

THE CRAFT OF POETRY

Dialogues on minimal interpretation



Derek Attridge
and Henry Staten



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This book presents an innovative format for poetry criticism that its authors call “dialogical poetics.” This approach shows that readings of poems, which in academic literary criticism often look like a product of settled knowledge, are in reality a continual negotiation between readers. Here, Derek Attridge and Henry Staten agree to rein in their own interpretive ingenuity and “minimally interpret” poems – reading them with careful regard for what the poem can be shown to actually say, in detail and as a whole, from opening to closure. Based on a series of e-mails, the book explores a number of topics in the reading of poetry, including historical and intellectual context, modernist difficulty, the role of criticism, and translation. This highly readable book will appeal to anyone who enjoys poetry, offering an inspiring resource for students whilst also mounting a challenge to some of the approaches to poetry currently widespread in the academy.

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INTRODUCTION

Dialogical poetics

This book is an actual series of e-mail conversations between its two authors, minimally edited for readability. It began when Derek Attridge was invited to contribute to an issue of the online journal *World Picture* on “The Obvious,” and proposed to Henry Staten that they write an article together as a dialogue on a single poem, Blake’s “Sick Rose.” Our discussion of this poem was so involving for both of us, and raised so many further questions about the reading of poetry, that it grew into something much larger.

As we gradually saw, there is more to the dialogue form of our expositions than we initially realized – something new, perhaps, in poetry criticism; we could call it *dialogical poetics*. We are accustomed to seeing all extended commentary on poetry as the vision of some individual consciousness – the more individual and “original,” the better. There is almost always a significant degree of arbitrariness in the pronouncements of such solitary readers: associative leaps, inferences drawn, symbolic meanings perceived, that might be more or less plausible, but the justification of which we are left to figure out for ourselves if we can. In this book, by contrast, the two authors have had to justify their readings to each other, step by step; and we have left visible the process by which we worked through our perceptions to reach at least partial agreement.

By revealing the process of this working-through as a process of debate and discovery, we enable readers who are not professional critics to see what happens in criticism behind the curtains of assured knowledge. Polished academic readings of poems, and especially handbooks on the study of poetry, suggest that there is some kind of fixed and decided knowledge about how to read poetry, starting with critical terminology, whereas in reality interpretation and analysis are always in process. Any critic worth her salt is always struggling with method and even with terminology, and disagreeing with other critics about the best way forward. What this book tries to show is that there’s no contradiction between the possibility of

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grounding reading in the “poem itself,” and the fact that readings are dynamic, complex, evolving negotiations. When we speak of “what is really in the poem” we’re not suggesting that there is an absolute boundary between what is inside and what is outside a poem, what is text and what is context, but rather that in any particular case this decision is the result of a critic’s engagement with other readers of the work – perhaps in actual dialogue, like ours, and most likely in a response to what earlier critics have said.

As it happens, one of us – Attridge – has devoted a good part of his career to contesting some basic, widely established assumptions about poetic meter – something that might seem to the reader of a standard manual on prosody to be the most cut-and-dried aspect of poetry criticism, but that is in fact an area of great obscurity and confusion, and has a long history of controversy. Attridge’s approach, presented in a number of books, is an attempt to understand meter on the basis of the most fundamental experience of rhythm, beginning in childhood and evident in popular verse and song all over the world. It is far from solving all the puzzles inherent in the complexities of metrical form, however; only in continuous testing and discussion, along with competing approaches, can progress be made in understanding this fundamental feature of the poetic tradition. And the most important goal in this continuing debate is not puzzle-solving but the heightening of the poem’s capacity to give us rhythmic pleasure.

Our aim in publishing our dialogues on poetry was to make a case for certain skills of poetry reading – including prosody – that we believe constitute basic poem literacy, and which over the past four decades have been shoved aside in many literature departments. In place of basic poem literacy, students have been taught “meta” approaches to poetry, approaches premised on the notion that poems are the product of interpretive techniques, mainly various kinds of “contextualism.” As a result, today there are ever fewer teachers who feel confident of their ability to instruct students how to read a poem so that they can understand what the poem literally *says*. As a counter to this, we wanted to demonstrate how poems can be read based on the assumption that it is not, in the first instance, theories, “interpretive communities,” readerly competence, or historical forces, but poets, and behind poets the *techné* (art or craft; art considered as craft), or generative system of poetry, that “produces” poems.

The term “close reading” is too ideologically radioactive, and means too many different things, to serve as a name for the kind of reading we do here. We have considered various names for it, which turn up in our discussions: “weak reading,” “minimal reading,” “literal reading,” and “reading for the essentials.” In the end, we have settled on “minimal reading” or “minimal interpretation.” Minimal interpretation assumes that good poems taken more or less at face value, as written, are already doing so many interesting things that it’s a shame to start weaving ingenious ideas around them too soon – ideas that we might be much less inclined to think necessary, or even relevant, if we had read the poem more carefully to begin with.

Yet both of us were deeply involved in the post-structuralist upheaval in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and neither of us has any inclination to repudiate its real

intellectual gains – either those made by Derridean deconstruction or by materialist historicism, feminism, gender studies, or cultural studies. There is no contradiction between these *real* gains and the sort of reading recommended here; the kind of reading we do here does not exclude any other genre of interpretive analysis. It's not a matter of exclusion but a matter of the "layering" of readings. Even the most devoted contextualist must think she understands a poem, in some ineliminably basic sense, in order to contextualize it; and in that case, she implicitly knows that there is a layer of reading that underlies the contextualization. What we propose to do here is to demonstrate, more fully and self-reflectively than has been done elsewhere, what the practice of actually understanding a poem at the most minimal level, as an artfully made thing, looks like and to suggest some rules of thumb for this practice – mainly "fencing" rules for what to keep *out* of one's reading. This fence is intended to run along the boundary that divides what the poem in the most direct way authorizes the critic to say, and what belongs to the context, or begins to become speculative, or is a product of the critic's own interpretive epicycles.

We are interested in poems as linguistic artifacts, as made things that manifest the techniques of making by means of which poets produce them at specific times and places. No one would try to interpret a poem without knowing the grammar of the sentences in it; and yet it is common practice to interpret poems with only the vaguest sense of the poetic *techné* that organizes it formally, at a different level, but just as necessarily, as does grammar. The formal organization of a poem is so complex and multi-leveled that no two critics are likely to analyze it in exactly the same way, but then, there are many different ways of analyzing and representing the grammar of a language. This is what bothered Noam Chomsky about traditional grammars and led him on his quest to develop a "perfectly explicit" grammar, a quest that remains unfulfilled; yet no one thinks that grammatical analysis is a merely arbitrary product of interpretive methods. If the lack of absoluteness is the essential characteristic of interpretation, then the kind of structural analysis we do is also interpretation; but its aim is to be as *minimally* interpretive as possible. Thus its protocols dictate a closer adherence to the text, in all its details and as a whole, than do other approaches.

We have no need of any metaphysical notion of the unity of a poem to approach poems as wholes, and as, in a crucial sense, "unified" wholes. This book is not an attempt to set the clock back to the New Criticism of the 1950s and 1960s. There is another, practical notion of unity that every craftsman of every kind employs and must employ: the notion of a completed artifact or action, one that has all the parts proper to it, and has them organized properly in relation to each other. This notion applies equally to a shoe, a mathematical calculation, a cast in fly-fishing, or a poem. This craft notion of unity needs no support from crypto-religious metaphysics, and the critic who does not perceive poems as more or less unified *on this level* has no chance of understanding the poem as the kind of craft object that it is.

In this book, therefore, we treat well-constructed poems of the more or less traditional type not as "organic" but as *artifactual* wholes, with beginnings, middles, and ends, driven from the first line to the last by a continuous impetus (although

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rarely without hiccups along the way). The critic's job is to identify the major inflections and turns of this continuous movement on the way to closure, and the force, considered in terms of this entire movement, of the closure itself. The hunt for ambiguities has no privileged place in this enterprise; by absorbing the reader's attention in local features of the poem, the overvaluation of ambiguity obscures the sharp, clear outlines of the shaped movement, the temporal architecture, of poems more than it enhances their "richness." We can think of minimal interpretation as a kind of "reverse engineering." When a mechanical or electronic device is reverse engineered, what we understand is how it is put together in such a way as to function as it does. There are many other contexts other than that of its functional organization in which a device can be understood; but the context posited by reverse engineering is on a plane that is *sui generis*.

To identify poems as *made things*, like mechanical devices or tools, implies their historicity, just as identifying a shaped bone from the Paleolithic, or a pottery shard from archaic Greece, implies the historicity of those artifacts. Archaeologists try to recover a tool's historical context along multiple dimensions, but one of them is the history of the *technai*, the types of how-to, that produced these artifacts. It is common sense today among critics to read poems in relation to the structures of power, or the relations of material production, or the ideologies of gender, of the historical time and place of their production; yet somehow the historical development of the knowledge of how to make, and how to read, poems, has fallen off the radar.

Not that our purpose has been to track historical development of any kind; we have for the most part presupposed it, and kept our attention on the resultant artifacts. We have chosen poems that we feel raise many of the most important questions that beset poetic interpretation and appreciation, such as: How do metaphors work? To what extent is the historical, cultural, and intellectual context presupposed by the poem important for our understanding? Should we take into account facts like the gender and race of the poet? How do we read poems that defy the conventions of logical and grammatical coherence? How are we to treat translated poems? Debating these questions as they are provoked by individual poems, we have engaged in more general discussions of the fundamental presuppositions and protocols underlying critical practice today.

There is no particular rationale for the sequence of topics presented in these chapters. This is genuinely an extended conversation, and topics arose, as they do in conversation, without obeying any stringent logic. We have preferred to discuss short poems, for obvious reasons, and our examples range from the sixteenth century to the recent past. There remains, of course, a large degree of arbitrariness about our choices – there are thousands more poems that would have been worth examining, each presenting its own singular challenges and pleasures – but we are content to leave further explorations along these lines to our readers. Our purpose in this book has not been to offer a theory of how to read poems, but rather to perform the work of reading in a way that we hope is, if not exemplary, at least a way that suggests much more can still be done along these lines than is generally suspected, and will perhaps encourage others to try it.

1

MINIMAL INTERPRETATION (WILLIAM BLAKE, "THE SICK ROSE")

Dear Henry,

As you know, I've been trying for a while to articulate an understanding of the literary critic's task that rests on a notion of responsibility, derived in large part from Derrida and Levinas, or, more accurately, Derrida's recasting of Levinas's thought, one aspect of which is an emphasis on the importance of what I've called variously a "literal" or "weak" reading, and what you've called "minimal reading." That is to say, I've become increasingly troubled by the effects of the enormous power inherent in the techniques of literary criticism at our disposal today, including techniques of formal analysis, ideology critique, allusion hunting, genetic tracing, historical contextualization, and biographical research. The result of this rich set of critical resources is that any literary work, whether or not it is a significant achievement in the history of literature, and whether or not it evokes a strong response in the critic, can be accorded a lengthy commentary claiming originality and importance for it. What is worse, the most basic norms of careful reading are sometimes ignored in the rush to say something ingenious or different. (Part of the problem here is the model of literary criticism whereby the critic feels obliged to claim that his or her interpretation trumps all previous interpretations, and another part is the institutional pressure to accumulate publications or move up the promotional ladder.) We may be teaching our students to write clever interpretations without teaching them how to read.

The notion that it's smarter to read "against the grain" rather than to respond accurately and affirmatively to the singularity of the work can compound this disregard of what is truly important. This is not to say that the use of literary works as illustrations of historical conditions or ideological formations (including abhorrent ones) is invalid or reprehensible; just that to do so is not to treat the works in question primarily as literature. Nor am I suggesting that what is important in a literary work is immutable and capable of transcending history; on the contrary, both literary creation and the practice of interpretation take place, it should go without saying,

within historically engendered cultural contexts. (The relevant context may, however, be of considerable historical duration and geopolitical extent.)

You too have expressed a desire to promote some kind of minimal interpretation as a critical virtue, and it occurred to me that an exchange of e-mails about what this means in the reading of a single poem might give us an opportunity to discuss these issues, focusing on what we each take to be essential to an interpretation (as well as what a concern with the essential makes possible and perhaps what it excludes). The choice of an example is going to be pretty arbitrary, but let me suggest – partly because of its shortness, partly because it has been subject to a huge amount of interpretive ingenuity – Blake’s little poem “The Sick Rose.” Are you up for it?

With best wishes,
Derek

Dear Derek,

I think that yours is a very needed project, and that no one is better qualified than you to undertake it because of your marvelous knowledge of the history of English literature and in particular of English meter – knowledge few literary critics can approach (certainly not me). My own work on this kind of reading has convinced me that it must be “dialogical”: if something is “in” a poem, then it must be so not just to me but to others as well, if not initially, then with a bit of pointing out. (Caveat: if someone takes it as axiomatic that everything in a text is always up for interpretive grabs, this person will resist all such pointing out. The interlocutor must be open to the possibility that there can be general – not universal – agreement, across ideological divides, on certain features of the text, and willing to take such agreement, when and if it happens, as pointing to something significant about the text.) So I think a dialogue between us on a specific poem is a very good way to approach the question of the obvious.

One more preliminary before we get down to cases. Since critics who consider themselves “formalists” or “close readers” have for a long time criticized what you call “ideology critique” along lines that superficially sound similar to yours, I want to underline the fact that you are as critical of “formal analysis” as you are of “ideology critique.” Close reading readily becomes a display of the richness of the reader’s imagination and her virtuosity as a reader of poetry; but virtuoso displays of reading by definition go where other readers can’t follow on their own. In my conception of “minimal” reading, there’s a certain rejection of virtuosity in reading. I don’t know if you agree with this. Clearly one must have a lot of skill as a reader to read poetry adequately; but an important part of this skill involves knowing where to stop.

You’ve suggested that we talk about Blake’s “The Sick Rose.”

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy:
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.

On the face of it, this is a poem about a flower that is being killed by some kind of vermin; which, if we take this image in its ordinary sense means that the vermin is eating it. But that's not what the poem says; what it says is that the rose is being destroyed by the worm's "dark secret love." So, if we approach the poem at the level of what it "means" we are immediately up to our necks in those qualities that get interpretive enthusiasm going: ambiguity, symbolism, multiple meaning. But there's a very different way of reading this and most poems, to which you point in your discussion of this poem in *The Singularity of Literature*. You mention its "deployment of syntax to achieve an unrelenting forward drive that climaxes on a single powerful word" (66). This observation sums up the power of the poem at an absolutely fundamental, and visibly manifest, level: that of the poem as a structure of grammatically formed, meaningful sound. Your discussion goes on to quickly note the multiple meanings of the key words, and this points into the depths of interpretation; but then you return to the sound-structure and talk about it as follows:

The simplicity of the strongly articulated phrasal movement contributes to this experience. The arresting initial statement, "O Rose, thou art sick," – one line, two beats – is followed, after a pregnant pause, by an extension that takes up the seven remaining lines. This extended elaboration of the opening line is made up of three lines of anticipation, followed by the stanza break which further heightens the tension, and then a four-line arrival. And those three lines of anticipation form a crescendo of intensity – "The invisible worm / That flies in the night, / In the howling storm," – while the stanza of arrival varies the 1:3 balance of the first stanza by taking the reader through two climactic statements of equal length: "Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy; // And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy."

(69–70)

This is a perfect demonstration of what I referred to above as a skillful analysis that is not ingenious, not something tied to the refined individual sensibility of the interpreter, but which brings into play basic analytical tools that must be the common stock of poetry critics. This is how the poem is put together at the most basic, nuts-and-bolts level.

And now, having taken the trouble to look first at how the poem is organized as a syntactic, temporal, rhythmic structure (I call this the "cadence" of the poem), you conclude in a way that resolves the interpretive problem I posed at the outset: "The final two lines, phrasally no more than an extension of the previous statement, work semantically to explode the thus far barely contained nursery-rhyme narrative into the most adult, and most terrible, of scenarios" (70). Instead of treating the

relation between worm and love as a question of ambiguity or multiple meaning, you treat the transition to love as a function of the poem's *action* or *gesture*, what it *does* rather than what it means. There is a temporal, syntactic movement that builds up to the eruption of the erotic scenario, and to perceive this movement is to perceive the formal design of the poem.

On my reading, however, the poem doesn't seem like a "nursery-rhyme narrative." "Thou art sick," "invisible worm," and "howling storm" introduce a dark foreboding into the poem from the outset. The contrast between the conclusion and the rest of the poem is not so much between innocence and experience as it is between animal-vegetable process and sado-masochistic eroticism. But the "dynamics" of the worm-love relation remain the same in either case, and are based, as you show, as much syntactically, in the cadence of the poem, as they are semantically. Your main point, concerning the overall movement of the poem, I would say is indisputable.

What both you and I want to do with poems, I think, is look at them at the level of how they work, how they're put together (which I call the poem's *techne*), rather than at the level of meaning. When you speak of the erotic scenario that erupts at the end of the poem you are taking it at face value, not digging into it; and we need to restrict ourselves to this sort of "minimal meaning" to trace the manifest features of the poem.

DA: Dark foreboding, yes: what I meant by "barely contained nursery-rhyme narrative" was that the intimations of something terrifying strains the nursery-rhyme qualities of the first six lines – their insistent rhythm, simple vocabulary, straightforward syntax, and the charged imagery speaking directly to childhood experience (the rose, sickness, the worm, the night, the storm). This tension is obvious, I would say, to anyone with the necessary linguistic and cultural knowledge – knowledge which is widely shared and in no way privileged.

HS: "The intimations of something terrifying strains the nursery-rhyme qualities of the first six lines." Yes, very well put.

DA: When you speak of "the level of how it works, how it's put together, rather than at the level of meaning," you touch on an aspect of your own work that I've found extremely valuable: your emphasis on the shared *techne* or know-how available to an artist at any given time and place. Presumably, "The Sick Rose" has an immediacy today, over two centuries after its creation, because the *techne* (let's drop the italics) that enabled Blake to write his poetry is, in large part, still accessible to us. The rhetorical forms of the lyric (such as the apostrophe – "O Rose ..."), the basic rhythmic templates of the English verse tradition (the whole poem works as a single sixteen-beat unit, the simplest and most popular rhythmic form available to Blake as it still is to us), the symbolic cultural heritage of the West (the rose as beauty, perfection, virginity, love, Christian sacrifice, and so on): these seem to be some of the resources Blake was able to draw on, and that still, by and large, engage us in the same way. So perhaps it's not quite right to say "rather than at the level of meaning"?

Doesn't meaning – of the kind you describe, “surface” meaning – form an important part of *techne*?

HS: You're right. My wording was misleading there; meaning is an essential dimension of the materials and techniques a poet works with and of the poem we read. I shouldn't draw such a sharp line between what the poem means and how it works, because what it means is an important aspect of how it works. But it's essential, I think, to keep the functional aspect foremost and to understand the meaning aspect in and through the functional.

DA: Now you may say that to read the rose as a symbol of beauty, perfection, etc. is to leave the surface, and the garden plant, and therefore the realm of the obvious, to enter the depths about which there cannot be general agreement. But don't these connotations constitute an aspect of the generally agreed meaning of the word *rose*? Or perhaps we need to distinguish between the obvious and the more *recherché* aspects of the word's symbolic force. Of the associations I mentioned, beauty, perfection and love are surely not much less general than the literal botanical meaning.

HS: There are many associations that a word like “rose” can potentially arouse; but which of these associations are in fact activated within a specific poem, in a way that we actually need to bring out, in order to get the bold, sharp outlines of the poem's action? *Perfection* doesn't seem to me to play a significant role in the major dynamic of “The Sick Rose” – a dynamic you've described so well – and therefore I would say this meaning is not saliently activated here (certainly not at the level of what is or can become obvious). The rose is sick, and sickness doesn't attack perfection as such, it attacks health. *Beauty* is no doubt there in some way, since flowers in general have this connotation; but even beauty plays no direct role in the drama of the poem; “bed of crimson joy” suggests a kind of exuberant organic vitality in the rose more than it does its beauty. The drama foregrounds the joyous vitality of the rose, on the one hand, and its vulnerability to the worm, on the other hand; and in this connection the associative resonance would be, rather, with the softness of rose petals, so easily crushed, don't you think?

An important difference between this softness and beauty or perfection is that the latter are culturally validated meanings of roses, prominent in the tradition of representation, but softness is much less so; it belongs more directly to our sense experience of roses. When I'm teaching a poem I like to start, not with the literary resonances, but with the physical, sensual characteristics of the phenomena named or implied by the words, and then to feel around in the associational fields of these characteristics. This keeps us focused on the primary physicality on which the functioning of the words is based. There are strong pedagogical reasons for going this route, since our students often don't know the cultural resonances of words and images; but they do have senses. Also, I believe that poets are crucially committed to this primary physicality, and that poems often manifest this interest.

Love, by the way, is a different case altogether from perfection or beauty, or softness, since it is named within the poem. We don't need to make the association; the link is given.

DA: The Christian associations, the evocation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the pointing towards images of the Christ-child holding a rose: these perhaps belong to the domain of the non-obvious. For Blake, however, Christian associations were probably much more powerful and widely perceived than they are today. Isn't our task as readers – responsible readers – to rediscover those lost or faded webs of association?

Or take the worm. As I noted in *The Singularity of Literature*, for Blake's initial (few) readers, the word *worm* could well have evoked much more than the garden creature: the monstrous "loathly worm" of medieval ballads, the worms that prey on the damned in hell, the worm that seduced Eve, and more. Obvious to Blake but not to us? (There are, of course, instances where what is needed is not so much the recovery of older meanings but caution about assuming the relevance of newer meanings; for example, one word that has to be treated carefully when it occurs in earlier texts is *gay*.)

Of course, here's where disagreements start. Historical disagreements, for one thing: what associations a particular word would have had at a particular time is a notoriously difficult thing to retrieve. But there is also the question of what potential symbolic meaning is in fact relevant, which raises a further test of obviousness. Let us imagine a reader arguing that "dark secret love" raises the question of racial difference. This would be moving beyond the obvious because, among other reasons, nothing else in the poem coheres with this interpretation. (A detailed analysis of Blake's references to race – in "The Little Black Boy," for instance – could possibly provide some justification for this reading, but it would still not form part of the poem's minimal meaning, and would remain an intriguing suggestion.) So coherence of some sort would seem to be an aspect of the kind of reading you and I are endorsing.

HS: Absolutely. Everything rests on looking at how the structure of meaning in the poem as a whole hangs together. We don't have to make a metaphysical fetish of "unity" in order to recognize that the poetic craft or *techne* as traditionally practiced aimed at giving a beginning, middle, and end to poems, in a way that produced a well-joined and completed artifact. I think one good reason to define a discipline of *minimal* reading, and to differentiate this discipline from that of "deep" or "strong" reading, is so that we can re-open the space for talking about how poems are unified, or how they fail to be unified, at the level of the craft of poem-making. The "fissures" in poems that cunning contemporary readers discern occur not at the level of visible craft-mistakes but at the level of the deep historical resonances of words.

As you note, retrieving what a word might have meant to the author, but not to us, by means of historical research, is very hard; it also opens a wide field of speculation. But the specific examples you give here of the historical meanings

of “worm,” strike me as cancelling each other out, in the sense that they all amount to exemplifications of the balefulness of worms, a balefulness that is already fully evident in the poem itself. And, to the degree that they might seem to add anything that isn’t already brought out by Blake, it’s something that doesn’t clearly cohere with the poem. For example, the worms in hell gnaw the damned; but how is the rose parallel to the damned? Is she a wicked sinner who is being justly punished? And Eve is not invaded and destroyed by her worm’s love; she is tempted verbally in a way that activates her own desire; she then willingly eats the fruit; God punishes her with mortality; and she lives out her life to die a natural death. The more detail we add, the weaker the parallel with the drama of the rose gets. What often happens in class is that students suggest this sort of supposed parallel, which then takes a lot of time to dispose of, because once you have a hypothesis in your head you can always invent clever ways in which to make it fit; and meantime we’re not reading the poem for the effects it’s actually, manifestly, creating. So, unless the fit with the poem is very tight, I prefer either not to mention such historical resonances at all, or I briefly summarize them, stressing that they’re not very important individually (which is exactly how you bring them in in *Singularity*).

DA: You may have doubts about the symbolic suggestiveness of rose and worm in themselves, but what about the sexual symbolism in their conjunction? Sexual symbolism in its crudest form – the phallic worm, the vaginal rose, the bed: is this not obvious to all readers, and thus part of what it means to take the poem at face value? It relies on the most basic visual associations to do its work (again, a touch of the child’s imaginative world?). Yet the implications of this interpretive leap are shocking: destructive pest entering beautiful flower to kill it *equals* human love-making. So my term “literal reading” is a bit misleading: it can include a response to symbolic meanings as well as literal. This is a poem in which a worm enters, and destroys, a rose; and it’s only because worms and roses, and howling storms and crimson joys mean more than entomological, botanical, and meteorological phenomena when we meet them in this arrangement that it’s a poem in which a great deal more happens.

HS: I’m very friendly to calling the kind of reading we’re after a “literal” reading, even though the term can be misleading. I think that the notion of “symbolism” is more misleading than “literal” is. Except when it’s used in the strictest sense, to mean something whose meaning stays more or less constant in each of its occurrences, the notion of the symbol has always seemed to me to introduce obscurity into the discussion of poems. To students “symbolism” inevitably suggests “hidden meaning,” something accessible only by guessing, or by scholarly research, not by paying closer attention to the poem at hand, and I prefer not to use it; in most cases, talk of “associations” does all the necessary work. You yourself say here that the fundamental conjunction of images “relies on the most basic visual associations to do its work.” Precisely. And I think it’s better not to call this “symbolism,” especially in cases like this one, where the technically non-literal meaning is so reliably linked to the literal

meaning. I think it's highly significant, though, that Blake has not depended on the worm-rose conjunction by itself to communicate the erotic meaning; he has thrown the words "bed" and "love" in there to make it obvious.

To read a poem "literally" doesn't mean to me that we should depreciate the figurative meanings, but that we should take it at its word – which is often a figurative word – and avoid reading through it or behind it.

I would put your final point, with which I very much agree, a little differently than you do. If we say that worms and so forth "mean more than entomological, botanical, and meteorological phenomena" we run the danger of evoking the science-poetry split by which the New Critics were so impressed. The poet is interested in the same things as the scientist, only from a different angle; if worms and so forth can mean so much it's because the phenomena themselves can mean so much. That's why I think we should privilege the literal, the sensual, and the physical, rather than the "symbolic," when we read poetry.

This brings me back to the point about the erotic associations around worm/rose. I've noticed that to my students it doesn't seem *enough* that this poem should be about a worm entering and destroying a rose, even given the striking translation of this drama into erotic language; they feel that the manifest drama has to have something more significant behind it – that the worm's love has to be just a metaphor for something about human love (whereas, in the formal order of the poem, the worm is literal, and "love" and "bed" are, apparently, metaphorical). For them, it's a poem about seduction, or rape, or venereal disease, or some confused mishmash of all of these. To my mind, they don't respect botanical phenomena sufficiently.

DA: I'm a little wary of the privileging of the "literal, the sensual, and the physical," or at least of the sensual and physical, since the literal may be the intangible as well. I take your point about the dangers of the old science-poetry division, and I agree entirely that the objects with which the scientist is concerned are the same as those with which the poet is concerned. Empiricism is no bad thing in the reading of poetry. But words may convey meanings – literal meanings – that the scientist would have a hard time analyzing. The "worminess" of *worm* is not quite captured by the entomologist, and it would surely be another example of misplaced ingenuity to undertake a lengthy investigation of the exact species of worm Blake might have encountered in London, or which type of worm attacks roses (and which type of rose is susceptible to attack by worms). Doesn't the empirical approach in fact break down pretty quickly as we try to imagine that flying worm that takes wing in stormy nights? This seems to be something like a generic worm, rather than an identifiable creature; a living entity prone to arouse disgust and fear. (Worm phobias are not uncommon, and the reluctance to touch worms is, I imagine, quite deep-seated among a large number of people, at least in Western cultures.) So yes, give the empirical phenomena their due, but recognize that literal meaning doesn't equate with phenomenality of that sort.

I'd also be willing to do without the term "symbol" on the grounds of its ambiguity; "associations" doesn't come with that complicated baggage. But here of course our notion of minimal reading runs into difficulties, as your comments

suggest: can we distinguish between obvious associations – those which are “generally agreed,” to use your phrase – and those which are secondary, perhaps only potentially there to be activated in certain contexts, or only retrievable through historical research? The *OED* definition of *rose*, for instance, includes “allusive, emblematic, or figurative uses,” the first of which is “the flower as distinguished by its surpassing beauty, fragrance or rich, red colour.” Can we not assume that any instance of the word “rose” will convey something of these associations to most speakers of English unless the context prevents it? I believe there’s a case to be made for beauty as an association that clings very closely to the concept “rose,” one that a writer has to work hard to shake off. And I would say that the force of “sick” derives partly from its contrast with those associations; the effect would be much weaker had Blake written “O gorse thou art sick” (for all sorts of reasons, of course, but among them the absence of a sense of perfect beauty).

Let me quickly say that I agree entirely with your analysis of the dangers posed by the readerly desire for “hidden meaning”: for many inexperienced readers of poetry this is a *sine qua non* of a good poem, and it leads one quickly astray. I also agree with the difficulty of countering (even in oneself) a far-fetched meaning that has presented itself – as you say, “once you have a hypothesis in your head you can always invent clever ways in which to make it fit” (regardless of how far out it may be). So what we need are techniques of disabusing ourselves – and perhaps others – of these unnecessary elaborations. We need to stop congratulating each other on producing ever more ingenious interpretations, as if originality and out-of-the-wayness were guarantees of rightness. One sometimes feels very alone; I was at a conference recently during which a visiting celebrity contributed to many of the Q and A sessions by postulating some far-fetched verbal trickery in one of the poems the speaker had discussed, and while I inwardly resisted, I sensed a murmur of impressed assent in the audience.

Your last parenthetical point is very interesting, and it raises the question – which isn’t easily answered – of which terms in the poem are literal. *Rose* we can assume is literal (but does Blake’s upper case R invite us to give the word something of the quality of a proper noun? – “this particular rose, which I name Rose”). *Sick* is not as commonly used of plants as of animals, but it’s pretty close to being literal. *Invisible* can’t be entirely literal, but we can understand it as “unseen” – though not entirely, as “invisible” carries a whiff of the magical, or the perhaps the eldritch. (Is this not an association that would be generally understood?) Then *flies*: if the worm literally flies it’s not literally a worm; if it’s literally a worm, it can’t literally fly. Do we have to invoke the historical meaning here? – a worm is “any animal that creeps or crawls, a reptile, an insect,” as the *OED* tells us, citing Shelley in 1820 for its most recent example. *Night* and *howling storm* are presumably literal; but then *found out* suggests a willed activity hard to ascribe to a worm, however noxious, and as you point out *bed* is metaphorical. So, in fact, is most of the second stanza, until the last line: this is part of the poem’s movement toward the adult and the erotic. Our obvious, minimal, “literal” reading has no option but to proceed figuratively in order to bring the meaning back to the empirical scene of

flower-killing pest: “love,” for instance, has to be understood as a metaphor for the pest’s physically intimate connection with the flower, as well as its need for what the flower can offer it. But it doesn’t stop meaning love as we understand it in the human domain. I believe it’s this mental stretching and wrenching that makes reading the poem – no matter how many times we do it – such a powerful experience.

HS: You’re taking “entomological” to mean the phenomena in question specifically as known by the scientist, but I meant it more loosely, to mean precisely what you describe perfectly as the “‘worminess’ of *worm*,” the human experience of worms as generically codified in our culture, including, notably, revulsion from their touch (as opposed to the “higher” levels of symbolic meaning that might be read through the worm). This typical, and even stereotypical, experience, which is typed into language, is the only “empirical” that I’m referring to when I speak of the sensual and physical aspect of poetry.

Lyric poems characteristically project literal scenes of utterance, in the detailed context of which (context mostly implied, and having to be carefully excavated) the words uttered acquire their force. The reader of poetry has to grasp the detailed outlines of this literal context, basing all inferences about it on what is explicit in the poem, in a way that fills out the reference, sense, and force of the words uttered as concrete, situated speech act or “language game.” Thus we ask, for instance, “Who is speaking in this poem, and to whom? What is the literal, physical situation in which these words are uttered? Are these words, in this context, the sort that someone would be likely to utter spontaneously, and if not, in what way do they vary from spontaneous utterance?” – and so forth. The context we reconstruct is, in part, an empirical scene in the limited sense (as consisting of physical objects with objective primary and secondary characteristics); but it’s recognizable as a typical scene-form, and its physical details come permeated with typical meanings that this kind of scene has accumulated across culture-history, not just in literature but in common, culturally typed experience and in the common language (what Wallace Stevens calls “the vulgate”). Thus, to fill in the scene’s empirical detail is a way of beginning to pry open the storehouse of meaning with which it comes permeated, including all the associations such scenes arouse in our memories. “The Sick Rose” projects a scene of someone in a garden looking at a diseased rose and noting, in the form of a direct address to the rose itself, and with considerable agitation, that some detestable varmint is killing it. The poem’s power need not be searched for in the allegorical depths because it can be found in the way this very familiar and commonplace scene is conveyed in language of an uncommonly artfully formed sort.

I think minimal reading fundamentally involves a rule of simplicity, an Occam’s razor, to combat the critic’s tendency to spin ever more elaborate interpretive epicycles: the simplest, most direct interpretation that nevertheless accounts for all of what a poem manifestly says is to be preferred. This rule interlocks with the principle of coherence we’ve discussed above. Once an interpretation is proposed,

we must go systematically through the poem to see what its consequences are for every detail of the poem. One might propose, for example, that because “Rose” is capitalized, it could be a woman who is being addressed. In that case, “bed of crimson joy” would become luridly sexual, to say nothing of the “invisible worm” that has found its way to this bed. But if her bed was already one of “crimson joy” before the worm found it, then Rose was already no angel (indeed, thoughts of prostitution start to arise, and one might recall the young prostitute of Blake’s “London”). Is the poem, then, a stern, sad lecture to a prostitute about venereal disease? But why, if she’s a prostitute, does her bed have to be “found out,” and why in the “howling storm,” and why does the worm fly, and why is its “love” said to be “secret”? The interpretive difficulties you’ve mentioned all become more acute in this alternate hypothesis. Its fit is loose at best; the rule of simplicity easily decides against it. And for this rule to be properly applied, we have to treat the poem as a *whole*.

DA: Excellent! Let me move on to another point. One of the weaknesses, as I see it, of traditional formalist criticism (even, or especially, when allied to a stern moralism, as in the example of F. R. Leavis), and still evident in such successors of the New Critics as Helen Vendler, is the unquestioned assumption that a critical commentary aims at a universal truth about a literary work, claiming to be the last word and rendering all previous and future commentaries inadequate. No doubt the practitioners of this style of criticism would deny that they accord such a status to their own work, but it is evident as an ideal in their writing: the unstated goal is to rid their commentary of all that derives from their own peculiar situation, history, and psychic constitution so that the universal and timeless shines forth. (Kant, or a misunderstanding of Kant, is somewhere behind this project.) The counter-argument, to which I subscribe, is that our most powerful, honest engagements with works of art spring from that very particularity, and that to eliminate it, if it could be done, would be to render criticism blandly programmatic. This is tricky ground, I know; on the one hand, I am arguing that ingenious interpretation is often forced and false to the work; on the other, I am insisting that a valid and valuable response is individual. The distinction that has to be made – and it’s a very difficult distinction – is between interpretation that is achieved by the ingenious exploitation of hermeneutic protocols that have gained credence in the literary establishment with scant attention to what the critic in question actually experiences, and interpretation that is an attempt to articulate a strong (and I would say necessarily singular) response that can be put to the test of general agreement.

Let’s take *allusion* as an example of an accredited hermeneutic protocol. (This is another area where we move away from sensuous empirical reality.) It’s possible – in fact, it’s quite easy – to scrutinize a poem for phrases that echo earlier literary works, and scholars can garner high praise from their peers for doing so. But an allusion that means nothing to a particular reader (because the source text is not familiar to her) is, for that reader, not an allusion in any meaningful sense. My understanding of how a poem works allusively is dependent on the singularity of my own reading (and the operation of my memory); I can explain it to others, and encourage them

to follow up some of the necessary reading, but I can't guarantee that anyone else will respond in the same way. (This is to leave out of account the equally important fact that an allusion is only relevant if it *works* in the poem: a mere echo has no value in itself – though to repeat your earlier comment, it's always possible to invent a clever connection.) And if we expand from allusion to the whole store of memories that an individual brings to the reading of a literary work, we see a similar process at work.

If I'm right, what becomes of the centrality of the “generally agreed” interpretation that we both regard as essential? I see the arrival at such agreement as a process: one puts forward what one understands as unquestionable, but one is willing to have it questioned. Our singular responses are tested against the responses of others; reading literature is not a solitary activity, but an ongoing conversation. If you and I can agree on a minimal reading, this is a stepping stone to a secure understanding of the poem; but if everyone else we encounter dismisses it, we are likely to lose faith in it. (Obviously, we observe some kind of hierarchy in weighing the judgments of others: we recognize experienced or acute readers as well as poor readers, and apportion credit accordingly.) What I'm calling a singular response is not an idiosyncratic response; the subject who responds is, after all, constituted within a cultural field, and singularity is a particular nexus within that field. All its elements are shared elements, though the specific conjunction that produces a subject is unique (and, of course, always changing).

So we can imagine arriving at a minimal reading that most experienced readers would assent to, even if it contains elements that some of them had not noticed before they were pointed out. This would be the basis for, but would not be the sum total of, singular readings, which would bring to the poem different accumulations of memories, habits of thought, preferences, psychological tendencies, and so on. Only in such a singular response can the reader do justice to what I've called the otherness of the work, which is one dimension of its singularity – its singularity, that is, for a particular reader. (The third term in my interconnected trinity is *inventiveness*; this raises further questions which I don't want to pursue here. It connects in important ways with your notion of *techné*.) Blake's phrase “in the howling storm” may for you be a cliché, a slight blemish in the onward movement of the poem; whereas for me it may be, for reasons I find very hard to articulate, a forceful, climactic continuation of the previous line. Would such a disagreement need to be resolved, or could it be accepted as the result of the language's working at a very deep level on, and in, both of us in different ways because we are different people?

HS: You've just articulated the basic conundrum of minimal interpretation. On the one hand, we take the “poem itself” as our guide, and stick to it as tenaciously as possible; on the other hand, we know that every reader is going to read the poem differently in smaller or larger ways, so there will always be disagreements as to what the poem says. Do these “need to be resolved”? No, of course not; some disagreements might be irreducible. On the other hand, many disagreements can be resolved, if we agree to take the elusive “text itself” as our guide. The aim is, as you say, to

bring out the singularity and inventiveness of the poem, a procedure that produces not the final correct interpretation, one programmatically dictated by the poem, but a text with its own singularity, and one which, like all other readings, can be only a temporary stopping place in the dialogical process of interpretation.

I want now to focus on the elements about which in some measure we disagree. I resist the notion that you float that “any instance of the word *rose*,” regardless of the specific context, will necessarily arouse the association of perfection, or for that matter of beauty, or redness, or vulnerability, or practically anything else. It all depends on how the word is deployed in the context; and in the case of “The Sick Rose,” the first thing we learn about the rose, and learn twice by the time we have read the title and first line, is that it is sick, so that the concept of perfection is neutralized before it can gain any traction. While *perfection* is undoubtedly “there” in some important thread of the associative skein, I find it important to deny it entry into the minimal level of reading. (One can always argue that “sick rose” conveys the notion “ruined perfection,” but to take this notion as presiding over the entire poem would lead to a very different kind of reading from the one we’re agreeing on.)

I very much agree that reading, even the most disciplined minimal reading, is a product of a singular location in historical-cultural time-space; but it’s precisely the nature of our cultural moment, in which we can less and less take for granted in our students the old conventional associations, that makes me favor a very restrictive boundary around the notion of a primary association. The typical American undergraduate cannot be counted on to think purity or perfection in connection with roses (though I’ve found they can pretty regularly be counted on to point out that roses have thorns). Whether or not the association of perfection is in theory to be considered primary, I can almost guarantee that an undergraduate who read “The Sick Rose” as “ruined perfection” would systematically misread it.

The case of “howling storm” is a more interesting divergence between us. I don’t look at our divergence as something that has to be resolved, but as something that opens doors to further dimensions of reading, working systematically on the basis of what we agree is given in the poem. We agree that “howling storm” belongs to the same rhetorical register as “flies” and, to some degree, “invisible” as predicates that don’t fit your empirical garden-variety worm; and we agree that, nevertheless, the garden variety worm has to underpin this rhetorical flight. “Invisible,” however, as you’ve noted, could mean simply that we can’t see the worm that is eating the rose (he’s presumably eating her from inside, and in the dark of night), and flying, while it isn’t a characteristic of worms, is a characteristic of many noxious bugs, so that “worm” starts to sound like a synonym for “bug,” “vermin.” (And among the bugs, of course, there is the case of the wormish caterpillar who emerges suddenly as a moth or butterfly.) But it’s hard to imagine a real bug of any kind that flies in a *howling storm*. It makes most sense to me if I take it as part of the children’s tale atmosphere you mention – as the sort of hyperbole we engage in when we emphasize just how bad and scary the big bad wolf really is. And rhythmically, of course, it’s marvelous; it’s hard to imagine the poem without the crescendo of the three lines

The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

with their heavy two beat measure, resolving into the first line of the culminating stanza.

However, from the standpoint of meaning, “howling storm” feels to me both excessive and unnecessary. I wonder whether Blake has momentarily sacrificed the severity of his scenario in order to attain a rhythmic effect (an effect that I admit is all by itself pretty close to worth the sacrifice). Blake’s poetic instincts can safely be assumed to be better than mine; but I don’t think it’s a good idea to assume that great poets are necessarily infallible in all their judgments (and we know that they have to make sacrifices on one level to gain effects at other levels, and that they are sometimes very unsatisfied with their work when it is as good as they have been able to make it). Whether or not it’s excessive, however, “howling storm” is clearly unnecessary at the level of meaning, in the sense that nothing is made of this supernatural dimension in the entire culminating stanza. The bedroom drama of “dark, secret love” (a phrase that, incidentally, strikes me as, along with “invisible worm,” the strongest in the entire poem, the very center of its power) doesn’t go well with a howling storm, and even worse is the fact that a howling storm would be furiously tearing petals off the rose even as the worm loved it to death (at which point the whole thing starts to sound ridiculous to me). Now, someone might reasonably object at this point that none of these problems arise if one doesn’t try to literalize the poem as I’m doing; but if there’s no literal scene to underpin the poem it dissolves into a shapeless goop of symbolism on which the interpreter is free to impose a form of her own devising.

It just now occurs to me to wonder if we should take the worm’s nocturnal flight in the storm to be, as I’ve always unreflectingly assumed, the flight by means of which he discovered the rose’s “bed of crimson joy,” or whether it’s mentioned simply by way of characterizing him as “the worm who is such a hellraiser that it’s nothing to him if there’s a howling storm.” If the latter, then the dark secret love-making need not be imagined as taking place in a storm; in favor of this reading is the frequentative “flies.” And now that “howling storm” is removed from the immediate scene it feels less disruptive, and I become able to hear it at just the same level of hyperbolic volume as “crimson joy,” which thus starts to feel like a suitable binary partner with it (“Howling-storm-worm, meet crimson-joy-rose”). But now the poem begins to feel too much like erotic melodrama!

As I noted before, the poem has to be read as fundamentally botanical and entomological because it becomes a lurid melodrama if read as a metaphor for a human scene. It doesn’t impugn the flower’s innocence to be crimson, but a crimson woman is not entirely innocent when a roustabout worm winds up in her bed. The power of the poem rests in the way it is able to arouse so much of our response to the fatality of human eroticism while keeping this response tethered to the non-human. Yet it remains the case, as you’ve convinced me, that there is a third semantic force

field operating in the non-empirical qualities of the worm. The whole thing is set vibrating with an overtone of the fabulous by these qualities; and “howling storm” is what ensures the sounding of this additional note (which “invisible” and “flies” by themselves don’t quite reach).

It’s a delicate balancing act; you’re apparently able to hear this note just right, whereas up to now I haven’t been.

DA: Delicate indeed, and one dimension of the balance is that between doing justice to the literary work – affirming to the full what I’ve called its singularity, alterity, and inventiveness – and being willing to register moments of failure (in the work) and disappointment (in the reading). In view of the former imperative (which I see as ethical or quasi-ethical, as it involves doing justice to the work of another person or group), the latter imperative must always be provisional: one must always be ready to reinterpret a work more favorably. Hence the value of other people’s responses. You’ve given an instance of this process.

But there is also much to be said for encountering a skeptical response to a line one has always taken as flawless. One aspect of the kind of interpretive dilemma we’re discussing is the difficulty of obtaining sufficient distance from a deeply familiar work. I don’t know when I first read this poem – I seem always to have known it, and known it by heart – and although it seems new each time I read it, I find it hard to defamiliarize it enough to raise the possibility that Blake has nodded. (There are certainly other poems, including one or two of my favorite poems of Blake’s, where I wince at a particular phrase that seems not to live up to the standard of the rest of the work.) So encountering an objection of the kind you raised is always, I think, a valuable process.

On this particular point – the “howling storm” – I have to say that, as I read your account of your unease with the “howling storm” line, it began to dawn on me that you had been understanding the phrase differently from me. Because, I suppose, of the inherent implausibility of the scenario of the second stanza taking place in a storm I had assumed just what you articulate so well – that the third and fourth lines of the first stanza are part of a description of the worm, of its natural habitat, so to speak, and that the scene that follows, in its apparent stillness (the worm is not flying, the storm is not howling) is, if anything, a contrast. But at the same time, reading your account has made me a little wary of that line; I now have to reassure myself each time I read it that your first reaction was wrong.

HS: I think the reason one has to reassure oneself each time one reads that line is that to read it as it’s apparently intended one has to mentally supply an implied *even*: “that flies in the night / [even] in the howling storm,” and this mental maneuver has to overcome the strong syntactic parallelism of “in the night / in the storm.” One could maintain this parallelism by understanding *even* before “in the night,” but this is complicated too, since it’s a sort of “back formation” required by the problems that “in the howling storm” raises. Either way, it’s far from a straightforward ellipsis, and strikes me as a fault in Blake’s techne.

DA: We still disagree, I suspect, about the link between “roseness” and perfection (purity, I will concede, is not as closely linked an attribute); for me the title itself, given its full weight, is shockingly discordant. But we’ve probably gone on long enough about this little poem – in saying which, I realize that one thing we haven’t made much of is its *smallness*, which is also an obvious feature that would have been worth talking about. Tiny worm, tiny poem: but what extraordinary power! There are many other features of the poem we haven’t touched on, though they might be thought to be part of a minimal interpretation in the sense in which we’ve been using the phrase. There is, for instance, the salience of line seven: I agree entirely with you that this comes across as “the center of the poem’s power.” How does it achieve this salience? It is, for one thing, the only line with three major content words (Rose–sick; invisible–worm; flies–night; howling–storm; found–bed; crimson–joy; *dark–secret–love*; life–destroy). Lexically, this produces in the second stanza the familiar AABA pattern, where a particular configuration is repeated, then varied from, and then returned to with a feeling of closure. The rhythm of the line itself is also exceptional, with three strong stresses – instead of two – slowing the pace: “secret”, although it doesn’t carry a beat, is too important semantically to be de-emphasized (as a chanted reading would do), and this produces a marked tension between metrical expectation and rhythmic realization. Semantically, too, the line stands out: not only does it have two adjectives qualifying a single noun, but they set up a little eddy in meaning. We would normally expect *secret* in the collocation *dark secret* to be a noun, so it’s a surprise to find that it’s an adjective; we then understand *secret love* easily enough, but what is a *dark love*? Then there is the echo in sound between two words in the final lines: *love* and *life*. Normally, these would belong together, and the sonic echo would reinforce the semantic contiguity; what the poem does, startlingly, is to turn them into one of those oppositions you mentioned – love becomes the enemy of life. More than that, actually: one of the other things we haven’t talked about is the force of the word *destroy*, which suggests much more, and much worse, than the mere ending of a life. But then there are many things we haven’t talked about – for instance, we haven’t so much as mentioned the question of Blake’s illustration – but it’s time to move on to another topic and another poem.

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2

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE (EMILY DICKINSON, "I STARTED EARLY")

Dear Henry,

Having made some headway with the task of identifying the purloined letters in plain sight in the Blake example, shall we see if we can carry our findings over to another poem? I have in mind a work that also raises, in an acute form, the question of "literal" versus other kinds of symbolizing or metaphorical readings: Emily's Dickinson's "I started Early." I find this an extraordinarily haunting poem, where the presence of whimsy doesn't seem to detract from the seriousness of its concerns or the power of its unfolding in the event of a reading, no matter how often repeated. And it's a poem that has produced many examples of the kind of unmoored readings you and I are keen to combat. I'd be very interested to know what you take to be the bedrock of interpretation in this case, the sure foundation upon which more elaborate suggestions might be built.

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Bodice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
 As wholly as a Dew
 Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
 And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
 I felt His Silver Heel
 Upon my Ankle – Then My Shoes
 Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
 No One He seemed to know –
 And bowing – with a Mighty look –
 At me – The Sea withdrew –

As with “The Sick Rose,” the poem presents a little narrative, and the most minimal reading of all would be to treat it as the story of a woman’s visit to the seaside, and of her hurrying back home as the tide advances and threatens to engulf her – just as we might read Blake’s poem as the story of a flower and a bug. As you noted, the words “love” and “bed” in that poem make it obvious that there is more going on than a biological event; and my question now is: is there anything in this poem that similarly forces us to go beyond the simple surface narrative? There is, of course, the strangeness of the poem’s metaphors – *mermaids?* in the *basement?* a dew on the *sleeve* of a *dandelion?* – but that could be a way of conveying the strangeness and excitement of the trip to the shore, and the hurried retreat when the rising water threatens disaster.

What I find more difficult to treat as merely an escapade on the beach is the sequence of clothing items the poem presents as the “Tide” encroaches on the speaker’s body: “Shoe” – “Apron” – “Belt” – “Bodice.” While these words could simply be a series that conveys the growing level of the water, this explanation doesn’t seem entirely plausible: for one thing, the image of the fully clothed woman or girl allowing the sea to rise that high before turning back doesn’t ring true (much more realistic is the later lapping of the waves at her ankle, inundating her shoes), and for another, it’s hard to resist the sexual connotations of these items of clothing. Here the appeal has to be not just to the empirical placement of clothes on the human (female) body, but a long tradition of erotic poetry in which items of apparel stand metonymically for the parts of the body they enclose. There is the eroticism of the foot, the apron as covering the genital area, the belt (or girdle or zone) long used in poetry as a metonym for the female sexual parts, and the bodice as an obvious correlate of the breasts. This sequence seems too conscious to be accidental; or if it was an accidental feature of the poem’s composition, it has ceased to be so in the reading – and we can, after all, always appeal to the operation of the unconscious in the writing process.

There is an unignorable sexual implication then, I feel, which we can track through the evident femaleness of the narrator, the line “But no Man moved Me,”

and the subsequent actions of this male personage – making as if to eat her up, following close behind, touching her ankle with his heel (though this is not very easy to visualize), and then withdrawing with a bow. (Predictably, I suppose, at least one critic has read “withdrawing” as referring to a post-orgasmic action by a male partner: needless to say, my sense of the poem’s sexual dimension doesn’t extend to this kind of literalism. This may have been the same critic who was convinced that the mermaids who “come out” in line four are revealing their homosexuality.) The question for me is not “Is there a sexual implication in the poem?” but “What do we make of this implication?”

We need, I think, to get to grips with what I referred to earlier as the poem’s “whimsy,” because this tone is what is most obviously there throughout, and constitutes a strong challenge to those who want to allegorize the poem as a treatment of universal themes. (Among the readings I’ve come across are that it is about the fear of death, or of love, or of overwhelming emotion, or of consciousness, or of aggression against women.) Yvor Winters, in *The Defense of Reason*, castigates the poem’s “playfulness,” and asks whether this quality is sufficiently transmuted or remains as a defect. “I have never,” he says, “been able to answer the question” (233).

It’s perhaps in the very unanswerability of that question that the poem’s power lies. It is a playful poem, from the apparently innocuous opening two lines, through the joke about the mermaids, the self-mocking image of a mouse being offered assistance by frigates (not necessarily warships, as some commentators have assumed), the teasing engaged in by the tide (as so often, Dickinson uses Shakespearean language – “made as he would” meaning “made as if he would”), the lighthearted image of the dewdrop on the “Dandelion’s Sleeve” (the plant’s hollow stalk?), the flicker of visual beauty in the silver heel and overflowing pearl, and the final comedy of the sea’s haughty but chastened withdrawal. Where I find playfulness, however, some commentators find terror: the speaker feels exposed to the gaze of the mermaids, the hempen hands of the ships are threatening rather than, as I take it, offering help (since they see her as a mouse who is “Aground”, that is, has run into difficulties), the sea is not just teasing but actually threatening to devour her, and so on. This disregard for the tone of the poem, it seems to me, is produced by the constant pressure on critical practice to find profundity and universal themes in literature, and a willingness to ignore the care with which a work has been put together. I once heard a lecturer say of this poem something along the lines of: “Let the tide of her images wash over us and see what comes up.” This, surely, is exactly what we should *not* be doing: Dickinson deserves more scrupulous attention to what she wrote and the order in which she wrote it.

I wonder if you would agree that one shouldn’t make too much of the use of the “common measure” hymn form for the poem, since it’s ubiquitous in Dickinson (though it does of course go very well with the fairy-tale quality of the narrative), nor of the upper-case letters and the dashes, for the same reason. There’s a temptation to read the dashes as contributing in subtle ways to the articulation of the sentences, but most of the time they just replace conventional punctuation. In the last two lines, however, they seem to me to do more than this: they break up the sentence,

“And bowing with a mighty look at me, the sea withdrew,” into a hesitating gait that seems to imitate the ocean’s embarrassment and perhaps the speaker’s surprise: “And bowing – with a Mighty look – At me – The Sea withdrew –”.

In this account of the poem’s playfulness, I have, of course, left out the lines about the tide I started with, and their sexual suggestiveness. This is where the whimsy seems suspended: there’s a slight increase of solemnity in the line “But no Man moved Me.” We might discuss the stressing of this line: the meter encourages stresses on “no” and “moved”; the sense perhaps invites a stress on “Man.” If we do the former, “no Man” functions more or less like “no one”; if we do the latter, the implication is that she has been moved by mermaids and frigates, but only when the sea encroaches is there a human, gendered presence. And then is “moved” physical or emotional or both? Literally, it’s physical: the sequence clearly runs: “no Man moved Me – till the Tide / Went past my simple Shoe – / ... And then – I started”. However, the sequence that follows suggests something more than a change of bodily position is at stake. (I find myself puzzling over the word “past”: it’s not quite the right preposition for a rising water level, since to me it suggests horizontal rather than vertical movement.) And I’ve already mentioned the oddness of the event itself: are we to imagine our heroine wading into the ocean fully clothed until the sea is up to her neck? Perhaps this part of the poem represents a fantasy, while the rest is a somewhat simple event told in fantastic terms. Can you help me out here? – and, of course, take the discussion in whatever direction you want.

Best wishes,
Derek

Dear Derek,

I’m not, as you know, in general a fan of mystery in poetry. I think the vast majority of poems make very clear sense, if you give them the proper attention and keep your own fancy in check. It takes a rare and special art to write an excellent poem that doesn’t make clear sense – to fracture the sense of a poem to a considerable degree and do it in a way that really works. Dickinson is very good at this, and so is Wallace Stevens. It’s worth quoting what Stevens says on this topic in his wonderful “Man Carrying Thing”:

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully. Illustration:
A brune figure in winter evening resists
Identity. The thing he carries resists
The most necessitous sense. Accept them, then,
As secondary (parts not quite perceived
Of the obvious whole, uncertain particles
Of the certain solid, the primary free from doubt,
Things floating like the first hundred flakes of snow

Out of a storm we must endure all night,
 Out of a storm of secondary things),
 A horror of thoughts that suddenly are real.
 We must endure our thoughts all night, until
 The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.

Stevens is another poet who gets a great deal of critics' meaning overlaid on his poems, but "Man Carrying Thing" proposes (*I think* – though it certainly has its "parts not quite perceived") that when we read a poem we look for "the obvious whole ... the certain solid, the primary free from doubt ... The bright obvious" (notice the repetition of the word *obvious*!). I need this encouragement from Stevens to make the following comments on "I started Early," because from what you say I'll be going against a lot of critical opinion.

I'm charmed by the colloquial simplicity of the first two lines, especially "Took my Dog," which makes the excursion to the beach sound like a very casual, normal thing. Yet this apparent normality gives way to strangeness already in the third line with "Mermaids in the Basement" (with the dog from this point dropping completely out of the poem, so that when I get to the end of the poem it makes me ask why it's there at all). "Basement" is obviously the sea deep, named in a whimsical, anti-lyrical way, which clashes with the quasi-mythological register into which the mermaids shift the poem. There are, literally in this poem, mermaids coming up to look at her; but why would mermaids come out of the sea-basement to look at some random woman walking on the beach? There follows the frigate on the surface of the sea. Whether it's a warship or not doesn't matter because the visible use the poem makes of it, and which any nineteenth-century reader would have recognized, is as a good-sized, full-rigged ship, which could have sailors climbing among the hempen ropes up in the rigging (hence the ship's "hempen hands"). The rigging in which the sailors are climbing is here called the "Upper Floor," which counterpoints the "Basement" of the mermaids, and confirms that basement refers to the sea deep. So everybody who is out in the water, from the beings living underneath it to those all the way up the top of the frigate's masts, is focused on the speaker, as though she's attracting their attention in some way. "Mouse – / Aground – upon the Sands," as you mention, images her as a helpless little creature in need of assistance, perhaps stuck in the sand as the tide rises; and this is how the sailors on the ship apparently see her, but not necessarily the mermaids, who are merely looking at her, while the sailors are trying to extend a helping hand ("Frigates ... Extended Hempen Hands" is a remarkably condensed metaphor). Perhaps the sailors would like to help, but they're too far away; it makes more sense that the extended hands are gestures of warning or exhortation or anguish, because their possessors see that she's being engulfed by the tide and can't do anything about it. But she pays no attention to their urgings ("no Man moved Me"); she's letting the tide wash up over her on purpose. The following lines are beautiful and chilling; the speaker is allowing the sea to wash all the way up to her neck, as though she's going to allow herself to drown. You say it isn't realistic that a fully clothed woman would let the

sea rise that far before turning back; but this isn't a sudden wave, it's the tide, which rises very slowly. No one can get covered by the tide unintentionally, unless they're unconscious. So if the tide is rising up her body, item by item (again indicating slowness), she must at least semi-purposely be allowing it to happen. The overall image is of a kind of suicidal trance. (I don't see any problem with the use of "past" to describe the rising of the water up each boundary marker of her body; it strikes me as equally appropriate for vertical as for horizontal movement.)

I don't see any sexual symbolism in the list of her items of clothing; at least, no symbolism that doesn't remain far in the background. What is poor Emily Dickinson to do to tell her story non-sexually, in the face of a tradition of poems by men that is sexually obsessed with every detail of a woman's body, and has explored every mode of indirection by which to speak of its parts? Does a poem by a woman have to be read in line with that tradition? If the speaker wants to describe the sea gradually rising up her body until it's on the verge of drowning her, how is she to do this except by naming her items of clothing or the body parts themselves? If she named her hips and breasts, then the imputation of sexual meaning would seem undeniable; she modestly names her clothing instead, but with no better result. It seems to me the feeling of sexual symbolism only arises if we fail fully to take in the much greater (and much less cliché-ridden) intensity of the scenario that is literally being enacted: the speaker has come close to suicide, in a dreamlike mode that at points verges on whimsy. This mode or tone for such a scenario is to me what is most remarkable about this poem.

The personification of the sea as male must of course be dealt with, but we're not obligated to simplify it into a straightforward erotic metaphor, and we certainly don't have to let it dominate our reading. If we're going to make much out of this "He," then we would need to bring the mermaids into the interpretation too. Are they the brides of the sea? Does the sea want to add the young woman to his collection of mermaids? Alternately, couldn't we feel that the mermaids to some degree *feminize* the sea? The sea is not entirely male if mermaids live in it. I think all these questions are a bit silly; I bring them up to suggest how readily readings start to come unhinged from the speech act that the poem executes. No doubt there are always very deep rumblings of meaning going on in great poems like this one, rumblings that reach into every hidden corner of our psychoanalytic underground if our seismometers are sensitive enough – but isn't the whole point of minimal interpretation to say, "enough with the seismometers"? We can acknowledge these rumblings without allowing them to usurp the place of the poem's actual saying, the actual drama that it plays out. The sea here is He and the speaker a woman, and her femininity is vividly evoked by means of her clothes, and this is all essential to the drama, just as in "The Sick Rose" the threatening worm is male, and the rose plays much the role that the woman in Dickinson's poem plays – but there are the essential differences that here sexuality is very much *not* in the foreground, and that the woman is not passive in her relation with the sea. She seeks it out to begin with, she allows it to rise to her throat, and then she chooses to leave it. This rise and fall and rise once again of the tide of her will, which determines the movement of

the poem from beginning to end, is the larger rhythm that contains that of the sea's rise and fall. Eventually she wakes up from her suicidal trance ("I started"); it scares her that the sea is about to "eat her up" (which, presumably, was also the source of her fascination), and she begins to move out of the water, until she reaches the town. Since the tide moves so slowly, she doesn't need to run, she can just walk. At the next stage it's only up to her ankles; so, even though the main body of the tide is now behind her, there is still water ahead of her as well, hence the silver heel upon her ankle. Then she emerges all the way.

Even though she's pulled her body out of the sea step by step, the sea keeps on her heels, and isn't turned away from his pursuit until they meet "the Solid Town." Solid Town, I think, we should read in relation to the frigates with their hands and to "no Man moved Me." The ship and the town evoke human society, to which the speaker returns at the end of the poem, but from which she had become momentarily detached or alienated. And in that case, "Man" in "no Man moved Me" sounds more like a reference to humanity than to virility. It's only the solidity of human society that dissipates the last of the sea's threat – a threat that was never anything other than the woman's own willingness to be engulfed. The notion of the "solid" town also strengthens the suggestion that the experience on the beach has the insubstantiality of dream.

The notion that the sea doesn't know anyone in town returns us to the tone of whimsy with which the poem began, though now with an undertone of mythological seriousness. Why do you read his "Mighty look" as haughty? The mythologized sea is being evoked as a kind of nature deity, and a mighty look would be a look of majesty; the fact that he bows before he leaves indicates courtly refinement of manner, as well as respect for the woman. It adds a layer of formality to the entire encounter, which is very much in keeping with the slow motion in which its drama plays out. It also informs us that the sea is not a savage predator who was going to eat her up like a lion or tiger; the nature of the contact that has taken place between them is of a rather different sort.

The most puzzling image in the poem to me is the "Dew / Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve." Dewdrops are of course a time-honored image of the brevity of life, a resonance that is wholly appropriate here, but in a fractured context, since it's traditionally the sun, not the sea, that swallows them up. I'm inclined to read it as an "ornamental" (rather than structural) simile, one meant only to suggest the fragility and smallness of the woman, and the extreme ease of the way in which her substance could be absorbed into the ocean.

I'm in complete agreement with you, by the way, about Dickinson's use of common measure hymn form, and of dashes. No need to read meaning into these, most of the time; but they can become functional in strongly marked circumstances, as at the ending. If one feels that the dashes make the poem hesitate at the end, as you say, this is because the dashes acquire extra force from their role in the poem's movement toward closure. Not only is the poem coming to an end, but the forward movement of the sea has just reached its limit, and is turning the other way. In this context, I agree, we can talk about the dashes.

What do you think? Have I read things into the poem as arbitrarily as some of the critics you cite, or is it convincing to you that this is what is “literally” going on in this poem? I don’t see how else one can explain a fully dressed young woman being engulfed stepwise by the tide, except as a flirtation with drowning; and if we accept that this is the case, everything else clicks into place.

DA: This is very interesting! I’ve known (and admired) this poem for a long time, and I thought of introducing it into our discussion as an example of a text that has invited all sorts of far-reaching interpretations but that is, at its most literal, “obvious” level the story of an adventure at the seashore. It therefore seemed to me a great test-piece for distinguishing between a minimal reading and a more elaborate reading produced by the reader’s inventiveness. However, when I re-read it several times in order to write about it, I found that the stanza about the rising level of the tide insisted on being taken more than literally, just as Blake’s “dark secret love” insists on there being more at stake here than an insect’s attraction to a flower. Yes, both poems have a strictly literal meaning; in this case the speaker walks to the shore with her dog, experiences the powerful presence of the sea and the ships (so there must be a dock here as well as “Sands”) but remains stationary until the incoming tide reaches her neck, at which point she turns back to the town, the water lapping over her shoes as she does so.

To achieve this reading we have to reverse the direction of the metaphors, turning “Mermaids” into something like felt presences in the water, “Hempen Hands” into rigging (or, for you, sailors – I’ll come back to this), “eating up” into drowning, “Silver Heel” and “Pearl” into foamy surf, and “bowing” into ebbing. (You say there are “literally” mermaids in the poem, where I would say “metaphorically”; I guess there’s another way of reading literally, which is to read as if there were no metaphors, which would make this is a poem about mermaids, frigates that can extend helping hands, a tide that can play at eating someone up, waves that have silver heels and are made of pearl – but no one would read it this way, right? Metaphor is a fundamental tool in the techne-box, and the poet can assume the reader knows how to handle it.)

Even at this simple level it’s a very strange story – or, rather, the bit about remaining still while the tide rises is very strange. It usually takes five or six hours for the tide to rise from low to high: can we literally envisage our heroine standing there for that long? Not a very efficient way to commit, or even dally with, suicide. An alternative might be to imagine her wading into the sea, like Chopin’s Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (published in 1899, eight years after the first publication of “I started Early”). Here is Edna on her way to death: “The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. . . . The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (175–76). But there is no suggestion in the poem that the woman is walking deeper and deeper into the ocean: the wording suggests that all the movement is on the part of the water, which I take it is how you read it too. I suppose she could be lying down, in which case the encroaching sea would cover her body more quickly, as

every third or fourth wave would travel a little further up the beach (and this would satisfy my slight unhappiness about “past” as describing vertical movement up a body). But there’s nothing else to suggest she has lain down.

Let’s look at the all-important logical connectives to be sure we’ve understood the basic structure of the poem. The first two stanzas consist of simple statements. Then we have “But”, which must refer back to the previous two verbs: “Came out” and “Extended” – these things happened, *but* “no Man moved Me.” How we understand this statement depends on whether there is an emphasis on “Man” or “moved”, as I suggested earlier: either “I was moved by the mermaids and the frigates, but no *man* moved me until the tide”; or “I encountered mermaids and frigates, but wasn’t moved until the tide.” (We have to ignore the upper case M, of course.) The second of these suits the meter better, though it is possible to read all three words – “no Man moved” – with stresses, and to foreground the second word by means of higher pitch (a trick in reading not much noticed in studies of rhythm but often crucial in marrying regular meters with rhetorical emphasis). However, I think there are other reasons for preferring the second reading: it seems more likely that the point being made is that, impervious to the appeals of the exciting-sounding mermaids and frigates, she finds herself moved by the sea. (Who, after all, she had set out to visit.) This means taking “Man” not only as a reference to the “Tide” but also as a highly generic term, encapsulating all those with agency (more than just “humanity,” as you suggest) – mermaids, frigates, and sea. We also probably need to allow “moved” its double meaning: if the “But” implies that the woman at this moment finally finds what she has been looking for, as I think it does, it is not movement but emotion that’s at stake.

The next logical step comes with “till,” whose function is clear enough, though we need to be aware that it is followed by *two* verbs in the sentence: “Went” and “made.” Not until the tide almost covered her, and pretended to devour her, was she moved or did she move. This is followed by “And then,” the logical sequel to “no Man moved Me – till.” We are about to learn how the “being moved” occurred. And we get another word with two meanings to complement the earlier one: “started”. If “moved” refers to physical motion, “started” means the same as the word in the first line – “I set off”; if “moved” refers to an emotional response, “started” means “gave a start.” Is it possible to decide which of these is more fundamental? The line that follows matches the first meaning better: “I started ... And He ... followed.” That slightly puzzling “too” (somewhat awkwardly repeated from the previous stanza) is better suited to the idea of motion: the sea performed certain actions, and then – since they were rather alarming actions – I acted too in setting off. But the sense of “moved” as an emotional response is so strong that I don’t think we can ignore the second meaning of “started” (which, of course, also implies movement, but of a different sort).

Finally, the logical sequence ends with “Until”: the sea follows the woman as far as the town, but, now out of place, it retreats.

Going through the poem’s logical structure like this, I think we gain a sense of the woman’s desire: she visits the seaside for a purpose, wanting to be moved in

some way, though perhaps she doesn't know in *what* way; although she has interesting experiences when she reaches the water, her desired emotional response doesn't happen until the sea itself almost engulfs her. This is more than she had bargained for, and she quickly retreats to safety. (I hadn't noticed before how strong the sense of purposiveness in the opening two lines is: she starts early, she takes her dog – this is not taking the dog for a walk, but wanting to have the dog with you – and makes a “visit,” no doubt a more formal and significant event for a lady in the nineteenth century than it would be now.) I'm willing to retract the too-specific sexual interpretation I made of the lines listing the items of clothing (and, to be clear, I wasn't suggesting that the poem was an allegory of a sexual encounter, just that the experience depicted has a strong sexual temper to it); let's say the poem traces the acting-out of a desire for excitement, a desire to be carried away, a desire for something that is the opposite of the “Solid Town,” and which turns out to be all *too* overwhelming. But there's no real danger, and escape is relatively simple, and is itself a pleasurable experience, as the desire to be – and fear of being – swept away is replaced by aesthetic enjoyment. (There is surely something aestheticizing about “Silver Heel” and “overflow with Pearl.”) It's a narrative that wouldn't be out of place in a story by Alice Munro.

Now, one doesn't have to read the desired experience of being “moved” as a sexual one; it could be some other form of bodily and emotional rapture, some other way of being carried away, swept off your feet, inundated with feeling. One of Dickinson's favored words is “transport,” which nicely captures both senses of “moved.” The various interpretations critics have come up with – not only sexual attraction but the force of nature, or the imagination, or the unconscious, or death – are not alternatives among which one has to make a choice but various manifestations of the general narrative of desire, a near overwhelming, an escape, and pleasure. I wouldn't say they're all equally plausible – I don't see a desire for death working in quite this way, so I'm not convinced by your “suicidal trance” – but the shape of the experience is certainly common to more than one of them. A minimal reading, I would suggest, stops at the level of the general narrative outline without coloring in any of the specific detail. (But if one *is* tempted to paint in sexual colors, I still maintain that the sequence shoe–apron–belt–bodice offers powerful support for one's choice – with the reverse sequence ankle–shoe suggesting the waning of desire.)

Perhaps this is the point at which one would need to bring in the context of Dickinson's oeuvre: would it be anomalous in terms of her other poems to read sexual desire or a sexual fantasy into this one? The answer isn't simple, since it depends on how we interpret all the other poems – especially those poems in which there is a male pronoun that could refer to a flesh-and-blood man or, on the other hand, something more spiritual. But there are poems that appear to be about a relationship with a man, such as “Again – his voice is at the door” (though in this poem, unlike the one we're discussing, “I leave my Dog – at home –”) or, less certainly, “He touched me, so I live to know” (in which “his breast” is described as “a boundless place to me / And silenced, as the awful Sea / Puts minor streams to rest”). Suffice it to say that a poem in which sexual desire is a possible resonance wouldn't be out

of place in Dickinson's output. I like your comment: "No doubt there are always very deep rumblings of meaning going on in great poems like this one" – and your warning that you and I are concerned here not with the deep rumblings but the obvious sense.

Just to get back to those "Hempden Hands" for a moment: where do you find sailors? Does "hands" mean sailors, as in "all hands on deck"? I have always read the phrase as a metaphor for the rigging itself, looking like hands extending from the tops of the masts down to the sides of the ship, as if offering help. If it's the *frigates* that are extending hands, it can't be the sailors who are doing so. Nor can I accept that the possessors of these hands "see that she's being engulfed by the tide," since this would necessitate ignoring the narrative sequence implied by "But" and "till."

I haven't mentioned the dew on the dandelion's sleeve in this response yet. I'm not as puzzled by this as you are. Wouldn't the fully expanded sentence read: "And made as if he would eat me up as wholly as he would eat up a dew upon a dandelion's sleeve"? I don't think the sun comes into it at all: she is imagining the smallest possible visualizable quantity of water – not just a drop of dew, but one tiny and delicate enough to perch on a dandelion's stalk. (I suspect William Empson would argue for some kind of carry-over of implication from the associations of "dandelion" with lightness and airiness, even though the seeds don't seem to be involved in this image.)

And the "Mighty look"? Whatever the sea itself thinks of its demeanor, the woman is surely amused by it. So "haughty" is perhaps wrong, but to take "mighty" to be the equivalent of "majestic" is to play too much into the sea's hands, I believe.

HS: Your comparison of "I started Early" with *The Awakening* is marvelous. Chopin's prose evokes something very like the woman's experience of the sea in "I started Early" – the same "sensuous" relation to the "touch of the sea ... enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" that Chopin evokes. But the difference between Edna Pontellier's intention and actions and those of the woman in the poem makes me agree with you that I shouldn't characterize the psychological state of the woman in the poem as a "suicidal trance"; that goes beyond what is plainly given, which is probably more accurately described as a "sensual trance." You also raise a good empirical question about how long it would take the tide to cover her, given that she's not walking into the sea. From what I find on the web, half the rise of the tide takes place during the third and fourth hours, so that if the tide is going to rise twelve feet altogether, a short person might be covered to the bodice in an hour and a quarter or so. That would still be a long time to stand there, but not inconceivably long. Still, given the non-naturalistic tenor of the entire poem, surely the whole thing is represented as a kind of dream-time experience, and we need to accept that she just does stand still while the water slowly rises up her body, without calculating the empirical facts too closely.

I completely agree that what we should try to paint in is "the general narrative outline" without "any of the specific detail" that isn't directly authorized by the text, and there's very little difference in how we read this general outline. But we do

differ on some of the details. You say the scenario is of a woman who, “impervious to the appeals of the exciting-sounding mermaids and frigates ... finds herself moved by the sea”; but I don’t see any appeals from the mermaids, who are only said to have come out “to look at” her. The appeal being made to the woman from the direction of the sea comes from the ships only. This is conveyed by the juxtaposition of “Extended / Hempen Hands” (which evokes the colloquial “extend a helping hand”) with “Presuming” and “Mouse / Aground.” Whoever or whatever extends these hands wrongly presumes that she’s helplessly stuck in the sand, and for this reason they extend their hands to her.

However, you see here a personification of the frigates, whereas I see “Hempen Hands” as a metonymy for the sailors in the rigging. This decision, whether to read a figure as a personification or as a metonymy, is an interesting problem for poetics that came to my attention a few years ago when I was teaching Eliot’s “Preludes”:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

My students wanted to read “morning” and “street” as personifications, but surely it makes more sense to read them as metonymic evocations of the people who wake up and walk to the coffee stands. We’re predisposed to read the “Preludes” this way because we have experience of how the modernist, and especially Eliot’s, aesthetic works; but with Dickinson the governing aesthetic principle is less clear, and we’re perhaps inclined to read it as personification. Yet it’s much more *elegant* as metonymy. If we read it as personification, it’s a rather clumsy device; the frigates become comic-book animated figures, and the unmoving rigging, or the masts and spars, have motion imaginatively projected on them for the purposes of the poem. Reading the frigates as personified also means we have to not only animate the frigates but then connect them with “Man” in the way that you suggest, taking “Man” as a “very generic term” that includes mermaids, ships, sea, and town.

But why do all this work, when the metonymic reading is so smooth? “Hempen Hands” taken as “hands that are in immediate contact with the rigging” evokes something precise and perceptual; “extended” becomes not a projection of the woman’s imagination but the actual physical action of the sailors; and “But no Man moved Me” becomes a reference to the actual men who have just been evoked. We need not imagine the compassion of the frigates, but take it literally as that of the men who see the danger she’s in. Of course personification is not alien to the aesthetic of the poem; the sea itself is undeniably personified. But this is a very different kind of personification. The image of the frigates extending their rigging in sympathy strikes me as slightly ridiculous; but there is nothing ridiculous about the way the sea is personified. No motion need be projected on it, as it must on the

frigates; its motion is real. And no *emotion* is attributed to it. Every detail of the sea's personified motion corresponds to an actual movement of the water – until we get to the bow and the look at the end. I'll get to that in a moment. I think there's an important line crossed, in the use of personification in modern poetry (a category in which I include Dickinson), when emotions start to be attributed to personified entities – in particular to man-made objects like boats. To a modern taste, at least, that's not normally an admirable move.

First, however, I want to address your criticism of my description of the mermaids as “literally there.” I think the simple distinction between literal and figurative or metaphoric is inadequate to describe the play of language in many poems, and certainly in this one. So in general of course you're right to object to what I said. But you take my saying this to point toward reading “as if there were no metaphors, which would make this is a poem about mermaids, frigates that can extend helping hands, a tide that can play at eating someone up, waves that have silver heels and are made of pearl,” and that's not the case at all. We can't make a blanket decision about all the images in the poem, because different images are doing different kinds of work, and we need to judge the precise register of their literalness or figurativeness individually, in context. The ones that – for lack of a better word – I say are literal are the ones that lock together to form the coherent basic scenario for the drama of the poem, the scenario that underpins a clear and complete movement from beginning to end. When I say the mermaids are literal I mean they're not symbols or metaphors for anything; they're part of the picture that's evoked, a “literal” dream-scenario of the woman's near-drowning as an object of general interest to the denizens of the sea, all the way from “Basement” to “Upper Floor.” The presence of the mermaids thus throws the poem into a quasi-mythological mimetic register. They prepare the way for the almost full personification of the sea in the last three lines, which comes to the very verge of transforming the sea into a literal person. The silver heels of the waves, on the other hand, are *almost* purely metaphorical; but they're transitional toward the *almost* full personification of the sea in the final lines. And on my reading, the frigates are strictly literal, serving only as the physical support for the “hempen hands” of the sailors.

It's hugely important to the poem that the woman imagines herself as so fully *witnessed* in her adventure on the beach. Despite her absorption in her experience of near-engulfment, this is far from a solitary experience; she sees herself as an object of intense interest to an extensive and varied maritime audience. But we're not given any information about any specific desire or satisfaction that she's seeking. You suggest she visits the sea because she's looking for some kind of excitement or transport, I presume because of the way you're reading “but no Man moved me.” You feel the poem as saying “I went eagerly down to the sea (thus the early start) because I wanted to be moved, but although I saw mermaids and frigates (which were pretty exciting), I wasn't moved, until ... ” That's a very plausible reading, in fact. But I don't think it can account for all the details of the poem. Her looking at mermaids could certainly be exciting; but what she says is that the mermaids *look at her*. And then, “Extended Hempen Hands” occurs already in the second line of the

second stanza, at the very first mention of the frigates. If, as we agree, this implies that the frigates/sailors think *she needs help*, this means that the search for excitement (if that's what it was) has been subordinated to the theme of danger almost as soon as it's evoked. Nevertheless, and even though I think it involves throwing a number of details into soft focus, the reading you suggest is now stuck in my head, and I don't know if I'll be able to stop hearing it as at least an undertone in my own reading.

Now, coming back to the personification of the sea in the final stanza: you suggest that the bow is the turning of the tide, which certainly makes logical sense; but the slow receding of water has no visual isomorphism with a man's bow. And there's certainly no physical equivalent in anything the receding sea could do to a parting *look* at the woman. So we just have to accept that in the final stanza the sea is almost fully anthropomorphized, in imagery that doesn't quite solidify around a physical "vehicle." Poseidon and his sea-nymphs are somewhere vaguely in the far background of this imagery, and that's what makes me feel the sea as majesty or deity. Even without that, though, the fact that he *bows* as he withdraws adds a crucial culminating touch to the characterization of the sea, one that I think we absolutely have to notice and account for. You leave the bow out of your accounting; but surely it's the most salient image of the last three lines. The "Mighty look" the sea gives the woman has to be understood in the context of his bow, and her likely response interpreted accordingly. I don't see where you get the idea that she must be "amused" by the look; there's no earthly phenomenon mightier than the sea, and it has just come very near devouring her. To me, as I said, the bow and the mighty look give a courtly touch to the relation between the sea and the woman.

All of this is, again, very dreamlike, with that wavering ambiguity that images in dreams can have – ambiguity not of meaning, but of their very identity – as when one isn't sure if a figure in a dream is oneself or someone else, or when a figure of one person metamorphoses into someone else, or into something non-human.

And one last note on the dewdrop. I didn't mean that the sun "comes into it" in this poem; only that the sun is the usual devourer of dewdrops in poetry (as in "Corinna's Going a-Maying"), and that the sea is surprising in that role. What I was puzzled by was the fact that the dandelion is brought into this beach scenario at all, since it doesn't connect with anything else in the poem. I'm interested in your identification of the dandelion's "sleeve" with its stalk, but that just makes it even more puzzling to me, since stalks are vertical and dew would presumably not linger on a vertical surface.

So there you have it. Perhaps we won't be able to agree about this fascinating poem except in the general outline.

DA: Many thanks for your, as usual, incisive and provocative comments. Mostly we agree, I think. You're right that being witnessed is crucial to the narrated adventure. I was at least in part playing dumb over the question of the literal and the metaphorical, and you've quite rightly set me straight. And yet I can see why

you made your earlier comment: the poem seems so matter-of-fact about its fanciful metaphors that the reader – this reader, at any rate – half-believes that they aren't metaphors at all, and that fantastic things are happening. You've summarized well my understanding of the implied motivation of this trip to the seashore, and I'm sorry if it will haunt your further readings – well, no, I'm not sorry, since I think it's what the poem does. I don't think you've provided a plausible alternative explanation for that crucial "But" as a turning point in the poem, nor for the earliness of the start and the insistence on the dog (which, as you said earlier, disappears from the poem – presumably because, as it turns out, the woman escapes without need of canine protection).

Our major disagreement – which is really pretty minor – is over those pesky frigates. (I wonder if Dickinson had been reading Tennyson's "Lady of the Lake," in which the knight-errant asks the maiden to allow him "to guide / Your fairy frigate o'er the tide" – nothing warlike there. She presumably had never seen a frigate, whether a military vessel or not.) I don't buy your argument that "Upper Floor" rules out rigging; if you were standing on a quay lined with sizeable sailing vessels, the sea would be below you, and the rigging would come from high up and terminate against the gunwales above you: basement and upper floors. And surely even in your reading, the frigates are personified: no literal ship is able to extend hempen hands, whether those are construed as ropes or sailors.

HS: When you say the frigates are personified, does that mean that you read Eliot's morning and street also as personifications?

DA: I'm taking personification in a purely technical sense: the statement "frigates ... extended ... hands" ascribes human agency to inanimate objects (whether you take "hands" as a metaphor for rigging, which would be to continue the personification in a straightforward way, or as a pun on a term for sailors – though for me this is more complex, as there is then a double personification: the frigate becomes human, then its hands become humans too). The Eliot example is even more complex, and I'm not sure I understand how the lines work. If "comes to consciousness" means "becomes conscious" then, yes, the morning is personified, or at least given the kind of life that possesses consciousness. If it means "arrives in the speaker's consciousness", then no. But if it were the latter, you would expect "with," not "of." If it is personification, it's also a kind of transferral, since the consciousness, though grammatically that of the street, is really that of the speaker. I don't see personification in "street." To say "its feet" is not to imply that it is human but that it has a close relation to all the feet that walk on it, a kind of possession. And "sawdust-trampled" is a bit like "sawdust" in "Prufrock": a condensed adjective that means something like "covered in trampled sawdust."

HS: Everything you say here is correct, if we're going to stick to the traditional terminology, based on pre-modernist poetry, that works with concepts like "personification," "literal," "figurative," taking them to be fundamental. But I think

new terms are needed to deal with the peculiarities of modernist poetry. I take my cue from the notion, widely noted, that modernist poetry is “elliptical.” Elliptical means: it leaves out words that would be necessary for the kind of explicitness and clarity of utterance that we expect in expository prose. This is not just an observable quality of modernist poetry; it’s a compositional principle. You can actually write poetry, create tropes, just by concentrating on paring your utterance down to the bones. You can start with “Morning comes, and with it comes renewed consciousness of” and reduce it to “Morning comes to consciousness,” and *voilà*, just by eliminating words you have what is formally indistinguishable from personification. By the twenty-first century, personification, however, has come to feel like a rather jejune device, and if there’s another way to read a nineteenth-century poet like Dickinson that is more in keeping with the modernist aesthetic, I think we should prefer it.

Something you say provides the key to this re-reading: “If [‘Morning comes ... ’] is personification, it’s also a kind of transferral, since the consciousness, though grammatically that of the street, is really that of the speaker.” Precisely. The consciousness is that of the speaker, or of the projected protagonist of the lines (since these are third-person poems); so qua personification it’s peculiarly thin and transitory – a slightly “poetic” periphrasis for what the lines literally say. Therefore it makes more sense to skip the whole idea of personification and analyse the figure as a straight “transferral” in the service of elliptical utterance.

Already in traditional poetry there are at least two basic kinds of personification. Personification 1 (p1), true personification, turns a non-human entity into an actor; but personification 2 (p2) is just a way of making concrete the relation between human actors and the non-human entity. Keats in “To Autumn” goes from p1 in the first stanza to p2 in the second (we can trace the same movement between Blake’s “To Spring” and “To Summer”). In the first, autumn is just autumn, personified as performing actions that only autumn can perform, such as causing fruit to ripen; in stanza 2, autumn is represented as nothing other than human beings doing typical things humans do in autumn. P2 is rightly still called personification, because of the way the whole poem works; but we read p2 transparently as images of typical human scenes, representative of autumn in an “elliptical” way, by way of what is formally personification. I take Eliot’s morning to be a further step in the decay of formal personification, in the service of ellipsis.

You’re right, however, that “streets,” while another instance of the kind of compressed utterance I’m describing, isn’t even formally personified. I had been thinking that if Eliot’s streets can have feet, Dickinson’s frigates can have hands; but you’ve made me notice that frigates is the subject of “extend” but streets is not the subject of “press,” and this makes a crucial difference. Still, we see from what Eliot does with “morning” that what is formally personification may be the clothing of a simple transferral. I’m crediting Dickinson with a modernist ability for this kind of ellipsis.

I think our difference over “frigates” is crucial, because my whole reading of the poem coalesces around the concrete image of sailors who extend their hands in the

woman's direction. If this dissolves into the allegorical picture of an animated frigate, then the sharpness of the tableau I'm projecting dissolves, and I have no reason to further resist your reading. The plausibility of my reading of "But no Man" depends on the concrete reference of "Man" to the sailors; I think the reason you don't find it plausible is that you don't see any sailors here. I concede that I have no explanation for that damn dog in the first line, but it seems to me a bit suppositious to translate these rather cryptic events into the clarity of "I was looking for excitement, but didn't find any until ...". The first line creates a festive mood, yes; but that's not the same as looking for excitement. (And if this is a search for excitement, wouldn't her flirtation with drowning be a straight bit of thrill-seeking?)

DA: This is very interesting; I like your argument about p1 and p2 very much (though p2 probably needs a different name, perhaps the term I used earlier, "transferral"). It's perhaps not that foreign to normal usage – in fact "restless nights" is just such a transferral. "I spent a restless night" isn't a personification of night – I suppose the traditional name for it is "transferred epithet" (which is where I got "transferral" from, but in the case of Eliot's "Preludes" it wasn't an epithet as such that was transferred). But of course it is a usage fully exploited by the modernists.

As for the hempen hands, my reluctance to read "But no Man moved Me" as referring back to sailors stems in part from a sense that "But" marks a major transition in the poem, and hence refers back to *both* the mermaids *and* the frigates (the two are linked by "And"), and that "Man" is therefore generic and not gendered. However, I feel this may be a point at which we need more than a dialogical poetics; we need other readers of the poem to join the discussion. We will have to leave it to readers.

HS: I agree with you that p2 needs another name, but I think "transferral" applies to a lot of figures in modern poetry that aren't sensibly conceived as personification, like "dancer's hungry foot" in Yeats's "Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," so I don't think that will do. However, transferral definitely seems to me a concept that should be established as a trope in the critical vocabulary. It's a very useful term.

I can see why you think that "But" should be taken to include both mermaids and frigates in its reference, because it gives the opening movement of the poem more structural integrity. The way I'm reading it, mermaids and frigates are not logically parallel in function; the mermaids are indifferent spectators, who make no attempt to "move" her. On this reading, the frigates align structurally not with the mermaids, who belong to the "sea" pole of the binary opposition at the base of the poem, but with the "solid town." Frigates and town constitute the "succour from the sea" pole of the binary.

DA: Thank you, Henry. I suggest that we abandon this question here, and return in a later discussion to the special demands made on minimal reading by modernist poetry. I think we've seen that the jump from Dickinson to Eliot is not that great after all.

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3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT (WILFRED OWEN, "FUTILITY")

Dear Derek,

In our discussion of Blake's "Sick Rose," we barely grazed the question of historical context, the question that more than any other has agitated literary criticism since the time of the New Critics, so I suggest we next discuss a poem that raises this question in an acute form: Wilfred Owen's stunning lyric "Futility."

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, –
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

In this poem the speaker speaks of a companion whose newly dead body lies, apparently, nearby. Since Owen's greatest poetry is to be found in his war poems, and "Futility" was written during the war, is about a recently dead man, and laments his death, this poem is naturally read by practically all critics as a war poem. Yet it contains not a single explicit reference to war. There is the mention of France; but that's it.

Owen's other war poems are much more direct in their references to the war. There are strong contextual reasons to read "Futility" as a war poem; and yet, someone who stubbornly, and perhaps against common sense, insisted on reading only what is "in" the poem would be unable to find any justification for such a reading.

The lack of explicit reference to history is, of course, no obstacle to the historicizing reading of literary works; historicizing readers are accustomed to excavating history from texts where the naked eye sees none. But it is one thing to excavate the history that necessarily inhabits a text, and which finds its way into the text whether the author wills it or not, and it is another thing to treat the history one perceives in a poem as determining "the meaning of the poem" as intended by the author. Those who read "Futility" as a war poem do not think that they are excavating implicit history from it; they think Owen is directly and intentionally referring to the war, and intends the poem as a "war poem." This seems so obvious to them that, in an article on this poem in one of the best recent introductions to the reading of poetry, the section on "Futility" focused mainly on the question of whether it was pro- or anti-war propaganda. What do you think? I have to admit I have to exercise considerable mental discipline on myself not to see the reference to France as decisive; but when I read the whole poem with care, I'm quite sure that this is *not* a war poem.

All best,
Henry

Dear Henry,

I like your choice of poem to continue our conversation. I must admit, I've always read it as a war poem (in the first instance, though it's clearly more than that), and you've now forced me to ask myself why. The most obvious reason is the one you suggest: Owen is known as a war poet, and one comes to the poem expecting the war to be its setting and, to some degree at least, its topic. Then, as you say, it appears to be about a newly dead man, and it mentions France; these seem to clinch it.

It's always useful, though, to imagine coming across a poem shorn of the context within which it is usually read, to ask: what can be said to be implied in the words themselves? So I'm willing to try to imagine encountering "Futility" with just its title, but with no idea of its provenance. A man has been discovered dead in the morning, and his death is linked to the overnight snow; the onset of cold weather has presumably been fatal for someone already close to death. He is not at home, where he was a farmer, nor, I would say, is he in France – if the sun always woke him there, he must now be somewhere else. (Otherwise one has to assume the phrase means "even here in France" – and Occam's razor would surely apply to throw doubt on this assumption.) When he was in France, the chances of death were high: there is something surprising about the fact that he never failed to wake in the morning, hence "*even* in France." The second stanza has no further clues about the specific situation.

To go any further, we have to raise the issue of the border between “inside” and “outside”; what is “text” and what is “context”? To know a language is to know the meanings of words, but to do that is to understand how those words, and the concepts they capture, operate in the world. You are more familiar with Wittgenstein than I am, but this seems to me part of the force of his claim that language is a “form of life.” I didn’t experience falling snow until I was in my twenties, and it was a shock: nothing like the balls of solid matter I’d assumed it to be. Suddenly I realized that I had been misreading two lines of a Hardy poem I’d encountered at school:

Some flakes have lost their way, and grope back upward when
Meeting those meandering down they turn and descend again.

This had seemed to me a bit of poetic license: but it turned out that it was merely accurate description. My new understanding of the context changed the text.

When we come to proper nouns, the impossibility of drawing that borderline is even more obvious. “France” doesn’t mean “the large European country bordered by Spain and Germany” but refers to something outside language (Saul Kripke would call it a “rigid designator”); and what I understand by it will be the result of my accumulated experiences, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Clearly, in interpreting an utterance, including a poem, I will try to restrict myself to connotations that I believe would be shared by most readers. “France,” then, in connection with an existence far from home in which one feels lucky to be alive each day, suggests to me the battlefields of the World Wars, and more particularly the trenches of the First World War, and I believe that many readers, at least, would have the same response even without an awareness of the author and the rest of his poetry. Where is the poem set, then? The puzzle is that it seems not to be in France, for the reasons I’ve given, but to be in a place where a cold night is felt sufficiently to bring about a death. A field hospital, perhaps? – but it would have to be in another country. Or a hospital with insufficient heating? I’m not sure I can get any further with this conundrum.

What I’ve tried to elucidate is what you’ve called “the history that necessarily inhabits a text”: whatever Owen thought he was doing, the mention of France and the likelihood of dying there brings to mind (to my mind, that is, and I suspect to many others) the trenches of the First World War. When you contrast this version of the use of historical knowledge with the alternative assumption that “the history one perceives in a poem” is “something intended by the author” I guess you mean that in the second case “external” information is used to attribute an intention, which is then read into the poem: Owen wrote many powerful poems against war, therefore he’s likely to have intended this one to be against war, therefore this is what it means. I agree with you that this is a dubious approach. There are other ways in which context could be said to be relevant, and I’m sure we’ll come to these later in our discussion.

To say that the scene described involves a First World War soldier dying after a cold night is not to imply that this is a poem whose main purpose is to offer a critique of war. If that’s what we mean by a “war poem,” this is surely not one.

We need to go on to discuss the second stanza to see if we agree on what it is doing. But I suspect you may have more to say about the first stanza.

With best wishes,
Derek

HS: You've nailed it precisely. One thing is for the poem to point implicitly to the context of the First World War; a quite distinct thing is for it to be a *war poem*, or, more specifically, an anti-war poem. You distinguish between the more and the less broadly shared field of experience that we bring to poetry; there's our experience (or lack of same) of snow, at one end of the spectrum, and there's our experience of the specific context of Owen's poetry at the other end. The former is far more broadly shared than the latter. The project of "minimal reading," as I understand it, is to push on the broad end of the spectrum as hard and as long as possible before reaching for more specialized knowledge. But there's a middle ground between the general experience of human beings in our culture (such as knowing about snow, whether we've experienced it or not) and the scholar's curious knowledge. This middle ground is that of the general cultural literacy of college-educated people who have gotten some modicum of training in the humanities. The reading of poetry, even at the most minimal level, requires this general literacy. We can also include in this general literacy those easily digestible bits of specialized information that, if one does not already know them, are quickly picked up. If I Google "Wilfred Owen," the first thing I see is the Wikipedia entry, the extract from which identifies him as "an English poet and soldier, one of the leading poets of the First World War." Minimal reading must take such bits into account as part of general cultural literacy.

On this basis, we must reckon that "France" evokes WWI as part of what is inextricably "inside" the poem. There's no absolute "inside" or "outside" of the poem; it depends on the context one decides is appropriate. One's first thought, given the context of WWI, is that this must be a battlefield death. As against this, however, as you point out, is the fact that "even in France" might mean that the protagonists are *not* in France anymore; it seems to mean "even when we were in France." However, I don't find "even here in France" less likely as a meaning than I do "even when we were in France," because "once, / At home" in lines 2–3 has nostalgically evoked the distance of home from the scene of his death. But none of this is conclusive; whether or not they are still in France is not clear, and other things are not clear either. We know a man is dead, and one scenario that makes good sense is that they're outdoors, under the shade of trees or of some other object; this is a battlefield death, and the speaker and the person addressed are comrades of the dead man. But it could be a hospital back in England; they could be on a veranda or piazza of the hospital, in the shade, or inside the hospital, removed from some windows through which sunlight is streaming.

The appeal of the first reading (that this is a battlefield situation) is that it makes good, literal sense of the notion that, as you say, "the onset of cold weather has been fatal for someone already close to death." If we go with this reading, this poem

sounds quite like Owen's other war poems. And yet if I look at "the words of the poem" it strikes me that *nothing* of the literal situation that I've been reconstructing is explicitly present. I re-read all of Owen's war poems to see how they refer to the war, and this poem is uniquely evasive in its reference to war. However we interpret the poem's context, Owen's *technique* in this one sets it apart from his other war poems. So we need to look very carefully at the technique of this poem to see why it's made just this way.

First thing I notice is that the conceit around which the opening stanza is constructed is not just that of the life-awakening power of the sun's heat, but, specifically, of its power to awaken life *when one wakes up in the morning*. The man has died with the coming of snow, but it is of equal or even greater importance that the speaker and the person addressed have found him dead when he fails to awaken in the morning. This is the point at which the poem begins to twist the notion of waking from sleep into that of waking from death. The speaker is, irrationally, perhaps crazily, suggesting that the light of the morning sun ought, based on its past record, to be able to awaken a man from death. "It always woke him, even in France where death was everywhere; ergo, now that he is dead, back here once again in England, it ought to be able to wake him once more." This is not a metaphysical conceit, but it works in the same way, except that, unlike a metaphysical conceit, it isn't at the service of the speaker's intellect. His anguish at the death of his comrade, his inability as yet to accept that he is dead, is such that it bends his reason to the service of his need for hope, and he produces this wildly illogical syllogism. The rising of the sun always woke him; the sun has now risen; ergo, it will wake him.

Of course there is as yet no explicit evocation of death; that the man is dead will not become completely clear until the second stanza. It has been adumbrated from the first line: Move him into the sun. But that could just mean he's paralyzed.

Now that I've gotten started, I find I have much more to say about this first stanza, but I'm eager to hear how you make out what I've said so far.

DA: I want immediately to respond to one thing you said, because it made me realize why I had always gravitated toward a particular understanding of the poem's setting. "They could be on a veranda or piazza of the hospital, in the shade, or inside the hospital, removed from some windows through which sunlight is streaming." I had never brought it to consciousness, but the command "Move him into the sun" had always evoked for me a scene in which there is a block of shade and a block of sunlight, with a clear boundary between; and although nothing more specific could be inferred from this, it seemed to suggest a building with defined areas of both, rather than the uncertain topography of a battlefield. I raise this point not to insist on the interpretation – clearly, shade and sun can occur on a battlefield in the necessary relationship, as you point out – but to make the point that we are often not aware of what it is in a poem which is pushing us toward a certain interpretation – which is why discussion of these apparent minutiae is so valuable.

Now to what seems to me the most important point in your argument. In trying to establish a minimal reading which could be agreed upon by all readers who

possess what you're calling general "cultural literacy" (a phrase once associated with the rather mechanical approach of E. D. Hirsch, but one we can perhaps use now without those associations), you focus on the specificities of Owen's technique. Another way of putting the project we're engaged on is that it is an attempt to describe a reading that fully acknowledges its responsibility to the singularity of Owen's achievement in the poem, one that strives to register what is *inventive* about Owen's choice and arrangement of the words of the English language. (You will recognize that these are terms I've used before: I don't expect them to fall as easily from your lips!) Your question about the distinctiveness of this poem in Owen's oeuvre points to this issue.

And you're surely right to begin by focusing on the craziness of that opening: the instruction given in the opening of the poem makes no sense except as a product of despair, a despair that has taken the speaker into a world of impossibility. It may not be literal insanity, but a kind of controlled craziness, the deployment of a conceit – you're absolutely right to use this word, I think – in the knowledge that it is a conceit, but that it expresses the hopelessness of the situation better than any rational statement would. There is, as you suggest, a relation to the conceits of Donne and Herbert here: extravagant claims that convey intense emotion when normal language can't do it.

Not that we realize this right away. Poems work temporally, line by line, and at first – precisely because the alternative is impossible – the reader must assume the man referred to is still alive, as you point out. (For a long time, not having read the poem with due care, I thought it was about someone near death; I wasn't able to take on board the craziness of the first stanza.) It's really only when we reach "Until this morning and this snow," I think, that we grasp the finality of the cold's effects. (The idea that it is the snow that has been deadly, thwarting the beneficial effects of the sun, is suggestive of the battlefield once more, since one wouldn't expect a hospital to be so affected by the weather.) Up to this moment, the reader is likely to mistake the conceit for a literal prescription: the warmth of the sun may be what is needed to rouse this sleeping man, as it has always done before. Would you agree that, if any doubts about whether he is actually dead remain into the second stanza, the phrase "still warm" clinches it, as no one would say this of anyone who is alive?

Owen's economy is astonishing (and part of the pleasure of reading the poem is registering how much is being said in so few words): the personification of the sun is not overdone, but merely hinted at in the metaphoric "touch," so that, with the modifier "gently," the waking becomes like that of a friend or carer placing a hand on a shoulder or cheek. It continues with "whispering" and reaches a climax in the last line, where again the economy is extreme: this seems to be the language of cliché – "the kind old sun" – but it's cliché in the service of the expression of despair, as hope, and language, run out.

HS: I think your point about poems working temporally deserves to be stressed. There is, of course, "concrete" poetry that works visually and a-temporally; and

even in conventional poetry nothing dictates that the reader must respect the order in which the words are printed in generating an interpretation. But most poetry, in most cultures, through most of history, has been written for the ear; the art of poetry has historically evolved as something directed at ordering words as something to be read aloud, these words in this order.

DA: I'd like to return to the question of context, or rather the question of what knowledge we bring to the poem and what difference this makes. The phrase "whispering of fields unsown" is Owen's economical way of filling in some background detail: the man was a farmer whose earlier experience of morning sunshine was inseparable from the daily round of work on the farm. But for me it also evokes Roman history: the story of Cincinnatus, sought out by the Senate to lead the Roman army and found at his plow, to which he returned as soon as he had ensured victory over the enemy. (There's a story with a similar outline that is even more widely known thanks to the film *Gladiator*: Maximus Decimus Meridius leading the army while longing to be back on his farm.) This association doesn't affect my interpretation of the poem, but it enriches the lines.

Interestingly, there is an alternative reading in the manuscript history of this phrase: "whispering of fields half-sown" – this is the version that appeared in *The Nation*, while "unsown" appears in a fair copy made by Owen.¹ This alternative suggests even more vividly what I think of as the Cincinnatus image (I must have seen a drawing when I was young): the farmer breaking off from his task of sowing to join the army.

The other piece of contextual information I find myself bringing to the poem is biographical. It's perhaps part of general cultural literacy: the knowledge that Owen, suffering from shell-shock, convalesced in Britain before going back to the battlefield and his death. Or perhaps not – there's bound to be a grey area between what we can confidently expect the literate reader to know and what only those who have made a study of the poet will know. (This detail of Owen's life has become more widely known thanks to its fictionalization in Pat Barker's highly successful novel *Regeneration*.) A little bit of research – so easy now with the internet, where one can find masses of information on the Wilfred Owen Association website – reveals that he wrote the poem in May or June 1918 in Yorkshire after a spell in the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh.

Now, this is information I can't clear my mind of when I read the poem, try as I might. Owen's words are indelibly associated for me with his time in the UK, and particularly with Craiglockhart, from which he had been discharged some six months earlier. There's no reason why he shouldn't have been thinking of an episode in the trenches while convalescing in Yorkshire, but one's responses to poems don't work logically, and my awareness of the hospital context conditions me to read the poem as an account of a death in a military hospital. In fact, thanks to our conversation, I've now found a transcript of his war record on the internet – which makes it clear that he was treated in several hospitals, in both France and Britain. The following account follows a reference to his being blown up by a shell explosion while sleeping:

On May 1st. he was observed to be shaky and tremulous, and his conduct and manner were peculiar, and his memory was confused. The R. M. C. sent him to No. 41 Sty. H. Gailly where he was under observation and treatment by Capt. Brown R. A. M. C, Neurological Specialist for a month. On 7/6/17 he was transferred to No. 1 G. H. Etretat, and on 16/6/17 to the Welsh Hospital Netley. There is little abnormality to be observed but he seems to be of a highly strung temperament *[sic]*. He has slept well while here. He leaves Hospital to-day transferred to Craig Lockart War Hospital, Edinburgh for special observation and treatment.

(www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/transcript/g3cs3s1t.htm)

“No. 41 Sty. H.” refers to a Field Hospital, Number 41 Stationary Hospital, formerly Number 13 Casualty Clearing Station, on the Somme Canal not far from the front line (the village of Gailly was taken by the Germans nine months after Owen had left). Knowing this as I read the poem encourages me to think of it as set in fairly primitive conditions in France rather than the more well-appointed environment of Craiglockhart.

But, you will say, we don’t need all this information to read the poem with insight and feeling, and I agree. (One bit of information actually counts against locating it within Owen’s own experience of hospital life: his various confinements occurred between mid-March and early November, 1917: i.e., not during the depths of winter.) My point is just that knowledge once absorbed can’t be jettisoned; reading a poem is a singular experience, a strange combination of activity, as one tries to bring it into focus and draw on whatever mental and emotional resources one possesses, and passivity, as one tries to empty one’s mind of irrelevancies and allow the words to do their work unimpeded.

HS: I don’t know quite what to make of the biographical information you provide. I worry that now that I’ve read it, the hospital interpretation will become as indelibly imprinted on my own reading of the poem as you say it is on yours. I know that you’re quite conscious of the way the biographical evidence is affecting your reading; but critics frequently mix different kinds of evidence in a methodologically undisciplined way, as though the critical reading of a poem should faithfully mirror the heterogeneity of our psychological responses to it. An even more serious problem is that, once we start digging past the illumination offered by the most general sorts of facts (such as the fact that this is a WWI poem) into historical details in the way you do here, things start to become murkier again, and the focus of our worry shifts from what the poem is saying to how to deal with all the external evidence. One might wonder, “well, which hospital was it – the English or the French one?” And then one will need to do more historical research to try to nail it down; and if the French hospital involved, as you say, “more primitive” circumstances, just how primitive were they? Was it so crowded and small that some patients might have been parked outside, perhaps the ones considered lost causes? Think how much poignancy would be added to our reading of the poem if we discovered that this

was indeed the case. But now we're really bogged down in the imponderability of context, and yet no amount of such information would tell us the specific effect of language Owen was trying for when he constructed his poem in just this way.

The Cincinnatus reference is somewhat different. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this poem also brings Cincinnatus to mind for me. I think for anyone educated as we have been, and as Owen was, the mention of unsown, or half-sown, fields in connection with a warrior can't help but arouse this association. But what then? Are we to think of it as an "allusion" made by the poem? To what end would the poem evoke Cincinnatus here? Again, this seems to me a potential distraction from the endless labor of reading the poem; one would now start to think, for example, about the fact that Cincinnatus was not called to be an ordinary soldier but to be dictator of Rome, and he did *not* die in the war. The ingenious critic can now attribute increased pathos to the death of the man in the poem from this difference, and the game of drawing epicycles around the poem can continue endlessly. As with the hospital information, I think associations of this kind do belong somewhere in the study of poetry, but not to minimal reading.

Back to the poem itself. Concerning what you call the "controlled craziness" of the "sun's warmth" conceit: I think in talking about this craziness we need to distinguish between the speaker and the designing intelligence of the poet. The speaker seems not to think of this as a conceit at all; in his despair (is it fair to say "he" here?), he makes a deadly serious argument about the chances of the sun's waking the dead man again. It's a conceit only from the standpoint of the poem as a technical product. The very artfully constructed figurative design of the whole poem is generated out of the notion of the sun as life-bringer, and there is a distinct boundary between conceiving these words as the marvelously controlled intelligence of this figurative design, on the one hand, and as the ravings of a grief-maddened speaker who is pinning his hopes on the sun's warmth, on the other. The control is all on one side, and the craziness all on the other.

I do agree that the phrase "still warm" in the second stanza is what makes it quite definite that the speaker's companion is dead; and your observation about the temporal nature of the poem reminds me that this detail has a powerful effect of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith called "retrospective patterning" on our reading (*Poetic Closure*, 119). I said that the notion of waking from sleep begins in the first stanza to be twisted into that of waking from death, but it isn't until we know for sure that the man is dead that the craziness of the notion, and hence the force of the figurative twisting, becomes fully manifest to the reader. The fact that the first stanza suggests that he can still be "roused" implies very strongly that he *isn't* dead, so the conclusive "still warm" is strictly necessary for the clarity of the poem.

Since in the first stanza it isn't yet established that he's dead, the apparent sense of the lines would be that it's a snowy morning, and on this snowy morning the man has, uncharacteristically, failed to awaken at daybreak. "And this snow" then, would function as a realistic or decorative detail, perhaps one that is rhyme-forced, rather than as identifying the cause of death: it's winter, and look, there's fresh snow outside, on this morning when he has failed to awaken. Once we read the

entire poem, however, we realize that he's dead and that the snow is a synecdoche for the cold that has *in some sense* killed him, whether literally or not. We won't know this until the next stanza, but from this point on it's the *cold* that becomes the central problem of the poem, the great antagonist of the life-giving sun. The second stanza makes it clear that the cold in question is not ultimately that of a wintry morning, but that of death, however caused. The speaker imagines that it was the cold of the weather that killed the man (although it wasn't), so that he can imagine that the warmth of the sun can rouse him (although it can't). Once we know that that's what's going on, the stanza takes on its full magnificence, especially the syntactic movement from the second line, "Gently its touch awoke him once" to the end of the fifth line. Once we become aware of where this movement is headed, we perceive how strong the "once" at the end of this line is; it gets strengthened into "always" at the beginning of line 4, and the sequence "once ... always" then culminates, or founders, in the fifth line's "*until ...*"

This poem is marvelous for speaking aloud because of the way one has to give their proper weight to words like "once" and "always," and then the funeral drumbeat of "Until this morning and this snow" that brings us to the full stop. The sequence "once ... always ... until" is in itself rather weightless, or can be taken that way by the inattentive reader, yet words like these are as much the essential substance of the poem as the nouns and verbs and metaphors.

Judged from the standpoint of art, the sentimental personification of the sun ("the kind old sun") is a real lapse; but we can partly rehabilitate it by noting that it's motivated at the level of the fictional drama by the despairing desire of the speaker. The notion of the avuncular sun is expressive of his state of mind, which has been deranged by emotion. Here is where it becomes apparent that the speaker is raving, because this is where it is made explicit for the first time that he thinks, or is trying to believe, that the sun can bring a dead man back to life.

Fortunately, however, this is only a transitional moment in the poem, which is about to rise to another level. While the diction of "kind old sun" is weak, what is not weak is the way in which the lines both culminate the preceding, and set up the next, stanza. In the first stanza the speaker has suggested that the sun can bring a dead man back to life; now the speaker begins to offer a logical, scientifically-based argument, in a quite striking and impressive, although still nutty, way, about why it's reasonable to think the sun can bring him back to life. We go from the weakest line in the poem to one of the strongest: "Think how it wakes the seeds." I imagine the speaker at this point becoming more animated and grabbing the sleeve of his living comrade, the one he's telling to move the corpse; now this argument in support of the possible efficacy of the move has suddenly occurred to him, and he means to convince the other guy, or rather to inspire him with the hope that now for a moment seems to be within reach (the line about the kind old sun, which is so feeble, I imagine as spoken more or less apathetically, in the apathy of hopeless or nearly hopeless grief grasping at a straw). Hey, it could work! Think how it wakes the seeds! Up to this point we're still in the register of the first stanza; the real turn takes place in the next line where we go cosmic; and that's where the high lyrical register starts to come in as well:

Think how it wakes the seeds, –
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.

It's possible to question just how perfectly achieved the transition is; and yet the lyricism of these lines is so fine in itself, so sharply cut and so hard-edged, that I can't prefer the first stanza to it. The hopeless grief, raging to find hope, the arousal, from an apathy that had expressed itself in such a lazy way in the image of the sun, into heightened intellectual activity, together with the intransigence of the problem (he's dead!), which calls for heavy artillery, seem to me adequately to motivate the raising of the linguistic register.

DA: Your distinction between the speaker and the designing intelligence is crucial, and I like the way you articulate the difference between the former's deadly seriousness and the latter's exploration of a conceit. It's this distinction that makes it possible for me to read the cliché of the seventh line without the embarrassment that you seem to feel: to speak of the "kind old sun" is to clinch the crazy hopefulness that runs through the first stanza, and I don't feel that the implied author (Owen understood not as biographical writer of the poem but as the author manifested in the poem in its fullness) is at all implicated in the cliché as cliché. Moreover, "old" serves as a prolepsis: we take it as empty formula, but the second stanza gives the idea of the ancientness of the sun real weight.

If there's a phrase that doesn't work for me as well as I would like, it's "fatuous sunbeams toil" – where the speaker, far from falling into formulaic language, is indulging in phrasing that seems slightly too "poetic." The heightened register of the rest of the stanza doesn't pose this problem for me: the words are almost all familiar monosyllables, and the most prominent deviations from standard language, the two compounds "dear-achieved" and "full-nerved," though certainly not imaginable on the lips of an ordinary soldier, earn their difficulty by their concentration of meaning. You say that whether the reader is willing to accept the raising of the linguistic register is "a matter of taste," and I wouldn't disagree: but the question of exactly what this means is perhaps one we should discuss at a later date.

HS: The question of the different ways we hear various phrases in the poem is of particular interest to me, because I don't think there's any difference in how we interpret the *meaning* of these phrases ("kind old sun," "full-nerved," "dear-achieved," "fatuous sunbeams toil"). What we hear differently is the tonality or register of the language of each phrase.

So, "kind old sun." You've convinced me to hear it purely as characterizing the persona – as an expression of his tremulous, somewhat deranged, hopefulness – and not as a weakness of Owen's diction. But the entire poem would, I think, collapse into the tremulousness of the persona if it were not for the turn it takes with the next line: "Think how it wakes the seeds." This line is very strong – so simple and self-evident that for at least a split second it blindsides the rational mind with its

logic (if the sun can wake the seeds, surely it can wake the dead man). And of course it takes up the theme of sowing fields from the first stanza, as well as implying the parallel between the seeds and the sower, who used to be awakened by the sun just like the seeds he sowed. But this line is only a transition; the next line raises the register of the poem to a spectacular, wholly unexpected, new level. What an amazing leap. *Think*: the same power that we see waking the seeds *woke, once, the clays of a cold star*. Now the poem has become visionary, in a way that once again the rational mind has to collect itself to refute. The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection is an essential subtext to this poem. The speaker is confronting Paul's problem with Paul's attitude: if the dead rise not, then all this is meaningless and without value. But, unlike Paul, he doesn't seem to have any religious belief to reassure him that the dead do rise; he adopts the modern scientific cosmology, according to which life arises by naturalistic means from *the clays of a cold star* ("Cold star," by the way, in this context can only mean "the planet earth before the advent of life." This is, I think obvious to any grizzled reader of poems, because the context points so inexorably to this meaning; but is the kind of thing that is very difficult to explain to undergraduates, for whom the fact that the earth is not a *star* but a *planet* can seem insuperable.) All of a sudden we're whirling in interplanetary space, observing a dead prehistoric earth. It's a *scientific fact* that the sun did indeed wake the clays of this cold star; and this scientific fact is the speaker's strongest evidence that the sun really has the power to bring dead matter to life. This is the metaphysical conceit at the heart of the poem. But the very logic that makes us accept the scientific-materialist account of life tells us that this is a crazy argument.

Nevertheless, the next two lines stick resolutely with the logic of the argument. If the sun can wake the seeds and even a cold star, how can limbs still warm be beyond its power? Now we come to those other two phrases to which you called attention, "dear-achieved" and "full-nerved." They seem to me just a bit nineteenth century; but now I realize that my problem is mainly with the hyphens. Remove the hyphens and the lines seem much more natural – don't you think? But you like the phrases the way they are, and maybe the hyphens are better left in. The emotion of the speaker has been raised to such a pitch that the hyphens work by making the phrases more rushed, and thus making the language feel more compactly wrought. The question that runs across these two lines is, after all, only preliminary, so we do need more or less to rush through it; we're building up to the climactic line, "Was it for this the clay grew tall?"

The weight of irony in this line, of the bitterest dashing of hope, lies on the word *this*, on which the entire poem pivots; what a challenge for a reader to give *this* precisely the right pacing and intonation. It's a marvelous line: "the clay grew tall" reminds us of the corpse as child and boy, growing toward manhood, and of Genesis; but it also takes us back to the "clays of a cold star," which were evoked in connection with the triumph of the sun, and gives the question the larger sense, "was it for this the clay of earth came to life and eventuated in the human animal with his upright posture?" When the clay of earth was first mentioned, however, it was to point to the triumph of the sun over cold, dead matter, whereas now clay is

evoked with the dawning awareness that the cold is going to be the ultimate winner; the line needs to be read with an undertone of incipient anxiety.

At this point, it's necessary to return to the question with which we began, about the relation of this poem to the war that was its occasion. If this is a poem that is in a strong sense *about the war*, or, by means of the reference to this specific war, about war in general, then "this" in the penultimate line is going to have to mean: was it in order to be killed in a war, or in this war, that the clay grew tall. But to read the line this way is to prune away practically everything that Owen has done to make this an impressively well-crafted poem, in order to insist on a meaning that one already had in one's head before one ever started to read this particular organization of words. The poem has been developing, in a terrifically original and moving way, the argument that the sun, the life-giver, who causes life to originate, must have the power to bring *this corpse here* back to life, an argument that opens onto a rhetorical question whose answer, by the logic of the argument, should be "no": if the great sun can wake the seeds and bring to life an entire planet, can still warm limbs be too hard to resurrect? Of course not! *The sun clearly has the power to resurrect this man!* The wave of hope the speaker has been riding from the first line crests in these first four lines of the second stanza, in the implied response to the first rhetorical question. But the wave begins to break in the next two lines, as he asks the *second* rhetorical question into which the note of anxiety creeps. *Was it for this the clay grew tall?* The presupposed answer to this question should, on the basis of what has come before in the poem, again be "no" (no, it was not for this the clay grew tall; some more glorious consummation must await it); but when we read the final two lines, we see that this line is transitional, that the speaker's emotion has shifted polarities in the movement by which it turned from assertion to question, and that this shift begins, subtly, to happen already in the first question. The final lines imply the speaker's dawning horror at the realization that the answer to his rhetorical questions is actually "yes." Resurrection *is* beyond the power of the life-giver; there is no hope that the dead man will come back to life.

Now, if the idea that the dead man was killed in war is in play at this point, and is in play specifically in order to say something about or against war, "Was it for this" must mean "Did the sun bring forth life out of the cold clay of a dead star, and did this specific bit of clay become a man, so that he could be killed in this war (or in some war, any war)?" But reading the line this way implies that *death in war*, or perhaps even *death in this specific war*, has a significance that is missing from, or is, at least, less notably present in, *all other kinds of death* – specifically, the significance of *futility* that the name of the poem points us to. Which implies – given that everyone has to die somehow or other – that there are meaningful alternatives to war death, alternatives that do make it worthwhile for the sun to have brought forth life on earth. And this would imply that, if his friend or comrade were lying here dead from some other, non-war cause, then this would not be an occasion for the despair that now ensues.

The entire question, like the entire poem, turns on the weight and tonality of *this*. *This* indicates the fate that has apparently befallen the speaker's comrade, who now lies dead before him; but this single dead body (as the final lines make clear) stands

good for the aspect of life that calls into question the value of the very existence of life in its entirety. What aspect is this? Is it the stark fact of death itself, death that is not followed by resurrection, or is it the fact that *this* life has been cut off in a brutal, senseless way? Here is the scale of possible readings, from the most particularized to the most general, that could be given to *this*:

- 1 This individual death here. Since my comrade's life has been prematurely ended by this brutal, senseless war, it's better that the earth had remained a cold, lifeless orb for all eternity.
- 2 This individual death as representative of the carnage of WWI. Since so many lives have been ended by this war as this one has, it's better that ...
- 3 This individual life as representative of the senselessness of war death in general. Since many, many lives have been ended in a similar way by many wars, it's better that ...
- 4 This individual death as representative of the premature, senseless cutting off of life in general, however this might happen. Since a multitude of lives has been ended, and continues to be ended, prematurely, senselessly, by war and many other causes, it's better that ...
- 5 Since all organic life ends like this, in the stark horror of the corpse, which reverts to the cold clay from which it came, *since there is no resurrection, not by the sun or by anything else*, then all organic life had better not have existed.

It would be oddly cranky on the part of Owen to have constructed this poem with so much craft in order to express meaning 1; he must have something more resonant in view. The next three readings expand by stages the range of reference of *this*, but once we've gone beyond the particularity of the individual case where do we stop? We cross an important threshold at 4, because at that point we stop reading this as a "war poem," even if the specific death in question is a war death, because war death becomes only one possible example of "futile" death. At each stage the despairing conclusion, that life ought not to have existed at all, becomes less and less obviously cranky; but it still creates a distinct separation between most readers – whose lives either have not yet ended this way, or who don't expect them to – and the speaker, since he's saying it's better *we* too had never existed. We can certainly sympathize with such an emotion, but only from the outside; only the most wildly empathetic reader could be caught up in the wild grief that brings forth the final cry if it's motivated only by a single war death. Meanings 1 to 4 are all, of course, impossible on the poem; but a skillful poet who wanted us to get at least a sense of the occasion for such wild grief should have done something to evoke the *pathos* of brutal, senseless, premature (war) death, instead of leaving us to weave it in our minds out of the phrase "even in France."

Or is the speaker saying, I, a modern man who accepts the naturalistic cosmology, in the presence of this corpse finds it unbearable that life should be merely organic in nature, and, overwhelmed by the absoluteness and irreversibility of death, as this has been brought forcefully to my awareness by the futile war

death of my comrade, cast a curse on the mindless soulless powers that brought life forth?

Now we come to *that phrase*, the one that you say doesn't (yet) work for you, and to which I hope to bring you around, because to me it's inspired, and makes the whole poem. The word *fatuous*, to begin with, is absolutely key, because it reverses the valence of the earlier personification "kind old sun" and, more importantly, destroys the possibility of reading the sun as a figure for the Christian God. Most important of all, however, is that this figure has to carry the whole burden of the *turn* from the hope that the entire poem has been nurturing, and which is still possible through the twelfth line (where the answer to the rhetorical question remains open), and does magnificently carry it. The "O" at the beginning of the line is an old-fashioned device, but the question being asked and the answer being proffered, the level of despair that is evoked, are such as to fully justify it; and the word *fatuous* is so surprising here, so deflationary; forms with *sunbeams* so sinuous a phrase in the mouth; and flows, with *toil*, through a stunningly strong enjambment, to the culminating phrase *to break earth's sleep*; that it gives the poem consummately achieved closure. The turn in the last two lines is very much what we think of the Shakespearean sonnet as doing (although Shakespeare himself, as Stephen Booth so brilliantly showed in his *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, doesn't actually do it that often). And isn't "fatuous sunbeams" the kind of slightly off-kilter figure Shakespeare might use, and by means of which he creates emotional effects that take us so much by surprise?

Then there are the almost whispered last two words, which I think have to be preceded by a very slight caesura after "sleep." This last phrase is crucial; it's what seals the *totalizing* nature of the question. "At all" means not why this life or death or that life or death, but why life *at all*, why was the entire earth not allowed to slumber on, cold and inert, for all eternity?

The proper historical context within which to read this poem, on this reading, would then be not the war (although the war does provide the contingent occasion for the confrontation with death), but the triumph of the scientific, materialist worldview against which the Victorians had fought the last agonized battle. In this connection, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is a directly relevant predecessor to "Futility".

DA: I'm glad you've returned to the question we started with, the question of context. My little exploration of the evidence we have of Owen's time in hospitals and of the writing of the poem was meant as a kind of test of my own account of the literary work as having its being in the event of the reader's experience. For if that is what the poem is, and I find that after discovering all these facts I have no option but to read it differently from the way I did beforehand, I am no longer reading the same poem. And by shutting down certain options, this research might have diminished the poem. In saying this, I'm probably guilty of the error you describe as the belief that "the critical reading of a poem should faithfully mirror the heterogeneity of our psychological responses to it." I can see why you say this, and I would certainly not want to argue that whatever associations a poem triggers

for a particular reader are relevant to the poem as poem. (For one thing, we have to have a way of discounting what I. A. Richards called “stock responses,” which arise from a failure to read what is actually there.) So we need a way of talking about an experience of the poem which is not simply the aggregate of the psychological responses it occasions, just as we need to find a way of keeping in check the ingenious interpretations (and the allusion to Cincinnatus may be one such) that the assiduous and inventive critic is able to bring to the poem.

Maybe the way forward is to regard *any* reading of a poem as provisional, always open to being affected by new information, fresh insights, more careful scrutiny of the way the words work. A minimal reading would be one that does justice to the poem as a construction in words relying on reasonably public knowledge – cultural literacy, you called it. The knowledge that Owen was killed during (or at the very end of) the First World War might count as such knowledge, and hence impart a sense of authenticity to the poem we are reading, as well as contributing more specific insights into its setting. Knowing more than this about the context *may* enrich the poem, or it may not; as literary scholars, one of our tasks is to explore that possibility, but we should be prepared to reach a negative conclusion as to its usefulness in enhancing the poem.

I found your account of the importance of capturing the right emotional weight and tone highly compelling, and equally so your demonstration of this in following through the lines of the second stanza. (I think I prefer having the hyphens of “dear-achieved” and “full-nerved” in the poem – here too there is something Shakespearean, or Joycean, in Owen’s fabrication of compounds, a quality that might be lost if they were simply pairs of words.) I’m glad you’ve returned to our initial question – is this a war poem? – and with such a detailed analysis of the possible readings of that crucial phrase, “Was it for this ... ?” Looking at your five possible readings, I find that I can’t move wholly past 3 and 4 in favour of 5. I don’t agree that Owen would have had to give a fuller sense of the pathos of death in war, or this war, to justify such readings; it seems to me that “even in France,” with miraculous economy, evokes for pretty much any literate reader that pathos (and if you’re reading the poem in the context of Owen’s other poetry, of course, all that horror and sorrow is vividly there). For the soldier we are invited to imagine trying to articulate his feelings at the death of his comrade, the waste, the futility is surely that of a life *cut off* when it need not have been, a death which *makes no sense* (and here is the implicit critique of this specific war – in another war, such a death might be understood to be justifiable). Would the speaker be moved to such grief, such anger at the death of an 85-year-old peacefully in bed after a fulfilled life?

Nevertheless, I see the power of the reading that takes the poem to be, ultimately, about the absence of any faith to compensate for the terrible and inescapable fact of organic death. Perhaps we need to evoke the distinction between the persona and the poet once more: while the speaker of the poem is responding to the senselessness of this particular death, and through it, the senselessness of this *kind* of death, the poet invites us to place it in the larger context you have sketched. If I remain a little dissatisfied with this more generalized understanding, it’s because the subject

of the poem's outburst of despair is something that even those first humans on earth – the clay grown tall – encountered. What is lost in this reading is the sense of the long history of human development, the outrageous fact that after millennia of supposed growth since that originating moment the human animal can slaughter its fellows in a pointless conflict. I'm sure you have a powerful response to this comment, but perhaps we should leave our disagreement there.

On *fatuous*, though, you have made the poem work better for me: the word, I now see, is a brilliantly conceived companion for *sunbeams*. If we were going on with this discussion, I would ask you if you could do the same with *toil*, which still seems an odd activity for sunbeams to be engaged in.

I'd like to end with some comments on one aspect of the *techne* employed by Owen, just to emphasize, as we haven't so far, that the achievement of the poem is partly a matter of its skillful deployment, and revitalization, of traditional forms. The meter uses the familiar four-beat rhythm, fully realized in all but the opening and closing lines of the stanzas, which have only three beats. The shortness of these three-beat lines (which encourages a pause at line-end) contributes to their distinctive quality – a certain straightforwardness and simple assertiveness: "Move him into the sun," "The kind old sun will know" (the second of these lines picks up on the first, of course, to provide some degree of closure); "Think how it wakes the seeds". The first line's straightforwardness is further emphasized by its headlessness, which is to say that it lacks the opening unstressed syllable usual in iambic verse and that this is not compensated for immediately after the first beat as happens, for instance, in the opening of the second stanza. Of the three-beat lines, only the last line of the poem introduces syntactic and metrical complexity: "earth's," though rhetorically stressed, doesn't take a beat, which creates a degree of rhythmic tension – tension heightened by the impossibility of easy articulation of the succession of consonantal sounds, *th – s – s – l*. The four-beat lines have sufficient variety to avoid any kind of sing-song effect, but at the same time sufficient regularity to keep the rhythmic movement going. Successive unstressed syllables (or double offbeats) give a slight lilt to the opening lines – "into the sun," "Gently its touch," "whispering of fields," "even in France" – until we reach the line that announces the terrible difference that marks this particular morning, where we have the first purely alternating line (an alternation which might encourage a reader to give a bit more emphasis to "and" than is usual): "Until this morning and this snow." The growing complexity of the thought in the second stanza is evident in the rhythms: after the relatively simple opening announcement, the lines acquire additional stressed syllables ("Woke," "Full-," "still," "grew," and, as already noted, "earth's"). The only occurrence in the poem of the disruptive *x x / /* rhythmic figure (what I have called "rising inversion") is in the semantically daring phrase "clays of a cold star," where the two successive beats lay striking emphasis on the final two words.

Rhyme, too, as so often in Owen, plays an important part in the poem's articulation of feeling. Most of the rhymes are the "slant rhymes" (to give them one of the many available names) favored by Owen in a characteristic adoption-with-a-difference of a traditional formal feature: repeated consonants but varied

vowels, as in *sun/sown*, *once/France*, *snow/now*, *seeds/sides*, *star/stir*, and *tall/toil*. But in order to give the two final lines a special concluding force, Owen introduces a perfect rhyme after a slant rhyme pair: *snow/now/know* and *tall/toil/all*. What we have then is a poetic form that exploits the conventional features of meter and rhyme but is entirely unparalleled (it has fourteen lines, but its working is nothing like that of the sonnet). Most readers are probably completely unaware of these details, but they do their work in the reading as part of the experience that makes this such a powerful and memorable poem.

HS: I'm delighted that I've brought you around on "fatuous." If you had continued to find it lacking, a shade of doubt would have entered into my own response to it. Conversely, you've brought me up a bit short by your reading of "this." I'm very struck by your suggestion that it encapsulates a kind of moral outrage at the fact that we're still stuck at *this* stage of human development, that the kind of senseless death exemplified *here* not only still occurs but occurs on a grand scale. That gives a body and a bite to the move from 3 to 4 that is missing from my more abstract formulation of 4. And if we still (as you suggest) hold onto 5 as a further resonance, but with 4 in the foreground, then I think we're starting to capture the full force of the poem. But it would take a few more paragraphs to fully articulate how this works out, and it's time to move on.

Note

- 1 See Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Day Lewis, 58.

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4

INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT (JOHN MILTON, "AT A SOLEMN MUSIC")

Dear Henry,

I'd like to propose that, having devoted a chapter to the question of historical context, we turn our attention to other kinds of context, and in particular to the relation between a poem and the currents of thought and systems of belief prevailing at the time of composition and initial reception – currents and systems that might be quite foreign to us as readers now. This question arises most acutely in works from earlier periods, so it would be expedient to choose a poem that dates from several centuries ago. Given the dominance in British culture of religion – and in particular of the Christian religion – until fairly recently, we might pick for discussion a poem from the Renaissance that assumes a readership wholly at home in the assumptions and beliefs of Christianity. If such a poem still speaks to us in a largely secular age, and can be not only understood but also actively enjoyed by readers who don't share the system of thought and religious convictions on which it is based (and I'm sure you'll agree that there are many such poems), we need to ask how it does this and what we are able to gain from it in the way of insight and pleasure.

What do you think? If you agree, I'd be happy for you to make the choice of poem, and begin the discussion of these issues.

Best wishes,
Derek

Dear Derek,

I suggest we try Milton's "At a Solemn Music." To me, this poem reaches the heights of poetic lyricism, but I suspect its greatness is veiled from the average reader of today by its intricate syntax, its combination of Christian doctrine and

devotional feeling, and its neo-Platonic music mysticism. But I think one can get past these barriers fairly easily if they're explained in the right way. And I stipulate straight off that one need have no investment in Christianity (as I don't) in order to fully enjoy this poem.

I know this is not a poem you rate very highly, so trying to convince you will give me extra motivation. Here is the poem:

Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heav'n's joy,
 Sphere-borne harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Verse,
 Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ,
 Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
 And to our high-raised fantasy present 5
 That undisturbèd Song of pure concent,
 Ay sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
 To him that sits thereon,
 With saintly shout, and solemn jubilee;
 Where the bright Seraphim in burning row 10
 Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow,
 And the Cherubic host in thousand choirs
 Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
 With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,
 Hymns devout and holy psalms 15
 Singing everlastingly;
 That we on earth with undiscording voice
 May rightly answer that melodious noise;
 As once we did, till disproportioned sin
 Jarred against Nature's chime, and with harsh din 20
 Broke the fair music that all creatures made
 To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
 In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
 In first obedience, and their state of good.
 O may we soon again renew that song, 25
 And keep in tune with Heav'n, till God ere long
 To his celestial consort us unite,
 To live with Him, and sing in endless morn of light.

I first realized what a great poem this is when I concentrated on following its syntax from beginning to end, not worrying too much about what everything meant, but keeping a sense of how the phrases and clauses fit together – allowing myself to be carried by the rhetorical rush of the opening 24 line sentence, with its four line coda. The sheer architectural grandeur of this syntactic construction, in its interaction with the metrical lines and end rhymes, gave me considerable pleasure. (I think, by the way, that it's generally a good idea to approach new poems this

way, by trying to get a feel for the flow of the language first, and for how this flow is organized into phrases, clauses, sentences, and verses, rather than trying to “understand” it right away. It’s much easier to understand the poem once you’ve clarified the syntax.)

I’ll start with a summary description of the syntactic architecture. The poem begins with a two-line apostrophe to Voice and Verse, in which we have to wait till the end of the second line for those two nouns, which are the grammatical subject of the sentence, to finally be named; then this two-line suspension resolves into the very strong stress on the verb “Wed” at the beginning of the third line, so:

Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heav’n’s joy,
Sphere-borne harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Verse,
Wed

“Voice” has to mean something like “musical sound” (or, as it is later referred to, “melodious noise”) and “Verse” must mean “words set in measure,” since these are the two components of song. “Wed” is the first of three parallel verbs naming the action that the blessed sirens are being asked to perform, Wed–employ–present, the third of which then takes as its object “Song”:

Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power **employ**,
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
And to our high-raised fantasy **present** 5
That undisturbèd Song

The heavenly sirens are being asked to use their mixed power, which has an Orphic ability to move dead things, to present a very special song to our “high-raised” imaginations (fantasy). Mention of this song then sets off a ten-and-a-half-line description of how it is always (“Ay”) sung in heaven at the throne of God. These ten and a half lines constitute a very long syntactic suspension that presents a serious challenge for reading aloud. One has to take a very deep breath and then somehow indicate by how one reads that this is as all a sort of parenthesis, rising to the resolution that finally comes in lines 17–18:

present
That undisturbèd Song of pure concent,
Ay sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
To him that sits thereon,
With saintly shout, and solemn jubilee;
Where the bright Seraphim in burning row 10
Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow,
And the Cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,

Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly;

15

And then the symphonic resolution of 17–18:

That we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;

The suspension of course has its own finely tuned internal structure, rising to the direct evocation of music in lines 10–16 that culminates with two pairs of very musical rhymed iambic pentameter couplets:

Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow,
And the Cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,

The first line is dominated by “r”s, the second by “l”s, the third by aspirates (ch, h, th, ch), the fourth once again by “r”s, and characterized by a strong stress on the first syllable created by a metrical inversion and the peculiarly strong rhyme (what the French call “rime riche”) of “wires” with “choirs.” These lines then trail off into the two seven-syllable lines (15–16), in order to pick up the main clause once again.

The mere ability to write a sentence like this, in a way that is metrical and rhymed and manages to keep its syntactic drive from beginning to end, is staggering; and to appreciate the achievement is to begin to understand the poem. But does the poem still have something to *say* to us today?

I think it does. It’s about an essential concern of human beings, certainly in the Western tradition, but probably elsewhere as well – the desire to be ravished by the most ecstatic or *absolute* music. When this desire is put into a poem, it becomes a statement of what that poem *itself* aspires to be, the ultimate conceivable lyricism, the most ecstatic music. I read the sheer scale of the lyrical drive that pushes through the magnificent opening 24-line sentence of this poem as expressive of a musical ecstasis, as though the “high-raised fantasy” of the poet-singer is already singing the song that he asks the sphere-sirens to inspire. This sort of ultimate lyricism is what every poet who dreams of writing a great poem, or the greatest poem, is reaching for. In the Romantic period, poems like Coleridge’s “Aeolian Harp” and “Kubla Khan,” which make music their explicit theme, manifest the same aspiration. Beginning with Baudelaire, modern poets aspire to absolute song in a way that is generally more indirect (though not always; see, for example, Baudelaire’s “The Poet”), but closely related. In Milton’s case, the Platonic/Pythagorean notion of the music of the spheres, and the Christian imagery of God’s heavenly choir, provide the terms by which to imagine the absolute music – as other poets have used Orpheus or Orpheus’ lyre – but it is unquestionably the

quality of the music, and not the proximity to God, that is the object of the longing this poem articulates. God is brought in only as the sponsor or necessary condition of absolute music.

OK, that's a brief statement of how I read the poem. Plenty of things remain to be explained, but I want to hear how you're reacting so far.

All best,
Henry

DA: First, a bit of a disclaimer. It's true that in a couple of off-the-cuff (and off-the-record) comments I have jibbed at your high praise of this poem, but I don't want to start out from a place where I'm assumed to have a firm (and not very positive) sense of its quality. Rather, it's a poem I've never spent much time with and thus never allowed to work on me with whatever power it possesses. I've spent a lot of time with Milton's long poems, and with many of his later short poems, and yield to none in my admiration for his achievement and his capacity to move and thrill the reader; but I've given relatively little attention to the early poems (apart from *Comus*, "L'Allegro," and "Il Penseroso"), and the result is that I've set "At a Solemn Music" aside as a minor piece, a poem I took to be rehearsing in a somewhat mechanical way familiar tropes about music as the symbol of cosmic harmony – ideas so brilliantly traced by John Hollander in *The Untuning of the Sky* over 50 years ago. But you're beginning to persuade me that I have overlooked an important and exciting poem. Discussing poems freely as we are doing is immensely valuable in expanding one's appreciation and enjoyment, although occasionally one ends up further entrenched in one's position. We'll see what happens here.

I agree that before we tackle the question of the poem's reliance on modes of thought and belief foreign to modern readers, we should find out if we agree on the poem's architecture and basic sense. I'm happy with your description of the poem's structure except for one minor point. I would describe the four opening phrases as being in apposition, as four alternative ways of naming the addressees of the apostrophe, rather than calling the fourth the "grammatical subject." The way I feel it works is that the first three versions, in which the addressees are named as "Sirens," "pledges of Heav'n's joy," and "Sphere-born Sisters," create a little mystery – who are these creatures, identified in turn with classical mythology (the story of the Sirens who sang to Odysseus), Christian theology (the promise of an afterlife of bliss to the saved soul), and Pythagorean cosmology (the idea of the music of the spheres – both "sphere-born" and "sphere-borne" in an undecidable ambiguity?). The answer comes with the surprisingly down-to-earth phrase, "Voice, and Verse"; simple names, after the earlier high-flown alternatives, for the two components of song. The apparently mundane practice of singing, the poem is telling us, is actually a manifestation on earth of divine perfection. Or, to be more accurate, it's a *potential* manifestation, because the point being made is that since the Fall we have been unable to realize the perfection embodied in the true marriage of words and music. If we were able to hear this perfect music, we would be able to

respond with music just as complete; but this can only happen with the final coming of God's kingdom.

What puzzles me about the poem's argument is how this sought-after music is meant to arise. Milton crafts the poem as an appeal to two non-human entities incapable of responsiveness or agency, so it seems at first that we have to understand them in a non-literal way. The most obvious construal would be that the "Voice, and Verse" addressed are those of a singer or ensemble; after all, the title invites us to treat the poem as a response to an actual concert. Yet this makes nonsense of what follows, since the hoped-for music, we are told, will elicit an answering music from us "on Earth." It appears, then, that Milton really is inviting some kind of extraterrestrial music to make itself heard, allowing us to listen in to the Seraphim and the blessed in full choir. And this can be nothing other than a millennial wish for the end of time – which, of course, the very end of the poem looks forward to. If you're right that the poem is an attempt to articulate "the ultimate conceivable lyricism" is such an achievement co-extensive with the Apocalypse?

Perhaps I'm going too fast here; I'd be perfectly happy if in your response you approached these questions more slowly. It would help if you could clarify for me the syntax of the third and fourth lines: "and mixed power employ / Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce." Is the second of these lines a delayed adjectival clause qualifying "power" (or, to put it differently, are we to read the verb "employ" as displaced from its more logical place after that second line)? Or is there some other, less contorted, way of reading the lines?

My estimation of the poem has certainly gone up now that I've paid it some concerted attention, though I'm still not finding it as rewarding as you clearly do. I remain open to persuasion, however; in fact, I look forward to it!

HS: I think one thing you say shows the danger to which we scholars are always exposed, of having our knowledge of the intellectual, or historical, or any kind of background of a poem, tilt our reading of it. You assume that this being, evidently, a Christian poem, the desire for a return to perfect harmony with God must be "a millennial wish for the end of time." But in reply to this, I must insist, in my stubbornly short-sighted way, that, however Christian such a desire might be, there's no hint of it *in this poem*. The only desire expressed here is for unending participation in the making of the divine music; and this is articulated as an *Edenic*, rather than millennial, longing. No surprise that the poet who wrote this poem also tried to recreate the condition of absolute bliss of Adam and Eve – but especially Adam – before the Fall.

The furniture of Milton's imagination was as much pagan as it was Christian – as was to some degree common in the Renaissance, but particularly marked in his case. He submitted his paganism to his Christianity in a wonderfully syncretic way, but we still need to take it as seriously as he did. We know that Kepler and Newton took seriously the idea of the music of the spheres, and I see no reason to doubt that Milton did too. So I think you're quite right that this poem "really is inviting some kind of extraterrestrial music to make itself heard," and there's no reason not to take the poem literally when it suggests that this music is "sphere-borne" – caused

by the harmonious rotation of the divinely ordered heavens (the “spheres”). It proposes that this music, which is always playing, and which is a continuation of the music in which “all creatures” once shared, might be heard by us when we are in the proper state of receptivity, when our “fantasy” is raised to its highest power (“high flown”); and, once heard, we might be able ourselves, in response, to sing in the perfect harmonies of that music. And none of this even hints at anything about the end of time qua Judgment Day. The wish is in the present: Sing, Sirens, that we might answer. The longed-for state is not an apocalyptic end, but a return to an origin that has never ceased to be present, an endless beginning of time (“and sing in endless morn of light” – a grand conclusion to the poem, by the way, with its suggestion of a light that is always new-born, and its liquid musicality, full of “n”s and “l”s). The only end in sight is the death of the human singers, who will “ere long” be joined to the crew of “blest spirits” that are *already* singing “immortal Psalms” with the angels. I remember reading that Milton was a “soul-sleeper” – that is, he believed that the soul is unconscious during the time between death and resurrection; but if that’s true, it must have been a belief he came to later in life, or one he chose not to intrude into this poem, since here the saved are clearly referred to as already part of heaven’s choir. But that’s not the crux of the poem; the crux is that we need not wait even for our own individual deaths; it’s possible here on earth and now for the “song of pure concent” to be “presented” to our imaginations, and if it is, we have the power to “soon again renew” it, in the interval of earthly existence that remains to us.

About the lines “and mixed power employ / Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,” you ask if the second of these lines is “a delayed adjectival clause qualifying ‘power’”, and the answer is “yes.” But I think the clearest order of these words would be, not to put “employ” at the end of the second line, but to move it to the beginning, and then switch the order of the second line: “employ mixed power / able to pierce dead things with inbreathed sense.” It seems to me that the second line is the bigger problem for the modern reader, but in any case you’re right to point out how “contorted” this syntax seems by modern standards. But is it really contorted by the standards of poetic syntax of earlier centuries? “Power employ” by itself strikes me as a perfectly transparent transposition of subject and verb. And since the subject of the poem is so hieratic, so ritualized – choirs singing psalms before the throne of God – the formality of the difficult syntax seems peculiarly appropriate; it raises the rhetorical register of the utterance.

DA: In your comment that there’s no hint of the Christian notion of the end of time and the Second Coming in the poem, you raise in an acute form the question of the relevance of background knowledge to our understanding of poetry. I might reply that there’s no hint, *in the poem*, of an Edenic longing; those of us who are familiar with Judeo-Christian mythology bring our knowledge of the story of the Fall to the poem, and we interpret the lines about “disproportioned sin” accordingly. I don’t see any contradiction between Edenic and millenarian longings: surely in Christian thought they amount to the same thing, a desire for the

restoration of the perfection lost in the first sin of disobedience. I think we agree that it's right to read poems in the light of the *minimal* amount of contextual information needed for them to make the most sense and work, as poems, to their fullest extent. In this case, there might be interesting doctrinal and historical issues to discuss in relation to the exact coloring of Milton's beliefs at the time, but this discussion, if it's going to be a responsible one, needs to happen *after* a proper understanding of the poem.

So: it's clear that we disagree about the meaning of the last four lines. The "O" with which they begin signals that these lines will act as a summary and a conclusion, and "that song" refers back to the prelapsarian harmony, figured as music, described in lines 21–23. (I do enjoy the notion that the very movements of the creatures in Paradise constituted a kind of perfectly harmonious music. Isn't it clear at this point, if not earlier in the poem, that Milton is thinking not literally of music – or poetry – but of human behavior more generally?) The "we" then must be humanity, the "we on earth" of line 17, as opposed to the inhabitants of heaven; and the prayer that is being uttered is that human beings once more begin to behave in accordance with divine law, "in tune with Heav'n." Then there is one of those important logical connectives that we have focused on before: "*till* God ere long / To his celestial consort us unite." What is the logic here? Is it not that when humanity rediscovers Edenic harmony by ceasing to sin, God's response will quickly be to marry heaven and earth, human and angelic being, in an eternity of bliss, an "endless morn of light"? In what other context could humanity be imagined as living with God and singing eternally with the angels beside that envisaged in Christian eschatology – the everlasting morning (which is another way of saying timelessness) of the new kingdom of heaven and earth that succeeds the Last Judgment? I don't believe it's necessary to bring any detailed knowledge of these beliefs to the poem in order to understand it; it's sufficient to know that the religion in which Milton was brought up held that at some time in the future the perfect relation of God and Man that was lost in Eden will be recovered, and this time it will be sustained without end. Whether the idea that the Second Coming could be hastened by a reformation in the behavior of mankind is part of any seventeenth-century Christian doctrine is something I'm ignorant of; what's important is that it's what the poem asserts.

Here's our disagreement, then: you write "The only end in sight is the death of the human singers, who will 'ere long' be joined to the crew of 'blest spirits' that are *already* singing 'immortal Psalms' with the angels." At first I thought you were referring to the human singers the poem is responding to, the ones producing the "solemn music"; but I guess you mean the human singers encompassed by the phrase "we on earth." But doesn't that mean all living humanity? And the wish that all humanity should "soon" achieve once more the harmony that was in Eden is surely some kind of millenarian hope?

To return to the question of the poem's apparent logic, it seems to me to go something like this: Listening to beautiful, "solemn" music provokes the thought that if humanity could hear song at its most perfect it would respond in kind with harmonious song, not in the literal sense but as sinless behavior in conformity with

God's will, and that this would constitute an invitation to God to unite heaven and earth forever. To say this is the logic of the poem is not to say that it represents its main thrust, and here you and I are, I think, in tune: the poem certainly does celebrate the power of music, and more specifically musical harmony, understood as encapsulating the lost but regainable harmony which is the world's, and humanity's, true state. There's nothing in the poem to extend this celebration to poetry, which constitutes only half of the twinned power of song; isn't this the kind of further elaboration that a minimal reading should eschew?

HS: I disagree about poetry being only half of the "twinned power of song". The art of poetry is in large part the art of making a music out of the words themselves; and poetry has always, in the Western tradition – and very much so by Milton – been conceived as itself song, and the poet as a singer. "Sing, goddess," are the first two words of the *Iliad*, the beginning of its "invocation to the Muse," a tradition that the speaker echoes at the beginning of Book VII of *Paradise Lost* in the invocation to the Muse Ourania, after which he repeatedly speaks of himself as singing and *Paradise Lost* as a song. An equally important tradition looks back to Orpheus with his lyre as the supreme figure of the poet, and Milton was deeply taken with the idea of Orphic song. The power to pierce "dead things with inbreathed sound" that in "Solemn Music" is ascribed to the music of the sphere-sirens is actually Orphic, and Milton also ascribed Orphic power to the voice of the idealized women in his Italian sonnets 2 and 4, as well as to the lady's "sacred vehemence" in *Comus*. There's no reason to doubt that the poem we are reading is itself an attempt to "renew" the Orphic-divine sphere-music that it celebrates.

Regarding the millenarianism you see in this poem – apocalypse does indeed arrive at a restoration of harmony between God and humanity, but it involves a cleansing of the earth by fire, the Second Coming of Jesus, the judgment and damnation of all the wicked, the final overthrow of Satan, the Resurrection of the dead, and so forth – and this poem has no truck *whatever* with such imaginings. I call the longing in this poem Edenic rather than millenarian because it seems to know nothing of the transitional horrors of the Last Days that have so preoccupied the Christian imagination (as in Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel), but dreams, instead, of painless return, a smooth sliding back into the state of harmony. When I call this "Edenic" longing I don't mean it in a doctrinal sense; it's a general name for longings of this type, which are very widespread and can be Christian or not (as in myths of a Golden Age, or Wordsworth's "There was a time"). What's the point of imagining, as the underlying meaning of the poem, a doctrinal background of the end of time that is so thoroughly ignored in the way the poem images its own return to harmony? This poem is an only partially Christianized version of the sentiments expressed by Milton in the second of his schoolboy "Prolusions":

If our hearts were as pure, as chaste, as snowy, as Pythagoras' was, our ears
would resound and be filled with that supremely lovely music of the

wheeling stars. Then indeed all things would seem to return to the age of gold. Then we should be immune to pain, and we should enjoy the blessing of a peace that the gods themselves might envy.

The question of the meaning of “we” in the poem is an interesting one that I hadn’t thought of until you raised it. I don’t think any orthodox Christianity of any stripe – certainly not the Puritans – has ever erased the distinction between the saved and the damned, so, unless we want to argue that the poem is doctrinally radical in this respect, it can’t be saying that *all* of humanity can return to a state of grace. I wouldn’t put such radicality past Milton, but I don’t think that’s what’s going on here. I read it as an indeterminate “we,” referring not just to the speaker but to whoever, like him, is capable of the “high-raised fantasy” that alone can perceive the cosmic music.

My main problem with your reading is that it reduces music to a *figure* for the “prelapsarian harmony.” Milton, you say, “is thinking not literally of music – or poetry – but of human behavior more generally”; and such a reading, to me, deprives the poem of its greatest power, which is the magnificent evocation of *music itself*, not figurative music or music as an allegory of some doctrinal truth but the most wonderful, rapturous, concord of “Voice and Verse” imaginable, one that is identical with the harmony of the cosmos itself. You yourself say that the “main thrust” of the poem is to celebrate the power of music, and I couldn’t agree more; but I read the “logic” of the poem as the articulation of a desire to go straight to the ecstasy of cosmic harmony through music. There’s nothing here about Jesus’s sacrifice, or the need for God’s mercy, or anything at all about how Christianity itself conceives the return to harmony with God; in place of Jesus’s mediation between God and humanity we have the sphere-sirens and their song, and that alone. The notion is that human beings can, here and now, “answer that melodious noise; / As *once we did*,” and do so purely and simply by having the Siren music present to their imaginations.

You have, however, forced me to think hard about the distinction between, on the one hand, a) the cosmic harmonies of the Sirens, b) the heavenly choir, and c) the “undiscording Voice” of the song the speaker desires to sing, and, on the other hand, the “perfect Diapason” produced by the swaying of “all creatures.” You’re quite right to emphasize that this “Diapason” is conditional on the perfect obedience to God’s will that obtained in the paradisaical state before the Fall, so that at this point Christian doctrine does indeed visibly intrude into the picture in a major way. And if I give in to the scholarly urge to read the poem in terms of its presumed intellectual context, I begin to be convinced by your reading. But when I stand firm to how the poem is actually articulated, I go back the other way.

Whichever way we read the poem, there’s a sharp change in the tone of the speaker’s voice – in the tone of the song, I would say – with the beginning of l. 19, “As once we did.” Here the poem goes from the anticipation of answering the “melodious noise” of the spheres to recalling the agony of the greatest loss imaginable, the universal loss inflicted on created being when “disproportioned sin” came into the

world. Even sin, however, is conceived in musical terms. “Disproportioned” means “unmeasured,” in the sense of not being organized into poetic or musical measures (the theory of the music of the spheres, of course, is based on Greek ideas of beautiful mathematical “proportions” or ratios, which can be translated into terms of the relative lengths of the strings in stringed instruments). So sin is imagined here as a catastrophic dissonance! The poem reaches its expressive apex in the pathos – pathos which I, with no investment whatever in the Christian mythology or belief system, but with full awareness of what, for example, is going on in the Middle East right now, find heartbreaking – of these lines:

As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against Nature’s chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason,

We come here to the stipulation regarding obedience; but notice that the obedience does not *produce* the song. The song is produced by God’s love swaying their bodies. The obedience is the *condition* of their being the objects of God’s love, and of their being able to respond to it with their song. So the direct object of the pathos of loss is not the loss of the obedience itself, but the breaking of the “fair music,” and I’m not convinced that this is merely a *figure* for Milton. What I am convinced of is that the poem loses much of its power if we do not take it at its word but translate it into the protocols of the presumed doctrine presumably behind it.

As you note, our disagreement comes to a head in the last four lines. You’ve made me see that there’s a genuine problem of interpretation, on the most basic level, with l. 25, “O may we soon again renew that song.” On your reading, as I understand it, this is no longer the song of lines 17–18, the song you describe as “literal” music, but the music of ll. 21–24, which is premised on obedience to the will of God. Thus the line should be read with a strong emphasis on “that” to indicate that we’re not talking about the *other* song, the “undiscording voice” that answers the “melodious noise” of the sphere-sirens, and which merely, as you say, “encapsulates” the power of the divine music. The poem as whole then says, “I’m longing to hear the sphere-music so that I can sing in response; but my higher aspiration is that all of humanity can return to the state we enjoyed in Paradise, which will then bring about the apocalypse.” Grammatically, it’s clear that the indicated reference of “that song” is, indeed, “the fair music that all creatures made”; so the question is whether this fair music is indeed to be generically distinguished from the “undiscording voice” that is evoked at first. Once one has millenarianism in one’s head, it seems one must, indeed, distinguish them. But if this is millenarianism, it’s a curiously vacuous form of it, as I’ve already noted, wiped clean of all doctrinal content except for the notion of renewed harmony with God. And, secondly, if the coming of the millennium, or of the end of the millennium, is what it takes for human beings to

be reunited with God “To sing with him in endless morn of night,” then what was the purpose of the evocation, in ll. 14–16, of saved souls that are *already* singing in heaven with the angelic choir (presumably the fairest of “fair music” that creatures can make)? This makes it very clear that one doesn’t have to wait for the millennium to be reunited with the most authentically divine music; one can die and go directly into the heavenly choir. So, if the ending anticipates a *different* kind of reuniting, all the mention of the first kind does is muddy the waters of what the poem is saying. But there’s no such muddying if we read the ending as referring to ordinary death.

However, that creates another kind of muddying, since now we have to figure out why “May we soon again renew that song” refers to the music created by the swaying of all obedient creatures in response to God’s love. And the only answer I can see is that there is, in fact, no sharp distinction between this music and the music of ll. 17–18. There’s only one cosmic music. Once it was made by all creatures; now it’s made only by a few; but it has never stopped playing in God’s court, or in the harmonies of the heavenly spheres, and those who can hear it with their “high-raised fantasy” can renew the song right here and now, in an earthly way, and soon again renew it in heaven. It goes without saying that only the pure of spirit, those who already live in obedience to the will of God, can hear the cosmic music and respond to it; it’s the *result* of this obedience that interests the singer of this poem: the music itself. This singer, in other words, is more interested in musical ecstasy than he is in God. I think this is readable in the poem entirely without forcing (which is not to say that there isn’t an alternative way to read it), which should make the poem accessible to anyone of any period who responds intensely to the power of music.

DA: Thank you for this fascinating response, which clarifies the difference between the ways we understand the fundamental logic of the poem. Before I go on to see if the gap can be bridged, or if we will have to agree to disagree, I want to resist one implication of your comments, which comes in your statement that “the poem loses much of its power if we do not take it at its word but translate it into the protocols of the presumed doctrine presumably behind it.” (Oh, the withering force of that repeated “presume”!) If you believe this is what I’m doing, I want to insist that it isn’t the case; I’m also trying to take the poem at its word. I agree absolutely that to translate a poem in this way is to deface and distort it; our responsibility to Milton himself – to his living on in his works, if you like – is to read with as close attention as possible to what he wrote. But we both know that a reading without the minimal information required to make sense of what is in the poem is a bad reading; so what you and I are arguing about is, in part at least, what that minimal information is. For you it is primarily information about the role and status of music to a man like Milton; for me it is information about the religious beliefs of a man like Milton, understood broadly. You quote an illuminating passage from Milton’s early “Prolusions”; I will quote two stanzas from another early poem, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.” The poem describes the angelic music heard by the shepherds, and continues,

For if such holy song
 Enwrap our fancy long,
 Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,
 And speckled Vanity
 Will sicken soon and die,
 And lep'rous Sin will melt from earthly mould,
 And Hell itself will pass away,
 And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

 Yea Truth, and Justice, then
 Will down return to men,
 Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
 Mercy will sit between,
 Throned in celestial sheen,
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering,
 And Heav'n as at some festival,
 Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall.

You're right, of course: Milton has no truck with the lurid melodrama of the Book of Revelations, but I would still call what is expressed in this poem a millenarian impulse – if our imaginations could be absorbed by the “holy song,” the poem insists, the last days, envisaged in a wonderfully non-violent way, would come upon us. As for the question “When?”, this poem, in place of the “ere long” of “Solemn Music,” has “wisest Fate” saying “no, This must not yet be so” – the scene, after all, is Christ’s birth, and over sixteen hundred years have passed since then by the time Milton is writing. But perhaps in the 1620s the moment didn’t seem quite so far away.

Our disagreement, as I see it, is not to do with the importation of external ideas; I don’t think the argument would be settled by a more and more detailed examination of Milton’s religious and aesthetic writings. It’s a question of exactly how the language of the poem works. The major difference, I would say, is in our understanding of the poem’s view of music. You regard music as the primary subject, and the harmonious relation between God and man as only a figure, there to enhance the praise of the ultimate in lyric beauty – not just music, but poetry as well. You say my reading “reduces music to a *figure* of the ‘prelapsarian harmony,’” and that you’re not convinced that the breaking of the “fair music” is “merely a *figure* for Milton.” What interests me in this way of putting it are the words “reduces” and “merely”: these terms suggest that you take it as read that music is a more important subject than man’s relation to God. I would say that, for Milton, this is far from the case: it’s precisely because music can be understood as figuring forth the most significant harmony of all, that between a sinless humanity and an omnipotent deity, that it possesses so much value. Yes, there is only one cosmic music; in heaven it takes the form of actual song, song which is a pure expression of love and worship (“Hymns devout and holy psalms”), and if we could hear it on earth, we would join in with our own reverent homage.

Perhaps the key passage is the description of Eden that you quote (and I agree entirely with your account of Milton's Edenic longing):

till disproportioned sin
Jarred against Nature's chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.

I do agree with you that these lines are the most moving in the poem, and give notice of the magnificent accomplishment that is the prosody of *Paradise Lost*. The first two enjambments occur across stressed monosyllables and are thus especially strong, and in the second instance, by following an inversion at the end of one line with an inversion at the beginning of the next, Milton gives us three stressed monosyllables in succession – “harsh din / Broke” – momentarily challenging the alternations of the iambic meter and forcefully enacting the rupture in Eden. (In contrast, the final four lines of the poem are unusually regular; the last line, with its promise of eternal musical bliss, is one of those rare successions of five uniform, regular iambs.)

However, I can't agree with some of the terms in which you refer to the passage: “the ‘perfect Diapason’ produced by the swaying of ‘all creatures’ ... conditional on the perfect obedience to God's will”; “The obedience is the *condition* of their being the objects of God's love, and of their being able to respond to it with their song”; “the music created by the swaying of all obedient creatures in response to God's love.” No, I find myself saying, that is not it at all – Milton's language makes it clear that the music *is* the obedience, not something separate from it. It is sin *itself* that is “disproportioned” – that is, lacking in harmony; it is Nature's own “chime” – harmony again – that it jars against; the “perfect diapason” *is* their reverential motion signaling their obedience and goodness. (I note you read “whose love” as God's, but it wouldn't be contrary to Milton's syntactic habits to read it as the creatures'.) By this point in the poem the figurative music is all there is; it's barely a figure, but has become a way of understanding what sinless obedience is. The wish that we earthlings should once again be able to sing with “undiscording voice” is not about choral training but about the abolition of sin.

Now it's certainly true that without a sense both of the extensive use in the Renaissance of words like “harmony” and “music” to mean something other than literal sounds, and of the centrality of the myth of the Fall to Judeo-Christian beliefs, it wouldn't be possible to read in this way. But that's what we mean, I take it, by the minimal contextual information needed to make full sense of the poem. (One point of doctrinal knowledge I don't possess is the one you rightly bring up as a possible complication in the poem: the relation between the blessed already in heaven and the ones who will get there after the Last Judgment.)

But of course that's not all there is to the poem, and it may be to a modern secular readership the more moving and powerful dimension of the poem is the

one you point to, the one that really is about music. We can't forget the title, with its implication that the concerns of the poem have been inspired by an actual concert. And if the poem's main aim is, as I read it, to present as vividly as it can, through the vehicle of the most accomplished music, the loss of the perfect state of sinlessness and the longing for its return, an effect of this strategy is to make music a central figure for that state. When I distinguished between the poem's logic – its fundamentally Christian argument – and its “main thrust,” I could have been clearer. It seems to me that it starts out with a profound awareness of the power and beauty of actual song, the perfect marriage of poetry and the singing voice, but that this modulates into an appeal or prayer in which music is sublated in a doctrinal narrative which, as we know, was deeply real to Milton. It's not deeply real to me, though, and although I share something of your sense of the pathos of the Fall as described here (though it's infinitely more moving when imagined through Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*), I'm left rather cold by both the Cherubic choirs and the endless morn. If we had time and space, I would have liked to discuss a poem by Donne or Herbert which traces the struggles and triumphs of the individual in living a Christian life; in such a poem, the complex of emotions can be felt by a non-religious reader with sufficient imaginative capacity to put herself in the place of a believer. You feel with Herbert that he is exploiting to the full the potential of language – including all the qualities summed up in the seventeenth-century notion of “wit” – to express the doubts, the anxieties, the moments of exultation, the experiences of loss and discovery – that might accompany any absolute commitment to a cause or a person. For a later example of the same poetic and emotional strength, I would turn to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

But perhaps this is the easy way out, and I need to work harder to feel my way into Milton's deep concern with the state of mankind and the longing for that lost perfection. (His appreciation of music and poetry is not difficult to identify with.) In any case, our discussion means I won't dismiss this poem so quickly in future.

HS: I can no longer resist your argument. You say that this poem “starts out with a profound awareness of the power and beauty of actual song, the perfect marriage of poetry and the singing voice, but that this modulates into an appeal or prayer in which music is sublated in a doctrinal narrative,” and there are certain crucial details of the poem that this reading explains and mine doesn't. I've been subliminally aware since your second response that the song of line 6 is a “song of pure consent,” which implies that it expresses the obedience (or “consent”) of created being to the will of the creator. And now I see clearly that line 5 does in fact ask the sphere-sirens to use *their* song to “present” to the speaker's imagination that *other* song, the song of consent that is presently sung in heaven and, as is later said, was also once sung by all creatures in praise of the “great Lord.” Thus lines 5–6 are the structural hinge of the poem, at which point, as you say, the sphere-music is “sublated” into a figure of harmony with God. I now feel that my reading was illegitimately “modernizing” the poem by downplaying its strictly Christian dimension. I do think, however, that there's a more complex story to be told here, that we don't have the room for. I'm

afraid our discussion leaves the impression that there's a kind of pat orthodoxy to the sentiment expressed by the poem, whereas placed within a larger historical frame this would be much less evident. In fact, it expresses a historical shift in the way Christians understood Christianity, the shift that began with the Italian Renaissance. Even though Milton is a Puritan, and we associate the increasing sensuality of Christian art primarily with Catholic Italy, the desire for musical ecstasy that is expressed in the peculiarly sinuous syntax of this poem, and the peculiar vagueness of its relation to any specific Christian doctrine apart from the fall and the reunion with God, strike me as very Baroque, in a way related to the way one might find the depictions of saints by Caravaggio or Bernini. To gauge the magnitude of the change in Christian sensibility that this poem manifests, it's instructive to consider the gap between Milton and St. Augustine in their attitudes toward sacred music. Augustine devotes Chapter 33 of Book X of his *Confessions* to agonizing over the danger of being carried away by the musical pleasure of *hearing hymns and psalms to God*. He wonders whether music should be entirely banished from worship, but is inclined to allow singing in church because "weaker minds" might be "roused to a feeling of devotion" by it. "Nevertheless," he concludes, "whenever it happens to me that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess that I am sinning grievously, and then I would prefer not to hear the music." For Milton, by contrast, the love of God appears to be indistinguishable from complete musical rapture. Similarly, as I've argued in *Eros in Mourning*, in *Paradise Lost* he imagines Adam's bliss in Paradise, rather scandalously, as a complete sexual ecstasy with Eve, based on his conviction that, as Adam says to Eve "to delight / He made us" (9.242–43). But that is a larger story than we can deal with here. Here I think we've demonstrated how one critic can bring another critic – kicking and screaming – to change his mind about a reading to which he was very much attached, on the basis of what the poem (with a little background knowledge, not a great academic mass of it) can be shown to actually say.

In light of the rethinking of the poem that your remarks have obliged me to do, I have to re-articulate my original claim about this poem. If poetry itself is music, as it seems to me is undeniably the case in the Orphic and "Sing, Muse" poetic tradition with which, as I argued earlier, Milton expressly aligns himself, then it is inescapably the case that this poem is a product of the "high-raised fantasy" that perceives the cosmic music sung by the sphere-sirens, and thus is itself an attempt to come as close as possible to the "perfect diapason" that once all creatures made to their great Lord. Probably the degree to which one finds this reading convincing depends on how successful one finds the music of the poem – and to me, it is ravishing. So I still see the poem as attempting to be, as I said at the outset, "absolute music," but you've persuaded me to see this music as an expression of "pure concent" to the will of God, and of what is, in a curiously paganized, and somewhat ambiguous, way, a "millennial" longing for a return to the original state. Can you accept this revised version of my reading?

DA: I can indeed. I'm not as ravished as you are by the music of the poem, and I find the language for the most part less inventive than the older Milton was capable

of, but that the poem strives to achieve the harmony of which it speaks I think there can be no doubt. And to a modern readership this celebration of the power of verbal and musical art may well be more important than Milton's Edenic longings.

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5

SITUATED SUBJECTS (LANGSTON HUGHES, "LENOX AVENUE: MIDNIGHT" AND "SONG FOR A BLACK GIRL")

Dear Derek,

We talked a bit about the role of historical context in the chapter on Owen's "Futility," but we haven't talked about the ways in which poems are determined by the particulars of what a few decades ago we started calling the author's "subject position." What we encounter in a poem will always, of course, be that of a constructed poetic persona rather than the biographical author, but the issues remain the same.

All literary works are produced by "situated subjects," and in some way manifest the particulars of the maker's socio-cultural positioning; but lyric poetry has traditionally made these particulars as little visible as possible, or when, as in the case of Yeats, there has been explicit reference to them, it has been to signal a more or less "normative" race-class-gender-sexuality positioning. When we turn to poets like Langston Hughes or Adrienne Rich, by contrast, we find the non-normative positioning of the lyric voice thematized, sometimes made the essential substance of the poem. The question for us is whether such poetry requires a different kind of reading than the kind we're doing in this book. My own feeling is no, it doesn't; when I admire poems by gay or non-white authors it isn't because I'm applying a different set of critical principles to them; and when I don't admire such poems, it's for the same reasons that I don't admire bad poems of a less visibly "situated" sort. I'm not inclined to cut a lot of slack to a poet because of her or his subject position, in part because I think that, if I did, I'd be doing a disservice to those poets who, speaking from equally non-normative positions, have been able to master the poetic craft. If poetry isn't good, it won't be because it isn't "universal," but because it hasn't been well done.

There's no intrinsic contradiction between the so-called "universality" of art and the particulars of non-normative subject positions. Only if one begins from a culturally cramped subject position of one's own would one even think that there is such a contradiction. The poetry of Langston Hughes, for example, was for many years consigned to a marginal position as too simple and primitivist to be really first rate; and yet

his art is patent. His lines have the easy flow and immediacy of a colloquial voice, but within the constraints of strict formal mastery, and with an indirection or obliqueness of approach to the subject that always takes new forms and thus always takes me by surprise. It's amazing to think Hughes's work was depreciated for this very carefully achieved simplicity; as though one should depreciate Blake's lyrics for being simple.

Take, for example "Lenox Avenue: Midnight."

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.

The broken heart of love,
The weary, weary heart of pain, –
 Overtones,
 Undertones,
To the rumble of street cars,
To the swish of rain.

Lenox Avenue,
Honey.
Midnight,
And the gods are laughing at us.

This little piece sends shivers through me. How enormously economical the utterance, and how tight the nonce form into which it's cast. The first two lines are a straightforward assertion in what could be a simple sentence of prose, here broken up into two 2-beat lines, and marked by the completely natural repetition of the word "rhythm," in a way that brings into prominence the two strong beats on "jazz rhythm." Here's a great example of how the iconic significance of the verbal rhythms of poetry is not intrinsic but created by context; there emerges something jazzy about the two beats of "jazz rhythm," in particular because of the way I have to hold "jazz" longer than an ordinary syllable to make it come out right, with an almost staccato break between the two words, emphasized kinesthetically by the kind of jump my tongue has to make from the extraordinarily strong "zz" sound when fully pronounced at the front of the mouth, with its expulsion of air through the teeth, to the rounding of the tongue halfway back in the mouth to form the liquid "r." All of this is a complex analysis of a very simple and spontaneous experience, of course; I initially noticed how much pleasure the lines gave me with no idea of why.

The first effect that I really noticed explicitly was how one falls off the edge of the second line onto the single, sentence-ending word, "Honey.:"

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.

The first two lines, one might think, are no more than a programmatic, and rather aggressive, assertion of black music over white music, of the black experience of life over the white experience, an utterance addressed to a general public, with a different ideological valence for the hearer depending on whether you're white or black (to mention those of us who are neither of those would take me too far afield). But then it turns out they're addressed to an individual. One can imagine various things the word "Honey" might signify; but the most obvious, in a poem by Hughes, would be that this is a black man addressing a black woman (or a woman, at any rate). Unexpectedly, thus, we discover with this word that the poem's first sentence is being spoken in an intimate tone. In that case, the utterance can still be read as a programmatic assertion of the type I just described, and that's what would come out of reading the poem in the wooden box of the black-white culture wars. But if one doesn't feel forced to believe that Hughes worked in that box, one is free to feel that he's trying to get her (and through her, us) to see something about the nature of jazz. This isn't a programmatic declaration in support of black pride; it's an effusion from someone who loves jazz passionately, who has a profound vision of it, and is trying to share that vision. (By the way, it's important to remember what would have been meant in 1926 by "jazz"; this is "hot," syncopated dance music that Hughes is talking about, not bebop.) But the biggest surprise awaits in the sudden climb from this abrupt end of the opening movement to the longest line of the stanza, completely unprepared for by anything that has come before: "The gods are laughing at us." Now a heretofore transparent poem reveals a gnomic dimension. The space between the poem's first sentence and its second is huge, and it is deep. The only thing obvious to me at this moment about the relation between the two is that "life" and "the gods" form a binary antithesis. But this implies that there's something ironic about saying that jazz is life's rhythm; it's the rhythm of something that is decidedly not divine.

I don't know if you share my valuation of this poem, or of Hughes's best work in general, so I'll stop here, and invite you to offer your own reading of this stanza, or, if you're generally with me, to take up the second stanza.

All the best,
Henry

Dear Henry,

Yes, I agree; this is an important topic that we need to address, and I am a strong admirer of Hughes's poetry. We don't have to rehearse once more our discussion of context, which includes the question of biographical information about the author; what we need to consider here is, as you say, poetry in which the non-normative status of the author – in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, and perhaps other factors – figures in the poem as a significant aspect of its working, through the creation of a voice that the reader is encouraged to identify with that of the writer. Like you, I don't believe this means we have to treat such a poem in a way that is different from other poems, but it does present a challenge to the idea

that one shouldn't bring extra-textual information about the author into one's response. It's not an idea I cling to (it's an impossible demand, for a start), but it has a certain power as a way of encouraging a focus on the text rather than on peripheral issues that could cloud understanding. For example, I don't think "I started Early" gains from being read in light of Dickinson's housebound existence; being too conscious of this as we read the poem might actually reduce its power by limiting the breadth of its potential relevance. I'm not even sure it matters that it was written by a woman: the lyric persona is clearly female, and perhaps that's all that we need to know.

But all Hughes's poetry unquestionably stems from the experience of black America, and one only has to imagine how differently it would come across if it had been written by a white poet – and if the reader was aware of this fact – to appreciate the importance of our knowledge, however minimal, of the author's race and situation. This, I take it, is why we need to separate the normative from the non-normative: when Eliot in his twenties writes a poem in the voice of a would-be man-about-town with thinning hair we accept the ventriloquism without demur, his alter ego being clearly a privileged member of society; but when his poems speak in the accents of low-life English characters we may not feel so comfortable. And when a poet crosses a significant racial divide our uneasiness is likely to grow. John Berryman is a case in point: the primary speaker of the Dream Songs, "Henry," shares many of Berryman's own traits and trappings, but when the poems introduce another voice that utilizes the clichés of "Negro" speech à la Stephen Foster – "is stuffed, / de world, wif feeding girls" and so on – the reader may squirm. I think such a reaction is wrong, as Berryman is clearly parodying this kind of racist caricature in his nameless interlocutor (an internal voice offering self-criticism rather than an imagined friend), but he is playing on the edge of troubled territory in doing so. Had the poems been written by an African-American, our response would have been quite different; one is allowed to make fun of one's own situation and speech-patterns (which Hughes does in some of his poems).

You've chosen one of Hughes's most haunting poems, one that doesn't use African-American dialect and so doesn't signal a black speaker by this means. However, the title situates the poem in Harlem, and on its main avenue. (If the reader is one to whom "Lenox Avenue" conveys nothing, a dimension of the poem is lost; but it's easy enough to look the name up.) Given what I've just said about the role of extratextual knowledge about the poet in coloring the reader's experience, it's an interesting exercise to imagine what might be the response of a reader who assumed the poem to be the work of a white writer. Such a reader, seeing the title, might well begin with the expectation that it will be about a sense of fear and threat; whereas the knowledge that it is by a black writer leads to a very different expectation, one that the opening lines confirm: Lenox Avenue stands for familiarity and centrality, and midnight doesn't convey menace and displacement but the still vigorous life of the street as the night continues. (Our imaginary reader who reads on and then has to assume the white poet has created a black voice is likely to be disconcerted and unconvinced.)

Your description of the rhythm of the opening two lines seems spot on to me (and in this poem we're likely to be even more alert to rhythmic configurations than usual, given its second word). I would only add that the successive beats on "jazz rhythm" are rendered all the more insistent by their bringing to an unexpected end the prevailing rhythm of the words that have come before: "The RHYthm of LIFE is a ... " It's a triple, waltz-like rhythm, suddenly forced into a different gear by the two stresses of "JAZZ RHY ... " I don't think it's inappropriate to call it syncopation, as the omission of the two unstressed syllables gives an unexpected accent on the second of these two words.

"One falls off the edge of the second line": yes, well put – it happens rhythmically and semantically, as universalizing assertion turns into intimate conversation and the expected two-beat line is truncated. The effectiveness of that truncation, and of the long single-sentence line that follows, can be demonstrated by a simple rewriting (a practice I wish teachers and critics would engage in more often, as it can be highly revealing – both of the subtleties of rhythm and syntax and of the exaggerated claims sometimes made about these matters):

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey. The gods
are laughing at us.

This version keeps the two-beat rhythm to the end of the stanza, losing the dramatic pause after "Honey" and turning the naturalness of the comment about the gods – the kind of rueful comment one might make on a late night street-corner – into a portentous bit of high cultural free verse.

Ruefulness turns into something more like despair in the second stanza, however. This no longer seems to be intimate conversation but a working-out in poetic language of powerful emotions. What's especially interesting, and moving, is that the emotions aren't located in an individual: there's no verb to give a specific situation to the "broken heart" and the "pain." We can take it that the speaker is suffering, but the possibility is left open that the words name a more general condition. The words in these two lines aren't original, but they are originally deployed: not just a broken and weary heart, which are clichés, but a broken heart *of love*, a weary heart *of pain*, so "heart" carries its meaning of "center" as well as suggesting the emotional core of the person. And the repetition of "weary" breaks the otherwise four-square rhythm of these lines. Another rewrite:

The broken heart of love,
The weary heart of pain, –

Rewritten like this, the lines still work, but they settle into a comfortable three-beat rhythm that almost becomes a chant, taking away some of the sharpness of the emotion.

The following two indented, one-word lines are a further surprise, retaining the sense of a generalized suffering, and inviting a more scrupulous attention than usual to what looks like an opposed pair of terms. Of course they're not opposed: they both mean additional, implied, half-perceived meanings, but their connotations aren't the same. "Overtones" is a musical metaphor, suggesting fainter and fainter resonances of a fundamental note; "Undertones" is an acoustic or visual metaphor, suggesting a particularly low sound or subdued color. Together they suggest a complex relationship of background to foreground – though it's not until we read on that we learn what that foreground is: "the rumble of street cars" and "the swish of rain". The simple onomatopoeic descriptive phrases (there's still no verb) deftly paint in the commonplace sights and sounds of the street, at once entirely detached from and yet unmistakably tinged by the despair of the speaker.

Would you like to take it from there?
All the best,
Derek

HS: You bring out very well how much art has gone into these apparently simple lines, especially concerning the effect created by the lineation of "Honey."

You have, however, taken me somewhat aback by your remarks on the difference it makes that it's written by a black poet, or how a white reader might read it. I just took for granted the author, and approached the poem from what I took to be his perspective; and I situated myself as a sympathetic and receptive reader, not one who might be afraid of the idea of being on Lenox Avenue in the middle of Harlem at midnight. For a start, I think we can just put to bed the notion "that one shouldn't bring extra-textual information about the author into one's response." I don't think that's really ever been done to any extent by even the most formalist critics, though often it's been sneaked in covertly, simply not mentioned while nevertheless informing the reading at some level. But in any case I see no need to adhere to precisely that principle. I think our rule should be to know as much extra-textual information as possible about a poem – about the author, the cultural context, the period of literary history, the specific genre and literary tradition out of which the poem comes, the author's other work, linguistic usage in the period when the work was written, the politico-historical context, all sorts of context – but to use it with the utmost discretion, letting as little of it through into our reading as is necessary to do justice to the particular poem involved, and always maintaining our alertness to what you bravely still call "the poem as poem."

Most of what is relevant to constructing our image of the author, I think, can be derived from reading his or her work extensively. Reading Hughes's work, for instance – poems like "Jazzonia," "Danse Africaine," and "Song for a Dark Girl" – will give us an expansive sense of the sensibility, cultural-political attitudes, and world-view of the relevant authorial persona (perhaps that's a good phrase to replace "implied author," "author scriptor," and so forth) and allow us to "feel" what Lenox Avenue means in one of his poems. If you're a white reader who encounters "Lenox Avenue:

Midnight” in isolation, and assumes it to be by a white writer, however, it still retains all the marks of craftsmanship that you and I are noticing, and the speaker would still emerge as someone who feels jazz deeply, and is commemorating a specific site where, evidently, jazz is to be heard, as well as the ambient sounds that resonate within jazz.

Regarding the second stanza, I would add that it manifests Hughes’s extraordinary feeling for symmetry and balance in his lines, but always skillfully varied. The first two lines, except for the added “weary,” not only share the same rhythm, as you noted; they are also, except for “weary,” perfectly symmetrical. Then there’s a rhythmic pause between lines for “Overtones, / Undertones,” which differ only in the opening letters, yet involve a vast shift of meaning. You note that “undertones” is not specifically a musical word (which I’m surprised to find out), but I still can’t help but hear it as the complement of “overtones” in a description of what the speaker hears in jazz – the broken heart of love, the weary heart of pain – as a resonance of the music both above it, overtly, and beneath it, as something that is not strictly a musical sound but which the music allows one to hear. The last two lines, “To the rumble of the street cars, / To the swish of rain,” are once more a near-symmetrical pair, varied for rhythm; but what is more striking about them is the range of sound they evoke, from low metallic rumbling to the gentle sound of a mild rainfall – the latter a natural phenomenon, but in this case suggesting rain falling on an urban scene. And here the expanding movement from three to four beats with which the stanza opens is reversed into the diminishing movement of three to two beats.

Then the final stanza, which is even terser than the first. Now the celebration of jazz turns into a celebration of Lenox Avenue. I have to say that before you mentioned it, I didn’t know it was the central street of Harlem. In fact, I didn’t know anything at all about it. I just assumed that it was the site of jazz, a place where the music was to be found that Hughes writes about in other poems. That’s enough to give it an air of glamour when it’s named in the poem. An urban place, a place where street cars can be heard or felt rumbling nearby, and where hot jazz with its overtones and undertones, the music that is the rhythm of life (all life, or mainly urban life? – isn’t this a situated utterance in the range of its generalization too?), can be heard. A place, at a specific time, the middle of the night: two words, one word, one word, then the repetition of the gnomic line:

Lenox Avenue,
Honey.
Midnight,
And the gods are laughing at us.

The irony of “The gods are laughing at us” in the first stanza had been left behind in the second stanza’s meditation on jazz and Lenox Avenue; but it comes back as the poem’s last word.

Very, very nice. What a light touch. And what an intriguing, complex tone of voice we hear in the movement toward closure and in the tension between the

jazz-talk and the gods-talk, and what a fascinating speaker we must posit as the persona who produces this voice.

Do you want to say more about this poem? And, since this was so short, do you want to suggest another Hughes poem we should do, or shall I? I think we should take one on that more directly addresses negritude in the United States.

DA: I don't have any more to say about the poem; you've given a fine account of the last part of it. Just a couple of small notes: your comment about Lenox Avenue led me to look up some information about it – I really like your statement about how we handle extratextual information – and discovered, not only that it's also called Malcolm X Boulevard and that there is a TV series named after it (facts that can be ignored for the purposes of reading the poem), but also that it is one of the widest streets in Manhattan, with sidewalks 35 feet wide. That fact has now entered my reading of the poem, as it suggests a space that is not dominated by vehicular traffic but one in which the life of the city is played out in all its forms.

I do have one qualification to suggest to your excellent formulation about contextual information: when you say we should let as little of it through into our reading as is necessary to do justice to the poem, you make poetry reading somewhat more under conscious control than I feel it is. That is, in between readings we can look for information, and decide whether or not a particular fact is relevant, but in the actual reading, when we're listening as hard as possible to what the poem is saying, we're not in a position to bring in or to exclude contextual facts, as a conductor bringing in instruments in the orchestra might do. Even if I wanted to, there's no way I could read "Lenox Avenue: Midnight" as having been written by, say, a white woman. My knowledge of the author enters into the poem from the beginning. But I guess that's implied by your comment: doing justice to a literary work means coming back to it several times, and with each reading you find yourself sifting out with greater subtlety what counts and what doesn't. And, as you say, the best way to enrich your reading of one work is to read as much as you can of the writer's other work, and of other writers associated with him or her – in this case, poets of the Harlem Renaissance. And then beyond that, other writers of the time, and earlier writers to whom he or she was responding. It all helps, but the writer's own oeuvre is likely to produce the richest rewards.

I would add, though, that if I came across this poem without an acknowledgment that it was by Hughes, the internal evidence from the title onward would enable me to deduce a great deal about the speaker and would lead to an informed guess as to the writer – not that the created speaker *necessarily* overlaps with the poet; it would remain only a guess. (Going back to Eliot's Sweeney, one wouldn't be able to deduce much about the poet from lines like, "We're gona sit here and drink this booze / We're gona sit here and have a tune / We're gona stay and we're gona go / And somebody's gotta pay the rent.") My view on this matter amounts to this: whatever knowledge one has about the poet is likely to enter into one's reading of a poem, and it's not possible to wholly control this influence. Having this

knowledge will usually enrich one's understanding of the poem, especially if one is able to exclude irrelevant facts; but in most cases the poem contains enough in itself to make a satisfactory reading possible. I would say that even in the case of what we're calling "situated subjects," poems in which the historical situation and point of view of the author play a major part in the writing, the poetry itself does the crucial work of situating.

"Lenox Avenue: Midnight" is clearly a poem about African-American experience, although like any good poem it isn't simply the representation of that experience as something to be examined from the outside. In other words, the reader is invited to *share* for a few moments the exhaustion and the pain it depicts – this is where the "universality" of the poem is felt. At the same time, the poem insists on the specificity of this state of mind and body as experienced by a particular community, identified by race, domicile and economic situation. The poem can thus be read as a protest against the conditions under which this community is forced to live; but this political edge is not prominent – indeed, the reference to "the gods" suggests a kind of fatalism rather than the pointing of a political moral.

In many other poems, Hughes aimed to arouse anger and indignation at the treatment of African-Americans – "Negroes," he would have said – in the United States during his lifetime. Such poems perhaps pose a somewhat different challenge to the reader, so I agree with you that we should spend some time with a work that is more plainly a defiance of white supremacy. The question we need to ask is whether a poem can be successful *as a poem* while intervening strongly in an ethico-political situation, and by implication attacking the views of many of its potential readers. Is such poetry necessarily propagandist, and so lacking in the subtlety we expect from the best poems? I'd like to begin a discussion of a poem of Hughes's that I find extraordinarily powerful as a challenge to the white ruling class without detracting at all from its accomplishment as a poem – indeed its power as a poem and its power as an ethico-political intervention are inseparable.

Song for a Dark Girl

Way Down South in Dixie
 (Break the heart of me)
 They hung my black young lover
 To a cross roads tree.

Way Down South in Dixie
 (Bruised body high in air)
 I asked the white Lord Jesus
 What was the use of prayer.

Way Down South in Dixie
 (Break the heart of me)
 Love is a naked shadow
 On a gnarled and naked tree.

Hughes entitles this poem a “song”, and it conforms in many ways to song conventions: it uses the four-beat meter characteristic of popular song, leaving the fourth beat in each line unrealized so that there is a distinct pause at this point (which, in a musical setting, would be filled by the accompaniment); it begins each stanza with the same phrase that alludes to a song tradition; and it has a kind of refrain in every second line, signaled by parentheses – though only the first and third occurrences are the same. Also pointing to song and away from speech are the rhymes on the second and fourth lines, ending the two-line unit on a strong beat (in contrast to the first and third lines, where feminine endings help unite the pair of lines). The profound expression of pain achieved by the poem is all the stronger for its articulation in a form conventionally associated with happier emotions – though, of course, the tradition of slave songs breaks with that convention.

The title, interestingly, is not “Song of a Dark Girl,” which would be consonant with the poem’s imagined speaker, but “Song *for* a Dark Girl.” It is Hughes’s tribute, in other words, to the woman he pictures, or, more broadly, to those who have lost the men they love in lynchings. Titles have a curious status, both part and not part of the work they name (you will know that Derrida has written brilliantly on this question in his reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law”); it’s a place where the author can speak more fully *in propria persona*, as I think is the case here. We’d have to do some research into the use of the term “dark” in racial language in the 1920s to fully appreciate the force of Hughes’s choice of adjective: for me it resonates beyond the matter of skin color to connotations of dark fate, dark times, dark prospects.

If we can imagine the first line as read by someone new to the poem and without any background knowledge, it would come across as the jaunty echo of a certain kind of song: the sentimental ballad written by the white song-writer imagining an ex-slave’s yearning for the Southern home that has been left behind. The term “Dixie,” as far as I know, is a word in the white lexicon rather than anything a slave or former slave would have used, and “Way Down South” implies a view from the supposedly less racist north of an (implausibly) longed-for south. But a knowledge of what’s to come in the poem, or of the author, or even a careful reading of the title, imbues the line with fierce irony, an irony heightened by the exaggeration of the upper-case letters. The poem is precisely *not* a sentimentalized image of racial experience in the South.

In the first stanza, I want to point out the unusual order of the adjectives in “black young lover”: had Hughes followed the more normal order, and written “young black lover,” the phrase would have bordered on cliché and the adjectives would have been stripped of much of their force. Defamiliarizing them by presenting them in reverse order, Hughes encourages us to treat them as conveying important information: both the victim’s blackness and his youth are significant, though it is “black” that takes the beat. “They” is also oddly powerful: its very anonymity suggests the mass hatred of the lynch mob. We don’t have to be told that “they” are white, unlike the young man whose main crime is his color.

Then there is the resonant fourth line: “To a cross roads tree.” Literally, it means a tree growing at a crossroads; but it seems to me that the separation of the words

gives “cross” some independent force, and associates the scene of the lynching with the crucifixion of Jesus – an association strengthened by the word “tree,” used in medieval religious verse to refer to the cross. The separation also makes possible an alternative to the more obvious rhythmic rendering of the line: instead of the somewhat artificial “TO a CROSS roads TREE” it could be heard as “To a CROSS ROADS TREE,” with three heavy stresses. I’ll be interested to hear if you agree that this further association is part of the poem’s primary meaning; to me it feels unavoidable.

The second stanza makes the connection with the Christian faith explicit, and the contrast between the white-dominated church – we can be sure that “They” consider themselves Christians – and the black Christ-like victim is emphasized by the rhythmic and verbal echo: “black young lover” / “white Lord Jesus”. Also in this stanza, “Bruised” is a stressed monosyllable outside the three-beat movement of the line; it’s therefore a moment of rhythmic tension – the voice needs to get on to the next word for the first beat, but “Bruised” is semantically far too important to be hurried past. Introducing in a single word the reality of the torture preceding the hanging, it has a phonetic connection with “Break” in the same position in the other two stanzas: the speaker’s wish that her heart would break is a consequence of that bruising.

I’ll let you comment first on the extraordinary final stanza, and look forward to your response to these comments and to the poem – and to the question of its role as a public protest against racist violence.

HS: I resist the notion that “Lenox Avenue” is about “African-American experience.” It says not that jazz is the rhythm of African-American life but, simply, of life; and given the way jazz was catching on with white culture, both in the US and Europe, at the time Hughes wrote, the claim seems reasonable. It was certainly the rhythm of life in Western urban culture at that period in history. Those who knew the Lenox Avenue scene first-hand would feel this poem strongly in terms of its cultural specificity, as a consequence of what they brought to the poem; but there’s nothing distinctively African-American about broken hearts, weary pain, or the sounds of street cars and rain. As with “Futility” in Chapter 3, I want to insist on the fact that the poet has *intentionally* not provided the details that would particularize the scene in the way that contextualizing readers insist on doing, and that in that case, providing the missing contextualization turns it into a different poem from the one the poet composed. Both Owen and Hughes are abundantly capable of providing such details, and do in many other poems, so I take it to be significant if they leave them out. The “Song for a Dark Girl” is an excellent example of the other kind of poem, which makes the particulars of a definite African-American experience the substance of its lyricism. I completely agree with you that “its power as a poem and its power as an ethico-political intervention are inseparable.”

This poem has the same quality of extreme terseness as “Lenox Avenue.” Because the syntax is simple and the sentences grammatical, this terseness is mistaken for simplicity, when in fact it’s just a particular way of compressing utterance, making it elliptical. Your instinct about the first line is sound, and is a good

example of how a careful reader of poems can detect the force of its figures even with limited knowledge of the context. As a South African, you wouldn't know what is immediately evident to me, that the first line is a savagely ironic echo of "Dixie," the anthem of the Confederacy during the civil war and even today the nostalgic echo of the old South.

Oh, I wish I was in the land of cotton,
Old times there are not forgotten
Look away! Look away! Look away, Dixieland.

Away, away, away down south in Dixie.

As a result of our discussion of "Song for a Dark Girl," I got curious about this song that I grew up with in south Texas (weird phenomenon for a little Mexican-American kid like me to grow up singing this song) and found the following hair-raising facts on Wikipedia:

The song originated in the blackface minstrel shows of the 1850s and quickly became popular across the United States. Its lyrics, written in a comic, exaggerated version of African American Vernacular English, tell the story of a freed black slave pining for the plantation of his birth. ...

The song presented the point of view common to minstrelsy at the time, ... that slavery was overall a positive institution. The pining slave had been used in minstrel tunes since the early 1850s. ...

The lyrics use many common phrases found in minstrel tunes of the day. ... "Away down south in ..." appears in many ... songs.

The more one learns, the deeper and more painful the irony becomes; but as you've demonstrated, it resonates in the words even if one knows none of it. This is an almost laboratory demonstration of the way "the text itself" takes up into the organization of its energies the force of a context that need not be deeply delved into to make its presence felt, and felt in the distinctive way that *poetry* can make it felt. I always feel reservations about bringing historical facts like these into the picture, because I'm afraid there are readers who will understand whatever power they feel the poem to have as no more than the delegated power of the facts themselves.

And after all, powerful as it is, "Way Down South in Dixie" is only an ironic citation, not Hughes's own words, where his art most fully shows itself; for example in the transition from the first line to the second. The capitalization of the first line (which you note) emphasizes the citational quality of the words – the public, anthemic quality of the voice by which these words would be spoken outside the context of this poem (a voice that historically, we've learned, was posited by white composers as the voice of a black slave longing for the South). And the separation between this citationality and the intensely personal quality of the voice into which it modulates in the second line is heightened by the placing of the second

line in parentheses. The irony is so fierce, the cause of suffering that is about to be revealed so stark, that the inexhaustible image of a heart breaking, especially in the private enclosure of the parenthesis, is brought back to full life once more. I think you're absolutely right that the separation of "cross" from "roads" brings the first word to our attention in a way that alludes to the Lord Jesus who will be mentioned in the next stanza. It would be interesting to know whether Hughes was familiar with the use of "tree" for "cross," but ultimately it doesn't matter, both because he clearly means *this* tree to resonate with the cross, and because the same linguistic dynamics that generated the medieval use of "tree" re-generate the analogy between tree and cross here. There is something tree-like about the cross. But we shouldn't forget that this is literally a tree at a crossroads, because this adds another dimension of savagery to the lynching: the body has been placed where the most people pass by, to make it a maximally public spectacle, gratifying some passersby and breaking the heart of others.

Your observations about the rhythm of "Bruised body" nicely bring out the subtlety of Hughes's art. I note additionally the delicately chiasmic relation of the stanza's first and second lines in their movement from "Down" to "high."

Way Down South in Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)

The next two lines on the one hand would bear more glossing than we have time to give them, but on the other hand any reader who needs them glossed is in need of more help than literary criticism can provide. I will comment only on the fact that the persona is indeed praying to this white Lord Jesus, as she asks what use prayer is; a quintessential expression of religious anguish. Apparently Hughes himself had a complex, skeptical attitude toward Christianity, but did not reject it outright, so, given that the posited speaker might be thought to be rooted in the traditional African-American religious faith, the irony here is complex.

But the strongest lines in the poem, to my mind, are the last two, which bring the poem consummate closure. Here is the only place in the poem where Hughes reaches for high lyricism, and the exceptionality of the register that he achieves here heightens its effect (the opposite of someone like Dylan Thomas, who tried to pack the densest figurativeness into every line). I don't want to pre-empt all the best bits, so I'll leave these last two lines to you.

What I would like to do for my parting shot is to bring up another astonishing lyric on the same topic that I can't help thinking about when I read this poem, and which throws the question we've been discussing, about the race of the author of poems of this kind, into an interesting new light. The lyric is "Strange Fruit," which most people, I think, associate primarily with the stunning performance of it by Billie Holiday (anyone unfamiliar with this performance can find it easily on the internet, and should do so straightaway). This is the first stanza:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Along with “Song for a Dark Girl,” this unbearably beautiful song shows how possible indeed it is to make great poetry out of “situation,” and this particular situation. But Billie Holiday didn’t write it; it was written by Abel Meeropol, one of those wonderful Jewish communists from the 1930s who were, along with other Jewish activists both before and after, so closely involved with black culture and black causes. Abel Meeropol is also known for having adopted the children of the Rosenbergs after their execution, something I mention here only because it was at the home of W. E. B. Dubois that he met them. So here is a “white” man – a particular kind, that is, one of a kind ambiguously related to whiteness, but definitely not a black man – who has written a poem mourning the lynching of blacks in the South. Does it detract from the poem for you to know that its author was white (perhaps you already knew this)? How does it alter your response to it?

DA: I too can’t read “Song for a Dark Girl” without thinking of “Strange Fruit,” and Billie Holiday’s rendition of it in particular; I still remember – it’s a bodily as much as a mental memory – the prickling of my skin when I first heard it. But I have never known the (fascinating) facts of its composition. I don’t think being aware of its origin now makes the experience of reading it, or would make the experience of Holliday’s singing of it, any different; this is because the words are already ingrained in my psyche (I can’t read it without hearing Holliday’s voice). If I had never heard or read it, and was told I was going to be presented with a poem written by a white man, it might not have registered in quite the same way as it did when I encountered it without this knowledge. I wouldn’t have *wanted* it to make any difference, though, and would have done what I could to exclude it from my consciousness. This is what I mean by the limits to the degree of one’s control over these things. And in the case of a poem that hadn’t already made a great impact on me, knowledge of this kind might indeed color my reading, possibly against my will. (I should add that I wasn’t aware of the actual song “Dixie,” just that the phrase was the sort of thing that turns up in white-authored minstrel songs. We used to sing such songs, in all innocence, around the whites-only campfire in Natal when I was a boy.)

Going back to “Lenox Avenue: Midnight,” I want to make it clear that I don’t believe that the scene’s location in Harlem in any way limits its wider resonance. Had it just been called “City Street: Midnight” there would have been no grounds for saying it is about African-American experience. But Hughes has put a geographically specific name there for a purpose; it’s part of the poem’s meaning that can’t be brushed aside as irrelevant, surely. It could even be said that one aspect of the poem’s function is to urge readers other than Harlem-dwellers to recognize that the sufferings of those who do live there are no different from the sufferings of others around the globe.

Now let me turn to those extraordinary lines:

Love is a naked shadow
On a gnarled and naked tree

You've already pointed out how with these lines Hughes changes the register to high lyricism, something we might think of as more recognizably "poetic," though that's the wrong word if it suggests mere ornateness or high-flown language. What happens, I think, is that the straightforward – though wrenching – statements that have occupied the last two lines of the previous stanzas are replaced by a statement that, though syntactically as straightforward as those two, makes no literal sense: love may be many things, but it's not a shadow on a tree. We have to read into that apparently simple constative "Love is" a richer meaning, though one that will always remain indeterminate. Some of its implications may be spelled out: my love for this man, with all its bright promise, now has to face up to a sunless vacancy, and it feels as if love in general – all possible love – has been challenged in the same way. Then "naked shadow" also refuses literal meaning – shadows are neither naked nor clothed – so we have to understand it as an example of what we called earlier in our conversation (in connection with Eliot's "sawdust-trampled street") "transferral." It is, of course, the lynched man's body that is naked, but this is too appalling a fact to state outright (though it was implicit in "Bruised body"). In photographs of lynchings, one of the most horrible features is the contrast between the clothed crowd – men in jackets and ties, women in pretty dresses – and the naked or semi-naked victims.

The final image is of an ancient and leafless tree; if it calls up Christ's cross again, it is now an ugly transformation of that cross (and we may remember the old Christian belief that the cross of Calvary was made from the wood of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden; here it's as if the cross of salvation has reverted to the tree of evil and suffering). But most shocking is the continued transferral, signaled again by the word "naked" (and by the insistence of its repetition): the stark image of the gnarled tree becomes indistinguishable from the terrible image of the beaten and twisted body of the young man hanging from it. It's as if the girl cannot bring herself to look at the body itself, and her gaze is transferred to the tree; but the tree has no comfort to offer. There is no salvation in this crucifixion. The lines are a marvel of concentration, all the more effective for coming after the relatively plain language of what went before.

It's only in the full experience of the power of the poetry – achieved by a total mastery of technique – that Hughes's protest, and the anger that underlies it, can be registered. In the nearly 90 years since the poem was published, its subject has gone from being lived reality to a historical curiosity – how could civilized human beings behave so abominably?, we ask ourselves. The many photographs of lynchings are painful to look at, but we examine them with a sense of an immense distance between then and now. Yet in reading Hughes's extraordinary poem with the attention it deserves, we may feel less comfortable about the historical gap between attitudes and actions of that time and place and the world we live in today.

HS: You've glossed the closing lines magnificently, Derek, with admirable preciseness and concision. I have nothing to add.

I also like very much how you articulate the problem for literary criticism of author situation, in your comments on how knowing a white man wrote "Strange Fruit" would have affected your initial reading of it. You bring out beautifully how there's no transcendental rule that divides the inside and the outside of a poem. The kind of candid "phenomenological" account you give here, of how our formalism and our feeling for context interact, differently in regard to different works, or in response to changing times or to our own changing circumstances and so forth – always while we make a disciplined effort to do justice to the art of the maker – this is the best we can do. This applies as well to our slight difference in regard to "Lenox Avenue." By no means was I brushing aside the specific reference of the title as irrelevant. But it's relevant in different ways, and to different degrees, to different readers, depending on their experience and knowledge. My point was that it's important to recognize how, while on the one hand Hughes situates the poem with great particularity in the title, the words of the poem itself involve no such specificity. This means that Hughes has written a poem that is filled with the particularity of context, and yet is maximally detachable from this particularity. You only need to know what jazz is (which will inevitably carry overtones of negritude), and what an urban scene is. And you might not even know the specific flavor of jazz at the origin of the poem; you might think bebop or Miles Davis, and the poem would not lose its power.

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6

POETIC COMMENTARY (SHAKESPEARE, SONNET 116)

Dear Henry,

I'd like to change tack for this discussion, and see what happens when we focus on a range of critical comments on a particular poem. What kinds of criticism help the reader understand and enjoy the poem for what it is, and where do critics go astray, perhaps in too quickly introducing questionable elaborations? And where do judgments of success or failure come into the critical picture?

Perhaps we can take a Shakespeare sonnet as our example this time, as these short poems have probably generated more criticism than any other poems in the language. A sonnet that has been much commented on, and is often regarded as one of Shakespeare's most successful, is 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

(The text is from Stephen Booth's edition of the Sonnets, except that I have followed the 1609 Quarto – which Booth also helpfully reproduces – in capitalizing “Time’s”.)

Paul Alpers, in an essay entitled “Learning from the New Criticism: The Example of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” discusses the responses of a number of critics to Shakespeare’s sonnets, including 116, in order to make an argument for the continuing validity of some aspects of what he calls “modernist criticism” – the American New Critics and the *Scrutiny* group in England. He begins with two critics who don’t share the widespread admiration for the sonnets, John Crowe Ransom and Yvor Winters, the second of whom reprises Ransom’s censure of Shakespeare for writing a poetry that is lacking in logical precision and relying instead on vague associations. Winters focuses on the word “worth” in line 8, arguing that the image of the star that can be used in navigational calculations but whose real nature cannot be known is a highly inappropriate one for the theme of true love – surely, he demands, the lover should know very well the worth of the love which he takes as his guiding principle.

I don’t think we can dismiss Winters’s objection, and for me it crystallizes a nagging dissatisfaction with this sonnet (and a dissatisfaction with the fact that it is so often hailed as one of Shakespeare’s greatest). What I’d like to do is look at the way other admiring critics and annotators – and this group constitutes by far the majority – have attempted to justify what Ransom and Winters see as a looseness of argument here and elsewhere in the sonnet, in order to find out how persuasive their defenses are. (Some of these are treated by Alpers in his essay, though I propose to look further afield as well.) But I need to know first if you share my uneasiness with the praise that has been lavished on the poem, and whether you find this project a valuable one.

Derek

Dear Derek,

Yes, by all means, let’s take Shakespeare on next. I share your doubts about Sonnet 116; and Alpers’s admirable essay – which provides a brilliantly insightful tour of the history of sonnet interpretation from Ransom through Booth to Vendler – would be a great place to begin our discussion. I hope we’ll be able to spend some time focusing on Booth’s work, because Booth comes closest to the ideal “minimal” reader of poetry of any critic I know. I think most readers of his commentary on the sonnets are not aware of this; I suspect they think of him as an “all possible meanings” reader. (It’s odd the way he buried his treatise on method, in which he explains that what he’s really after is the “clear and effectively straightforward sense that all but a few of the sonnets so obviously make,” in his commentary on Sonnet 112.)

Henry

DA: Before going back to the line that bothered Winters, perhaps we should look at some comments on the sonnet as a whole. It’s unusual, of course, in presenting itself as a programmatic statement, a definition of love (and not overtly about the

speaker's love, as Marvell's poem of that name is). For Shakespeare this depiction was presumably a Platonic notion of love as an ideal, but for the contemporary reader it chimes with a Romantic and post-Romantic conception of love; hence its appeal in the world of Hallmark cards. Among those who praise the poem is Booth, and I'll begin with him.

Booth appends a general discussion to his meticulous account of individual words and phrases, noting that it is "the most universally admired of Shakespeare's sonnets" but that its virtues are "more than usually susceptible to dehydration in critical comment." He continues:

The more one thinks about this grand, noble, absolute, convincing and moving gesture, the less there seems to be to it. One could demonstrate that it is just so much bombast, but, having done so, one would have only to reread the poem to be again moved by it and convinced of its greatness.

(387)

This is almost a confession of critical helplessness, but Booth goes on to make an attempt at a justification of the high standing of the poem and of his own obvious admiration of it. As a reader who, while not responding to the sonnet as bombast, finds it more of a rhetorical exercise than a subtle exploration of human feeling, I would like to be persuaded by Booth's arguments – I would be delighted to experience any poem as grand, noble, etc.

Booth's claim is that the sonnet presents abstract statements that have "the vividness of sensually perceived action" (388). Thus for him the words and phrases *the remover*, *looks*, and *bears it out* all endow love with concreteness while asserting that it is "too big, too grand, too spiritual to be grasped." (This would be Booth's riposte to Winters's objections about the illogicality of *worth*.) The two assertions of what he calls "absolute nonsense" (389) – "Love is not love" and "I never writ, nor no man ever loved" – also, he states, create a blend of both "substantial and insubstantial fabric" and gain power from the "ostentatious falsehood" of their literal meanings. (He has another argument, which bears more directly on our concern with minimal reading; we can come to it later.)

I can't say I'm convinced. Until we reach the "ever-fixed mark" the sonnet is a set of abstract assertions, and even that image is far from specific. (Booth glosses it as "seamark, e.g. a beacon or lighthouse," Colin Burrow as "landmark (*OED* 9); here probably a star which aids navigation.") The echo of the marriage ceremony adds color to the opening lines, certainly, and the play of verbal repetition is pleasant; but this can't compete with the stunning power or tonal complexity of so many of the other opening quatrains in the sequence. I think Booth is on more solid ground when he comments that "the hyperbole of the couplet is so extreme that it merely vouches for the speaker's intensity of feeling." Ah ha!, I want to say, so this is *not* a straightforward assertion of a truth believed in by the speaker, but a rhetorical performance. Its excesses are symptoms of an affective state, not articles of faith; it is to be understood, perhaps, as one moment in a series of fluctuating emotional

responses within a relationship in which both parties, it would seem, fall short of the ideal expressed in this sonnet. But Booth appears not to recognize the degree to which his passing comment implies a wholly different reading of the sonnet.

Alpers puts his finger on this weakness in Booth's approach: "Booth's blindness," he says, citing Paul de Man's formulation of the necessary blindness involved in any insight, "was to the character of the first-person speaker of the Sonnets" (126). In reacting against the New Critical dogma that lyrical poems were dramatic utterances, Booth, he argues, went too far in the other direction, focusing on the language but not the speaker it constructs. But I'm not sure I can agree with the use Alpers makes of this insight in his discussion of the "ever-fixed mark." He points out, surely correctly, that the mark only becomes a seamark in line 7, but then claims that the speaker identifies *himself* with the unshakeable mark – although he does recognize that there is also an identification with "every wand'ring bark." This shifting of position, according to Alpers, arises from the "mobile and elusive" first person of the poem, the result of its being not a lyrical expression of feeling but a rhetorical performance. The critic he turns to as the best guide to the Sonnets is Kenneth Burke, "who alone among modernist critics made it a principle that human uses of language, including literary uses, are inevitably rhetorical" (131).

Well, this is all very interesting, but aren't we losing sight of the larger context of the Sonnets if we focus too much on the poem as complex rhetorical construction? I'm not quite ready to give up on the idea that a lyric poem – many lyric poems, at any rate – are best readable (that is to say, yield the most pleasure in their evocation of human realities through language felt to be unusually precise and powerful) as utterances in a drama, of which we have to reconstruct the narrative and the characters. To assert, as Alpers does, that Sonnet 116 is replete with ambiguities and shifting identities, its situation "troublingly unclear, though not uselessly murky," is either to value it as peculiarly modern (and Alpers cites Joel Fineman's argument about the "subjectivity effect" of the Sonnets to this purpose), or to brand it as unsuccessful in comparison with the best in the sequence. However, if we take it as a dramatically imagined utterance, we need to understand the situation in which it is uttered – and we only have to look at the following sonnet, which begins, "Accuse me thus," to be reminded of a stance or phase in the relationship that offers a plausible occasion for this one. Why, after all, would a lover insist, to the extent of absurdity ("I never writ, nor no man ever loved"), that love is a force that remains unchanged even when its object strays – is guilty of "alteration," "removal," and "wand'ring"? Surely when the *speaker* is guilty of such straying, and is attempting to persuade the beloved to overlook his fault? "You say my behavior is an impediment to your love, but if that's the case what you feel is not love – I'll tell you what love *really* is." I'd like to suggest that this scenario makes best sense of the sonnet's paradoxical statements.

An older criticism would go from here to biographical speculation about Shakespeare's frequent abasing of himself before Henry Wriothesley or whoever, in which case the sonnet would be seen as an outrageous example of self-deception – how could WS dare to demand absolute and permanent fidelity from the very beloved he has betrayed? But treating the poem as a dramatic utterance – and we

are dealing with a writer to whom dramatic speech came naturally – we are able to see it as the mimetic representation of the extremes to which a passionate lover will go when threatened with the loss of the one he loves. The couplet *is* unconvincing, the sonnet *does* fall flat at the end (like many others, it has to be said), but this is a reflection of the impossible position the speaker is in. Logic fails, but the poem succeeds in capturing something of that “intensity of feeling” Booth so fleetingly alludes to.

One critic who approaches the poem as a dramatic utterance is Helen Vendler, who insists that the Sonnets are not “discursive propositional statements” but “situationally motivated speech-acts.” I want to endorse this general comment, but resist the rather over-fanciful and, as I find it, unhelpfully complicated, scenario she conjures up for Sonnet 116. She imagines the sonnet as the reply to the young man, who has just attempted to justify his infidelity by asserting that love *does* alter when it alteration finds and *does* bend with the remover to remove. For Vendler, too, then, the sonnet is a declaration of the speaker’s firmness in the face of the beloved’s frailty. Rather than an urgent, and hopeless, plea for the continuance of a deeply needed love, it remains a self-important – perhaps even bombastic – utterance.

I don’t want to go any further without hearing whether your take on the sonnet and these views of it has any similarities to mine, so over to you.

HS: You agree with Alpers’s root criticism of Booth – that he “turned his back on the first-person character of the sonnets” – but side with Vendler’s approach to this first person character (while rejecting the way she construes it in 116). I certainly agree that sonnets have to be considered as dramatic utterances as well as poem-objects, but before we discuss this question further, I have to get over a problem that strikes me as vitiating the whole discussion before it even gets started – the apparently universal assumption by the commentators that the poem is about infidelity (whether on the part of the speaker or the addressee). This presupposition bothers me because I don’t see how it harmonizes with the opening sentence: Let me not to the marriage of *true minds* admit impediments. This statement entails – doesn’t it? – that *both* lovers whose marriage is in question have *true minds*, which I presume means that they “are true” in the sense of honest, faithful, dependable. It’s in the case of the coming-together of two true minds that the speaker proposes to deny the existence of “impediments”; and anyone who is either guilty of, or susceptible to, infidelity, would, I take it, be excluded from the category of true minds, and therefore from the extension of the definition of true love that the poem proposes. But, in that case, it makes no sense for infidelity to form the context of the rest of the poem. If one of the lovers’ love is subject to “alteration” such that he becomes a “remover,” then the speaker is asserting that true love will continue to love the faithless one who has gone away; but how then would that still be a “marriage of true minds”? That would just be the old courtly love model of “love at a distance” by an abject true lover who will put up with any kind of abuse from a love object that is indifferent to him.

The obvious problem with my way of reading the opening sentence is that, if it's presupposed that the minds of both lovers are true, then why does the rest of the poem argue so vehemently that love is true? The poem is concerned with *marriage* as a *plighting* of troth. The first line implies the question: is there any reason why true minds should hesitate to plight their troth to each other? To which the speaker of the poem replies, "I, for my part, would never admit that any such reason exists." Is there some other way to go forward with the poem from this beginning, once we rule out the infidelity interpretation? It worries me that none of the commentaries I've looked at have read the opening statement as I do; and yet at the moment I can't see how one can read it otherwise if one applies the strict discipline of reading that this critical tradition of commentary on the sonnets has always respected – but which, as I now see it, it has failed to apply to the first line of 116. If you can get me past this objection, I'll be happy to continue the discussion in the terms you originally proposed.

DA: I must admit that it's the first line and a half that I have always found the most puzzling, for just the reasons you state. Before I answer directly, though, I am going to keep to our brief for this conversation by looking at what the various annotated editions and commentaries I've assembled have to say about that bit of the sonnet. (Most commentators point to the echo of the marriage ceremony in "impediments", so I'll take that as read.)

Ingram and Redpath, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Let me not: "Not 'Don't allow me ... ' nor 'Don't cause me ... ,' but simply 'May I never ... '"
true: "faithful"

This is helpful, though it leaves the question of tone (and behind tone, underlying cause) unanswered. Something anterior has prompted this assertion (if we take the model of the speech act to be a legitimate one): is the speaker responding to an expression of the opposite sentiment? (Vendler) Or to a question about a plighting of troth? (you, tentatively) Or a situation in which the speaker himself is responsible for some "impediments" (me, equally tentatively).

Burt and Mikics, *The Art of the Sonnet*

Commentary on this poem is by Mikics:

With his opening three words, "Let me not," the poet pleads, in both senses of the word: he testifies and he asks for strength. We infer that he has been tempted to acknowledge impediments, to give them a place; now he vows to exclude them.

Mikics proposes a fourth situation and a different tone: the beloved has been unfaithful, and the speaker has been tempted to acknowledge that this constitutes an impediment to their love. I prefer Ingram and Redpath's straightforward interpretation – the idea that the same statement can both testify (from a position of strength, presumably), *and* beg for strength seems oversubtle. I remain unconvinced.

Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Paterson points out the “tragic frisson” of the echo of the marriage service, since the Church would never sanction a marriage between two men. Nice point, I think. (One that complicates the idea that this is about the plighting of troth, perhaps?) He notes, too, that the sonnet is “sandwiched between two others which address WS's own wandering” – though he assumes this one is a contrast to those, rather than part of a trio on the same subject, as I'm suggesting.

Burrow, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*

Burrow states that the “two minds” could be those of the poet and the friend, or the friend and someone else. If the former, “admit” means “acknowledge,” and the poem asserts that no changes in the friend can change the poet's love. If the latter, it means “to allow of the presence” or “to allow to enter,” and the poem “becomes excessive and potentially ironic in its self-abnegation: ‘Do not let *me* become an impediment to your union.’” I like the idea of irony at work here, but I don't see how this interpretation extends to the rest of the poem. Burrow doesn't say which reading he prefers – and surely it can't be *both*.

Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Vendler makes the interesting point that the iambic pentameter forces an emphasis on “me” – “Let *me* not to the marriage” – and uses this in part justification of her argument that the poem is a rebuttal of the young man's assertion that love *does* alter with the alteration of the beloved. This might chime with Burrow's second reading. On the other hand, Shakespeare may be availing himself of a license rare in iambic pentameter until the nineteenth century, the double initial inversion – “**Let me not to the marriage of true minds**”. So much depends on which word(s) in this opening line receive emphasis!

Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Let me not: “May I never” [back to Ingram and Redpath's straightforward reading].

Admit: “(1) concede the existence of, acknowledge; (2) permit consideration of.”

Booth goes on to suggest a background metaphor of a doorkeeper admitting or not admitting wedding guests to a marriage ceremony. I'm puzzled by Booth's second alternative: the poem *is* considering the question of impediments, surely.

Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*

Admit: "concede (that there are, that there might be), permit the consideration of."

Kerrigan is simply following Booth.

Where does this leave us? I think it shows that this first line and a half is *under-determined*; it fails to establish immediately the context within which it is spoken, partly because it seems oddly toneless. There is no "me" and "you," just a general statement which could be uttered for a number of possible reasons. Somewhere, somehow the question of impediments to this mental union (which can't be publicly sanctioned) has been raised – that is, the question of infidelity – and here we have the speaker's answer. Perhaps we should focus more on the oddness of "marriage of true *minds*," which no one comments on apart from Paterson. The word is in the climactic position in the line. Bodily infidelity need not affect mental fidelity: our minds are true even if one of us has strayed physically (altered, bent, removed, as the poems will go on to say, producing a "tempest"). Would this be an answer to your worry – which is a legitimate one, certainly – about two true minds? The sestet will shift the ground from the effects of infidelity to the effects of the passing of time, as if the former are as inevitable as the latter (a clever move, if it is indeed the speaker's faults that are at issue); and again, the contrast is between physical deficiency and mental/spiritual consistency. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

HS: Your survey of the commentators confirms the impression I had that nobody really has noticed the strict logical implication of the presupposition that both minds are *true*. You make the important suggestion that it might be "minds" that is the key word here, so we do have the option of reading "minds" as bearing a stronger strong accent than "true," but even in that case "true" is still accented. (I would stress both words equally.) "Minds" is, as you say, in the climactic position, but on the other hand, the accent on "true" receives the extra force of the delayed accent from the preceding foot.

Emphasizing "minds," you suggest, might resolve the problem raised by "true": "Bodily infidelity need not affect mental fidelity." I think you're right that we should take "minds" seriously and ask how it functions here; but I still want to know why we need to assume, right out of the box, that infidelity has to be read into this? I think critics have automatically found infidelity in 116 because it's so pervasive a theme of the sonnets, but it isn't the only theme; and carnal infidelity is not the only way in which "alteration" occurs with the passage of time. The fundamental, more tragic, theme underneath that of carnal or even emotional infidelity is the mutability of the temporal, and sometimes Shakespeare stays at that level of alteration in entire sonnets – notably in 115, which, *pace* Paterson, is clearly not about infidelity, but about the relation of love to time. 116 could be a continuation of this theme. If we give "minds" the heaviest stress in the line, it does suggest mind in contrast with something else, but in the context of the whole phrase it could be understood instead as the contrast with *some other kind of marriage*. We don't have to get as

specific as Paterson does; the echo with the language of the marriage ceremony is there, but that's because Shakespeare loves language, and the language of the Bible and of church ritual are so rich – not because (to my knowledge) he ever gives any sign of being worried about the church's moral judgments. The more obvious reference would be to the distinction between spiritual, intellectual, "Platonic," presumably homosexual or "homosocial" love, and ordinary heterosexual loves that end in ordinary marriage. The contrast between ideal and non-ideal love is in fact the background that Booth, invoking Donne's lyric "Love's Growth," suggests for 115. So 116 could be saying, "that *other* kind of love, the one that alters with time, is not really love; only the more spiritual kind (the love of true minds) is real and unfaltering, and I claim that it can exist; I admit no impediments to the possibility of its existing, not even that fundamental impediment that bedevils non-ideal love, the alteration of time." What you call the "sestet" brings Time center stage; but the first eight lines can quite straightforwardly be read as referring to time also. (Vendler in fact glosses "the remover" as time, although she fails to draw the consistent consequence of this that I'm drawing, because she's stuck to the presupposition that the theme must be infidelity.)

On this account, the dramatic speech act would be: Yes, it's true that ordinary love alters with time, but may I never admit that anything can cause this to be true of ideal love, the marriage of *true minds* (both words accented). This love, love in the authentic sense, does not alter (as do other, pretended loves) when it finds its object ravaged by time, nor allow Time's action of removing the physical traits that it loved to cause it to abandon the beloved ("bend with the remover to remove"); no, ideal love serves as an unfaltering, unshakeable goal of aspiration for all those other loves ("wandering barks") that waver in their steadfastness.

I note, by the way, that Winters's objection to "worth's unknown," on which Alpers bases his own interpretation, is just poor reading. Winters reads it as saying that the worth of the star is unknown by the mariner, and argues that the lover *must* know the worth of love, so the analogy with the mariner breaks down. But the sense of *unknown* worth here is quite obviously constituted by its contrast with another kind of value – the star's height – that can be *taken*, that is, known. The lover does in fact know the worth of love in the most essential way: he knows that it's "untakeable," incapable of being measured by the ordinary means of measurement available to humans. Shakespeare is not being sloppy here.

It seems to me that the only thing that stands in the way of recognizing that all of 116 is about love's invulnerability to Father Time is the deeply rooted assumption that it *must* be about infidelity. (Booth's commentary is so gnarled and tangled that I can't be sure, but I think the reading I'm proposing agrees with his; he says that 116 has "simple clear content" that can be straightforwardly paraphrased, but he never provides this paraphrase.)

I assume you'll have more to say about the interpretation of this sonnet, but in the meantime I want to also touch on another question that you raised at the outset, about what Alpers calls the "rhetorical" nature of the sonnets. You prefer to speak of the sonnets as "speeches in a drama," or, following Vendler, as "speech acts," rather

than as rhetoric, and, given Alpers's sense of the term, I quite agree that these terms are preferable. But there's another sense of rhetoric that is, I think, more the historical sense of the term than Alpers's usage, and which is quite essential to understanding the sonnets: rhetoric as the "reserve" of technical devices for developing speeches that is available to a given writer. Alpers sees this whole aspect of rhetoric in a way that I'm afraid is all too common, as "manipulations" of language or "ornaments of speech" (130); but rhetoric is more integral to the *techne* of Renaissance poetry than this way of conceiving allows. The Renaissance poet's ability to generate fresh and forceful new utterance isn't at odds with the conventional devices of poetic rhetoric; it emerges in large part out of mastery of them (this used to be well known, I think, and I'm surprised to see as knowledgeable a critic as Alpers eliding it). The sonnet-writing *techne* in the Renaissance is driven by the relation between the poet's inventiveness, the increase and decrease of this inventiveness across sonnets and even within parts of the same sonnet, the constraints that the formal requirements of the sonnet place on this inventiveness, and the rhetorical reserve that enables the poet to "coast" from time to time on the mechanical generativity of inherited figures and moves. What is most impressive to me about Booth, and which sets him above all other readers of the sonnets, is his sophisticated awareness of this interplay, as set forth especially in his *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (a staggeringly good book, perhaps the canniest, most incisive work of formalist criticism ever written, but unfortunately unknown to many readers of Booth's commentary). He argues there, for example, that the sonnets tend to exhaust their inventiveness, and their ambiguity-creating complexity, as they approach the final lines; the closing couplets, in particular, often give a simplified and reassuring version of the much more opaque and disturbing statement of the first twelve lines. The couplet of 116 is certainly not one of these; it might be the most difficult part of the poem. But Booth's principle concerns not just the concluding couplet but the overall movement of the poem as it *approaches* the end, shedding important light on the rather lazy recourse to Time's sickle in the third quatrain of 116.

Sonnet 60 [Booth writes] is one of seven poems in which the stock figure of time or death as an old man with a scythe appears; in only one of the seven does it appear before line 10, and the exception, 126, is not technically a sonnet. Father Time appears in the couplets of sonnets 12, 100, and 123, in 60.12, 74.11, and 116.10.

(*Essay*, p. 132, *fn.* 11)

When we consider the art or *techne* of the sonnets, it seems to me essential to note the "dynamic" or "energetic" aspect of them that Booth has defined in so many of its aspects, and of which the use of Father Time is an example. It tells us something about the commitment of Shakespeare to a given poem if he works his language through to the end with an unflagging quantity of revisionary force, or if he chooses to coast on the strength of his rhetorical "reserve." The Renaissance sonneteers' craft doesn't mind a certain amount of that kind of coasting; you can't write that many

lyrics, with formal constraints that severe, without doing that. But that means that we can't put the same kind of interpretive pressure on every part of a sonnet; we have to consider what constraints or forces, other than the sonneteer's intention to *mean*, are at work here. And that, to me, is the importance of thinking in rhetorical terms for reading Shakespeare's sonnets.

DA: Excellent! You've clarified some of the important questions the poem raises; I'm very taken, in particular, by your argument that the poem does not deal with the issue of fidelity.

The line that, as I now see it, misled me (and many others) is "Or bends with the remover to remove." Commentators almost without exception take this to be a reference to the lover's "removal" of his love: "yields to change when the loved person ceases to love" (Burrow); "Or inclines to withdraw when the other party's love withdraws" (Ingram and Redpath); "When the lover abandons him, the lover might be tempted to remove his affections" (Mikics); "It doesn't change when it finds change in the beloved, or even when the beloved leaves" (Paterson). With this reading of the line imminent, it's tempting to take the opening lines as referring to infidelity, the most obvious cause of such a breach: *marriage* sounds a warning note, *true* is then understood as "faithful," the *impediments* are taken to be the acts of sexual betrayal; and *alteration* points to the cessation of love. Until now, this is how I have read the opening, but your discussion has made me reconsider.

Booth offers two contrasting interpretations of *the remover* (I'll come back to the question of whether he really does share our objective of "minimal" readings): "(1) one who goes away; (2) one who takes something away (as time takes away beauty)." The first of these chimes with all the others I have cited, but the second suggests a rather different reading, the one which you have put forward and with which I am now inclined to agree. I see now that the line can be paraphrased as: "Or takes itself away when it finds the taker-away has been at work" – the taker-away in question being named in line 9 as (capitalized) Time (but implicit in the image of the "ever-fixèd mark"). Understanding the line in this way, all references to infidelity in the previous lines dissolve – the *marriage* is very clearly of *minds*, not bodies; *true* means "lasting" (or "ever-fixèd"); the *impediments* are those of the aging body (described in the third quatrain); and *alteration* refers to the changes wrought by time. The sonnet is thus about the inevitable process of aging, and constitutes an assertion that love – at least the love of "true minds" – is unaffected by it; anything which is called love but is touched by these changes does not merit the name. The third quatrain is not a digression from the topic of infidelity but the climax of the poem's argument, clarifying the thrust of the previous two quatrains.

All this is what you have already understood. But the question now arises: if the sonnet is not a freestanding meditation or proclamation but, like the others in the sequence, an utterance made in a particular context, as part of a continuing drama of love requited and unrequited, sustained and betrayed, what is that context? What can have prompted this utterance, what is at stake for the lover and the beloved? If any weight can be attached to the ordering of the Sonnets, it may be significant that

the previous poem is about the effects of time, and the next is, as Paterson puts it, about “WS’s own wandering” (as you point out, Paterson is wrong to state that 115 is also about his wandering). Elsewhere in the sequence there are many expressions of a feeling of unworthiness in the relationship, and of the fear of being abandoned when the beloved turns to a younger lover (sonnet 73 is perhaps the most powerful statement of this fear, although couched in defiant terms); here the young man – or so I am suggesting – is being warned that should he slacken in his love on account of the speaker’s increasing age and consequent loss of beauty, his “love” can’t be called love at all. “If ours is a marriage of true minds” (and it’s implied that the couple agree that this is the case) “then I can’t accept that it is subject to sub-lunary changefulness – so if you stop loving me because you detect the effects of aging upon me, yours isn’t that ideal love that we’ve read about but is directed instead at the mutable body.”

To read the sonnet in this way is to agree with Vendler that it is not an example of definition but of a dramatic response; but to disagree with her claim that what it is a response to is an attempt by the young man to excuse his own infidelities. The poet is responding to his own awareness of his increasing age, and perhaps to some signs of consequent restlessness on the part of young man; the result is this lesson in 14 lines on the nature of love. There is, of course, an implication that the speaker’s own love is of this kind; but I read the “definition” not as a triumphant assertion but as a slightly bitter, slightly reproachful reminder of all the declarations made down the ages in the name of perfect, absolute love. (Kerrigan argues that the impossibility of the claims made reflects the speaker’s skepticism [53–54]; I would argue that it reflects his familiarity with the Platonic and Petrarchan traditions, a familiarity he shares with his addressee.) The bitterness comes out more fully in the hyperbole of the final couplet.

I’m inclined, therefore, to resist my own suggestion that the poem begins with the highly unusual metrical variant of a double inversion – reading it iambically allows one, as Vendler understands, to put an emphasis on *me* that, together with the alliterative sequence linking five of the first eight beats (*me, marriage, minds, admit, impediments*), sounds like a personal rebuttal rather than a grand impersonal assertion.

Alternative readings would have the poet trumpeting his own steadfastness in the face of the young man’s susceptibility to the ravages of Time, or the permanence of their own marriage of minds despite their joint bodily vulnerability (I think this is roughly your take on the poem). These are plausible interpretations, but to me make the poem a somewhat bland assertion uncharacteristic of the sequence (and don’t really explain the personal force of the opening line).

Perhaps that’s enough interpretation – our aim in this discussion is not to achieve agreement on what the poem means, but to draw some conclusions from the critical commentary that surrounds it. One question that emerges for me from the variety of interpretations is the following: does the fact that commentators give such differing accounts (and that you and I, after immersing ourselves in the poem, differ from most of them and perhaps from each other) mean that it is a weak poem? Though there is a widespread critical inclination to find multiple interpretations a virtue, even when they are incompatible, my own inclination is to say that

Sonnet 116 is a less successful, less compelling poem than many in the sequence because Shakespeare has failed (*pace* Booth) to achieve sufficient clarity of verbal expression to carry the emotional and logical weight implied by the subject. I think your comments about the reserve of technical resources upon which Shakespeare was able to draw are absolutely right, and it may be that there is a certain amount of coasting here. (However, if I'm right that the definition of love provided in the poem is held in invisible quotation marks, there may be more inventiveness than this judgment allows.)

HS: You ask "What can have prompted this utterance, what is at stake for the lover and the beloved?" and then you answer this question, in a way that I find highly satisfying, by reading it as a dramatically motivated "personal rebuttal" related to sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst observe in me"). The young man has expressed doubts about their "marriage" (in the vernacular, he "has a problem with commitment"), because, after all, time will change the speaker (who is older than the youth, and showing the effects of age) and the speaker retorts, "May I (as opposed to YOU, who are finding reasons to doubt that true minds can marry) never admit that such reasons can exist," proceeding then to remind him of the ideal, time-defying nature of the marriage he proposes. The poem is thus a reminder of commonplaces about ideal love spoken in a "slightly bitter, slightly reproachful" tone to a lover who is concerned about the speaker's age. The speaker throws in with the tradition of declarations about ideal love in so hyperbolic a way as to sound a bit desperate; he's banking everything on this tradition being right. Your reading vividly brings out the significance of the accent on "me" that Vendler emphasized, yet in a way that doesn't depend on elaborate imaginings.

This reading gives the whole thing a bite it didn't have for me before, turning the very qualities that threaten to make it a mere rhetorical exercise into something alive with feeling.

I'm particularly struck by the way your dramatic reading affects the tone of the word "impediments." I've always read it as tonally neutral; but now I hear a particularly "bitter and reproachful" lilt to this word, reflecting the fact that impediments are what the presumed youth has raised – a comment that is now being thrown back in his face. Every word, every detail of the poem, up to the couplet (which I still find murky, but I'll set that aside), now seems transparent in meaning to me.

But you remain unsatisfied with the poem, as do I. The failure in "clarity of expression" of which you complain I understand as its lack of specification with regard to the dramatic context, the context that you've now reconstructed, but which – even though it looks pretty obvious now that you've pointed it out – hadn't occurred to any of the commentators we've looked at, or to me. There's not much beyond the peculiarly "asseverative" intensity of this poem to which Alpers points, an intensity that culminates in the hyperbolic language of the couplet, that marks it as having an identifiable speaker at all, much less one situated in a specific dramatic situation. If one has the context you've described in mind as one reads or recites it, one can make it dramatic by intoning it in the way you suggest, but that complex

tone isn't "in" the poem; it has to be supplied. That's why you formerly saw it as a mere rhetorical exercise.

Of course the very notion of a dramatic context implies that the context itself will contain meanings relevant to the speeches, requiring us, if we understand what's going on, to read them in certain ways, with certain meanings, even if those meanings are neither explicitly nor implicitly signaled in the language of the speeches. "Pray you, undo this button" late in *King Lear* carries a pathos in context of which it is utterly void in itself. But precisely this fact about dramatic utterance marks the limitations of reading 116 as though that's what it is. It reminds us that sonnets in a sonnet sequence are only in a very limited sense comparable to speeches in a drama, because, while they do have to carry on an implied narrative, developed in the sequence as a whole, they also have to work as stand-alone poems, each one on its own terms, and specifically in the very restrictive form of neo-Petrarchan sonnets. The maximally successful sonnet would be one that worked perfectly in the context of the sequence, but remained equally powerful when read in isolation. This is probably unachievable; if a sonnet retains all its power in isolation, it probably doesn't have a very grainy connection with the sequence.

Shakespeare has to write each sonnet in a way that furthers the emotional drama of his sequence, but he also has to make each piece as good as he can make it, qua sonnet. The latter requirement limits him to a specific verbal form and a specific reserve of figures, conceits, and emotions; but it also gives him resources independent of the drama he's inventing. Having a male love object, then introducing a non-Petrarchan female as a second love object, and devising a triangle among them, gives him a rich new set of possibilities to explore; and yet the conventions of the tradition are rarely out of sight. Hence the spotty nature of the narrative in this sequence, which is hard to make consistent sense of, and to which some sonnets make little contribution, and others none at all (notably the last two). He can slide between the two sets of resources that he has at his disposal – the sonnet form with all its conventions, and the drama that he has conceived as the context for his sequence. When the inspiration from one set of resources flags, he can look for it from the other set. Sometimes both will fail and the result will be relatively flat; and sometimes, I suspect, Shakespeare finds himself exploiting both sets of resources in a way that fully succeeds in terms of neither. 116 may be one of these poems.

The hypothesis of the speaker as dramatically individualized is best sustained by sonnets like 20 ("A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted"), in which the problem addressed (that nature added to the love object "one thing to my purpose nothing") and the emotion articulated have a freshness and vitality that emerges directly from the specific, non-traditional dimension of the sequence. 116 can be read either as a stand-alone Petrarchan sonnet or as dramatically situated, but your original feeling that it's a piece of rhetoric points to the fact that it doesn't naturally fall into the dramatic camp. You've shown how it can be read that way by setting it in relation to sonnet 73; but its other aspect becomes salient if we set it next to 65 ("Since brass, nor stone"), which also meditates on resistance to the corrosive power of time. I think it's worth quoting this beautiful piece in full, in order to

bring out the correspondence between these two sonnets in subject matter, and the contrast in their comparative level of verbal achievement.

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
 But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
 O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
 Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
 Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
 O fearful meditation! where, alack,
 Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
 Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
 O, none, unless this miracle have might,
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

116 offers an alternate way to resist the inexorability of time to that offered by 65; love in 116 can't forbid time "his spoil of beauty," but it can remain true even when beauty is gone. 65 is, like 116, an iteration of traditional thoughts about its subject, barely gesturing (if at all) at the specific dramatic situation; and yet, it is – as I trust you agree – incomparably the better poem. Comparing 116 to 65 brings out the flaws of the latter in a very obvious way. Whereas 116 is all "asseveration," as Alpers says – precisely the quality that leads Booth to fear it might be mere bombast – 65 is a series of agonized questions; whereas 116 asserts the existence of the poet's writing as guarantee that his assertions cannot be wrong, 65 anxiously hopes that this writing might just possibly, by some miracle, "have might" against time. These qualities give 65 the intrinsically "dramatic" character that we call *lyric*. And of course the whole utterance is so clear and straightforward, the language so much fresher and more vivid, the imagery so much more densely wrought, than in 116. 65 doesn't *need* the specific dramatic context at all. If we read it in relation to this context, it adds a bit of pathos to the worry about beauty being spoiled, and a bit of specificity to the love preserved in this black ink; but it is just as strong without them.

DA: Rereading Sonnet 65 certainly strengthens my sense of the limitations of 116; it's a poem where every line is working at full stretch, both in itself and in the context of the argument. None of the "coasting" that you interestingly referred to earlier.

I'd like to return to Booth's treatment of the sonnet to comment in more general terms on his procedures as a critic. After asserting that it has "simple clear content," that "its first clause aside, it is one of the few Shakespeare sonnets that can be paraphrased without brutality" (a proposition that we've seen is not borne out by the critical responses), and arguing for the brilliance of Shakespeare's fusion of the concrete and the abstract, of what he calls "substantial and insubstantial fabric"

(389), Booth makes a move that to some extent undoes, to my mind, the achievement of his criticism. (This is the second arm of his defense of the poem I mentioned earlier.) He tells us that “the poem is both singleminded, presenting constancy as the only matter worth considering, and heterogeneous in ways that do nothing to diminish or intrude upon its singlemindedness” (389). This heterogeneity arises from “relationships established in patterning factors that do not pertain to or impinge upon the logic and syntax of the particular authoritative statement it makes.” He further explains that these relationships occur among meanings of individual words that are irrelevant to the sentences in which they appear, and among his examples are *let* understood as “stop” as well as “allow”, *bends* understood as “applies one’s energy” or “stoops” as well as “turns aside,” and “compass” understood as a mariner’s tool as well as “encircling reach.” He believes there is an echo of “know” in *no* and “altar” in *alter*, and detects an “undercurrent of frivolous sexual suggestiveness” throughout the sonnet, including a hinted phallic pun on *polestar*. He offers a fuller justification of this kind of interpretation during the course of his commentary on Sonnet 112, where he admits to a fear that he will “seem to be a crazy advocate of crazy interpretations” (371), and insists that “such verbal side effects *cannot* displace or substitute for the clear expository intentions that are ordinarily obvious in the sonnets.” (In his book *Precious Nonsense*, Booth sets out in detail his claim that what makes the experience of works of literature pleasurable is their resistance to logic and sense.)

Isn’t this the kind of excessive interpretive ingenuity you and I have been grumbling about? If you allow all the connotations of a word to resonate, irrespective of the context in which it’s being used, aren’t you giving critical cleverness more importance than accurate and sensitive reading? True, this section of the commentary comes as a kind of afterthought to Booth’s more scrupulous attention to the words, and neither you nor I want to argue that interpretation should stop after the establishment of a minimal reading, but I would be interested to know how you respond to this aspect of Booth’s project.

HS: I very much want to discuss the question you raise, regarding Booth’s tendency to find a plethora of meanings in every detail of the sonnets; I think it’s an enormously important question, one the answer to which will enable us to articulate the issues around “minimal reading” more fully than we’ve done so far. But the question is so important that I think it deserves a whole separate discussion to itself, one that will further air out the issues about rhetoric and dramatic utterance and “the speaker” in the sonnets that Alpers’s essay brings into view. Alpers suggests that the New Critics were unenthusiastic about Shakespeare’s sonnets because their speaker lacked the emotional maturity and the “continuous, observable presence in the poem” that they valued in lyric poetry (123–24), and that Booth saved the sonnets for New Critical analysis by ignoring the speaker more or less altogether. On his way to these remarks, Alpers tracks the evolution of Booth’s method out of Ransom’s distinction between “structure” and “texture,” a distinction I’ve always found highly problematic, but also very intriguing, and to which I want to devote some close

attention. So I propose that we close our discussion of 116 here (I mean, including whatever response you want to register to what I've just finished saying) and devote the next chapter to this set of issues.

DA: We may be ending this discussion on a note of agreement, but it has been through a process of working through our disagreements that we have reached this conclusion, so I guess there is a point to be made here about critical practice. Reading and responding on one's own to a literary work, there is always the possibility of blind spots and overhasty assumptions. It's vital, therefore, to test one's understanding against that of others, in person or in print. In a way, what we have been doing is testing the responses of a number of critics against our own, and then testing our own against each other's. At the same time, I'm wary of the slight tinge of triumphalism in what I'm saying, as if you and I are claiming to have finally clinched the argument that has, implicitly or explicitly, engaged some of the best literary critics of the past 70 years. Of course this isn't the case; Ransom or Winters or Booth would no doubt have had important things to say in answer to our claims, and debates about Sonnet 116 will not be put to rest by our agreed reading. There is a *techne* of criticism as well as of creation, and you and I have certain protocols and practices that we work with, partly conscious but also partly unconscious; they are the resources we draw on but also the limits within which we read and think about reading – though we try always to push beyond those limits. What I'm suggesting is that our disagreements with earlier critics may be in part due to what they could and couldn't see, and what we can and cannot see; and that future readers will have a different set of habits, proclivities, and norms that may result in further shifts in the meaning and power of the poems we and they read. This is not to give way to some kind of relativistic view of interpretation – I continue to think that the poem has become a more interesting poem as a result of our discussion than it was in any previous reading, and that what we have described is more faithful to what Shakespeare wrote than any earlier description; it is just to acknowledge that all readings are dependent on context, and we cannot know the full extent to which that context determines what we make of any text we engage with.

I would be very happy to move on, as a new discussion, to the question posed by Booth's welcoming of apparently marginal meanings, and the issue of texture vs. structure. And I would be happy for you to make the first move this time.

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7

MODERNIST POETRY AND DISCURSIVE LOGIC (T. S. ELIOT, "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK")

Dear Derek,

It's true, as you say at the end of our last discussion, that we can't know the degree to which what we see in the poem is determined by our own context. But poems, like musical compositions, are in the first instance not the product of how we perceive them or how we interpret them, but of the *techne* that makes them, and the productive *techne*, unlike the poem, requires not "interpretation" but *apprenticeship*, on the part of both the artist and the critic. The critic's apprenticeship need not involve writing poems (although that is highly desirable); but it requires a parallel, intellectual rather than practical, submission to the poetic discipline.

Where does Booth fit in all this? On the one hand, his lesser-known *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* is the best analysis I've ever seen of the internal structures of a body of poems, and of the technical machinery by means of which they were constructed (I think the Russian Formalists would have appreciated his achievement); on the other hand, his famous commentary on the sonnets contains some of the most hair-raising "interpretive ingenuity," as you call it, that anyone has ever practiced. But Booth himself is perfectly clear, in the commentary as much as in the *Essay*, on the relation between the two sides of his enterprise. He cautions repeatedly that all the Empsonian ambiguity that he comes up with is strictly *irrelevant* to the architectural construct that is the poem, and that the structure of straightforward statement, which he takes to have been the main object of Shakespeare's concern as a skilled shaper of poems, is primary. What confuses the matter is that he also argues that, although the multiplicity of conflicting structures of sound and meaning – what Ransom called the poem's "texture" and most readers today think of as "ambiguity" – is logically irrelevant to the architecture of the poem, *this multiplicity is nevertheless what gives Shakespeare's poetry its peculiar richness and power*. The combination of these two claims is hard to grasp; I'm not even sure it makes sense. But most readers have not

tried to grasp it; they've simply understood Booth as a champion of mysterious multiplicity of meaning. But I think his most important contribution to poetics is the light he casts on the nature of poetic "structure" *in relation to* multiple meaning.

The question I want to raise now is: how generalizable is this way of talking about poetry? It's one thing to talk about the logic of exposition of the classical sonnet form in the Renaissance, but does modern poetry work in a similar way? Does the distinction that Booth posits between the poem's clear discursive structure, on one side, and the texture (the excess of ambiguity and multiple patterning), on the other, have any application to modern poetry?

In order to investigate this question, what do you say to our going straight to the poem that most influentially opened the floodgates of modern formlessness, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?

All best,
Henry

Dear Henry,

Your suggestion that the reader, like the artist, requires "apprenticeship" is a highly fruitful one, and it will be a particularly useful one in turning – as I am more than happy to do – to "Prufrock." I guess one of the things we're trying to ascertain in these conversations is just what such apprenticeship consists of: what are the techniques, kinds of information, and skills required by the reader in order to do justice to the literary work?

One of the things this way of approaching the question highlights is that as an artifact the poem is the product of a writer's deployment of the techniques available to him or her – I would say the inventive deployment, in the case of the successful writer, pushing beyond the limits hitherto operative – but that as an experience the poem is the product of the *reader's* deployment of the available techniques. Do those two sets of techniques have to match exactly? Is it possible for later periods to develop techniques – first in writing but subsequently in reading – that then become available for the reading of earlier poems? Or are these ahistorical readings, if that's what we should call them, illegitimate? And to what extent are these questions irrelevant, since, as you began by noting, we can't be fully aware of what we bring to the work we read, and we can't therefore expunge the protocols absorbed from our own cultural context? These issues relate directly to the poem we're about to discuss, of course, because the invention of new techniques by Eliot and Pound demanded new modes of reading, and it is now difficult, if not impossible, to turn back the clock even when reading Shakespeare or Milton.

I use the word *experience* in talking about the reader's activity, partly because it's one I've used frequently elsewhere (along with the word *event* to refer to the ontological status of the literary work), but also because it's one Booth uses a great deal in his *Essay*, in the course of stressing the mental activity required – and stimulated – by Shakespeare's sonnets. Early on in his book he makes the honest, but necessary,

admission that the responses he attributes to “the reader” “cannot ultimately be more universal or other than my own” (x). We may – and should – do our best to respond to any poem in terms of a shared *techne*, but we have to acknowledge that there will always be an element of the idiosyncratic – or let’s just say the idiomatic – about each of our responses. This is not detrimental to the life of literary works; on the contrary, it what gives them life. *Techne*, in other words, is not simply a given set of tools to be used by all alike, but a set of possible tools, to be tested both against the poem and against the uses of *techne* by other readers. Apprenticeship never reaches the point of total mastery.

So I like Booth’s emphasis on the mental activity of the reader very much; it enables him to talk not simply about pattern and structure in the various elements of the poem but about patterning and structuring as they occur in the reading process, in a complex dance of clash and coincidence. When you say that “poems, like musical compositions, are in the first instance not the product of how we perceive them or how we interpret them, but of the *techne* that makes them,” I feel the need to qualify your assertion: the poem considered apart from readings of it is nothing but a set of signifiers, which, when read – or, better, performed in the special kind of reading demanded by poetry – achieves its full being. That is to say, many kinds of reading do *not* release the poetic potential of the words; and here we are at one again, because I would say that the reading that does do so is the one that springs from an awareness of the appropriate *techne*.

Where I part company with Booth is his account of the final end of the reader’s mental activity: for him it appears to be summed up in words like “solace” and “comfort” – mental states made possible by the poem’s conversion of the chaos of nature into the controlled intricacy of art. While I’m sure he’s right that the poem is anything but a “natural object,” I’m not sure that its artifice operates only to console or reassure. But this may be because I am reading after “Prufrock,” as it were; the idea that the glory of art was its ability to crystallize into a harmonious whole the diverse energies of nature was a central one during the Renaissance, whereas the idea that art pleases by its opening up of new vistas of thought and feeling is a more modern one.

I’m going to let you make the first moves in getting to grips with the text of “Prufrock,” but let me think aloud for a moment about the task. I take it we’re not going to embark on an archaeological enterprise, attempting to reconstitute as minutely as possible the conditions of the work’s composition and publication, the context within which it was written and first received, the responses of its initial readers, and so on. Such an enterprise would be a worthy and illuminating one, though not one that would necessarily enhance a reading of the poem as a poem; it would be to treat the work as a historical object, located firmly in the past. And it would inevitably be an incomplete reconstruction. We can’t hope to recreate for ourselves the shock experienced by the poem’s first readers, a shock felt even – or perhaps especially – by those who considered themselves up to date with the poetry and poetic conventions of the time. Yet in reading the poem today, you and I inevitably, and quite properly, bring to it our knowledge of its place in the history of

twentieth-century poetry. If, by some fluke of personal formation, we had never encountered or heard about it before, and it was presented to us as the work of a young contemporary poet, we would read it very differently; it simply would not be the same poem, though the words would be identical. I believe the poem is still shocking, though the quality of that experience of shock is clearly different from what its first readers felt.

Best wishes,
Derek

HS: Yes, the reader has to deploy the techniques by means of which the *techne* of the poem is reconstructed; and no, those readerly techniques are not the same as those the poet used to make the poem, although they have an essential relation to them. Yet I don't think this justifies saying that "the poem considered apart from readings of it is nothing but a set of signifiers." A musician who looks at a page of Mozart's *Requiem* doesn't see a set of signifiers; she sees the masterful organization of musical notes that Mozart devised, and of which these signifiers are the reminder. We can also decode, behind the organization of the musical notes itself, the *techne* that Mozart inherited, and which determines his horizon of possibility of new musical forms; and something similar goes for a poem. So I would say that a musical composition – or a poem – considered *apart from the techne that produced it* is nothing but a set of signifiers. When you add that the reader must perform those signifiers "in the special kind of reading demanded by poetry," I think you're making the same point that I am now, because this special demand issues not from the set of signifiers that inscribe the poem, but from the special kind of organization, involving multiple forms of patterning, that has been given to those signifiers by the *techne* that made it. So, yes, the reader has to perform the poem; but in response to the "demand" made by the poem's *techne*.

This doesn't mean that everybody's readings of the same poem must arrive at the same result, any more than every performance of the *Requiem* is going to be the same. They will inevitably be different. But both kinds of performance imply a very restrictive *discipline* of performance.

DA: I'm sure we agree about the status of the material signifiers of a work of literature, or of music. As you say, the marks on the page which, translated into sound, realize Mozart's *Requiem* (I'm trying to phrase this carefully, as I don't think we can say the marks *are* the *Requiem*) mean nothing to the viewer without any knowledge of Western post-Renaissance musical notation but a great deal to the musician who possesses that knowledge. Likewise, the poem on the page, in order to be realized as a *poem*, requires a reader who not only understands the written language but who also possesses a certain body of knowledge, or know-how. You say that these readerly techniques have an "essential relation" with the techniques that went into the making of the poem, and I agree, but I think we still have to tease out more fully exactly what that relation is, especially across significant historical distances. I don't believe there's any *necessity* in, say, the discovery and appreciation of the verbal

complexity of Shakespeare's sonnets or the paradoxical wit of Donne's lyrics in the early part of the twentieth century; had cultural history been different these poems might still be little valued, and we might regard Joshua Sylvester or Robert Herrick as the great poets of their age.

This, at any rate, would be what I see as the methodological implications of Booth's appeal to the reader's experience, though I doubt whether he would have spelled them out in this way. The dance in the reader's mind is not simply produced by the poem, but by the interaction between the poem and the reader. And I believe it *is* a dance – that is to say, a happening that takes place, not a signifying structure that is to be replaced by an interpretation, understood as two static entities.

HS: Now for "Prufrock." I wonder whether naïve readers might not have reacted to the poem from the beginning the way I did at the age of 17, when, almost wholly ignorant of poetry apart from "The Raven" and "Gunga Din," I heard an English professor read it aloud to our class, and was enchanted by the poem's rhythms and rhymes, the brilliant, offbeat images, the pungently pathetic subjectivity evoked by the voice. Maybe most of all I was taken by the incantatory anaphoras: "Indeed there will be time ... there will be time ... time for you and time for me," "For I have known them all already ... Known the eyes already ... Known the arms already." I'm inclined to think that the shock the poem brought to some of its early readers might have been a product more of the prejudices regarding literary conventions that those readers carried, than of something intrinsically difficult or strange about the poem.

Here are the opening lines, following the transparently ironic title and an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* in Italian, the gist of which is that the speaker and the person he is addressing are both in hell. (I suggest that we keep the epigraph firmly on the very margin of the poem.)

Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
 Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
 Let us go and make our visit.

Turning to the main question I want to ask about this poem, then: is Prufrock fundamentally a *texture* of associations, of patterns of sound and image that can be put together differently by every reader, and that perhaps is spoken by more than

one voice, or is it *structured* as a logical discursive progression, from beginning to middle to end? The answer seems to me obvious. It's a clearly structured argument; and the sense of pastiche arises from mistaking the associative texture for what Booth would call the "straightforward sense" of the poem and I'm calling its structure. This is strongly signaled right from the beginning, with the "then" in the first sentence, which implies that there is a preceding ground (either that suggested by the epigraph, or some unspecified preceding discourse; in any case, we are picking up the argument already in progress) for the action that is now suggested: "Let us go, *then*, you and I." A few lines later the discursive character of Prufrock's speech is underlined: the streets on which "you and I" are to go "follow like a tedious argument / of insidious intent / to lead you to some overwhelming question." This is marvelous, I think: these are actual streets, to be actually walked on; but walking along them figures an allegorical journey that leads *logically* (by "tedious argument") to the "overwhelming question." The interesting thing about the rest of the poem is that, in fact, the speaker will evade this logical conclusion to which the tedious argument of the streets ought by rights to lead him, but he will do so by coherent counter-argumentation.

Very schematically, here is the discursive skeleton of the rest of the poem. After proposing that we "go and make our visit," there is an unexplained pause or hesitation as attention drifts to the yellow fog; but immediately after this section, the speaker reflects on, and justifies, this hesitation: "And indeed there will be time." Notice the discursive flag provided by "indeed." "Indeed" indicates that an observation is being made, something is being underlined, about the immediately foregoing remarks ("We've interrupted our pursuit of the overwhelming question to linger over the fog or smoke, but be not concerned, for 'indeed there will be time / For the yellow smoke'"). There will also be time for this and that and the other thing, a reflection that sets up the doubt in "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?," a doubt occasioned by the fact that "In a minute there is time," always, to rethink one's daring. This culminates the first major movement of the poem. The next major movement comprises three anaphorically connected passages, all of which are ruled logically and syntactically by the "for" at the beginning, and the "so" at the end, of the first one:

For I have known them all already, known them all:
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall
 Beneath the music from a farther room.
 So how should I presume?

"For" is a very strong logical connective; it indicates that some important consideration is being brought to bear on the question of whether the speaker dares disturb the universe. Do I dare disturb the universe, *given that* "I have known them all already, known them all"? And "So (given that I have known them all already)

how should I presume?" The next two passages begin with "and" rather than "for," but the anaphora makes clear that this is a continuation of the same argument; and the second passage begins to intrude a new direction for the meditation with a new logical connective: "then." "Then how should I begin ... ?" ("I have explained what impedes my willingness to dare; so *then* how should or would I go about getting started in daring?")

In the first "I have known them all" passage, the fact of having known them all initially appears to provide conclusive reason for not daring. "So how should I presume?" seems to be a rhetorical question with a foregone conclusion: clearly, I cannot presume, because I've known them all already. But in the second passage, the speaker starts haltingly to move toward how he might dare after all. "Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways." At this point it sounds merely rhetorical, implying that obviously, there's no way (given that I have known them all) that I would begin. The passage then ends again with the question about how he should presume; doubtless to reassert the point about the strong reasons for not doing so. But then at the end of the third passage the question of *how to begin* comes alive, as "should I then presume" and "how should I begin" switch places, with "how should I begin" now becoming the focal, concluding question, which then leads directly on to the actual attempt by the speaker to presume and to begin: "Shall I say, I have gone through certain narrow streets".

Now, it's true that there's been a shift from daring to disturb the universe, to daring to spit out the butt-ends of his days and ways. This is not obviously the same daring. However, the discursive framework is treating them as though they were equivalent. The question has remained "do I dare" across the apparent shift in the aim of daring, and has now turned to the question of how the daring should be undertaken. We should take the equivalence of disturbing the universe and spitting out the butt-ends of his life as our default assumption until it's proven that it won't work. So let's keep going to see if in fact it will work. It's easy to make out that "I have gone through certain narrow streets" is one of these butt-ends. The speaker demeans the value of the way he has spent his days by calling their residue "butt-ends," and the beginning of the poem has acquainted us with "certain half-deserted streets" that he proposes to walk (as well as, perhaps, the "oyster-shell" ashtrays in which another kind of butt-ends collects?), and with the character of which he is evidently already familiar. So if we suppose his discourse to be coherent, it makes straightforward sense that what he's referring to now as how he might begin is the story of his acquaintance with this milieu.

DA: One general comment: I suspect we differ in our responses to the poem, or at least in what we want to emphasize about those responses. I want to bring out the exact nature of the shock I feel it renders my expectations as a poetry reader, even on reading it for the twentieth or thirtieth time; you want to stress its structure as a coherent argument, and suggest that there's nothing "intrinsically difficult or strange about the poem." (The whole question of what can be considered "intrinsic" to a work is something we've been circling around for a while.) But we

have rather similar stories to tell about our initial engagement with the poem – and those initial engagements we had with various literary works often continue to play an important part in later readings. I was 17 or 18 when our English professor introduced the poem to the class I was in, with the boast that he had actually met Eliot. (He was a British expatriate teaching in South Africa.) I honestly don't remember if it was me or another member of the class who asked, "And did he wear the bottoms of his trousers rolled?" The professor didn't share in the amusement of the class, but the anecdote shows how quickly some of those lines stuck. I too have many of them lodged somewhere in my cerebral cortex – and I never hear or even think the phrase "Let us go" without mentally continuing with Eliot's words.

That memorability of so many of the poem's lines – perhaps poetry's oldest function and still the sign of a particular kind of poetic power – comes in part from Eliot's almost consistent use of an alternating, duple rhythm (including many lines that fall into simple trochaic or iambic meters), with the frequent reinforcement of rhyme. In fact, the duple rhythm is more regular than most poems written in canonical meters: it scarcely falters in its alternating movement until the lines "Time to turn back and descend the stair / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair – / They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'" In these lines we encounter for the first time a more varied rhythm, including some triple sequences. This is 40 lines into the poem! And the duple rhythm returns immediately, to continue, with only occasional departures, to the end of the poem. (The verse paragraph beginning "No! I am not Prince Hamlet" is one of the places where the rhythms are freer, just where the Shakespearean pastiche might lead us to expect them to be strictest.) As a test of the contribution made by the regular rhythm to the memorable swing of the lines, try these slightly modified versions of the poem's final lines:

We have lingered in the sea's chambers
By sea-girls wreathed with red and brown seaweed
Till human voices awaken us, and we drown.

And here's the original:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

It's a sign of Eliot's technical mastery that there's very little sense of padding or word-order shifting to accommodate the rhythm of his lines: the inversion of "seaweed red and brown" is perhaps one example, and in prose we might have expected "I do not think they will sing to me," which is an irregular four-beat line instead of the regular iambic pentameter of "I do not think that they will sing to me." ("Taking of a toast and tea" might be another one, but perhaps the idiom has changed since 1915.) Eliot's notion that in the best free verse there is a regular

meter lurking behind the arras doesn't really apply here, since regular meters are unmistakably present in the room itself.

This, then, is one aspect of the poem's dance: the words flow easily, calling up, consciously or not, the centuries-old tradition of English metrical verse. The varied line-lengths don't present any kind of puzzle, nor would they have when the poem was published, since the Pindaric ode had been a favored form since the seventeenth century, and many Victorian poets played with line-lengths and rhymes. (It occurs to me now – it has surely been observed before – that Arnold's "Dover Beach," with its similarly irregular rhyme-scheme, shifting line-lengths, and variable meter, must have served as one of Eliot's prosodic models.) The freedom to lengthen and shorten the line gives Eliot the opportunity to highlight a short phrase – "The muttering retreats," "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?," "I grow old ... I grow old ..." – or to spell out a longer utterance – as in the pompous length of "My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin."

HS: I find your remark about the predominance of duple rhythm very illuminating. I would add that the varying line lengths on which you comment are what keep the duple rhythm from becoming monotonous. But how do you read the recurring pattern of lines with an accented first syllable – lines that have an odd number of syllables, usually seven (beginning with the first line of the poem)?

DA: The seven-syllable line you point to, such as the first one of the poem, is, I would say, one of the simplest of metrical forms – the four-beat line that is the basis of almost all popular verse, in a duple meter without initial or final offbeats. One of its most famous uses is in Shakespeare's enigmatic poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" ("Let the bird of loudest lay / On the sole Arabian tree"); another well-known example is Auden's "Lay your sleeping head." Traditional prosody based on classical meters doesn't easily accommodate the form. Eliot knew what he was doing, even if he didn't have a word for it.

Let me go back to the beginning now. The irony of the title is, as you say, transparent, perhaps even cruel. The poem that follows, since it invites us to share Prufrock's perspective, encourages a degree of sympathy that tempers our laughter at the ridiculous figure cut by the insecure bourgeois gentleman, but the title simply invites laughter at the disparity between, on the one hand, a character bearing this name with its pretentious initial, and, on the other, the tradition of the love song.

I'm very taken with your decoding of the poem's logical structure, and I'm looking forward to hearing the rest of it. A question then arises: why have readers generally not given this structure its due? You blame "the general fogginess that besets the reading of poetry in our era," but perhaps there's more to be said. Is the reason at least partly to do with the poem's refusal to abide by the conventions that used to govern poetry, and still do for many readers? Let me just suggest places in the opening lines where the poem goes off the rails.

A first person speaker – the aforementioned Mr. Prufrock, we assume – is extending an invitation: but to whom? As you note, “then” might imply that we’ve come into a conversation in progress, but who is the interlocutor? Love songs are usually addressed to the beloved, but any such hypothesis is quickly disproved by the nature of the invitation itself. Is it I, the reader, who is being invited to accompany the speaker, even though I’m ignorant of the conversation that’s been going on? Will I traverse the half-deserted streets together with J. Alfred? Is it the reader who is enjoined to refrain from asking what the overwhelming question is, and who makes up with the speaker the “us” and “our” of the last line of this opening verse paragraph? (The “you” in “To lead you” is presumably a different kind of “you,” since it seems to mean anyone at all – at least this makes more sense to me than assuming another address to an interlocutor. A slight clumsiness in the poem, perhaps.)

You could have added “Oh” to your list of discursive flags, I feel, as it implies that the addressee has asked, or begun to ask, or shown signs of being about to ask, the question about the overwhelming question:

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

(Or the “Oh” could be a purely pre-emptive exclamation – if the addressee is the reader, for instance.) In other words, this opening paragraph implies a lively interpersonal relationship that has existed before the poem began. We continue reading, assuming this relationship will continue, and perhaps that the identity of the accompanying figure will be identified. But looking ahead for a moment, it turns out that this assumption is false. The idea of a joint visit quickly disappears, the first person pronoun becomes dominant for the remainder of the work, and the second person pronoun makes only fitful appearances. It functions as the generalized “you” once more in “to meet the faces that you meet,” “drop a question on your plate,” and “the eyes that fix you,” and rather more puzzlingly in “Time for you and time for me,” “here beside you and me,” and “among some talk of you and me.” It then disappears altogether for the rest of the poem – about a third of its length – although it perhaps resurfaces implicitly in the first person plural of the last three lines. But most readers, I suspect, take that final “we” (“human voices wake us, and we drown”) as embracing a wider population than just Prufrock and the mysteriously disappearing addressee.

The peculiarity of the second person is the first spanner thrown by the poem into the traditional works, and it begins in line one. The next disruption starts in line two, with the notorious simile of the anaesthetized patient. No doubt inspired by Marvell, Eliot hazards a “metaphysical” comparison. It’s fun, but it doesn’t make sense: you and I will commence our journey when “the evening is spread out against the sky”? (Notice, by the way, that the apparently logical “then” of the first line now looks more like being a temporal adverb – “then” is complemented by “when.” Had Eliot written “Now the evening,” we would assume the invitation was for an immediate

journey.) If I were Prufrock's companion, I would be waiting for ever, as I have no idea what this crepuscular scene would look like, nor how to perceive an "evening" "against" "the sky." If I follow his words further in hope that the simile will help clarify the image, I'm disappointed: I can't think of much that would look less like the evening sky than "a patient etherised upon a table." The reader also has to work hard to construe "muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells." Is the point that those who do frequent these streets (since they're only *half*-deserted) are seeking a retreat from their hotels, where they can't sleep? It would be easier to interpret the lines in this way if "Of" were replaced by "From." And are they in retreat from the restaurants as well, as the punctuation suggests? Or is the "Of" appositional? – streets which are retreats which are one-night stands and restaurants. (That last line provides another of the poem's few clumsinesses; the rhythm is smooth, provided that we give "restaurants" three syllables – as Eliot does in his own reading of the poem, incidentally – but the sense would be clearer with something less rhythmic, surely: something like "restaurants with oyster-shells in the sawdust of their bars," if that's what the line means.)

All right, I know, Eliot is playing with us; the kind of Ransomesque nit-picking rationality I've been forcing on the words has no place in a response to this poem. It would be equally out of place were I to attempt to make prosaic sense out of the yellow fog's transformation into a cat or dog (muzzles are usually associated with dogs or horses, though the animal's behavior suggests a cat), a metaphor that takes on a life of its own until vehicle has left tenor far behind. Yet we can't ignore the poem's refusal to conform to the protocols of sense-making. My point is that the lines remain a challenge to interpretation a century after it was written; they both soothe and disturb, inviting us in but then repelling us, giving us vivid but off-kilter similes, following quaint urban vignettes with the brittle cynicism of lines like "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" or the outspoken horror of lines like "There will be time to murder and create."

What do you make of the poem's apparently willful departures from sense? In the rest of the poem there are perhaps none as egregious as those I've discussed, as if Eliot wants to disconcert us at the start but then give us something more like a conventional poem. Nevertheless, Prufrock's monologue continues to make unexpected jumps from one kind of statement or question to another, refusing us the usual connective tissue and narrative coherence. Or are we now so accustomed to poems with gaps in continuity and obstacles to sense that we take them in our stride, just as we are no longer startled by Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*?

HS: You ask how the obscurity of the first part of the poem squares with the clarity of the discursive structure that I'm claiming to find. A simple answer would be that a clear discursive structure can accommodate an almost unlimited amount of obscurity; that's, I take it, what Booth showed when he traced the multitude of crosscutting "textural" structures of meaning that are nevertheless accommodated in almost all of Shakespeare's sonnets within the dominant discursive structure. The

fascinating thing about discursive structure is that it can be reduced until only its skeleton remains, and yet it can still continue to function. This is clearly visible in a nonsense poem like “Jabberwocky,” where the pleasure we get is precisely from the disjunction between the clear narrative and sentence structure and the nonsense words. I’m not suggesting that Prufrock functions like a nonsense poem, only that “Jabberwocky” illustrates the way that discursive structure functions as a sense-giving container all by itself. We wouldn’t be able to get the point of “Jabberwocky” if we didn’t notice this autonomy of its discursive structure. Correspondingly, readers of “Prufrock” have often ignored the discursive skeleton and as a result gotten lost in obscurities of the type you point out.

The first obscurity, as you note, is the identity of the “you” that the speaker addresses. There’s not a clue in the poem as to who it could be, and whenever a poem leaves something open like this it’s fruitless to try to close it by means of one’s own ingenuity. The reader who thinks that everything in a poem has a literal or symbolic *referent* and that the reader’s job is to decode this referent, or to invent one where one cannot be decoded, is troubled by this lack of information; but from the minimal-reading or *techne* standpoint it’s merely a design feature – possibly an ill-conceived one, but a design feature. You’ve noted what information the poem does give us about “you,” and from this all we can say is that it’s an undetermined, generalized “you,” and that it functions to frame the poem as an odd kind of apostrophe. Approaching it this way, we can read the subsequent “fitful appearances,” as you call them, of second person pronouns as elements of a continuous design feature, linked to the opening address. You’re right that the “Oh” of the opening passage is an important marker; it personalizes the relation between the speaker and “you,” adding a touch of affect that arises directly from the relation as it is being lived at that moment, something which you nicely articulate. The “you” then, as you point out, returns, fairly unobtrusively, four more times before disappearing for most of the last third of the poem. But the opening and these repetitions are enough to identify Prufrock’s discourse as addressed to *someone* throughout. When he asks “Do I dare?” and “How should I begin,” and “Would it have been worth it after all?” he’s asking *somebody else* these questions, engaged in an earnest colloquy with a silent, unspecified, generalized human Other. The “you” is supposed to be following the speaker’s journey through the argument of insidious intent, on the way toward the “overwhelming question.” This invites us to hear the movement of the “For I have known them all already, known them all” sequence – with its two culminating questions: “So how should I presume? / And how would I begin?” – differently than as Prufrock’s entirely private interior dialogue. And yet, because the Other remains so underspecified, we remain in some in-between space; I as a reader experience the “you” as always on the edge of being absorbed into Prufrock’s interiority, never quite a real other. This is how it functions. The Other is there, and yet not quite entirely there. For me this is part of what makes the poem so haunting.

Our default assumption when reading a poem should be that any given feature is a design feature, one that was put there by the poet-scriptor for *techne* reasons.

This is not because the poet is assumed to be infallible, or because he's "conscious" of everything he puts in, but because we assume that a poet has worked like a skilled artisan, and has felt the surface of her poem with an artisan's "feel" for bumps and irregularities in its surface, and has done her best to work these out. We make this default assumption and then draw out its full consequences; if it doesn't work, we drop it and try something else. But it's remarkable how often just trusting oneself to the poem yields satisfying results, results one didn't expect at first.

Turning to the beginning of the poem: reading "then" as leading to "when," as you suggest, is a satisfying way of dispensing with the need to worry about any antecedent to this speech act, and enables us to dispense with the epigraph altogether. I'm quite in favor of that.

As for the evening's being "spread out against the sky": doesn't this simply picture the sky as a background for a foreground effect, presumably of light and color? This would be crepuscular evening, not night; if we think of it as night then the image really doesn't make sense. The slowly vanishing light of evening stretches across the horizon. I quite agree that the anesthesia image defeats any effort to treat it as visual; but this just means that it functions in some other way, since there's no doubt that it's an *effective* image – is there? It must be a rare reader who isn't impressed by it. What impresses me is the evocation of helpless immobility in a context of illness or serious injury; then the shockingly technological nature of the image, which, like the suggestion of pathology, clashes, in Baudelairean anti-Romantic fashion, with the traditionally bucolic topos of evening. The first two lines and first word of the third suggest a conventional "nature opening"; then comes the shock of the anesthesia image. Under the influence of this image, I've always seen this evening sky as a dirty, smoggy sky, the kind typical of cities, an association that is supported by the subsequent reference to the fog as "yellow."

The "muttering retreats" I read as referring to these streets as backwaters, a neighborhood not frequented by most of the city's inhabitants (therefore "half-deserted"), "backwaters characterized by one-night cheap hotels and similarly cheap restaurants." "Retreats" also implies that this is a part of town to which one can "retreat" from the kind of world to which Prufrock belongs. Nor does "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" strike me as clumsy. "Sawdust restaurants" I've always read as signaling a certain cultural level of eating place, the kind one would find next door to a one-night cheap hotel. If there are oyster shells in the sawdust, this is an additional identifier, suggesting (once we read the rest of the poem and note that the sea is evoked twice) that this area of town might be near the seashore. But are the shells necessarily thrown into the sawdust? Perhaps this is a phenomenon you're familiar with; but I'm not (although I do remember non-seafood sawdust restaurants from many years ago). This is one of those features of poems that to be decided require specific reference to concrete culture history.

In general, then, I don't see much "departure from sense" in these opening lines. The evening fog or smog, by contrast, does indeed meander off in catlike form in a puzzling way. But it's so manifestly wandering off that this wandering, too, must be treated as a design feature. I've already noted that it motivates the introduction

of the “indeed there will be time” sequence. The whole point of this sequence is that the speaker can’t get himself to “bring the moment to its crisis,” as he will say later, so he has to temporize; and going off on this fog-reverie immediately after declaring that the streets lead to an “overwhelming question” and that we should “go and make our visit” is explicitly pointed to as just such a delaying tactic. It instantiates the fact that “In a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”

Doubtless all of this is highly elliptical, and it may be, as you suggest, that this is a new, modernist, kind of departure from sense in poetry that we’ve just gotten used to; but to me making sense of *Prufrock* doesn’t seem essentially different than making sense of one of Shakespeare’s sonnets. Do you think it is essentially different?

I’ll now sketch as economically as I can the remainder of what I see as the skeleton of the poem’s discursive structure.

I broke off last time with “How should I begin.” I was saying that the question “do I dare” has now been refined into a specific act of daring, the act of “spitting out the butt-ends” of his life. “I’ve had a whole lifetime of experiences of triviality and of being pinned by critical eyes and of muted desire that show there’s no point in my daring to ‘disturb the universe’; yet, even so, let’s say that I did dare. How would I go about it?” And he proposes a beginning: “I have gone through certain narrow streets.” It’s not clear how this beginning constitutes an act of daring or presuming, and, more enigmatically, how it would disturb the universe. But we don’t need to answer this question – in fact we need to ignore it – when we’re trying to discern the poem’s discursive structure. For this we need to keep focused on what remains reasonably stable about the poem amid the shifting texture of possible meanings that it causes to flash across the reader’s mind. Within the confines of a well-constructed structure, any amount of texture can safely slosh around. At the level of the discursive outlines of the poem, the poem as a distinct speech act, we can see that, whatever it all means, after much delay we seem somehow to have finally been led to the brink of the culmination portended by the beginning of the poem, the “overwhelming question” toward which the “tedious argument” leads: “If I do presume, exactly how will I do it? Like this?”

Immediately there comes the sudden recoil that marks the beginning of the poem’s turn: I should have been a speechless organism somewhere far away from the sound of human voices:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

This clearly constitutes a refusal of the possibility that was just momentarily touched, of daring to speak. And now, for the next three sections, comes the explanation of this refusal, in the form of a reiteration of the life experience he has already characterized in the “I have known them all” sections. But now, following one final interrogative (“Should I, after tea and cakes and ices”), the way in which this experience blocks the possibility of daring is no longer put forward in a merely

tentative way; now it is definitively affirmed: “But though I have” done this and that and the other thing, “I am no prophet, and here’s no great matter.” Here’s the poem’s definitive turn. The answer to the question, “Should I dare” – which has been finally specified as a question of utterance, of what is now retrospectively further specified as *prophetic* utterance – is now given; the answer is “no,” a no that will be re-affirmed, with an exclamation mark, at the beginning of the coda: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet.” Hamlet, of course, is not a prophet, but he fits into a structural series with John the Baptist and Lazarus, as a protagonist of heroic utterance of the sort to which Prufrock is unequal.

The second and third sections of this part of the poem are held together anaphorically by the rhetorical question, “would it have been worthwhile?” which involves a fundamental tense shift. We have crossed the line that separates prospect from retrospect. It’s no longer a case of some possibility of future daring, but of looking back on a past in which the speaker might have dared, but never did. This confirms the negation of “I am no prophet.” We are now on the other side of the rejection of the possibility of attempting prophetic utterance, looking back on that possibility and arguing that, in any case, it would have been futile.

The coda, then, once again confirms, and intensifies, this denial. Not only am I not Prince Hamlet, and not only would it have been futile if I had spoken like Lazarus back from the dead, but it was *never* in the cards for me to take on the role of prophet (“nor was meant to be”). This marks the descent into self-justification and self-pity that begins with “although I’ve wept and fasted.” This then culminates with Eliot’s characteristic trick of bathetic deflation: the sublime “Do I dare disturb the universe?” is shrunken down to the “indeed, almost ridiculous” question, “Do I dare to eat a peach?”

The mermaids then enter the scene to complete the love song, but this is all, as I said, a coda; the discursive structure of the poem is already complete with “I am not Prince Hamlet.”

OK – back at you. I’m eager to see what monkey wrenches you can throw at this tidy – no doubt overly tidy – picture.

DA: No complaints about your tidiness. I think you’re absolutely right to stress the discursive skeleton of the poem, which distinguishes it from a host of later poems in which verbal fireworks are unconstrained by any larger coherence, resulting usually in frustration and boredom for the reader. Your account of this structure in “Prufrock” has helped me appreciate the work as a single poem rather than a series of brilliant lines.

I’m going to respond first to your comments on “the reader,” then seriatim to some of your points about the poem.

In our engagement with the poem we are both trying to be a certain kind of reader, seeking to shed our idiosyncrasies (just as we would advise our students which of their responses to a work appear to be merely idiosyncratic) and to do full justice to the poem as a crafted piece of language. (Jumping ahead a bit, I like your account of the default assumption with which we approach a literary work – the assumption that

it is the product of a skilled craftsman in which everything that appears is there for a reason.) As you know, there have been lengthy debates about the kind of reader the critic is trying to be or to ventriloquize: the “ideal reader,” the “implied reader,” the “superreader.” Whatever name we give it, I think we agree that this figure is the reader demanded by the poem, which is to say that it only comes into being *in the reading*, in the back and forth between expectation and fulfillment or disappointment, in the hermeneutic circle between local detail and larger context, in the gradual building up of a sense of what kind of poem it is. So in commenting on “Prufrock” part of what we are doing is developing a sense of what kind of reader the poem demands, not so? In some of my earlier comments, I played the part of the rationalist, and though this threw up some interesting points about the poem, it didn’t work; your discussion has proposed a somewhat different reader, one who can activate, as it were, more of the poem’s potential. This is not quite the same, I suggest, as Jonathan Culler’s “competent” reader (see his *Structuralist Poetics*), who is already constituted by the literary system before engaging with any particular work.

I take your point about the increased possibility of local obscurity within a firm discursive structure. Another example would be *Finnegans Wake*: for the most part Joyce retains recognizable sentence structures within which he plays merry hell with lexical items. When the reader is unable to grasp the syntax as well as the individual words, the result is too much confusion and disarray to allow of much reading pleasure. In both “Jabberwocky” and the more accessible parts of the *Wake* the reader can make informed guesses at otherwise unintelligible verbal items thanks to the clarity of the armature in which they occur. We do this all the time in reading texts in a language of which we have a limited grasp. I see that, to a certain degree at least, the same is true of “Prufrock.” However, some of Eliot’s phrasing remains unproductively obscure to me; that is to say, its refusal of straightforward sense leads to blockage rather than the release of interesting implications. And – to jump ahead again – I’m a little suspicious (as I am in Booth’s commentary on Shakespeare’s sonnets) of the “shifting multitude of possible meanings” sloshing around inside the logical framework. Doesn’t this give carte blanche to the kind of interpretive excess that you and I have already expressed doubts about – in, for instance, our discussion of Blake’s “Sick Rose”?

One thing I like about your more detailed account of the poem is that you are now acknowledging the shock which it delivers, something I thought you were denying. Yes, the anesthesia image remains shocking, however hard one tries to relate it to scenes we have witnessed. Going on, I see that I was misreading “Of” in the sixth line – the restless nights and the sawdust restaurants *are* the retreats, as you point out (though I’m still not sure about “muttering,” which must be a displaced epithet that rightly belongs to the unnamed retreaters). A cultural historian might indeed help us with the oyster-shells: presumably oysters were, in 1910, far from a luxury in some areas (near the sea, as you say – if we bring in biographical evidence, we might suggest Boston), and presumably there were restaurants with sawdust on the floor as was certainly the case with cheaper bars. But I still can’t see the shells anywhere other than in the sawdust, and I still find the tacked-on phrase awkward.

Do I think making sense of “Prufrock” is essentially different from making sense of Shakespeare’s sonnets? – yes and no. The process is identical, but the differences in *techne* between the 1590s and the 1910s (and Eliot’s own *techne*-expansion) make for differences in the norms put to work in that process: we don’t expect that same kind of logical clarity about sequences of sentences in Eliot that we do in Shakespeare, for example – or if we start with that expectation, we learn to set it aside.

I like your reading of the remainder of the poem, and you’ve successfully justified the uncertainties of the second person pronoun. One aspect that remains, for me, oddly hard to pinpoint is *tone*: is this all uttered in deadly earnest? Or does Prufrock perceive, with ironic detachment, his absurdity? There could hardly be a more banal line than “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.” Is Prufrock doing a comic turn at his own expense? Or does the comedy arise from our own perception of the banalities he is capable of coming out with in all seriousness? I don’t expect you to answer these questions: my point is really that one of the remarkable features of the poem is just this tonal uncertainty, which amounts, if one takes it to its furthest extreme, to an uncertainty about the place of the individual in the universe. (He may not be Prince Hamlet, but there is something Hamlet-like about the juxtaposition of the goodly frame and the sterile promontory, the paragon of animals and the quintessence of dust.)

Have at you!

HS: When I denied that the poem was shocking, I meant that it’s still recognizably a poem, that it’s not shocking in the sense of “scandalous,” as some early readers felt who found it an affront to their poetic sensibilities. It uses all the most basic, familiar techniques of poetry, so that even an ignorant freshman such as I was could take pleasure in it. I also meant that I don’t believe the poem is significantly more “difficult” than many poems from earlier eras, such as certain of Shakespeare’s sonnets or some of Donne’s poems, or even “Mont Blanc.” It is of course, new and strange and difficult in its own way, but all worthwhile poetry is new and strange and difficult in a way that requires most of all a certain resourceful responsiveness to the many dimensions of form and meaning that cut across the primary discursive structure of the poem, a resourcefulness that I doggedly believe to be much the same for almost all poetry up to and including “Prufrock.”

I like very much your suggestion that we think of Eliot’s seven-syllable lines in terms of the traditional four-beat line with a duple rhythm. Joseph Malof taught me many years ago to think of English poetry in terms of the fundamentality of those four beats, and I’ve always found it a rich foundation for thinking about English prosody.

I’m curious about what the further “obscurities of phrasing” are that you find in the poem.

I see no tonal uncertainty of the sort you mention; the banality of the line about trousers corresponds to the banality of his being as he fully recognizes it to be. The

cuffed (“rolled”) trousers form a series with parting his hair behind (to cover his bald spot) and the bathos of “do I dare to eat a peach.” The whole point of this concluding sequence is to confess his complete surrender to the pathetic reality of his life – a reality that was already hinted at by the title of the poem. He aspired to grand, resonant utterance – as well as to who knows what kind of success with women – and he now accepts that underneath his tasteful and expensive clothing (with the “necktie rich and modest” and so forth) he truly is that very skinny-limbed and balding, aging man that the piercing eyes of the women earlier in the poem perceived and left “pinned and wriggling on the wall.”

I do see a different tonal question, concerning whether this final section crosses over from mournful resignation into mawkish self-pity – in which case the speaker becomes ridiculous in a way beyond that which he recognizes.

In either case, the pathos reaches its climax with “I do not think that they will sing to me”; yet, with this perfectly regular line of monosyllabic iambic pentameter – which gives us a foretaste of the iambic pentameter of the poem’s concluding couplet – the formal register of the lines shifts in such a way that the emotional excess is reined in. In between this line and the end is a fascinating play of rhythm that is beyond my expertise to illuminate, and about which I hope you will say something. The lines that are not iambic pentameter vary between ten and eleven syllables, and are liberally sprinkled with anapests; that’s about all I can say. The final six lines are an astonishing tour de force of “poetic closure,” on the levels of both sound and sense. In “Combing the white hair of the waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black,” the speaker’s personal emotion recedes entirely from view; the dense alliteration/assonance foregrounds the aural qualities of the words in a way that almost overwhelms the meaning. Here, although the voice still says “I,” it suddenly shakes off the plaintiveness of the preceding lines, because now the lines foreground their own quality of poetic artifice, in such a way that we feel the constructed “Prufrock” voice to be steadied by the scriptorial consciousness behind it. In this way the poem begins its movement toward closure at both the level of the Prufrock persona’s discourse and at a very sophisticated level of form.

The final stanza then balances perfectly between this cooler, more artful voice and the Prufrock subjectivity. The previous stanza said “I,” but was no longer straightforwardly subjective; this one now once again takes up the thread of Prufrock’s pathos, but by beginning with “We” as the subject-speaker it distances the pathos from the *individuality* of the Prufrock-subject, evoking a general (*not* “universal”) condition of life-sustaining erotic fantasy that is shattered by the intrusion of the sound of human voices.

Perhaps this is enough about “Prufrock,” although if you could shed some light on the prosody of the concluding part that would be nice.

DA: Thank you for the clarifications. We are, as I suspected, pretty close on the question of the relation between the continuing identity of a poem and the idiomatic responses individual readers will make. You’ve also been very helpful in providing a way of talking about tone, by distinguishing between the Prufrock-subject and the

more objective tenor of the “scriptorial consciousness,” as you call it – something like an “implied author,” I guess, who presents Prufrock for our consideration, with a compassion based on a recognition of the generality of his dilemma, however pathetic it becomes in his particular case.

My prosodic reading of the final lines is that they sustain the iambic pentameter movement of “I do not think that they will sing for me,” varying the meter by means of long-accepted deviations from the strict alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. The two three-line sentences (which is to say the two *abb*-rhymed groups of lines) both begin with an extra unstressed syllable, so that “We have lingered” feels like a new beginning as well as a repetition. There are several inversions, both initial (“Combing”) and internal (falling in “hair of”; rising in “the wind”), which momentarily unsettle the rhythm, and a demotion (on “blown”) which briefly creates a counter-rhythm perhaps enacting the wind’s effect on the waves. The last two lines approach regularity most fully, imparting a feeling of rhythmic closure to match the finality of the sense – though the end of the final line has a lovely promotion: “and” is in the position of the beat, sustaining the metrical norm, but we’re not encouraged to stress it, so that those sad last words come with a rhythmically dying fall.

HS: One final observation about “Prufrock.” Walking on the beach here in San Sebastian every day, watching the furious winds whipping the waves, I’ve kept thinking of the next to last stanza of Prufrock, which has always puzzled me, and I’ve finally managed to identify the sources of my puzzlement.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

First puzzle: “riding seaward on the waves.” The waves come IN to the shore, so it’s curious that the sea girls ride OUT on them. Second puzzle: “combing the white hair of the waves blown back.” How can it be blown BACK, when the foam that caps the waves is blown FORWARD, in the direction of the waves’ movement? Now, what’s intriguing about this is that both of these counterintuitive descriptions go in the same direction. Both assume that the movement of the waves is out; if that’s so, then their hair is indeed blown back. Are we getting a fantasy picture, in which the waves face outward to sea, carrying the seagirls out with them? Next we get “when the wind blows the water white and black” (to me this whole stanza is pure word magic). This implies (and I hadn’t explicitly thought about this until I saw the water blown white and black here) that it’s a stormy sky, with a thick cloud cover and strong, gusting winds. But if one imagines a day like this (and why? what relation is there between a stormy day and the whole context of the seagirl imagining?), then it becomes even harder to imagine the waves being blown OUT. So I can’t make clear literal sense of these lines, and yet they’re so marvelous that, very uncharacteristically for me, I don’t care.

DA: I do marvel at those lines, but I hadn't found the image as complex as you do. I've always assumed that the wind is blowing from the shore out to sea, and that the mermaids are riding with the wind, which is whipping the tops of waves and producing white froth (while the troughs are black). The action of combing the white hair of the waves identifies the mermaids with the wind, which is doing just that. I have seen froth starting to form as the wave begins to break and being whipped up by the wind, and I assume if that froth is "blown back" by the wind – if, that is, it's not blowing in the same direction as the waves are travelling in – the effect is more pronounced. (There's a late Turner painting entitled "Waves Breaking against the Wind" that illustrates this phenomenon.) Wind/mermaids disappearing in one direction – away from Prufrock, desolate on the shore – and waves coming in the other direction. Result: water and foam thrown up into the air, like a woman's long hair blown back by a wind that is coming towards her.

HS: When you first wrote about the froth blown backward I was skeptical, but just yesterday I had the experience for the first time of seeing the white hair of the waves blown back, and precisely when the wind was blowing the water white and black. Not anything subtle, either, but great plumes of spray.

It was an intensely exciting moment when I perceived this as a phenomenon in itself for the first time; a great example of the way that art teaches us to see. I must have seen this many times in the past, but never noticed it. I think what threw me off before is that these plumes are not nearly as white as the foam on the crest of the wave that keeps moving forward; but they are definitely white, and reciting to myself "the white hair of the waves blown back" over and over as I watched it was deeply moving to me. The degree of inspiration behind this image, and the whole set of lines, is astonishing.

This still doesn't solve the problem of how the mermaids can be riding seaward on the waves, but maybe that will become clear in time, as well.

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8

THE POETRY OF ELLIPSIS (DENISE RILEY, "A NUEVA YORK")

Dear Henry,

Taking our discussion of "Prufrock" further, I'd like to raise the issue of the later development of the poetry of ellipsis, semantic transferral, and alogical progression, something we broached during our discussion of Emily Dickinson and have continued in our thoughts about Eliot. Among the most visible schools of poetry today are some that have extended these challenges to language's communicative function to the point where it becomes extremely difficult to isolate a level at which common understanding could be reached. Most of the commentary I have read on such poetry proceeds as if the language was engaged in normal communication, and sentences that are deliberately resistant to interpretation are treated as making assertions, offering descriptions, and so on. My view is that to do justice to the singularity of a poem of this kind, the commentary has to register the work's challenge and the reader's inevitable bafflement, rather than pretending that it can be read like any other poem.

Let me quote one example, and offer a few comments. The following poem is by Denise Riley, from her collection *Dry Air*:¹

A Nueva York

"In order to create life, it is merely necessary to advance in a straight line towards all that we love"

I would do it for you but not here
it is a matter of seasonal change, it
is slow & unconcerned with the particulars
of now and individual wilfulness
it regards autumn as one natural
grace to arrive, the humanity of it
deflected and no cries to be heard
even the private affections turned to

larger change. And with the change
 the statement of the need to merely
 head directly; the arrow does for a
 harder sign. Indicate the clear lake
 it is precise and we anticipate it
 truly and already know by heart this
 clearness, and engage. In this hour's
 ripening it is chill, it unnerves
 me, it is suggestibility : but
 verging on a fall, it is also to be
 lived through, it exhausts. No era
 changes palaces, old burr of swallows
 lavender that prime spring I broke
 through the abyss. Master I spoke
 directly an arrow through me, ice?
 questions come in fits a small pony
 a name dragged across the sun eel-like
 to me poor thing you think to be at the
 centre skin of the royal worm, egg,
 door of the world, they'd trail to all
 parts for peace, just that, pushed up
 close into one another to swap grand
 secrets. Companions, doves of one wish,
 mine, go straight ahead to where I'll
 find you, the man of dry vision hails his
 ornaments yellow basilica red brook red
 carp. Fear is marvellous and simultaneity,
 this morning Paris this morning Saigon
 the tombs swollen the mouth's rock.
 Between us we came down to the clear world
 and went out together to observe the stars.

To start with, I want to comment only on the first 15 lines – probably as far as a reader is likely to go if the poem doesn't work for her. Reading these lines without any additional contextual information, I would note first that even though it refuses to release plain meaning, it mimics coherent, logical discourse (unlike, say, much work of the Language poets). Although the absence of punctuation in places contributes to the difficulty of comprehension, we can supply what appears to be missing. The opening lines, for instance, appear to require the following punctuation:

I would do it for you but not here.
 It is a matter of seasonal change; it
 is slow & unconcerned with the particulars
 of now and individual willfulness.

There follow two fully punctuated sentences (though a comma after “change” might help, where I read an implicit verb like “comes”), and then perhaps a colon needs to be inserted after “lake.” Such logic as can be gleaned from the sequence hinges on the unspecified “it”: it is something that the speaker is unwilling to do in a particular place, its characteristics include slowness, lack of concern with the present and with individual willfulness, and a view of autumn as a grace; it possesses humanity though this is deflected, as a result of which cries remain unheard and private affections become a bigger change (of which the earlier “seasonal change” may be an example). This change then brings with it a need for directness in movement, symbolized by the arrow. The arrow, perhaps, is what points out the lake. Then we return to “it,” and learn that it is precise, that we correctly anticipate it, and that we know by heart the aforementioned lake’s clearness. The excerpt I’m reading ends on the idea of engagement (with what remains uncertain).

These are rather slim pickings after some effort at understanding, and numerous puzzles remain. I’m put in mind of the arguments of Relevance theory, which approaches utterances in terms of the cognitive effort required to process them. Although statements can potentially have multiple meanings, coming into awareness at a greater and greater distance from the obvious meaning, in our daily exchanges we usually stop the interpretive process at an early stage, since the pay-off ceases to be commensurate with the cognitive effort required. Poems, of course, are different: we are (or should be) willing to put in a great deal more effort than in casual conversation, but even in reading poetry there comes a point where the rewards for further exertion are too exiguous to be worthwhile. We can short-circuit the effort of painstakingly working through all relevant meanings and scrutinizing the potential discursive logic, of course, and indulge instead in fanciful interpretations; but this is what our whole endeavor in these conversations is attempting to counter.

The next step in sense-making is perhaps to take into account title and epigraph. The Spanish name for New York helps very little; perhaps it is the “here” of the first line, but that doesn’t get us very far. The epigraph, by contrast, has a clear connection with the sentence about “the need to merely head directly.” This could well be the “statement” referred to, a statement that seems to arrive with the “larger change.” And this means “the clear lake” is identified with “all that we love,” and the poem is somehow concerned with the creation of life. I can’t get very much further in explicating the lines; anything more would have to proceed from critical ingenuity not necessarily arising from what I actually experience in reading them. In some poems, the line-breaks would contribute importantly to the sense; but here they seem arbitrary, their main function being to produce lines of similar length, to encourage careful articulation, and of course to signal “this is a poem.” Nor does the sound-texture – what you would call “musicality” – of the poem seem to me to be very important. And yet I enjoy reading the lines, I enjoy the way they flirt with sense, hint at moral truths but refrain from endorsing them, use syntax to create a simulacrum of logical discourse. What I enjoy is language not quite doing what language is supposed to do, language that invites comprehension then resists it. Many of the lines in other poems equally deficient in plain sense I have found

uninteresting, not worth the effort of trying to unpick them. In this case, I find I am sufficiently intrigued to want to read on, and also to see if I can improve my understanding through extra-textual information.

The lines that follow this opening offer more concrete examples of possible change – palaces, swallows, lavender, “skin of the royal worm, egg, / door of the world” – and more assertions of directness – “directly an arrow through me,” “go straight ahead to where I’ll / find you.” Clarity of meaning never emerges, though the final two lines are both very clear and about clarity, the clarity we first heard about in connection with the lake:

Between us we came down to the clear world
and went out together to observe the stars.

I can’t help hearing an echo of the ending of Whitman’s “Learn’d Astronomer” poem here: in both poems the action of observing the stars provides a concluding moment of other-worldly calm.

Extra-textual research – thank you, Google! – reveals that both the title and the epigraph come from Godard’s dystopian film *Alphaville*, the first being the birthplace of the Anna Karina character, Natacha von Braun, the second being a slightly altered quote from a poem by Paul Eluard shouted by a man about to be executed. I’m not sure I know what to do with this information.

Would your approach to a poem of this kind be at all like mine? Can you make further headway? Is “minimal reading” inappropriate for this type of poetry?

Best wishes,
Derek

Dear Derek,

Riley is visibly a skilled poet, and I feel the power of her language in flashes. For me the poem as a whole doesn’t quite come off, but I do value the way it almost entirely manages to avoid sentimentality and cliché by means of obscurity and ambiguity. Like you, I enjoy the way the poem “flirts with sense.” The question is whether we can adapt the way we’ve been reading earlier poems to this degree of departure from earlier modes of poetic obscurity. I agree with you that the way this kind of poetry is commonly elucidated doesn’t work hard enough to get down into its nooks and crannies. Michael Peverett’s comments on this poem (which I also have gotten from Google) exemplify the kind of thing I’m referring to. He writes that in this poem “It’s the apparent simplicity of the Godard/Eluard advice [of the epigraph] that Riley plays off against an intuition of the ultimate obscurity of directness – by going there so directly you find yourself with a haziness about how you arrived.” “The ultimate obscurity of directness” is the kind of phrase that comes like a linguistic reflex to contemporary poetry criticism; the paradox ties a quick rhetorical bow on the unopened package of the poem’s linguistic design, which is

comfortably left in a “haziness” presented as integral to that design. There’s a similar move in Peverett’s comment on the closing lines: “Observing the stars, apparently so fixed and passive, almost as it were originating the word ‘observation’, is an ironic clarity; this is just what creating life isn’t like, in the doing of it.” I don’t want to make Peverett a scapegoat here; I think the kind of thing he’s doing is widespread, and that he does it quite well. And it isn’t easy to say why his sort of response isn’t just what the “poem itself” calls for, since it’s definitely constructed to achieve a maximum of “texture” with a minimum of “structure.” This means, in the terms I used in our “Prufrock” chapter, that meaning can slosh around almost as much the reader likes. As Peverett puts it, “The poem can be read endlessly, and its movement through that kinetic storm is endlessly thrilling.” One can’t demand from a kinetic storm the definiteness of outline that you and I have been tracking in earlier chapters.

But it’s worth trying to cut through the haziness in the way you’ve started to do, to see if we can’t find a way of talking about it that goes beyond summing up its ambiguities and paradoxes with paradoxical summings-up of our own. Clearly it doesn’t work like Owen’s poem or even like “Prufrock”; we need to think of its structure in a fundamentally different way. For me it helps to think of the way this poem works as being a bit like bebop, which takes off from a familiar melody into flights of sound that retain no hearable trace of the original melody, though with underlying harmonic references, and in the end reiterate the opening theme (the “head”). In “A Nueva York” there isn’t such a clear return at the end, but the opening lines certainly evoke a traditional poetic “head,” that of “seasonal change,” and specifically that of autumn. Lines 2–9 read like a conventional poetic reflection on this topos:

it is a matter of seasonal change, it
 is slow & unconcerned with the particulars
 of now and individual wilfulness
 it regards autumn as one natural
 grace to arrive, the humanity of it
 deflected and no cries to be heard
 even the private affections turned to
 larger change.

The reference of “it” is indeterminate, but whatever it might be, the lines say fairly straightforwardly that the private, individual human response to the death that comes with autumn is “deflected” in the “natural grace” of the “larger change” of the seasons that is “slow and unconcerned with particulars.” This is nicely done, I think; the pathos of autumnal change is both evoked and “deflected” by the dry, philosophic tone of the reflection.

Before and after these lines, however, the flirtation with sense is much coyer. I think you’ve done as good a job as one can hope for in reading the obscurities of the poem without recourse to fancy, and, as you say, the pickings are slim. Taking off from the analogy with bebop, I would say that what is called for is a “tonal”

reading. There's a banal way in which ambiguity can be pushed to the limit, and there's another, quite different, more interesting, "tonal" way. The banal way maximizes the number of possible interpretations of meaning, so that the critic's fancy is set free; the interesting way uses ambiguity to create quite definite harmonic blocks of semantic resonance that can be related to each other according to a traceable tonal design. T. S. Eliot does this, in a less radical way than Riley, in *The Waste Land*.

Some of the tones in "A Nueva York" are of the kind I've already discussed, derived from the echo of poetic topoi; but at times it goes into more unfamiliar linguistic territory, in a way that one feels making a more primordial contact with the raw material of ordinary language. I think the most successful part of the poem in this way is the following:

No era
changes palaces, old burr of swallows
lavender that prime spring I broke
through the abyss. Master I spoke
directly an arrow through me, ice?
questions come in fits a small pony
a name dragged across the sun eel-like
to me poor thing you think to be at the
centre skin of the royal worm, egg,
door of the world, they'd trail to all
parts for peace, just that, pushed up
close into one another to swap grand
secrets. Companions, doves of one wish,
mine, go straight ahead to where I'll
find you

This excerpt starts off badly: "No era / changes palaces" seems too calculated, and old fashioned, a reversal of the seasonal change topos, with an overtone of "Ozymandias" revisionism. But "old burr of swallows / lavender that prime spring I broke / through the abyss" is lovely; here the cry of private affections that was denied in the poem's opening movement is heard in accents of nostalgia for a long ago spring. Whatever the directness is that the poem is talking about, it isn't the directness of its approach to lyricism, at which it arrives here by surprise, using the backdoor approach to lyricism that the modernists pioneered. In this approach the lyric moment erupts unexpectedly and remains at least partly opaque – we might not be sure exactly what feeling is being evoked, or why, or even who the subject of the feeling is – yet the strings of emotion are plucked in a way that can be more intense, for the modern reader, than any Romantic lyricism. I think of certain moments of Beckett's *Molloy* as setting the standard for this kind of thing.

With the pleonasm "prime spring" – which I quite like – the lyricism starts to overflow, but is then pulled back by the doubt the reader encounters over the valence (positive or negative?) of the abyss that is then evoked, or even the sense in

which it has been broken through. It seems to be something good, a plumbing of depths beyond depths, but the abyss is not a conventional springtime motif. The next sentence is the most opaque in the poem, and also contains the most striking and original language. Is “Master” being addressed, or is the speaker saying that in that prime spring of breaking through the abyss “she” became a master, at last able to speak directly? The arrow that was formerly a directional sign here becomes an arrow penetrating the subject-speaker; a very conventional way of imaging painful emotion, but here unfixable in any straightforward conventional sense. Was there an arrow through her as she spoke, or was her direct speaking the arrow that traversed her? Is the arrow made of ice, or is the speaker asking, how could there have been an arrow through me who was ice? There are multiple possible readings of the line, which I don’t have the space to unfold fully, but no matter which way we go, we’re in the realm of poetic lyricism, both in the style of the language and in the subject matter – agonized emotion, or failure of emotion (if that’s what ice betokens), and its connection with speech; and evocation of the ice keeps the lyricism from becoming, well, overheated. This is what I mean by a “harmonic block.” There’s a quite definite realm of lyrical utterance that is being evoked, and the dissonances of ambiguous or contradictory semantic possibilities all echo within its boundaries. There’s a kind of Hegelian resumption of the history of poetry involved in such tonal writing; we already know all the ways the lyrical utterance can go (it can say this, or the opposite, or say it ironically, and so forth), and now the trick is to take as many of them as possible together as the material of a new level of utterance, at which it isn’t any longer the meaning, or even the multiplicity of meanings qua meanings, but the dissonant harmonies created by their confluence, that becomes the structural unit on which the poem’s design is based.

Reading it this way, I now make out the poem as following, up to “royal worm, egg,” pretty continuously from the epigraph. “I would do it for you but not here” could without strain or fancy be taken to say “I would go in a straight line toward what I love (as my epigraph suggests), but not in this poem,” implying, in this poem I will approach what I love by indirection. The reference of the various appearances of “it” still remains opaque, but “it is a matter of” could mean, “my reason for not doing it here is a matter of” “And with the change / the statement of the need merely to head directly” would then say “the statement of the need changes too, with the larger change; one can’t ‘merely’ head directly”; and the arrow takes the place of that statement as a “harder sign,” either one more definite, or one indicating a more difficult path. The relation between “merely” and “harder” suggests “more difficult.” “Questions come in fits” emerges naturally out of the agitation of the mental state evoked in the preceding lines, and the “small pony” seems to be another flash of nostalgic memory like that of the “prime spring.” The next lines are the ones I find most striking in the poem:

a name dragged across the sun eel-like
to me poor thing you think to be at the
centre skin of the royal worm, egg ...

Up to this point I can find my way through the poem in what feels like an unforced, consistent way, allowing for a great deal of play in the meaning of each of the elements – reading them, as I’ve said, tonally. The name, immediately following the small pony, seems to be another flash of memory associated with the fits of questioning that are erupting, and “dragged across the sun eel-like” I think is just superb. Here the language jumps to that register of lyrical near-nonsense that is to me the highest achievement of this kind of poetry, evoking sense and evading it with equal suppleness. If this is a name remembered in a moment of agitated reflection, “dragged” and “eel-like” give the memory a negative valence, and I hardly know what to say about the stunning image of the name’s being “dragged across the sun.” Perhaps it darkens the sun. These lines can be punctuated various ways; I like “A name dragged across the sun, eel-like to me [i.e., ‘to me it seems eel-like as it drags across the sun’]; poor thing – you think to be at the centre skin of the royal worm, egg.” On this reading, she is remembering an egotist whom she pities. Or it could be “me” who is the poor thing, whom “you” thinks wrongly to be “at the centre skin of the royal worm.” Worm resonates with eel; but “royal worm, egg” suggests something inhumanly grand, like a queen bee in her royal chamber. So, beginning from the “ode to autumn” variation at the beginning, the poem has moved through the impersonality of “it” in its various transformations to the “we” and the we’s “heart,” and the resolve to “engage” something, in response to the arrow indicating the “clear lake,” which provides the occasion for the lyrical subjectivity of the speaker to be introduced into the poem’s harmonics: the feeling of “chill,” the unnerving, the obscure “suggestibility,” the susceptibility to falling and exhaustion; then the evocation of memory associated with one supreme spring that I have already discussed, and the following rhapsody of lyrical language that I have praised. Then, at precisely this point, I lose my thread. The poem now changes register entirely, evoking a “they” that is an entirely new note, unprepared for by anything that I can see.

That’s as far as I’ve gotten, and I don’t see a way forward. My suspicion is that the poet’s initial surge of inspiration has exhausted itself, but Riley doesn’t feel that the poem is finished yet and is trying to find a way to adequate closure. That’s where the problem with this kind of poetry shows itself: the lack of definite discursive structure makes it possible to improvise a way to closure in a way unconstrained by the traditional requirements of sense. The critic always has to be aware of the possibility that it isn’t the poem, but one’s reading, that is failing; but the way the poem ends is so straightforwardly weak that it bolsters my feeling that the poet has lost her way.

Between us we came down to the clear world
and went out together to observe the stars.

This is no more than perfunctory poetism, with a note of empty reassuringness. A “we” that comes down (*down?* from where? Trailing clouds of glory?) to a “clear world”(?), and then, “together,” gazes back up again (whence it came?). This doesn’t belong to the same universe of poetic discourse as the rest of the poem.

What do you think? Is my reading of the first two-thirds of the poem convincing, and convincingly minimal, and if so, do you see any way to recuperate the rest of the poem, or some of it, for such a reading?

All the best,
Henry

DA: You've moved the discussion along very helpfully, Henry. I like your ideas of "tonal reading" and "harmonic blocks" very much, and am with you when you say that good reading – perhaps even "responsible" reading, to use a word I've probably deployed too often – goes in the opposite direction of much published criticism of this kind of poetry, in making interpretation difficult rather than maximizing possible interpretations. What I understand by this requirement is that poetry that resists our normal processes of sense-making should be approached with *more*, rather than *less*, stringent criteria in arriving at any conclusions: before asserting that such-and-such a phrase means so-and-so I need to be very sure of my ground. Otherwise criticism becomes an opportunity for ingenious embellishment rather than intense engagement, the writing of a complementary (and complimentary) prose poem rather than a commentary on what the work is actually doing. Such prose poems are often remarkable creations, well worth paying attention to; but they obscure rather than clarify what is going on in the work, which is to say in an act of reading it that is paying the closest, and narrowest, possible attention to words, phrases, and formal devices.

The question of evaluation comes in here too. If we are to judge among the huge number of poems of this kind that have been published, if we are to argue that some are genuinely moving or illuminating or exciting and others are not, only the kind of strenuous attention to what is really going on will help. For it's possible to write an imaginative and interesting prose poem in the margins of *any* work of literature.

Like you, I find Riley's poem does provide a verbally, intellectually and emotionally gripping experience, and does open up new relations of sense that I hadn't been aware of before, even though it does this only intermittently. In commenting on it, therefore, I am trying to explain this response. Others will respond differently, and if they are able to explain their responses with clarity and force, I might find my enjoyment of the poem changed and perhaps enhanced. You've begun to do this, and I'll say something about the way the poem now happens for me in a moment.

One more point about the value of hyper-elliptical poetry. I've been arguing for some time that it's useful to think of the literary work as an event rather than an object (whether that object be material or ideal, a particular realization of a created set of words or a type of which any given realization is a token), and that in doing so one is less interested in any meaning or lesson or knowledge that can be taken away from the poem when one is done with it than in *how* meaning or teaching or knowing occurs (or doesn't occur) as the poem is being read. There's nothing new

about this argument, of course; though I'm not sure its consequences have always been followed through as completely as they might be. Now in a poem like Riley's we are pretty much forced to pay attention to the way meaning offers itself and retreats, how sense is, to use your lovely phrase, evoked and evaded with equal suppleness. With most poetry composed over the past three millennia, the reader or listener has been given a body of meaning that can be extracted from the poem in what Louise Rosenblatt has called an "efferent" reading; and this has been an important function of what in the last couple of centuries we have termed "literature" – but, I would argue, it's not something that is peculiar to literature, it's not what makes poems poems. Criticism has often been seduced by the glow of meaning: it's extremely tempting to say what the poem is about, what lesson it teaches, what it tells us about its author or its time. This is fine; but it misses what is distinctive about literature. Poems like Riley's foreground the event of poetry, refusing to provide us with the transportable meaning we usually look for in the instances of language we encounter and making us aware of the *happening* of words, phrases, sentences, lines, and paragraphs.

The temptation remains, however, and it's perhaps all the stronger when meaning refrains from offering itself to the first comer. So we get criticism that still goes about its business of extracting meaning – but with poems like Riley's this has now become a dodgy business, with so little to go on, and with questionable results. I'm not suggesting we do something other than attend very carefully to the sense of each word and phrase, just that we acknowledge that our goal is not to solidify the poem into a block of sense. That's why I like your use of musical analogies. That artworks are fundamentally events is so much clearer in the field of music (especially when no words are involved), and I would like poetry critics to approach poems with the way music works in mind, rather than the way a journal entry or a letter or a historical account works. This is not about the deployment of sound textures – though that may be important, as we've said – but about attention to what is happening as the work proceeds instead of asking what meanings the reader will be left with at the end.

Another analogy is with the emergence of abstract art. Here too, in commenting on most visual art before the twentieth century the temptation has been to dwell on what is represented – rather than how it is represented and how the viewer engages with that artistic process in an event of looking. Abstract art takes away that temptation and compels the viewer – and the art critic – to concentrate on the use of color, shape, line, medium, and so on. But more importantly, perhaps, the acceptance of abstract art has made it easier to enjoy the way in which the event of representing occurs in more traditional paintings and sculptures. And, of course, there are works which hint at representation without ever offering fully realized and recognizable objects, just as our poem plays with scenes and events and truths without fully actualizing or endorsing them.

To the poem, then. One thing your comments have made me see more clearly is the degree to which it is engaging with the lyric tradition. It is a first-person utterance: it begins with "I," and thereafter varies between singular and plural first

person, ending with a strong assertion of plural selves embraced by the poem's language. In this it is unlike much hyper-elliptical poetry, which refuses to accede to the reader's habitual practice of assuming the words are being uttered by a particular imagined individual on a particular imagined occasion. One of the most highly regarded of younger British poets who write in this vein, Keston Sutherland, begins a poem, entitled "Poem" (from the volume *Hate's Clitoris and Other Poems*), as follows:

The new fathom item A-Z mercy spree unsmothers afresh
 re donkey spirit sprezzatura fit or agog for a relapse, a slipped pin
 up assent to purpose marked down see hence vertical
 shark loans in purveyance-arrest, a bit strapped for life
 on the quay, shattered and bawling joke acid.

With this poetry (and these lines are entirely typical of Sutherland and a number of other British poets, most of whom take their lead from the Cambridge poet J. H. Prynne), the reader accustomed to the lyric tradition of poem-as-utterance is immediately thrown off balance, and has to work extremely hard to situate the words in any definable or imaginable setting. Such readers would be advised not to make the attempt; the tonal approach you sketch is more likely to achieve results, linking phrases that seem to come from the same register, allowing sense to flicker into life and fade into non-sense. Thus the financial language of "marked down", "shark loans" and "a bit strapped" perhaps invites thoughts about being hard up; "new fathom item" sounds like a mispronounced "new fashion item" which might connect with "spree", as in "shopping spree", and if you look up "purveyance" you'll find that it refers to the sovereign's prerogative to compel the sale of goods at reduced prices. Whether the experience of reading the poem provides sufficient pleasure to justify the effort it demands is a question I won't attempt to address.

By contrast, Riley's poem invites us to imagine a speaker, however sparsely characterized and in however thinly represented a time and place. The poem also, as you point out, restates in its own way a lyric convention: the ambiguity of autumn and its emotional resonances. (My favorite poem in this tradition is Dickinson's "As imperceptibly as Grief / Our Summer lapsed away.") The epigraph is also a traditional feature, giving the reader a thematic thread to track through the poem. And the achievement of closure in the final two lines is also conventional – perhaps too conventional, as you suggest. These lines are separated out from the rest of the poem by its only line-final period (other than the final period of the poem), their diction is straightforward, and the last line – like the line of Whitman's I mentioned – is a regular iambic pentameter, apart from a double offbeat at the beginning. The phrase "clear world" echoes the earlier "clear lake," "clearness," and "door of the world." Many of the features identified by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Poetic Closure* are at work here. It's interesting that Peverett can't read the final lines as straight: their clarity is so unexpected in a poem of this kind that they must be ironic.

Like you, I find the lines following “old burr of swallows” particularly successful. (“No era / changes palaces” just seems untrue, and it’s not obvious why our speaker – if we accept there is one – should utter an untruth.) I read the question as addressed to a “Master” (the source of the epigraph, perhaps; a Zen Master?) and as expressing surprise at the injunction in the epigraph, which has already been referred to in “the statement of the need to merely / head directly” with its following mention of the arrow – surprise because the speaker feels like ice. (The words “broke” / “spoke” provide the only terminal rhyme in the poem, but I don’t know what to do with this fact.) I accept, however, that the other possibilities you mention are viable, and that resistance to monosemic interpretation is an aspect of what the poem is doing. I think I would have liked it better with more punctuation to limit interpretive possibilities somewhat, but that perhaps goes against the way this kind of poetry works. What I wouldn’t say, and I’m sure you’ll agree, is that the more polysemic the poem the better. Anybody can write a poem with dozens of meanings in a few minutes.

You describe the effectiveness of the three lines beginning “a name” very well indeed – though I would go on to the marvelous “door of the world.” To me there’s a Lear-like intensity of self-abnegation here (if “poor thing” were addressed to the “you,” the tone would become supercilious, so I prefer to take “me poor thing” together): the “royal” figure now exposed as a “worm,” one who is thought to be “at the centre,” the creative origin or “egg” (and I think of the Fool’s sour joke), and the “door of the world.” The introduction of “they” is a surprise, as we’ve only heard about “I” and “you” so far; and “they” are not very admirable, swapping their secrets all jammed up together. But they turn out to be – if this is still “they” – “Companions, doves of one wish, / mine,” interpreting the speaker’s desires like Wotan’s wish-maidens, and they too are urged to be arrow-like. Then, like you, I am lost; sense gives way too completely for me to find anything to enjoy in the next five lines. And then those weirdly conventional last lines.

We have also failed to make much of the title and the references to *Alphaville*. It’s decades since I saw the movie, probably when it first came out, and nothing in the poem resonates with the few memories I have of it. And what do you think the force of the Spanish to be? What does “A” mean: “to,” as in a dedication or as in travel to a place?

Any reflections on what we have achieved in discussing the poem, or on my thoughts about this kind of poetry, would be welcome. I’m aware of using phrases like “this kind of poetry” to excess, as there is great variety within poems that might be considered hyper-elliptical, from those that are strongly resistant to interpretation, like the poems of Sutherland or Prynne, or, in the USA, the Language poets, to poems that provide much more fully the pleasures of meaning’s appearance and disappearance like Riley’s or, say, those of Jorie Graham or John Ashbery. But, as you said in our discussion of “Prufrock,” the tools we use in reading are basically the same in every case.

HS: You put your finger on why sooner or later this kind of attention has to be paid to poems like Riley’s. Huge numbers of poems are published, and even huger

numbers vie to be published, and there is an extensive sifting process by means of which this mass of poems will in the end, inevitably, be hierarchized. There is today a lot of resistance to the whole notion of hierarchizing poems, a sense that we must lay the ghost of T. S. Eliot at last; but the editorial and publication process, the giving of prizes, the selection of “best of” collections, and the processes of canonization persist. I’ve argued about this with young poets who claimed that they reject this whole setup – and yet there they were, getting an MFA, paying attention to who’s who in the poetry world, studying the canonical poetry of the past, sending their own poems out to little magazines. The process is here to stay, and it can only be an *honest* process if it involves the most careful possible reading of the poems, and a thoroughly explicit articulation of how one has read them, rather than, as you so tellingly put it, writing one’s own poems in their margins.

It’s good that you brought abstract art into the discussion; I think the analogy with art brings into view important dimensions of how poetry – and not just hyper-elliptical poetry – works that the music analogy misses. In fact, it was from abstract painting that I got my first clues toward minimal reading. We need all the analogies we can get. You talk about the poem as event, I talk about it as an architecture; perhaps we could call it an “architectural event.” (Music, it seems to me, is well characterized by such a term.)

I quite like Sutherland’s lines that you quote. I think you’re right to class it together with “A Nueva York” as a “kind” of poetry; despite the increased fragmentation and decreased punctuation I don’t see that much difference in the way they’re using language. You’re right that Sutherland’s lines don’t evoke a “lyrical I” in the way Riley’s poem does, but I still hear a distinct voice with a consistent point of view and consistent thread of utterance, which you begin to trace. It sounds like “social comment” poetry to me, evoking consumerism, then desperate indebtedness, then a state of psychological desolation; the usual topoi of this sort of thing, but, as in the case of Riley, uttering them in fresh, original tonalities. I actually find these lines take less work than the Riley did (maybe because you already did a lot of it); but I haven’t seen the whole poem.

I’m afraid I have no insight into the title, except for the fact that Nueva York connects with Paris and Saigon later in the poem; how, I don’t know – though, of course, like any good literary critic (or indeed any smart undergraduate English major) I could come up with an endless number of fanciful speculations. And as to why it’s in *Spanish* – by that, I’m totally baffled; but thanks for pointing out that “A” could mean “dedicated to” or “traveling to.” I had assumed it was a dedication, but it need not be.

Note

- 1 We’ve chosen this poem because of its inherent interest, not in order to suggest that it is in any way representative of Denise Riley’s work at the time it was written (1970) or later.

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9

TRANSLATION (CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, "AU LECTEUR"; FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA, "ROMANCE DE LA LUNA, LUNA, LUNA"; RAINER MARIA RILKE, "SONNETS TO ORPHEUS II.13")

Dear Henry,

My thoughts have been turning a great deal recently to the question of translation; I have been reactivating my long-buried knowledge of Afrikaans to read some recent fiction in that language, and have become very interested in the challenge these works pose to the English translator. If you agree, I'd like to take up as our final project the issue of the translation of poetry, focusing on a selection of particular examples.

The kind of close attention to the nuts and bolts of particular poems that we've been giving is relatively rare in criticism these days, but translation is a field in which such attention is absolutely essential, and in which it is continuing to be exercised now as much as it ever was. A translation is, after all, a critical act that attempts to get to grips with whatever the translator feels is most important in a work in order to search for an equivalent, or as near an equivalent as possible, in another language. It's therefore very close to our endeavor to identify the undisputable formal and semantic structure upon which more speculative commentary might be built.

This, at least, would be the case in a good translation; no doubt some translations are as fanciful or misguided as some critical responses. If we spend some time discussing a few examples of translation, we might be able to take our investigation of what is vital in a poem's operation a stage further, and in doing so evaluate the process of translation as a type of critical commentary.

The standard model of translation is that the translator is someone who is at home in both languages (usually, but by no means always, a native speaker of what is called, in translation studies, the target language), whereas the reader is someone who knows the target language but not the source language. A challenge to this assumption has been mounted by Clive Scott in several books, arguing that translation should be primarily

concerned with the situation in which the reader is familiar with *both* languages, a condition that gives the translator much greater freedom to act creatively as a commentator on the source text – and Scott has provided us with many examples. This, of course, is the situation in which you and I will find ourselves in discussing examples of poetic translation; without a reasonable knowledge of the source language as well as the target language, informed analysis of a translation – as a translation – is impossible, and the critical purchase on the original that translation makes possible goes for nothing. Another context in which some knowledge of both languages is assumed is the poem printed, as in a number of estimable Penguin volumes, with a straightforward prose translation at the foot of the page. But I think we should always have to have in mind that, *pace* Scott, the chief function of translation is to make texts available, with some degree of completeness, to readers who don't possess the language in which they are written.

The most immediate question poetry raises, in a manner more pressing than in other literary modes, is that of *form*: to what degree does a translation fail if it is unable to reproduce the formal elements of the original? Very often, there are formal elements that can't be reproduced. The rhythmic qualities of a French Alexandrine have no equivalent in the metrical schemes available to the composer of English verse, since the two languages have different phonetic structures out of which have arisen different prosodic traditions; or, to take another example, rhyme in Italian, thanks again to linguistic differences, has a very different feel from rhyme in English, and operates differently in verse; and so on.

A less easily visible challenge to the translator is the manner in which a poem relates to other poems in the source language: any formal choice made in a translation will establish alliances with other poems in the target language which have resulted from similar choices made by other poets, and thus color the new work in ways that have no parallel in the source language.

Translation thus always involves trade-offs: fully carrying over one feature will usually necessitate skimping on another. For example, I can choose to retain a rhyme-scheme but as a result I am likely to sacrifice some verbal accuracy. Another trade-off concerns length. As Derrida has pointed out in an important article on translation ("What Is a Relevant Translation?"), it is possible to hypothesize a complete and exhaustive representation in one language of, say, a phrase of two or three words in another. This would necessitate a translator fully at home in two languages, two cultures, and two entire socio-cultural histories, who has, as Derrida puts it, "all the time in the world," and who is allowed to fill a book with notes explaining all the subtleties and complexities of meaning, connotation, and formal effectiveness implicit in the source text. But no one would call this a translation, because of the other rule that the translator is expected to observe: the translation should be the same length as the original. Hence the trade-off, especially acute in poetry: whether to sacrifice aspects of meaning in order to keep to the same length as the original, or to sacrifice the ideal of quantitative faithfulness in order to corral more of the meaning.

Another decision facing the translator, and much discussed in translation studies, is whether to aim at a text that reads – to the reader unfamiliar with the source

language – as if it were written in the target language, or to attempt to create one that conveys to the reader something of the character of the source language (a practice that is known in the trade as a “foreignizing” translation). There is something of a fashion for the latter procedure at present, a fashion sometimes allied to a larger argument about the function of translation as a global phenomenon. To the extent that translations read as if they were originals, the source language is rendered invisible, a process that contributes to the marginalization and possible disappearance of the world’s minority languages. A foreignizing translation, on the other hand, keeps alive traces of those languages.

These, then, are some of the issues that it seems to me we need to bear in mind in examining examples. I’m happy to hand over to you the task of choosing an initial text to look at, and beginning the investigation.

All the best,
Derek

Dear Derek,

I think it’s a great idea for us to take on the question of translation. I very much agree that the translator’s search for an “equivalent” of the source poem, in another language, is closely related to what we’re trying to do, and that this “equivalent” is primarily to be defined in relation to a reader who has scant, or no, knowledge of the “source language.” But I think we should conceive “translation” in the most modest terms possible, as across languages with which you and I have some fair familiarity, all of which are closely related because they’re all Indo-European (at least, the ones I know anything about). Among these languages, it makes sense to me to speak of looking for an “equivalent.” About any bigger jump, from, say, Chinese to English, I’m not qualified to say anything.

I conceive of the shift from what we’ve done in previous chapters thus: formerly we considered the *techne* of the critic in light of the *techne* of the poet; now we’re going to triangulate these two *technai* with that of the translator. The translator’s craft is, obviously, closer to that of the poet than is the critic’s, because the translator, like the poet, is trying to write the best poem she can. But we’re setting aside the kind of translation that strives for maximal originality – the kind that is closest to the poet’s craft *per se*. We’re focusing on the kind that doesn’t try for originality, but tries to follow the template of the source text as rigorously as possible. This kind of translation, while still closer to the poet’s craft than criticism is, shares the aim of the kind of critic you and I try to be. Unlike the critic, however, this translator tries to render the “most important” of the poem with an *eloquence* that approaches as closely as possible to the source. That means, crucially (and I’m glad you put a spotlight on this), that, whereas critics can use as many words as needed to convey the most important, the translator’s eloquence must be compressed as much as possible, preferably to the precise degree of the source’s compression.

Now, the most faithful restatement of the poem can be defined as a kind of paraphrase, what Cleanth Brooks called paraphrase that “approaches adequacy.” In that case we might consider template-following translation to be the limit-point of paraphrase – the *best possible paraphrase*, because it’s the one that renders the poem into other words (in a different language), while yet retaining as much of the poetry as possible. The translator tries to compress the restatement of the poem to the same proportions as its statement; and she uses just as much figurative language, and the same figures, and even, to the degree possible, the same resources of sound, as the source.

Looking more closely at the nature of the translator’s attempt to reproduce the original, I remark that translators usually try to reproduce the syntax of the original. Interestingly, although translators almost universally strive to fulfill this requirement, hardly anyone ever talks about it, as though it went without saying. All the focus, when we’re talking about reproducing the “form” of the original, gets put on the versification. Yet the masterful manipulation of meter, rhyme, and so forth are only part of the poet’s formal mastery; this manipulation is part of a larger process, consisting of the interplay between the syntax and the versification – the dialectic of sentence and line. I think I’ve learned more about the poet’s *techne* from this aspect of the translator’s *techne* than any other; and it perplexes me that it doesn’t get talked about. A good translation, in my view, tries as hard to reproduce the original syntax as it does the verse form, and in this way the translator “iterates,” as Derrida would say, the fundamental work of the poet’s craft.

I first realized the importance of poetry’s syntactic architecture from reading in French a poem of Baudelaire’s that I had previously known only from a badly mistranslated English rendering. The poem is “Au Lecteur,” “To the Reader,” the opening salvo of the *Fleurs du Mal*. At the beginning of “Au Lecteur” Baudelaire uses the Alexandrine in its strict traditional form, with end-stopped lines balanced around a central caesura. The first five stanzas paint a horrifying picture of “our” condition, as we daily descend into hell, consumed by our sinfulness. There follows this repellent stanza (I give it with the prose translation from the Penguin edition, not because it is without weaknesses – it has many – but in order to postpone for the moment the discussion of verse translations):

- 6 Serré, fourmillant, comme un million d’helminthes,
 Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons,
 Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons
 Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes.

A dense, seething host of Demons, like a million helminths, orgies in our brains; even as we breathe the invisible stream of Death flows down into our lungs, yet we hear not its groans.

Stanza 7 then climaxes the opening movement of the poem by switching from the declarative mood to the conditional, suspending the sense all the way from the opening if-clause of the stanza to the opening “C’est que” (“It is because”) of the fourth line.

- 7 Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie,
 N'ont pas encor brodé de leurs plaisants dessins
 Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,
 C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie.

*If rape, poison, dagger, and fire have not yet woven all their ridiculous pattern
 on the dull canvas of our lamentable destinies, that is only, alas, because our
 souls lack daring.*

In 7 for the first time in the poem there's enjambment that joins lines 2 and 3 of a stanza, breaking the formal 2-2 line balance that has been observed to this point, thus creating a single breath unit out of the whole stanza. And, as the syntax-ver-sification relation gets more interesting, so does the sense, which for the first time starts to transcend homiletic, suggesting, with an ambiguous tenor, that the worst sins, which, out of cowardice, we have not committed, would raise our lives above banality by giving them some aesthetic value. Now the poem is ready to raise the rhetorical intensity to a yet higher level. The "Mais" ("but") at the beginning of 8 begins the movement toward closure, which comprises the final three stanzas.

- 8 Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices,
 Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,
 Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants,
 Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices,
 9 Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!
 Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,
 Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris
 Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;
 10 C'est l'Ennui! – l'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
 Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.
 Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
 – Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!

*But among the jackals, panthers, bitch-hounds, monkeys, scorpions, vultures,
 snakes, and monsters that scream and howl and grunt and crawl in the sordid
 menagerie of our vices,*

*there is one even uglier and more wicked and filthier than all the rest! Although
 it makes no frenzied gestures and utters no savage cries, yet it would fain reduce
 the earth to ruin, it would gladly swallow the world in one gaping yawn:*

*it is Boredom, Tedium vitae, who with an unwilling tear in his eye dreams of
 gibbets as he smokes his pipe. You know him, Reader, you know that fastidious
 monster – O hypocritical Reader, my fellow-man and brother!*

All the preceding rhetoric of sinfulness is now revealed to have been mere preface to the revelation of the worst sin of all, one that makes all the others seem trivial.

“Mais” is thus the hinge on which the poem radically turns. It introduces a dependent clause that extends across all of stanza 8, and whose internal structure is mostly pure parataxis, consisting as it does of two lists (the monsters, and the noises they make), and which thus constitutes an almost complete breakdown of the grammatical elegance of the preceding. The (highly paratactic) syntactic suspension is finally released in the first line of stanza 9, which ends the sentence that covers all of stanza 8. I suppose there’s not, strictly speaking, enjambment between the end of 8 and the beginning of 9; and yet the suspension of sense from the first words of 7, since it isn’t resolved until the start of 9 (But among all the sins ... there’s one worse than all ... It’s ennui!), creates a rhetorical cadence that subordinates that entire expanse and makes it into a single rhetorical unit; so 8 is continuous with 9 in a way that transcends the simple device of enjambment.

The main point I want to draw from all this is that this whole syntactic drama draws its effect in large part from the way that it evolves out of the contained formality of the first six stanzas. It’s Alexandrines all the way through, and the same rhyme pattern, yet the poem subordinates them to its syntactic architecture in a way that produces entirely new, and much larger and more impressive, formal effects, specific to the form of this particular poem.

When we’ve recognized this, we recognize also just how formally crucial the “Mais” at the beginning of 8 is; as I said earlier, it’s the hinge on which the form of the poem turns. It’s also essential to understanding the plain sense of the poem; otherwise the relation of the final, worst sin, to the second group of sins named in 7 (the uncommitted ones, which are said to be worse than the committed ones of 1–6), remains a bit muddy, the more so since it’s not entirely clear whether the poem is saying that we would do *better*, rather than worse, to commit these sins rather than the more banal ones. And, indeed, my own sense of both the sense and the structure of the poem remained muddy for years, because the only version of the poem I had studied closely was Roy Campbell’s vigorous English translation, which simply omits the “but” at the beginning of 8. Not until I started studying the source text did I realize both the fact and the significance of this omission; and this realization started me on the analysis of what I’ve called the syntactic architecture that I’ve given here.

Campbell’s omission gave me a sharper sense of the importance of “Mais” than I otherwise am likely ever to have gathered; but that makes it no less of a translation gaffe – at least, if one thinks that *syntactic architecture* is a crucial formal aspect of this poem, integral to what is “most important” about it. In “To the Reader,” and in the technai of the poet-critic-translator, in my view, the interplay of versification and syntax is a larger, more important concern than the admittedly lovely dance of the hemistichs of the Alexandrine, which functions primarily to set up the contrasting rhetorical cadences of the second half of the poem.

That, then, is the single biggest lesson I’ve learned from teaching and studying translations of poetry over the past 15 years. The dialectic of syntax and versification has become ever more fundamental to my feel for what is most important in poems, not all poems but many of them. Unlike more delicate “musical” effects of sound, this dialectic is eminently translatable, and very often is preserved by

translators. I think readers of translations often don't realize how much of the "body" of the source text is being handed to them by this kind of translation.

All best,
Henry

DA: I'm with you in believing that syntactic architecture is a crucial aspect of the working of poetry, and that it's sometimes overlooked in translations. I want to point out another example in the poem, at what is for me the moment where the tone deepens. After a catalogue of vices almost too extreme to take seriously, there is in stanza 6 a second strong enjambment between the first and second line, this time with only one word making up the continuation – what the French call a "*rejet*" – that makes the run-on all the more disruptive of the even pace of the Alexandrine than the one you point to:

Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons
Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes.

There can be no doubt that the syntactic pressure to continue reading over the line-break after "poumons" ("lungs") enacts the irresistible motion being described, strengthening the already chilling idea of death as an invisible miasma being breathed into our lungs along with the air. And the effect is all the more powerful, of course, because of the almost complete absence of enjambment in the poem so far.

What, then, have translators made of this poem? I'd like to look at some versions of stanzas 6–8 plus the first line of 9 to see how far translators have been able to capture the features we have been addressing, and to use these lines to continue the discussion of meter and rhyme as a challenge to translation.

Here's Laurence Lerner in the *Everyman's Poetry* edition:

- 6 A million devils guzzle in our brain
Chewing like worms. Each time we take a breath
It bubbles through our flooded lungs, and Death
Gives a choked cry; we drown, then breathe again.
- 7 On the drab canvas of our destiny
The lovely patterns made by hate, disgrace,
Rape, dagger, poison, sword, have left no trace.
The reason is, we are too cowardly.
- 8 Our vices are a zoo. They hiss and crawl,
They bark and yell: dogs, crocodiles and apes,
Clawing and grunting; writhing and sliding shapes,
Jackals and vultures. But amongst them all
- 9 The very worst, consumed with quiet scorn,

No difficulty in pointing out the problems here: the use of iambic pentameter and the retention of Baudelaire's *abba* rhyme scheme have produced distortions in sense that take us far away from the original's measured horrors. Stanza 7, one sentence in the original, is broken into three lines plus one line. The syntactic drive of the eighth stanza's sentence leading into the ninth "Mais ... Il en est un" ("But ... There is one") is completely lost, and the "But" that transformed your understanding of the poem when you discovered it is here advanced to the middle of the previous line so that there is no sense of a new beginning as the ninth stanza kicks off. However, in one respect the translation is faithful: lines 3 and 4 of stanza 6, though they lose the terrifying image of death being imbibed with every in-breath, do retain that strong enjambment in "Death / Gives".

The Oxford World's Classics translation is by James McGowan:

- 6 Close, swarming, like a million writhing worms,
A demon nation riots in our brains,
And, when we breathe, death flows into our lungs,
A secret stream of dull, lamenting cries.
- 7 If slaughter, or if arson, poison, rape
Have not as yet adorned our fine designs,
The banal canvas of our woeful fates,
It's only that our spirit lacks the nerve.
- 8 But there with all the jackals, panthers, hounds,
The monkeys, scorpions, the vultures, snakes,
Those howling, yelping, grunting, crawling brutes,
The infamous menagerie of vice,
- 9 One creature only is most foul and false!

Iambic pentameter again, but rhyme is abandoned, leaving the translator more scope to find semantic equivalents. (Though there's one example of a word inserted purely for the sake of the meter – the superfluous definite article before "vultures" – and the reduced number of words in each line creates problems such as the problematic substitution of "most" for Baudelaire's repeated comparatives, "plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde.") The tone, it seems to me, comes closer to the original, avoiding the lapses into the comic that Lerner inadvertently perpetrates, an avoidance assisted by the lack of rhyme, a device which is always more prominent in English than in French. At the same time, by ending each line of regular meter with a monosyllable, McGowan uncomfortably reminds the reader – or this reader, at least – of the missing rhyme. Stanza 7 has the unity of movement you observed in the original, though without the central enjambment, and stanza 8 begins with that important "But." However, the enjambment that works so powerfully in stanza 6 has now gone.

Roy Campbell, whom you mentioned, a talented South African poet capable of writing powerful verse, opts for iambic pentameter as well, with an *abab* rhyme

scheme. He comes close to achieving the same effect as the original with the run-on in stanza 6, except for an intrusive comma (we might charitably suspect an over-zealous editor here), and binds stanza 7 together well, including the enjambment between lines 2 and 3. However, as you say, he omits that crucial “But”:

- 6 Packed tight, like hives of maggots, thickly seething,
Within our brains a host of demons surges.
Deep down into our lungs at every breathing,
Death flows, an unseen river moaning dirges.
- 7 If rape or arson, poison, or the knife
Has wove no pleasing patterns in the stuff
Of this drab canvas we accept as life—
It is because we are not bold enough!
- 8 Amongst the jackals, leopards, mongrels, apes,
Snakes, scorpions, vultures, that with hellish din,
Squeal, roar, writhe, gambol, crawl, with monstrous shapes,
In each man’s foul menagerie of sin—
- 9 There’s one more damned than all. He never gambols,

The meter and rhyme again exert their distorting pressure: “wove” is excruciating, and the power of the last line of stanza 6 is wrecked by the unfortunate need to rhyme “surges” with “dirges”. Yet with Campbell there is a real sense of words to be relished in their sound as well as their – mostly horrifying – sense.

A translator who jettisons meter and rhyme, and is therefore able to approximate more closely the sense and syntactic structure of the original is William Aggeler. His version allows us to judge what is lost when Baudelaire’s formal structure is absent:

- 6 Serried, swarming, like a million maggots,
A legion of Demons carouses in our brains,
And when we breathe, Death, that unseen river,
Descends into our lungs with muffled wails.
- 7 If rape, poison, daggers, arson
Have not yet embroidered with their pleasing designs
The banal canvas of our pitiable lives,
It is because our souls have not enough boldness.
- 8 But among the jackals, the panthers, the bitch hounds,
The apes, the scorpions, the vultures, the serpents,
The yelping, howling, growling, crawling monsters,
In the filthy menagerie of our vices,
- 9 There is one more ugly, more wicked, more filthy!

Many of the original's strongest features are carried over, including the enjambment in stanza 7 (though not the one in stanza 6), the "If ... It is" sentence, and the "But." Although Aggeler follows the French closely, however, he eschews syntactic inversions. Had he followed Baudelaire, he might have written:

And when we breathe, Death into our lungs
Descends, an unseen river, with muffled wails.

This choice raises one of the perennial questions about translation: should the translator of works of an earlier age imitate the target language of that period, or is it better to use the language of the day? In the case of novels, we would generally, I think, prefer the latter option: we wouldn't expect a twenty-first-century translator to give us *Le rouge et le noir* in a pastiche of early nineteenth-century style. With poetry, perhaps, the question is more delicate. Aggeler's avoidance of inversion is no doubt due to a sense that present-day readers will find it overly "poetic"; yet he has lost the opportunity to retain in English a powerful effect in the French. This avoidance is in keeping with the generally prosaic quality of his translation; the loss of meter and rhyme isn't compensated for by any verbal intensity. These lines don't call out to be read out loud, the way Campbell's do, and thus they miss the peculiarly visceral quality of Baudelaire's vocabulary.

Eli Siegel, another translator who dispenses with rhyme and meter, comes closer to the original's syntax, and doesn't shy away from the inversion that produces the enjambment in stanza 6:¹

- 6 Tight, swarming, like a million worms,
A population of Demons carries on in our brains,
And, when we breathe, Death into our lungs
Goes down, an invisible river, with thick complaints.
- 7 If rape, poison, the dagger, arson,
Have not as yet embroidered with their pleasing designs
The recurrent canvas of our pitiable destinies,
It is that our spirit, alas, is not brave enough.
- 8 But among the jackals, the panthers, the bitch-hounds,
The apes, the scorpions, the vultures, the serpents,
The monsters screeching, howling, grumbling, creeping,
In the infamous menagerie of our vices,
- 9 There is one uglier, wickedder, more shameless!

Siegel is the only one among these translators to retain the "hélas!" of the seventh stanza, an exclamation that I feel is important in conveying that ambiguity you speak of: if our failure to make the most of our vices is a matter for regret, what attitude are we to adopt to the worst vice of all?

I haven't come across a translation of this poem that stands out as superior to all the others. They all wrestle with the various double-binds we have been considering: fidelity to form versus fidelity to sense; strict meter versus free verse; style and language contemporaneous with composition versus style and language contemporaneous with the translation. I haven't encountered a translation into English Alexandrines, which is a pity. Nor do I have any sense that the translators have tried to achieve a foreignizing translation: all the effort has gone into making "To the Reader" sound like a poem written in English. (I don't see this as a problem; I simply note it.)

One possible conclusion to draw from this exercise is that the best way for a non-speaker of French to engage with this poem is to learn at least a little French (including pronunciation), and then read Baudelaire's lines aloud, with a prose crib to help. But that leaves out of account those who are unwilling or unable to master sufficient French; perhaps the best option for them is to read at least one prose or free verse translation, and one in regular meter (and perhaps rhyme), and try to imagine an original that combines the virtues of both.

HS: A fascinating, and highly instructive, survey, Derek. I almost entirely agree with your judgments of the translations, except that I think the Campbell is the best of the lot. It does of course have flaws, though I don't agree that "dirges" ruins the last line of 6; but "wove" is certainly bad, as you note, and the absence of the Alexandrine is lamentable. Siegel's version is pretty good, too, though I regret his "population of demons", and the lack of meter is a problem. Your observation regarding the importance in stanza 7 of "hélas!" (which Campbell, like everybody else but Siegel, has omitted) is important. Somehow I had missed how crucial this word is. This is the tensest stanza of the poem, the one in which the precise stance of the implied speaker to the question of sin suddenly turns problematic, and "hélas!" is a crucial signal of this turn; but Siegel should have preserved the exclamation mark as well as the word, and the fact that he didn't suggests that he didn't quite grasp the importance of the word (as I hadn't, but should have).

The omission of "but" by most of the translators strikes me as a function of a general lack of understanding, among critics as well as translators, of the structural importance in poetry of words that aren't verbs or nouns or adjectives – such as conjunctions, and especially adversative conjunctions like "but." And this leads me to suspect that the main thing that is wrong with the practice of translating poetry is not the resistance of poetry to translation, but poor poetry-reading skills on the part of translators. In addition to knowing both source and target language well, and having some facility with writing verse, a translator needs in addition to be a master of the art of reading poems. Every slightest shortcoming in mastery of this art will translate into flaws in the translation, no matter how good a poet the translator is, or how well she knows the languages involved.

We started out discussing the translation of the French Alexandrine, and then turned to the interaction of line and syntax. What neither of us has paid much attention to has been the aspect of poetry that is foremost for those who think it

can't be translated – the sheer musical sound of it. Rhythm and what I call rhetorical cadence are one aspect of a poem's music, and we agree that these are, in some measure, translatable; but there's the other kind of music, rhyme in all its varieties and sub-varieties. Responsiveness to this kind of sound is, I think, the staple of poetic connoisseurship; and of course it's impossible to reproduce in translation. I might be able to reproduce the meter, the stanza form, the metaphoric structure, the syntactic architecture – but I won't be able to reproduce the tones the words produce. If this is pre-eminently what makes a poem a poem, then poetry is untranslatable.

But I'm resistant to this view as a generalization, which strikes me as a particularly restrictive version of the “heresy of paraphrase” – the notion that there's some “essence” of the poem that will not bear carrying over into another linguistic body. There are many different kinds of poems, made up of different combinations of effects, some of which are more translatable than others. Depending on the degree to which the features dominant in a given poem are more or less translatable, that poem will be more or less translatable than other poems – and, further, more or less translatable into some languages than others. Poems are artifacts, made by a wide variety of techniques, techniques that might shade off into pure music, or ordinary language, or neighboring genres such as popular song or folktale or oratory, and so on and on, and for some poems, translated from some languages into some other languages, we can find equivalents that will satisfy some informed and discerning readers but not others, and for some we can't. That's all we can meaningfully say.

It would be useful, if one were doing a systematic, full-scale inquiry into the problem of translating poetry, to catalogue its many aspects and identify the nature of the problem each presents, and to assess the degrees of success that translators have achieved with each of these aspects. But of course the shape of such an inquiry would depend entirely on the theory of the “most important” in poetry. I'm suggesting that the most important is the movement or gesture of each individual poem as a whole, considered as a linguistic architecture, and that the importance of every individual element of the poem has to be assessed in terms of its role in this overall movement. Yuri Tynyanov spoke of the “constructive factor” and the “subordinated factors” in verse, and I like these terms; but, for him, the constructive factor in all verse was quite simply rhythm. To assess translations, however, we need to think, not in terms of rhythm as the universal constructive factor, but the specific constructive principle of each particular poem. Only then can we judge the importance of each subordinated factor in terms of the movement and gesture of that particular poem.

As an initial contribution to the systematic inventory of translation principles, I propose the following:

- there is a hierarchy of elements and devices in poems, some more important to the overall movement and gesture of any particular poem, some less. The most important elements are “structural” to that poem, because they are particularly important, and in some cases indispensable, to the poem's overall design.

Consider Allen Tate's rendering of "soleil de ma nature" ("sun of my nature") in the final three stanzas of Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" ("A Carrion") as "star of my eyes."² "Soleil" has occurred in the third stanza, as what intensifies the process of putrefaction in "nature," and the powerful resonance of the relation between these two signifiers (the sun that rots the carcass, and the beloved referred to as the sun), which is integral to the gesture of the entire poem, is erased by Tate's translation. This is part of a general transvaluation of Baudelaire's values in an idealist direction by Tate's translation, which ends the poem with the word "involute," where Baudelaire's poem ends with the word "décomposés." Here, in this particular poem, since it's precisely decomposition that is at stake in the whole thing, the question of the poem's *last word* also acquires a crucial structural significance that it need not have in other poems. Tate perhaps knew just what he was doing here; the combination of these two revisions of the source text are structural to his idealizing translation. But he most definitely fails to preserve what is most important about this poem. *Traduttore* is *traditore* here in a way that has nothing to do with the impossibility of translation.

I would argue that "musicality," the effects created by all the varieties of rhyme, including alliteration and assonance, is generally a subordinated factor in poetry, accessory not to the "content," as the classical view had it (so that even Sir Philip Sidney described poetry as a sweet shell for a moral message), but to the structural design of the particular poem. After all, most of the time, we read poetry silently, in our heads. Imagine if we mainly listened to music in our heads, by reading scores. Read on the page, the lineation and stanza form seize more of our attention; the aesthetic force of enjambment reaches a new level; and although one still sounds out the words in one's head, the force of the sound-tones is greatly diminished. Musicality is the poet's virtuoso-flourish, and the awe in which it's held by some critics is the response of connoisseurship to virtuosity. But there's something more "exoteric" and fundamental to poetry, some of which is sound, too, but which is more structural, in a more evident way, than musicality often is. I've rarely been convinced by "iconic" readings of liquid sound; "The murmuring of innumerable bees," is convincing, but nothing more than a parlor trick. By contrast, when you read the enjambment of "la Mort dans nos poumons / Descend" as a "syntactic pressure" that "enacts the irresistible motion being described," it strikes me as a phenomenon based not on the connoisseur's exquisite sensitivity to sound (which varies a great deal from person to person) but on something far more robust, which can be perceived even without being pronounced aloud (indeed, the force of the enjambment is considerably strengthened by its visual appearance), and is eminently translatable. It's still the realm of sound, not musicality (is there a better name for it?), but rhetorical cadence. Rhetorical cadence includes not only refined effects of syntax, such as the various kinds of enjambment, but also the force of the meters and rhythms per se, and the line lengths with which they're associated.

A three-beat folk meter, for instance, can be absolutely indispensable to the effect created by a poem, as in Lorca's haunting "Romance de la luna, luna, luna."

The meter is essential to the effect of the poem, which takes folk-tale material and heightens its dreamlike quality; yet none of the translations into English that I've seen even attempts to preserve the three-beat pulse, despite the fact that it's easy to do. I'm no translator, but it's not much of a trick to translate it so that you do at least hear the three beats, and the imagery is so vivid and immediate that that's enough to convey in English the hypnotic power of the poem. Here are the first three stanzas:

La luna vino a la fragua
con su polisón de nardos.
El niño la mira, mira.
El niño la está mirando.

*The moon arrived at the forge
wearing her bustle of spikenard.
The boy is watching her, watching.
The boy is watching the moon.*

En el aire conmovido
mueve la luna sus brazos
y enseña, lúbrica y pura,
sus senos de duro estaño.

*The moon is moving her arms
through the agitated air
and displaying, lubricious and pure
her bosoms of rigid tin.*

Huye luna, luna, luna.
Si vinieran los gitanos,
harían con tu corazón
collares y anillos blancos.

*Run away moon, oh moon
If the gypsies were to come
they would take your heart and make
white necklaces and rings.*

Spanish phonology is as different as French phonology from that of English; my lines usually end on a beat, whereas the Spanish almost always ends on a slack syllable; and Lorca's lines are octosyllabic, whereas I've used whatever works to get three beats. But I've preserved the imagery and the three-beat pulse, and I believe this conveys a worthwhile impression of what Lorca crafted. No doubt a more skilled translator could do a better job – but only if she had a proper idea of what is most important to preserve. In this case, the folk meter of this lyric is the most essential element of its rhetorical cadence, and therefore structural in an indispensable way.

DA: I warmly endorse your proposal about the existence of a hierarchy of elements in any poem, and your assertion that the task of the translator is to recognize and, as far as possible convey in the translation, the most important elements in that hierarchy. Where effects of sound are indispensable the translator has to find a way of reduplicating them, or at least finding an equivalent, in the target language. As you say, most often sheer sound is not central, and if something has to be sacrificed in a translation, as something usually has to be, this may be the thing that has to go. You're unquestionably right about the importance of the folk-meter in Lorca's "Romance de la luna, luna, luna"; my only slight quibble is that some lines in your version, though one can certainly read them with three beats, are too overloaded with syllables to feel folk-like. I'm no translator either; I'm just going to give the opening lines with a word changed here and there to produce what I think is a simpler rhythmic and lexical movement (not that Lorca restricts himself to a simple folksy vocabulary, which is one of the interesting features of this extraordinary poem):

The moon arrived at the forge
wearing her bustle of nard.
The boy is watching her, watching.
The boy is watching the moon.

There in the troubled air
the moon is moving her arms
and showing, indecent and pure,
her hard, metallic breasts.

Run away moon, moon, moon.
If the gypsies were to come,
they'd take your heart to make
white necklaces and rings.

As always, there's a trade-off between verbal accuracy and formal features. I've cheated a little, perhaps, with the triple "moon," but this seems such an important feature of the line (it's in the title of the poem as well) that I'm willing to exploit the tendency of the middle stress of three to be "demoted" and not take a beat. (So, for example, "Ten green bottles" has only two beats. Admittedly, it's unusual to have commas between the stressed words.) Of course, as soon as one starts attempting to translate a poem – especially a poem like this, where almost every word carries a little charge of surprise, where beauty and horror are so economically conjoined – one realizes the hopelessness of the task.

I'm happy to go with your terms "musical" and "rhetorical cadence," as long as it's clear what we are referring to. Talk of "musicality" in poetry sometimes taps into stereotypes about the melodiousness of Latinate vocabulary and so on, and "cadence" also has a history in discussions of poetry, usually as a vague gesture towards graceful rhythmic modulations, and its more precise meanings in musical

analysis (a closing chord progression) or Latin rhetoric (the terminal rhythm of the sentence) don't help much either. Perhaps the distinction we want to make is between something like *decorative* sound patterning and *structural* sound patterning, the first adding a pleasant musicality to the verse, the second contributing to its functioning as a poem. I think in both cases we are talking about patterning; that's to say, a more than usual concentration or repetition of a particular sound or group of sounds (groups such as plosives or affricates, voiced or unvoiced consonants, high or low vowels, stressed or unstressed vowels, etc.).

HS: In principle I think the distinction between decorative sound patterning and structural sound patterning is well founded, although I wonder if "decorative" might demean too much the value of that kind of feature. But "structural sound patterning" is not the same idea as what I call rhetorical cadence; both decorative and structural sound patterning as you describe them have to do with what I've been calling "musicality" (and which you describe more precisely as "a more than usual concentration or repetition of a particular sound or group of sounds"), but rhetorical cadence has to do primarily with the syntactic architecture of the poem. The most breathtaking instance of mastery of rhetorical cadence I know is one we have already discussed, Milton's "At a Solemn Music," but Yeats's "The Cold Heaven," or the first sentence of Dylan Thomas's "Refusal to Mourn" show what I'm referring to in a very striking way. I think this aspect of poetry has been inexplicably under-remarked by criticism, and I also think it comes closer to identifying what is specifically *architectural* about the temporal structure of poetry than any other concept.

I think you did well to change my "spikenard" to "nard" in the second line of the Lorca; I was trying to catch the slack ending of the Spanish wherever possible, but here the sacrifice in the rhythm of the line wasn't worth it. But I'm skeptical about your "moon, moon, moon." This repetition is in the original, but I feel strongly that it doesn't translate into English. This is a prime instance of a difference between English and Spanish that I've often noticed, and which is one of the main obstacles for translation. Spanish is much richer in polysyllabic words than English, and this is notable especially in the basic vocabulary: head, hand, moon, clock, wheel, nose, milk – practically any basic word in English that comes to mind is a monosyllable, and they all have at least two syllables in Spanish. "Huye luna, luna, luna" is pure flow; "Run away, moon, moon, moon" is, to this Spanish-speaker's ear, jarring in the punctuality of the repeated "moon." I think one should keep repetitions like this one where possible; I understand why you thought it important. But in this case, the sacrifice in sound is too great for me.

I think we've staked out a distinctive position on the translation of poetry in our discussion thus far. We've agreed that the importance of pure sound as such has been overstressed; and we've argued that translators have too often been inattentive to the other strictly formal properties of verse. We've also agreed that sound as such can be "structural," and when it is, then it becomes part of what is most important to seek an equivalent for. You're far better at analyzing sound than I am; my special focus is on syntax, which I've argued plays a formal role that is on a par with such

things as meter and stanza form, and I've argued for a formal dimension of poems that I call "rhetorical cadence," a dimension that incorporates both syntax and the other formal properties of poems. I mean by this term something much like what I mean by the poem's "architecture," and in a way it's better because it doesn't make the suggestion of spatial form; on the other hand, it doesn't point toward the integrity of the design of the whole poem, as "architecture" does. So I find both terms necessary.

DA: You've summed up our discussion on the subject of translation economically and accurately, and I simply want to bring one more dimension of the issue into play, by means of one more poetic example. Don Paterson, who is a highly successful contemporary poet (and whose commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets I referred to in an earlier conversation), published what he calls a "version" of Rilke's extraordinary *Sonnneten an Orpheus* in 2006 – not, he insists in his notes, a *translation* of Rilke's poems. Translation, he says, "glosses the original but does not try to replace it"; versions, however, are trying to be poems in their own right; while they have the original to serve as detailed groundplan and elevation, they are trying to build themselves a robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture, with local words for its brick and local music for its mortar (*Orpheus*, 73).

We are back to the question of fidelity here. The question is this: is it possible to be *more* faithful to what is most important in a poem by being *less* faithful to the actual words and their relations? Clearly, not any kind of departure from verbally precise translation will work; it's no surprise that the example I'm putting forward is by an immensely skillful poet. I will be very interested to know what you think.

I'll take the thirteenth poem of the second section as an example. (As you know, Rilke wrote all 55 sonnets, as well as finishing the *Duino Elegies*, in the space of about three weeks in a kind creative frenzy):

Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre er hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.
Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos Winter,
dass, überwinternd, dein Herz überhaupt übersteht.

Sei immer tot in Eurydike –, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.

Sei – und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung,
dass du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal.

Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum dumpfen und stummen
Vorrat der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen Summen,
zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte die Zahl.

And here is Paterson's "The Passing" (the addition of titles to the sonnets is one of the indications that this is not a translation in the usual sense):

Be ahead of all departure; learn to act
as if, like the last winter, it was all over.
For among winters, one is so exact
that wintering it, your heart will last for ever.

Die, die through Eurydice – that you might pass
into the pure accord, praising the more, singing
the more; amongst the waning, be the glass
that shatters in the sound of its own ringing.

Be; and at the same time know the state
of non-being, the boundless inner sky,
that this time you might fully honour it.

Take all of nature, its one vast aggregate –
jubilantly multiply it by
the nothing of yourself, and clear the slate.

If we were to discuss this as we have the earlier examples, as a translation, we would have no difficulty in pointing out losses and distortions. "Departure" doesn't capture the sense of "parting" or "farewell" suggested by "Abschied"; there is no equivalent in the original for "learn to act"; "endless" winter in German becomes "exact"; and so on. Most strikingly, perhaps, Rilke's "endlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung" – literally something like "endless ground of your inner vibration" (hardly a transparent phrase) – is turned into "the boundless inner sky." Also worthy of note is Paterson's decision not to provide an equivalent for the original's "dumpfen und stummen" – "dull and dumb" – and thus to present Nature in more attractive guise. In the final tercet Paterson sustains the commercial register of the original though considerably altering the content: instead of Rilke's bookended "zähle ... Zahl" enacting a paradoxical undoing, an addition to an uncountable number that annuls the count, we have the equally paradoxical multiplication by nothing and the down-to-earth mercantilism of "clear the slate."

No doubt some of the unusual word-choices in Paterson's versions occurred to him because of his need to find rhymes, though this doesn't have to be a weakness; Paterson himself has written eloquently about the value to the poet of a fixed rhyme-scheme in stimulating verbal creativity and precision. (I think we can be certain that many of Rilke's most startling articulations in the sonnets came to him in this way.) The standard by which we have to judge is laid out by Paterson in his notes: "Translations fail when they misrepresent the language of the original, or fail to honour the rules of natural syntax. Versions fail when they misrepresent the *spirit* of the original, or fail in any one of the thousand other ways bad poems fail." Rilke's poem, to put it extremely crudely, is an affirmation of the positive

and creative potential of the wholly conscious and affirmative experience of nothingness – within the mythic framing of the sequence, this nothingness is represented by Orpheus’s loss of Eurydice, while within the context of the actual composition, it appears to have been manifested in the death of 19-year-old Wera Knoop, but its implications of course go well beyond these particulars. The translations of the poem I have read serve a useful purpose in allowing one to return to the original to make sure one has understood it; but only Paterson’s version, it seems to me, succeeds in conveying a similar (certainly not the same) spirit of an endurance which is also joyful acceptance in a poem that works as a poem in its own right.

And there’s perhaps a point to be made about paraphrase: Rilke’s poetry is peculiarly resistant to paraphrase, as my crude attempts have just shown. (In this he might be considered another forerunner of those poets writing today who shun logical coherence and semantic transparency.) It is also – and this is perhaps saying the same thing – resistant to translation. Someone knowing no German or having no access to the original who reads only a “faithful” translation may well wonder why Rilke is so highly regarded; and a paraphrase would probably only make things worse. But reading Paterson’s versions of the sonnets, though one could never say that this is the same as reading the original, does at least communicate something of the blazing intensity of Rilke’s writing in a way that translations and paraphrases don’t. Which means, I guess, that in searching for what is indisputably *there* in a poem, as we are doing throughout these conversations, we are not simply looking for verbal and structural elements and relations, but also for some quality of experience that those elements and relations produce in the competent reader. Or do you think putting it like this strays too far from our goal of minimal reading?

HS: What a question you pose for us – whether a “version” can capture the “spirit” of the original while putting it in a different body. I’m not sure this is even a meaningful question, yet I think it’s one we should address. And Rilke’s sonnet is an excellent test case. I’m not a great admirer of Rilke’s later poetry (as opposed to his “thing” poems); it tends to be too sublime and Romantic for me (with the notable exception of the magnificent “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.”). But you’ve chosen well; Sonnet II.13 is exceptionally successful at reaching toward the ineffable; it convinces even me.

However, it’s really hard for me to judge Paterson’s version with Rilke’s original in my head. I need you to explain to me in detail what you find so well done about it. How can you be so aware of the important features of the original that have been left out or changed, and still be able to have such a fresh response to the Paterson? And how is it even conceivable that the *spirit* of a poem be transferred into a different body? Isn’t the most we can ask of a version that, having gotten its inspiration from the original, it be a successful poem in its own right? I’m not even sure how good I think Paterson’s poem is on its own, but I’m sure I don’t think it captures the “blazing intensity” of the original; some sparks at most.

I think Paterson's second and fourth stanzas are pretty good, but I have serious problems with the first and third. The first feels limp to me, partly for the changes you mention, partly because of the rhythm of the second line (I can't help but compare it to the rhythm of Rilke's second line, but I think it would feel mushy to me in any case). And the third stanza seems to me disastrous. It blunts the sharpest point of Rilke's poem, because Paterson completely elides the third line: "Dass du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal." The phrase *dieses einzige Mal* occurs at the climax of the poem's rhetorical cadence, the end of the third stanza (where the sonnet "turns"), and carries the essential pathos of the poem, the pathos of being mortal: "This only time, this sole, singular existence that only occurs once." The buildup of "Sei ... Sei ... Sei" is all for the sake of this line and this phrase, with the injunction that the never-to-be-repeated time should be most fully consummated (*dass du sie völlig vollziehst*). I don't see how the "spirit" of the poem can survive this omission.

But I'm sure you didn't praise "The Passing" lightly, and I'll be very interested to have you point out to me merits of this poem that I'm missing.

DA: I'll agree that the blaze of Rilke is matched only by sparks from Paterson, but there are more sparks in his version than in the translations I've read. Of course, the more you have Rilke's German in your head (and musculature, since the physical rhythms are, as you suggest, important), the more you will be disturbed by departures and disappointments in a version like Paterson's. In this case, a literal translation may well work better because it enables you simultaneously to recall the original. What this means is that the ideal reader of Paterson's poem is one who knows nothing of Rilke's sonnet, and is not bothered by any echoes or absences.

Having said that, I have to defend my assertion that Paterson captures something of the spirit of Rilke's poem, so I am not operating as that ideal reader. And that means looking at the original, which is where our disagreement starts. I don't read Rilke's poem as having to do with the "pathos of being mortal" – nothing so hackneyed, in my view. It attempts, in a series of tropes, to expose the reader, mentally and affectively, to the possibility of a profoundly paradoxical state whereby the acknowledgment of non-being is at the same time the highest assertion of being. Yes, I know, it sounds banal; that's the problem of paraphrase with this kind of poetry (it's no better, I admit, than your phrase about the pathos of mortality). And probably too sublime and Romantic for you. I don't read "dieses einzige Mal" as referring to the human being's one-time-only existence but simply as "for this one time" – for this one moment out of all the moments of a life, a moment in which the addressee might be able to grasp and live the paradox, the moment given figurative expression in arithmetical-commercial terms in the last line and half. I agree that Paterson's version loses the emphasis that Rilke achieves by placing "dieses einzige Mal" at the end of the line and rhyming it with "Zahl," and that this is one of the weakest of his lines ("it" is a feeble ending, and the half-rhyme "state/it" does very little poetic work). But the sense of the line is quite close.

Although this is a sonnet, I'm not sure Rilke provides much of a turn between octave and sestet, since both seem concerned with the paradox of a death-like state that is at the same time the achievement of some kind of perfection (the perfection of art, of course, as in Orpheus's song, but perhaps more than that as well). However, there is a clear rhetorical signal of a new beginning to the poem when the third "Sei" is followed by a dash instead of the continuation of the previous two; it thus functions as a summary of the entire octave, and signals that something different is about to happen. Paterson abandons this triple repetition, but does succeed in capturing the important truncation with his semicolon after "Be," and as in the original what follows stresses not the condition of life (endurance, praise, beauty) in death but the single moment of honoring. (Rilke's "vollziehst" would be more literally "fulfill," but I suspect Paterson found the echoing of "fully fulfill" too salient and potentially comic – more so than "völlig vollziehst," where there is a shift in vowel sounds.)

Like you, I find Paterson's second quatrain and second tercet particularly successful; perhaps that's as much as one could hope for. The rest of the poem moves along reasonably well, but doesn't move me in the other sense. I do find, however, that the word "exact" works strongly: it carries the overtone of "exacting" as well as "precise" – as a schoolmaster might be said to be a precisian. Or is this over-reading? (I can't resist quoting Paterson himself here, making a comment I feel accords well with our own enterprise: "My definition of overinterpretation is the avowal of the presence of effects which you neither felt nor intellectually registered in the process of your open and direct engagement with the poem – but instead discovered in your post-reading critical vivisection" ("The Domain of the Poem," 83).) I do find "exact" registering in this way, unless I am deceiving myself. Which raises a large question: how can we distinguish between what we "actually" feel and intellectually register, and what is only the product of our ingenuity as "trained" readers? The latter may kick in pretty quickly in the reading process, and distort the former. Is this a legitimate question to ask?

HS: It's not only a legitimate question – for a critic whose aim is to be faithful to the poem as written, it's an *essential* question, one that marks the boundary between critical authenticity and critical inauthenticity. We may not always be able to discern which side of the line we're on, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't even try.

I accept the justice of your response that "the pathos of being mortal" is a "hackneyed" topic for a poet. I don't think it's the topic itself that is hackneyed (how could it be?) but that particular phrase, which was lazy of me. Your own articulation of the "paradoxical state" toward which the poem encourages the reader is much better, and, if I might say so, is what I meant! Rilke pulled off something astonishing with this poem, and you describe very finely what that is. Since *dieses einzige Mal* does, as you say, refer to this moment of all moments, and "sie" makes most sense as referring back to "Bedingung," the moment is charged to "fully fulfill" (which, as you say, doesn't work in English) the *condition* of non-being (= mortality, no?) that is the condition of life as a whole (and even if we take it to refer to *Schwingung*, we're still

looking at some larger condition beyond the moment). So I think our readings of “the moment” amount to pretty much the same thing. And if I only focus on stanzas 2 and 4 of Paterson’s translation, I can agree that he manages the “spirit” or essential force of the original very well at those crucial points. And that, with a poem like this, is an admirable achievement.

I do disagree with your reading of the sonnet structure, which doesn’t look 8–6 to me at all. The dash after “Sei” in the third stanza has been adumbrated by the dash after “Sei immer tot in Eurydike” in the second, and syntactically the dominance of the repeated “Sei” at the beginning of each of the first three stanzas makes them a very strong continuous sequence of verbs that breaks then to “zähle dich” in the fourth stanza: “be ... be ... be ... and count yourself.” The turn in terms of meaning at the end of the third stanza is also quite marked: the fourth stanza could scarcely be more explicitly a summing-up.

This has been an exhilarating tour of translations and translation issues, and I like how you turned it here from our strictly formalistic focus to the more generous perspective of the “spirit” of a poem – not a notion that I’m very comfortable with, I confess, because opinions are likely to depend so much on individual intuitions. Yet we seem to have arrived at a reasonable convergence of view.

DA: A reasonable convergence, yes; our discussions have shown that it’s possible to overcome many initial differences about what constitutes a minimal interpretation, but also that this doesn’t mean there is a wholly objective, universally valid account of any poem to which every reader has to assent.

The constraints of publishing mean that our conversation in print has to stop here, with a degree of arbitrariness in view of the many other topics and poems it would have been enjoyable and instructive to discuss; but our conversation will no doubt continue off the page.

Notes

- 1 Siegel’s translation appeared in his collection *Hail, American Development*. The translations by Campbell, Aggeler and Siegel, together with others, may be found on the *fleursdumal* website, www.fleursdumal.org/poem/099.
- 2 Tate’s translation appears in Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, ed. Mathews, 38–39.

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