lyric can help to illustrate what Jeffreys means when he claims that many late twentieth-century critics of lyric possess their own alternative “ideological expectation of a lyric text.” In a formula that she often repeats in other essays, Perloff writes:

the dominant poetic mode of early modernism [sic] remains the lyric—what Goethe calls “*die Ich-erzählung*” [sic] in which the isolated speaker (whether or not the poet himself) located in a specific landscape, meditates or ruminates on some aspect of his or her relationship to the external world, coming finally to some sort of epiphany, a moment of insight or vision with which the poem closes. (Perloff, *Dance of the Intellect* 157)

She traces this “dominant poetic mode” to a version of “Romantic theory” that becomes institutionalized in the mid-century institution of New Criticism. In another influential essay on the “impasse of lyric,” she identifies the contemporary representatives of the pro-lyric camp with the Romantic genealogy: “A...sophisticated version of what I take to be an essentially Romantic theory of lyric may be found in the writings of Harold Bloom” (*Dance* 175). Perloff optimistically argues that Bloom’s lament about the increase of serious critical attention to postwar experimental writing suggests that the lyric’s academic dominance is finally waning: “It has not been suggested, for instance, that if there was a poetry ‘before the flood,’ ‘before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness,’ there might well be a poetry after the flood has receded, after, that is to say, the Romantic (and Modernist) lyric has been, in Bloom’s words, ‘murdered by its own strength’” (*Dance* 174-5). The issue here is that Perloff unproblematically equates Modernist lyric with Romantic lyric (and collapses Anglo and Germanic traditions), but then objects to this seemingly monolithic, timeless genre as passed its heyday: “Thus we take note of the ‘belatedness’ of this or that poetic text...without stopping to consider that it may be the genre itself, not the particular poet, that is ‘belated’” (176). Her most common objection is to the way that this historical concept of lyric has become synonymous with “poetry” itself over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “It may be well to clear the air by probing, a little more closely, the lingering hold Romantic norms for poetry continue to have among us. The equation of *poem* with what Bloom calls “the

Wordsworthian crisis lyric” is not fortuitous; it is the logical end product of a century in which this ideology was dominant” (176). When Perloff objects to “lyric,” a term which she uses interchangeably with “Romantic lyric” and “Romantic (and Modernist) lyric,” she specifically has in mind, “the equation of lyric with expressivity,” as well as, “Brevity, rapidity of movement, passion—all these were to be subsumed under the principle that was to become a cornerstone of New Criticism: organic unity” (177). She does not distinguish between a poem in which the poet speaks in her own voice and a poem in which she speaks in dramatic personae, a distinction that even a critic like Eliot recognizes as an important consideration in the historical development of If poetic genres.<sup>11</sup> It is also unclear whether Perloff objects to Wordsworthian crisis lyric, or merely Bloom’s contemporary account of it—but the distance between the two is an important distinction for a critic who objects to the revisionary effects of a genre to observe. Ultimately, Perloff’s real target in her criticism of this definition of lyric is not the genre so much as what the “Romantic (and Modernist) lyric” represents for her: lyric becomes synonymous in Perloff’s critique with “the subjectivity that haunted the latter Romantics, and, to a large extent, the Moderns.”

In contrast to Perloff, to rectify her problematic slippages, Jeffreys offers a broader historical account of the codification of the Romantic theory into Modernist ideology that Perloff decries, emphasizing that the term has an incredibly convoluted range of references:<sup>12</sup>

The most important transformations of the usage of the term *lyric* occurred during the Renaissance, long after Aristotle and well before Hegel, when short inscriptive forms such as the epigram, newly distributed by printing presses and emblem books, mingled with Petrarchan song forms and then reemerged in the confusion of miscellanies and comprehensively titled individual collections of shorter verse forms...From a welter of shorter poetic genres, lyric gradually emerged as the most common catchall category, and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was it mythologized as the purest and oldest of poetic genres and thus transformed into a nostalgic ideological marker. (197)

The transformation of lyric from a confusion of different genres into a “nostalgic ideological marker” is, of course, what Perloff and many other contemporary critics have actively tried to counteract, but in doing so, they have re-inflected the term. Hence it is possible to speak generally of the “canonical view, which Perloff and others uphold, of the belated, generic lyric as an ahistorical, self-contemplative crisis or epiphany presented in brief monological verse” (Jeffreys 201). In order to resist or counteract the influence of a New Critical canon, it is tempting to follow Perloff by adopting lyric as a term that is implicitly negative, now a “catchall category” for a welter of critical complaints about the Modernist canon and the literary institution that constructed it. I will argue that this tendency, since Jeffreys has identified it, must be resisted, in order to appreciate the

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss Eliot’s argument about the “three voices of poetry,” at length in my chapter on fourth chapter. Eliot 1954.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffreys is also far more cognizant of the way that contemporary attacks on a lyric ideology of New Criticism have created a caricature of their theories: “the New Critical era’s views of lyric were far less simplistic and unified than recent caricatures of New Criticism have suggested” (196). Another study that carefully demonstrates how contemporary champions of 1960s experimental poetry, associated with the 1980s Language Poetry, have mischaracterized New Criticism is Ashton *From Modernism to Postmodernism*.

innovations in the lyric voice that have emerged in experimental postwar poetry. Postwar serial writing, I contend, offers an especially important but complex example of how poets skeptical of academic intellectual formations explored a more historically responsive understanding of lyric while still conceiving of their work as within an open and developing lyric tradition. Moreover, the “mythology,” “nostalgia,” and “belatedness,” Jeffreys and Perloff say characterized the lyric by mid-century are qualities that poets ironically explore in the serial mode—often by presenting conventionally marked lyric features as anachronisms that create dissonance with other modern or contemporary parts in the series. One striking example is Spicer’s fondness for conceits that scramble Romantic tropes for poetic inspiration with technologies of the mass media: “The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar,” uses a homophone to pun on the classical “instrument” of the lyric poem: the “lyre” (Spicer, *Collected Poems* 374). His implication is not to trust this instrument of mediate speech, but by extension the poem suggests not to trust the radio either. The poet-radio figure is an important element of Spicer’s explanation of serial practice because it allows him to explain why he “receives” serial poems in short “transmissions.”

Jeffreys exposes Perloff’s anti-New Critical criticism of lyric as a critical ideology as pernicious as it alleges its predecessor to be. He shows her blindness to the slippage of her own vocabulary in the very essays that make an effective criticism of lyric “nostalgia”: writes Jeffreys, “Perloff, the acutest critic of the evolution of nineteenth- and twentieth-century lyric poetry, blurs the terms *lyric* and *Romantic lyric* so that it is unclear whether she contests the genre itself or only a particular historical variation...If the entire genre of lyric is belated, then by implication a reactionary ideology inheres in the genre, and any text identifiable as an instance of that genre could be assumed to participate in its ideology” (198). If a powerful current of critics writing about Modernist and postwar verse has been influenced by this view, the result has been that, “most of these recent criticisms of lyric share an expectation that the more lyrical a writer seeks to be, the more that writer will try to exclude history and otherness” (198).

Equally troubling, I believe, is that the converse of what Jeffreys observes is also true: critics who champion Perloff’s experimental genealogy often tacitly believe that the more a writer includes history and otherness into a mode of writing, the less that writer is “lyrical.” The problem, as I argue in each of my analytical chapters, is that purging lyric from experimental writing practices gives “lyric” a narrow field of reference that may not correspond to the poet’s own understanding of modern literary genre and its history. Perloff is not alone in this critical tendency, but rather merely one of the more outspoken and influential figures behind the trend. To be fair, she is also one of the scholars who have tried to be sensitive to the possibility to historical variance within the concept of lyric itself.<sup>13</sup> The problem of a reactionary critical ideology that has emerged around critiques of “lyric” clearly has causes that run deeper than any one critic’s interventions. In order to counteract this problem, we can start to seriously consider the ways that writers contemporary with the “ideologues” of Modernism and New Criticism crafted their own subtle responses to what they saw as an emerging aesthetic program, but also

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<sup>13</sup> Her clearest statement of a more nuanced, historically response account of different lyric transformations is in the introduction to *Poetic License*. There her argument is similar to Jeffreys, but not without characteristic slippages.

without simply assuming that the poets were critical visionaries, free from their own blind spots.

Arguments such as Perloff's have been instrumental in winning academic legitimacy for the postwar poets of my dissertation. However, it is essential to recognize how the definition of "lyric" on display in Perloff's revisions of Modernist literary theory has negatively influenced the reception of postwar serial writing. Such arguments are clearly lodged with the polemical aim of opening a space within academic criticism for writers working in longer, mixed-genre forms, including Spicer, Berrigan, Ashbery and others developing what I define as a postwar serial mode. The framework that Perloff establishes for this writing rests on a stark binary opposition between lyrical and anti-lyrical poetry. The "impasse" of lyric that Perloff recognizes is almost always tied, in her arguments, to the inevitable demise of lyric—lyric must die in order to make space for new, different modes:

Postmodernism in poetry, I would argue, begins in the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded—political, ethical, historical, philosophical—to the domain of poetry, which is to say that the Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystalized into a timeless pattern, gives way to poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and the comic, verse *and* prose...a new poetry is emerging that wants to open the field so as to make contact with the *world* as well as the *word*. (*Dance* 180-1).

In this passage the two alternatives that Perloff says "return" to the opening field of "poetry," are "narrative" and "didacticism." In other essays, she describes the options as "narrative" and "collage," but her point is similar: "postmodernism" in poetry is an effect of what Bakhtin calls the "novelization" of genre: the modern transformation of genre into something more plastic and developmental.<sup>14</sup> Writes Jackson: "One difficulty for critical thinking about the lyric is that a contingent, developmental view of genre is so intimately tied to the novel that the lyric becomes the novel's other, assigned to an outmoded stylization rather than a dynamic process" (*Dickinson's Misery* 55). Perloff's argument rejects lyric as precisely just such an outmoded stylization, and she suggests that hers is the only option for a critic who wants to take a developmental view of modern "poetry" that focuses on its political, ethical, historical, and philosophical vocations.

The "postmodern" poetry that Perloff introduces as post-lyrical corresponds very closely with the texts that I read in my dissertation. In fact, Perloff's description of the "crystalized" form of the Romantic lyric carries a strong echo of Jack Spicer's description of the individual poems that he quits, like a bad habit, in order to turn his efforts towards long, serial works. The serial mode as it appears in all three poets of my dissertation combines elements of verse and prose, and if narrative is not a strong component in all of the works, what I have called the emphasis on rhetoric in the serial mode could be described as "didacticism." Indeed, the opening passage of Ashbery's

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<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin argues: "Once [the novel] came into being, it could never be merely one genre among others, and it could not erect rules for interrelating with others in peaceful and harmonious co-existence. In the presence of the novel, all other genres somehow have a different resonance. A lengthy battle for the novelization of the other genres began, a battle to drag them into a zone of contact with reality. The course of this battle has been complex and tortuous" (*Dialogic Imagination* 39). Perloff echoes Bakhtin's influential essay when she argues, "a new poetry is emerging that wants to open the field so as to make contact with the *world*."

*Three Poems* presents a speaker trying to find a mode or “way” of writing which can “put it all down,” which suggests “all” of the “political, ethical, historical, philosophical” material excluded from the domain of poetry. What Perloff does not explain in her essay, however, is why this vast and diverse set of material would necessarily be excluded from poetry that expresses momentary insights, emotions, and solitary voices. Her focus is instead on the poetry that does allow all of these vital elements back into the text. Although she does not explicitly link this excluded material to the serial mode, the connection becomes clear when she explains, shortly after the passage quoted above, that the hinge figure is Ezra Pound: “In the English-speaking world, the pivotal figure in the transformation of the Romantic (and Modernistic) lyric into what we now think of as postmodern poetry is surely Ezra Pound” (181). In a major essay that I will now discuss, Perloff names Pound’s mode of writing that “opens the field” to all the “material” that a certain type of lyric has rigidly excluded; she calls it the “collage method” of the *Cantos*. Poundian collage in Perloff’s account becomes the prototype for later critics who have understood serial poetry as an “open form,” which also means, “anti-lyrical,” within the critical ideology I have outlined.

## II. From Modernist Collage to Postwar Serial

The opposition that Perloff makes between Pound and “Romantic (and Modernistic) lyric” has seriously shaped critical discourse on serial writing. What she describes as the “return” of “material so rigidly excluded,” that amounts to Bakhtin’s “novelization” of the “domain of poetry,” leads her to map an entire counter-canon of innovative poetry that fits perfectly into Bakhtin’s description of the novel: “It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is every questing, every examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review” (39). Because she defines this mode of poetry as the return of not one, but numerous repressed elements, she provides a formal description of the new mode that stresses its expansive scale, its heterogeneity, and most importantly, its ability to indicate—if not actually represent—historical time. Perloff argues that we should recognize a tradition of innovative 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry whose genealogy can be traced to Pound’s “transformative” poetics of fragmentation and collage. Pound’s dictum that the *Cantos* is a “poem including history” provides Perloff with an imperative, and “collage” becomes the mechanism for poetically accomplishing it (Pound, *ABC* 46, my emphasis). She makes this argument in a seminal 1982 essay that primes readers to interpret postwar serial poetry as a Poundian mode, and not surprisingly, in binary opposition to her version of Modernist lyric. Consider this passage in which she contrasts the two types Modernist long poem, and refers to the “serial mode” of Pound’s *Cantos*:

Despite its great lyric coda, Canto LXXXI is not essentially a lyric poem; its collage surface bears the traces of any number of diverse genres: epic, romance, satire, tall tale, travelogue, song, and so forth. By contrast, Steven’s lyric poems, ambiguous as their meanings may be, exhibit what the Romantics and New critics called organic form....Which is to say that there *is* closure in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, however much the ending speaks to new beginnings. What Vendler calls the “massively solid structure” of the lyric sequence has little in

common with the serial mode of the *Cantos*, a form which is, in Kenner's words, "a gestalt of what it can assimilate," or, as I have put it elsewhere, a running transformer, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data. (*Dance* 16)

The power of Perloff's argument is in the neat Pound/Stevens binary that she establishes, a tendency that is characteristic of her criticism of lyric. Perloff's definition contains many of the same elements that will appear in later definitions of postwar serial work. The key terms for each side of her binary are here in full force: the "new mode" of Pound's long poem is opposed to "closure," and its collage surface is a "juxtaposition without explicit syntactic connection of disparate items" that contains "diverse genres" (16). Curiously, the one genre that Pound's remarkably porous poem does not contain is "lyric," because following Perloff's logic, collage and lyric are like oil and water. Another formalistic descriptor that will later appear in accounts of postwar serial is "parataxis." Perloff argues that the *Cantos*' mode of verbal juxtaposition makes the text function not *like* visual collage, but *as* visual collage: "despite the temporality inherent in any verbal structure, Pound's way of relating word groups is *essentially spatial*" (16, my emphasis).

Perloff's definition of the Poundian collage mode and the genealogies of experimental writing it enables, makes a strong argument about the social and political value of poetic form. The influence of her argument has made it too easy to assimilate the poets that I discuss in my dissertation to the Poundian tradition. It is a truism to say that each has ties to that tradition, but her description of the mixed-genre collage poem also accounts for many surface aspects of postwar serials. All three poets openly experiment with collage techniques in ways that Perloff's scholarship has illuminated. Yet, Perloff's definition of the collage mode fails to account for the lyrical qualities of postwar serial because it doesn't read contextually, which is to say rhetorically, where biography and the expression of a personal voice can be heard. The stress on discontinuity and fragmentation in her criticism almost always seems to overshadow the elements of continuity and the concept of the whole, which postwar experimental poets are interested in for a variety of reasons, as my readings will discuss. Mutlu Konuk Blasing objects to Perloff's tendency to read "rhetoric" out of Poundian collage technique and then to generalize this technique as the archetype of later experimental practice: "Those who read Pound as both the paradigmatic modernist and the source of a postmodern poetic reaction to modernism aim to establish historical continuity between poetic practices and ideologies that may well be discontinuous. Pound comes to serve as a type, whose discontinuous composition projects...all the varieties of experimental poetry that came after him" (*Politics and Form* 5).<sup>15</sup> Blasing corrects for the critical oversight that she recognizes by arguing that to historicize poetic forms and techniques in postwar poetry critics must be attentive to rhetoric. She explains how rhetoric needs to be understood differently in writing practices that seem formally or technically continuous with Modernism:

Postmodern poets regard all poetic techniques—whether canonical or experimental—as conventional and instrumental, without any inherent authority;

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<sup>15</sup> Blasing's objection is not simply that critics who take Pound as paradigmatic of postmodern poetry repress the element of rhetoric in his technique, but rather that they tacitly follow Pound himself in this: "What is indeed new about [Pound's concept of] image is precisely its repressing of rhetoric. The impulse to purge rhetoric from poetry appears to be a general modernist impulse" (5).

techniques serve rhetorical rather than revelatory functions. And the modernist legacy is an inheritance that can be used for any number of rhetorical purposes. While postmodernism may look like a kind of neoclassicism, its authority is less historical than rhetorical, for historical coherence and cultural consensus are very much in doubt—which is itself one of the legacy of modernism. If neither universal truths nor a unified history or a dominant cultural practice that could substitute for metaphysical authority is available, by the same token a greater wealth of conventions becomes available. After modernism, different formal options open up, enabling poets to use a wider range of historical resources. (10)

In arguing the other side to Perloff's version of Poundian postmodernism, however, Blasing tends to exaggerate the extent to which postwar serial poets write as if free from traditional concern. I show that serial poems register a more pronounced tension between these two alternatives, which makes the serial mode an important hinge—a poetic terrain for rhetorically framing the “doubt” which afflicts “cultural consensus,” according to Blasing and other critics.<sup>16</sup> My caveat notwithstanding, Blasing offers the valuable insight that postwar poets treated discovery and appropriation of “historical” techniques as elements of a rhetorical praxis. Without this insight we risk overlooking a fundamental dimension of serial poems, because rhetoric in the works that I discuss is often present in the form of arguments about the poet's position within traditions whose authority is ambiguous. The first and most obvious example that illustrates Blasing's insight is the rhetorical gesture of Spicer's title, *After Lorca*, which flags the incredibly sophisticated ways that Spicer figures poetic belatedness in his first serial poem.

Other critics writing after Perloff's important intervention have also complicated her argument about collage. Andrew Ross, writing in the mid-80s about Ashbery's collage experiments in his second book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, historicizes collage technique and discusses how its value is transformed in the context of 1960s culture. Referring to Ashbery's pastiche of appropriated texts, Ross explains:

The deepest poetics on the *Tennis Court Oath* is to eradicate, at all levels, formal and material (through decontextualization and collage), the experience of an original work created through autonomous authorial agency. It would be a fatal mistake, however, to dehistoricize Ashbery's use of the found and the given within the classical context of shock, chance, and defamiliarization. ... To reiterate these techniques three or four decades after they were first adopted is also to recycle them and thus to regard them as if they were already a second-order reality, in the same way as we read the advertising strategies in an advanced consumer society. (Schultz, *Tribe of John* 203)

Ross does not explicitly discuss the seriality of the poem, but he signals the importance of understanding how the collage technique itself as appropriated and transformed, rather than merely the texts that are fed into the collage. This insight is relevant to my chapter on Berrigan, because Berrigan's sonnet series is constructed through a hodge-podge of avant-garde techniques that he borrows from different sources, and yet his work often defies readings that simply ascribe a standard value of “shock” to the techniques. Spicer also proposes that his serial poetry is a “collage of the real,” although *After Lorca*, the

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<sup>16</sup> In chapter 4 I discuss Robert von Hallberg's reading of this crumbling consensus in Ashbery's *Three Poems*.

book in which we find that statement, treats collage neither as a modernist shock technique, nor as a method to critique contemporary consumer culture.<sup>17</sup>

Despite a more historically sensitive account of experimental techniques, Ross does position “neo-avant-garde,” experimental poets of the 60s within a rigid binary opposition that is similar to Perloff’s: “Denied autonomy in the same way as writers and artists of the thirties, the sixties intellectual was now compelled to take up a position, either on the side of tendentious social commentary or else on the side of transforming his or her medium of expression. These are clear alternatives, even if they were not articulated as mutually exclusive options for sixties artists and writers” (203). The difference in position that he refers to is one between: “on the one hand, sophisticated and urbane poets who are able, through safeguarding the integrity of their voice and its poetic medium, to comment upon the excesses of popular culture and, on the other, collagists who construct a poetic surface upon which the languages and imagery of popular culture can be reproduced and incorporated into the substance of the text” (202). His dichotomy brings into focus an important aspect of my dissertation: the issue of an oppositional or experimental “voice.”

In each of the serial poems that I discuss, “voice,” is a complex matter, and often an important part of what produces notable tensions around the question of lyric within the work. Ross explains that postwar poets associated with the “neo-avant-garde” approached voice in their poetry as a matter of social and political position taking. The alternatives that he maps are clear-cut, and suggest two different ways that postwar poets understand poetry’s social vocation: poetry that establishes a clear, expressive voice, and poetry in which voice is abandoned in favor of a collage of cultural materials. The latter are poems that have, “structurally absorbed if not wholly integrated a wide range of demotic elements into the medium itself” (202). Ross contends that both alternatives are thoroughly political, even if the experimental poetry is only implicitly so, and to his credit, he does not privilege one mode over the other. His reading of Ashbery illustrates how strategies of appropriation that have political significance can offer poets ways to position themselves in relation to the tradition without simply being “in” a tradition—of Pound or Stevens. The alternatives that he identifies are more sensitive to the cultural, aesthetic, and political climate in which Spicer, Berrigan, and Ashbery worked, but the stark binary of “choices” merely seems to update Perloff’s choices between Poundian serial-collage and Stevensian-Romantic-Modernist lyric. Moreover, Ross’s essay reaches a conclusion that is symptomatic of scholarship on the legacy of Modernist and avant-gardist techniques in postwar “neo-avant-garde” practice: his rigid opposition starts to collapse, and in that collapse the specter of lyric returns. When the opposition between Modernist lyric and collage begins to blur, T.S. Eliot always seems to enter the picture. Ross argues, finally, that Ashbery’s experimental neo-avant-garde work retains an enigmatic element of “lyric” voice, despite formal devices that seem completely antithetical to expression, and that the prototype of this strange impersonal but affective element is Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. For critics such as Perloff and Ross, Eliot appears to be an enigmatic hinge figure. He offers a more “lyrical” alternative to Pound’s version of fragmentation and collage, which enables the redrawing of genealogies for postwar and

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<sup>17</sup> For a reading of Spicer’s later serials as critiques of capitalist culture, see Nealon.



contemporary poetry composed in a synthetic mode.<sup>18</sup> Ross does not refer to Eliot's "synthesis" of modes, but his description of Eliot uses the adjectival form of "lyric" in a way that implies Ashbery's poems retain a positive or progressive quality of lyric without the politically reactionary elements that Perloff protests against: "inwardness, subjectivity, monovocality, and transparency" (Jeffreys, *New Definitions* x).

Through Ross's intervention a "synthetic mode" becomes visible and viable in criticism of lyric as an alternative to the restricting Perloff binary view. The key element that Ross usefully highlights is rhetoric, which he articulates as the lyric "voice" that arises within experimental poems, including those, like Ashbery's, utilizing collage elements or techniques. Although Ross outlines the clear alternatives between rhetoric and collage—voiced poetry and a more tactile treatment of the cultural text—he recognizes a synthesis of the two positions in Ashbery's book by virtue of reference to the hinge figure of Eliot. Says Ross, in *The Tennis Court Oath*: "violence and lyricism are spliced together in a way redolent of the opening of *The Waste Land*." (207). We can extend this synthetic reading to other experimental poems of the period like Ashbery's, such as those of Spicer and Berrigan.

Ross's intervention is not without complications. Although he does not define "lyricism" as the opposite of "collage" in the explicit way that Perloff does, the synthesis that he finally recognizes in Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* makes it difficult to gauge whether the poems create the effects that Ross describes simply because of a lyrical element, because of the tension between the lyrical and superficiality of collage, or even *despite* the lyrical. Ross appears to argue the second of these three possibilities, but he is vague about the details. Perloff argues something similar in a recent essay where she accepts something she calls a "new lyric" mode: "Let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater: romantic [sic] poetics itself remains one of the highpoints of Western lyric—a poetics whose very violation today makes it an especially interesting object of study" ("A Response" 254). When Ross declares that Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath* has a lyrical element, he implies that the poetry retains some "integrity" of an authorial "voice," affect, or expression, despite the "violence" of formal techniques that he says are directly at odds with it. His initial claim is that Ashbery's book obliterates the author's voice: "Construed by their own lights, the collagist techniques developed in *The Tennis Court Oath* would preclude any possibility of presenting ...a unified author" (202). But Ross contradicts his initial claim with his comparison later in the essay of Ashbery's work to Eliot's modernist masterpiece. In Ross's eyes, Eliot's poem, despite its collage of different cultural sources, does not preclude the authorial voice of cultural commentary, nor does his work totally "flatten" the lyrical element. If Ashbery's poem "in no way laments the 'fragments shored against my ruins,' as Eliot's had done," Ross suggests that even with its strikingly "flattened" affect, *The Tennis Court Oath* still exploits lyric "resonance," albeit to different rhetorical ends than *The Waste Land* does. Ross concludes that, "*The Tennis Court Oath* already harbors within itself historical knowledge about the failures of the avant-garde, not only on the level of cognitive/aesthetic strategies of shock, but also in the context of the politically utopian project of constructing a new social reality" (207).

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<sup>18</sup> That Eliot would appear in Ross's argument where he tries to explain how Ashbery's experimental mode effectively works as social commentary might not be surprising if we recall that Eliot was the author of an essay called, "The Social Functions of Poetry." See Eliot 2009 3-17.

I take Ross's insight as an invitation to think about how and why Berrigan's *The Sonnets*, which actually includes many lines from Ashbery's early books in its "collaged" surface, produces effects that critics call lyrical despite their discomfort with the concept. Ashbery, Spicer, and Berrigan have digested many lessons from modernism and the historical avant-garde, and as a result the attitude that their work takes towards lyric poetry is variously critical, reflective, and ambivalent. The critical problem that I confront in my readings is to understand the poetics of generic mixing in the serial, while also answering how and why versions of lyric genre are included in the mix. If a poem can be called "lyrical" despite its supposed rejection of "lyric," clearly we are dealing with a more nuanced—and rhetorical in Blasing's sense— notion of genre in these works. Their serial projects suggest that "safeguarding the voice," or "incorporating" voice into the "surface of the text," are not mutually opposed alternatives (Ross 202). In fact, I think that we can invert Perloff's claim about the "violation" of Romantic poetics in postwar poetry, and recognize that it may be a lyric element in postwar serial poetry that "violates" a now-canonical definition of collage poetics, and makes the poems "especially interesting objects of study." Blasing proposes why experimental writing might invert the ratio of collage and lyric that Modernist initially found so scandalous: "When novelty becomes an old value, then, the past offers novel options" (13). The formal "shock" techniques that Ross identifies in Ashbery's 1960s revival of collage form becomes novel insofar as they are already a stock feature of the so-called "historical" avant-garde. Ashbery's appropriation, thus, uses the bathos of the formal device to express a vantage on his own historical conjuncture—one in which the original "shock" of such devices appears farcical the second time round (Ross 203). It is misleading, I believe, to regard such rhetorical gestures as somehow opposed to personal "voice," or uninterested in "safeguarding" it.

Other scholars have lately come around to a view that is similar to Ross's and mine, arguing that postwar experimental writers retain a complex investment in a lyric mode, despite formal techniques that supposedly augur against the voice of the poem.<sup>19</sup> Their arguments amplify and extend the new genealogy of the "synthetic mode" that I'm proposing here, following Ross's lead. For example, responding to the critical legacy of Perloff's "Pound/Stevens" essay twenty years later, Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains that alternatives to the binary are emerging, or already emerged decades ago and passed under the critical radar. I can now return to her observation about the postwar serial mode, having offered a survey of the critical terrain that she comments on:

lyric meditation vs. encyclopedic collage... those categories were, from their inception, too inflexible to accommodate the range of modern and contemporary poetry. By 1965, both George Oppen and Jack Spicer had, differently "invented" the practice of seriality—a way of structuring a long, sectional yet lyric poem as a series of meditative leaps, paratactic in relation, and thinking or meditating serious issues without narration, but rather by a kind of rhizomic, discrete tacking from point to point. One could argue that seriality solved the problem of form "haunting" modernism (Perloff 4). Remixing Perloff's binarist terms...serial

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<sup>19</sup> A special 2001 issue of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* dedicated to reprisals of Perloff's important 1978 polemic includes an essay by Perloff herself, and contributions by Douglas Mao, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Charles Altieri, among others. Nichols 1995 proposes a reading of Eliot that prefigures the interest that Perloff, and other champions of postmodernism, take in his work.

works could well be defined as meditative collage—a description crossing the binary of stylistic traits. Thus with the mode of seriality, many poets had already made syntheses of the Pound/Stevens opposition about twenty years before this opposition was critically enunciated. (“Genius for Sale” 196)<sup>20</sup>

Blau DuPlessis’ proposed a “synthesis” between Perloff’s binaries that sounds very similar to Ross’s description of Ashbery, and she also proposes Eliot as a precursor to the synthetic mode of serial, but she explicitly recognizes that Perloff’s categories of lyric and collage are too rigid to account for a postwar “practice of seriality.” Blau DuPlessis also claims that postwar serial poets’ mode of combining lyric and collage is “about twenty years” ahead of scholars, like Perloff and herself, who in time have come to recognize an important aspect of the modernist project, associated with Eliot and lyricism. The reason it has been overlooked, Blau DuPlessis claims, is because the lyric/collage binary blinded critics to it. She claims that the practice of seriality does not merely *make* the synthesis the critics later describe, but additionally that it is already a mode of “thinking or meditating serious issues”—a form of criticism. This criticism constitutes what I am here calling lyric “rhetoric,” or “voice.”

The terms Blau DuPlessis uses to describe Spicer’s and Oppen’s different serial practices are very close, however, to the definition of serial offered by Joseph Conte in *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*—the study that attempts to make the most rigorous formal definition of serial. Conte is yet another critic to lately join the chorus of revisionists moving past Perloff’s binaries. He, too, helps make visible a concept of lyric voice in the serial mode. Conte’s thesis is that the postmodern form of serial is significant for epistemological reasons: Blau DuPlessis echoes Conte’s earlier study when she relates the formal elements of serial to a new mode of “non-narrative” critical thought. In Conte’s argument, serial form is therefore one manifestation of a broader current of “serial thinking,” a concept he adapts from Umberto Eco, (who borrows the concept from composer Pierre Boulez) (Conte 24). In his attempt to categorize the series as, “the one form of the “long poem” which truly has its origin in the postmodern era,” Conte generalizes a set of features found in postwar long poems. However there is no mistaking that his study is post-Perloff’s “Pound/Stevens Whose Era?” because his formalist account of serial is clearly built on her blueprint of Poundian collage. Conte also alters the formula somewhat by citing Barthes’ structuralist semiotic theory as a foundation, but more importantly he distinguishes postmodern serial from the “epic” ambitions of Modernist collage:

The discontinuity of its elements—or their resistance to a determinate order—distinguishes the series from the thematic continuity, narrative progression, or meditative insistence that often characterize the sequence. At the same time, the series does not aspire to the encompassment of the epic; nor does it allow for the reduction of its materials to the isolated perfection of the single lyric. The series demands neither summation nor exclusion. It is instead a combinative form whose arrangements admit a variegated set of materials. (22)

Conte’s definition attempts to distinguish on formal grounds the specifically postmodern serial poem from “Modernist” forms of “sequences,” including verse epics, such as

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<sup>20</sup> Blau DuPlessis then reads this “synthetic” mode back into modernism itself—Loy, Pound, Stevens and Eliot all produce serial lyrics that “suggest that lyric and collage, fragment and meditation were mixed and simultaneous within poems of early modernism, not necessarily seen by poets as an either/or choice.”

Pound's *Cantos* and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and "meditative...lyric" sequences such as Stevens' "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction." This passage contains Conte's serial genealogy—a set of terms to describe the "open work," largely present in Perloff's earlier essays, but also with some alterations that subsequently appear in later discussions of postwar serial, such as that of Blau Duplessis. His key terms include: "indeterminate," "polyvalent," "discontinuous," "modular," "aleatory," and "procedural" (Conte 18,24).

But in this serial genealogy Conte adds an important distinction that is not so easy to see. If his study carries strong echoes of Perloff's analysis of Pound, Conte also alters the genealogy of postwar serial by proposing Williams' *Spring and All* (1923) as its prototype. Williams' book "consists of twenty-seven numbered, untitled poems interspersed with prose arguments whose concern is the defense of the author's poetics"; it offers an example of an "arrangement of discontinuous and mobile elements," and distances serial poetry from Pound's modernist epic. His choice of *Spring and All* as the Modernist precursor to postwar serial, however, points to the problems with his formal definition of the category, because Williams' sequence has in fact "allowed" its materials to be isolated down to the "perfection of a single lyric." Williams' sequence is now known best for the single poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," and that this poem is a perfect of example of the "small chiseled lyrics" that Perloff identifies with the Modernist lyric ideology (1985 181). In Conte's defense, the reception of Williams' book could merely offer evidence of reactionary reading practices, but the more important point is that Conte's definition of serial is still largely stuck within the rigid opposition between lyric and anti-lyric modes. Nevertheless, Conte's understanding of the postwar serial as a mode of thought distinct from Modernist versions suggests the polemical way that the poets in my dissertation put form to oppositional uses, often as a way to ask how Modernist formal devices can inflect contemporary social situations. These devices are rhetorical in nature.

The complication in Conte's definition is that despite suggesting that postwar serial poets use the serial mode for a type of critical thought, he ends up making unnecessarily fine distinctions that result in more stark oppositions: between Modernist "sequences," and postmodernist "series," for example. Conte's interest in declaring a form of long poem the sole property of postwar poets leads him to overlook the much more complex ways that projects he calls "serial" often contain elements that he identifies with the opposing side—including formal features marked by the poets as narrative and lyric. In trying to give the serial poetry formal identity and historical specificity he ends up defining it too narrowly. By contrast, Blau DuPlessis' claim about a mode of critical serial thought expands on Conte's narrowly formalist account, because she illustrates that one of the most salient features of the serial mode is in its use, and not rejection, of lyrical elements. Yet her view, like Conte's, is too narrow. Blau DuPlessis attempts to get beyond the dichotomy that she finds in Perloff's and Conte's definitions but remains trapped in one of his assumptions about serial form. Both Blau DuPlessis and Conte conceive of the serial mode as a distinct type of critical *thought*, although Blau DuPlessis amends the version by describing the mode as "meditative," whereas Conte firmly links "meditative insistence" with the more "continuous" mode of Modernist sequence.

The important disagreement about lyric meditation notwithstanding, both primarily link the formal elements of the serial to epistemological functions; “meditation” and “serial thought” both emphasize a thinker reflecting on the world in seclusion. Both of these descriptions of postwar serial overlook what I have described as the significant polemical and rhetorical dimensions. Form is clearly an important element of the serial mode, but I argue that form is less important to my poets than communication—it is the rhetoric of the serial poems rather than play at the purely aesthetic level that really accounts for the emergence of the mode. It is not that Conte overlooks the relevance of the social to serial poetics, but rather that the attempt to link epistemological effects to formal features is bound to mischaracterize the mode in which poets engaged with social issues. A primarily formal taxonomy is not sensitive to the different rhetorical uses that form takes within each poet’s situation, and the emphasis on reflective thought fails to grasp the pragmatic, communicative uses that I find in each serial text that I read.

### III. Lyric Rhetoric: The “I-You” Address and the Postwar Serial Mode

Critics including Blau DuPlessis and even Perloff herself have increasingly recognized that the categories of collage and lyric, and the opposition “Pound/Stevens” are too rigid to accommodate the actual practices of Modernist and postwar poets. This welcome development suggests that critics now recognize what Jeffreys describes as the consequences of their interventions:

In the context of the recent struggle to clear away New Critical poetics and to make room for a postmodernist poetics emphasizing openness in place of closure, intertextuality in place of the individual text, a fiction of polyvocality in place of the fiction of the ‘speaker,’ and the appearance of subversive play in place of the appearance of ironic control, lyric became a metonymy for New Critical ideology and, in the extreme case, for all of the Western literary authority since Plato. This trope depended for its rhetorical force on the New Criticism’s late-Romantic assumptions about lyric monologicism and ahistoricity, the same assumptions that were supposedly under attack. (203)

Perloff’s more recent arguments, for example, propose that “early Eliot” may in fact be the most important Modernist precursor to contemporary experimental writing, and that “in the twenty-first century, the issue is no longer that of lyric meditation versus encyclopedic collage, most of our best poetry partaking of both in unprecedented ways.<sup>21</sup> The focus today, once we get beyond...sheer subject matter, is less on genre or poetic mode, than on the *language* of poetry, and that makes Eliot and Stein...such key figures” (Perloff “‘Whose Era?’ Revisited” 139). These critics recognize that their previously excluded category of “lyric meditation” may actually be an important element of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetics, but they barely propose a more critical understanding of the concept, which leads to the feeling that their “syntheses” are forced.

An alternative way to approach the problem of a lyric “synthesis” in the serial mode is proposed by a group of scholars with a different intellectual formation. Their

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<sup>21</sup> As I discuss in detail in my chapter on Ashbery, Eliot actually voices a criticism of the category of lyric that reveals a historical sensitivity that critics of a “lyric ideology” rarely credit him with. See Eliot 1954. For Perloff’s recent reappraisals of Eliot see the Introduction in, Perloff 2002.

diverse perspectives could be called “pro-lyric,” with the caveat that they are sensitive to the historical dimension of lyric that Jeffreys outlines in his overview of lyric’s critical vicissitudes.<sup>22</sup> Their understanding of lyric is distinct from Perloff’s. Unlike critics who historicize lyric as an empty and confused category, and primarily a marker of modern critical blindness, however, these critics argue for the existence of a lyric genre: in trying to be sensitive to its transformations, they claim that something called lyric does exist, and moreover, that it is a distinct type of critical activity.

One such critic is Mutlu Blasing. She offers the most persuasive arguments about why a critical mode of lyric is at work in Modernist and postwar poetry.<sup>23</sup> Her views of lyric are a useful corrective to those connected to Perloff’s version. The crucial distinction that Blasing makes is between lyric as a primarily aesthetic category, and lyric as a set of practices that are fundamentally rhetorical. The critical mode that lyric offers, in her argument, is therefore immanent to language itself. Blasing references subtle historical transformations in the concept: “Essential to the classical lyric is rhetoric...The rhetoricity of lyric language and its relation to the audience is obscured with the emergence of ‘aesthetics,’ which registers a ‘modern’ anxiety about how a public audience might be defined or conceived...In the romantic opposition of lyric and rhetoric, the lyric comes to be privileged but also purged, as it were, not just of baroque ornament and diction, but its public offices” (*Lyric Poetry* 42 n.21). Blasing’s historical understanding of classical lyric, and the modern divorce of lyric from its rhetorical “office” is based on W.R. Johnson’s historical study of the genre. Johnson argues, “There is no question but that the forms of lyric poetry have met with remarkable changes in modern times”; he explains that classical lyric involved an I-You address, but that only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has this explicitly rhetorical mode been replaced by versions of Mill’s lyric that Eliot calls “meditative”: “the voice of the poet speaking to himself, or to no one in particular.”

What Johnson and Blasing explain as a symptom of this shift, many critics accept as lyric itself. Their point is that a historical reading of lyric’s transformations is necessary, but also that modern poetic theories have lost touch with an element that is still fundamental to poetic practice. Johnson explains: “The most usual mode in Greek lyric (probably) and in Latin lyric (certainly) was to address the poem...to another person or to other persons. This typical lyric form points to the conditions and the purposes of song: the presence of the singer before his audience...The specific context, the fiction of I and You and their situation of discourse, concretizes the universal” (23). He concludes: “What is essential...to lyric is rhetoric, and essential to this lyrical rhetoric...is the pronominal form and lyric identity, the dynamic configuration of lyrical pronouns that defines and vitalizes the situation of lyrical discourse” (23). The contingencies of lyric genre, and the modern transformations that these literary historians describe, in which the aestheticized, isolated “meditative” voice displaces a pronominal configuration that emphasizes rhetoric and context, uncovers a historical alternative to Perloff’s version of lyric.

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<sup>22</sup> Critics that I associate with this group include Blasing, Charles Altieri, Robert Kaufman, Allen Grossman, Oren Izenberg, and John E. Vincent. They do not make up a “camp,” and largely avoid the party affiliation that Perloff encourages with her Pound/Stevens essay. They represent diverse interests, but a common thread is that they retain a critical concept of lyric in their readings of post war long poems.

<sup>23</sup> See Blasing *Politics and Form* and *Lyric Poetry*.

On this basis I contend that the version of lyric that stresses the rhetorical I-You configuration is central to the postwar serial mode. Blasing develops Johnson's historical account into a theory of modern and postwar poetry, hoping to counteract what she objects to as "the critical polarization of the Pound-Stevens camps that Perloff first proposed in 1982," and that "still holds" (*Lyric Poetry* 18). An example of her understanding of lyrical rhetoric illustrates why her approach offers a way out of one lyric "impasse":

Rhetoric is an art of seduction; it aims to affect, to move, to transport the audience. The only "truth" rhetoric can claim lies in the social *power* of the material, physical act of speech. "Truth" inheres in the *event* of discourse and the relation between a speaker and a hearer; it is neither "inside" discourse—in what is said—nor outside the discourse...And the lyric is the most rhetorical of poetic genres, entirely dependent on the cultural audibility and credibility of the speaker. The reference of the lyric is hypothetical—the perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and memories of an "I" that refers only to the given instance of discourse...Poetic texts, emphasizing the physical media of sounds and letters, their tones and rhythmic arrangements, are designed to deploy the full resources of the medium for persuasion: the "I" has to persuade "you," the reader-auditor, to hear him as an "I," to believe him, and it does that by invoking the rhetorical and emotional authority of the material code. (*Lyric Poetry* 34).

Blasing's theory bears striking resemblances to Spicer's own self-theorizations, in particular, but also offers penetrating insight into the serial mode in *The Sonnets* and *Three Poems*. As I discuss in my first chapter, Spicer frequently invokes the myth of Orpheus in order to figure the lyric address as a rhetorical encounter. An early essay exclaims, much in the spirit of Blasing's theory of I-You address: "Orpheus was a singer. The proudest boast made about Orpheus was not that his poems were beautiful in and of themselves. There were no New Critics then. The proudest boast was that he, the singer with the songs, moved impossible audiences" (*The House that Jack Built* 230).

As I will argue, however, Spicer's understanding of the "physical media of sounds and letters," is incredibly subtle because the poetics of address that his first serial explores puns on the figure of epistolary address, and imagines the modern I-You encounter as a heavily mediated speech situation, laden with all sorts of social and sexual drama. Ashbery, in *Three Poems*, is invested in "communication" with his reader, but he uses the serial mode to foreground what he calls "the *pathos* of communication." Almost impossible to locate in time or place, the poem's voice appears strikingly "hypothetical," and the discourse begins by addressing a "you" on the first page. Ashbery seems to interrogate the conventions that allow the poetic voice to become "audible and credible," because a series of accidents and digressions that the voice falls into, and abrupt shifts in ordinary speech genres, make it difficult to ascertain whether the voice belongs to an author, or merely to the "lyric" discourse itself. Berrigan has a similar interest in the rhetorical pathos of a collaged-text, though the "matter" of his poem is clearly more personal and referential than Ashbery's: his cut-up sonnets reassemble pieces of his own writing and fragments of texts by friends. Rhetoric, for Berrigan, is closely tied to the form of the traditional sonnet, but his serial approach to the sonnet transforms the mode of argument and tries to move the audience in a different way. Blasing does not theorize the serial mode, but her understanding of lyric as a specific type of coercive speech

situation opens new possibilities for reading these works. The one aspect of her theory that the serial modifies, however, is the claim that lyric focuses on the “*event*” of discourse: the serial poem contains or provokes a series of *events*, and therefore involves a dynamic and shifting relation between speaker(s) and reader(s).

The dynamism of speaker-audience relations in the serial—what one reader of Spicer calls his “serial audience”—partly explains the generic instability of the mode (Imbriglio 112). Even Perloff’s definitions of Poundian serial collage, which ignore the possibility of lyric rhetoric, recognize the intense dynamism of the poems, which leads to the very problems of generic definition that I have framed. I appeal to critics like Blasing because I believe that the generic instability, or what Perloff calls the “openness” of the serial poems, does not preclude the possibility that the poets themselves understood or imagined their works as lyrical. When Jeffreys’ turns the lyric mirror back on its ideologues, and says, “the very impossibility of stabilizing the definition of lyric exposes the greater significance of this curious literary category,” and when he finds an “empty set that lies at the center of the history of lyric criticism,” that enables, “continual inscription by the ideologies of lyric’s critics,” he describes an attitude shared by postwar serial poets. However, they would not necessarily conceive of the practice with the term “ideology.” One of the defining features in the serial mode is how interested these poets are in the instability of genre, which I believe relates to their historicizing approach towards lyric: the series is a continuum for transforming and generating *lyrics*. Blasing argues that exploiting this instability of the social code, and the dynamics through which a speaker stabilizes meaning within communicative events, is in fact the essence of lyric; I tend to think any account of lyric that claims to identify a transhistorical core appears suspect.

Nonetheless, Blasing’s perspective on the I-You address unsettles a critical dogma (with, perhaps, a more rhetorically useful one) and offers a theory that helps to read the sophisticated rhetorical dimension in Spicer’s, Berrigan’s and Ashbery’s serial poems. She proposes one possible response to Jeffreys’ most insightful question: “Under what compulsion must anyone continue to believe that short, expressive lyric poetry need turn from social realities at all or even that, of all the genres, lyric is peculiarly prone to such evasions?” (203).<sup>24</sup> There are ways that serial writing of the postwar period seems to register this rhetorical question particularly well—I attempt to frame those ways. When I describe the serial projects as critical of the concept of lyric in their time, I effectively treat their poetry as a form of critique like the one Blasing imagines: texts in which an “I” attempts to persuade the reader-auditor to listen, but also to “listen” for the material code itself—the “pathos of communication.” At the very least, I want to be sensitive to the possibility that the poets themselves envisioned a critical vocation of lyric as an important dimension of their various “turns” to the serial mode. Ultimately, I do not pretend to resolve the antagonism around the critical concept of lyric, nor do I try. Indeed, it seems like the openness the concept, and its historical and even belated quality, is something that these poets value.

Like other critics who recognize the term lyric as riven by a complex history, but also still relevant to understanding the “dynamic pronominal configurations” of poetic address, I will treat the concept as valuable insofar as it remains useful. The merit of his

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<sup>24</sup> While I agree with his general position, I would submit to Jeffreys the question of why we must believe that expressive lyric poetry be “short.”



method is that it is in solidarity with Spicer's theory of language, and hence with the pragmatic orientation of his serial poetics: "Most of my friends like words too well," Spicer objects in a letter to Lorca, "Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else" (*Collected Poems* 123). The word "lyric," is itself just a word, and if Spicer treats it as a mere sticker, or a stick to prod the reader with, it might make sense for the critic to do the same with respect to Spicer's "lyrics." This is a poet, after all, who seems comfortable with the imperative, "Imagine this as lyric poetry." On the other hand, the poet who wrote these things had a vexed relationship to the "pleasure and pain" of words. According to lore, Spicer's real-life serial ends with words spoken on his death-bed: "My vocabulary did this to me."

## Chapter 2 Post Office Lyrics: Spicer's Epistolary Figure, and the Turn to Serial Poetry

### I. "No One Listens"

It seems paradoxical that the poet who begins his penultimate serial "book," *Language* (1964), with a short poem that laments: "No one listens to poetry," would write in his first book, *After Lorca* (1957), "I would like to make poems out of real objects...I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger" (*Collected Poems* 373). "Why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?" Spicer asks in another essay (*The House that Jack Built* 229).<sup>25</sup> How can one listen to a poem that has no sound in it? Or more to the point, why would the poet want to make a poem that cannot be listened to in an ordinary way, if he worries about the audience of his poetry? Spicer's statements such as these, often placed within the poems themselves, suggest that his fabled "turn" to a new poetic is organized around a central problematic of the audience. Spicer, however, is more interested in receptivity than reception. What he calls "serial poetry" explores a materialist theory of poetic genre, in which the serial poem fractures and displaces the singular "lyric" voice, in order to reflect the conditions in which the text is received. His serial books frame "listening" as a mediated activity. I will explain how Spicer's dual interest in the voice and mediation, "listening" and "pointing," leads him to make poems out of—or at least by pointing to—a certain type of "real object": letters. The pun is intentional.

Spicer's serial, however, treats the question of listening not simply as a literary issue, but as a larger problem of poetry's position in society. The serial reacts to a conventionalized understanding of the address in the lyric poem by inscribing various figures of audience into the text, but it does so in order to show the poem as something continuous with the audience's world. Spicer's serials treat words as things: they propose that the poem is a linguistic use-object that can produce real effects, rather than a beautiful vessel for disinterested aesthetic contemplation. The audience's role becomes an act of positioning the text, and positioning itself vis-à-vis the text. Listening becomes a deictic act, a game of echo-location. Therefore, what I will call Spicer's "audience problem" points to the question of lyric poetry's position not within some abstract public sphere, but in Spicer's world. "No one listens to poetry," acknowledges the historical conditions in which people—a public of private individuals—encounter poetry, as well as

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<sup>25</sup> The poem, titled, "Thing Language," in its entirety:

This ocean, humiliating in its disguises  
Tougher than anything.  
No one listens to poetry. The ocean  
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop  
Or crash of water. It means  
Nothing.  
It  
Is bread and butter  
Pepper and salt. The death  
That young mean hope for. Aimlessly  
It pounds the shore. White and aimless. No  
One listens to poetry. (*Collected Poems* 373).

other media that compete with it. The poem ends with an echoing enjambment: “No / One listens to poetry.” Spicer is confronting the reader, demanding, “Listen to this,” but also showing a different listening; the emphasis can also fall on *one*: “no single person listens to poetry, alone, because it is a group act.” Spicer’s attenuation of the voice in his serial poems is thus an inquiry into the social vocation of poetry during his time; it is not surprising that his poetic is informed by advanced studies in rhetoric and the pragmatics of language. Ironically, his concern with the audience and interest in spoken American English does not make for a more accessible style of writing, even if its preferred figure of address is the seemingly direct, I-You exchange of the epistolary. One of Spicer’s closest, lifelong correspondents, Robert Duncan, explains Spicer’s ambivalent populism: “From the beginning he saw his work as a public gospel—he wanted a public; and partly in humor, partly in earnest, partly in desperation, partly in anger.”<sup>26</sup> The complex desire that Duncan describes—part populist, part antagonist—suggests that Spicer will imagine an audience that is itself full of frictions—what Catherine Imbriglio has called Spicer’s, “serial audience” (Vincent, *After Spicer* 112).<sup>27</sup>

To understand the audience problem, and the pointing problem, at the center of Spicer’s writing practice, one must look no further than his “discovery” of serial poetics through a series of experiments with the rhetoric of personal letter correspondence, and with real letters themselves. The epistolary figure, which is shaped by his experiments at turning his personal correspondence with friends into serial letter-poems, allows him to repurpose his signature style of short, cryptic verses into a poetics of exchange and reciprocity, but also of negativity and absence. Spicer’s epistolary figure is a strategy for making poetry seem at once more substantive and communicative, and reflects the postwar literary avant-garde’s general interest in embodied speech, most famously codified in Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay. But ever fond of the dialectical turn, Spicer crosses purposes with his letter-poems. At a moment when new technologies were rapidly dematerializing communication and entertainment media, and offering new varieties of immediacy, he returns to a set of seemingly anachronistic rhetorical devices from 19<sup>th</sup>-century epistolary correspondence that emphasize distance, delay, and dispersal.

Spicer’s private correspondence with friends in the years leading up to his work on *After Lorca* reveal that by the time he started working on his first book project he was already quite interested in focusing poetry on the pragmatics of communication, rather than the hermeneutic task of interpretation. Spicer suggests the dimensions of the project that become manifest in *After Lorca*, and the serial books that come after, in a letter sent across the country to a friend during his brief exile from Berkeley in the early 50s: “By the way, I hope you show other people these letters I write you. They are personal letters

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Duncan, “The Underside” (unpublished ms.), 5. In Davidson, “Incarnations of Jack Spicer” 103-134.

<sup>27</sup> “Spicer’s primary audience, the one that he subsequently tries to entertain, becomes more immediate, local, predominantly male and like the serial poems it inhabits, serial. This serial audience (serial because the addressee rapidly changes from book to book and even within books) could account for some of the perceptions of audience as unreliable and unstable.” While I find her notion incredibly suggestive, I think that she takes Spicer’s figures of audience too literally, and fails to recognize Spicer’s own interest in the “instabilities” that she describes. Spicer’s 5<sup>th</sup> letter to Lorca offers a starting point to challenge her description of his audience: “Finally there are friends. There have only been two of them in my life who could read my poems and one of that two really prefers to put them in print so he can see them better. The other is far away” (*Collected Poems* 139).

for you and they are also public letters. I measure their success by how well I can succeed in being deeply personal and deeply public at the same time. Like my poems.”<sup>28</sup> If this letter compares itself to a poem, it also distinguishes itself from one. Yet precisely such a distinction is what Spicer begins to undo in *After Lorca*, and through pushing the envelope, so to speak, with the metaphor of letter correspondence as serial poetry, he develops the serial as a new critical genre within what he perceives as a problem of public relations. Spicer uses the series as a tool for amplifying rhetoric. What appears to be a poetics of direct address—of addressing poems and letters to real people—is a strategy for encouraging his audience to reflect on the contingent form of the poem’s genre and the mediated conditions of “listening.” His concern that “no one listens to poetry” is not a comment on the size of poetry’s contemporary audience, but rather a warning that listening itself should not be viewed as a unitary—or solitary—social practice. Spicer’s serial makes it nearly impossible to approach listening—or lyric genre for that matter—as a transhistorical given. Looking at Spicer’s *After Lorca* alongside “personal” letters and other texts, I hope to show why Spicer writes poetry that begs to be spoken, but can’t be listened to.

## II. Postal Lorca

*After Lorca* is the text that clearly shows how the central problematic of Spicer’s serial poetics first takes shape with his interest in the epistolary. It is the first book that Spicer published, and also the book during which he claims to have discovered “serial” poetry, so it occupies a significant place in his corpus, and also in the canon of contemporary American poetry. Consider that Spicer’s famous, Zen-koan-like sentence about the “sound of a finger pointing,” which has been taken as an important poetics statement in its own right, actually appears in a letter that is addressed to Lorca.<sup>29</sup> The letter makes the book’s pun on “correspondence” obvious:

Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. ...

Even these letters. They *correspond* with something (I don’t know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparent 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 to each other.

Love,  
Jack

(*Collected Poems* 134)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to James Allen, held in the Jack Spicer Papers, BANC MSS 2004/209.

<sup>29</sup> Spicer uses an excerpt from this letter, which also contains the sentences about making, “a poem that has no sound in it...” as his “Poetics Statement” in Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* anthology. Despite his pivotal role in the Bay Area literary scene mid-century, Spicer continues to be a casualty in the contemporary-anthology wars more often than not.

<sup>30</sup> Gizzi’s recent edition of Spicer’s collected poems incorrectly renders Spicer’s important typographic pun “*correspond*” as “*correspond*”—overlooking Spicer’s intention to distinguish the second “r” with roman typeface (*Collected Poems* 134). For a discussion of this issue see Holt, in Vincent, *After Spicer* 59.

The letter's pun on "correspondence" is Spicer's first attempt to publicly think through a new doctrine of poetics, and it is a symptom of shifting attitudes about lyric's social vocation in the 1950s. For some reason, critics who have tried to make sense of Spicer's eccentric and hyperbolic statements about his writing practice have tended to focus instead on the terms he provided at the end of his life in 1964, in the few lectures he gave on his poetics. In his "Vancouver Lectures" Spicer famously describes his poetry as "dictation," a practice in which poet becomes a medium for a voice that is not his own, or in another favorite figure of his from late in his career, the poet becomes a radio receiving short transmissions. Because the transmissions are unpredictable, and come over a period of days, the resulting poem takes the form of a longer series. The fact that Spicer blatantly cribs this Surrealist image from Cocteau's film *Orpheus* has not stopped readers from taking it as a serious explanation of how he writes a new type of long poem. The trope has been taken as an extreme, "postmodern" version of poetic impersonality, with a sci-fi twist Spicer was fond of. It is interesting to observe that Spicer's critical reception has functioned in a similar manner to his poet-radio, receiving Spicer's explanations of "dictation" and "serial" poetry he dictated to the audience in his lectures on his art. Michael Davidson, a critic partly responsible for reviving scholarly interest in Spicer's work, offers an example of how criticism focuses on Spicer's late-career mythology: "For him, poets are ghost, mediums, fakes, radios, and Martians through which the poem is filtered from an enddistanced, detached source...totally disinterested in who receives the poem...Since he does not generate the poem himself, the poet's creative process involves an emptying-out of what Olson called "the lyrical interference of the ego." Why should we take Spicer's accounts of ghosts and Martians, and his claim of "total disinterest" at face value, however? Spicer's epistolary trope suggests that the serial emerges out of a much more intimate tangle of ego and erotic attachment, that the "source" is quite interested in "who receives" the message, and that the personal voice, usually signed "love, Jack," is an important element.

The "correspondence" letter shows that Spicer's scrutiny of the expressive formalism takes place not in the abstract, but by understanding poetry's relationship to other genres and modes of discourse, which the letter frames in various ways. *After Lorca* is a complex "game" (as one letter says) of generic positioning: "these letters," casually uses the deictic to designate themselves as "letters," which implies that the text itself is a collection of "real objects," similar to the "lemon" and "seaweed" the speaker indexes, as if they are sitting nearby. At best, the book contains mimeographed reproductions—not holograph originals—of the six letters that make up the supposed letter exchange. The reader is called upon to distinguish "these" epistolary objects from the "poems" by conventional generic markers: salutation, signature, and prose formatting, as opposed to the versified and titled "translations" of Lorca. The deixis gives away what was already obvious about the book's artifice: the original letters cannot be included because the exchange is fictional, and something of a novelty.<sup>31</sup> If there was any doubt, Spicer gives away the fictional status of the letters in a letter to Donald Allen giving instructions on how to render the visual "pun" on "correspond": "In the letter to L[orca]...co-respond is the best compromise in print...The letters, however, were written

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<sup>31</sup> Holograph "originals" do exist, but they are scribbled into a spiral-bound notebook that also contains versions of his Lorca translations and imitations. (*Jack Spicer Papers* Bancroft MSS 2004/209)

for the typewriter. A pun the letter reflects” (Holt 59). It flows in the other direction too: what is the material status of “those” poems that accompany the letters?

Spicer’s subtle generic tweaking has another layer: it invokes the para-literary genre of an author’s “collected letters,” which implies an editorial apparatus, and an effort of gathering together real objects that have a dual ownership: to whom and where do the original letters “belong”? The book’s six letters are all signed by “Jack,” begging the question, where are the corresponding letters? Do they even exist, and what of the fantastic possibility that the book suggests: that Lorca corresponds telepathically by “sending” Jack his poems to translate. Vincent Kaufmann suggests the odd generic status of a poet’s correspondence, calling the letters a “vacant lot...hidden between the life and the work; an enigmatic zone connecting what he [the writer] is to what he writes, where life sometimes seeps into the work, and vice versa.”<sup>32</sup> Spicer is fond of exploiting the spatial sense of this generic “zone”—not only does his play with deixis in the fictional letter invoke real objects that have circulated between authors, but also the notion of positioning the different texts of the book into respective generic categories uses a spatial trope to suggest that the serial book is a “thing” extended in the reader’s world, a collection of objects. Spicer’s careful control over the publication of *After Lorca*, at his friend, Graham Macintosh’s White Rabbit Press, suggests his interest in pushing the conceit as far as possible. The “book” is a sheath of papers, minimally bound, which implies the dispersal and collection of “real” correspondence. The “enigmatic zone” of authorial correspondence also describes Spicer’s careful inflection of the letter’s genre with the salutation “love.” Awkwardly positioned between “official” and “amorous” correspondence, the letters employ a personal, confessional tone not only to show where “life seeps into the work,” but also where life and work seep into death and afterlife, which may be symbolized by “Lorca,” but is literally described in the letter as “some future poet” who takes Spicer’s position. The artifice of Spicer’s super-natural love letters puts distance between the book and more conventional collections of love letters: love is expressed not merely as an “exchange” of words, but as a palimpsestic overwriting of the book.

The book takes its “serial” form from the series of letters that Spicer supposedly inserts as accompaniment to the poems, but in the prose of the letters the poet theorizes poetic translation as a type of epistolary exchange that confounds generic boundaries: Spicer and Lorca exchanging poems, letters, and letter-poems. Spicer expresses the figure subtly through a typographic detail in the letter quoted above. The visual pun is so minor—and silent—that different editors of *After Lorca* have managed to overlook it: Spicer intended “correspond” to be italicized, with the exception of the second “r” which remains in roman typeface: “*correspond*.” The letter’s refusal to be italicized works like a diacritical mark to draw attention to textual inscription, and underlines the slippery play in Spicer’s pun between epistolary “letters” sent between poets, and the alphabetic letters that the poet exchanges in order to translate across languages. The visual pun draws attention to the typographic “letter” and by doing so invokes the corresponding sense of epistolary missive. Spicer does not merely suggest the difference that allows the mark—the “r”—to refer to both types of “letter, however, but rather adds another layer of

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Daniel Katz “James Schuyler’s Epistolary Poetry.” My argument in this chapter is indebted to Katz’ discussion of the epistolary figure in the poetry of Spicer’s contemporary, James Schuyler, as well as to his brief discussion of Spicer’s practice of sending letter poems, 150-1.

meaning because the figure of epistolary correspondence tropes the difference between the two meanings as a physical distance between two poets. To “correspond” with another poet—which is how Spicer asks his reader to think of the act of reading—is to negotiate innumerable minor linguistic transformations. Spicer’s pun on the “letter” reminds his reader that the text has a strange material status—it is a *thing*, and yet its value comes from the fact that it is always in transit between people. Strikingly similar to Derrida’s neologisms, Spicer’s play here is a deconstructive move, “*avant la letter*,” as people are fond of saying, and offers one of many examples of ways that Spicer troubles the hermeneutic horizon of the poem by invoking inscription. Critics have commented on how well Spicer’s work lends itself to deconstructive philosophemes, but oddly, to my knowledge none have explored Spicer’s typographic pun, which, seems by the far the most salient example of his interest in inscription and difference. Nor have I read an essay that discusses Spicer’s fascination with letters alongside Derrida’s *The Postcard*.<sup>33</sup> Poets correspond via letters and “letters,” just as the book’s letters “correspond” to/with the poems. Thus drawing a line between the prose letters of the book and the poems becomes as problematic as distinguishing the “real” translations that Spicer makes of Lorca from the “apocryphal” ones that he inserts.<sup>34</sup>

Although *After Lorca* is most frequently discussed as an interesting experiment with poetic translation, Spicer’s interest in the problems of translation are best understood as strategies for thinking-through a larger shift in his poetics. Though the reliability of the authorial voice—or any voice for that matter—is persistently undermined, it actually makes sense to take the “Introduction” seriously when it flatly states, “It must be made clear at the start that these poems are not translations. Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words with completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it” (*Collected Poems* 107). By suggesting a play of different voices within a single text, translation offers merely a convenient conceptual point of access into problems that Spicer associates with the poem, and associated labors of composition. The poet is described as a tinkerer who takes a perverse interest in violating the poem integrally. Spicer already recognized such issues of translation as part of a modernist problematic—one that he identified in works such as Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*—so his clever use of the preposition “after” positions the work, and himself, in a relation of belatedness not only to Lorca, but more generally after important 19th and 20th century projects.<sup>35</sup> His return to problems of the

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<sup>33</sup> The closest is Katz’ essay on Schuyler, which discusses Spicer and references Derrida as an “obvious” influence. The most clear attempt to read Spicer through the lens of deconstruction, as a poet of “disclosure” who (fittingly) came before his moment, is the collection of essays in a special Spicer edition of *Boundary 2*. In the volume introduction W.V. Spanos writes, “With the emergence in the 1970’s of a phenomenology of absence and a literary thinking that appropriates the anti-metaphysical or anti-logocentric formal and rhetorical imperatives of Heidegger, of Merleau-Ponty, of Jacques Derrida, Jack Spicer’s non-sense has begun not only to make sense, but to assume considerable importance in America. ...The postmodernism of Jack Spicer’s poetry is a complex phenomenon...he commits language to the freeplay of writing (somewhat in the manner of Derrida’s notion of *écriture*)” (1). See also Stuart and Scoggan.

<sup>34</sup> Clayton Eschelman does precisely this genealogical work in his illuminating essay on *After Lorca*. See Eschelman, “The Lorca Working.”

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to Blaser that responds to the confused reception of *After Lorca*, Spicer explains, “I can see why Pound got so angry at the reactions to his “Propertius.” (Jack Spicer Papers)

lyric genre, which he enacts in order to make a more historically situated and dialogic lyric, is therefore also a dialogue with important avant-garde experiments with translation.

Because the serial, as Spicer imagines it, is a resonating chamber for puns as well as other types of linguistic correspondence, we can let the “after”/“post” pun echo and think of *After Lorca* as a kind of post office, or a virtual space in which Spicer proposes a new conception of the poet’s office, his official role. “I don’t know if there is room in the world for a postoffice but you come across ‘em often enough, if you don’t make the mistake of pretending that they’re in a fixed place (like the moon) and if you don’t let their continual changes bewilder you,” Spicer writes to his friend, James Alexander, in 1958, suggesting how portable the epistolary becomes as a trope for his poetics. Because the metaphor of correspondence in *After Lorca* prefigures Spicer’s unique take on poetic impersonality, Spicer’s vision of the serial book as a “post office” flies in the face of “official” (academic) doctrines of the poem, and hence the notion of a poet/post-officer that delivers the poems in Spicer’s first serial book troubles well-established ideas about the expressive subject who “delivers” the poem. Spicer’s rhetoric helps create a picture of the poet-postal-worker who delivers the letters as external to the poem. As a trope for conceptualizing the long poem as a series of inter-related parts, the whole of which exceeds any single speaker’s intentions, letter correspondence proposes a different model of meaning than a more traditional book of translations. Translation traditionally understood involves a hierarchal relationship between translating poet and the original work, whereas “post” becomes a way for Spicer to understand “position” in the text—to think of the rhetorical positioning of poet and audience, and to liken translation to a more literal, spatio-temporal act of repositioning another’s words: “That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time.” Therefore correspondence translates the concept of translation, but it also responds to it and displaces it. Spicer treats the concept itself as something that is caught in time, rather than beyond it, which is why “correspondence” and “translation” are merely more examples of the “radically metonymic sense of language” that the second letter describes: “Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem...They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to” (Katz, “Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*” 92; *Collected Poems*, 123).

Spicer’s epistolary figure emerges forcefully in the first pages of the book in a short poem that makes the pun on letters. “Ballad of the Seven Passages,” is one of the ten “apocryphal” Spicer poems in the series, and it does not make much of an effort to conceal the fact that it is not a Lorca original:

Rimbaud is spelled with seven letters of the alphabet  
Your heart will never break at what you are hearing  
Rimbaud was older than you are when he was dead  
Your heart will never break at what you area hearing.  
I tell you, darling, beauty was never as old as he was  
And your heart will never break at what you are hearing.  
Shut your mouth.  
Rimbaud is spelled with Seven passages  
A E I O U Y  
And that stony vowel called death.



Oh,  
Damn Rimbaud,  
Beauty is spelled with all the vowels of seven passages.  
Shut your damned mouth  
When Rimbaud died he became older than your alphabet

And your heart will never break at what you are hearing. (*Collected Poems* 111-2)

Instead of translating Lorca, the poem loosely corresponds with Rimbaud by approximating his famous “*Voyelles*” sonnet, and therefore it is the first indication in the book that Spicer’s exchange of letters has numerous correspondents. Scholarly interest in the book has so far focused on Spicer’s translation of Lorca, and critics have overlooked this short poem. It is overshadowed by the volume’s much longer translation of Lorca’s “Ode to Walt Whitman,” which is often described as the only “serious” translation in the entire book, but the “Ballad” actually plays a more important role in the book’s turn towards seriality, and it also is a more typical example of the type of shorter verse that Spicer spends the rest of his life building his serial books out of. This poem is more obviously “after” Rimbaud than the book’s other poems are after Lorca—in the sense of being loosely based on the Rimbaud original, but being more invention than translation. Spicer’s liberties allow him to demonstrate a type of generic transposition as well: the original sonnet has become a ballad. Spicer’s change of verse form betrays a subtle attention to variance, and suggests lyric is actually an amalgamation of different generic forms from different traditions. Spicer implies that the transmission of a text across geographic, temporal and linguistic borders also entails a translation into related forms. Both ballad and sonnet retain a connection to musical practices, but the conventions are different. The Romance tradition of the sonnet maps onto the Anglo-American ballad, which Spicer took special interest in through folk music traditions. In Spicer’s poem, the rudiments of the ballad are heard in the echoing refrain: “Your heart will never break at what you are hearing.” Whose heart the poem speaks to, or speaks from, is not certain, however.

Dedicated to fellow San Francisco poet Ebbe Borregaard, the “Ballad” links the book’s central epistolary trope to the conventional theme of lyric voice. Voice bleeds into an act of voicing, and therefore links this poem to the “heart” of Spicer’s serial project. It is important to note the ways that the poem both encourages and resists a reader’s attempt to “voice” it, and in doing so, models the kind of “serial” listening that Spicer is eager to teach. Although the poem is dedicated to a real friend of Spicer’s, its double address to Ebbe Borregaard and Rimbaud makes the direction of speech unclear. The poem’s “you” seems to pass back and forth between the two named men, but the theme of “voicing” alphabetic letters also makes the poem exist somewhere between the page and the mouth. Neither Rimbaud’s nor Borregaard’s vowel-heavy patronyms are actually spelled with all “seven” vowels, but both contain seven distinct letters, and therefore the two names correspond on a formal level. Because the central drama in the poem is not so much the romantic conceit, but rather the linguistic articulation of different sounds by means of “letters,” the pun on epistolary letters literalizes the material structures that make conceptual correspondences possible. The poem goes out of its way to show speech as a mediated activity, but also a dynamic act of actually producing sounds with the mouth. Begging to be read out loud as if it were the script for a phonetics lesson, the line, “A E I O U Y,” is also a bold reminder that we are looking at

silent type-face.<sup>36</sup> Together with the repeated, “shut your mouth,” the line of vowels provokes the poem’s reader to think about what voice is speaking, and warns the poem’s listener to listen carefully. The poem constantly dislocates voice, and reinforces this estrangement with the second pun on “passages”—a linguistic reference to the mechanics of making vowel sounds by shaping the mouth into a resonant pathway. The book presents the reader with a transcript of sorts, in order to suggest that the real poetry only occurs through the passage into the reader’s voice. Therefore he cleverly signals the inherent variation of live performance, as well as regional accent, with his transliteration of the vowel-sounds in Rimbaud’s name: “Oh / Damn Rimbaud,” uses conventional English words—“/o/” “/dam/” that echo the French pronunciation of vowels in /ram – bo/, rather than the bastardized /rim – bode/, that an American speaker might produce. Spicer does not offer these as correctives to improper speech, but as a directive to notice different possibilities for the voice that are not so much in the text, as they are actualized by it. In fact, it is the illusion that there is a single “voice” in the text to begin with that Spicer seems to be diametrically opposed to in this poem of fractured sounds, forms, loves, letters, and lips. “It is not merely that the voice, the personal gets in the way of the poem. That is bad enough. But worse, the sounds of the language change year by year and mile by mile from the speaker,” Spicer writes in a seventh letter to Lorca that he chose to omit from the final version of the book.

What Spicer appears to be doing in the “Ballad” is offering an object lesson in the “sound” of the poem, which is utterly distinct from the voice which gives “life” to it. Rather than suggesting an intimate and direct passage from voice to voice, heart to heart, the “Ballad” puts a stony material in the reader’s mouth—the “seventh vowel.” Sound confronts the reader as an object extended in the world, mutable and mute-able, and subject to constant change. Spicer likens the act of “voicing” to a literal exchange of positions—positions that the mouth makes. The distancing function of the text is a crucial part of the interference that Spicer is trying to run: “I could not have translated your poem from a tape recording of your voice,” he says in the unpublished letter to Lorca, “Your voice, my voice, your page, my page, your language, my language—they all get in the way if we let them.” Letters are not about direct address, but rather figure an economy between different audience positions in the poem.

### III. The Turkish Bath

*After Lorca* is the book in which Spicer says he “discovered” serial poetry. He outlines his serial poetics around the concept of “correspondence” within the book’s “letters” to Lorca, but it is only in a letter that he sends to fellow Berkeley poet Robin Blaser, after the book is published, that he explains the significance of his discovery. His letter has become one of his most important and frequently cited poetics statements. It does not mention “correspondence,” but rather uses another set of figures to illuminate how his turn towards the serial entails rethinking lyric as a historical genre, and “lyric reading” as a social activity. He writes to Blaser:

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<sup>36</sup> Rimbaud’s original sonnet is also a work that has inspired the vocal performances that stress the dynamic range of the speaking voice. For a variety of remarkable performances see Christian Bök’s recordings of the sonnet on YouTube.

Halfway through *After Lorca* I discovered that I was writing a book instead of a series of poems. . . .

The trick naturally is what Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us – not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat, but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem. This is where we were wrong and he was right, but he complicated things for us by saying that there is no such thing as good or bad poetry. There is – but not in relation to the single poem. There is really no single poem.

That is why all my stuff from the past (except the *Elegies* and *Troilus*) looks foul to me. The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath. It was not my anger or frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique – something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit – that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry. Look at those other poems. Admire them if you like. They are beautiful but dumb.

Poems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can. . . . Things fit together. We knew that – it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone. (*Collected Poems* 163)

The letter presents the basic outline of a conversion narrative. It is important that the poetic discovery that Spicer makes was unintentional, because the very nature of the poem that he discovers attacks the notion of the well-wrought, short and discrete poem that dominated Spicer's contemporary "English Department." The "book" is Spicer's new compositional unit, and with it he intends to displace the individual poem: it is precisely unity and formal containment of the "beautiful" poem that Spicer has learned to escape. He characterizes the "single poem" as a self-contained structure in which formal artifice and aesthetic "beauty" "exchange" for interiority. Yet while it may appear that the alternative that Spicer relates to Blaser is a formal innovation—a new definition of the fundamental poetic unit—his letter has much deeper implications as a theoretical statement of a serial poetics. The more radical gesture of the letter is to attack the idea of containment and identity implied by poetic form itself. As Katz points out, we cannot merely take the book as a replacement of the individual poem because it would then be subject to Spicer's same objection to the shorter unit: "Rather, his poetics take on their full power when considered as a poetics of displacement and deferral; 'there is really no single poem' must also imply 'there is really no single book'—that poetry, to be poetry, must always be exceeding its own limits and falling short of its own demarcations" ("Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*" 85). The letter proposes the book, which he later will call the "serial book" or "serial poetry," in opposition to the lyric poem's aesthetic autonomy, which means that the alternative to "perfect poems" is not so much a form as a mode: a looser, more open "way of writing of the moment" that ultimately leads the poet out of

the short poem's formal envelope. Spicer's idea of letting this writing "go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem..." presents the basic axiom of serial poetry: the serial poem is an *act*, or mode of doing, rather than a form, and its ephemerality tries to escape formal confinement. The gesture he announces to Blaser is one of restoring the poetic act to the real world. Spicer's act-centered approach is consistent with the avant-garde aesthetics of the period. Robert von Hallberg describes Harold Rosenberg's 1952 essay on the action painters as gospel for the avant-garde poets on both coasts: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." This is the climate in which Spicer's close friend, Duncan, says, "In this aesthetic conception cannot be abstracted form doing" ("Poetry, Politics and Intellectuals" 84). Spicer's figures for dematerializing the work, however, are strikingly original. If Spicer's choice of "book" to describe his discovery corresponds with Mallarme's notion of *le Livre*, we can see Spicer's manifesto as an inversion of the Symbolist project: "If Mallarme, as Sartre suggests, put the world between parentheses, Spicer on the other hand does similar violence not to the world, but to the poem" (Katz 85).<sup>37</sup> Spicer's problem with the idea of a "single," "perfect" poem is really the notion of a boundary that separates it off from the world that it is in, which is why he refers to the short poems that he wasted ten years of his life on as a kind of vehicle for exchanging one type of currency: emotion, for a foreign one: *poetic* language.

The sense that his new concept of "book" is not a formal category is also implied by an important but subtle detail of the letter. While this letter has been taken as his first announcement of what he later calls "serial poetry," he describes his new unit as a book, "instead of a series." Why would he describe his discovery in opposition to a series? *After Lorca* is, in fact, a series of translations of Lorca's shorter lyrics, interspersed with a series of letters, and containing one longer Lorca poem: the famous "Ode to Walt Whitman." To differentiate the work as "a book," from its putatively serial form, however, proposes a distinction that is not formal. It seems as though the book implies a more intentional construction—a higher level of patterning or closure, and yet Spicer defines the new entity as less intentional than the individual poem: a thing that emerges when the poet loosens his grip on design and lets go of "perfection." If *After Lorca* appears, literally, to be "a series of poems," what Spicer means by "book" must to be something that exceeds the formal. Therefore, another axiom of Spicer's serial poetry is that its basic impulse is against the reification of the poem, which co-exists—paradoxically, it would seem—with his constant troping of the materiality of the poem. The move follows a general trend that Tilotama Rajan sees already present in Modernism's early Romantic forebears: "Lyric is increasingly absorbed into larger structures which place it within a world of difference" (Hosek and Parker 195).

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<sup>37</sup> Spicer's relationship to Mallarme's symbolist project is clearly more complex, as his frequent invocation of a "pure" poetry that is "free of rhetoric" suggests. In this way he is similar to modernist writers earlier in the century, according to William Doreski: "The modernist welcomed symbolist urban topics and colloquial diction, but their suspicion of the mystifying power of symbolism, their sense of the dialogic nature of language, and their embrace of the lyric narrative (like Rimbaud's "*Le bateau Ivre*") and other impure genres (such as the one described by M.H. Abrams as the greater Romantic lyric) shaped a new kind of poetic" (xiii).

To make sense of how the “series” gets displaced at the moment that he discovers “serial” poetry, however, Spicer has to shift his discussion from poetic form to social act, and he does so by shifting registers to a very different metaphor. In theory, the letter’s attack on aesthetic autonomy is not remarkable, but Spicer adds a fascinating twist when he shifts his criticism of “English Department” poems into the vocabulary of public and private sex acts. Spicer inflects the generic through the social, and shows that he thinks of the two as faces of the same coin. He offers Blaser an evocative formula that he has become known for: “The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath.” The statement casts his poetic practice in terms that allude to Spicer’s open homosexuality, which at the time was a bold gesture in itself. If his images are not explicitly autobiographical, they index his social position by means of his knowledge of this form of gay erotic encounter in 1950s America. Those who have commented on this letter’s suggestive analogy, however, have not recognized that Spicer blends together two different figures of similar, but distinct acts. He does not liken his short poems to one-night stands *in* a Turkish Bath, but rather toggles from one figure to the other. His slippage is interesting, because while the one-night stand suggests an encounter that is emotionally intense, but lacking in development, the bathhouse encounter is more overtly sexual, and also more radically discrete, anonymous, and shorter in duration. The very aspects of the short poem that Spicer finds constraining are intensified in the bathhouse. As a social institution the Turkish Bath offers a space that blurs the temporality of the “one night stand” itself, because erotic coupling can be had any time of day, and without the requirement of lasting the night, or even buying a drink. If the one-night-stand implies a minimal narrative, the discrete/discreet sex act in the bathhouse is a different genre of experience that seems more difficult to narrativize. There is also a difference in the aspect of publicity and privacy between the two: while the one night stand is conventionally a private act, sex in a Turkish Bath blurs the line between public and private, personal and impersonal. For precisely these reasons it has been an important *topos* in queer theory.<sup>38</sup>

Spicer’s mixture of metaphors ambiguously positions the single poem between these two types of acts. The problem he has with both is related to their anonymity, discreteness, and isolation, and yet his slippage from bedroom to bathhouse also reveals that he sees his practice of writing individual poems sliding in that direction. With its unique ratio of publicity and privacy, the bathhouse ultimately offers a more interesting dramatic scene for the type of isolation Spicer is describing. It is a specific location—but one that is significant for its lack of context. The uniformity that facilitates the bathhouse encounter is what seems to make it “meaningless.” The odd thing about Spicer’s analogy is that the anonymous sex in the Turkish Bath is an especially serial type of activity (Vincent, *After Lorca* 182). It is not the act itself, then, that seems to trouble Spicer, so much as the repetition of similar episodes without any way to connect them. The letter sees both modes of poetry as types of social acts, but it distinguishes between kinds of relationships that the acts put into practice. Spicer clearly favors acts that develop,

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Snediker’s discussion of Spicer’s bathhouse scenes, in his essay on Spicer’s *Billy the Kid*, contrasts Spicer and Leo Bersani’s theories of bathhouse sex. Bersani observes that the bath house is a space that facilitates, “shedding much of the personality that individuates [its guests] psychologically.” (Snediker, “Jack Spicer’s *Billy the Kid*” 182)

change, and progress, rather than mere iteration without inter-relation. However, the “one night stand” still seems to hold a certain appeal to Spicer—he calls it “beautiful” with a remorse that portends recidivism—but he ultimately finds it troubling because of its intransitivity. His figure suggests that it is the lyric’s failure at negativity that he despairs—its inability to recuperate the perfectly contained emotion back into a more socially available, and therefore “meaningful,” form. The operative word in his critique of the one night stand is “unique”: these discrete acts resist connecting back into the poet’s life is because they create the illusion of being “singular” when in fact, there is something remarkably generic about them. Hence, the “single poem” actually encourages a slide into a bad version of seriality, and the new mode of writing that he proposes represents a different version.<sup>39</sup>

The difference between the two modes hinges on what he refers to with the crucial word “pointing.” In the letter that describes why *After Lorca* is a turning point in his career, “pointing” is the closest he comes to naming the epistolary mode, but the reference is clear. The type of pointing we find in epistolary correspondence offers him a template for a poetry that addresses its audience by name, while also figuring distance and delay involved in such an address. The one night stand, and even more so, the bathhouse, offer negative examples of what he means by “poetry that points.” They describe erotic consummation that results in loneliness, which by analogy makes the lyric poem favored by the “English Department,” “meaningless” because of its lack of external relation to a larger collective unit. Spicer’s figures, however, link the failure to point in the short poem not to its length, but to the issue of voice. He says that because these “perfect” poetic objects are “beautiful,” they become “dumb,” which is to say that Spicer’s objection, in this elaborate social inflection of genre, is to the way the “single” poem represents “voice” as itself solitary, intense, and immediate, while also publicly available. The Turkish bath offers Spicer a very specific version of “nowhere”: a social enclosure that contains the wrong ratio of public and private. It becomes the analogue for a bad version of interiority that is present to a lesser degree in the one night stand: although the sex inside involves coupling, it comes off as a solitary act that “belongs nowhere” precisely because it is so intense and immediate. “Pointing,” on the other hand, implies mediation and remainder, which is what Spicer’s alternative mode of writing focuses on, and the analogy that he offers as an alternative to the bathhouse is one of voicing and mediation: “poems should echo and re-echo against one another.”

It should now be apparent that Spicer uses the bathhouse analogy for “English Department” poetry in order to critique a classic definition of the lyric poem. The strange enclosure of the bathhouse is Spicer’s restaging of a famous scene from late romantic literary theory: John Stuart Mill’s definition of the lyric poem as solitary speech that is “overheard.” Mill codifies this definition in a formula that still proved enormously influential over a century later, despite the many modernist projects aimed at distressing it: “Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*...Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.” Virginia Jackson explains, “On this view, in order to have an audience the lyric must not have one” (129). If this sounds eerily similar to Spicer’s sexual encounter, in which the other partner seems to evaporate in the consummation of the anonymous deed, consider Mill’s striking

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<sup>39</sup> The parallel with Hegel’s notion of a “bad infinity”—an insufficiently mediated totality—seems striking.

figure for lyric “song”: “[it] has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next” (130). Mill’s prison cell becomes Spicer’s Turkish Bath in a slight modification of the dramatic scene that also brilliantly translates it into a campy, contemporary gay lexicon. With the bathhouse Spicer points out that his individual poems, and the poetics of New Criticism, operate under Mill’s assumption about the structure of address in “lyric” poems: the poems fictionalize their discourse as the speech of a solitary speaker, and therefore dissemble that they are composite texts that have an audience. His criticism aligns with contemporary critics who have pointed to Mill’s definition of lyric as a fundament of “lyric ideology”: “Put simply, [this logic of lyric address] converts the isolated “I” into the universal “we” by bypassing the mediation of any particular “you” (*Dickinson’s Misery* 128). Spicer figures the bathhouse as a social and aesthetic prison cell, thus his alternative mode of serial brings the poem outside, into contact with other voices and listeners. Making his poetry “heard,” rather than “overheard,” is what he means by “pointing,” and he achieves this by returning to discursive strategies that are overtly *conscious* of an audience. For Spicer, the serial discovery, which takes him out of the bathhouse, is the return to a more rhetorical understanding of the poetics of address, and specifically a figure of address that involves writing to “you.”

Before continuing to explore the alternative mode of poetry that he proposes to Blaser, it will help to see a specific example of Spicer’s claustrophobia inside his “English Department” style of poem. It would be hard to find a better—or more pathetic—specimen than his early lyric, “One Night Stand.” As the title suggests, the poem describes a nocturnal scene of cruising in a bar, and its aftermath the next day. Neither the act referenced, nor the poem itself, are terribly memorable, which is exactly what the short, 15-line poem laments. Rather than describing the scene of consummation, or the nameless partner, it only points to its “stand,” metonymically: “...your red silk tie is a real heart / ... your raw wool suit is real flesh.” Like the single night, the poem has hardly started by the time it ends. The singular affect that it offers in exchange, however, is none other than Spicer’s “anger and frustration,” over the anonymity and ephemerality of the hook-up that he describes in his letter to Blaser. The poem ends, “Waking tomorrow, I remember only / Somebody’s feathers and his wrinkled heart / Draped loosely in my bed”(Collected Poems, 13). The feathers, however, hint at a more literary form of isolation than the garden-variety erotic sort. With the lines, “Listen, you wool-feathered bastard / My name, just for the record, is Leda,” Spicer signals to the reader, who is secretly overhearing this soliloquy, that his poem rewrites, translates, or otherwise corresponds to Yeats’, “Leda and the Swan.” Yeats’ poem, it will be recalled, figures the sex act much more directly: “A sudden blow: the great wings beating still” is the graphic introduction to the sequence of images that constitutes the bulk of the verse. Does Spicer represent his sexual encounter only indirectly, through traces of exfoliated men’s ware, because of the taboo nature of the sex? From our vantage, the indirection makes this a historical document resonant with perceived homophobia. While this reading seems plausible, it seems to me that the more interesting matter has to do with the poem’s mode of citation, rather than representation. By invoking Yeats’ famous lyric, Spicer shows that “pointing” is also an issue of citation. Spicer’s poem rather lamely gestures towards Yeats’, but it hardly “resonates” with it. If anything, Yeats’ powerful, but hyper-condensed mythology—“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon

dead,” gets shed like the clothes in Spicer’s more domestic scene of banal anguish (Yeats 214-5). Cramped into its claustrophobic form, his one-night stand cannot bear the history of Yeats’ lyric that it tries to contain.

What Spicer truly seems frustrated with is his lack of room to work with Yeats’ poem—to over-determine the relationship between the two. To resonate, Spicer suggests, will require both a longer structure and a more complex relationship to audience. The issue is not, I believe, that Spicer wants to translate Yeats’ poem or some emotion *in* it—his position on translation in *After Lorca* makes that clear. In fact, it is precisely because he wants to have a looser, less determined relationship to the previous poem that he wants out of the “One Night Stand” club. The pretense of perfection in this “beautiful” little poem is that it could perfectly translate the sense of Yeats’ lyric, when in fact, Spicer would like the act of commerce with Yeats to be more mediated through his own time and place, a task that lyric genre, narrowly conceived, is not up to. As Spicer’s serial books, beginning with *After Lorca* will explore, a perfect translation of Yeats is impossible, and the serial is a strategy to introduce historical perspective into the poem’s “voice”—to convert it to a game of “voicing.” Herbert Tucker refers to Mill’s formula for the solitary lyric speaker as a, “thirst for intersubjective confirmation of the self.” What he means is that Mill’s lyric imagines a solitary, individual reader, and, as Jackson explains, “a self-address so absolute that every self can identify it as his own.” Spicer’s rewrite of Yeats doubles this thirst, because it treats the poem as a kind of immediate community not only with the reader but also with Yeats’ poem: “My name...is Leda.” The problem that Spicer discovers while writing fake letters to Lorca is that his old poems are too stuck in the speech of the solitary I to “point” historically. When the poems address a “you,” they imply universal access, which Spicer equates with bathhouse isolation.

Spicer clearly voices his objection to the anonymous, formalist, decontextualized “Turkish Bath” version of poetry, but he does not offer a figure for the other type of relationship that corresponds to his new mode of composition by book. Is there a reason for this omission? For a poet so fond of graphic images, his letter is curiously “dumb” on this point. At the moment when we expect an alternative to the Turkish Bath, the letter switches metaphors: “Poems should echo and re-echo against one another. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can.” The connotation of these images is radical exteriority: voices are reduced to sounds, bouncing against one another like things; and also exchange and interaction: like people they “can’t live alone.” The crucial difference between this conception of serial poetry and the “English Department” poem containing a solitary voice is that the “resonance” of poems against one another creates more amplified effects: “two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence.” Michael Snediker has argued that Spicer insinuates an alternative to bathhouse cruising, “modeled on a long term relationship.” He explains: “it’s not exactly that a serial poem is meaningful like some other sort of sex. Rather the serial poem proposes a solution to the problem of a loneliness whose needs exceed the erotic. ... Not a single one-night stand, nor a proliferation of one-night stands, but the proliferation of nights (and days) held together by the resonances between them: which is also to say, held together by the angers and frustrations unique to those resonances” (Vincent, *After Spicer* 182-3). The long-term relationship suggests a duration in which each moment is mediated by the idea of the whole, without being totally constrained by it.



Yet the problem with this interpretation is simply that Spicer's letter does not stage another scene to replace the prisoner in his cell, or the cruiser in the bathhouse. He leaves the situation of the echoing and re-echoing serial poem evocatively blank in order to underscore the other connotations of the "resonance" figure for serial voicing: ambiguity, negativity, and dislocation.

Naturally what this means is that Spicer is trying to point to his alterative in a more indirect fashion. He does so rather rhetorically—"eloquently" in Mill's parlance—through the form of the letter itself. "This is the most important letter you have ever received, Love, Jack," is how it concludes, which is Spicer's sly way of letting Blaser know that he intends to publish this important personal note as a poem in his second serial book, *Admonitions* (1958) (*Collected Poems* 155-68). That is where "we," the other audiences of the letter, find it. The form in which we encounter the "letter" to Blaser is a generic hybrid: no longer strictly a "letter" it has become a letter-poem sandwiched between two, more conventional-looking verses that are also "addressed" to personal relations. When Spicer speaks of producing "consequences" in this letter-poem to Blaser, he points to a figure that he does not name in his elaborate bathhouse scene, but who has been watching the entire time: the audience. Consequences, we discover, are the result of rhetorical strategies such as this one, to reflect a fractured image of the audience back to itself, or at least to get the audience, whomever it may be, to reflect on its relation to the text of the poem. The letter to Blaser illustrates the novelty that Spicer has recently put to use in *After Lorca*: the personal letter, signed, "love," that speaks to a friend, *in front of the reader*. It should be observed that this is not quite an "open letter," conventionally speaking, but a close relative: an "opened" letter, perhaps. The introduction to the Lorca book, which addresses the reader through the ghostly voice of "Lorca," refers to this genre flippantly: "When Mr. Spicer began sending the letters to me a few months ago, I recognized immediately the "programmatically letter"—the letter one poet writes to another not in any effort to communicate with him, but rather as a young man whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening" (107). Although Spicer's first letter responding to Lorca declares, "These letters are to be as temporary as our poetry is to be permanent. ... We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems," we now know how to listen to Spicer's punning voice, and to invert this statement. The poem that immediately follows the letter is the "Ballad of the Seven Passages." *After Lorca* is a series of letters and "letters," and rhetoric is an essential feature of Spicer's new poetic. Spicer is interested in epistolary letters, such as the one he sends to Blaser, precisely because they are "temporary," which means that he recognizes the epistolary as a genre more overtly bound up with time. He repositions the personal letter to Blaser as a poem in *Admonitions* in order to stress how a text is sent out into the world, and passes through different generic states, each of which inscribe different audiences. The type of pointing that he illustrates with the example of the letter, however is a complex gesture towards the audience, because it imagines that audience as heterogeneous: both named and unnamed, personal and public. This type of open letter tries to avoid apostrophe, favored figure of "English Department" lyric, because he really is addressing Blaser, and also the audience, and also both, and neither. The formula is perfectly distilled in the letter he sent, a few years earlier, to Joyce, though that letter was never published as a poem: "By the way, I hope you show other people these letters I write you. They are personal letters

for you and they are also public letters. I measure their success by how well I can succeed in being deeply personal and deeply public at the same time. Like my poems.” It his deep interest in this “success,” and his sense that such oddly cross-purposed letters offered a means to achieve it, that I will now turn.

It should be noted, as an afterthought, that Spicer applies the same strategy that he uses to reposition the letter to reposition the figure, in the letter, of the Turkish Bath. He repositions from Mill’s prison cell to 50’s gay bathhouse. Even with his analogy of the Turkish Bath, he manages to do what he says the single poem cannot do: he makes it resonate with social meanings. He does this by inflecting Mill’s trope with greater attention to social context. The bathhouse is not exactly the prison cell, and Spicer’s letter should be read as a performance that rather brilliantly points to the distance and remainder between the two. Mill’s example of the prisoner is itself supposed to have a kind of universal appeal to the reader—when he writes, “it has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell,” he is supposing with his “always” and “us” the same intersubjectivity that he ascribes to the lyric—anyone should be familiar with the pathos of this scene (yet how many have heard a prisoner soliloquizing in an adjoining cell?). Spicer, however, uses a figure that pointedly denies such universal access. As a social institution, the Turkish Bath is a gay men’s club, and one that most men in 1950s American would not openly confess insider knowledge of. Choosing it as a figure is very much a part of his address to Blaser, who, like Spicer, will get the reference because he is also openly gay. Unlike queer theorists of the past decades who have celebrated the bathhouse and what it represents, Spicer turns it into a parody of the “English Department.” The move itself is clever—he places the English Department lyric inside the walls of an outsider social space, which is an irreverent way to describe the mainstream literary institution—but perhaps also self-hating and homophobic; in any event, the psychology is beside the point. It becomes a subversive gesture, however, when the text travels on to become a published poem, and moreover, not one that would be taught in his contemporary English Department. Then serial poetry is positioned outside of a social space that is already outside the norm, which suggests that it achieves its generic legitimacy through a rather vexed detour through the academic and the erotic. It is a dialectical move, and indicates that Spicer understands genre, including the genre of poetics, as itself a medium subject to constant social and historical negotiation.

#### IV. Dickinson and the Lonely Symposium

Spicer’s fractured figures of address, evident throughout *After Lorca*, the letter to Blaser, and the other “poems” of *Admonitions*, admit of a poetics deeply informed by rhetoric. The genealogy of Spicer’s interest in the audience problem can be traced to Spicer’s student days at UC Berkeley in the late 40s. A fall 1949 edition of UC Berkeley’s *Occident* magazine contains Spicer’s contribution to a “symposium” of student poets, discoursing on “problems” that the poets recognize in contemporary poetry. Spicer’s essay focuses directly on the problem of producing “consequences” in the audience, and the solution it proposes, in a vague and speculative manner, is a “resonant” poetry that prefigures the poetics he theorizes years later to Blaser. The opening lines of the essay are almost perfectly echoed in the opening lines of his late book *Language*,

which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The “Symposium” essay begins: “Here we are, holding a ghostly symposium—five poets holding forth on their peculiar problems. One will say magic; one will say God; one will say form. When my turn comes I can only ask an embarrassing question—“Why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?” (*Collected Poems* 229).

In a curious but telling critical oversight, nearly everyone who has commented on Spicer’s statement in *Occident* has assumed that it is the transcript of a talk that Spicer gave at a live symposium with his fellow poets. That is not the case. The essays were submitted to the literary magazine and assembled to form a virtual “symposium,” which is why Spicer refers to it as “ghostly.” This little detail transforms the valence of his “embarrassing question,” into an ironic one, and moreover, a gesture of pointing towards the printed medium itself. “Who is listening to us?” becomes a very different question when it is asked in print, in a manner that self-consciously acknowledges its literal silence. The problem that Spicer then considers is what I have referred to as his fundamental “audience problem,” but now can be seen as a genre problem related to Mill’s distinction between “heard” (rhetoric) and “overheard” (poetic) speech. Spicer is interested to know how the “voice” of lyric poetry can “move” its audience in a more effective way, given what he sees as the contemporary, material conditions of address. He describes, on the one hand, academic poets like the ones of the symposium who communicate via the institutional apparatus of, “critics, magazines, . . . publishers,” and on the other hand, he describes the apparatus of popular culture that includes the music recording industry and audiences hungry for “entertainment.” Without recourse to the Turkish Bath, the younger Spicer outlines a similar line of attack on “English Department” poetry:

The truth is that pure poetry bores everybody. It is even a bore to the poet. The only real contribution of the New Critics is that they have demonstrated this so well. They have taken poetry (already removed from its main source of interest—the human voice) and have completed the job of denuding it of any remaining connection with person, place and time. What is left is proudly exhibited in their essays—the dull horror of naked, pure poetry. (*The House that Jack Built* 230)

Here, he explicitly names not the English Department, but its animating doctrine, New Criticism. The complaint, however, is the same: reading every poem as a type of “pure” poetry—what Jackson has dubbed “lyric reading”—produces a reified, aesthetic object that lacks any meaningful relationship to its audience. Accessibility comes at the price of interest, and of detachment from the messy situations in which the poem is produced and consumed. Once again, Spicer departs from aesthetic “disinterest” when he implies that the criterion for poetry should be “entertainment”: a bodily involvement co-extensive with one’s time and place, “connected” to a real context. Illustrating the roots of his concept of “resonance” in the Orphic myth, Spicer focuses the discussion on the “human voice,” and proposes that poetic entertainment involves “listening” to the poem in one’s mouth. What he has in mind is a corrective to the “dull horror of naked, pure poetry,” which is the equivalent of the “beautiful” but “dumb” lyrics he decries to Blaser. Even at this early point in his development, Spicer’s conception of voice is not the voice “in” the poem, but rather the poem in speaker’s voice, and the “speaker” is not a persona, but a real person, connected to a place and time.

The most interesting aspect of his shift of focus to the audience, however, is that it reveals the attitude of a marketing executive as much as a poet. If poetry is not to be a pure, naked bore, then its objective has to be “entertainment,” which is the criterion Spicer proposes in order to “move” an audience in the way that “Orpheus...moved impossible audiences—trees, wild animals.” In an essay that opens by acknowledging its printed form, Spicer appears curiously nostalgic for the live encounter: “Today we are not singers. We would rather publish poetry in a little magazine than read it in a large hall. If we do read in a hall, we do not take the most elementary steps to make our poetry vivid and entertaining. We *recite* from a printed page...Our problem is to make this connection, to regain our voices.” It is difficult, however, to read this rallying cry as a simplistic return to an idealized age of Orpheus. Although Spicer seems to advocate a spoken-word, performance poetry, he is not deaf to the naivety of this populist position, and the essay’s ironic inflection of its printed form reveals that Spicer is not unaware of the conditions in which the poet finds himself isolated, socially and otherwise. His impassioned call for a new poetry of entertainment is really a canny analysis of the situation in which poetry could possibly regain a “voice.”<sup>40</sup> Spicer advocates a poetry of “entertainment” because he observes even Stein’s notoriously “nonsensical” poetry has managed to reach a large audience through “phonograph records.” Spicer implicitly makes a McLuhan-esque argument when he observes that a popular audience finds her “Four Saints in Three Acts” “entertaining” despite not “understanding” it, simply because it is recorded on vinyl. In light of his discussion of the phonograph, and of the little magazine, Spicer’s interest in “moving” an audience is shaded by an understanding of the contemporary audience as a dispersed entity. What this means is that if “poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it,” it will need to discover a more mediated figure of voice, and a more mediated figure of the listener within the poem, in order to more persuasively lodge these demands. His invocation of “Orpheus” the singer should not be taken as a naïve conception of the lyric genre. Even at this early stage in his development, Spicer reveals that he translates the problem of the lyric voice into a rhetorical problem of listening, and this, in turn, will develop into his more nuanced materialist conception of genre in the serial.

The crucial link between his speculative position in the early, “Symposium” essay, and his discovery of serial poetics, is his interest in the epistolary as an experimental nexus. Spicer’s correspondence from this period, which often borders on the experimental even when communicating the mundane, offers evidence of subtle changes to his understanding of the “listening” problem that he articulates in the “Symposium” essay. The clearest he comes to a theoretical statement is the short essay he wrote on Emily Dickinson’s letters. What appears in the early piece as a populist, Whitmanian desire to address large audiences, albeit through new media such as the records, gives way to a fractured, uncertain vision of mediated audience, accessed through serial books.<sup>41</sup> Letters play a pivotal role in this transformation towards his serial mode because of their different figures of address. His interest in Dickinson reveals that he was excited by a powerful tension that figures as a commonplace in 19<sup>th</sup> century letter exchanges. William Decker describes this common theme, and offers an in-depth

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<sup>40</sup> I am not suggesting that Spicer’s position on these matters remains unchanged between 1949 and 1957,

<sup>41</sup> The parallel between serial books and record albums is obvious, however, and has yet to be studied more carefully.

discussion of ways that Dickinson and other prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century American authors exploit it:

Represented in the text of the letter, then, the materiality of the letter exchange reifies the correspondents' absence to one another and distance between them, even as it embodies the letter writer to the far-off reader, offering something of the addresser's "here" to the addressee's "there." Exchange of letter sheet thus articulates and substantiates the central paradox of epistolary discourse: that the exchange of personally inscribed texts confirms even as it would mitigate separation. As much as correspondents affirm their transcendence of geographic distance or affect, in their letters, a series of sociable visits, the fact of separation remains and excites the suspicion that separation between friends is a condition that neither written nor spoken language can bridge. (47)<sup>42</sup>

On the one hand, the epistolary mode offers Spicer what seems to be a more direct figure of address, because a letter names its addressee, but on the other hand, letters can connote the opposite of direct address: the failure of communication, errancy and contingency, and the problem of the letter's dispersal. Working in Boston, from 1956-7, as a librarian in the rare books room of the Boston Public Library, Spicer had access to originals of Dickinson's correspondence. His 1957 essay on her letters, which responds to Johnson's variorum edition of her poems, focuses on a problem of reading that we should also recognize as the "listening" problem. Looking at the holograph version of Dickinson's letters, Spicer points out that it becomes difficult to differentiate between the poetry and the prose. Readers of edited versions of Dickinson are not troubled by this matter because the generic "line has been drawn" already, by the editor. Spicer sees this problem of identification as a material problem of genre, but also an indicator of a radical poetic:

The reason for the difficulty of drawing a line between the poetry and prose in Emily Dickinson's letters may be that she did not wish such a line to be drawn. If large portions of her correspondence are considered not as mere letters—and indeed, they seldom communicate information, or have much to do with the person to whom they were written—but as experiments in a heightened prose combined with poetry, a new approach to both her letters and her poetry opens up. (*The House that Jack Built* 234)

The central issue is that Dickinson embedded what is now called her "lyric poetry" into her personal correspondence in ways that trouble not only the editor's task, but the very enterprise of reading a text "as" lyric. Although Spicer does not explicitly attack the predominant editorial approach towards "drawing a line" as complicit with the "English Department" that he criticizes elsewhere, he does make a similar challenge to a formalist definition of the lyric poem, which would allow the verse to be easily extracted the prose of the letter. In her provocative study of Dickinson's letters, Virginia Jackson addresses Spicer's contribution to scholarship:

Since "John L. Spicer" was otherwise known as the avant-garde California poet Jack Spicer, his suggestion that Dickinson's writing be read as experimental prose-poetry was a way of making Dickinson avant-garde, of recasting old manuscripts as modern literature. As we have seen, as novel as Spicer's

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<sup>42</sup> Cited in Katz, "James Schuyler's Epistolary Poetics." Decker's book is an indispensable source for anybody interested in Spicer's letter-poems.

suggestion was (and...prescient of contemporary approaches such as Susan Howe's and Marta Werner's), he followed in what was already an established tradition...Spicer's idea of Dickinson's letters "as experiments in a heightened prose" made Dickinson into the precursor of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, a position occupied by Spicer himself...What is at stake in such fine distinctions is not the existence of Dickinson's writing as either poetic or epistolary but the existence of literary criticism. The reason that the distinction between genres seems an important point of debate for literary critics is that once the genre of a text is established, then, as we saw in the last chapter on lyric reading, protocols of interpretation will follow. In other words, what is at stake in establishing the genre of Dickinson's writing is nothing less than its literary afterlife. (*Dickinson's Misery* 124)

I quote Jackson at length because I think she has it mostly right, with respect to Spicer's Dickinson's essay. She helps to show precisely what is at stake in Spicer's "positioning" of Dickinson as an early experimentalist, and why it is related to his weird obsession with the "afterlife," especially of literary figures like Lorca. Spicer's essay is clearly working out ideas about his own forthcoming *After Lorca*, and his alignment of Dickinson's "intentions" with his own legitimates "protocols" for reading his serial books. Jackson, however, makes a weird assumption herself when she claims that "fine" generic distinctions are primarily the concern of "literary criticism," and not also of poets. She does not entertain the possibility that a poet would take a rhetorical stake in her audience, or take interest in it vis-a-vis the text, in order to establish new genres of which the text would constitute a favored example. Yet just this attitude towards the rhetorical as the domain of "literary criticism" is what Spicer troubles by drawing an ambiguous line between "programmatically letters" and poems in his serial books.

Jackson sheds light on Spicer's rhetorical interest in the genre of Dickinson's letter, but she also suggests a deeper and more fundamental aspect of Spicer's epistolary poetic. Spicer is interested in the "possibility" that Dickinson intentionally creates generic ambiguity in letters. He is also interested, as I have discussed above, in using the epistolary figure of address to reflect or mediate images of the poem's reader—a corrective to what he diagnoses as the "dumb," *overheard* voice in a specific genre of lyric poetry. And yet, when he says that Dickinson's letters, "seldom communicate information, or have much to do with the person to whom they were written," he seems to cast her as speaker who is always talking to herself, even when others are listening in. This emphasis on her isolation, Jackson explains, is the standard way of transforming Dickinson into the perfect image of the "English Department's" favorite lyric poet: "...from the moment that Dickinson's writing was published and received as lyric poetry has devolved a history of reading a particular structure of address into the poems. This structure is one in which saying "I" can stand for saying "you," in which the poet's solitude stands in for the solitude of individual reader" (128). Cutting Dickinson off from even her most personal relations—the addressees of her letters—does Spicer not effectively repeat this cliché of Dickinson's inviting solitude?

The answer is more complicated than it first seems. It is not that Spicer is beyond such a maneuver in principle, but rather that he believes that he is beyond it in practice. Although Spicer seems to claim that Dickinson intends to blur the line, as he does, he merely holds her intent to do so open as a possibility. His "new approach" emerges only

because she “may” have intended it, but what Spicer really indicates is the more radical position that we cannot really know. To pretend to know is precisely to assume the intersubjectivity that he would like to purge from the experience of “listening.” (Likewise, to dismiss the possibility that Dickinson did make such an “avant-garde” gesture as outlandish, is also to assume such a special private economy with her.) What Spicer seems most interested in is the way that Dickinson does not really speak to herself, but rather speaks to nobody, or somebody else, *while* speaking to somebody particular. This, we should now recognize, is precisely the strategy that he adopts in his first attempts at serial poetry. Jackson, glossing the bad version of “overhearing,” says, “the ‘intersubjective confirmation of the self’ performed by a reading of the lyric based upon the identity between poet and reader must be achieved by denying to the poem any intersubjective economy of its own” (129). It seems that such an intersubjective economy is the very thing that Spicer tries to inscribe into the poem when he keeps open the possibility that the genre of her texts cannot be determined. As a strategic tool, Spicer’s personal/public letter, like Dickinson’s, reminds the audience that it is always on the outside of this economy. Reading Dickinson as speaking to nobody in front of somebody also serves Spicer’s rhetorical interests, because it keeps open the possibility that the genre of her text may not be what she intended either. Spicer demonstrates this understanding of genre with his own letters, illustrating with his practice of serial re-positioning that “a difference in address can become a difference in genre as the public transmission of a text makes it so, but that historical process does not mean that the writer originally intended that form of address to make such a difference” (Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery* 125). The difficulty is that his position very quickly slides into what seems like the opposite: that he simply is confirming his own poetic by assuming an identity between poet and reader. Which is why the letter in Spicer’s serial book is always a “temporary” act, and the book a temporary achievement. Spicer later says, in a letter, that he regretted sending many of his letter-poems.<sup>43</sup> The threat of sliding into egotism, which is a version of hell for Spicer, is also why his turn towards serial should be understood as a constant attempt to keep the poet a letter away from his correspondents.

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<sup>43</sup> In a 1959 Letter to Stan Perskey, Spicer writes: “Letters are a trap for me as a person and, I suspect, for me as a poet. They’re impure. I’d give a great deal (have given a great deal) not to have written the Alexander ones. Warnings to myself, mostly.” It appears that the letters to Alexander that he read in public, as an experimental serial poem (they have been published that way in the recent *Collected Poems* were taken as *merely* letters, rather than the fractured objects Spicer wanted them to be. (*Jack Spicer Papers* Bancroft MSS 2004/209).

Chapter 3  
Elegy and Objecthood in Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*

I. Reading from Line to Line, Sonnet to Sonnet, and from Line to Sonnet

Ted Berrigan's account of his emergence into the 1960s poetry scene in New York City, retold numerous times in talks and interviews throughout his career, emphasizes the "breakthrough" impact of his first book, *The Sonnets* (1964)<sup>44</sup>:

I thought I would start out fairly big, like Shakespeare. I would write a sonnet sequence... But as it happened, I wrote a sonnet sequence which proved to be very successful. It was my calling card, my key, my access to poets older than me... So I used the sonnet sequence to be my big jump into poetry and stardom, as it were. (*Talking in Tranquility* 160)

With the help of the book he achieved the status of a major "minor poet," which is, by all measures, what he aspired to. Published by his own "C" Press, and subsequently republished in no less than four significantly different editions over the next 40 years, *The Sonnets* firmly placed him in the counter-cultural limelight he desired and established him as the central figure of the "second generation" of the New York School of poets.<sup>45</sup> Berrigan's statements about the impact of his early work, such as the one above, should be heard with an ear for the rhetoric of self-legitimization common to actors in the avant-garde literary field. Such narratives play a part in retroactively solidifying and sustaining the very career trajectory that they purport to describe.<sup>46</sup> Yet even immediate reactions to *The Sonnets* from other members of the poetry community in New York suggest how his book was able to function as a "calling card" with more than 15 minutes of fame on it.

One immediate, local reaction to *The Sonnets* gives a sense of the type of "calls" that Berrigan was making with the poem. Berrigan's friend, fellow coterie poet and collaborator, Ron Padgett, published a review of the work in *Kulchur*, an important "little magazine" in the New York scene. The review indicates the audience that Berrigan imagined for his work. Like Berrigan, Padgett was a member of the younger generation of New York poets who were electrified by the emerging post-war poetries anthologized in Allen's *New American Poetry*. Padgett and Berrigan moved to Manhattan in 1960 seeking entrance into the poetry scene. Co-edited by LeRoi Jones (Amira Baraka), *Kulchur* included both criticism and poetry, most of it written by other coterie poets.<sup>47</sup> Padgett's review of *The Sonnets* does not operate in the conventional mode of the review genre—as a description or discussion of book with illustrative excerpts:

*The Sonnets*, Ted Berrigan: "C" Press Books: \$1.25

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<sup>44</sup> References will be to the most recent version of *The Sonnets*, in *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* 29-75.

<sup>45</sup> Other editions include ones published by Grove Press (1967), United Artists (1983), and Penguin (2000).

<sup>46</sup> Libbie Rifkin discusses the "bildungsroman" quality of Berrigan's accounts in, "Worrying about Making It." Her argument is a recent example of scholarship that situates Berrigan (and other NY School writers) in the social context of his literary field, claiming, "Berrigan's formal experiments are best understood through their social aims and effects" (658).

<sup>47</sup> A helpful overview of the social dynamics of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation New York School "coterie" is Lytle Shaw's *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*.



My dream is to have a drink with the people who wrote these poems. They mean “something.” They mean to me what night letters from everyone I have every known would mean to me. Perhaps I weep too much. Still, if you want your life to change, change your shirt the same way you must read from line to line, sonnet to sonnet, and line to sonnet, because many people, when reading these poems, roar.

And a few paragraphs below:

Either these poems are feminine marvelous and tough or I am feminine marvelous and tough when I read them on the site of Benedict Arnold’s triumph, Ticonderoga. It hurts. Au revoir, scene! I am forced to write “au revoir” when I mean “my hands make love to my body when my arms are around you.” But no rivers of annoyance undermine the arrangements, for they are present as a breakdown of Juan Gris. (*Kulchur* 17, 94)

To the uninitiated, the review offers what seems like playful nonsense, along with a few cryptic instructions on how to read the sonnets in Berrigan’s sequence. It is interesting to imagine who the “uninitiated” reader is, however. It is possible that a reader who did not know of Padgett and Berrigan’s friendship would be able to discern that the review is a friendly parody by the fact that it immediately follows Ted Berrigan’s own review of Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*. A reader familiar with *The Sonnets* will immediately recognize that nearly every word or phrase of Padgett’s short “review” is actually lifted from Berrigan’s sequence. Even a reader of *Kulchur* who was not hip enough to have already seen *The Sonnets* or the previously published bits of it in print, could recognize that Padgett’s game of cut-up is a parody—that mode of utterance that Bakhtin calls the most vulgar form of double-voicing.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Padgett’s review quotes the style of the book itself, adding Padgett’s own inflection. “If you want your life to change, change your shirt the same way you must read,” is actually a penetrating insight into Berrigan’s poetic: Padgett did not know that the book would change Berrigan’s life—it did—but he recognizes that Berrigan would like the poetry to enter life as an ordinary, habitual activity. Reading in the same manner as getting dressed suggests that the poem is an every-day object, but the comparison to getting dressed also suggests an act of appropriation and self-expression, because choosing a shirt is part of the daily routine of self-presentation. Padgett’s example also hints at the seriality of the activity, which is both minor and important at the same time.

Despite its mischievous tone, Padgett’s review also offers valuable insights about the work. His selection and rearrangement of phrases from Berrigan’s text nicely illustrates Berrigan’s omnivorous cut-up method. His instructions for reading capture an important sense of the serial structure of the work: “you must read from line to line, sonnet to sonnet, and line to sonnet.” Naturally a reader would read from line to line, and from sonnet to sonnet, but the fact that one “must” read from line to sonnet refers to the characteristic way that Berrigan’s poems repeat individual lines or fragments of lines in multiple sonnets, which gives the book a highly recursive texture. This aspect of the

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<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin discusses the parodies of sonnet form with which *Don Quixote* begins. See *The Dialogic Imagination* 54.

series forces readers to make “horizontal” connections between poems that are not contiguous in the sequence.

Sonnet II offers a good example of the texture Padgett imitates, and also of the every-day quality of the work that he alludes to:

Dear Margie, hello. It is 5:15 a.m.  
dear Berrigan. He died  
Back to books. I read  
It's 8:30 p.m. in New York and I've been running around all day  
old come-all-ye's steele into the streets. Yes, it is not,  
How Much Longer Shall I Be Able to Inhabit The Divine  
and the day is bright gray turning green  
feminine marvelous and tough  
watching the sun come up over the Navy Yard  
to write scotch-tape body in a notebook  
had 17 and ½ milligrams  
Dear Margie, hello. It is 5:15 a.m.  
fucked til 7 now she's late to work and I'm  
18 so why are my hands shaking I should know better (*Collected Poems* 29)

This poem is representative of the other 66 published in the first edition,<sup>49</sup> and contains the features that combined in concert to make *The Sonnets* Berrigan's first major “career move.”<sup>50</sup> The characteristics that Padgett's review parodies are present in concentrated form here: the parataxis that gives each line a “cut-up” feel, heavy repetition of entire phrases and lines, the sharp contrast in different speech genres ranging from the personal letter to literary allusion. To any aspiring poet in Padgett's and Berrigan's circle, “How Much Longer...,” would be recognizable as the title and first line of a poem from Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). Ashbery's book received attention for its use of collage technique associated with the pre-war avant-gardes, and in one account is “the most obvious influence for the disjunctiveness for the Sonnets.”<sup>51</sup> Even the reference to Ashbery points metonymically to Berrigan's everyday life, though, because we can surmise that Ashbery is in one of the “books” that “Berrigan” goes back to. However, the decontextualized and repeated reference to clock-time undermines the poem's representation of a scene in Berrigan's world, and emphasizes the sense that the poem is literally a “scotch tape body” inside of a notebook. There is a minimalist attitude toward poetic form in *The Sonnets*: working with found “blocks” of text, eschewing rhyme schemes and conventional prosody, the poet's sonnet-building activity becomes one of arranging the source material into a modular form: 14 one-line units: “Blocks. Blocks is a key word in *The Sonnets*. It talks about blocks all the time and that's exactly what it is” (*Talking in Tranquility* 131)

Because of its striking display of cut-up procedures the book has generally been received as Padgett receives it: as an important experimental work. Criticism has focused

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<sup>49</sup> Though Berrigan wrote 88 sonnets in the sequence, some of which he saw unfit for publication, but were “restored” in later editions.

<sup>50</sup> Libbie Rifkin explores Berrigan's career aspirations and the development of his poetic. I reference the title of her book: *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde*. Also see Rifkin 1998 for an earlier—and longer—version of the Berrigan argument.

<sup>51</sup> Notley viii.

on the procedural aspect of his writing and the collage technique. The most astute critics of *The Sonnets* also recognize a significant tension between the poem's disjunctive surface, and the strong sense of biography and personal voice. Although it evokes a collage of disparate sources, the poem is constructed largely from autobiographical material, which suggests a traditional lyric *topos*. The work is deeply personal, and critics have noted its emotional intensity and elegiac tone. Libbie Rifkin, for example, describes the "tension between pathos and procedure" that "characterizes the poetic incongruities of the sequence as whole" ("Worrying..." 648). Barrett Watten recognizes that, "The most notable fact of Berrigan's work is the mind actively at work in the poems, acting with and through the sensory interferences and preemptory compulsions" (104). Charles Bernstein casts the tension more dramatically when he says, "the enormous pull *The Sonnets* exerts on readers to project onto the text a cohering "self" even in the face of incommensurable evidence" (277). Despite what often appears as a desire not to find continuity, emotion, and identity in the work, the book "pulls" its readers in.

Focusing on the procedural and collage techniques, though warranted and encouraged by Berrigan himself, can overshadow the more interesting tensions created by autobiography and elegy. Collage implies an analogy with a static visual art-object, whereas many of the work's most salient features—the repetition, emotional resonance, and other continuities—can only be understood when the poems are read in sequence. Focusing on the serial mode of Berrigan's book, I will discuss the interesting matter of its elegiac tone, and the eccentric "pull" it exerts on readers.

After discussing Berrigan's entry into serial composition, my reading considers theories of objecthood in postmodernist art. I discuss Brian McHale's notion of a "fractured" ontological model of postmodernist lyric—what he calls "heterocosm." Berrigan's use of a cut-up and collage method to recycle his own poems retains the meaning of individual lines and phrases while also asserting the poem itself as a tactile object—a "scotch-tape body," as one sonnet figures the material text. McHale's theory helps to show that cutting and collaging older poems that work according to a more conventional logic of representation introduces different ontologies, or attitudes about the work's objecthood, into the series. Berrigan's practice echoes Spicer's, who also took an interest in "making" poems out of "real" objects, although Spicer's notion of collage reinterprets a Modernist genealogy of translation that is different than Berrigan's return to Dada-ist assemblage. The other approach to postmodernist objecthood that I discuss is Michael Fried's in his essay, "Art and Objecthood." Fried's understanding of the affect associated with artworks that foreground the facticity of their objecthood helps to account for the strange pathos of Berrigan's series.

## II. Collage and Series

The best place to begin to understand the serial mode of *The Sonnets* is actually in the work that most clearly establishes a relationship to the collage technique. "Sonnet XV," which cuts up and rearranges the lines of an older sonnet that Berrigan had written shortly prior to starting the sequence in 1962, is also the poem to begin to understand Berrigan's work with elegy.

In Joe Brainard's collage its white arrow

He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.  
 Of Marilyn Monroe, her white teeth white-  
 I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn  
 and at King Korn popcorn," he wrote in his  
 of glass in Joe Brainard's collage  
 Doctor, but they say "I LOVE YOU"  
 and the sonnet is not dead.  
 takes the eyes away from the gray words  
 Diary. The black heart beside the fifteen pieces  
 Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie  
 washed by Joe's throbbing hands. "Today  
 What is in it is sixteen ripped pictures  
 does not point to William Carlos Williams. (*Collected Poems* 14)

In the first line, Sonnet XV proposes its likeness to collage by referencing a piece by Berrigan's friend, Joe Brainard, who is an artist associated with the emergent Pop Art scene.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, by putting the collage into the poem, Berrigan gives it a Pop quality. The move marks the poem as avant-garde, but it also employs a conventional ekphrasis. The ekphrastic relationship implies layers of representation: a poem about a painting, and therefore about what the painting is about too. The logic of ekphrastic reference is suggested by the description of the "white arrow" in first line, however the line break fractures the illusionistic representation of the collage. The strong grammatical disjunction between the "white arrow" and the complete sentence of the following line tells the reader that syntax has been violated—we search for a referent to the cataphoric "he," but, "He is not in" the picture yet. Like the arrow that is left hanging, the poem's descriptive mode of reference to its supposed object—Brainard's collage—is temporarily suspended. Reading on through the poem, each line confirms this pattern: each makes syntactical sense internally, but the relation from one to one another is indeterminate. Even the final line, which returns to the action of "pointing" in the first line's arrow, turns into a negative gesture, this time one that is described rather than enacted through enjambment. The poem, "does not point to William Carlos Williams."

By the time we reach the end, however, we can start to recognize connections despite the disjunction of the 14 lines, which, we gather, are like the "16 ripped pieces" in the collage. We can connect Williams to the "dead doctor" mentioned in the second line, and connect the poem back into contemporary history, because both Monroe and Williams had recently died. The poem, which works in a mode analogous to Brainard's collage, pays homage to these celebrities from very different sectors of the public world. Berrigan's poem does not merely describe Brainard's collage, but also references the act of making, and thus his fractured syntax takes "Joe's throbbing hands," which are metonyms for the fragments of collage that they have assembled, and turns them into figures for an artistic act of mourning.

A meticulous reader would notice what later editions of the book make obvious, but only later in the sequence. By reconnecting the names and hands and arrows, the

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<sup>52</sup> The collage, produced in 1963, is held at UC San Diego's Mandeville American Poetry Archive. No reproductions were publicly available, but the library generously provided me with a scanned image of the collage, reproduced below in the Appendix. Permission to reproduce the collage is kindly granted by Joe Brainard's estate.

sentence fragments can be made whole again and the sonnet can be restored. The task is made easier if we recognize the simple pattern that “Sonnet XV” uses to rearrange the 14 lines of the “original” sonnet: 1 - 14 - 2 - 13 - 3 - 12..., and so forth, where the numbers indicate ordinal position of lines of the original sonnet. “Lines rearranged by arithmetical formula. The only one in the book that can be reconstituted,” Berrigan writes in notes on a typescript of the poem. In order to understand the complexity of what Berrigan accomplishes with his formulaic arrangement it is necessary to look at the original sonnet, which Berrigan decided to include it as “Sonnet LIX” in the 1967 edition of the book. Formally, the original poem is a more conventional sonnet, and the mode is more obviously elegiac:

In Joe Brainard’s collage its white arrow  
does not point to William Carlos Williams.  
He is not in it, the hungry dead doctor.  
What is in it is sixteen ripped pictures  
Of Marilyn Monroe, her white teeth white-  
washed by Joe’s throbbing hands. “Today  
I am truly horribly upset because Marilyn  
Monroe died, so I went to a matinee B-movie  
and at King Korn popcorn,” he wrote in his  
Diary. The black heart beside the fifteen pieces  
of glass in Joe Brainard’s collage  
takes the eyes away from the gray words  
Doctor, but they say “I LOVE YOU”  
and the sonnet is not dead. (*Collected Poems* 60-1)

Although it does not adopt a rhyme scheme, Sonnet LIX constructs an argument in the traditional, discursive mode of the Petrarchan/Shakespearean sonnet. Through a series of linked statements it describes Brainard’s funerary collage for Monroe, and then connects Brainard’s memorializing gesture to an elegiac subject not present in Brainard’s elegy: Williams. Berrigan’s move is an appropriation or redirection of Brainard’s act of dedication to Monroe. The labor of Brainard’s “throbbing hands,” the testimony from his diary, and the words “I LOVE YOU” in the collage, become Berrigan’s own gestures for Williams. In addition to mirroring Brainard’s memorial gesture, however, the sonnet makes its own ingenious argument. Berrigan’s homage to the great American doctor-poet is a riposte to Dr. Williams’ poetic diagnosis that the sonnet is a dead form, “Forcing twentieth-century American into a sonnet—gosh, how I hate sonnets—is like putting a crab into a square box. You’ve got to cut his legs off to make him fit. When you get through, you don’t have a crab any more” (Rifkin, “Worrying...” 646). Berrigan’s memorial gesture, in the form of a sonnet that describes a cut-up collage, therefore ends with a simple literary claim: “and the sonnet is not dead.” His sonnet backs up his words. The gesture is laden with the pathos of fraught father-son dynamics, because Berrigan’s quoted “I LOVE YOU” acts as a cry of love-through-defiance. Unable to resuscitate the doctor, he has at least kept the sonnet alive, and moreover, in a way that answers Williams’ complaint about sonnets being inadequate “containers” for contemporary American life. If Berrigan can get Brainard’s collage about Monroe’s tragic death into a sonnet, and if he can make that sonnet memorialize Williams, and if he can make that memorial in the form of a tightly constructed, ekphrastic argument—all in a poem that

sounds like (and quotes) ordinary speech—then the sonnet is indeed still alive as an American genre. Yet despite all the ways that Berrigan’s sonnet is “contemporary,” it is also an interpretation of a traditional sonnet form, and works in a traditional elegiac mode.

Berrigan’s decision to rearrange the sonnet, and then ultimately to include both in the series, reveals his developing understanding of seriality as a mode for re-contextualizing conventional poetic elements such as ekphrasis and rhetorical function of sonnet form. Rifkin observes:

In Sonnet XV, experimentalist virtuosity is mostly show, easily deciphered and forgotten; the poem works because in it, the “throbbing hands” of the poet seem almost palpable. Written within a year of the New York debut of Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn* series, Sonnet XV gestures at pop elegy but resists its reveling in mechanical reproduction. Berrigan’s poetic collage reproduces Brainard’s visual one with an aching imprecision. Apostrophizing Williams and compelling the reader to repeat the mournful process of assembling a whole from fragments, it is closer to the elegiac tradition than might first appear. (648)

Rifkin says that Berrigan’s collaged rearrangement more literally imitates Brainard’s piece, and in doing so, changes the mode in which the elegy works. If the cut-up version is actually more distant from the elegiac tradition than the original sonnet, it also makes the act of elegy more palpable in the poet’s visceral act of cutting and arranging. Berrigan’s deformation of his first poem complicates the ekphrasis because “Sonnet XV” does not simply propose an analogy to the collage, by means of an argument, but rather aligns the poet with the collage artist by showing that the poem *is* a collage. Berrigan makes the representational function of the poem—the conventional mode of ekphrasis—ambiguous. The suggestion that Brainard’s hands are like the poets’ becomes much more literal when the “throbbing hands,” are severed—the distinction between the two collapses and the “throbbing hands” now point just as well to the poet’s. According to Rifkin, this makes them point to the reader’s. The reference to the hands, however, merely makes more obvious what the cut-up sonnet points to in its very being: the poet’s elegiac work.

Rifkin hints that the “tension” that critics find between the “pathos and procedure,” actually “compels” the reader to reassemble the sonnet, and in doing so, to recognize that the act of reading/reassembling is one of dedication. I would like to explore this claim, because it gets at the complex but conflicted type of elegy that emerges when Berrigan shifts from a mode of writing we see in “Sonnet LIX,” to the cut-up, serial mode of “Sonnet XV.” Rather than see this shift in terms of the isolated, sonnet-collage that Berrigan “makes” out of the earlier poem, however, we must see the shift as an entry into a serial mode. Neither does the reader encounter “Sonnet XV” in isolation, nor it was written alone. The “entry” into a serial mode that I am imagining is virtual, however, because Berrigan was already underway with the project when he wrote “Sonnet XV”; my point is rather that “Sonnet XV” emerges at a point where the original sonnet, composed individually, enters into the series. The “mournful process” that Rifkin detects should be grasped in this context.

Rifkin sees Berrigan’s poem as an invitation for the reader to reflect on the act of elegy, by re-ordering the scrambled pieces and restoring “Sonnet XV” to “Sonnet LIX.” In doing this, the reader occupies the position of the poet, and the labor of reading becomes a “mournful” process of rearrangement parallel to the poet’s mournful labor of

arranging. The aim of the act is to restore what Rifkin calls a “shrine” to Williams (and Brainard and Monroe), and “its workmanlike quality is the source of its affective success” (648). It is worth speculating on what type of relationship to his audience Berrigan would be proposing with a poem that works in this fashion. The poem appears to clearly equate the poet’s hands with Brainard’s in order to emphasize the artist’s labor, but to suggest that the reader is also building a “shrine” assumes that the reader will stop and reassemble the lines, making the poem “whole” again. This implies two distinct stages of analysis and synthesis: recognizing that “Sonnet XV” actually contains a “whole” inside of it, and then putting the pieces back together in order to restore “Sonnet LXI.” Then, by carefully reading—interpreting—the conventional sonnet-elegy, the reader will reflect back on her act of reading and re-reading “Sonnet XV” and recognize it as a labor of mourning the subjects of Sonnet LXI: Williams, Monroe, and the sonnet form itself. This process is in no way unreasonable to imagine, but the “workmanlike” quality of this reading seems foremost like a description of the careful, close reading of the literary critic who goes through all the trouble to take the poem out of the series, dissect it, and interpret it in light of the original. The labor may be elegiac, but it is also rewarded with the satisfaction of linking the disjunctive “Sonnet XV” back up to its original, which then becomes a kind of “map” for reading the collaged version—a map that tells us that the poem is, indeed, “closer to the elegiac tradition than it first appeared.”

In the proposal that “Sonnet XV” is about the act of reconstruction, there is a hint of what Virginia Jackson has called “lyric reading”: the projection of the literary critic’s conception of the poetic object back onto whatever text is being interpreted, in a supposedly “objective manner.” The assumption of the “lyric reader” is that such a thing called “lyric” exists wherever there appears to be text arranged as verse. The sleight of hand that Jackson points to is in the version of “lyric” that is read into the object: it is a historical construction originating in 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism, and specifically in the doctrine of the New Criticism. The problem, for Jackson, is that this notion of lyric, and the critical act that nourishes it, makes pretense at universality and objectivity, when in fact, it is a contingent definition of the poem and of reading practices. My goal is not to discount Rifkin’s reading by saying that it seems complicit with the practice Jackson defines, but rather to show that her insights point to only one alternative of how the poem can be read, or may have been read by Berrigan’s audience. The reason that I detect “lyric reading” is because it seems much more plausible that “Sonnet XV” “compels” its reader to reconstruct the lines when the poem is excerpted from the sequence and put into an essay. The implicit assumption is that this is how (lyric) poems are read. The fruits of the effort at reconstruction are many: for example, once we see “Sonnet XV” in the context of the Williams quote about fitting the crab (American) into the box (sonnet), Berrigan’s transformation of “Sonnet LIX” into “XV” seems even more ingenious. Berrigan has shown that the solution is to rearrange the sonnet itself, and to disfigure the form and rhetorical function so that it fits what he takes to be a contemporary American sensibility and idiom. It is the 1960s, and things are modular.

Can we speculate how the poem does first appear, and engage in the dubious exercise of imagining Berrigan’s imagined reader? The question I am asking is whether Berrigan treats “Sonnet XV” as a poem that the reader is supposed to reconstruct in order to read closely and reflect back upon. Lest my objection about Rifkin’s reading appear too polemical, I merely want explore an alternate possibility about how Berrigan may

have imagined the scene of reading. I am interested in what these different attitudes toward the text say about reading the sonnets as a series: as *The Sonnets*. There is a scrap of anecdotal evidence that Berrigan's initial readers "got it": the painter Jasper Johns declared "Sonnet XV" his favorite, and made a painting that decoupages the sonnet, on the page torn from the book, onto the paint surface (Waldman 16). The date of Johns' mixed-media painting, *Screen Piece 3*, indicates that he would have read the book in the early edition that does not contain the restored "Sonnet LIX." His artwork is clearly a gesture of dedication, but it is inconclusive as evidence of what he found so exciting in the poem. Simply recognizing that Berrigan's sonnet applies collage technique to a poem about Brainard's collage may have been enough to inspire a similar citation of Berrigan's poem with his artwork: a dedication to the poet's labor that imitates the poet's imitation of the other painter. It is important to realize, I think, that John's response illustrates a type of "reading" similar to the one Padgett performs in his review. Neither of these re-appropriative readings necessarily entail actually trying to restore some "whole" or original poem behind the text, and then parsing the poem in the manner of a literary critic—a method of reading that looks very similar to New Critical close reading. Johns' gesture does not require "getting" that such a figure is hidden in the carpet at all. It suggests, moreover, that homage takes the form of incorporation, rather than careful reconstruction.

When Berrigan cuts up the sonnet that later becomes "Sonnet LIX," he effectively distances the new poem from the original. When we assume that "Sonnet XV" "compels" the reader to reconstruct the poem with the original as the objective, we implicitly assume that Berrigan leaves the original out in order for it to be discovered, and this will lead us to the conclusion that when he restores the poem to the book in 1967 that he may have done so to facilitate the discovery. These are assumptions about a mode of reading. The opposite may have been the case, however. He may have omitted the "original" in order to distance his cut-up version from the more conventional mode of argument and elegy in the earlier poem, and he may have later included the original in order to suggest that the two poems are distinct entities, put on the same level by the series and, "complete in their own time," as Alice Notley describes the semi-autonomy of the poems in the book (*Collected Poems* 5). All of this is speculation, and, at the very least, Berrigan's motivations are ambiguous. It seems less controversial to observe that "Sonnet XV" distances itself from the elegiac mode of "Sonnet LIX," because the most striking element of "Sonnet XV" is the fracturing collage effect itself. It is not immediately obvious that the lines all fit back together—none of the previous 14 sonnets can be reassembled in that manner, and the recognition would be even more difficult if you were listening to the sequence read publicly, which Berrigan often did. The result of the cut-up is a poem that still retains some weakened connection to the elegiac mode, through the fragmented references to death and the named subjects of the elegy, without necessarily depending on or evoking the argument of the original.

The distancing effect of the collage does something interesting to the tone of elegy. Berrigan effectively severs the address to Williams made in the original sonnet, so that "Sonnet XV" points mournfully outward, but to what or whom is not immediately clear. Rifkin's sense that the "throbbing hands" become the locus of the poem's mournful affect is right, I believe, but the fragmented syntax shifts the focus of the mourning onto the poet himself. "Sonnet XV" does not read as an elegy to Williams, but



rather as the fragment of an elegy that “does not point” in the same way. By treating his earlier work as an object to disfigure, Berrigan effectively makes the new subject of the poem his own labor, and the “throbbing” hands point silently to the writer at his desk. This reading is not opposed to Rifkin’s, but it is important to note, however, that Berrigan’s reference to his own labor always points towards the series as larger structure, rather than any individual sonnet within it. His gesture is one of shifting focus away from the topic of the original poem, and also, more generally, from individual poems as primary units of meaning. Severed from its elegiac subject, the tone of elegy in the original poem becomes focused onto the character who is indicated everywhere in “Sonnet XV”: Berrigan.

Sonnet XV elegizes Berrigan, but it does so as a part of the series rather than as an individual poem. What I previously described as Berrigan’s “distancing” of the collage from the original, is an effect of turning the sonnet into a serial form. The transformation involves both a change in attitude towards the sonnet’s form, and change in attitude towards writing the sonnets in series. “Sonnet XV” destroys the syntax of the sentences in the original and the syntax of the old sonnet’s argument: a conventional structure that develops a claim and conclusion around the architecture of the sonnet’s octet and sestet. The hinge is what is conventionally called the *volta*, the turn, or what Ron Padgett, in his handbook of poetic forms calls the sonnet’s “therefore.” In “Sonnet LIX” Berrigan delays the turn until the final couplet, when he turns from Brainard’s memorial to his own loving address to Williams. Pushing the “therefore” moment until the final line: “[therefore] the sonnet is not dead,” already implies a loosening of convention that is one of the poem’s topics. “Sonnet XV” does away with the cumbersome machinery of the argument. “I wrote them as fast as I could write them. I didn’t have to build conceits, I didn’t have to evolve the root metaphor in any way” Berrigan explains in an interview (*On the Level Everyday* 92). He is able to process the poem using a device that Berrigan saw as his “technical achievement”: “to conceive of the sonnet as fourteen units of one line each” (Waldman and Cohn 134). Berrigan is correct to think that he has “gotten a certain sense of structure that is like form turned inside out,” because the “turn” of original sonnet has now been put on the outside (Alpert 50). Transformed, the collaged sonnet articulates its connections to other sonnets in the series, not internally between the octet and sestet—it shifts the scale of the “therefore” to a macro, rather than micro level. Turning the sonnet “inside out” makes reading an act that focuses outward, into the series, rather than inward into the poem. It is true that turning outward, “Sonnet XV” now points towards “Sonnet LIX,” but its mode of pointing is ambiguous, over-determined. Its new *volta* is a hinge that connects it to many other poems and lines in the series. The poem points ambiguously, like the arrow in it, because Berrigan has turned “Sonnet XV,” and all of the poems in the book, into a fragment. Like the individual lines of “Sonnet XV” that point to the “throbbing hands” of the poet, the individual sonnets point ambiguously to the series as a whole, and everywhere in the series there are reference to Berrigan. Series has replaced “shrine” as an entirely different mode of monument. The effect is that individual elegies are transformed into a serial elegy. The sonnet’s “turn” has turned into a practice of reading and writing laterally, between different clusters of lines that repeat in new combinations and arrangements. Because a single phrase accrues sense from the combinations that it enters into recursively, Berrigan is free to develop associations that weave throughout the series without being tied to the linear development

of a single sonnet's octave and sestet. His new approach to the sonnet's *volta* implies a different function of rhetoric in the series.

### III. Elegy and Objecthood

If it seems like a stretch that Berrigan has shifted the focus of the elegy onto himself, consider an inaugural moment in the second poem, which I quoted above:

Dear Margie, hello. It is 5:15 a.m.  
dear Berrigan. He died  
Back to books. I read (*Collected Poems* 28)

The book begins with the death of the poet. Echoing the fragment of a personal letter to Margie, which reoccurs countless times in the book, in the second line Berrigan apostrophizes himself. Using his last name in a book that addresses most of his relations on a first-name basis elevates him to the level of the other poets and artists mentioned in the book, whose names appear as if printed on the books themselves: "Shakespeare...Auden Spenser Pound Stevens and Frank O'Hara," as one of the sonnets lists in rapid succession (*Collected Poems* 69). At the point that "Berrigan" dies in the second sonnet, he dies as a "he," and then in the following line, immediately after going "back to books," he reappears as "I," the poem's speaker. Although *The Sonnets* is famously filled with many voices—an effect of the mode that I have been describing as "collage"—this early moment in the series establishes Berrigan at center, like the black heart in Brainard's Marilyn collage that has numerous snaking arrows pointing to it. At the same time, the poem fractures the poet into "he" and "I," subject and object. "Berrigan" dies at the moment that he becomes another object in the poem, coextensive with the other stuff in the room. There is another subtle but crucial detail: the "I" that continues on after Berrigan has entered into the orbit of the poem's material world is an "I" that "reads."

The second sonnet is not an isolated example, but rather sets a tone of death and loss that is present throughout the sequence. The motif is not merely one of the literary *topoi* of the sequence, it is also literally linked to the "books" that keep reappearing. The series as whole replicates the logic of mourning that is so palpable in "Sonnet XV," but the morning is linked to "Berrigan" by means of the fragments of his everyday world. One striking feature of *The Sonnets* is the sheer repetition of lines and phrases, but the lines and phrases are filled with references to Berrigan's domestic sphere. The return of the books, drugs, names of friends, names of local places, clippings of personal letters, and many other ordinary *things* makes the series an almost constant metonymy for the poet. There are also poems that focus on Berrigan and the scene of his death through the more direct device of the first person:

I wonder if people talk about me  
secretly. I wonder if I'm too old. I wonder if I'm fooling  
myself about pills. I wonder what's in the icebox. I wonder  
if Ron or Pat bought any toilet paper this morning. (69)

These lines conclude a sonnet in which the poet announces that it is his birthday. He ends on a characteristically deflective note of concern about sundries, but it does not dispel the darker sentiment of the poem. It is a birthday poem in which the poet worries

about drug addiction, death. Within the series, the line, “had 17 and ½ milligrams,” takes on a “pathos,” equivalent to the “black heart beside the fifteen pieces,” of the elegiac “Sonnet XV.” These are but a few examples of the muted, dolorous tone that is almost constantly invoked in the book’s fragmented lines, and in no ways is the sense of mourning and loss limited to Berrigan. The “Anne” who appears throughout, for example, was a girlfriend of Berrigan’s who had recently died in an arsonist’s fire, and might be imagined as an equivalent to Petrarch’s Laura that the entire series memorializes.<sup>53</sup> Despite these other references, the thing that all of these charged fragments have in common is “Berrigan,” the “throbbing” presence that the work invokes in so many ways. By the end of the series, the lines from the first sonnet, “Is there room in the room that you room in? / Upon his structured tomb:” seems to suggest that the book is itself a tomb, and that Berrigan has been interred not with, but within, all of the domestic objects of his room.

The series associates “pathos” with many domestic objects described in the poems, and with the fragments of everyday speech and text that make up the poems themselves. There are two different ways to think about the series as an elegy, related to two different attitudes about reading. Rifkin’s reading of Sonnet XV proposes one version of pathos in the poem: the work of reading, like the poets work of making, is “assembling a whole from fragments,” and constructing a “shrine.” When the sonnet turns inside out, and Berrigan focuses the “mournful” labor reflexively onto the series itself, the shrine appears to be the book itself: “the big earth is floating into ‘The Poems’” reads one line, and “The Poems,” appears repeatedly in scare quotes as a stand-in for the monumental scale of the series itself. Rifkin’s interpretation proposes reading the series not as “assembling,” but as “re-assembling.” The question that follow is whether the series actually is a shrine that the poet, and then the reader, re-constructs. If this is the case, the pathos of reading the work is analogous to the pathos of working from “Sonnet XV” back to the antecedent “Sonnet LIX.” Although the sense of the re-constructive labor is “palpable” in the fragments, the aim of this practice, whether it is the “Berrigan’s” work or the reader’s, is symbolic. The “tomb” of the sonnets is built on the blue-print of Mallarme’s Symbolist word-tombs. In Berrigan’s version, the labor of mourning is compensatory, like the collage itself:

Still they mean something. For the dance  
And the architecture.  
Weave among incidents  
May be portentous to him  
We are the sleeping fragments of his sky,  
Wind giving presence to fragments. (28)

What this final sestet of the first poem refers to as “architecture” is the form that contains the flux of incidentals and gives presence to them. Rifkin’s interpretation the emotional work that Berrigan carries out as assemblage relies on an architectural metaphor for the text. Berrigan frequently encourages such a metaphor in his discussions of “sonnet structure,” and yet there is something misleading, or perhaps only partly satisfying of this approach to the series. The plasticity of the series, like the “wind” that inhabits the fragments in the final line of “Sonnet I” invokes a structure of breath and sound that is much too labile to be architecturally sound.

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<sup>53</sup> See Notely, “Introduction” in Berrigan, *Collected Poems*.

This first, architectural way of thinking about the whole series as a “whole” that the poet and reader reconstruct invokes a doctrine of mimesis that, according to Brian McHale, remained a “mainstay of theories of poetic ontology” at least until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. McHale refers to this as the doctrine of a “heterocosm,” which assumes, “The world of the poem is separate from the real world of experience... The heterocosm theory draws a sharp boundary *around* the fictional projected world, but by the same gesture it denies the possibility of ontological difference *within* the fiction.” Berrigan’s “Sonnet LIX” still operates primarily within the logic of the heterocosm, because it describes Brainard’s sonnet as an existing entity, and only establishes its analogy to the sonnet through the sonnet’s descriptive and argumentative machinery. Even in the un-reconfigured original, however, there are hints of an alternate principle of poetic ontology that McHale associates with “Postmodernist mode,” of which *The Sonnets* is an interesting example. “Postmodernist texts typically propose not unitary but *plural* ontological models, and ontological cuts do not just bound them and set them off from the real world, but fissure their interior volumes as well” (“Postmodernist Lyric” 19). In Berrigan’s “Sonnet LIX,” what is the status of the quoted phrase “I LOVE YOU”? Is it merely a quotation, or does it suggest, with its boldface, that Berrigan already conceives of this poem as a textual collage? The quoted text from Brainard’s diary is the first crack in the mirror, but “Sonnet XV” clearly fractures the ontological model into two. On the one hand, the lines continue to refer to the objects in the original poem, but on the other hand, they index Berrigan’s “hands” by suggesting that the poem is a tactile object itself, a “scotch-tape body,” present in the oft-referenced “room” with Berrigan. The illusion of “cutting” the poem bodily into lines by “breaking” the sonnet into 14 units implies two different ontologies: one treats the poem as “texture,” and one as formal “structure.” The move is strikingly similar to Jack Spicer’s, who accomplish similar effects in his serial books, and also through a notion of “collage” that leads him towards the series, by means of the epistolary. With McHale’s notion of “rifts between texture and structure” that disrupts the heterocosm, we are prepared to understand what I believe is the more compelling way to understand the pathos in *The Sonnets*.

The second way to understand the pathetic “pull” that the series exerts on readers is more unsettling. Rifkin refers to the “tension between pathos and procedure that characterizes the poetic incongruities of the sequence as a whole” (648). What if the pathos is actually a result of the procedure? I have argued that “Sonnet XV” illustrates Berrigan’s passage into a serial mode of writing sonnets, and that he effects the change by breaking the sonnet into “blocks” that he can more easily compose with. The looser, modular form allows him to “compose by ear”: “I would measure [the sonnets] by ear...I would use [lines] in order to make the poem go faster or to make the poem go slower, and that is all that I would primarily worry about...as long as the poem retained its shapeliness. Not visual shapeliness, but shapeliness as being said out loud.” The series allows Berrigan to create these sound-structures quickly. When Berrigan claims that his real concern is with the “shapeliness” of the poem as a sound, and when he says that wants the sonnets to have, “a tactile quality,” he treats the poems themselves like the objects in his room: things that are continuous with his world and extended in it. As an “architectural” unit, however, the incredibly ductile sonnet that he works with is not very “sound,” in the sense of solid and stable.

When previously I entertained the possibility that Berrigan decided to restore “Sonnet LIX” in the 1967 edition not out of a desire to make readers unscramble “Sonnet XV,” but in order to show that the poems were two distinct entities, related on the same level, rather than through the before/after relation implied by writing and re-arranging, I was alluding to this second way that Berrigan appears to think of the series. “Sonnet XV” can help to make my point more clear: once the poet imagines his primary activity as one of cutting and arranging sound-units, he treats the poem merely as a sequence of lines, and lines as things, like books or people, that are in the room with him. Berrigan frequently describes the poem in just this manner: “I wrote these poems fast...I could spill out what was inside me and I had to have a vessel to spill it out into” (*Talking in Tranquility* 92). His choice of the word vessel should not delude us into thinking that he thinks of them as expressive forms, however. He indicates that it is the *act* of making them is itself laden with pathos; the act seems primary and the vessel appears important insofar as it occasions the spilling. He reveals the truth a few lines later in the interview when he modifies his first metaphor: “Then I found that I was actually making the vessel. I was making whatever I was spilling into...content is nothing but an extension of form” (92). Berrigan inverts Robert Creeley’s dictum, “form is nothing but the extension of content.” In other words, once he begins composing sonnets in the series, by combining parts of other sonnets, the poems no longer have “content” in the same way. The content literally is the extended forms. The poet is not primarily interested in reconstructing meanings within a poem, but rather focused on constructing poems, and the vessel—the poem as a made sound-object—becomes more important than the contents. Berrigan explains, “I might say ‘I wonder if I’m fooling myself about taking drugs?’...or I might simply talk about common needs like ‘I wonder if there’s any toilet paper.’ Each one of those kinds of statements is meant to stand for something, and yet I wrote these poems fast” (92). He writes so fast that the “things” that the lines are supposed to stand for seem insignificant—and they also are not “things” that a reader is meant to reconstruct. Instead, the important thing becomes the speed, and the speed itself, palpable everywhere in the jagged edges that point to Berrigan’s “throbbing hands,” provides the series with its uniform affect. At every turn the sonnets point to the Berrigan’s “throbbing hands” not as a figure in the poems, but as presence in the room with the “scotch-tape bodies.”

The question that remains to be asked is this: why would this exuberant, fast, constructive act be associated throughout the book with death and mourning? Why would the sonnet, freed from all of its traditional machinery and turned into a slick, tactile, modular unit, still be an elegy? A second question is whether this type of serial sonnet “compels” a different type of reading? The question can be turned around: is Berrigan compelled to write *The Sonnets* because he imagines (or is) a different type of reader? An interesting way to consider these questions is by means of an offhand comment Berrigan makes about one of the great elegiac poems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Eliot’s poem is an obvious point of reference for any discussion of ambitious postwar serial poems. In the midst of name-dropping other influences, Berrigan mentions it as the primary inspiration for his book, and Eliot as the first poet to influence him. The comment is interesting, not because it contradicts the many other interviews where he says that Shakespeare is the obvious template for *The Sonnets*, but rather because of what he says about Eliot’s “mood”:

The first poem that I understood how it was put together and everything was “The Wasteland,” and I think it’s possible that most of my poems that have any kind of craft in them other than the kind that just comes to you sometimes, are probably totally influenced by “The Wasteland.” Every bit of other information that I got just served to show me that what I got from “The Wasteland” was true. Of course I had to get what was in “The Wasteland” without getting that mood, ‘cause that wasn’t my mood. I was this guy running around New York City ripped out of my mind with excitement. (132)

Berrigan understands *The Waste Land* as a thing that is “put together.” The way that he characterizes Eliot’s craft as primarily a form of assembly speaks volumes about his practice of reading, as well as his approach towards writing *The Sonnets*. Even more telling is what he says about having to, “get what was in *The Waste Land* without getting that mood.” But what is *The Waste Land* without its “mood”? The poem is perhaps most famous as the high Modernist attempt at capturing the collectively experienced “mood” of a social moment in history. The poem is the early masterpiece of the poet who theorized the “objective correlative”—the idea that a successful aesthetic object, such as a long poem, crystallizes a set of particulars that “immediately evoke” a specific emotion. In other words, Eliot’s theory of a successful poem would make it impossible to “get what was in “The Wasteland, without getting that mood,” because the “mood” is objectively “in” *The Waste Land*. Berrigan’s take on Eliot is a remarkable misappropriation of Eliot’s texture, without the structure of Eliot’s poetic theory.

Whether or not Berrigan is being insouciant, or flip, his way of “getting” *The Waste Land* takes the text and turns it into something completely *subjective*. He sounds very much in tune with the youth-culture of the 1960s when he declares, “that wasn’t my mood.” Berrigan treats Eliot’s text much like he treats the various sonnets that he cuts up and puts into *The Sonnets*: it is a put-together thing that can be detached from whatever emotions it contains, which ultimately means that “what” is “in” the poem is not emotion at all. “Back to books. I read / Poems by Auden Spenser Pound Stevens and Frank O’Hara. / I hate books”: these lines suggest that *The Waste Land* is important as another book on the shelf in Berrigan’s room, but these are objects that trigger love and hate, in succession, but “in” Berrigan (*Collected Poems* 68).

Berrigan’s description of himself as “running around New York City ripped out of my mind with excitement,” still does not appear to fit the dark “mood” of *The Sonnets*. Berrigan’s grasp of Eliot does, however, suggest why the mood could turn suddenly from excitement to pathos. The poet that understands *The Waste Land* as a vehicle for his own emotion, rather than a crystallization of Eliot’s, will end up transforming the sonnet into a tool for speed, not a type of architecture. The architecture metaphor is misleading, although it is encouraged by Berrigan’s literalization of the poems as an object that he works on, and his metaphor that the sonnets are like “blocks,” or even “bricks” in the room he is in. His choice of metaphors could be a form of wishful thinking. Something undermines the stability of the “structure” that Berrigan seems to imagine in *The Sonnets*, and the work is ultimately too mobile to function as a “shrine” that the poet or reader constructs. Berrigan has taken Eliot’s famous conclusion, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” as referring to the lines of the poem, without the reference to the cultural and historical value they resonate with for Eliot, and the “I,” as “Berrigan,” merely another fragment among the others.

The final optic that I will propose to understand the mode of elegy follows from the way that Berrigan treats the work as a series of things that the poet responds to by assembling together into new objects, and that the audience encounters as a series of sound-shapes read in succession. Berrigan's treatment of the sonnets as material things in the poet's world, as I have suggested, is in tension with his emphasis on the speed of writing, which seems to follow the dictates of his "mood" rather than any meaning contained in the objects that he cuts up. The poetic ontology that characterizes *The Sonnets* is what McHale refers to as a "fissured" heterocosm: a text in which the texture is in tension with the representational or mimetic function. I take these "rifts" to be what Rifkin describes as the "incongruences" of the series. Perhaps the pathos of these tensions can be understood better with another concept introduced to describe postmodern art: Michael Fried's notion of the "literalist" art-object. In his seminal essay, "Art and Objecthood," Fried focuses his polemic on a mode of Minimalist sculpture, which he calls, "literalist," because of the way that it literalizes the "objecthood" of the work. Berrigan's series of sonnets is obviously quite formally different from the sculptures of Smithson and Judd, but the attitude towards the artwork that Fried describes is similar in some vital respects. The important point of overlap, I believe, is that Berrigan's series is organized around a certain type of authorial experience, which is what Fried defines as the "theatricality" of the Minimalist sculpture. Fried's claim is that these artworks do away with the "frame" around the work, and become objects whose entire meaning is in the experience itself: "The object, not the beholder, must remain the center or focus of the situation, but the situation itself *belongs* to the beholder—it is *his* situation... There is nothing within his field of vision—nothing that he takes note of in any way—that declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience in question." Such artworks are "theatrical" because they are merely props for the viewer to experience, but, therefore, "the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation*—one that virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*" (Fried 153). Eliot's Modernist "fragments" belong to history and are framed by the total work, but Berrigan's fragments are the stuff in his room, and their only connection is to Berrigan, another thing in the world. Berrigan's reduction of the sonnet into its "basic unit... the single line," suggests a Minimalist, "literalist" attitude towards the genre. The repetition of fractured references to Berrigan's "room" only underscores what the poems constantly remind a reader: that they are made out of objects close to Berrigan's hands. The poet's work of assembly that I have described is therefore a version of theatricality. The attitude that Berrigan takes towards writing the sonnet sequence, once he discovers his enabling procedure, also fits Fried's description of the literalist work. The important, but easily overlooked congruence is that while Fried seems to be describing the most static and physically solid of art-objects, the mode of artwork that he calls "literalist" pulls the artist, and the viewer into what seems to be a type of serial mode.

The comparison between Berrigan's serial sonnet and a contemporary form of conceptual sculpture requires a longer discussion than I will go into here, but Fried's concluding comments will suffice to make the point that I think is most important. Fried ends his essay by discussing the temporality of the literalist work, and contrasts it to the mode that he calls "modernist," but that we can recognize in McHale's notion of the *heterocosm*:

Like Judd's Specific Objects and Morris's gestalts or unitary forms, Smith's cubes is always of further interest; one never feels that one has come to the end of it; it is inexhaustible. It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness--*that* is the inexhaustibility of art—but because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless the way a road might be, if it were circular, for example. Endlessness, being able to go on and on, even having to go on and on, is central both to the concept of interest and to that of objecthood. In fact, it seems to be the experience that most deeply excites literalist sensibility, and that literalist artists seek to objectify in their work—for example, by the repetition of identical units...which carries the implication that the units in question could be multiplied ad infinitum.

The comparison of Fried's "literalist" mode with Berrigan's sonnet series now comes into better focus. Berrigan's lines are not identical units, but he is excited by reducing the sonnet to a serial form. One of the most notable characteristics of the series as a whole is how much it repeats such a small stock of phrases, in what often feels like an endless number of combinations. When he describes his mood as "ripped out of my mind with excitement," he seems to speak the way as when he describes the experience of writing *The Sonnets*: "I was very fired up, I felt like I could write four or five any day if I wanted to, and that scared me a little bit" (*Talking in Tranquility* 51). Not simply being excited, but also scared, might indicate that accompanying his new serial method as a presentiment of the "endlessness" that Fried relates to an artwork that inexhaustible, because it is empty, or perhaps circular. Describing the overall shape of the series, Berrigan says, "There's a deliberate parade into it—of the first twelve or so—and there's a deliberate parade out of about the last six or seven. In the middle it all goes around in a circle, that's my theory of writing poems, in a way." (*Talking in Tranquility* 51). Berrigan's attempt to the end the poem with a pastiche of Shakespeare and an echo of the first line seems like bad theater. The fact that we now know is that *The Sonnets* did not end there for Berrigan, and not only because he kept adding more sonnets to new editions of the book, but because he continued to repeat lines from the sonnets, and even entire sonnets, in later books.

Fried elaborates on the temporality of the "theatrical" artwork that, "confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theater addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*), *as if apprehended in an infinite perspective*" (167). I have read no better explanation than Fried's description of the "infinite perspective" for the most-commented upon feature of Berrigan's series: the fragmentation of clock times. "It is 5:15," "It's 8:30 p.m." "It is 5:15 a.m." "fucked til 7 now she's late" appear in a single poem, and also many times throughout the series. In another poem we find, "It's 8:54 in Brooklyn it's the 28<sup>th</sup> of July and it's probably 8:54 in Manhattan" (47). Despite the superficial appearance of what Fried calls "simultaneity," the "probably," gives away the real situation with the poems: their architecture does not fix time, but rather pulls one into it with only flotsam to hold onto.

The gist of my comparison is that Fried offers a new way to understand the mode of elegy in the work. The type of reader that Berrigan seems to imagine, if we look to the response of members of his scene, like Padgett, as an indication, is a mirror image of the type of writer that Berrigan presents himself as in the book itself. The pathos of the



series is not the lament of a writer who expects his reader to go through the patient work of reconstructing the whole from the parts. The pathos is rather related to Berrigan's sense that no whole is there to be reassembled, and that therefore the task is interminable. His concern is not simply what one sonnet intimates when the poet writes, on his Birthday, "I wonder if I'm fooling / myself about pills." The pills refer to drugs, and yet by the end of the poem, which moves through a series of small concerns in rapid succession, the overall effect is that Berrigan worries, on his birthday, about how to mark his time as it passes. His mode of composing the poems at break-neck speed implies a similar mode of reading, which is haunted by a similar affect of worry. Berrigan imagined readers who would take from his poems forms that suited their own moods. A reader of the poems looking for a subject to elegize confronts all of the stuff of Berrigan's "room," but despite being full of personal affects, it is weirdly empty. There is nothing in this beautiful architecture of sound to exhaust, and conversely, the pathos of the work, or of the work it proposes, is perhaps most accurately described not as mourning, but as a feeling of exhaustion. The elegiac mode of Berrigan's serial poem is fatigue.

## Chapter 4 Post-Crash Modern: Ashbery's Serial Accident

### I. Ashbery's Books

A refreshing, recent development in Ashbery criticism is the realization that his books can be understood as coherent projects, rather than collections of individual poems. A stronger version of this claim is that his individual poems, after a certain point in his career, can *only* be understood properly as parts of books. Critics who claim Ashbery as a type of “serial” poet appear to be left with only one option: to read his “book” as a framing strategy or “organizing principle” for making meaning out of the relationships between individual poems. This allows critics to speak of Ashbery's books as serial “projects” with a certain coherence that is looser than a theme. If critics take this approach, it becomes necessary to ask whether there is a moment in Ashbery's career when he shifts his attention from the unit of the poem to the book: a familiar conversion narrative in postwar poetry towards a mode of long poem.

The exact date of Ashbery's turn towards the arrangement of short poems into book projects, if in fact such a shift occurred, is a debatable issue. The bigger problem is how such a change in attitude is to be identified, and how it is to be understood alongside other postwar serial projects. John E. Vincent, the first critic to propose reading Ashbery as a serial poet, thinks that Ashbery's attention shifts from the individual lyric poem to the book beginning only late in his career, in the mid-1980s. Vincent distinguishes the serial book—in both Ashbery and Spicer's versions—from the normal practice of grouping poems together for publication that “figures in the artistic decisions of any poet.” He defines Ashbery's book as a unique poetic structure in itself: a “closural device” that the poet uses to communicate meaning to a reader, and to “imply the presence” of the authorial agent (Vincent, *John Ashbery and You* 5). This hermeneutic is based on a reading of Jack Spicer, but ultimately rests on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's notion of “poetic closure” in individual *lyric* poems: “Herrnstein Smith makes the important distinction between the end of a lyric and its closure. The end of a poem is where the poem stops; closure gives the reader the feeling that it stopped for a reason” (Vincent, *Queer Lyrics* xvi, Herrnstein Smith 13).<sup>54</sup>

The most interesting contention about a “serial” Ashbery, I believe, is that the “book” brings about a change in priorities that “consequently and consequentially changes his relation to the reader” (Vincent, *Ashbery and You* 6). Rather than offering one new relation to the reader, the frame of the book becomes a method for exploring different authorial positions and structures of address. It should be noted, however, that Vincent's approach rests on a homology between the individual lyric and the serial book: “Like the closure of individual lyrics, the shape of the book in Ashbery's case offers the reader a glimpse of an agent constructing her or his reading experience” (5). Both the “lyric” and the “book” are understood as intentional units: “In a sense, closure is an effect

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<sup>54</sup> Vincent and Herrnstein-Smith do not discuss the problems of genre associated with the term “lyric.” They appear to use the term in one common sense to refer to any short poem that presents I first person speaker.

of the fact that a lyric is a unit. A lyric has to end somewhere; the poet makes a choice where.” The interesting thing about an approach to reading closure in Ashbery’s series, which turns it into a “book,” is that it compensates precisely for the *lack* of closure that many readers find so “difficult” in his individual poems: “since many of his poems do not “make sense,” such hand-tipping offers the reader an entrance into projects that might otherwise seem without discernable pattern” (5). Vincent’s approach to the seriality of Ashbery’s later books offers befuddled readers a way “into” the work. Vincent’s assumption, which Herrnstein-Smith discusses at length, is that this closure occurs within the horizon of conventions that reader and author share. The horizon is a social one, which is why Ashbery’s book “projects” refer to contemporary social themes. The “book project” allows readers to discover a new, socially engaged voice that they had not found in Ashbery’s earlier, shorter poems. Vincent also believes that the serial demarcates an early from a late Ashbery: “It is precisely a shift from interest in pattern on the level of the single lyric to patterning at the level of the book that demarcates earlier from later Ashbery” (5). The supposed turn occurs around the time of Ashbery’s *April Galleons* (1986).<sup>55</sup>

The possibilities of this new approach to the frame offered by book projects are manifold, but the most obvious is the ability to understand more sophisticated ways that groups of poems can speak to the poet’s historical moment, even though individual poems within the groups evade lucid reference. The “difficulty” of Ashbery’s poems, as Andrew DuBois recently observes, has become a critical cliché—a code word used by his fans and detractors alike, in both cases to suggest ways that his poems resist efforts to parse them. The approach to his later books as serial works is a mode of reading more attuned to what Harold Bloom has called Ashbery’s “elliptical” style—what he says by not saying, in gaps, in order to sustain contradiction while at the same time sounding fluent. The approach is also more sensitive to the idea that a poet does not simply have one “poetic” but rather explores different priorities over the course a career; recognizing a “shift” towards serial in the 1980s provides a hypothesis for the “loosening of lyric form” in individual poems that commentators have objected to. Reading serial patterning in his books is a way to find meaning on the horizon without sweeping away local difficulties, or even of preserving local difficulty and resistance to interpretation as part of a bigger project. Vincent, for example, is able to find in Ashbery’s recent poetic production, a series of “unique, decipherable projects” that explore such topics as the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, “the device of naming,” and children’s adventure characters “as a means to reimagine queer childhood” (*Ashbery and You* 161). The approach to Ashbery’s books as larger conceptual projects has also proved flexible enough to suit different historicizing critical agendas.<sup>56</sup>

Taking this approach as a guide, what are we to make of the obsessive concern for book-length patterning and seriality earlier in Ashbery’s career, in *Three Poems* (1972)?

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<sup>55</sup> Vincent’s introduction reveals that his project also has the intention of countering a recent critical outcry against Ashbery’s prolific production of poems and books that sees Ashbery’s “late” style as a mode of hyperproduction—a kind of echolalia or logorrhea (3).

<sup>56</sup> Citing Vincent as a model reader, Chris Nealon contextualizes Ashbery writing during the 70s by reading at the level of book in order to propose a relationship between Ashbery’s poetic and changes in the global capitalist system. He brilliantly shows how a pattern of evasions within *Three Poems* and other long poems from that period—what Ashbery euphemistically calls “turning away”—relate poetic labor to the specter of economic crisis. See Nealon’s “Ashbery’s Optional Apocalypse,” in *The Matter of Capital*.

The work has occupied a special place in Ashbery criticism, despite being an anomaly in the poet's corpus, because it supposedly marks a turning point in his career between what critics describe as his experimental collage-like poems of the 1960s, and the longer, discursive style of the award-winning *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). If Vincent is interested in a model of reading that accords with Ashbery's turn towards being a more socially engaged poet, critics who speak favorably of *Three Poems* take it as evidence of his turn towards being something more like a *major* poet.<sup>57</sup> Ashbery has also called *Three Poems* his favorite book. Despite the straightforward designation of the title, however, the book treats genre as a problem rather than a fact. In the book we find a series of three, long prose texts that the title designates as poems. There is little of what appears to be verse in the book—only sporadic stanzas alternating with prose sections in the first, 40-page section, “The New Spirit.” The second and third poems, titled, “The System,” and “The Recital,” are written entirely in prose, with only occasional breaks. Despite the prose form, it seems wrong to call the units that result “paragraphs,” because the breaks can appear in the middle of a sentence, and even when they fall at the end of sentences, there is never any discernable logical coherence that binds together the sentences within a block of prose. The sentences relate to one another in a fluent but digressive manner, but the shifts in topic are abrupt and seem arbitrary—sometimes they happen multiple times within a long sentence. The three poems are predominantly written in first-person discourse, though occasionally the speaker drifts into narrative, often imperceptibly. The generic ambiguity has led most critics to refer to the book's mode as “meditative,” or simply to dodge the issue of genre by calling it “prose poetry,” but either designation is precarious.

*Three Poems* indicates that Ashbery's focus was shifting towards the problem of longer poetic forms long before the mid 1980s, but it also complicates the picture of what seriality can look like and accomplish for him. Describing the text's seriality, which always invokes a part-whole relation, becomes a more complicated task than in the books that Vincent discusses after the model he finds in Spicer and Herrnstein-Smith. On the one hand, it can be read as a triptych, as the title suggests, but the main continuity between the sections is the mode of the speaker's peregrinating discourse. In other words, all three poems seem to present the same voice, speaking in a similar manner about a loosely related set of things. There is heavy repetition, as Susan Schultz observes, “The method of the book is one of repetition; the poems are like old eight-track tapes, at least insofar as their central concerns do not change...Repeated textual riffs resemble serial music, in which the same notes are repeated over and over again, varying slightly and then continuing according to the established pattern” (“Theater of Subjectivity” 143). Ashbery also speaks in interviews of the book as a single project—an experiment aimed at producing certain reader effects. Another reason to consider the book as a serial “project,” however, is the sheer repetition of passages in the book that discuss seriality: the relationship between parts and whole, continuity and fragmentation, and other related

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<sup>57</sup> Harold Bloom, chief among this group of critics, writes, “*Three Poems*, in resonance and spirit's strength, can stand near Rilke's *Malte* as a visionary achievement...It places Ashbery at the center of his generation of American poets.” Bloom, in an essay that helped to establish Ashbery as a major figure of academic interest, contrasts the work after 1970 with Ashbery's more experimental poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*. Bloom refers to the earlier work, which employs avant-gardist techniques such as collage automatic writing, as, “a fearful disaster.” See “The Charity of the Hard Moments” (Bloom 51).

*topoi*. My point is not to get into a periodizing argument about Ashbery's career by showing that his shift in focus came earlier than others have claimed; I find the notion of such a shift dubious anyway. Instead, I believe that *Three Poems* reveals a very different conception of the serial project than the one Vincent describes, and "consequently and consequentially" it entails a different relationship to the reader. Ashbery's serial project in *Three Poems* appears as an attempt to undermine the book's sense of wholeness, unity, and what Vincent calls closure. An important dimension of this project is the reader: what does *Three Poems* reveal about Ashbery's conception of his audience? What does his project say about the "feeling" the poem causes in the reader, and what does it offer the reader if not "entrance" into the book? I will answer these questions by means of Ashbery's interest in the poetic "accident," which is one way that he explores the larger unit of the book as a contingency, rather than a determined pattern.

In a resonant passage, Ashbery, or a speaker of the poem, describes the book as a "big accident" caused by a series of smaller accidents. It is one of many figures in the text that seems to refer to its own serial structure:

It would be inconceivable for the progression to pursue its course unmolested, since it is a progression, for it not to be narrowed down to that single moment of grabbing you and shaking you mercilessly, nor that this moment become the practical meaning of the pattern of events, thus to be terminated "sadder and wiser," drawing the rueful lesson from experience, and yet it was an accident, wasn't it? Not just the part where everything went haywire but the whole thing, a series of accidents complete in themselves and as components fitting into one big accident? There would be nothing very encouraging about this either except that our shared apprehending of the course as plotted turns it into a way, something like an old country road. We can stop, we have stopped, we are stopping now, turning to look into the fulfillment that each unconsciously exhibits to the other, without wanting to especially or knowing too much about it. (24)<sup>58</sup>

Here, as in countless passages in *Three Poems*, the strangely fluent, but dislocated voice relates the concept of the whole to the series of the parts. The description is very close to Joseph Conte's formal definition of the "postmodern" serial poem: the parts are semi-autonomous—"complete in themselves,"—but they loosely relate together in a way that is not predetermined, or constrained by a formula—"fitting into one big accident." The speaker's figure implies that the book—"the whole thing," is "one big accident," which by analogy makes the moments of the book little "accidents." Because *Three Poems* does not contain a series of "little," individual poems, the identity of the serial accidents is unclear. Perhaps this is why the figure "is not very encouraging." It offers one solace, however, because the figure brings about a new relationship between the speaker and the reader: "we" apprehend the "course" of the series together.

I will explain the issue of Ashbery's shifty pronouns and what they reveal about his understanding of the audience. The voice that speaks in the poem variously as "I," and "we," sometimes to "you," often has the feel of speaking to itself, or to nobody. The problem of this fractured voice, which appears to be the book's biggest accident of all, can be clarified by T.S. Eliot's definition of the "three voices" in modern poetry. Ashbery's treatment of the voice in *Three Poems* has what appears to be more than an accidental relationship to the essay, which contains Eliot's programmatic definition of a

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<sup>58</sup> All page references to *Three Poems* are to the Penguin ed.

mode that he will not quite call “lyric.” Instead, he opts for “meditation,” but the terms, like the voices, are easily mixed up.

The above passage about the “big accident,” would not be memorable if it were only an isolated incident. The text is filled with passages that sound very similar. The “accident” returns, however, in a very significant way. At what feels like a climactic moment that is all the punchier in a text that explores different types of monotony, the speaker says,

one can almost hear the beginning of the lyric crash in which everything will be lost and pulverized, changed back into atoms ready to resume new combinations and shapes again, new wilder tendencies, as foreign to what we have carefully put in and kept out as a new chart of elements or another planet—unimaginable, in a word. (106)

The sentence stands out because it is the single appearance of the word “lyric,” in the text. The title of the book itself raises the question of its genre, and the question is repeated again, as I will discuss in a moment, on the book’s first page. The questions that I will now attempt to answer in the remainder of the chapter are the following : first, why does Ashbery equate the “big accident” of the series to a specific type of accident involving lyric “voice”? Second, what is “the lyric crash”?

The phrase is ambiguous. “Lyric” could be either a noun or an adjective, but Ashbery exploits the ambiguity at this key moment in the series, and plays off the different meanings that result. If “lyric” is a noun, the phrase seems to equate the book itself with a lyric poem, the vehicle that Ashbery has driven through a series of “swerves,” “digressions,” “dislocations”—all words that appear in the poem in connection to the “course” of the speaker’s discourse. The crash would then be the end of the poem—the point at which the poetic artifice could go no further. Is it a figure for a different type of closure, or a poem that ends without? Ashbery, Vincent observes, is fond of speaking of poems that “end up in the décor”: a literal translation of a French idiom for a car crashing over the edge of the road (Vincent 16). If “lyric” is an adjective, however, the meaning is slightly different. Then the phrase would refer to the imminent crash as being “lyrical,” but the thing that crashes is not a lyric (poem), but perhaps a prose poem, or the voice of the poem, or the poet, or “us.” The uncertainty of the thing that crashes invokes the “it” that the poem introduces in the first line, but never defines: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way.” The point is that “lyric” is neither one nor the other, neither adjective nor noun. The flexibility of “lyric,” however, is evidence of the term’s vexing generic status: the way that the word seems to be both a specific genre and a trans-historical quality of texts. Virginia Jackson, sensitive to the effects of a lyric ideology, puts a red flag up where she sees this telling slippage: “Think of the modern imaginary construction of the lyric as what allows the term to move from adjectival to nominal status and back again” (7).<sup>59</sup> I would also note that in addition to the problem of “lyric,” the nature of the “crash” is ambiguous too. Is the crash something that will

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<sup>59</sup> She continues, “Whereas other poetic genres (epic, poems on affairs of state, georgic, pastoral, verse epistle, epitaph, elegy, satire) may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narrative, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions and narratives for their interpretation...the poetry that comes to understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading.” Her notion of a “lyric social imaginary,” is an interesting appropriation of Charles Taylor’s concept, n. 7, 242.

happen to the text, or has it already happened? Is it inevitable, and if so, what is the cause? Is the reader involved, or injured? And why is it “unimaginable”? Ashbery’s figure suggests that he sees “lyric” as an accident-prone genre, and that he treats the serial book-project as a set of crash-tests designed to produce a “mountain of data,” with “unimaginable” results.

## II. Three Poems, Three Voices

The first accident in the book establishes a connection between the crash, the audience, and genre. The poem invokes the reader on the first page, in a passage that many critics cite as an important statement of Ashbery’s poetics. The reason why the opening sequence would stand in as a poetics statement is because the poem’s speaker poses a question about the mode of the discourse, which also amounts to a question about the genre and form of the book.<sup>60</sup>

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another truer, way.

clean-washed sea

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but—yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true. But the truth has passed on

to divide all. (3)

This opening passage offers a first taste of the speaker’s meditative tone, but also frames subsequent passages that refer reflexively to the discourse. The speaker contrasts two modes of writing: putting it all down, “and “leaving all out.” Critics generally agree on what seems like the obvious meaning of the passage: the two “ways” that speaker considers are verse and prose. Hence the “examples” of “leaving out,” appear to be examples of the fragmented poetry of Ashbery’s first books, most notably his *The Tennis Court Oath*. They also bear a likeness to Ashbery’s model in those books: the condensed, fragmentary style of modernist free verse. The “flowers were,” evoke flowers in Pound’s *imagiste* poem, “In a Station of the Metro”—perhaps the canon’s most famous example of “leaving out.”<sup>61</sup> Critics writing about this passage have not commented on the crucial detail that the two fragments of verse conspicuously leave out any pronoun. They are examples of poetry without any speaker. Not all poetry contains pronouns, of course, but the omission of the “I” in the two “examples,” is underscored by the following sentence.

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<sup>60</sup> I use “genre” and “mode” somewhat synonymously here, but I am sensitive to the complex issue of how the terms have been tangled in theories of genre. The question of whether Ashbery treats lyric as a mode or genre is itself a problem that does not have an easy answer, as this chapter should demonstrate. An important discussion that has shaped my thinking is Genette 4-73.

<sup>61</sup> Pound distills the perception down to its “image complex” so that no verb predication is necessary to coordinate the two lines of the poem. There also is no personal pronoun.

The “something” that comes and occupies “their place,” is “yourself.” The conclusion that we are encouraged to draw is that the speaker has decided to go with the “putting in” approach towards writing, because it is the more inclusive mode. The second conclusion, which is implied by the example of the book that follows, is that “putting in” is equivalent to prose. The first poem is scattered with what appear to be stanzas of verse, but they gradually disappear from the work. The book’s title almost suggests a joke: the poetry has been left out of *Three Poems*. Naturally the matter is more complicated.

The small detail that I noted about the pronouns is actually a big deal. What appears to be poetry, or rather, a certain style of verse, is displaced by a pronoun: “yourself,” with an unstable referent. The speaker’s problem of choosing between two modes of writing, hinges on the second person singular pronoun. The following sentence repeats the second person pronoun, with “you made this, therefore you are true.” The line could be read as an address to the reader, or readers. However, the strange effect of Ashbery’s pronouns, as many have observed, is that they simply do not allow for any determinate reference. “You” could address a reader, but also could be the poet speaking to himself, or of himself in the second person. To speak of oneself as a “you,” is a rhetorical figure, often used for the purpose of demonstration, and implies that the speaker is making a point to an audience. On the other hand, we also use the second person pronoun when we are un-self-consciously speaking to ourselves in private. In that case, the discourse appears as private speech that we are overhearing—another rhetorical figure, but one that has, as I will discuss, been used to define the mode of the voice in a lyric poem. All of these considerations are less interesting than one crucial detail, however, that is easily overlooked: the “you” that “comes” at the pivotal moment and “stands in the place” of the voiceless fragments, transforming the book into a serial prose poem, appears to be an *accident*. “Forget as we will, something soon comes,” implies that the “yourself” that comes is not intended. “You,” which is now equated with everything that follows—the long flux of sentences produced by the poem’s speaker—just happens. If the rest of the book, or the poem, or prose poem, or meditation, is what the “you” makes, Ashbery seems to be suggesting that the work is “made” as a series of accidents, of which this is the first moment.

Ashbery comes much closer to defining what he means by accident in his subsequent long poem, “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” in which the speaker, also addressing a “you,” says:

...Long ago  
The strewn evidence meant something,  
The small accidents and pleasure  
Of the day as it moved gracelessly on,  
A housewife doing chores. Impossible now  
To restore those properties in the silver blur that is

The record of what you accomplished by sitting down (*Collected Poems* 477)

In the later poem, which takes a more conventional verse lineation different from the prose of *Three Poems*, accident seems to describe minor elements of perception that are registered, but not recorded on the surface of the painting that the speaker muses over. Mohanty and Monroe, in an important essay on Ashbery’s “articulation of the social,” observe: “The veritable obsession of the poem [is] the concern with the minor acts, the unstudied gestures, the colorless present which is often subsumed into larger narratives.



Teleologies are easy, the poem suggests; the untidy present needs to be attended to on its own terms” (40).<sup>62</sup> One way to understand the accident, therefore, is the very element that resists the narrative pull that often seems to take hold of the discourse in *Three Poems*. Ashbery’s use of the term is necessarily vague, I would argue, because *Three Poems* avoids not only road-map of narrative, but also a conceptual map that would make it easier for a reader to parse the text’s key poetic principles. Accident, therefore, seems to refer not only to the “all” that the poem’s speaker tries to record in his “colorless” present, but also the poem’s obsessive description of the discourse itself, which emerges as a dizzyingly monotonous repetition of “unstudied” verbal “gestures.” It is in this sense that a series accidents in the speaker’s discourse leads to the “lyric” crash. The accidents begin with the voice’s direct address to the reader, but the voice, and the scene of listening are difficult to contextualize, which makes reading for meaning feel like an unusually contingent effort. Ashbery seems interested in the way that these minor accidents in the discourse feel both inevitable and also “impossible” to record, which gives them the effect of being repetitive and fleeting. On the first page of *Three Poems* the “accident” in which the “you” “comes to stand in their place,”—the accident that the speaker calls “truth,”—is over almost before it begins, and soon the series continues on, “to divide all” (3).

The series of pronominal displacements on the first page suggests a much broader theme of instability in the book. The unspecified “it” that the speaking “I” wants to “leave out,” is displaced by “you,” but the “you” stands in for a problem, rather than a person. The problem, to put it broadly, concerns a social relation between the poet and the audience, but *Three Poems* frames it specifically as a problem of the voice in the poem. Is it one, or is it multiple, and to whom, if anybody does it talk? Who listens, or reads? Superficially this problem also touches on a formal-generic question about verse and prose; specifically it is a question about a type of Modernist, early-Ashberian verse that “we try to forget.” The deeper issue that the speaker of the poem confronts is not really about the choice between styles, but rather how the poet imagines—and addresses—the audience. The problem is the instability of the pronoun “you”: the poet’s address to the audience, which is a figure of direct address, cannot be distinguished from the his address to himself in front of the audience, which, oddly, is a figure for a less rhetorical type of address. The weird quality of the “meditation,” and the most notable characteristic of the book besides its apparent lack of any plan, is that it appears to contain a voice that we are overhearing, and yet it also often seems to be speaking to us directly. At the times when it voices confusion about its own discourse, it also seems to be our own voice, as we are reading, which in a way, it literally is.

Rather than simply take the instability of these relations as an abstract reflection on pronouns, however, they should be read against the historical horizon that the poem paints like a vague, atmospheric backdrop. Robert von Hallberg argues that the book’s figures of disorder and breakdown in the book are references to the social and political climate of Ashbery’s America: “Ashbery’s poems of the late 1960s and 1970s show how the intellectual climate changed once the consensus began to crumble...Ashbery rather determinedly undoes systematic arrangements. The chance elements of his poems are intended to unsettle expectations, even at the expense of the form of his own poems” (von

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<sup>62</sup> Ashton offers a different, more critical reading of the status of “Accident.” See her “Introduction: Modernism’s New Literalism” (*From Modernism to Postmodernism* 1-29).

Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture* 54). Thus, the title of the second poem, “The System,” takes on shades of concrete, historical meaning in the opening line: “The system was breaking down” (53). The poem never provides many particulars that would allow us to determine which “system” was breaking down. Like the unstable pronouns, the “system” can refer variously to the unsettling social changes unfolding in public all around the poet—what von Hallberg describes as the dissolution of consensus at numerous levels in American society—but it can also refer to the more arcane or mundane systems that are breaking down. An obvious example is the system of genres that the book troubles on the first page: verse is subtracted, but a more inclusive form of “poetic” prose soon comes in its place. The speaker suggests this generic switch is an inevitable consequence, but the form of the book is unforeseeable and amorphous: a new genre of experimental prose poetry? Ashbery avoids falling into a simple binary of new vs. old, avant-garde vs. conventional, however. Mutlu Blasing cites an essay of 1968 in which Ashbery talks about that “other tradition” that was becoming newly hegemonic in his cultural milieu: “Is there nothing between the extremes of Levittown and Haight-Ashbery, between an avant-garde which has become a tradition and a tradition which is no longer one? In other words, has tradition finally managed to absorb the individual talent?”<sup>63</sup> Blasing explains: “To survive both as an individual and as an individual talent now, Ashbery resists any “Rigid binary system of inducing truths/ From starved knowledge of them,” whether the binarism of the “old” and “new” traditions or of the opposition of literary and cultural discourses.” Ashbery’s reference to Eliot will become more resonant later in my discussion, but Blasing’s observation suggests that Ashbery’s sense of a systematic breakdown happens with the social category of individual, not at a higher level. Andrew Dubois recognizes how a breakdown in consensus around literary and formal conventions is transferred onto another individual: the reader of *Three Poems*:

Ashbery is hardly beholden to classical and Renaissance systems of form and rhetoric...nor does any particular religious system motivate Ashbery’s work to a disproportionate degree...Ashbery may gesture toward, but is actually not beholden to, containing systems or narratives in organizing his poems. The purposeful absence of an available model of the whole produces problems of attention, since the many parts of culture Ashbery uses to construct his poems cannot be understood primarily in relation to a stable preexisting model. This burden is heavy on the reader, because Ashbery’s content, or what the work is about, is meant to be virtually everything, yet no extant form can contain such content...Ashbery’s is a struggle to make total content the container of subsidiary forms. (xii-iii)

The burden for the reader that Dubois describes results from a particular problem of form: the form of address that is confused by the “you” on the first page. Positioning this “accident” at the beginning, Ashbery suggests that it has important status in the series that follows. The shifty “you” in the opening sequence points to another systematic instability related to the formal-generic one. The burden of understanding “what the work is about,” is partly a burden of negotiating what feels like a work that “contains everything” without following a narrative or thematic model, but the problem also stems

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<sup>63</sup> I put “other tradition” in scare quotes because it appears that way in *Three Poems*: “It is this “other tradition,” which we propose to explore” (56). The speaker’s words are born out in real life, because the phrase later appears as a title of the second poem in *Houseboat Days*, (Ashbery, *Collected Poems* 491)

from the accident on the first page, when the text confuses who is speaking, who is reading, and who is “making” the text. When “yourself” becomes an accident, communication between author and reader, and perhaps between author and poem, becomes a subsidiary concern. Ashbery effectively triggers a hyperbolic doubt: is the text to be read as a meditation in his own voice, or as some parody of the “meditative” voice? To answer the question we must make an assumption about the voice that the poem will not admit. The system of the poem’s voice is breaking down.

T.S. Eliot’s essay of 1954, “The Three Voices of Poetry,” attempts to systematically establish a consensus about the “the voices of poetry” that ground a system of genres. Whether or not Ashbery had read the essay, which was first given as a lecture and then circulated in condensed form in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it gives voice to an established position of the dominant academic literary criticism in American universities when Ashbery was in school. The doctrine that Eliot tries to clarify represents a literary-critical system that clearly informs Ashbery’s work, and offers perspective on what “lyric” might mean in Ashbery’s “lyric crash.” Eliot defines the three voices:

The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. The distinction between the first and the second voice, between the poet speaking to himself and the poet speaking to other people, points to the problem of poetic communication; the distinction between the poet addressing other people in either his own voice or an assumed voice, and the poet inventing speech in which imaginary characters address each other, points to the difference between dramatic, quasi-dramatic, and non-dramatic verse. (38)

Eliot’s program helps to show that one of the difficulties of *Three Poems* is that it thoroughly scrambles these three voices. As I have already suggested, the “yourself?”/“you” of the first page could be the speaker addressing himself, or it could be a proposition directed to the reader. The indeterminacy between the two positions is what Eliot calls the “problem of poetic communication,” and the book is literally filled with instances of this problem. The problem that Eliot describes as the “distinction” between the first two voices is not simply about identifying pronouns, but rather it concerns the rhetorical aspect of the discourse. The “you” of a poem could always be a figure of apostrophe, and many critics speak of “The New Spirit,” which uses the “you” much more heavily than the other two poems, as a “love poem.” Eliot reveals that the entire purpose of outlining the three voices, however, is to settle a common misconception about this type of poetry: “I wish to anticipate a question... Cannot a poem be written for the ear, or for the eye, of one person alone? You say simply, “Isn’t love poetry at times a form of communication between one person and on other, with no thought of a further audience?”” (38). Eliot flatly answers, no: “A good poem, though addressed to one person, is always meant to be overheard by others.” Eliot’s essay, therefore, is really about the poet’s relationship to the audience, and the ways that the poem is shaped by the audience that it does or does not address. He only associates rhetoric with the “second voice,” but it is the real problem at hand.

An example of Ashbery's play with problem of communication comes later in "The New Spirit":

Is it correct for me to use you to demonstrate all this? Perhaps what I am saying is that it is I the subject, recoiling from you at ever-increasing speed just so as to be able to say I exist in that safe vacuum I had managed to define from my friends' disinterested turning away. As if I were only a flower after all and not the map of the country in which it grows. There is more to be said about this I guess, but it does not seem to alter anything that I am the spectator, you what is apprehended, and as such we both have our own satisfying reality, even each to the other, though in the end it falls apart, falls to the ground and sinks in. (15)

Whether a lover or a reader (or both), Ashbery's "you," as the passage above suggests, is explicitly tied to a problem of rhetoric and a larger audience. The "I" acknowledges that the "you" is being used for the purpose of a demonstration, and a demonstration implies a purpose and a larger audience. The "I" that speaks, however, declares that it exists in a "vacuum," – a solitary space that has been formed by his audience "turning away." The audience of this statement, then, could be the speaker or the poet himself, who is using the "you" merely as a "spectacle." As in the first passage, the thought ends when the two positions are divided "each to the other," and as usual, "it"—the whole thought—"falls apart." Not only does it become difficult to tell what this passage is trying to communicate or demonstrate, it is also unclear whether the demonstration is even *for* the reader. It becomes unclear whether the audience is listening to Eliot's "first voice": Ashbery talking—writing—for himself, or for nobody. Ashbery's notorious "we" is just as difficult to locate in Eliot's schema of voices: "How we move around in our little ventilated situation, how roomy it seems! ...we believe that we are immune to time because we are "out of" it" (88-9). Is the voice that speaks attempting to communicate to an audience by aligning itself with the group, or has it merely imagined this social formation, as it suggests a few lines later, when the "we" is replaced with the more abstract "one": "These thoughts oppress one in the social world one has built around oneself, especially the thought of these other infinite worlds upon worlds, and when one really examines one's own world in the harsher light of its happiness-potential one sees that it is a shambles indeed" (89). The world of the "we," the speaker suggests, is just really just an isolation chamber. Even in the presence of an audience, the speaker may only be able to communicate with itself.

Eliot's third voice concerns dramatic poetry, so it would seem out of place in *Three Poems*, which does not present any characters in dialogue, and seems, moreover, to present only one speaker. Ashbery manages to tangle up the problem of dramatic vs. non-dramatic verse with Eliot's "first problem" in various ways, though. Although *Three Poems* seems primarily to focus on breakdown of "poetic communication," the dramatic voice is regularly invoked when the speaker likens the discourse to a play, a spectacle:

And it is no longer a nameless thing, but something colorful and full of interest, a chronicle play of our lives, with the last act still in the dim future, so that we can't tell yet whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, all we know is that it is crammed with action and the substance of life. Surely all this living that has gone on that is ours is good in some way, though we cannot tell why: we know only that our sympathy has deepened, quickened by the onrushing spectacle, to the point where we are like spectators swarming up onto the stage to be absorbed into the play, though

always aware that this is an impossibility, and that the actors continue to recite their lines as if we weren't there. Yet in the end, we think, this may become possible; that is the time when audience and actor and writer and director all mingle joyously together as one, as the curtain descends a last time to separate them from the half-empty theater. When this happens—yet there is no point in looking to that either. (93-4)

The description ends, as it always does in *Three Poems*, with the reassertion of the momentary blurring of different social relations. Here they are defined generically as audience, actor, writer and director, but the curtain comes down like the line, “to divide all” on the book’s first page. The divisive effect of the curtain becomes an effect of grammar itself in this passage, because the sentence that begins, “When this happens,” is cut short by the speaker’s admission of futility.

Like many passages that invoke the dramatic, this appears to be a description rather than an actual confusion of the “third voice.” Eliot says that to achieve the third voice, “The personage on the stage must not give the impression of being merely a mouthpiece for the author...And these lines of poetry must also justify themselves by their development of the situation in which they are spoken” (43). A poem that is spoken in character, but that merely reports the author’s own voice in guise, is a “dramatic monologue,” which Eliot describes as a hybrid mode, distinct from dramatic poetry. Ashbery’s text problematizes these distinctions, however, because the speaker of the poem is never really located in a situation to begin with, nor does the voice describe any characteristics that we could map onto the poet or use to differentiate the voice as a mere persona, such as in the monologues by Browning that Eliot uses to illustrate his point.

To call the situation of the speaker in *Three Poems* a “meditative” situation is already to grasp at generic straws, because the truth is that the speaker, who may or may not be a character on a stage, is not in one single situation. Even within one poem, or page, the situation seems to be shifting in a kaleidoscopic way by means of deictic references to different “enclosures”: “This was the outside reality. Inside there was like a bare room, or an alphabet, an alphabet of clemency” (55), “But the light continues to grow, the eternal disarray of sunrise, and one can now distinguish certain shapes such as haystacks and clocktower.” “As a lost dog on the edge of a sidewalk timidly approaches...” (91)—these are but a few selections of the shifting context that the speaker seems to be in. On the last page of “The System,” which ends when the speaker suddenly seems to be inside of a movie theater, a reader confronts the problem of sorting out characters from mere “mouthpieces” of the author: “And it is here that I am quite ready to admit that I am alone, that the film I have been watching all this time may be only a mirror, with all the characters including that of the old aunt played by me in different disguises. If you need a certain vitality you can only supply it yourself, or there comes a point, anyway, when no one’s actions but your own seem dramatically convincing and justifiable in the plot that the number of your days concocts” (105). The speaker’s thought undercuts Eliot’s criteria for “justifying” whether the voice in a poem is “plausibly” dramatic. Ashbery presents a situation in which the plausibility of the character has to be supplied by the viewer, or the reader. But even this source of drama is undercut by the sheer succession of “days”—a reminder of the way that each statement or scene in *Three Poems* is dislocated by the next passage. The dislocation of the voice from one passage to the next is the drama of the book, if we can call it that. At the end of

“The System,” as in all of *Three Poems*, the voice is not dislocated because it appears to be nowhere, but rather because Eliot’s “second” and “third” voices collapse into the first, but conversely, there is no sense if this is really the poet who frankly admits, “I am alone.”

The slide of the first voice into solitude suggests a fundamental problem that Eliot recognizes. The “first voice” is usually associated with lyric poetry, but Eliot attempts to extricate this poetic touchstone from a conceptual wreck: “I must make the point that this poetry is not necessarily what we call loosely “lyric poetry.” The term “lyric is unsatisfactory.” (41). Eliot proceeds to object to the lack of resolution in the term—is it a “short” poem? A poem intended to be set to music? What about long lyrics?—his awareness of the generic problems with “lyric” is rarely noted by contemporary critics. He tries to clarify the problem, however, in a manner that points to deeper rifts in the concept. The revised definition that he arrives at is that poetry of the first voice is “lyric” in the sense proposed by the German poet Gottfried Benn. Benn proposes lyric as a poetry truly written in isolation, addressed to no one, that originates from a profoundly asocial impulse: “When you have the words for it, the “thing” for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by a poem” (42). Eliot summarizes this conception in his own words: “Where [Benn] speaks of “lyric poetry,” then, I should prefer to speak of “meditative verse”...In a poem which is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet may be concerned solely with expressing in verse—using all his resources of words...--this obscure impulse. He does not know what he has to say until he has said it...He is going to all of that trouble not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort...he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable.” The post-climatic aftermath to the “meditative” lyric act that Eliot describes is starting to sound very close to a “lyric crash” that ends Ashbery’s “meditation.” The problem, however, is that Eliot’s description of the impulse that compels the poet into this process, and the nature of the process itself, is markedly different from Ashbery’s. Or rather, Ashbery’s *Three Poems* takes a very different approach to Eliot’s rather unsatisfactory explanation of the “origin” of this “first voice”: “I don’t believe that the relation of a poem to its origins is capable of being more clearly traced” (42).

Lest I make a straw man out of Eliot, it is crucial to show how ends his essay with a qualified definition of the first voice, and the relation to the other two. He finally admits the accident that his definition of “meditative,”—Benn’s “lyric”—has gotten into, because he acknowledges the situation of the audience. The idea of a poem that contains a voice speaking to nobody is a fiction, Eliot confesses, because every poem, even the most “meditative,” is written with the audience in mind. Therefore every poem mixes the voices: “So far I have been speaking, for the sake of simplicity, of the three voices as if they were mutually exclusive.” Distancing himself from Benn’s conclusion, that “lyric” truly is a speech that is asocial, and therefore entirely “overheard” by the reader, Eliot clarifies his position: “for me the voices are most often found together... Even, though, as I have maintained, the author of a poem may have written it primarily without thought of an audience, he will also want to know what the poem which has satisfied *him* will have to say to other people” (42). His final turn, so to speak, is towards the audience—he admits the poet’s understanding of the audience and the various types of interest involved.

He also gives a sense of the audience situation he imagines: “There are, first of all, those few friends to whose criticism he may wish to submit it before considering it completed...but I am not thinking primarily of the few judicious friends...but of the larger and unknown audience—people to whom the author’s name means only his poems which they have read. The final handing over, so to speak, of the poem to an unknown audience, for what that audience will make of it, seems to me the consummation of the process begun in solitude and without thought of the audience” (42-3). Eliot does not refer specifically to the problem as historical or even textual in nature, but the situation that he describes is clearly related to his contemporary literary market. The audience he imagines is the anonymous reader of the published book or magazine. The anonymity of the audience is the perfect inverse of its relation to the author, whose name “means” nothing more to the reader than the content of other poems attached to that name. His discussion of the voices is an attempt to describe how such a social relation could shape the poetic text, through the figure of the voice, and how this is marked in the text. The situation he describes is one in which the identity of the voice in the poem is extremely contingent, limited by what seems like the accident of whether the unknown reader had read any of his works, and if he had, by what voice he found in them. Despite this contingency, Eliot admits that the poet’s interest in this reader is somehow both internal and external to the voice, which thereby makes it *mixed*:

I think that in every poem, from the private meditation to the epic or the drama, there is more than one voice to be heard. If the author never spoke to himself, the result would not be poetry, though it might be magnificent rhetoric; and part of our enjoyment of great poetry is the enjoyment of *overhearing* words which are not addressed to us. But if the poem were exclusively for the author, it would be a poem in a private and unknown language...[it] would not be a poem at all. (43)

I have quoted liberally from his essay in order to show the back-bend that Eliot seems to be doing in order to keep the voices somewhat distinct from each other. The passage also reveals that Eliot’s voice is mouthing the words of another famous lyric theorist, and the ventriloquism comes at a telling moment in the essay. Eliot’s words are a virtual mimicry of Mill’s definition of lyric, which I have already discussed in my chapter on Spicer: “Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*...Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.” Jackson discusses the way that Mill, in his essay, already acknowledges that the audience is mediated by print. In a fashion similar, but not identical, to Eliot, Mill tries to naturalize this element of contingency and the threat that it poses to his definition: “It may be said that poetry which is printed on hot-pressed paper and sold at a book-seller’s shop, is a soliloquy in full dress, and on the stage. It is so; but there is nothing absurd in the idea of such a mode.” Jackson explains, “According to Mill, the circulation of poetry...is exactly what the generic conventions of lyric cannot acknowledge—that is, the lyric can no more acknowledge its literal circumstance than can the actor...Thus the difficulty of thinking about the lyric as implicated in historical contingency is that the discourse that surrounds the genre must admit without acknowledging the defining effect of that contingency” (56). Eliot’s situation in 1954 is far from Mill’s, and he does suggest an awareness of the historical dimension of his generic categories when he says that Benn considers his concept of lyric voice, “to be on the whole a development of our own age” (42). Like

Mill, Eliot ultimately tries to deny the contingency of his system of voices, though. He makes the element of rhetoric secondary to the “primary” voice of the author speaking to himself. The entire system by which he differentiates “great” poetry depends on the possibility of distinguishing the three voices, and this system is hierarchical: the “first voice,” is also “primary.” Eliot’s admission that even a poem in the first voice cannot be truly “private,” is where his argument “goes into the décor.” He admits that in order for a poem to be *heard* at all, it must contain a *mixed* voice, which then implies that what he calls “great poetry,” involves a voice the dissembles the fact that it is divided. Ashbery, names this division at the beginning, however, and turns it into the lyric—or lyrical—subject of the poem.

### III. The Crash

Ashbery is openly interested in the “problem” of his readership. A few decades after Eliot’s essay, the situation is similar in some vital regards, even if the consensus that Eliot’s definition asserts is itself in the midst of crumbling. Ashbery recognizes that his audience is an unknown reader of books published by a major press, and confronts a situation in which he has the weird anonymity of the author that Eliot implies.<sup>64</sup> In an interview conducted while he was writing *Three Poems* he describes his interest in the “problem” of an imagined reader:

As far as understanding goes, is there really anything to understand? I think that’s a question that my poems are more or less asking throughout: What’s there? Is there anything there? If there isn’t, or if there is, the poem will be whatever it means to the reader. All poetry is written, I think, with this understanding in mind because the poet can advance only a little way out of the poem to push the reader in one direction or another toward an understanding of it. But what the poet can do really isn’t very much. What the poem *is* is going to be determined by the reader. I guess my poems are a kind of simplification of this problem, one which has always affected poets. The poem is not really in their hands: it’s in someone else’s. I’m calling attention to this, perhaps, with the hope that eventually there might be some other way out of the problem. (Poulin 246)

He seems to contradict himself by both treating the problem as universal and also contingent. His description makes the “problem,” seem like a broader philosophical issue of other minds, but he also suggests a rhetorical and pragmatic element to his approach. The reader, whom the audience does not know and only contacts through the poem, can still be influenced. Ashbery says the influence is limited, that the “poet can advance only a little way out of the poem.” He does not explain how the poet would do this, but the sense that even a little influence is possible reveals that Ashbery understands his relationship to the reader as coercive, albeit in a qualified way. His interest in the rhetorical seems to exist uncomfortably with the other position—the meaning is really in the reader’s hands. Despite the limited way in which the poet can “push” the reader, Ashbery’s situation does not seem to be one of “speaking” to a reader, or of

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<sup>64</sup> *Three Poems* was originally published by Viking, which was a major press even before being acquired by the Penguin group in 1975. In the early 70s, for example, the press published titles by Miller, Bellow, Kerouac, Arendt, Paz, and Pynchon.



communicating information. Later in the same interview he elaborates on his desire to “communicate” to the audience, but complicates what communicate means:

What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes. Something which a reader could dip into and maybe get something out of without knowing anything about me, my history, or sex life, or whatever. The reputation that my poetry has as being something terribly private and difficult to get at is not at all what I hoped for. I’m hoping that maybe someday people will see it this way, as trying to become the openest possible form, something in which anybody can see reflected his own private experiences without them having to be defined or set up for him. (251)

Ashbery’s remarkable image of the one-size-fits-all tube-sock is loaded with resonances of the mass-market society that seems merely incidental to the discourse of *Three Poems*. The uniformity that the tube sock—and Ashbery’s “all-purpose experience”—implies, is the obverse to the crumbling consensus of the postwar decades that von Hallberg recognizes in Ashbery’s “system breakdown.” Ashbery’s desire to create a text in which private experience can be a tacit given implies that consensus is already lost. The tube-sock metaphor does not hide that he is saying something about the audience remarkably similar to Eliot, two decades earlier. His understanding of the audience is one that only knows him as a literary name, associated in the public imagination with the word “difficulty.” Yet unlike in Eliot’s model, where the poem moves from a private scene outward into the public sphere, Ashbery begins by imagining having an experience that is already a reflection of his reader—the entire act of *overhearing* has been automated for the reader. His “hope” for accessibility leads him to imagine a poetry with the “openest possible form,” which suggests the “inclusive” turn at the beginning of *Three Poems*. To translate this into the lexicon of the poetic voice, Ashbery is describing a poem in which the reader would merely *overhear* his own thoughts.

Like the “system” breakdown, there is muffled social reference here as well. Comparing experience to an elastic sock, he suggests an attitude about his imagined, anonymous reader that puts him at a great distance from modernist projects. Andrew Ross, writing of Ashbery’s earlier book, *The Tennis Court Oath*, says of Ashbery’s use of avant-garde formal techniques: “But *The Tennis Court Oath* already harbors within itself historical knowledge about the failures of the avant-garde, not only on the level of cognitive/aesthetic strategies of shock, but also in the context of the political utopian project of constructing a new social reality...both *history* and *shock*, the radical moves, respectively, of high modernism and the avant-garde, are immobilized alongside the aleatory speed of the poetic surface” (207-8). In *Three Poems*, however, Ashbery has “left out” any trace of avant-gardist techniques of shock—the dislocations of sense in the poem certainly cannot be described as shocking. “Putting it all in” is a mode more attuned to a consumer society. Because that turn towards “putting it all in,” also happens at the beginning of *Three Poems* as the arrival of the mixed-up voice, it appears that his writing is trying to “become” the openest possible voice as well, and yet there are no markers in the text that suggest this is a politically motivated, democratic voice. Even the descriptions of social disarray are as lacking in sentiment as they are in any historical detail. An extreme version of the “immobilization” of history that Ross describes is on display in “The System,” as moments like this illustrate: “There was, however, a residue, a kind of fiction that developed parallel to the classic truths of daily life (as it was in that

heroic but commonplace age) as they unfolded with the foreseeable majesty of a holocaust, an unfrighting one, and went unrecognized, drawing force and grandeur from this like the illegitimate offspring of a king” (55-6). The idea of returning the “word” holocaust to a meaning without historical reference, which is what the speaker suggests in this sentence, implies a very different take on the banality of evil. It is almost as if the word most resonant with 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural memory needed to be emptied of reference for “anybody” to hear in it his own, “private” voice.

A few other comments about *Three Poems* from other interviews fill in the picture of Ashbery’s model of “communication.” He describes mixing speech genres as a way to produce the unexpected: “One of my aims has been to put together as many different kinds of language and tone as possible, and to shift them abruptly, to overlap them all” (Plimpton 409). Inclusivity is less important than the “abrupt” shift and the “overlap” in tone. These, as I will show in a moment, are examples of his “small accidents,” that accumulate serially in the work. Shortly after, he says another interesting thing, “I wanted to see if prose poetry could be written without that self-conscious drama that seems so much a part of it. So if it is poetic, it is probably because it tries to stay close to the way we talk and think without expecting what we say to be recorded or remembered. The pathos and liveliness of ordinary human communication is poetry to me” (409). Of all of Ashbery’s comments about the book, this is by far the closest to Eliot’s, Benn’s, and Mill’s notion of the lyric voice: a voice that is completely unconcerned with an audience, “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of utter solitude” (Jackson 9).

Ashbery quickly links this raw voice, which is somehow recorded in his poem unwittingly, with communication. “The pathos and liveliness of ordinary human communication,” is something different from ordinary communication, however. It implies that there is something pathetic about communication—a way to describe the mode of humor and parody in some of his poems. The phrase also shows he is primarily interested in communicating the *feeling* of information. It therefore refers to what some theorists of “lyric” see as the essential characteristic of a lyric “voice”: a memory of the trauma that every speaker undergoes through the socializing process of language acquisition. Mutlu Blasing says, “Infants are seduced into discipline, and the individuated/socialized subject is formulated at a crux of pain and pleasure. Poetry formally returns to that crux, to the emotionally charged history of the disciplining and seduction into language; it affirms the seductions of laws and the pleasures of discipline, always keeping in view the alien code and the pain of language” (*Lyric Poetry* 13). Ashbery modifies Mill’s scene of overhearing to make the social dimension of listening much more explicit—he imagines the un-self-conscious voice that talks to itself as already plural: “the way *we* talk and think,” places a social voice at the center of his scene of overhearing. He does the same thing by inverting the “you” and “I” at the beginning of the book: “you made this,” suggests language as an inter-subjective project.

Ashbery’s “hopes” for communicating the pathos of communication, and a general-all-purpose experience suggest that there is a rhetorical purpose behind the notable tension in *Three Poems* between the recursive accident and the seemingly fluid voice. Eliot, borrowing from Benn, proposes a “germ” or “impulse,” the “thing” that the poem comes to replace. Ashbery begins his book with a similar figure: the “it” that the speaker wants to put all in. One of the ways that we learn to interpret “it,” is as the expansive, elastic voice of the poem. “Voice,” as I have already said, is not a thing but a

problem of social relations for Ashbery, and also a problem of pathetic communication. The best way to understand the many “small accidents” of the series is as communicative accidents, failures to communicate information. It is the pathos of these acts that “push” the reader in some direction. Understanding the series as a plot-less chain of discreet accidents helps to explain one of its curious qualities: it seems highly repetitive, without feeling monotonous. The second feature that is important to observe about the book’s repeated minor accidents is that the element that repeats is often a confused figure for the series—a chart that fails to introduce clarity or pattern into the work. These references to the work take numerous forms, but in each case, the attempt to map some type of relationship, and thus to communicate useful information about how to read the work, fails:

Yet this seems not quite right, a little too pat perhaps, and here again it is our senses that are of some use to us in distinguishing verity from falsehood. For they never would have been able to capture the emanations from that special point of life if they were not meant to do something with them, weave them into the pattern of the days that come after, sunlit or plunged in shadow as they may be, but each with the identifying scarlet thread that runs through the whole warp and woof of the design, sometimes almost disappearing in its dark accretions, but at others emerging as the full inspiration of the plan of the whole, grandly organizing its repeated vibrations and imposing its stamp on these until the meaning of it all suddenly flashes out of the shimmering pools of scarlet like a vast and diaphanous though indestructible framework, not to be lost sight of again? (77)

This is a fairly representative passage. The particular figure it offers for the text—“warp and woof”—is not particularly novel, but so loaded with possible references that it would be difficult not find some private resonance. The promise of some clue about the “whole” tantalizes a reader. The key moment—and a common strategy—occurs only at the very end of the sentence, when suddenly what seems to be a very long assertion is transformed into the interrogative. After a series of confusing pronominal shifts in which “they,” “them” “each” “its,” “these,” stand in for numerous words, what has felt like a complex description of “the whole,” is suddenly cast into the mode of a question. The transformation of the sentence solely with the punctuation suggests the most contingent of modifications—the verb in the sentence is not inflected to suggest a question nor does the syntax prepare us for the question mark. Such a provisional alteration is central to Ashbery’s project, however, because it is through sudden shifts like this one that the discourse changes course. The effect is an accident of the poem’s voice, because the change, however minor, affects the way that the oceanic sentence is to be read. Specifically, the sentence cannot be taken as a factual statement about the book, though it may have started out as one. To return to Eliot’s trichotomy, the question mark throws into doubt whether the statement is merely an “overheard” statement that the poet is speaking, or a statement that is spoken with the interest of communicating to the audience. Even if the voice could be located as the second voice, the content of the communication can’t be fixed: is this a statement that is relevant conceptually—in which case we try to read it a second time as a question—or is it communicating some type of “pathos”—one associated with a sudden change of inflection to the interrogative? As Mohanty and Monroe have observed of Ashbery’s indeterminacy, it has a unique way of denying any

“possibility of a secure metadiscourse” (43). This passage, however random its sudden abortion may seem, does not strike a reader as “automatic” writing, though. Nor can one read the text as beautiful noise or pure rhythm: passages such as this begin by offering the promise of useful information.

The effect of these “accidents” is one that Ashbery produces in series. Ashbery’s interest in the seriality of the reading experience, it appears, is shaped by his own experience as a reader. Something like a plan for the anti-systematic project of *Three Poems* is evident in his early review essay of Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, another serial work that occupies an anomalous position in the “lyric” category. He writes:

There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. These austere “stanzas” are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words...though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is alike...a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds on the strings. (*Selected Prose* 12)

Stein’s “Albert,” and Webern’s “single note,” are the equivalent of Ashbery’s punctuation mark: a temporary suspension of monotony. We should not be surprised that in this essay he says of Stein, “it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it their “way of happening,” and the story...is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars” (12). If the model of *Three Poems* is deliberately treated as accidental, the voice is clearly modeled on the voice of Stein’s poem. Ashbery has taken it and adapted it to his own particulars.

As a reader, Ashbery takes an interest in the serial effect of Stein’s work that is strikingly similar to his interest in producing a pile up of accidents in *Three Poems*. The parallel suggests that Ashbery modifies the lyric scene of overhearing: he writes as if he is overhearing his own voice. One final look at Eliot’s essay will help to show the alteration to Eliot’s schema involved in this authorial positioning. Eliot modifies his system of voices such that every poem involves aspects of all three, but for poetry of the first voice begins the poet speaks the poem to himself, or nobody in particular. The second step, however, is editorial: “the first effort of the poet should be to achieve clarity for himself, to assure himself that the poem is the right outcome of the process that has taken place. The most bungling form of obscurity is that of the poet who has not been able to express himself to himself; the shoddiest form is found when the poet is trying to persuade himself that he has something to say when he hasn’t” (42). The assumption in this piece of advice is that the successful poet—the poet who is neither bungling and obscure, nor shoddy—is able to properly overhear himself. If this is not circular enough, the poet must also be able to recognize when he has “something” to say, and moreover, he must be able to recognize, and resist when he is trying to persuade himself otherwise. In effect, the poet would have to be immune to the rhetoric his own second voice. Or rather, if the second voice is the one that is aware of an audience and *communicates* to the listener, the poet would have to overhear the second voice speaking within the first voice

in order to understand it. Eliot finally acknowledges that this may be the case, but his position is not consistent.

Ashbery's treatment of voice as a series of accidents betrays a different view, however. The effect of Ashbery's indeterminate pronouns, as many critics have observed, positions the reader along with the speaker, but a better way to describe *Three Poems* is that Ashbery, the writer, imagines himself in the position of the reader with respect to the mixed voice of the poem. The assumption that Eliot makes—the writer will recognize for himself that he has something to say—is exactly the one that Ashbery does not take for granted. The text has a diaristic quality—it proceeds without interest in perfect sentences. Practically speaking, the effect is a text that Ashbery appears to have written without a knowing ahead of time what each sentence was trying to say. The situation is literally a version of “lyric” overhearing that Eliot describes—a voice speaking to nobody with an audience waiting on the horizon—but Ashbery imagines himself, at each moment, to be on the audience side, and he and the audience keep breaking into the scene of overhearing. This would seem to simply replicate the system that Eliot outlines, in which the poet overhears his poem, recognizes that it has “something to say,” and then brings it out to press and hands it off, except that Ashbery's *Three Poems* is from its inception explicitly organized around producing effects on the reader. The project follows like a stutter that suddenly stops, the first time, when “The New Spirit” ends at an ominous but opaque symbol: “this horrible vision of the completed Tower of Babel.” Babel denotes both overheard speech that does not make sense, and speech that continues interminably. The voice—or at least, a voice—starts up, proceeds along its uncertain “way” for a while, and stops at least two more times. Effectively the number of accidents is difficult to count, because doing so presupposes a metric for measuring vocal “accidents.”<sup>65</sup> The first page of *Three Poems* does constitute an important statement of Ashbery's poetics, not for what it says, but for what it does to the voice. This is where he throws a wrench, so to speak, into the supposedly closed circle of the “first” voice, and proceeds to see what happens to the poem when the system breaks down.

The sense of accident and breakdown is also, notably, due to an absence of the much-invoked narrative plot. Eliot explains: “In poetry of the second and in that of the third voice, the form is already to some extent given. However much it may be transformed before the poem is finished, it can be represented from the start by an outline or scenario. If I choose to tell a story, I must have some notion of the plot of the story I propose to tell” (43). “Story,” and “plot,” as well as the cognate “history,” appear more than 20 times in *Three Poems*, which suggests how laden with *pathos* Ashbery finds these words. The book, however, is remarkable for its absolute lack of any story or plot, despite what appear to be so many attempts. We might understand that Ashbery writes with the motivations of a second voice, but has avoided the “choice” that Eliot assumes the rhetorical poet starts out with. To the degree that his rhetorically motivated, second voice has a story or plot, it simply is a story of the first voice itself: the drama of a voice

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<sup>65</sup> This is what appears to be the general purpose of Andrew DuBois' study on Ashbery's “attention,” which is more accurately about Ashbery's lapses of attention, or modes of inattention. Negative reviews of his monograph take issue with his characterization of Ashbery as a poet who is not always fully attentive to his poems. But these reviewers seem to miss an important dimension of Ashbery's poetic. “Senility,” if it were a factor in Ashbery's late poetry, would seem to have a place within the compass of his writing just as much as carefully wrought serial book projects.

speaking accidental sentences, to nobody. Ashbery treats this as a pathetic piece of lyric theater. His reading of Stein is, once again, instructive: “*Stanzas in Meditation* gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a “plot,” though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on...[it] is always threatening to become a novel” (13).

A poem “always threatening to become a novel,” is a repetitive threat. To the extent that Ashbery’s project succeeds, it does so as a serial work. Seriality, however, is not formally marked as a sequence of “individual” poems, but rather through a more plastic and conceptual device that I have been calling the “accident.” If a conventional “lyric” contains a voice that can be imagined as the author’s or a persona’s, set in a scene where it is “overheard,” Ashbery’s *Three Poems* presents an indeterminate number of scenes of overhearing. Ashbery does not present a scene in which the reader or the speaker is overhearing one “mixed” voice, but rather a series of scenes that bleed together, accidentally it appears, in which a lone voice is speaking. The texture reflects a detail of Ashbery’s writing practice: “Just the fact that they’re so long gets you into a whole new way of writing, I think. It’s not something that can be written at one sitting...They are works being written by a writer who is in a different frame of mind each time he sits down to write” (Poulin 255).<sup>66</sup>

What about the “lyric crash”? Is the crash the end of *Three Poems*, or does it happen at the end of the poems as an event that the speaker narrates? Each poem does end with a sudden shift in perspective—the “Tower of Babel” and the desert sky in “The New Spirit,” the movie theater that the speaker of “The System” suddenly announces he is sitting in, and the musical performance that ends at the end of “The Recital.” Each of these jarring shifts of frame could be described as “crashes” that announce narrative endings signaling that the “performance” is over. Other attempts to read Ashbery’s books as serials look to the way that they offer “closure,” rather than simply ending. The model of closure that Vincent’s model is based on treats the book as rhetorical device, a version of poetry in the second voice. I have argued, however, that *Three Poems* is significant because its project, if it even has one, begins when the poet assumes the position of his reader, and writes as if he is overhearing himself, unaware of things are going to “happen” next. The benefit of this model is that Ashbery knows as much about the project as his reader does. Writing blindly, like this is a strategy for producing a text of which the reader will have a generic experience—not of any specific genre, but generic in the sense of evocative of in a general, non-specific way.

But if Ashbery is writing without a plan, does the fact the book ends up containing three *poems* suggest that Ashbery cheated, and that his project failed? Or does the fact that critics recognize the book as a work in the “meditation” genre suggest that Eliot’s diagnosis is correct, and that Ashbery’s “great” poem began when he almost perfectly forgets his audience, and then found its way out into publication and the hands of his readers? Another alternative is the reading that von Hallberg makes: Ashbery breaks down established social systems because he ultimately wants to clear space for

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<sup>66</sup> The reference to Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” essay is unmistakable. Poe’s argument is that an effective poem has to be a short poem composed during a single sitting. A long poem merely patches together a series of short poems. Ashbery experiments with the outcomes, but perhaps with an interest in producing different effects.

what one passage of *Three Poems* calls, “some kind of rational beauty within the limits of possibility.” Beauty will emerge organically out of the wreckage, as if entropy itself constituted Ashbery’s new aesthetic principle. According to von Hallberg, his sense of social disorder really betrays a deeper faith in a version of systems theory, and *Three Poems* is about natural patterns emerging (von Hallberg 40). Ashbery’s “lyric crash” seems to anticipate these possibilities, if only vaguely. “Is there a *wrong* way to interpret a poem by John Ashbery?” John Gery pointedly asks (126).

There is another way to think of the crash. Writing of Stein’s *Mediations*, Ashbery describes how the experience of “almost physical pain” of reading the text—the “pathos of ordinary communication”—is punctuated by “moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau with a view of the whole distance we have come...It is for moments like this that one perseveres in this difficult poem, moments which would be less beautiful and meaningful if the rest did not exist, for we have fought side by side with the author in her struggle to achieve them” (15). The passage where we find the “lyric crash,” is, I believe, one such moment in the text. Or at least, we should recognize it as one such moment for Ashbery, when he had a view of the whole while writing the text. He writes the text “side by side” with the reader, which means that he takes the act of overhearing as a serious struggle with himself, to divide himself and to dislocate his voices. The whole sentence near the end of “The System” where we find the crash reads:

Now it seems as though that angel had begun to dominate the whole story: he who supposed only to copy it all down has joined forces with the misshapen, misfit pieces that were never meant to go into it but at best stay on the sidelines so as to point up how everything else belonged together, and the resulting mountain of data threatens us; one can almost hear the beginning of the lyric crash in which everything will be lost and pulverized, changed back into atoms ready to resume new combinations and shapes again, new wilder tendencies, as foreign to what we have carefully put in and kept out as a new chart of elements or another planet—unimaginable, in a word. (1060)

His recording angel replicates the description he gave of trying to capture the “pathos” of “the way we talk and think without expecting what we say to be recorded.” But here, the recording angel, which is the writer himself, threatens to take over the plot-less series of small, monotonous accidents that Ashbery allowed to happen. The series begins, we should recall, when the speaker wills the act “forgetting”: “but forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place.” What Ashbery tries to forget is a style of verse itself: the “clean-washed sea” style of *The Tennis Court Oath*, about which Ross says, “Violence and lyricism are spliced together in a way redolent of the opening of *The Waste Land*. In fact, Ashbery describes a very violent and concerted approach that he took towards “forgetting” his earlier mode of “lyricism”: “The wonderful thing about writing prose...was that you do away with the lines of poetry. I retained verse passages in the first of the three prose poems, but they are rather peculiar verse. I was hammering away at verse there too, because those are extremely flat lines...And the tyranny of the line—where you’re going to break it—is something that always bothers me enormously” (254). In one sense, then the crash suggests Ashbery’s hammering away at lyric form in order to find a more expansive mode for the voice that Eliot calls “lyric,” but it also suggests a modification of way the voice is “overheard,” because his “project” is now to let in the “misfit pieces that were never meant to go into it” that Eliot calls “shoddy form.”

Suddenly, at this vista-point in the text, these “pieces” are the “minor accidents” viewed from afar. In reality, the accidents are not really discreet pieces so much as a flux of pathetic data that usually is not communicated. What Ashbery tries to “forget,” however, is not exactly “lines of poetry,” but the *end* of the line, the tyranny of where the break falls. Formally, prose allows him to write in a way more prone to rhythmic and semantic accident. Therefore, the return of the “lyric” invokes a number of different “ends” of the poem. At this vantage point, one end that he can “see” is the end of the line that he has managed to push further back to the horizon, so the crash is the point when the long prose discourse reconnects back up with the poetic concept of “line,” and the text becomes poetic, in retrospect. *Three Poems* therefore, implies a retrospective assessment of a mode that aims at being impossible to name ahead of time.

It is important that the end of the poem is signaled by the word “lyric,” however. Ashbery suggests the lyric is an inevitability in the same way that the “you” enters the text on page 1 like an unavoidable accident—a head-on collision. The term “lyric” suggests a different type of end: Ashbery has struggled to keep his serial “project” as free from design as possible, but he recognizes that the “whole” is an unavoidable necessity. The project needs a shape. What he indicates in his moment of clarity is the fact that the shape the whole will inevitably take is “lyric.” This means a few things. On the one hand, it is a comment on the breakdown of the systems that the poem describes and the situation the poet finds him in: any text that Ashbery writes and hands off to his public will be a poem, which is to say a “lyric.” The lyric *is* the literary genre that names a “one-size-fits-all experience,” a kind of universally accessible form of privacy. Jackson explains: “This structure is one in which saying “I” can stand for saying “you,” in which the poet’s solitude stands in for the solitude of the individual reader. Ashbery tweaks the lyric situation, in a minor way, by showing that saying “you” can stand in for saying “I,” but this modification does not change the larger conditions of the system. The text, once it is “printed on hot-pressed paper and sold at a book-seller’s shop,” as Mill says, will still be a lyric (Jackson 56). Yet Ashbery, as Ross correctly observes, does not confront mass-culture with angst, and the “pathos” of the wreck is something he seems energized and enabled by. When he exploits the ambiguity of “lyric,” which could relate to “crash” as either a noun or an adjective, he implies that lyric has already become so plastic that it can contain the unstudied gesture.

The one thing the text does not seem to contain is the “crash” itself. The way that he introduces the figure is odd: “one can almost hear the beginning...” There is another dislocated voice speaking faintly in these lines—a voice unquestionably linked to the high modernist poem that Benn calls “lyric,” and Eliot “meditative.” The angel in Ashbery’s poem helps to set the scene. One can almost hear Rilke’s first “Duino Elegy”: “For beauty is nothing but / the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, /And we revere it so, because it calmly disdains / to destroy us.” I do not think that Ashbery intends for the allusion to be important. It seems that within the logic of the poem that one should only have to “almost” hear the other line that the prose has tried its best to forget. Hearing the lyric voice, however, compounds the meaning of the lyric crash. Ashbery implies a historical reader who still has Rilke ringing in his ear, and the aesthetic transfiguration that Rilke suggests becomes, in Ashbery’s crash, the inevitable transcription of the text into a lyric text. At the end of the series, the big accident that Ashbery looks forward to is the reader.





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Appendix A



Joe Brainard, I LOVE YOU MARILYN MONROE, 1962 - Collage, 10 1/2 x 17, signed.  
Courtesy Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.