



The Gothic as "Transgressive" Fiction

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provocative

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George Poulet, in his engaging study of the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, *Exploding Poetry*, states in his preface that "[R]emarkable writers of any age are but feebly distinguished by what they have in common and, conversely, strongly distinguished by what separates them."¹ His intention in his dual study, he asserts, is not to provide the two poets with some sort of common ancestry, though he admits that this "clearly diminishes the possibility of producing a historical work"²; he also states that once he has established their inherent differences, he does not intend to compare the relative merits of one poet's approach over another, which would create untenable aesthetical hierarchies. Thus, Poulet decontextualizes the poets from the start, giving each a chance to be totally different from each other though writing within the same time period, locale and language. However, he also frees Rimbaud from being the offspring of Baudelaire, in his "tradition" (and he doesn't even consider the sort of "anxiety" that Harold Bloom, for example, posits as being symptomatic of influence), hence providing the chance for a clear break in lineage. He therefore admits the possibility for an atomistic schema of literary history -- since "history", indeed, is what it will finally have to be called -- one in which opposites can exist freely, though joined by "a family resemblance."³

¹ George Poulet, *Exploding Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pg. xvi.

² *ibid.*, pg. xvi.

The general shape of Poulet's approach becomes clear in the summary of his argument in his preface. He writes of Baudelaire and Rimbaud:

The former feels harshly predetermined by original sin, which threatens to deprive him of all freedom of thought. He is haunted by the past and by remorse; he perceives in himself only endless depths extending to the farthest reaches of his retrospective thought. The latter, on the other hand, keeps awakening to a new existence. He is exempt from all remorse, free to reinvent his world and Self at any given instant, so that this moment immediately acquires an absolute value for him. Between these two worlds, one of determination, the other of liberty and novelty, there is no resemblance.⁴

There is something of the "yin and yang" relationship here; indeed, Poulet permits there being some of one in the other, but without permitting one poet to judge the other and creating some sort of hierarchy among themselves (regardless of the critic's opinion). His study maintains this sort of distance between the two writers, sometimes even exaggerating it by their very linkages. For instance, he writes of Baudelaire's use of sunsets: "Their function is to use distance to engulf not only the light of day but, with it, everything it illuminates: first external objects, and then the mental objects that haunt thought. Thus the sunset is also the setting of human consciousness, its entry into a region of drowsy reverie where thought seems gradually to be emptied of its contents."⁵ Rimbaud, on the other hand, has a different use for the sun, and for light itself:

For him the sun is the great awakener, the one to whose call, from the depths of their sleep, all beings respond by gaining consciousness of self and of

³ *ibid.*, pg. xv.

⁴ *ibid.*, pg. xvi.

⁵ *ibid.*, pg. 15.

Can you compare
sunsets to
sunrise?

world. At the same time, the sun, by virtue of a rigorously immediate act, makes all that precedes it fade away -- night, dream, the past -- and imposes its animating power upon that which is born or reborn within the exclusive act of the new day. Thus the sun's first act, its first creative act, initially manifests itself as negative and eliminative. It consists in making a clean slate of things.⁶

Readers of Rimbaud will recognize this sort of "great awakening" dramatized in the terrible intoxication of "The Drunken Boat," which, with its enactment of a complete surrender to the "poem/ of the sea", has become the model of the Modernist infatuation -- from Mallarmé, Bergson and Williams to Stein and artists like John Cage, who inject a degree of Buddhist sobriety into the formula -- with the *presentness* of language, perception and time. Rimbaud develops the theme throughout his brief career, most notably in his "Letter of the Seer," in which he describes the poet's self-education as requiring a "long, gigantic, rational *derangement of all the senses*", generally meaning that the poet has to find a way to individuate him- or herself from the flux, to see things anew all the time.

Baudelaire stands at the complete opposite pole from this, since he finds it impossible to be so optimistic about consciousness, especially in its complete attainment. "How vast the world is by the light of the lamps,/ But in the eyes of memory, how slight!" he writes in "The Voyage," and more tellingly:

It cheers the burning quest that we pursue,
Careless if Hell or Heaven be our goal,
Beyond the known world to seek out the New!⁷

His journey, no matter how far he travels, and despite whatever small pleasures he

⁶ *ibid.*, pg 81.

⁷ *Flowers of Evil, A Selection*, edited by Marthiel and Jackson Matthews (New York: New Directions, 1955), pg. 133-45. Translated by Roy Campbell.

attains, will end in "Hell or Heaven" -- he is beyond caring which. Poulet describes Baudelaire's consciousness as being a prison, and introduces Piranesi's drawings of fantastic architectural structures as a possible model for Baudelaire's imagery (though he states that it is not important if it were not an "influence"). Indeed, Baudelaire can be understood as being (in a clear opposition to Rimbaud) domesticated by his damnation; for Rimbaud, who awakens into consciousness and therefore into nature⁸, sings a Whitmanesque "song of the open road" (in poems like "Ma Boheme," for instance) that is open-ended, free, pleasurable but violent and always to be pursued, however ephemeral. One poet feels he has swallowed all poisons, and is debilitated; the other, that there are more poisons worth perusing.

Poulet's approach to these two writers is instrumental in beginning to approach the complex idea of the "tradition" of the Gothic novel, since even when something like a clear lineage can be observed, a number of contradictions arise simultaneously. For example, how can one reconcile the "rational fictions" of both William Godwin and Mary Shelley with the more excessive, sensual and seemingly less responsible fictions of Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis? One doubts that Godwin's idea of crime in *Caleb Williams*, for instance, was quite the same as William Beckford's in *Vathek*, just as one would most likely not link the name of Dickens with Beckford, nor the name of Sade with Godwin -- however much the comparisons might be illuminating. One can see, in Poulet's description of the differences between Baudelaire and Rimbaud, a graph of sorts against which one can place the various major works of Gothic literature. Though it might seem that Baudelaire -- with his sense of predetermination and sin, his use of Piranesi-like imagery, his dungeon-like sense of the darkness and pointlessness of eternity, not to mention his interest in Poe -- would seem the likely candidate for being a poetic inheritor to the Gothic, there is also a Rimbaudian element of "awakening" present in even the gloomiest of Gothic novels. Rimbaud, who Poulet says is free to "reinvent his world and Self at any given instant," is merely giving free reign to his imagination, regardless of the suffering that he might have to endure, the censure of society and pressure to write

⁸ *Exploding Poetry*, pg. 79.

"edifying" literature. Rimbaud's call for a "rational derangement of all the senses" is, in fact, a reverse of the Goethean *Bildungsroman* that Beckford, Godwin and Shelley, for example, were parodying with their retellings of the Faust myth; whereas they portray man's fall in that very pact with the devil (or knowledge), however, Rimbaud sees growth, the attainment of a visionary state. Rimbaud invites the solitude and madness that he knows will be his only reward, for he -- significantly, as opposed to such Gothic characters as St. Leon and Frankenstein -- is a modern artist, the "true thief of fire."

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the Romantic difference

William Godwin's relation to Charles Brockden Brown seems to mirror in a number of ways the relationship of ~~the~~ Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and it is by looking at these two authors that one can initially discern the "awakening" element of the Gothic. Godwin's two main fictional works are generally considered to be *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon*; both works, different as they are, can easily be distinguished from works of Brown, who was much influence, nonetheless, by Godwin. Each progresses in an orderly fashion, but with a measured degree of counter-development, or "deconstruction", of the narrative, and one senses in neither text the art of the improviser which one senses in Brown. Each of the narratives occur within a limited locale and time-frame that can be gleaned early in the book -- which does not mean that the characters are not permitted to travel and grow old, but that time and space, in this sense, seems to be a steady constant; there are not the strange gaps that almost seem like accidents in Brown's novels, nor the sort of disappearances and reappearances, like in a house of mirrors, of characters and themes. Another way of seeing this difference might be to imagine a graph of a novel like *Caleb Williams* to that of *Edgar Huntly*. The former would be symmetrical, in three equal parts that (after a quick jaunt through the continent) remains entirely in England, and even for the most part in one community, with a steady dramatic tension between Falkland and Caleb (everything else falls somewhere in between); the ending stays always in sight, therefore, since the main problem is always begging for conclusion. A graph of *Edgar Huntly* would fly off to Ireland, the European continent, New York and deep into caves (where not only place but time itself drops out) in the matter of a few pages, with

John Bunyan
he had back
parts, - didn't
know what
would be in
the last two.
of course this is
different from
beginning or
not knowing
the ending!

when...?
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not ✓

characters jumping in and falling out with the randomness of pinball; the narrative after Edgar's waking in the cave, halfway through the novel, then veers off into a digression that has nothing at all with Clithero or the murder of Waldegrave, in that neither plot ^{is} are then central to the maintenance of the suspense. Despite the wholeness that Brown does achieve in the conclusion of *Edgar Huntly*, it comes off as a small miracle that such resolutions could be formed out of such chaotic material.

What truly distinguishes the two authors, however, is the relations of their work to a closed, complete philosophical system, which would also include a systematic theory of narrative. Though the narrative of *St. Leon*, for example, expands to include a potentially endless period of history due to the achievement of immortality within the novel, and though St. Leon, once in exile, begins wandering a practically endless geographical area, there is never the sense that one is approaching something new and for the first time, or that one is ever escaping a fixed European philosophical (symbolized by the geography) system. Switzerland is always there to return to for St. Leon, and one is sure, to a degree, of what one will find there; the apparently indeterminate aspects of the novel, in general, are integrated into the text and take on a sure symbolic value. In Brown's *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*, mysteries abound about what *is* in another locale, another house, another person -- they are truly dark gaps in the novel that, like the perfectly smooth boxes that Sarsefield constructed in which to hide manuscripts, have no catches. The novels are like dramatic monologues of sorts, but without the historical detail that, for instance, Browning gives to his poems, which give them completeness; Brown's novels are almost stripped of detail entirely, in fact, as is can be seen in that mysterious, empty first sentence of *Wieland*, "I feel little reluctance in complying with your request," in which not only the "you" but the "I" ring empty, however charged with urgency. Godwin is able to write his *Bildungsroman* from a comfortable distance, having, not unlike Browning, thoroughly thought out and researched his narrative and its specific meanings, and for him chaos can be articulated (and occasionally too much so); in Brown, chaos is not only articulated but enacted in the novel's form, which is free to grow as organically and twisted as necessary.⁹

miss point

Caleb is unable to flee England for Ireland, and that complicated passage that is denied him becomes a single focused regret, a symbol of his failure; St. Leon, on the other hand, is able to traverse the entire continent despite his various exiles. The quality that both protagonists share, however, is an inability to *escape*, a sense of pursuant remorse that can make all of England, all of Europe and of time, a prison. They share this quality with a number of characters in the Gothic -- Vathek, Frankenstein (both doctor and "monster"), and Melmoth, for instance -- but also with Baudelaire, for whom, as has been observed, Heaven and Hell, at the very core of one's *Wanderlust*, have become interchangeable. Edgar Huntly stands in contrast to these figures, however, for not only does he not suffer from *ennui* (at least not to the degree that his European counterparts *can*), but his journey is also more indeterminate than theirs, containing aspects that will never be resolved, and he is not even very sure why he is doing it. He has made no pact with the devil or other supernatural agent, nor is he suffering from a desire for extraordinary knowledge; he is a passive reactor to his bodily and mental urges rather than an active agent of his fate. Brown overflows any sort of orderly philosophical argument by the very sensationalism of Edgar's story, and one senses that Brown himself is discovering the journey as he writes. Indeed, whereas St. Leon could trace even his damnation to a religious or alchemical tradition, and begin to trace his faults to a certain failure of nerve -- the Faustian surrender to Mephistopheles, the choosing of esoteric cult sciences over the rationalism of the Enlightenment, etc. -- Edgar has transgressed in a totally new way, and his initial reactions are, significantly, primitive and visceral,⁹ *an imitation of birth.* He has awakened into the New, like Rimbaud himself, who ~~is~~ eventually cries out in *A Season In Hell*, cursing his own isolation: "If I only had ancestors at some point in the history of France! No! no antecedent." Whereas Rimbaud becomes modern, however, one could say that Edgar becomes American, though American for the first time.

⁹ This is not to say that Godwin did not permit the irrational into his texts -- indeed, it is that irrationality that was so attractive to Brown -- but that he had a surer sense of the "controlled experiment," and hence was more successful than Brown in excluding contradictory elements in his novels, however much this thoroughness itself has its disadvantages.

Edgar's growth, in the second half of the novel, is portrayed as being a series of complete victories over societal codes rather than a swerving from a more common code to a more private. In this sense he *creates ritual*, pulls from the dirt the necessary steps that must be taken toward manhood, rather than adopting or adapting it from a previous group or tradition. The first step of this growth is his eating of the raw flesh of a panther, which he is forced to do at the point of final desperation in the cave:

My hunger had arrived at that pitch where all fastidiousness and scruples are at an end. I crept to the spot.... [...]

The first sensations of fullness had scarcely been felt when my stomach was seized by pangs whose acuteness exceeded all that I ever before experienced. I bitterly lamented my inordinate avidity. The excruciations of famine were better than the agonies which this abhorred meal had produced.... I stretched myself on the ground. I threw myself into every posture that promised some alleviation of this evil. I rolled along the pavement of the cavern, wholly inattentive to the dangers that environed me. [...]

Gradually my pains subsided and I fell into a deep sleep.¹⁰

Though one might maintain the relationship of the philosophies of Godwin with Brown by stating that Edgar would not have been sleepwalking in the first place had he not been guilty of some sort of Godwinian negligence -- a failure to act and a growing self-alienation -- it is clear that Edgar has done something that St. Leon and Caleb were never able to do: he has advanced into a form of consciousness without precedent, at least in Europe. He has therefore clearly walked (or sleep-walked) beyond a traditional system of good and evil. Despite his use of the word "evil" in describing the effects of his meal, his ability to actually digest the flesh illustrates that he has been, or has become, privileged with a Manichean ability to draw nourishment from these equal forces -- good and evil in

¹⁰ *Edgar Huntly*, (New York: Penguin, 1988), pg. 160.

opposition. This complete overhaul in his philosophy, significantly, is never articulated by Edgar throughout the novel, much as Waldegrave's letters relating his own subversive thoughts are kept from the reader, though Edgar himself has read them. What is important is that Edgar, unlike even Caleb Williams, is neither damned nor saved; he has, however, despite his despair, surely grown.

Edgar continues his discovery of the "new day" after he kills an Indian, his first of five, that is standing between himself and a stream. He writes that, once having satisfied his thirst: "Never was any delight worthy of comparison with the raptures which I then experienced. Life, that was rapidly ebbing, appeared to return upon me with redoubled violence. My languors, my excruciating heat, vanished in a moment, and I felt prepared to undergo the labours of Hercules."¹¹ In the same way that "scruples" had stood between himself and the satisfaction of his hunger in eating the panther, a similar set of scruples kept him from quenching his thirst. Edgar, in his various victories, is thus learning to live bodily, nearer to the moment than ever before, but consequently experiences a shift in his entire sense of nature. One could say that he is enacting, in his own life, the Darwinian schema of survival; on the other hand, in the eyes of the society in which he lives, he is growing progressively more savage. In this way Edgar, in having surrendered himself to his bodily needs in a way that will cut him off from society, meets such Gothic characters like *Vathek* and *Ambrosio*, who also transgressed society's mores by satiating hidden urges for sensuality and murder. Though one is unsure if Brown would have welcomed the comparison, it is Beckford's *Vathek* that, after *Edgar Huntly*, ~~most~~ most effectively demonstrates this growth, one might say, into savagery, and hence into a truer commune with the present, beyond the confines of a closed and primarily moral philosophical system. Both Edgar and *Vathek*, in their own ways, grow by means of enacting crimes.

This is food

¹¹ *ibid.*, pg. 173.

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Though Beckford's *Vathek* doesn't contain any scenes of explicitly described sex, it shares many similarities with Susan Sontag's complex description, in her essay "The Pornographic Imagination," of literary pornography -- *The Story of O*, for instance, or Balaille's *Histoire de l'Œil* -- that a number of the other Gothic fictions share only to a lesser degree. Sontag writes that most critics identify pornography with the supposed perverse impulses of its authors, hence reducing it to a "pathological symptom and problematic social commodity", so that, for them, "all pornography amounts to is the representation of the fantasies of infantile sexual life, these fantasies having been edited by the more skilled, less innocent consciousness of the masturbatory adolescent, for purchase by so-called adults."¹² She also observes that "our society" (America in the sixties) is, itself, a "pornographic" society: "[A] society so hypocritically and repressively constructed that it must inevitably produce an effusion of pornography as both its logical expression and its subversive, demotic antidote."¹³ Already parallels emerge, in that the lowest but still very visible levels of much Gothic writing, itself layered like pornography but in more complex ways, center around infantile sexual fantasies; this sexuality, often as complex as that of *The Story of O*, is not as articulated, but it is therefore more open for interpretation (and hence admits a variety of *types* of sexuality). The Gothic in relation to its age could be said to be a necessary byproduct of Enlightenment morality, providing an antidote not only for rationality but for the sentimental novel, which concentrates primarily on more permissible spheres of human interaction. The Gothic, therefore, like pornography, provides a forum for the

¹² Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), from "The Pornographic Imagination," pg. 37.

¹³ *ibid.*, pg 38.

marginalized impulses to find expression in an almost pure, ^{and} primarily fantastic, form.

antecedent? Sontag then writes that many critics dismiss pornography because of the "singleminded way in which [they] address the reader, proposing to arouse him sexually"¹⁴ and that they have no "beginning-middle-and-end" (citing Adorno's dismissal of pornography) characteristic of literature. These critics contend that pornographic writers "can't evidence any care for its means of expression as such, (the concern of literature)" since the writers' only intentions are to inspire superficial fantasies, regardless of the quality of the language. The final argument of these critics is "most weighty," she writes, which is that:

the subject of literature is the relation of human beings to each other, their complex feelings and emotions; pornography, in contrast, disdains fully formed persons (psychology and social portraiture), is oblivious to the question of motives and their credibility and reports only the motiveless tireless transactions of depersonalized organs.¹⁵

These arguments, all of which can be applied to the Gothic on some level, are refuted by Sontag not by the denial of their validity as descriptions of pornography, but by their invalidity as providing qualifications for art, modern art especially. She constructs, in this essay, one of her most sure definitions of the modern artist, whom she describes as being a traveller to dark parts of the consciousness, providing trophies that "fascinate" rather than simply "edify or entertain."¹⁶ The modern artist is therefore a "broker in madness," taking an "immense spiritual risk." Sontag then chides that artist who takes a "sexually obsessed consciousness", for instance, as his or her subject but who "adds a rider to the agreement which effectively nullifies it. They require that the author have the proper 'distance' from his obsessions," she writes, "for their rendering to count as

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pg. 39.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pg. 45.

literature." This emphasis on "distance" points out an important aspect of Sontag's descriptions of the task of the modern artist, which is that it centers not only around the artist's relationship with certain themes, but also with *time*. In other words, for Sontag, the artist should be able to present the most direct sensations in all their intensity rather than simply describe them, and should effect as much as be affected. The "distance" she writes about is the moral distance that explains phenomenon and nullifies its unsettling potency, or maybe the authoritative distance, which assures the reader that it is "all in the past." It can be easily discerned in many Gothic fictions, to different degrees, and yet one senses in novels like *The Monk*, and especially in *Vathek*, that the author is struggling to do away with it, to transcend or destroy the safe border between reader and text -- and by extension that between the author and the world. (Of course, it is entirely abolished in pornography, but also in much modern art that unsettles long before it is understood.)

Vathek contains, like many Gothic novels, a humanized^{-ized} or less epic version of the Faust myth; indeed, rather than looking at Beckford's fiction as a combination of improbable fantasy and realism (which is "nature... intended to be... copied with success"¹⁷ according to Walpole, whose definition of the Gothic this is), it can be seen rather as a combination of Goethe's *Faust* (which is realistic in many ways, and also improbable) and a pornographic novel, maybe even one of Sade's. *Vathek* is described early in the novel as growing dissatisfied with his castle, Alkoremi, which had five wings designed for the satisfaction of his senses; this already parodies Faust's dissatisfaction with his studies in the first scene of Goethe's poem. More importantly, however, is that Beckford sets the stage for his attempt at a synthesis of a moral philosophy with a philosophy that admits eccentric degrees of sensuality. This concern links *Vathek* to another important nineteenth century work, Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, itself containing detailed sensual description, except that Pater created an entirely original paradigm, involving the meeting of Marius with Marcus Aurelius, for his synthesis rather

¹⁷ from Horace Walpole's introduction to *The Castle of Otranto* in *Three Gothic Novels* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pg. 43.

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date of Faust?

than applied an old one. More importantly, though, is that Pater, unlike Beckford, was interested in refinement of sensual pleasure, rather than an aggravation of its more extreme, anarchic sides. Pater portrays the synthesis, in fact, as a struggle between an Epicurean instinct and the Stoic instinct of self-abnegation; ironically (ⁱⁿ ~~when discussing~~ ^{of} the Gothic), he finds the balance in Christianity.

Beckford intended to create an imbalanced portrait, one that leans heavily toward the sensual side while exploring it deeply; it is an exploration of that which exists *below* philosophy. The following demonstrates Beckford's willingness to transcend standard ethical codes:

[The numerous guides of Carathis have just died out of fear; being near a cemetery, Carathis thought to lure the Ghoules with the fresh corpses in order to question them regarding the location of Vathek]:

The negresses, full of joy at the behest of their mistress, and promising themselves much pleasure from the society of the Ghoules, went with an air of conquest, and began their knockings at the tombs. As their strokes were repeated, a hollow noise was made in the earth; the surface hove up into heaps; and the Ghoules, on all sides, protruded their noses to inhale the effluvia which the carcasses of the woodmen began to emit. They assembled before a sarcophagus of white marble, where Carathis was seated between the bodies of her miserable guides. The Princess received her visitants with distinguished politeness; and, supper being ended, they talked of business. Carathis soon learned from them everything she wanted to discover; and, without loss of time, prepared to set forward on her journey. Her negresses, who were forming tender connexions with the Ghoules, importuned her, with all their fingers, to wait at least till the dawn. But Carathis, being chastity in the abstract, and an implacable enemy to love intrigues and sloth, at once rejected their prayer....¹⁸

¹⁸ *Three Gothic Novels*, pg. 230.

The main attraction of much of Beckford's narrative is in the outrageous invention of the detail, which also involves various sub-plots that don't really add much, in terms of philosophical or psychological dimension, to the narrative. There is complexity here, but it is a complexity of sensation, in that Beckford creates an aroma that mingles sex, death, hunger and decay on an effectively haunting landscape. Of course, Beckford is expressing something important by having Carathis, the mother of the Caliph, be "chastity in the abstract", but it is not the psychological complexity of another author who explored the dark sides of consciousness, Dostoyevsky; one doesn't sense that Beckford is seeking to articulate these various psychological schisms so much as noting them in complaint. The novel is, in its inventiveness and transgression, very modern in this way; it is not unlike the fiction of Beckett or Kafka, ~~in which~~ the meanings of which are not articulated by their authors so much as ^{loosely and} ~~effectively~~ ^{effectively} presented. It is also unlike Pater's *Marius*, for Pater would never take the risk of being *misunderstood*, in enacting his synthesis, so much as Beckford does here.

The lack of a beginning, middle and end, the secondary position that style takes in the text, and the absence of any real investigation of human relations, are all qualities that *Vathek* more or less possesses. Despite the completeness that the ending of *Vathek* provides, it is easy to believe that Beckford (like Maturin in *Melmoth*) could have continued this series of crimes as long as he wanted; the ending, therefore, with its pat resolution is not entirely convincing, especially since Carathis is sentenced to an even greater damnation than the Caliph, who is therefore moderated. It is when one thinks of the Caliph as the figure of the modern artist as Sontag describes him, and the nature of his particular "frontier of consciousness," that one understands the novel's relationship to pornography (while maintaining, of course, that it is not pornography itself, at least in its ordinary sense). *Vathek*, though it is hardly the enactment of "tireless transactions of depersonalized organs," yet includes many highly sexualized beings, like the "negresses" and the numerous eunuchs; indeed, all of the characters, including Carathis, are primarily ordered by their placement in a sexual hierarchy, and much of the "drama" is

in shifting these characters around. Beckford is thus able to invent, over and over, new ways to configure these characters and excite his reader; he sacrifices the complexity of their psychologies to this inventiveness, for they become like chess pieces taken up in a whirl of providence and untamed desires. "Only in the absence of directly stated emotions can the reader of pornography find room for his own responses," Sontag writes¹⁹, and it is this absence that allows Beckford's fiction to be so compelling; indeed, it is the cartoonish quality of such characters as Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar that lets the reader project whatever fetishes upon them as he or she wishes. It is also important to note that the simplified structure of the narrative allows the focus to be on the detail in its *presentness*, its immediate effectiveness; and it also allows the detail, centrifugal in nature, to exist without sacrificing the integrity of the whole. (One should also note that Beckford's fiction, unlike the Gothic novels of Radcliffe, Maturin, Lewis and Shelley, takes place primarily outdoors, ~~and~~ ⁱⁿ settings in which the characters can have an easy interaction with nature, and that it also maintains a steady progression of time; it is thus one of the most lyric-like, rather than epic, of the Gothic fictions.)

why does this follow?

Sontag's description of sexuality later in "The Pornographic Imagination" provides an excellent gloss on the motivation behind *Kathak*, illuminating the psychological backdrop against which the narration occurs:

Human sexuality is, quite apart from Christian repressions, a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs, at least potentially, among the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity. Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness -- pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself. Even on the level of simple physical sensation and mood, making love surely resembles having

¹⁹ *Styles*, pg. 54

an epileptic fit at least as much, if not more, than it does eating a meal or conversing with someone. Everyone has felt (at least in fantasy) the erotic glamour of physical cruelty and an erotic lure in things that are vile and repulsive.

The association of sexuality with the "vile and repulsive" would not be lost on Beckford; and "laboo and dangerous desires" are more "sudden" and "arbitrary" in *Vathek* in than in any other Gothic novel. It is clear, in this light, that later novelists like Radcliffe and Maturin chose to model their sexual transgressions after Lewis's *The Monk*, with its complicated plot, great amount of scheming and much else, including morality and societal mores, standing in the way of sexual fulfillment, rather than after *Vathek*, which begins sinning early in the narration, unable to wait. What is most distinctive about *Vathek*, however, is that it does seem to be about a continual attempt to "extinguish one's consciousness", hence the inclusion of so much outrageous, jarring detail; indeed, though the plot portrays the Caliph's entourage as heading steadily towards doom, one senses that nothing has really been lost, since, finally, all Vathek discovers is that he was unable to escape *himself*. His sentence may have Dantescan elements, but it follows a most un-Christian like display of sin and revery; Vathek himself may have lost "HOPE", but it is important to remember the moderation of Vathek's punishment by Carathis's far worse one. One could even credit Beckford's graphic description of damnation -- "All severally plunged themselves into the accursed multitude, there to wander in an eternity of unabating anguish", he writes -- as his final titillation for the reader, his dare, the last detail of his "erotic lure."

Vathek, with its ending that seems tagged-on, thus exaggerates something which exists in the more orderly novels of Lewis, Radcliffe and Godwin, but which is more surely hidden, and that is the interchangeability of "Heaven or Hell" at the end of the literary work. Though Ambrosio in *The Monk* is sentenced to a rather gruesome doom, for instance, one can hardly say that the reader has suffered anything quite so horrible, nor that he or she has been morally edified (though who could say, exactly); Ambrosio's

Radcliffe was
- antagonist
- a model for
Lewis.
You'd have to
pinpoint
Schubert
here.
Her
mystery
of Vathek
are his
model

fate after escaping the Inquisition is basically as interesting, fantastic and sensational as anything in the novel, and thus the level of stimulation and variation that has been characteristic of the entire work has been maintained. Since we are not interested in Ambrosio as a growing or even tragic character, but more as a reader's double, one is only marginally interested in his fate, especially since it is a fate in which the reader can find humor as much as horror. In fact, it is that ability to laugh that enters at just the right moment to free the reader of an equivalent guilt that, for the most part, extinguishes the viability of the novel's resolution, its supposed confirmation of the hierarchies of good and evil. A work of literature cannot, itself, be damned, since fiction cannot be damned; neither, one thinks, can the reader or writer, at least in the nineteenth century (though it is curious to consider whether or not Maturin, for one, actually thought his blasphemies serious enough for damnation). However, one thinks that both *The Monk* and *Vathek* would have been much more troublesome had they been written in a time when the religious conscience was more thoroughly integrated with the social; not only would one have assumed that the authors were more sincerely Christian, but also that their blasphemies were really acts of self-destruction, rather than decadence.

It is for this reason that Sontag is so upset with the *modern* artists (not certainly all artists) who include a "rider" in their works to distance the writing from moral approbation. The question is important because one would realize that one of the earliest Gothic novels, *Vathek*, is also one of the most "postmodern", in that it is the closest, structurally, to being able to discard its conclusion without damaging the reader's interest in the work. This would help to identify the "tradition" of the Gothic as not being in the continuance of the superficial tropes of these novels -- for example, the decor including castles and dungeons, the use of elaborate plots and literary "flashbacks", supernatural intervention, and the facade of heterosexuality merely concealing a more complicated, diverse sexuality -- or even in the horrific, "uncanny" atmosphere (which appears in the writings of Poe, Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor), but rather in the voyeuristic, hence transgressive, heart of the fictions. This would make writers like William Burroughs,

you're leaving Rodolphe out when you define these

Thomas Pynchon (in *Gravity's Rainbow*), and Jean Genet more Gothic than many writers who maintained the Gothic "aura", since these writers follow-through on the Gothic novelist's invitation to explore marginalized, extreme and primarily private psychologies as thoroughly and directly as possible given the state of public concepts of morality, and even to blaspheme as a way to escape religious persecution (one thinks of Genet and Burroughs). Since the modern artist, indeed a "broker in madness", is more able than the artists of ^{the} past to avoid placing judgement without censure on the extreme obsessions portrayed in their art -- to cross that "distance" -- it therefore becomes clear why the Gothic as it had been known in the ~~late~~ late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is no longer really visible in quite the same way -- it has exploded. The castles and dungeons, symbolic of an oppressive moral and religious code, have been overturned; the action now takes place in the open (hence the importance of *Vathek*'s locales), and indeed one need not expect damnation or its effective symbol, the limitless darkness of the dungeon, as one's fate, but rather an Enlightenment of sorts, though one that is private in scope, and too intense for effective communication. (Hence the topic of the Gothic novel becomes, also, the inability to communicate, surely a main concern of modern artists like Beckett and Kafka.) The Gothic, both old and new, can therefore be said to be some sort of cross between Baudelaire's sunsets and Rimbaud's suns; it is a portrayal of both the drama of being "predetermined by sin, which threatens to deprive [one] of the freedom of thought" but also of the "awakening into new day." The entire slope of the narrative in the Gothic can thus be seen as reversed; rather than it being understood as the descent of the protagonist into hell, one can see it as a parable of growth, but a growth for the reader spared the novel's sensational damnation. They are, therefore, parables of adolescent experience and adventure rather than moralistic fables of the renunciation or tempering of experience, a narrative paradigm that is most apparent in that other Gothic novel that seems peculiarly postmodern, with its gaps and various philosophical and fictional transgressions, *Edgar Huntly*.

40 Earle Place
New Rochelle, N.Y. 10801
27 June 1995

Dear Brian,

Your paper is very good, with a lot of deep and valid (I think) insights. I've pencilled a few notes and queries inside.

Basically I'd raise two questions:

How do the Radcliffe Gothic fit into your schema?

Could you have introduced the Poulet less obtrusively? The Sontag, for instance, slips in nicely in its place, but I think the Poulet would have taken less center stage if you had introduced the subject of the Gothic and how you hoped to interpret it, and then brought it in perhaps more compactly to start off your discussion.

Your use of Rimbaud is really excellent.

One more question, after all: what has the full flowering of Romanticism to do with Rimbaud's approach? That is, in other terms, when does the Miltonic hero become not only fascinating, but right? Blake certainly says so, but one doesn't get that sense with the Monk or Vathek.

Anyway, as I say--a really fine and provocative paper.

The "Bad" Poem in *The Canterbury Tales*

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The "Bad" Poem in The Canterbury Tales

Brian Kim Stefans

Due to the nature of the canonization process, by which the largely impersonal arbiters of literature determine which literary works have proved most valuable through the ages and hence worth continued preservation and which not, one doesn't often come across – in "masterpiece" anthologies, for instance – the great "bad" poems of the past. These poems, some of which were the products of sophisticated imaginations and even bestsellers, fall together to compose something of a counter-canon, which can simply be a state of "in waiting" for those poems which, when a change in literary codes of judgment occurs, eventually become attractive again to anthologists and editors. One great "bad" poem, which isn't entirely bad, is America's first epic, Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad*, in which are lines like the following:

deserve
(your syntax
demands parallel
verbs:
have proved →
deserve/warrant)

He spoke; and silent tow'rd the northern sky
Wide o'er the hills the Hero cast his eye,
Saw the long flood thro' devious channels pour...
Thy capes, Virginia, towering from the tide,
Raise their blue banks and slope thy barriers wide,
To future sails unfold an inland way
And guard secure thy multifluvian bay;
That drains uncounted realms, and here unites
The liquid mass from Alleganian heights.
York leads his wave, imbank'd in flowery pride,
And nobler James falls winding by his side;
Back to the hills, thro' many a silent vale,
Wild Rappahanoc seems to lure the sail,
Patapsco's bosom courts the hand of toil,
Dull Susquehanna laves a length of soil;
But mightier far, in sealike azure spread,
Potomac sweeps his earth disparting bed.¹

Although a counter-canon would suggest — given your introduction of the word "bad" — a veritable canon of awfulness, just as "inscribed" a collection of texts as the old Reading list for the Comps was a canon of goodness. It's hard to imagine a time when the counter-canon's Barlow will displace the canon's Whitman, though it's not altogether difficult to imagine that Whitman might some day lose canonical status (again).

Barlow clearly had the epic convention of the "cataloguing of the ships" in mind when composing these lines. He makes the mistake, however, of applying the convention to a New World landscape that would

¹ *American Poetry. The Nineteenth Century, Volume One: Freneau to Whitman*, edited by John Hollander (New York: The Library of America, 1993), pg. 12.

Most style manuals prescribe p. cl pp. (I wait make corrections, however).

require the creation of new conventions to describe its unique spatial characteristics and chaotic abundance. The orderly progression of couplets, each line of which contains a classically proportioned description of an element of the landscape, points to the artificiality of the language more than to anything else; and though Barlow is known for some rhythmical dexterity in poems like "Hasty Pudding," the metrical stiffness of these lines doesn't help to hide the poorly applied convention. Heroic tags like "nobler" and "mightier" make it sound as if Barlow is trying to sell his rivers rather than describe them; they seem strangely inert, and stress the packageability of the rivers rather than their rushing power. Nonetheless, there is an odd, soothing quality to the poem, though it may bring one to an unwelcome attention to the dangers of repetition and over-ambition in an epic poem.

John Ashbery, a poet whose sense of form permits him to utilize unpromising methods in fruitful ways, would use many of these conventions to create one of his most formally daunting poems, "Into The Dusk-Charged Air," which may be an homage to Barlow:

If the Rio Negro
 Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
 The jungle flowers, the Tagus
 Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
 Abrade its slate banks. The tan Euphrates would
 Sidle silently across the world. The Yukon
 Was choked with ice, but the Susquehanna still pushed
 Bravely along. The Dee caught the day's last flares
 Like the Pilcomayo's carrion rose.
 The Peace offered eternal fragrance...²

Something of a slow moving river itself, the poem continues for 150 lines, each of which includes the name of a river and a descriptive phrase, whether absurd or absurdly conventional, that brings each river into the briefest focus, only for it to disappear with the next name. Ashbery's game, however, is not just to expose the artificiality of literary convention, but rather, as if illustrating the impotent epistemology of the traveler described in Baudelaire's "The Voyage," to describe the joy, tinged with sadness, that a writer can take in a literary voyage regardless of how much of it is just second-hand, or "book," knowledge (Ashbery probably found these names in an encyclopedia). The voyage is only virtual, and the poem is — one fears, in a rather Foucauldian sense — the mere proliferation of meaning, the spinning of language's wheels, with only the additional element, or presence, of the storyteller's charm and charisma. The poem is, then, not a parody of Barlow's epic and other failed poems like it, but a suspenseful drama of meaning, in which the reader is forced to ask with each line: will this change? will it — the repetitive structure which has begun to feel comfortable — stop *now*? The poem never opens itself up with a self-interpretive gesture, but it never dismisses the possibility of one either. It also permits the reader to stop or start —

² John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985), pg. 54.

Chances, for example,
 knew the danger of
 confining discrete
 thoughts in discrete
 couplets.
 | good
 contrast

| fine phrase!

Do you mean
 this word?
 Is it some sort
 of meaning, pace
 Foucault, what
 the lines lack, so
 what we have is a
 proliferation of
 geography with no
 earth actually written?

(Rather than refer in passing
 to a critic's "take" ["in a rather
 Fouc. sense"] try to give a
 sense of it more explicitly in your own
 words)

and thereby help create the poem – at will, since there is no sense of what constitutes narrative completion.

This sort of game, in which ^{a narrator} the author of a poem constructs a “bad” poem which foregrounds its conventions without the clear signal to the reader that the “game” is being played, is characteristic of Chaucer’s project in certain of the *Canterbury Tales*. The only sure assurance to the reader – and one is even then not certain – that Chaucer is aware of the formal deficiencies of his tale is when it is cut off by another pilgrim or the Host. This occurs three times in the *Canterbury Tales* – with Sir Thopas, The Squire’s Tale, and The Monk’s Tale; it should have, perhaps, occurred with The Tale of Melibee, but it doesn’t. The most serious result of this failure to have Melibee cut off is that the reader is left uncertain of how aware Chaucer was of the tediousness of the tale; one could even propose that he left that “bad” tale intact to complicate even further a reader’s critical sense of confidence in the *Tales*. Though this is unlikely, there are clear indications in the three tales that were interrupted that Chaucer was aware of the dangers of the over-proliferation of meaning, of the potential that a story teller (like himself) can be taken over by his/her own conventions despite the contingencies of time and reader/auditor interest, and that he intended to raise questions about the quality of his own writing by making a game of it.

There is a series of general characteristics which link the three tales, and which inform the reader of Chaucer’s intentions for them. These characteristics are:

1) an attempt or attempts by the teller to rally the pilgrims by alluding to the excitement of what will come next, often in a manner that will strike the auditor as unpromising. Though this occurs often in the *Canterbury Tales*, the convention itself is parodied in these tales, either because the teller is clearly futile in his effort, or because he describes a project that is well beyond the scope of his abilities.

2) sections of a tale that are the product of the “cloning” of details, actions and poetic form in a way that doesn’t accent their variety, but rather their tedious sameness. The teller then becomes an assembly line of information, in which detail is simply packaged into verse and pushed forth.

3) large or important sections in the tale that can be characterized as having a paratactic construction rather than a structure that reflects causal and dramatic integrity. A diverse range of materials can be linked by a paratactic structure, but in these tales they are almost always “cloned” details that foreground repetition. This type of structure can employ connectives like “and” and words that serve as their equivalent, but which don’t create more than a relationship of mere adjacency between the elements linked.

4) the discarding of the contingency of time at some point in or before the tale, which creates a grotesquely wide space for the teller in which to elaborate his tale. For example, there are moments in the three tales when a twist in the narrative implies that the tale itself would have to be unbearably long in order for it to complete its structural arc.

Though this is intriguing, it stops your brain or thought momentarily at one; but better he is a fool than a fortune. (Plus, you're assuming that your taste at medieval taste are synonymous.)

You ought to note clearly somewhere here that this "interruption" is part of your reading: it is NOT necessarily textual in the way that the interrupted Thopas or Monk's Tale are.

You need to make clear how #3 is fundamentally diff. from #2 (you have the focus on important sections/details).

5) a "sub-standard" or "immature" aspect of the writing that makes one question the quality of the writing rather than the quality of the teller as a dramatic persona. These three tales threaten the idea of the *Tales* as a ~~total~~ production of high quality, though it is clear, upon closer examination, that Chaucer was aware of certain structural and linguistic "deficiencies" within these tales, and that he succeeds in using them to great advantage.

As these five characteristics imply, the structure of these tales makes possible a comedy based on the mechanics and physicality of language as opposed to the wit or buffoonery of the teller. It is similar to the type of comedy described by Henri Bergson in his essay "Laughter," in which it is the potential mechanization of human life that raises the possibility for the comic. He writes, for example, about laughing at someone who was running along the street and suddenly stumbles:

[I]t is not his sudden change of attitude that raises a laugh, but rather the involuntary element in this change, – his clumsiness, in fact. Perhaps there was a stone on the road. He should have altered his pace or avoided the obstacle. Instead of that, through a lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else.³

Chaucer creates something like a linguistic slapstick in these tales, since part of the humor is grounded in the sudden awareness of "rigidity" or "momentum" that their interruption creates. Indeed, these tales indicate Chaucer's anxieties regarding the potential for the mechanization of his writing and the failure of his project. The moments of repetition in each of these tales act as a counter to the form of the entire poem, which doesn't permit repetition. Their focus on language and convention, consequently, serve for the poet as a way to touch ground, to allay the "high anxiety" that he might have experienced when writing the more deep and innovative tales, in which he might have sensed his sure control slipping due to the complexity of their integration of forms, tones and content. (It is also worth contrasting this focus on mechanization to another element in Chaucer's comic tales, which is their emphasis upon creative improvisation, most apparent in the prologue to the tale of the Wife of Bath. However, the swerve from "rigidity" and "momentum" is a major element in the humor even in the prologue, for its more liberating elements concern the Wife's numerous departures from the mechanics of cultural authority.)

The obvious place to begin a characterization of this group of tales is with Sir Thopas; it is the simplest in narrative construct, the most unusual in stylistic form (hence foregrounding its artifice, which Helen Cooper believes had a visual element as well⁴) and it provokes, in the lines following it, in which

³ Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1956) pg. 56. The italics are Bergson's.

⁴ Helen Cooper, *The Oxford Guide to Chaucer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): "[W]e tend to think of *Sir Thopas*, on the model of recent editions, as a *narrow* poem, but in Ellesmere, Hengwrt... and some others, it sprawls right across the page, threatening to fall off the right-hand side of the folio altogether. The layout is certainly Chaucer's own.... The first joke of *Sir Thopas*, in fact, is obvious before one starts to read, in its very appearance on the page." (pg. 300)

consistently (?)

Excellent point, which you might underscore: the whole context would be defined by repetition by encouraging "one-upsmanship"

the "Host styntheth Chaucer and his Tale of Thopas," a defense by the Pilgrim Chaucer in which he raises the legitimate question of why one teller, namely himself, cannot tell his tale when another can. The reader is clearly signaled to think of Sir Thopas no longer as Chaucer's misguided effort at a ballad romance - if that, indeed, were ever the belief - but as a brilliant parody. "Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" replies the Host, famously, to Chaucer; however, the trick is that the tale, in its very failure, indicates most clearly the operation of the auto-critical element built into the structure of the entire poem. The tale raises a problematic that threatens the illusion that the *Canterbury Tales* is a single story which aims to maintain a certain level of "quality", or that there is circumscribable set of artistic values shaping the *Tales*. It suggests, rather, that the author is in a state of doubt about the criteria upon which judgments of literature are based, and that the *Tales* is an exploratory, rather than expository, work. The entire poem is, following this line of reasoning, Chaucer's attempt at creating an *oeuvre*, a "life's work" within a single work; the fragmentary nature of the narrative, which includes juxtapositions of poems of various qualities, is his way of gauging, or containing his understanding of, the quality of the work, for it enables him to see it from the outside.

Too inexact
"is stifled when another is not?"

But hasn't Chaucer-narrator already dispelled any such illusion before anyone has even spoken (GP 725-46) - itself ANOTHER narrative disjunction - as - parenthesis -

The Pilgrim Chaucer begins the tale with a request for attention: "Listeth, lordes, in good entent, And I wol telle of verrayment." (712-13) The attempt is to create a state of anticipation in his auditors, but by the "Third Fit," it is clear that nothing substantial is on its way; they become restless, and the Pilgrim Chaucer is forced to ask them to shut up. Sir Thopas promises to be long, but not only because clues have been provided concerning a lengthy future for the knight and later twists in the plot. Rather, it has become clear that a cloning of information has taken over the tale, that meaning is following meaning without order, and that the teller has not taken pains to reduce his story to an effective narrative and dramatic form. For example, during the "Second Fit," in the lines immediately previous to the injunction to "holde your mouth," the Pilgrim Chaucer seems to pay absolutely no attention to the rules of structural proportion in describing the armament of Sir Thopas, but instead includes everything that comes to his mind. The teller, rather than being deficient in, say, creativity or enthusiasm, is more like a poor editor:

OK, at any rate, before he "allows" the Miller to speak (Prol Mill T 3171-86, esp. 3174.)

Where do we know this from? Do you take l. 891

He dide next his white leere
Of cloth of lake fyn and cleere,
A breech and eke a sherte;
And next his shirte an aketoun,
And over that an haubergeoun
For Percyng of his herte;

And over that a fyn hawberk,
Was al ywrought of Jewes werk,
Ful strong it was of plate;
And over that his cote-armour
As whit as is a lilye flour,
In which he wol debate.

As a real "dramatic" response - or just another cliché-gone-awry?

His sheeld was al of gold so reed,
And therinne was a bores head... (857-65)

The paratactic construction of this part of the tale, based on the use of the word "and," is obvious; the other primary connective word, "over," indicates Chaucer's parodying of the potential for an over-active associative capacity in a story teller, for it is clear that the Pilgrim Chaucer – or rather the type of balladeer he is impersonating – simply doesn't know what to leave out. Chaucer shows that meanings were available to be placed in the ballad to proliferate on their own momentum, but that their over-abundance short-circuits their ultimate value, for they are not organized. As a result, hierarchies of value collapse within the poem; with all detail leveled, there is nothing upon which to base judgments or to hang interest. This becomes apparent when one considers the merely decorative value of the word "Jewes" in line 864 as opposed to its repeated use in The Prioress's Tale, which had directly preceded Sir Thopas, in which one, for reasons of conscience, had to come to a conclusion about the use of the word because of its racist overtones. In this way, the dangers of such numbing fantasies as Sir Thopas are illustrated, since there is nothing within the tale that might serve to shock the reader into a critical stance – not, of course, until the Host cuts the tale off.

Yes - go on to play with this idea of "layers" conveyed in the repetition of "over" (esp. since we're meant to think of this "clothing" as a process in fitting out Thopas of the poem, whereas with every layer both, in fact, get thinner.

The humor of this sequence, which continues "cloning" without a change in formula for another sixteen lines, becomes apparent when one looks back upon the promise with which Sir Thopas had left the giant:

The child seyde, "Also moote I thee,
Tomorwe wol I meete with thee,
Whan I have myn armoure... (817-819)

"Tomorwe" becomes dependent on the completion of a task, which then necessitates a digression, a sub-narrative, as occurs in many of the tales, which will have its own start, middle, and end. However, the paratactic construction of the stanzas concerning the arming of the knight continue to draw the story, and by extension the auditor, further away from the movement of the main "plot." This creates a state of anxiety in the reader, not unlike the anxiety of reading "Into the Dusk-Charged Air," for satisfaction is being repeatedly deferred only so that invention for its own sake can continue. The contingencies of time, therefore, have been temporarily superseded, and Chaucer's parody becomes a more serious affair than it might have first seemed, for it becomes a parody of the ego's ability to become perfectly blind to the realities upon which it may depend to fetter it.

Not just the repetition makes this a rather bewildering (because not quite comprehensible) end to a terrific #.

The Squire's Tale does not propose itself as one of Chaucer's "bad" tales as forcefully as Sir Thopas. Indeed, Helen Cooper, in the *Oxford Guide to the Canterbury Tales*, writes that there is nothing more than the "plausibility" that The Squire's Tale is a parody; she writes: "If there is an element of parody, and if it is aimed at the genre rather than the Squire... there is not a great difference between the original

does

romances and the parody offered here. Worse examples were written with a straight face.”⁵ Cooper later gives more attention to the prospect:

To read the tale either as a parody of romance or as an imitation of callow immaturity may be too simple. Much modern discomfort with the tale arises, I suspect, from a characteristic found widely in romance: its insistence on treating all its elements with the same degree of seriousness – in this case, its hyperboles and its hangovers, its princesses and its passing kites, the deathly swoon of the abandoned lover and a bird falling out of a tree. [...]

The very stress on the rhetorical process of storytelling in the Tale may be a backhanded way of reminding the reader of the element of literary convention in so much of what is being narrated – a convention that here has a more obvious potential for becoming cliché, than for taking on the kind of resonance that makes the telling of the Knight’s Tale so powerful. Such a flattening, such attention to convention for its own sake, is the source of many of the strengths of the Tale.⁶

Cooper approaches the issue of the leveling of detail and “flattening” of the tale by suggesting that Chaucer was simply providing a very good, albeit problematic, imitation of a model in a way that “allows for a demonstration of the weaknesses as well as the potential of each form.”⁷ This may be true; however, this interpretation still indicates that Chaucer was conscious of the sub-Chaucerian quality of some of the writing, but that he used it to provoke a comparison of the tale’s occasionally attractive “flatness” with other tales told by the pilgrims. In the second part of her statement, Cooper implies that Chaucer was employing something akin to Brecht’s “alienation effect” when denying the tale the “resonance that made the Knight’s Tale so powerful,” thereby “calling attention to convention for its own sake.” Chaucer, of course, never foregrounds structural elements to the degree that is characteristic of “Epic Theater” – the placards, the “non-psychological” acting style – which the playwright used to assure the viewer that the “flattened” content of the drama was not the failure to create “real” drama. However, it is to the idiosyncrasies of the structure of The Squire’s Tale that one must turn to interpret it, for therein is they contain / convey / contained Chaucer’s most unequivocal expression of his intent.

× good point,
and an
intriguing
comparison with
Brecht.

The Squire, who as the reader knows from the General Prologue is a young poet, prefaces his tale with the mild request to “Have me excused if I speke amys” (7). He then provides – after an effusive *occupatio* that indicates the abundance of his creativity (58-75) – the foundation for a tale which (as Cooper notes) would be “far too long for the Canterbury sequence.”⁸ The set-up is itself characterized by a sort of paratactic construction, for it centers around the spontaneous arrival of a knight bearing gifts, but without providing any other reason for the objects being brought together *beyond* the knight, who is only a formality and soon disappears. The description of his arrival is relevant:

⁵ Cooper, pg. 219.

⁶ Cooper, pg. 225.

⁷ Cooper, pg. 225.

⁸ Cooper, pg. 219.

You might point out that it's all down hill
from here.

In at the halle dore al sodeynly
 Ther cam a knyght upon a steede of bras,
 And in his hand a brood mirour of glas.
 Upon his thombe he hadde of gold a ryng,
 And by his syde a naked swerd hangyng;
 And up he rideth to the heighe bord. (80-85)

The conjunction “and” is superfluous in both the third and sixth lines of this excerpt. For instance, the “brood mirour of glas” that the knight is holding (though no verb is included) is the subject of a clause not contingent upon the first verb of the sentence, “cam.” One could say that the mirror came in *with* the knight and happened to be in his hand, but that’s absurd. The second superfluous “and” begins the part of the sentence that could only be called “run-on,” all the more unusual arriving after the neat parallel construction (involving an “and”) of the previous two lines. Though one can only speculate concerning the correctness or implications of Chaucer’s grammar, it is clear that he pushes the focus swiftly from one thing to the next, serving to draw attention away from the knight himself. The “ands,” by diluting the dynamic of the lines, indicate the arbitrary nature of the four objects being together at all; and so the projected frame of the narrative – since it is based on the meaning of four disconnected objects and not yet on a plot that ties them together, or even on the knight – is itself paratactic in construction. This is Chaucer’s way of poking fun at the convention of having the mere aura of magic motivate the dynamic of a tale.

The knight proceeds (110-167) to describe the magical qualities of the four objects he brought with him; he then promptly “rideth out of the halle” (169). The section following (174-262) concentrates almost entirely on creating a sense of wonder about each of the objects – at length and one at a time (mirroring the knight’s descriptions) – and thereby anticipation about the role each of the objects will play in the forthcoming story:

Greet was the prees that swarmeth to and fro
 To gauren on this hors that stondesth so... (189-90)

And somme of hem wondred on the mirour,
 That born was up into the maister-tour... (225-26)

And oother folk had wondred on the swerd
 That wolde percen thurghout every thyng... (236-37)

Tho speeke they of Canacees ryng,
 And seyden alle that swych a wonder thyng
 Of craft of rynges herde they nevere noon... (247-49)

The second objection
 is better: the
 first (“And in his
 hand”) is perfectly
 acceptable: you
 appear to be looking
 for zeugma where
 Chaucer wishes
 none to be.
 Your general
 point, however, is
 well-taken, esp.
 the conclusion of
 “poking fun at a
 convention.”

The Squire has yet to indicate what shape the plot will take. This is in stark contrast to a tale like the Miller's, in which the machinery of the plot, though it also has a centrifugal motion that temporarily baffles the reader, remains focused because of the clearly defined intentions of each character, and through the interest in Nicholas' schemes.⁹ No intentions have yet been presented by the Squire, and no schemes;

the tale proceeds for about another 130 lines before the Squire even acknowledges that the "knotte" of his story has not been reached. This warning to himself to stick to good narrative form occurs directly following the lines (382-400) in which occurs the first significant event since the arrival of the knight, which is that Canacee takes a walk. "I sholde to the knotte condescende,/ And maken of hir walkyng soone an ende" (407-8), the Squire says, thinking that it is his lengthy description of her stroll, and not his elaborate but entirely indeterminate set-up for the tale, that is making his auditors (one imagines) visibly restless.

The tale then swerves into an entirely unrelated story, thus suspending – as the description of the knight's armament did in Sir Thopas – the progress of the main narrative. Since Chaucer's opinion of the quality of the Squire's tale of the falcon can be only inconclusively discerned, the digression does not serve as a direct parallel to the over-proliferation of meaning that characterizes lines 851-887 of Sir Thopas. However, it contributes to the brilliance of Chaucer's parody of romance in The Squire's Tale to believe that he intended this episode to be the *most* interesting part of the tale, since it arrives at a moment when one is ready to believe no story is ever forthcoming. One does arrive, but it is not quite what was expected, for though the falcon (as opposed to the knight earlier) actually contributes a dramatic element to the tale, it has almost nothing to do with the horse, mirror, ring or sword, and points to no plot that will connect them.

Chaucer's intention for The Squire's Tale is really given away in the last lines of the second part, in which the Squire, overstimulated by his successful performance, projects the telling of his tale into the next couple of weeks:

First wol I telle yow of Cambyuskan,
That in his tyme many a citee wan;
And after wol I speke of Algarsif,
How that he wan Theodora to his wif,
For whom ful ofte in greet peril he was,
Ne hadde he ben holpen by the steede of bras;
And after wol I speke of Cambalo,
That faught in lystes with the brethren two
For Canacee er that he myghte hire wynne.
And ther I lefte I wol ayeyn bigynne. (661-670)

⁹ At the 247th line of The Miller's Tale, the "knave" has just started walking up the stairs to look through the keyhole, and will soon see Nicholas sitting "evere capyng upright,/ As he had kiked on the newe moone" (3444-45). It is at this point that the reader begins to lose "omnipresence" and is kept in the dark regarding Nicholas' exact intentions.

You miss the double point that the people go on to talk about is really unconvincing at best, in the pervasion, all this is treated as outright argument (261-62).

very fine comparison – and at the end of the Tale we see no much the wiser (though in Mil T we appreciate the artistry & what might, on first reading, have seem circumstantial.

Actually, everyone is left with what ends up to a perpetual hangover.

That the Squire would end the 660th line of his tale – in which drama and plot has yet to play a significant part – with the promise to “bigynne” is a clear sign of narrative driven by blind momentum, by the over-production of information. He has lost whatever ability he had to edit his story to a digestible size; meanings have run over the top, and he has lost all sense of time. The Squire has, therefore, learned something of the magic of poetry, which is that any sort of detail can be packaged into an infinite number of heroic couplets, but his enthusiasm has made him blind to the necessity of creating the fictional “knotte.”

well, there may be some solas in this, but ultimately little sentence.

The opening lines to the third section of the Squire’s tale – “Appollo whirleth up his chaar so hye/ Til that the god Mercurius hous, the slye” – again indicate that Chaucer is playing the game of meanings with the Squire, especially if one understands the Squire to have acquired these conventions directly from his father, the Knight, who told the standard-setting first tale of the pilgrimage. The young poet can be said to have found himself, therefore, on the winning end of the Oedipal gesture, able to supersede the role his father had played as story teller and epic poet. However, his callowness is transparent in his superficial understanding of the physics of narrative; he finally proves himself throughout his tale as capable only of loose detail, not of the “knotte”. (One term from the vocabulary of Harold Bloom, “belatedness,” may certainly be applicable here, since the Squire may have patterned his tale on the Knight’s – perhaps as its negative image!) The “knotte” of The Squire’s Tale as a whole, of course, is that Chaucer has engaged the reader in another search for meanings in places where they didn’t appear – the space around the “plot,” in the psychological depth of the characters, etc. – but has nonetheless brought the reader to a heightened awareness of elements of narrative structure and poetic artifice. As with Sir Thopas, another rip has been created in the fabric of the *Tales*, for The Squire’s Tale, by containing writing that is partially intended to repel the reader rather than invite, raises questions about Chaucer’s intentions in the entire project of the *Tales*.

probably could use a footnote – or this could be a footnote.

The Monk’s Tale, like the Squire’s Tale, has often been considered a potentially “early work” of Chaucer’s, due to the occasional dullness of its language and the general weakness of the individual narratives.¹⁰ Even if this were the case, the placement by Chaucer of the tale within the Canterbury sequence was surely intended to supply it with a new range of significances, especially in terms of the critique that runs throughout the poem of narrative strategies. If Chaucer wrote most of The Monk’s Tale before embarking on the *Tales*, then its significance for him was probably as a map of errors, as a blueprint of what *not* to do. If he wrote it during the time he was composing the *Tales*, then it was, most likely, a game of some sort, or his way to communicate certain anxieties and special delights that he felt when writing the tales and which the reader should also feel when reading them. As Cooper observes:

- But why? Can you be more specific about what those intentions might be? In other words, if Chaucer is trying to teach us to be better (warier) readers, then isn't offering a "bad" tale just to see what we'll make of it part of

¹⁰ Cooper’s comments to this effect appear on pp. 217 and 324.

a discernible project rather than a questioning of it?

More to the point: its dreary redundancy and amorality

The Monk tells, not just a tragedy, but a series of tragedies. As such, it represents the kind of story-collection that the *Canterbury Tales* is not: it assembles stories of a single genre, tone, and meaning, as do the collections of saints' lives, animal fables, Miracles of the Virgin, or, from Chaucer's own works, the *Legend of Good Women*. The *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, stresses variety and multiplicity, moral, generic, and stylistic. The Monk's Tale is a story collection that serves to define by contrast what is happening in the larger work to which it belongs.¹¹

(though I would call it a series of catastrophes) NOT tragedies

She also notes that the variety of sources upon which Chaucer drew to compose The Monk's Tale is "almost as great as that from which he draws the whole *Canterbury Tales*."¹² (The contrast seems akin to the contrast one expects to find between an anthology of poetry that centers upon the literature of one nation in an outmoded way – Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, for example – and one of the "multicultural" anthologies of today – though these latter, unfortunately, rarely include as much "multiplicity, moral, generic, and stylistic" as Chaucer's single work.) The Monk levels his wide range of sources into a rather monotonous sequence of stylistic and thematic exercises; rather than stressing their diversity by decentering his authority through the presentation of contrasting viewpoints and stories with different styles and endings, his obsessions with death and the fall of great men, filtered through his limited ability in providing his fictions with life, reduce the stories to a lulling sameness that only exaggerates the Monk's centrality. He certainly has confidence in his abilities; this Monk, whose "patience" was worthy enough to be mentioned in the prologue, expects to talk for quite a while with the "tale, or two, or three" that he is eager to relate, and then finally the "hundred" that he has "in my celle" (1968, 1972). His ambition loses some of its luster when one realizes that each of these tales is going to be a "tragedy," which is, in the Monk's hands, a rather uncomplicated, undramatic and easily reproducible form.

witty parallels

The Monk's definition of "tragedy" (1973-82) is split in two halves: the first five lines basically describe how tragedy is concerned with "hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / and is yfallen," the key word being "fall," a version of which occurs in almost all of his tales (along with "prosperitee," "heigh," "myserie," and "wrecched"). The story doesn't become tragedy, however, until it is "versified communely / Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*." This isn't the first or last time that the relationship of poetic form and content is mentioned in the *Canterbury Tales* – there are, for example, the Host's accusation of "ryme dogerel," or the Parson's dismissal in his prologue of "'rum, ram, ruf", which is to say alliterative verse. However, in the context of what his tale proves to be, the Monk is clearly being proposed as something of a formalist, one who mistakes the completeness of "tragedy," like another poet would a "sonnet," as legitimizing the content, even if it is not there.

It's not the genre, it's the unselectiveness that takes that sheen off things!

which, of course, is precisely what the Monk ISN'T.

Though Cooper notes, in the *Guide*, that the Monk's definition of tragedy was to become the definition for readers of Chaucer¹³ for lack of any previous, the uncomplicated nature of the Monk's

- Be clear: like another poet would any 14-line poem...

¹¹ Cooper, pg. 328.

¹² Cooper, pg. 328.

¹³ Cooper, pg. 327-8.

well, it's become the textbook definition of medieval "tragedy" - but we rush in to that definition, in my estimation.

theory of tragedy is almost obvious; perhaps Chaucer just didn't think much of the form. There are too many tales in the Canterbury sequence regarding the "fall" of individuals – whether it be the young knights of the Knight's Tale, or the summoner in the Friar's Tale – which imply that Chaucer thought that what the Monk called "tragedy" was really more complex. If the signature aspect of tragedy is that the story concerns one who stood "in greet prosperitee" who falls "into miserie," then the difference between "tragedy" and a story like the Friar's Tale is a difference in the distinctness of certain dichotomies – high and low, rich and poor, very alive and very dead. One could then conclude that tragedy was an *oversimplified* form in Chaucer's estimation, since the tragic storyline would be limited to merely tracing the movement from an awesome "prosperitee" to a lamentable "miserie," without the various moral ambiguities and psychological depths that he liked to explore in, say, The Pardoner's Tale or The Prioress's Tale, or the Canterbury sequence as a whole. The Monk's Tale can be understood, then, either as a group of parodies of tragedy as reproducible form, or a group of tragedies as parodies of reproducible form, either version of which serve the same functional ends.

Plus it legitimizes the story of Chauntecler (at least up to line 3414) as tragic.

The Knight's words, after his halting of the tale, also suggest that form – either in terms of patterned thinking or poetic structure – had run away with the Monk and his tale:

I seye for me, it is a greet disese,
Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,
To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!
And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,
As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
And there abideth in prosperitee. (2711-17)

One would hasten to propose to the Knight that a hundred stories of the rise from "povre estaat" to "prosperitee" told with the same lack of imagination would not have been much better; they would have been as schematized as the tragedies, and finally as unconvincing. The Host is much more perceptive when he proposes that the truer "contrarie" to the Monk's performance would be a tale of "desport" and "game," but of course, the Monk's Tale is exactly that – a game – when placed in the context of the *Tales*.

The paratactic structure of the tale is clear in the separate titles that are provided for each tragedy, similar, again, to Brecht's use of placards in his Epic theater, since they remind the reader of the artificiality – the blatant mechanics – of the tale when it periodically breaks off only to start anew. The titles impede the progress of the tale and force the reader to reorient his or her concentration and anticipate the burden of a new set of characters and a new plot; neither character nor plot, however, are ever really developed beyond their contribution to the tragic form. Another sign that Chaucer is foregrounding the formulaic construction of tragedies is the limited space he gives to the most monumental tragedies – the falls of Lucifer and Adam – compared to the space he grants to, for example, Queen Cenobia. In the case of the former, the Monk is content to mention at some point in the verse that

good point
(see also
end comment)

the hero had at one time been (respectively) in "high degree" or in "paradys" and that he has since fallen into hell. The Monk, of course, is taking advantage of the pilgrims' knowledge of these two biblical figures, and is stripping his tale of unneeded detail; unfortunately, he leaves little left but the bare outline of tragedy.

In the other stories, he often has to raise the hero to the levels of "great prosperitee" which is a prerequisite for the tragic fall by including information that was not general knowledge, and it is this material that comprises much of the content of these tales. For example, the second verse of the tale of Hercules relates:

He slow the crueel tyrant Busirus
 And made his hors to frete hym, flessh and boon;
 He slow the firy serpent venymus;
 Of Acheloys two hornes he brak oon;
 And he slow Cacus in a cave of stoon;
 He slow the geant Antheus the stronge;
 He slow the grisly boor, and that anon;
 And bar the hevne on his nekke longe. (2103-2110)

The repetitiousness of detail can be appreciated by the pilgrims as nothing but filling the format that the Monk had described as tragedy; he is merely producing iambs, and the story never moves forward or backward, but rather remains *inside* the form. The resemblance to paratactic construction is apparent in the repetitions of "he" in six of the lines (with "slow" in five of them), and the "hym" and "his" that appear at least once in each of the others. Whether the Monk, like the Pilgrim Chaucer when telling Sir Thopas, is attempting to annoy the Host – an argument for which there is some proof – he is still clearly demonstrating one possibility for the abuse of poetry, which that it can give a superficial organization to any type of information.

give this in
a
footnote.

The static quality of these lines, in which event is laid over event with no apparent progress, reappears in the Monk's description of the life of Queen Cenobia, which, ironically, is the story of an individual's conquest of "manye regnes grete" (2313) – a story of a power, in which the queen's imperialist appetite can be equated with what the Monk does with his relentless packaging of tales.¹⁴

is ?

) compelling
parall.

¹⁴ If this seems like an outrageous association, consider Kenneth Rexroth's description of Arthur Rimbaud's methods for writing verse: "He applied to literature, and to litterateurs, the minute he laid eyes on them, the devastating methods of total exploitation described so graphically in the *Communist Manifesto*. Some of them were not very applicable. He 'ran' the vowels like he later ran guns to the Abyssinians, with dubious results. Usually, however, he was very successful – in the same way his contemporaries Jim Fiske and P.T. Barnum were successful... The old monument to Rimbaud in Charlesville ignores his poetry and memorializes him as the local boy who made good as a merchant and hero of French imperialism in the Africa where the aesthetes who were never good at business think he went to die unknown, holding the Ultimate Mystery at bay." *Bird In Bush: Obvious Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1947) pg. 44. Ironically, Brecht's Marxist understanding of Rimbaud's methods of cultural accumulation applauds him for exactly what Rexroth condemns.

intriguingly
reminds yet
related
footnote.

Cenobia's downfall is immanent when she makes the mistake of conquering cities that were "Apertenaunt unto the magistee/ Of Rome." (2315-6) However, rather than proposing that the queen may have been responsible for her own defeat, the Monk attributes her eventual fall, as he does all the falls, to Fortune:

But ay Fortune hath in hire hony galle;
This myghty queene may no while endure.
Fortune out of hir regne made hire falle
To wrecchednesse and to mysaventure. (2347-2350)

Allas, Fortune! She that whilom was
Dredeful to kynges and to emperoures,
Now gaureth al the peple on hire, allas!
And she that helmed was in starke stoures
And wan by force townes stronge and toures,
Shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte;
And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures
Shal bere a distaf, hire cost for ~~the~~ ^{to} quyte. (2367-2674)

His awe at the cyclical inevitability of Fortune's determination of history, in which those in power invariably fall low, is almost Marxist in its confidence, and yet at a critically reduced level. He doesn't show any insight into the nature of Cenobia's power, but merely sees it as a formal element that is necessary for the tragic fall to occur. The tale is clearly divided into two parts, one which describes her rise (in detail, for those who didn't know already), and the other the lament for her fall; the "fall" itself is the hinge, but it doesn't contain anything of what one might call "drama."

*another
unusual but
definitely parallel*

The Monk presumes at some point that the form for tragedy is so apparent that he is even able to abbreviate, in a way different than he did the tales of Lucifer and Adam, the tales regarding his contemporaries. His formula of prosperity-(Fortune)fall-misery is so well established, in fact, that he has to ask himself, during his tale of Barnabo Viscounte:

Why sholde I nat thyn infortune acounte,
Sith in estaat thow cloumbe were so hye? (2401-2)

The Monk recognizes that the form of Barnabo Viscounte's biography would make it suitable for the machinery of his poetry; he is unable to continue, however, because he doesn't have the proper information. He leaves the tale a fragment – a fragment within a fragment of a tale that, itself, is characterized by fragmentation – which, ironically, points to a strong element of the Monk's "poetic." The Monk has created a literary space in which to run his machines of tragedy that doesn't rely on his constant authorial presence, but rather makes room for authorial silences, as his ability to leave his tale of Barnabo half-complete demonstrates. From within this space, something like the "still point of the turning world" of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the Monk attains the power to address history directly, not

*Excellent
observations:
The Monk will
seize anything,
even a
skeleton, for
his corpus*

(I don't quite see this connection)

dissimilar, in fact, to Eliot's address to the reader in Part IV, the "Phlebas" passage, of the *Waste Land*.¹⁵ The Monk seems to exhibit a knowledge of the way history crosses into literature, and manipulates it to great affect. Consider his tale of Pierre de Lusignan:

O worthy Petro, kyng of Cipre, also,
That Alisandre wan by heigh maistrie,
Ful many an hethen wroghtestow ful wo,
Of which thyne owene liges hadde envie,
And for no thyng but for thy chivalrie
They in thy bed han slayn thee by the morwe.
Thus kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye,
And out of joye brynge men to sorwe. (2391-98)

That the Monk would include contemporary tragedies in a sequence that begins with the falls of Lucifer and Adam is itself worthy of notice; one could base an argument for a greater deal of structural complexity within the tale than is implied by the present essay. One could also argue that the Monk is skeptical of a closed structure for poetry, and that he needs something more open, which would allow him to make these direct addresses to history. However, even if the Monk were mastering a *new* poetic form rather than failing in an old one, the argument for the ultimate value of his creation would still have to be made, since it would not explain the foregrounded repetitiousness of his sense of tragic form, nor the rushed quality of his narratives which aim only at this formal completion.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carol T. Christ, in *Victorian and Modernist Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) describes something she calls the "mythic space" which poets like Pound and Eliot developed based on models of narrative fragmentation found in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Browning's *Ring and the Book*. Christ writes that "by effacing the continuous narrative structure of the long poem" one could "maintain a fidelity to particular angles of vision while [implying] a single design beyond the vantage point of even the poet" (pg. 117). She writes that Eliot's turn to fragmentary modes of writing had to do with his "sense of the futility of historical action [which is] one manifestation of a discomfort with all categories of agency" (pg. 131) and that "the gaps [in *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*] at once reinforce the poem's atomism, the sense it communicates of the chaos and anarchy of contemporary history, while they supply the space in which a mythical structure, implied in the poem's characters and events, can be erected" (pg. 132). The implications of this idea are obvious for a consideration of the *Canterbury Tales* and The Monk's Tale. The reason the Monk finally fails as a poet using the mythic structure, however, is that he more than "implies" a single vision beyond his vantage but rather continues to conform everything to his limited, mechanistic philosophy of Fortune. In some ways, this is akin to Pound's application of his limited understanding of economics to his wide-ranging sense of history, thereby blaming every cultural shortcoming on "usury."

¹⁶ Laura Kendrick's interpretation of the Monk's inability to create an interesting tale in *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in The Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) contrasts the formal quality of these tales to "abreactive" fictions like The Clerk's Tale that "satisfy the need to repeat fearful experiences to master them." She writes: "[T]he mastery in these [the Monk's] stories is almost exclusively the narrator's. It is a formal, rhetorical mastery. The Monk does not give us time to identify with the suffering hero and thus to work through anxieties, nor does his abbreviation allow for the comforting, wish-fulfilling detours of more effective abreactive fiction (which presents escapes from death, raising of the humble to high positions, return and reunion with loved ones believed dead)" (pp. 51-52). This is a fascinating understanding of the tale, for it alludes to psychological depths

m

I'm glad to see
Chaucer
critic appear
at last.

There is almost no "sentence" to the story of Petro de Lusignan except that his "chivalrie" was the object of envy for the "heathens"; the reason one would kill someone for their chivalry or the drama inherent in such a murder is not explored. It is worth noting, also, that the type of the abbreviation in this tale assumes a degree of previous knowledge – as one *can* when discussing a contemporary – on the part of the pilgrims. Chaucer may be pointing to the peculiar relationship of history and literature, which is that the form of the latter determines the content of the former; hence, if your book is not the Bible, but rather the fragment of a poem of Chaucer's, you fade from a culture's memory. A testament to the inherent power of the paratactic structure of The Monk's Tale is that it is able to present different stories and the contradictions between the parallel aspects of their content – Nero equated with Adam, for instance – without the tale ripping itself apart, since the structure insures that content from one tale does not have to carry over to the next if it won't fit; this string of gaps guarantees the tales' thematic fragmentation while providing structure. However, though the Monk is free of the necessities of plot and can create as many tales as he wants, he fails to stop to smell the roses, engage in more than a few moments of rich verbal elaboration, to develop a philosophical theme, or to offer anything more than the barest characterization of his heroes. It is the mistake that any poet, when rushing to establish a poetic identity and create an *oeuvre*, can make.

Why no pilgrim stops the Tale of Melibee, which shares so many characteristics with the "bad" poems, is a thesis in itself. The most obvious argument is that the tale is more a moral treatise than a fiction, and therefore didn't require the sort of dramatic and formal integrity which, say, The Monk's Tale was expected to attain. Another argument, more tenuous and even a bit dated in its lack of an awareness of critical "theory" (not necessarily a fault) is R.M. Lumiansky's interpretation in *Of Sondry Folk* that the Tale of Melibee is the second half of the Pilgrim Chaucer's joke on the Host:

Harry neither interrupts nor complains in the course of Melibeus. In delivering this lengthy moralistic tale, with a proverb for every possible need, the Pilgrim Chaucer has presented the most routine sort of literary fare, in direct contrast to the highly original "Sir Thopas," which the Host rejected. Thereby, Harry's lack of any real qualifications for his job as literary critic on this pilgrimage has been revealed for anyone whose taste runs to material of a less strictly hortative nature than the "Melibeus." And this jest is all the better by virtue of the fact that "Juge" Bailly does not realize what has happened to him.¹⁷

in the Monk's character which the present essay does not consider (beyond the suggestion that the Monk has a fear of a closed poetic). However, Kendrick doesn't offer here or elsewhere in her book an explanation of the *function* of the Monk's failure to satisfy his obsessions to the *Tales*, since he produces such an obviously awkward, at times unreadable, tale. The Monk is simply dismissed after he serves as a contrast to other "abreactive" fictions.

¹⁷ R.M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk. The Dramatic Principle of The Canterbury Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), pg. 94.

Or even to
examine the
status of his
heroes, the
organization of his
stories, or the
accuracy of his
model (see
end
comment).

1 good
criticism

This is an awkward argument for a number of reasons: first, any of the pilgrims could have stopped the tale, and no doubt there were many who wanted to; second, this would have been a rather poorly constructed (too long, certainly) joke on Chaucer's part, too much of a torture for both reader *and* the scribe who had to put it to paper; third, any sort of "direct contrast" with Sir Thopas fades well before the half-way point of the tale; last, Chaucer would have provided a more transparent dramatization of "Juge" Bailly's mistake in his opinion of the tale than what appears in his speech following it, perhaps by contrasting the Host's reaction to a dissatisfied pilgrim's. The text would certainly have been more fictionally layered with clear tonal shifts – possibly with indications of Bailly's dumb interest – if Chaucer intended the reader even to *get* the joke. The tale could be seen as humorous, however, only if taken entirely out of the dramatic and fictional context and into the more paratactic structure described in the present essay. It could then be seen as the ultimate example of the over-proliferation of meaning, especially if one were to contrast Prudence, who is composed almost entirely of quotes (like Walter Benjamin's ideal essay) with a character like the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath. Chaucer would then be providing an open warning against the banality of merely regurgitating wisdom found in books, and of the impotence and absurdity of such uses of cold and rationalized "prudence" when the situation clearly requires some emotional ventilation.

You probably need to look beyond humanism, whose "dramatic principle" itself becomes a stumbling block to reading a tale like Melibeus, which defies drama. Compare Don Howard, for example.

A larger question is what role these "bad" tales play in the structure of the *Tales*, and why Chaucer believed – as one can assume he did – that they would contribute to rather than subtract from the overall quality of the poem. The conclusion that Chaucer merely wanted "diversity" in the *Canterbury Tales* is too simple an explanation, or at least a not very interesting one. The Monk's Tale, for instance, contains so many structural parallels with the *Tales* as a whole that it is easy to see how Chaucer was examining, in composing it, the ways the entire Canterbury sequence might "hang" together as a whole. He was aware of the poetic space that was created by the paratactic structure of The Monk's Tale, with its titles and sub-divisions, and what effects could be made by the juxtaposition of poems that deal with a diverse range of materials with differing degrees of literary competence. The use of fragmentary poems added yet more possibilities for radical juxtapositions. One could compare the impression the Monk makes as a author to the image of a face composed of fruit in a painting by Arcimboldo or Salvador Dali, in which the fruit come together to form an illusion of mass, and yet remain distinct in themselves. The space between the fruit is also maintained – they never become integrated – offering a painted metaphor of a mind that is broken into component selves rather a single personality. This, indeed, may have been what Chaucer felt he was doing for himself in writing the *Tales*, especially if one considers how his fictional representative told two tales of entirely different qualities but which, taken together, were intended to compose "the Pilgrim Chaucer."¹⁸ More important, however, was Chaucer's anxiety about the success of the "diversity"

Good

fruits?

¹⁸ C. David Benson in *Chaucer's Drama of Style. Poetic Variety and Contrast in The Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) observes that: "Chaucer did not intend the narrator to become a uniform character of novelistic verisimilitude; rather, the various portraits

in the context of maintaining that variety in the *Tales* militates against a "single 'Chaucer'" (27)

of the project, since the decentered structure of the poem depends upon the integrity of this diversity. If Chaucer failed to achieve it with one or two tales that resembled each other too much in theme and style – that is, if he unwittingly wrote the same tale (or part of a tale) over again two or three times, thus subtracting from that space of *difference* upon which the poem depends – the poem would sag a little, flatten out, or appear to repeat, as happened with The Monk's Tale (in the opinion of the Host).

Chaucer's project could be understood, then, as not only dependent upon the interest the tales have in themselves but on the dynamics of the space that exists between them, a single but multi-dimensional space defined by absence, but which provides the possibility of difference. Indeed, this absent space at the center of a poem is what is lacking in a work like Sir Thopas, in which every rift is filled with detail, regardless of its relevance. Sir Thopas may be a miniature of what Chaucer feared the *Canterbury Tales* would be, an egoistic show of technique that didn't allow the reader to enter at any point (that didn't allow the difference of the reader) or the author to escape (to look at his poem); the tale enacts a feat of blindness, while the *Tales* enacts, through its play of contrasts, a feat of vision. The role that the "bad" poems play in the main frame of the *Tales*, then, is to add an auto-critical dimension to the *Tales* that it would not have possessed had the quality been consistent throughout, in the manner of, for example, Browning's *Ring and the Book*. In this way, the three tales – Sir Thopas especially – also serve to integrate other moments in the *Tales* in which the reader might fear that Chaucer had nodded off or which Chaucer felt incomplete, since even the worse parts of the poem play into the auto-critical game. It makes possible some of the "difference" of which even Chaucer was unaware.

well-written
"concluding"
idea.

nice
extension of
your
argument

John H. Fisher writes in *The Importance of Chaucer* that "Chaucer was the first English person to emerge as author," and that "he is the first English author to recognize his own productions as an *oeuvre*."¹⁹ Fisher finds evidence for this latter statement in Chaucer's Retraction to the *Tales*, in which is created the "authorial persona Chaucer projected into the fifteenth century – the image of the writer concerned about the way his writings would be received by future readers, and aware that he could no

....
of the pilgrims are held loosely together by a nonspecific and flexible "I" who is capable of adopting many perspectives, even contradictory ones. Other medieval first-person narrators... such as Dante in the *Commedia* or the dreamer in the *Pearl*, are far more believable and consistent characters: each is a central figure throughout the work and whose education is a primary focus of the action. Chaucer the pilgrim is none of these things; instead, he is a shadowy figure who disappears immediately after the *General Prologue* and then reappears before *Thopas* only to confirm his elusiveness. He seems never to learn anything" (pg. 27) He later writes that the choice of two tales for the Pilgrim Chaucer of such varying quality "seems to have foreclosed any notion of a single 'Chaucerian style'" (pg. 31) One is not sure if Benson means the author or the Pilgrim in the last part of his statement, but the distinction need not be made. Implicit is the possibility that Chaucer believed a structure like that of the *Canterbury Tales* could provide as well-defined or limned a literary space for a long poem as a closed narrative like the *Commedia*, even if the various compositional elements *never* become integrated, or its narrator/author emerge as a unified, omnipresent character – but is, himself, defined by a permanent rift (and absence)!

good ellipsis

X

¹⁹ John H. Fisher, *The Importance of Chaucer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp. 71, 86.

longer be sure of the responses once they had been launched."²⁰ (It is worth observing that, because of the mention of poems outside of the *Tales* in the Retraction, Chaucer rather magically connects everything he has written to the Canterbury sequence, thereby including all of his writing, both poems and prose, in the auto-critical game.) Fisher explains that the anonymity of the medieval creator is due to the intense integration of a society in which the "individual" had no chance to appear, a cultural totality that could metaphorically be understood to be like that of the body. He writes:

The medieval view of society was strictly corporate. Its concept of the community was the *corpus Christi*, described by St. Paul in Corinthians 12:12. As with the human body, each of the community's members had a specific function, without which the whole could not survive. This platonic view of community is hierarchic and totalitarian. The head directs the hands and feet, which in turn sustain the head. The organism and its functions are created and sustained by God, not, as in the eighteenth-century social contract, by the consent of its members. Only the head, the ruler, was called upon to make decisions. The other members were absorbed into the commune and existed only through their functions.... Chaucer was instrumental in ushering into English literature a new perception of the importance of the individual.²¹

It is interesting that Fisher would trace the "medieval view" of society to a literary source, for it seems to fit right into the problematic use of cultural authority throughout the *Tales*, ranging from the various comic misreadings in the Wife of Bath's Tale to the method Prudence finds to bolster her advice in the Tale of Melibee. That Fisher would choose to use the word "totalitarian" is also significant, since it raises parallels with twentieth century totalitarian societies – both communist and fascist – in which there was an attempt by dictators to make citizens become (artificially) "absorbed into the commune and exist only by their functions." It is these societies and the ideologies that spawned them, in which private life was a nearly unattainable fiction, that contributed to the appearance of philosophies such as those of Foucault and Baudrillard, the former of whom capitalized on that very aspect of medieval society – the anonymity of its authors – that is a subject of Fisher's study, and both of whom see the same sort of medieval integration and loss of individuality occurring under the present Western state of "late capitalism" and information saturation.

Regardless of the twentieth century parallels, however, it is clearly unusual when the author of a poem with such an elaborate absence at its core as the *Canterbury Tales* is responsible for the "new perception of the individual." If the medieval view of society stressed integration and individuals "defined through their functions," then what does one make of those tales that implode and *refuse* to function? How does one reach the conclusion that a tale is refusing to "function" at all (how does one know that that "drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord")? By including tales within the artificial canon of the Canterbury sequence that break-down, run-on, contain only the slipperiest of meanings, are depressingly saccharine,

²⁰ Fisher, pg. 87.

²¹ Fisher, pg. 71.

And while that listing – or even the matter of a retraction – are often called "typical" of medieval authorial practice, in fact (as you are pointing out) this was certainly NOT the case.

elegant connections of formulations

and an elegant set of questions.

tiny note: us in verbs in this sense you needn't employ hyphens, which would be appropriate if there were adjectives. But I would add a hyphen in twentieth-century

oppressively morbid or going entirely astray, Chaucer seems to enact within the tale something of the "kenosis" that Harold Bloom describes in *The Anxiety of Influence*, which is "a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions... [It] then is a movement toward discontinuity with the precursor."²² Chaucer performs this "breaking" within the sequence of his tales by, ironically, including tales that contain an exaggerated continuity with precursor models – the ballad romance, the "tragedy." If this were the case, and one were to understand Chaucer's theory of literary influence as similar to Bloom's, then Chaucer seems to have taken a stand against the implications of his own theory, since he refuses, in the Canterbury sequence, to define a single "style" of writing, a single world-vision, or even a single standard of quality and "function" – the entire sequence represents an attempted break with this leveling critical paradigm. In this way the Father of English Poetry hesitates to influence at all, at least in terms of promoting a standard style or philosophical outlook. ^{unaware ~~as~~ he is of his bud. day paternity} Implicit, also, is a critique of "originality" and the anxiety that goes into attaining it, especially since most of the *Tales* are reworkings and translations, thereby engaging the poet in a direct conversation with, rather than anxious swerve from, influence and the "tradition." A final irony is that the poem that stands at the head of the English canon contains within it an implicit critique of (and defiance of) the machinations of canonicity, for after all, would *The Squire's Tale*, *The Monk's Tale* or the *Tale of Melibee* have "survived" had they not been included in the sequence?

(A) This extended & extensive study into three tales, poetic value, and literary reception shows able thought in its cogent, exacting language. You have covered a great deal of intellectual, as well as poetic, territory, emerging with an impressive analysis of Chaucer in particular & poetry in general.

Comments are spread throughout the margins, but let me make a few general remarks here:

1) your purpose is more discursive than pedantic, so you need not rely heavily on other scholarly material: I just want to point out that, from the point of view of a literary journal's editor, this essay is "naïve" on criticism of Chaucer's *Tales*;

2) you never explain WHY you adopt the order *Thop* → *Sq* → *Mk*, with a *Melibee* coda: obviously this isn't the order of the tales themselves, and I don't quite know what governs your choice or how your argument

²² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pg. 14.

"extends itself" based on this order;

3) you never explore the differences between a tale that is "bad" stylistically (*Thopas*) and "bad" morally (*Priores*): you could build

Course Grade: A

(although your first two papers lacked total excellence in quality, and although your classroom presentation was unfocused - if interesting - this performance merits the top grade. I've enjoyed your presence, and perspective, in class.)

another level of "badness" into this general argument;

- 4) you are, I think, weakest on the MkT in that you overlook its tedium ~~too~~ given its simple pattern that all data must be shaped to fit: thus, Lucifer stands along side Adam and Samson, Nebuchadnezzar is here even though, in fact, Fortune smiles on him - the end (2171-72), and Fortune rules all in her capricious way (you do say this, but you don't indicate the implications of this amoral force - either from the ^{standpoint of the} Mark as teller or from the point of view of fiction [i.e., what do stories mean if nothing drives events, and all ends are equally "tragic" because Death falls all?])

Still, I find your range and diction, your attention to detail & capacity to survey, impressive and invigorating.

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Pope's Couplet and Eighteenth Century Poetic Stylistics

Brian Kim Stefans

cited where?

The opinion of Joseph Warton and Matthew Arnold that Alexander Pope and other eighteenth century poets were masters of prose rather than poetry seems ripe for reconsideration, especially in the context of the neo-Enlightenment nature of poetic discourse – discourse about how poems should be written by poets and critics – in the past two or three decades¹. Unless one is stuck in a permanent devotion to notions of “primitivism” and Romantic subjectivity, sincerity and spontaneity centered around readings of the English Romantics, early continental Modernists such as Rimbaud and Lautréamont, and Modernists such as Williams, for example, it is possible to re-engage with the poetry of Pope without feeling the stifling effects of the classicism, meritocratic elitism, artificial (“insincere”) empiricism and social conservatism that, for many, constitutes the “aura” of much eighteenth century English poetry in general, and such poems as Pope’s *Essay On Man* in particular. There is, contrary to expectations, a sort of mechanism in Pope’s idiom that not only permits but *demand*s that the reader escape the directives of the poem’s discourse itself, a mechanism that counters the poem’s Horatian idiom and pleadings to “submit” to a great chain of being with a sort of visionary illumination, a peek through a breakage in the system, that becomes the *possession* of the reader during the act of reading. This is not conveyed, as in Blake, through declarative assertions of the author (as voiced by, for instance, Milton at the end of the poem of that name), but is rather *sounded*, like a bell, within the obvious perfection of a sometimes meaningless, or even tautological, couplet. It is, indeed, this “illumination” that, in the general schema of *An Essay On Man*, is intended to empower the reader with a stoic resignation even when (in Johnson’s phrase) “the pincers are tearing his flesh,”² thus compelling a passive acquiescence to the social order. Pope even describes the necessity of a

Would that it were!

Not in Benjamin's sense, right?

¹ This is obviously a loaded statement itself, but will not be elaborated beyond the mention of a few important volumes of literary criticism by poets that, informed by post-Marxist and structuralist theory, have moved this discourse beyond considerations of “self expression” to the larger problem of the position of poetic language in the public sphere: *Content's Dream* and *A Poetics*, by Charles Bernstein; *The New Sentence*, by Ron Silliman; *The Politics of Poetic Form*, edited by Charles Bernstein; and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Both Bernstein and Andrews (and some poets associated with them) have made explorations into the essay-poem, as well as the use of contemporary social science discourses (among other discourses) in large-scale works that attempt to dis-establish value systems as unsystematically as Pope systematically (via paradoxes and conundrums) established his.

² “Review of a Free Inquiry into the Origin of Evil.”

doubtful or fragmentary knowledge of the whole, suggesting that understanding of this whole is synecdochic, only the experience of proportion in the “rightness” of his heroic couplets:

All in exact proportion to the state;
 Nothing to add, and nothing to abate...
 Shall he alone, whom rational we call,
 Be pleased with nothing, if not pleased with all?
 (ll. 183-84, 187-88)³

This transference of vision (which positions authority in the reader rather than system) is an activity that is not usually thought to occur in the reading of Pope’s poetry, but is usually attributed to the poetry of more “democratic” and “original” writers like Blake, whose prophetic works are so singular in their symbolism that only the very educated, or very devoted, can read them well, and Whitman, whose unchallenged sense of freedom and individuality can be so dominating and effusive as to lessen the possibilities of a thoughtful, meaningful cross-engagement. Nonetheless, the couplet’s split form, and on occasion the formal emptiness of the “commonplace sentiment” itself, offers moments of outlet in Pope’s writing, in ways that are not found in, for instance, the long blank verse sentences of Milton, a writer Pope claimed he could “polish,”⁴ or in Blake and Whitman. Pope’s couplets are often not very closed at all, and it is, indeed, difficult to determine whether they are less so when expressing *sententia*^{ae}, emotions, or (as in the *Dunciad*) disgust.

Pope’s skill as a poet lies not only in his ability to wrap two lines of poetry around a thought or sentiment, but in his ability to create and manipulate expectations by a carefully half-complete presentation of the subject of his couplet in its first line. Pope’s lines do not ever appear half-empty to the reader, but there is usually a lovely shape to its incompleteness that is a major element in the baroque quality of his writing. Though a line of his may contain no imagery at all, for instance, the reader’s heightened attention to the arrangement of words creates images of the words themselves, not unlike the way a well-arranged garden can create heightened effects beyond the mere elements – flowers, stones and paths – that constitute it⁵. A contemporary poet, John Ashbery, in his

³ *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century*, edit. Cecil A. Moore (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935). All quotes from Pope’s poetry are taken from this edition.

⁴ Pope was implored by some of his friends to fix the expression of *Samson Agonistes*, though he considered the “exotic style” of parts of the poem suitable for its subject. A letter from Atterbury states: “I hope you won’t utterly forget what passed in the coach about *Samson Agonistes*. I shall not press you as to time, but some time or other, I wish you would review, and polish that piece.... [I]t is capable of being improved, with little trouble, into a perfect model and standard of Tragic poetry – always allowing for its being a story taken out of the Bible...” As cited in “On Versification” by Geoffrey Tillotson, in *Pope. A Collection of Critical Essays*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972) p. 57.

⁵ It is worth mentioning that the most controversial, but probably greatest, Scottish poet today is the “concrete” poet, Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose 5-acre garden Stonypath, now called Little Sparta, is a large-scale neo-classical poem itself. His general aesthetic centers around the ability for single or small groups of words to have a dynamic interaction with their immediate physical environment, such as trees or a pond. It is tempting to see the neo-classical style in English poetry from Pope’s day as limned by a gardening aesthetic, for the main aspect of the

poem "37 Haiku," which is composed of 37 single-line poems, provides a good modern example of (and contrast to) Pope's use of the single line, and brief examination of that poem should set the stage for a look at this element of Pope's stylistics.⁶ The following examples, none of which acquire that "oriental" style that normally disqualify English-language haiku from being poems, and all of which are unmetred and unpunctuated, move very near to the effect of a *single* line of Pope's in setting-up and manipulating expectations that are rich and slyly compelling:

Old-fashioned shadows hanging down, that difficulty in love too soon

Some star or other went out, and you, thank you for your book and year

Something happened in the garage and I owe it for the blood traffic

Too low for nettles but it is exactly the way people think and feel

And I think there's going to be even more but waist-high

Night occurs dimmer each time with the pieces of light smaller and squarer

You have original artworks hanging on the walls oh I said edit⁷

I think you need to define the sense in which Ashbery is using the term "haiku". He isn't referring to the metres of the classical Japanese lyric but, to a "meta-physical" poetics of indirect symbolization - a poetics shared with other metrical forms.

Though these are not, indeed, the best lines of poetry that Ashbery has written, they do demonstrate in a very clear way the way silence after the end of a line of poetry can be shaped to create narrative expectations in the reader.

As one commentator has pointed out, the very title of Ashbery's first book of poems, *Some Trees*, is a haiku, since one is never sure if the word "some" is emotionally emphatic ("those are some extraordinary trees"), descriptive of amount ("here are some - a few - trees") or denoting a percentage ("some trees, but not all, are..."). The first "haiku" of the present poem is as non-committal about the word "that," which, were there to have been a period at the end of the line, would make the "shadow" a simile for the "difficulty," but in its present state leaves the clause open to a wide array of interpretations. (It also includes a visual description that calls to mind the discourse on over-elaborate descriptions of nature in English poetry, beginning with Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, which was harshly criticized by Wordsworth, and which figured so poorly in Ruskin's theory of the Pathetic Fallacy.) A later "haiku" - "And I think there's going to be even more but waist high" - is a loose pentameter, and points, with its

Well no, more ambiguity does not make a haiku.

style is a preoccupation with words themselves and their *arrangement* over what they "express," the words themselves, rather than the images they convey, being subject to the authoritative gaze of the eye.

⁶ Of the major postmodern figures, it is Ashbery who has sought the same sort of refinement in his writing - non-intrusive (impersonal) style, full of *bon mots* as well as *mots justes*, expressed with a faultless "harmony" - and stoicism (of a surreal sort) in his social philosophy that is characteristic of Pope. Though one might wish to see a formalist like Anthony Hecht or John Hollander as Pope's truer "heir," it is worth considering how anachronistic, almost antique, the idioms of these two writers seem in the twentieth century, and how little they have attempted to deal with the formal innovations of their immediate predecessors. Pope, with his aristocratic, though thoroughly middle-class, attention to the mysteries of artifice, can be seen as a forerunner of the decadent schools of poetry that flowered in France and England in the nineteenth century, as well as of the Symbolists; Ashbery is their socially-integrated American cousin.

⁷ John Ashbery, *Selected Poems*, p. 311.

How did we get onto Ashbery?

use of the word "And," to very specific possibilities for what "occurred" previous to this line of the poem much more than to what might follow; the "but" that appears near the end twists the syntax of this sentence into a linguistic pretzel, so that one is unsure what one is even *permitted* to expect. Ashbery, in this poem, constructs lines that seem to capture the essences of many stories, thus creating suggestions of possible futures and possible pasts in which the lines play subservient, implemental parts. That none of the lines fit completely with the narrative frames imposed by its neighbors (though one is invited to surmise what the connections might be) makes the real "content" of the poem lie in that empty space.

This may sound like the "meaning of non-meaning,"⁸ but Ashbery's lines rarely leave the domain of what can be called a literary space, an area animated (or dominated) by irony, in which the author is engaged almost entirely in the artifice of his presentation, rather than in an a developing narrative or thesis. While Pope's poetry does not engage in such total suppressions of determinacy, his lines rely on a degree of mystification and incompleteness which keeps them moving, and contributes to the impression of ornate abundance that his verse projects. In poems like *A Rape of the Lock*, with its sylphs and mock heroic catalogues, or *Elegy: To The Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, which can derive imagery from the Gothic, one might say that Pope had a wider range of imagery to access, and therefore had less of a need for the pyrotechnics of syntax to sustain his poem. However, these plays of incompleteness abound in many of the lines of these poems, and they don't call attention to themselves the way Ashbery's "haiku" do, they are a necessary element in Pope's poetic. The following lines are from the fifth Canto of *The Rape of The Lock*:

"Restore the Lock!" she cries; and all around
 "Restore the Lock!" the vaulted roofs rebound.
 Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain
 Roar'd for the handkerchief that caus'd his pain.
 But see how oft ambitious aims are crossed,
 And chiefs contend 'till all the prize is lost!
 The Lock, obtain'd with guilt, and kept with pain,
 In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain:
 With such a prize no mortal must be blest,
 So heav'n decrees! with heav'n who can contest?
 (ll. 102-111)

Not unless the "event"
 is a thinking! which
 haiku is Barthes
 thinking of??

⁸ Barthes contrasts haiku with western forms of concision in poetry (which would have to include the heroic couplet) in *Empire of Signs*: "In the haiku, the limitation of language is the object of a concern which is inconceivable to us, for it is not a question of being concise (i.e., shortening the signifier without diminishing the density of the signified) but on the contrary of acting on the very root of meaning, so that this meaning will not melt, run, internalize, become implicit, disconnect, divagate into the infinity of metaphors, into the spheres of the symbol. The brevity of the haiku is not formal; the haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form." (Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*. [New York: Hill and Want, 1982] p. 75.) Within these parameters, Ashbery's "haiku" would be failures, since they "run, internalize, become implicit, [and] disconnect" at every moment. However, there is some connection to Pope's use of the couplet, for (as will be shown later in the present essay) there are many couplets of Pope's that present very little material as "content" but rather an arrangement of words that seem to promise content, but provide nothing more than a "rightness" that was – as his philosophy in the *Essay On Man* states – may have been his only goal.

But here haiku is used to denote the metrical form, and Barthes' analysis of its poetics is careless.

The first great surprise for the reader is the “rebound” of the cry “Restore the Lock!” in the second line of the couplet, coming as it does after the end-word “around,” which seems to suggest that a visual image is forthcoming. To have the “vaulted roofs” themselves satisfy this lead, or complete this half, would have been disappointing, as would have (though less so) the image of Lords and servants shuffling around at Belinda’s beck, which might have created a satisfactory description of the event, but would have gone no distance in recreating the sensation of the furor raised. That is, in this couplet, the syntactic structure of the first line is brought into the aesthetic experience of the poem by the very swerve away from its assumed narrative completion in the second line. In the following couplet, Pope chooses otherwise, and goes for a literary allusion, but one that repositions the tone of the mock satire firmly in contrast to a “real” tragedy, that of an Othello foiled by Shakespeare’s most successful evil genius. What expectations are created by the single line: “Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain”? The line, only a fragment, is clearly dynamic on its own, and points to very specific expectations on how it should be closed; however, Pope goes further (though not too much) by bringing in the handkerchief, a detail that is itself as trivial as a lock of hair. The first line contrasts Pope’s ~~mock~~ ^{minuscule} tragedy with one of the grandest of Shakespeare’s; the second puts *The Rape of the Lock* inside the tragedy of *Othello*, pointing to the trivial materiality of its central narrative hinge, the handkerchief. The “silence” that exists between the two halves of this couplet is completely different than that of the previous, for the second line of the couplet resolves, perhaps more than it has to, the expectations raised by the first line; indeed, these two lines link to form a very easy, very colloquial, sentence. In this way, Pope has created a different *shape* for the way two halves of a couplet can interact, which is part of the variety of his performance.

The couplet beginning “But see” is as insistent as anything in the *Essay On Man*, and, as shall be shown later in the present essay, shares many characteristics with parts of that poem. The couplet following creates an image of maze-like confusion, as if the couplet, a poem of only two lines, could provide enough complexity that the eye will wander where it will but can come to rest nowhere; it is, itself, a tangle of ivy⁹. The first half of the couplet could, alone, be a poem (“The Lock, obtain’d with guilt, but kept with pain”), for it seems to refer back to

⁹ Joanne Cutting-Gray and James E. Swearingen, in their essay “System, the Divided Mind, and the *Essay On Man*,” describe how Pope’s poem provides a “world picture,” which they see as one of the distinguishing symptoms of the modern age. This picture is introduced, in Pope, through the metaphor of the garden, that “mighty maze! but not without a plan.” They write: “[T]he old religious and philosophical riddles, representing man’s search into the mysteries of life, are safely enclosed within the completely managed figure of landscape architecture. For all its intricate turnings, the maze is arranged in an order, the garden crafted to appear as a labyrinth, and the entire ‘scene’ planned, not by God, the essential architect, but by man, the landscape architect.” (*SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32:3 [Summer, 1992], p. 481.) At the level of the single couplet in the *Essay On Man*, it is clear that Pope generally took a thought that has already had a previous life in, say, a discourse by Bolingbroke, and transformed it into something that had part of the “wild” left in (or put back into) it; indeed, Pope’s own theories of landscape architecture centered around a permissive eye toward the free products of nature, and he was often at odds with friends who rashly trimmed trees (he had a peculiar fondness for just letting them grow to great heights) and who sculpted without the taste to make up for their deletions. See Peter Martin, *Pursuing Innocent Pleasures. The Gardening World of Alexander Pope* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984).

or has been kept? Insisting on the sense of an absolute construction is dangerous. 6

itself with no promise of a rational resolution, and yet does not mind this inconclusiveness, for it points to a human truth; in other words, there is proportion in its paradox, as well as life. The next half of the couplet, in which the lock "In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain" contradicts the proposal of the first half, which not only states that the lock has been obtained, but that it is being kept. The lock never meets its place, in this line, nor do the acts of obtaining and keeping stave off the necessity of continuing the search; in this way, these two lines turn on themselves with a never-ending force of conundrum, one that contains more "rightness" in its presentation than it does a static meaning. The closing couplet of this verse-paragraph is equally non-committal, and each line seems rather divorced from the other; that is, the second doesn't contribute to the meaning of the first, but rather generalizes it. (This is the opposite of what happens in the couplet about Othello, in which the image went from the general to the specific, from the iconic to the significant detail.) "With such a prize no mortal can be blessed" provides commentary on the entire verse-paragraph, and perhaps the entire poem; it, in some ways, can be said merely to reiterate the puzzle of the last couplet, but contributes to the irony by widening the sphere to include all "mortals." The second line widens the view even more, to take in the order of all of "heaven," though it transfers the comedy of emotions – with a mischievous dexterity – to the paradox of man-against-God, or the individual against divine order. In this way, the interaction of the two lines of this couplet are like those of two steps on a flight of stairs, the one merely propelling the philosophical context of the other (perhaps exponentially) to higher grounds, the space between them only being that of increment.

It might be useful to compare Pope to some of his contemporaries in order to understand how skillful he was in manipulating these spaces, and how unusual it was for him to desire to do this, or to recognize that it could be done. While these examples may strike low, since both Addison and Young made their reputations for very different types of writing,¹⁰ both of these poems are quite close in subject and certain elements of style to the *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay On Man*, so they serve as stronger contrasts against which to set Pope's practice than, say, Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* or Swift's "A Description of a City Shower." This first example is from "An Account of the Greatest English Poets," in which Addison recounts the line running "from Chaucer's days to Dryden's times" (the poem was written when Pope was six):

Great Cowley then (a mighty genius) wrote,
O'errun with wit, and lavish of his thought:
His turns too closely on the reader press;
He more had pleas'd us had he pleas'd us less.
One glitt'ring thought no sooner strikes our eyes
With silent wonder, but new wonders rise.
As in the milky way a shining white
O'erflows the heav'ns with one continu'd light;
That not a single star can show his rays,

¹⁰ Young is best known, of course, for *Night Thoughts*, which he wrote when he was after sixty, though he was acclaimed in his day for many works written in heroic couplets. Addison's reputation as a poet is certainly not as high as when he was considered the yardstick against which to measure one's achievement, as Arnold describes in his essay on Dryden and Pope.

Whilst jointly all promote the common blaze.
 Pardon, great poet, that I dare to name
 Th'unnumbered beauties of thy verse with blame...
 (ll. 32-41)¹¹

The scruples that are responsible for Addison's criticism of Cowley keep his own lines, in contrast to Pope's, prosaic and timid. They are overdetermined; for example, the second line of the first couplet gratifies in every way the expectations set up by the first line, since it is only too natural that a hyperbolic statement of praise like "a mighty genius" would be qualified by sober literary criticism such as that he was "o'errun with wit" and "lavish of thought" (uncompelling praise, as it is). One is presented with nothing on a poetical level that helps to illustrate the wit, might, or lavishness of Cowley's poetry; this should be contrasted with the first couplet excerpted from *The Rape of the Lock* above, in which Pope enacts the rebounding of the phrase "Restore the Lock!" by having it rebound within the line. Whereas Pope presents something almost cinematic in its drama (because it relies on the visual effect on the page, as well as the aural), Addison maintains the consistency that, for many (such as Arnold) characterizes "good prose," but to the detriment of his verse. As a single line, "Great Cowley then (a mighty genius) wrote" contains no real dynamic, and seems too complete a thought; and why is his phrase "a mighty genius" – a cliché, but central to the argument – in parentheses? When Addison does succeed in creating interest in the form of a paradox, conveyed with some deft play of language ("He more had pleas'd us, had he pleas'd us less") (multiplying, consequently, the number of readers from the previous line, and placing himself among them), he squanders the affect by repeating that same rhetorical structure, in which the two halves of the line mirror each other, two lines later ("With silent wonder, but new wonders rise")¹². The later line does not, consequently, achieve the same sort of "rightness" that the former does, and so there appears a falling-off into prose after the poetry of the one line; there is a "rightness" in the second line, but only of style, not on the level of poetic expression¹³. The quatrain that follows attempts a Miltonic stateliness, but achieves none of that poet's spatial grandeur and sense of the awe (which Pope mimics, and achieves, in his garden metaphors)¹⁴, thereby

¹¹ *Eighteenth Century Poetry*, pp. 32-33.

¹² Pope is a master of a three-part line that includes the "golden line," a line that is balanced between two halves, within it, along with a coda or introduction to provide asymmetry.

¹³ This problem of style that does not impress with anything but propriety is described in the first pages of Longinus' *Treatise on the Sublime*: "I am almost relieved, at the outset from the necessity of showing at any length that Sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in language... [F]or it is not to persuasion but to ecstasy that passages of extraordinary genius carry the hearer: now the marvelous, with its powers to amaze, is always and necessarily stronger than that which seeks to persuade and to please..." *Longinus on the Sublime*, translated by A.O Prickard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906) p. 2.

¹⁴ This change in scale, so important to one's understanding of the whole course of poetry from Milton to the present day, is one of Pope's finer achievements, and it was a credit to his imaginative gifts that he was able to adopt so much of Milton's poetic machinery but translate it into a domestic, relatively secularized (or privately religious) situation. He was, himself, socially marginalized, but managed an individual, but at the same time general, system that accounted for this lack of integration; his image of the marvelous became private, but not mystical. "The world can only become picture when man becomes *subjectum* at its center.... [P]ope's new narrative setting completely alters the traditional genre upon which it is based and reverses the nature of human experience from a God's eye view to that of the plan and context of man." (Cutting-Gray and Swearingen, p. 483)

Well, this may fall short of Milton, but the simile works pretty effectively for me.

It's not quite a cliché: Addison's point is that Cowley is like a musclebound athlete whose feats overpower himself, no?

less is more
L. 32-41

making the praise a bit academic; he does not appear able to humble his authorial stance before an actual milky way “overflowing” with stars, hence keeping his poem too much within the sphere of prose description. His image is colorless and flat, too tidy in its meaning; indeed, his remarks that Cowley’s “fault is only wit in its excess” is ironic as it is wit’s failure to overflow that deadens his poem.

The presence of Pope’s manner are clear in Edward Young’s couplets, and the following lines, from the second of “Two Epistles to Mr. Pope, Concerning the Authors of the Age. 1730.” are characterized by the thrust and parry of the *Essay In Criticism*, though the thought itself is more mundane, less infused with a sense of divine order, and perhaps less confident:

Write, and re-write, blot out, write again,
 And for its swiftness ne’er applaud your pen;
 Leave to the jockeys that Newmarket praise;
 Slow runs the Pegasus that wins the bays.
 Much time for immortality to pay
 Is just and wise; for less is thrown away.
 Time only can mature the lab’ring brain;
 Time is the father, and the midwife Pain:
 The same good sense that makes a man excel,
 Still makes him doubt he ne’er has written well.
 Downright impossibilities they seek;
 What man can be immortal in a week?
 (ll. 118-130)¹⁵

Yes

In contrast to Addison’s, Young’s lines seem downright rambling¹⁶ and conversational, with shifts in tone, rhythm and syntax that mirror the agitated mental process of the poet; few of them appear to have the “rightness” that is

¹⁵ *Eighteenth Century Poetry*, p. 536.

¹⁶ W.H Auden provides interesting commentary on the use of the couplet by Pope’s predecessors, such as Donne and Cowley, in which the “feeling of the couplet is almost lost,” the writing having become something like blank verse since Chaucer’s time. Of course, a play of silences is not going to occur in this type of writing, in which the line breaks and even the meter seem a formality, and which is not end-stopped. Donne’s *Satires* are a good example of this type of writing, themselves conversational and run-on; an brief example of Pope’s “polishing” of these satires is illustrative (from the fourth Satire, lines 1-4):

Well; I may now receive, and die; My sinne
 Indeed is great, but I have beene in
 A Purgatorie, such as fear’d hell is
 A recreation to, and scarce map of this. (Donne)

Well, if it be my time to quit the stage,
 Adieu to all the follies of the age!
 I die in charity with fool and knave,
 Secure of peace at least beyond the grave. (Pope)

It is quite clear that Donne decided to leave the sense of after-thought, the roughness of recollection during speech, in these poems, which are more like epistles. “Rambling” was, consequently, Pope’s term to describe his trips through the English countryside to visit famous gardens.

essential to Pope, for the calm that is in the eye of the storm never quite touches down. What Young has learned from Pope is not to contain too much of the sentiment or thought in the first line of the couplet, and not to follow it with a too pure resolution; that is, the first line of the couplet must be demonstrably incomplete (or even a bit vague), and the second must continue to propel the thought beyond the couplet (to permit leaks in meaning), so that the couplet following becomes, in some way, necessary. That is, one should never sacrifice amusement to the cause of sober criticism; pleasure is to be found in a couplet that doesn't quite complete itself if the range of discourse can be widened to take in a new conceit, such as that of the Pegasus, or the father and midwife. Each line in these couplets presents something syntactically, narratively, and tropically that the other doesn't, and which isn't entirely anticipated; the quickness of Young's mind creates, in this way, the effect of a free fall, for it is unpredictable. For instance, the first line presented here, a map of fruitless indecision, leaves the reader with no clear idea of how this sentiment could be resolved; the self-countering, or self-reflexive, forces described makes the line an image of the poet's own anxieties, so that it actually stands out, in its hectic drama, in a poem that purports to be an essay. (These sort of anxieties are absent in Pope, for even in his most emotive, in certain passages of the *Eloisa to Abelard* for example, a high level of artifice is maintained and a "rightness" always achieved, so that one never feels that the poet has lost emotional and stylistic control¹⁷.) The transformation of poets into "jockeys" is very clever and right out of conversation, and the development of the trope, from Newmarket → pure commerce → to the image of the Pegasus is easy but eclectic, and owes much to the revolution in imagery made by the metaphysical poets (and perhaps to the victory of the distinction, when Milton's influence had waned, between the epistolary mode and the epic¹⁸). "Much time for immortality to pay" is so artless as a fragment that (one is not even sure what grammatical part of the sentence is being presented here) and yet Young resolves it nicely and

Engl. eg. of
Saratoga

It's an infinitive noun clause, inverted, as any C18 fool could tell you.

¹⁷ This is in contrast to writers like Coleridge, Byron and Shelley, who seem to skate over loss of control in much of their poetry. It is interesting to consider Browning's relationship to Pope in this light, for it seems he, of the Victorians, was most interested in "polishing" the idiom of the Romantics by chaining his narratives to historical personages and paradigms based on authentic texts that are distant in time, thereby re-creating that relationship between the author and the most passionate emotions that Pope had already explored in *Eloisa to Abelard*.

¹⁸ Young's treatise on poetry, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), is a virtual manifesto for the letters of his time; he clearly wanted a break with the classical constraints. "But why are *Originals* so few? not because the Writer's harvest is over, the great Reapers of Antiquity having left nothing to be gleaned after them; nor because the human mind's teeming time is past, or because it is incapable of putting forth unprecedented births; but because illustrious Examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate. They engross our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they prejudice our Judgement in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they intimidate us with the splendor of their Renown, and thus under Diffidence bury our strength. Nature's impossibilities, and those of Diffidence, lie wide asunder." His theories of creativity seem almost modern, as does his "anti-intellectual" stance, for he is critical of academic learning: "[F]or what, for the most part, mean we by Genius, but the Power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end? A Genius differs from a good Understanding, as a Magician from a good Architect; That raises his structure by means invisible; This by the skillful use of common tools." And: "Genius, is that God within. Genius can set us right in Composition, without the Rules of the Learned; as Conscience sets us right in Life, without the Law of the Land." (Edward Young, *Conjectures* [Leeds, England: The Scholar Press, 1966], quotes taken from pp. 17, 26 and 31 respectively.) Young's essay seems key in determining the move of poetic theory from a devotional, to a secular/public and finally to a private (and oppositional) character; this is consonant with Young's attention to the rhythms of private speech versus Addison's to public poetic decorum.

unexpectedly by balancing the “much” and “pay” with “less” and “thrown away” in the second line. Young variegates the spaces between his lines, but this variety seems almost an accident; that is, his “wit” moves so fast that it is inevitable that there will be different shapes to spaces between the lines. The problem is that he doesn’t call enough attention to these breaks and their different forms; he is facile, quickly moving, as in conversation or a letter (which it is), from thought to thought. Some of the lines are as empty as “The same good sense that makes a man excel,” which sets up obvious parameters for completion; others are strikingly fragmentary and colloquial (“Downright impossibilities they seek”). Though these lines are not so resonant as Pope’s – his lines abound with awkwardly-accented syllables that mar a smooth reading – one senses in them a compelling personality and mastery of diction, and it wouldn’t have been unpredictable that this writer would center his masterpiece, a rambling series of blank-verse epistles, around the theme of insomnia.

In contrast to Addison’s too strict sense of proportion and decorum, and Young’s conversational, quick-witted but not always stately idiom, Pope’s couplets are both measured and charismatic, but with an added element of artifice that shows that the poet is taking as much delight in plays of contrast and syntactic arrangement as he is in creating small “explosions in the brain” (in Ashbery’s phrase)¹⁹ that re-position the couplet around a manipulated silence. The following are from *An Essay On Criticism*:

Some, to whom Heav’n in wit has been profuse,
Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
For wit and judgement often are at strife,
Though mean each other’s aid, like man and wife.
‘Tis more to guide, than spur the Muse’s steed;
Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed;
The winged courser, like a gen’rous horse,
Shows most true mettle when you check his course.

Those rules of old discover’d, not devis’d,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz’d;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain’d
By the same laws which first herself ordain’d.

Hear how learn’d Greece her useful rule indites,
When to repress, and when indulge our flights:
High on Parnassus’ top her sons she show’d,
And pointed out those arduous paths they trod;
Held from afar, aloft, th’immortal prize,
And urg’d the rest by equal steps to rise.
Just precepts thus from great examples giv’n,
She drew from them what they deriv’d from Heav’n.
(ll. 80-99)

It is interesting to witness, in these lines, the young poet planning his future course of refining the heroic couplet, attempting, for himself (though many of these ideas were “commonplace” and derived from his reading) to discover the balance between the “steeds” of “Nature” (his own “horses of instruction”) and “judgement.”

¹⁹“Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

However, if one examines these couplets closely, the central motifs seem to be those of measurement, and yet Pope takes every opportunity to overturn one statement with another, to annihilate matter, making the empty space between the two lines of the couplet the only place where “balance” of any sort can be found. In other words, Pope uses the couplet to make statements that would never “fly” in prose, for he makes of the narrative break implicit in an end-stopped couplet’s structure a chasm in which to transform the “something” of his statement into a very fertile “nothing.” (The poem, in this way, recalls such works as Rochester’s “On Nothing,” which was probably a favorite of Pope’s and is usually linked to the *Dunciad*, and Edward Taylor’s “Prologue,” which Pope couldn’t have read, but which ends with a decidedly Popian flourish, with a similar pluralistic sense of divine order.) The first couplet, for instance, only projects the meaning into space – “Want as much more...,” but how much more? – and it is worth noticing that, despite Swift’s specific praise, none of these couplets presents anything less than a nearly tautological, somewhat nihilistic paradox. Indeed, the visual descriptions, which never attain the epic weight and certitude that Addison attempts, are the only real “substance” of the verse, since the thought itself implodes so often; however, even this imagery is only metaphysical, and hence is often lost in the machinery of the multiplying subtleties (like uniqueness of individual books of Borges’ infinite library). The problem that Pope seems to be considering here is that same which Foucault describes in “What is an Author?,” or Blanchot in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, which is that of when to stop meaning and its proliferation; indeed, the mechanism that the couplet provided for writing poetry in the early eighteenth century (like the mechanism that “emotion” provided in the early nineteenth, and “dreams” and free verse in the twentieth) may have made the question “When to stop?” an important issue. Pope writes: “Hear how learn’d Greece her useful rule indites,/ When to repress, and when indulge our flights”; but what is this “hearing” but the attention to the proportions of poetry (as opposed to the submission to dogma, *interpretation* of the prose). In this light, it appears that the “meaning” of Pope’s couplets are not only the system that is its “content,” but that meaning itself must be molded, and turned on itself, in order to be meaning at all; that is, it must run counter to, or overrun, the form that contains or transports it, in this way using the constraints of the form as the medium through which it, conversely, advertises its unique property, which is its ability to overrun form. The option to this hanging garden, in which plants droop to their full length, is the cement garden, prose itself, in which meaning is tidily contained in its approved style, and nullified.

This sort of play of presence and absence, or proposal and retraction, in which reality continually disappears behind its announcement, came in handy for Pope when writing *Eloisa to Abelard*, in which he had to describe the effects of love; he stops the poem from being taken over by emotion, however, by always bringing the speaker back to the empty, but entirely malleable, middle that is possible with an end-stopped couplet.

For thee the fates, severely kind, ordain
 A cool suspense from pleasure and from pain;
 Thy life a long dead calm of fix’d repose;
 No pulse that riots, and no blood that glows.
 (ll. 249-52)

Though it seems unlikely, dramatically, that anyone could be speaking this way (especially after the innovations of in the conversational poem made by the Romantics²⁰), the recourse to style as a stop against the total victory of passion has many interesting implications. Indeed, this split in the poem points to a larger element in eighteenth century poetry, which was the question of the positioning of a public, transparent style against both the desire to expose something deeper that might confuse this style with psychology, or the desire to elaborate the style itself, again perhaps pathologically, to excess (to make a fetish of style). Roland Barthes analysis of the two dimensions of style in *Writing Degree Zero* is relevant to the distinction between styles such as Addison's (public) and Young's (epistolary and speech based, but still socially open) and that of Pope's:

Style is properly speaking a germinative phenomenon, the transmutation of a Humor. Hence stylistic overtones are distributed in depth; whereas speech has a horizontal structure, its secrets are on a level with the words in which they are couched, and what it conceals is revealed by the very duration of its flow. In speech, everything is held forth, meant for immediate consumption, and words, silences, and their common mobility are launched toward a meaning superseded: it is a transfer leaving no trace and brooking no delay. Style, on the other hand, has only a vertical dimension, it plunges into the closed recollection of the person and achieves its opacity from a certain experience of matter; style is never anything but metaphor, that is, equivalence of the author's literary intention and carnal structure.... So that style is always a secret; but the occult aspect of its implications does not arise from the mobile and ever-provisional nature of language; its secret is recollection locked within the body of the writer.

Barthes' theories of style largely rely on his own analysis of such writers and Flaubert, Proust, and Gide, the last two of whom centered their masterpieces on highly-stylized recollections of their own youths, hence Barthes' emphasis on "recollection locked within the body of the writer." With Pope, style would have derived as much from the present as the past, for one can discern a continuous state of adolescence, or even childhood, in his biography. (Though one might wish, in this context, to link Pope's style only to his own physical deformities, it is probably more relevant to associate it with the entire world that he had to create based on his inability to be as mobile as his mind would have liked, in a way "occult" without being Gothic: the sculpted vistas of his garden at Twickenham, the tunnel that he had to dig in order to reach his garden from his house (and the grotto at its entrance), the "rambles" over the countryside, and even the translation the *Iliad* (and *Odyssey*, only partially his) for money, a work in which the vertical aspect of style is strongly contrasted with the horizontal aspect of the myth

²⁰ Auden writes: "We, who have been brought up in the Romantic tradition, are inclined to think that whenever the Augustans wrote bad poetry, they were using their own recipe, and whenever they wrote good poetry they were using the Romantic recipe by mistake. This is false. Without their ideas on nature and the Heroic poem, we should miss *The Rape of the Lock* and the *Dunciad* just as much as we should be spared *Eloisa to Abelard*.... The gusto, objectivity and perfection of texture of the one, owe just as much to their theories, as does the bogus classicism of the other." While one is unsure that the poem, praised by Johnson as "one of the most happy productions of human wit" (though he is more attentive to the sophistication, rather than desperation, of the speaker) is a failure, its clash of high emotions and bizarre psychology with the strictness and deftness of the form as managed by Pope's philosophical wit is unique in English literature.

Clearly a post-romantic poet.

Not as you've defined his style on p. 10

itself²¹. In other words, Pope's immobility may have forced him into the deeper quest for style, so that he learned, more than anything else, that there must be moments in poem when the definite links of a public, transparent style must be broken or twisted, to permit the grandeur of meaning to enter and illumine the work, from the syntax (as it appears on the page) up. Barthes continues:

The allusive virtue of style is not a matter of speed, as in speech, where what is unsaid nevertheless remains as an interim of language, but a matter of density, for what stands firmly and deeply beneath style, brought together harshly or tenderly in its figures of speech, are fragments of a reality entirely alien to language. The miracle of this transmutation makes style a kind of supra-literary operation which carries man to the threshold of power and magic. By reason of its biological origin, style resides outside art, that is, outside the pact which binds the writer to society. Authors may therefore be imagined who prefer the security of art to the loneliness of style.²²

This final sentence is most intriguing, for it points to a rift that existed between two very general types of poets in the eighteenth century, that between those who chose "art," which is firmly rooted in a "pact" with society, and those who chose "style" – an over-elaborate style, or a perverse one – which is "vertical," residing in the "humor" (not a sense of comedy, but rather bile) of the writer. Barthes finds this style outside of the literature itself, grounding it in the very biographical and biological composition of the writer *against* the expectations of society; in this way, style becomes a private signature, a personal recognition, and serves to hold back the total imposition of interpretation. It is this ability for the reader to totally "interpret" much eighteenth century poetry that makes it appear prose-like and mundane (though there are pleasures to be derived from this sensation itself); Pope exists somewhere between these two extremes, for what is exposed and "public" in his poetry points to, and relies on, what is hidden and missing.

For whatever reason – the rise of print-based literature, the secularization of the educated classes, the permutation of the materialism of the English industrial system – ^{either} eighteenth century English poets such as Gray and Chatterton drove their imaginations deep into the realms of pure style, and radically swerved from the possibility of a direct engagement with their readership based on the "pact" that Barthes mentions. The Enlightenment may have simply forced poetry to take a stand for which it wasn't prepared regarding the new certainties that were reputedly becoming possible about nature and religion, which extended to new certainties about poetry itself. Joanne Cutting-Gray and James E. Swearingen describe in their essay "System, the Divided Mind, and the *Essay On Man*" the importance of the revolutions in biblical hermeneutics and the new science to this radical shift in thought, which forced a systematized world picture to replace that of faith:

²¹ Ruskin's criticism of the way Pope complicated visual imagery, and often stretched two lines into four, in his translation is relevant here, for it is apparent that Pope derived as much pleasure from stylistic complication, which could be of no practical use, as Ruskin would have him derive from simple and accurate presentation. In this way, Pope continues the shaping of his environment, in this case that of literature, to reflect his own baroque, very Catholic, sensibility.

²² Roland Barthes, "Writer Degree Zero," as reprinted in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 34.

Just as Descartes and the biblical interpreters who followed his method needed both certainty and mystery to reconcile unlimited knowledge with an inscrutable God, so the poem maintains an ancient sense of ineffability as a brake against the pride of the new rationality. "See! and confess, one comfort still must rise,/ 'Tis this, Tho' Man's a fool, yet GOD IS WISE." With man as both theological center, proud system maker, and empirical doubter, the plan of providence must be rationally discernible yet partially inscrutable, and therefore irreducible to a full explanation that would fuel human pride and crush religious faith.... The system-maker not only needs mystery in order to preserve the wonder that total explanation would expunge; he needs mystery as the impetus for systematizing. Hence, the uncertainty of faith destabilizes the poem, and in effect, the whole system.²³

In the case of Gray, who was one of the most popular poets of his time (a popularity based on about three poems), there was a deepening, or hiding, in poems such as "The Bard," which is really a surface beneath which a wide swath of English history is elliptically portrayed; in this way, he seems to anticipate the density of allusion and surface that will characterize the French Symbolists and the later poems of T. S. Eliot. However, though Gray's extensive studies in prosody would seem to have qualified him for more engaging experiments in the use of meter, he would never attain Pope's variety of expression; it would actually be Blake, in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and the prophetic writings (which resemble, in obvious ways, Gray's poem) who would first break totally with the constraints of the heroic couplet, and make speech the natural measure. (Burns, of course, is another story; his style could not be considered the fruits of an achieved "artifice.") Chatterton, by the changing and addition of letters and archaic words, would create a new pact with his public, that of a counterfeiter, hence thwarting any sort of normal engagement between author and reader. There is no way to reward the achievement of a literary fraud, and yet one senses that this sort of "agreement" was Chatterton's own way out – forfeiting the stylistics of an Addison or Johnson – of an overdetermined reading. In this way – through the layered historical allusion of Gray's "historical" poems, and the bogus historical dimension created for Chatterton's poetry by the changing of words and letters, and even the location of the chest in which the Rowley poems were "discovered" – both poets sought a way out of the impasse of a purely public "art." Indeed, in the eighteenth century, the public style, equated with art, was so coded that the secret "occult" art of style, by necessity, had to have been cultivated. By means of this secrecy, the author, in an ever-expanding universe crowded with ever-longer poems of repetitive

²³ Cutting-Gray and Swearingen, p. 489. The conclusion to their essay contains insights of relevance to the present essay: "The poem that articulates the passion for a new rationality, reducing mystery to a maze and the maze to a map, finally over-reaches that conceptual project by bringing out something unexpected and hidden in systematic thinking itself. The transformation of an unverifiable Christian faith into an equally unverifiable faith in system produces a profound distrust of experience, the very legacy of suspicion inherent in the new model of biblical interpretation. But where system reaches its limit, poetic thinking itself extends beyond system and acknowledges the need for faith and hope as "Nature plants in Man alone / Hope of known bliss, and Faith in bliss unknown." (p. 491) Such articulations shed light on Pope's necessarily paradoxical re-articulations of "commonplace sentiments" in the *Essay On Man*, in such ways that show the rifts inherent in over-systematized thinking, hence keeping the focus of allegiance on the ineffable, on God.

heroic couplets, was able, through innovations and deeply planted secrets, to construct microcosms of “verticality” – channels to a biological and historical past – which were, themselves, avenues of escape.

Of course, for Pope these evasions, secrets and layered meanings – half systematized, half ineffable – are all part of his own more sophisticated poetic theory, which is described, one would think, quite accurately in his “gardening poem,” the “Epistle to Richard Boyle”:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
 To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
 To swell the Terrace, or to sink the Grot;
 In all, let Nature never be forgot.
 But treat the Goddess like a modest fair,
 Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare;
 Let not each beauty ev'ry where be spy'd,
 Where half the skill is decently to hide.
 He gains, all points, who pleasingly confounds,
 Surprises, varies, and conceals the Bounds.
 (ll. 47-56)

These final two lines are a devastating challenge to anyone who would wish to regulate, or systematize, the often self-contradictory philosophy of the *Essay On Man*, or attempt to turn it into prose without taking into consideration the many gaps and silences – haiku-like in their attainments of peace and balance – that animate and support it. This theory of landscaping and arrangement, which imagines words and ideas as parts of an aesthetic (rather than a philosophical) framework, is not only an element of his poetry, but could be said to govern his most successful works, which are themselves like gardens that imitate the wilds, or that present the *actual* wilds of his fertile intellect. As the landscape architect would want to give to a 5-acre plot the illusion of spatial and historical – i.e. neo-classical, and beyond – infinitude, so the poet would leave holes in syntax and sentence structure, to represent the *sensation* of infinitude that is the intellect when engaged in thought. The “surprises” of his couplets are varied indeed, but the sense of completion, without necessarily the proof of one, is always characteristic of them. Pope was, after all, an artist, and any reading of the *Essay On Man* has to take into consideration the meaning of those parts of the poem where no answers are provided, but rather the question as *question* (an incompleteness with specific demands) is more or less withdrawn. It is, finally, ironic that this poet who is often credited with having wanted to maintain the status quo would have devoted so much of his talents to a poem – the *Dunciad* – that only served to aggravate his relationship with the normal business and society of literature, what would today be called the “establishment,” as if the status quo itself were only a sensation, an *idealized* image of an ordered society that subverts itself the further it departs from poetry.

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MEMORANDUM

Date: June 13, 1996

To: Brian Kim Stefans

Re: Pope's Couplet and Eighteenth-Century Poetic Stylistics

This is a rich and consistently interesting paper, but it was unusual in being shaped as a belletristic essay with lots of scattershot opinions (the sort of thing John Updike might write for the *New Yorker*, say), or a series of your own *Night Thoughts on the Couplet* rather than a scholarly approach to the texts (there are just four contemporary secondary sources, if you count Auden as contemporary). I didn't agree with all those opinions, as you'll see as you go through the marginalia. Sometimes I didn't know whether you are seeing an additional layer of meaning---as when you suggest that "Newmarket" in the quote from Young should be analyzed into the capitalist meanings of its component syllables---or missing the obvious---Newmarket as a popular racecourse in the eighteenth century. (Similarly, Young's relatively commonplace inversion of an infinitive noun clause used as the subject---Pope does it all the time---seems to strike you as a grammatical deformity.)

But if I was sometimes puzzled and sometimes irritated, I was often impressed. It is really unusual to see anyone doing a disciplined poetical analysis of eighteenth-century poetry qua poetry and I really admire the sensitivity you bring towards it. You seem to be using, though you don't refer to him, a sort of Iserian reader-response poetics, exploring the way in which the "silence" between the lines of a couplet can be exploited in terms of the repertory of routes the poet might be expected to take (and of course must not take if he is to surprise us).

As a result I was a bit taken aback by your subsequent dive around p. 13 into Barthes's apothegms on style, since his notions, filled with postromantic nostalgia, don't seem to bear on your own more interesting way of analyzing eighteenth-century verse. Similarly, your earlier dive into the poetics of Ashbery and haiku seemed poorly motivated: something that apparently intrigued you but doesn't integrate well into the rest of your project here. You may need to restrain the fury of your winged courser yourself....

The ending on Gray and Chatterton is a bit disappointing and unearned. Gray isn't metrically comparable to Pope because he isn't exactly known for writing in couplets: the "Elegy" is in quatrains, "The Bard" is in one of the classic ode meters, and so on. But the heroic couplet was still hanging on in Goldsmith, in Crabbe, and finally in Browning (where "My Last Duchess" takes the theme of enjambement to its ultimate extreme). The story you end with is actually the beginning of a different story, that of the development of the romantic ode, not the natural denouement of the story you were writing at the start.

Grade: A-.

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A

Boundaries in *The Four Zoas*

This is a fascinating paper with numerous brilliant if highly speculative insights. Much of it seems not only to have captured but to share some of the strangeness of Blake's universe. Many of the ideas seem actually to be poetic inferences - informed by a good grasp of basic Blakean motifs and rationally ordered according to them (i.e. Blake's rejection of ~~the~~ mathematical form, his allegorical space & intertextuality). I find these leaps (Donk's equivocal space, .. Atonia's fall into non-entity) provocative - like Blake's images themselves, ~~not~~ right or wrong.

I loved the comparison to Picasso. I found the link between the geometric & Newtonian Mundane & Blake's rejection of selfhood justified but found you argued very hard to follow. The on Blake's geography of meanings was clearer. The third offered excellent illustrations of Blake's transformation of allusion into something much more - with Blake writing a kind

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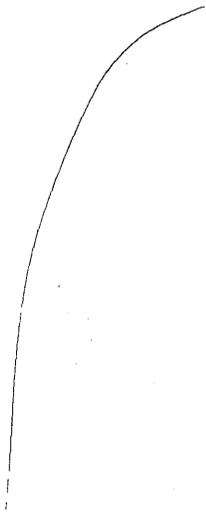
December 23, 1995

Shell

Second section

of New Testament - turning his literary antecedents into a kind of biblical canon whose sense his own poetry re-visions as Christianity re-visions the Hebrew Bible - all literature becomes Blake's type.

Finally I loved Nadel'sky's substitution of skin for wall & its application to Blake!



Boundaries in *The Four Zoas*

Brian Kim Stefans

Blake writes in one of his more aphoristic additions to his text of *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*: “The difference between a bad Artist & a Good One Is the Bad Artist Seems to Copy a Great Deal: The Good one Really Does Copy a Great Deal.”¹ Picasso famously echoes this sentiment in the twentieth century (“The good artist borrows, the great artist steals”), thus creating a small but direct link between two painters who couldn’t have had a more dissimilar relationship to their own times – Blake being the working-class recluse who found almost no patrons for his art or his highly original poetic writings, and Picasso having created for the world the image of the multi-millionaire artist as cultural institution, and who wrote little more than a few undistinguished poems and a play. However, as their overlapping quotes imply, the two painters share a number of similarities regarding their relationship to other artists and to images in general, both of the past and their own times. For example, both artists rejected many of the “discoveries” of the Renaissance and the emphasis on visual resemblances, especially concerning the creation of spatial illusions and adherence to the perfectly proportioned human form; each opted for a flatter pictorial plane and a simplified human figure that was more expressive and allusive rather than mechanically proportioned. As Northrop Frye writes in *Fearful Symmetry*: “For Blake the acquiring of the power to visualize independently of sense experience was a painful and laborious effort, to be achieved only by relentless discipline.”² Though one would want to replace “sense experience” with “the dictates of Sir Joshua Reynolds” – for Blake remarks in his marginalia on the necessity of the artist making “Finished Copies both of Nature & Art & of whatever comes his way,” though coupled with a strong dose of “Enthusiasm,” which Reynolds discouraged³ – the quote, in its present state, could be equally applicable to Picasso. Both artists found it necessary to create their own systems of perception, almost as revolutionary acts, though Picasso would make it a point to destroy as many systems as he created. (Blake is, in this way, “singular” in his efforts, creating one system that synthesized all experience; Picasso is “plural,” the true protean artist, who creates systems and then explores, in separate works, what lay outside of them.) Blake also famously boasted that he wrote poems that were so clear a child could understand them, and his most popular sequence, *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*,

¹ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pg. 645.

² Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry. A Study of William Blake* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947), pg. 24.

³ *Blake*, pg. 645.

were intended to be poems for children, though they are as profound as they are direct contrasts to the classically weighted couplets of Pope. Picasso, likewise, was an admirer of children's pictures, and many of his later masterpieces are done in crayon.⁴

Aside from their mutual distrust of the "science" of painting as it was perfected during the Renaissance, the two painters find their most profound link in the relationship each held with other people, in a way that reflected a social and aesthetic ideal. Picasso perfected Cubism in a joint venture with the painter George Braque, the two sharing techniques to such a degree that visitors to the studio they were sharing could not determine who painted which works. The sort of selflessness that such a collaboration implies (though there was no doubt a lot of ego-tripping, too) would have been attractive to Blake, whose social philosophy revolves around the ability or inability of individuals to perceive, and survive with, their interconnectedness. Blake was constantly critical of the false boundaries that society erects between individuals, but also between the rational eye/I and the "natural" world. The Picasso/Braque collaboration, being an extended act of perceiving in a collective *and* inspired way (no "guinea-suns" here), was also an exercise in a sort of disembodied perception, in which the artist, normally only a perceiver when making a painting, becomes simultaneously perceived, processed and developed upon (reacted to). One could imagine that the activities that normally occur within an artist's head as a series of invisible mental experiments took place, during the Cubism collaboration, in the "extended" world of reality. In this way, the boundaries between the mental and the physical, the artistic and the social, and the perceiver and the perceptible (as states possible only at different moments in time) were, for a moment, transgressed. This transgression of artificial boundaries is a recurring theme in Blake's *The Four Zoas*, and it is these transgressions and their implications ^{FAV} on Blake's outlook on art, society and politics that are the subject of the following essay.

The transgression of important societal boundaries can be found on three major levels in *The Four Zoas*. There are no doubt many more, but the following essay, which makes no claims for being an exhaustive study, should provide a fair start for the discovery of all these levels. The first level is the narrative, which is the story of the creation and transgression (or dissolution) of the boundaries of selfhood and society. The central focus will be on the section in which Urizen and his architects create the "mundane shell" of the Lockean universe, but also on the recurring theme of societal entrapment. The second level is the "physical," which is that level of the poem in which the narrative occurs. As there are rules of space, time, causal and sequential relationship of events and the "autonomy" and growth of characters in, say, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, there are equally a series of rules or lack of them by

⁴ They also share a propensity for stealing imagery. Picasso, for example, is famous for having perfected collage, an art which itself relies on a type of stealing, but also for basing many of his later paintings (in a way related to parody) on great art works of the past, in this way conversing directly with past masters. Blake's drawing of Albion rising from the mills, generally known as "Glad Day," is a direct lifting of the Adam Kadmon, and there are parallels between Picasso's relationship to past artists and Blake's intimate relationship to Milton.

which *The Four Zoas* operate. This physical universe is, of course, a “fallen” state, created in some ways as a concession to the reader, for were the story to be told as it occurred in the Eternal universe, it would have to happen in such an instant as to preclude the possibility of a poem describing it. Nonetheless, this physical universe of *The Four Zoas* retains many qualities of the Eternal universe that it is unable to completely portray. Notably lacking is the possibility for practical economy, for nothing seems to operate in such a way as to *produce* (since causality is so fluid) or to rigidify activity; indeed, the motivational force for the characters’ activities is intense emotion, especially jealousy at first, which creates the separateness that is responsible for the narrative. The final level which will be described on which important societal boundaries are crossed is the authorial, and it is this level in which the poem becomes synthesized into the narrative of the history of literature, while consequently putting such a strong signature on its participation – changing all the rules, so to speak – that it refuses to “work” in this tradition in a normal way. This has become a common theme in discussing Modernist poetics since Pound and Eliot, but it is clear, when looking at Blake’s symbols, which are both original and borrowed, that Blake helped to create much of the “mythic” space that became the domain of these two American Modernists, and which allowed them to use earlier works and forms for their own ends.

Some of the most lucid and powerful passages of *The Four Zoas* are the descriptions of Urizen’s creation of the “mundane shell” around the universe. The shell, rather than being an example of clear “outline” that Blake describes as being characteristic of great art in his marginalia to Reynolds, is rather equivalent to Reynold’s Platonic notion of “General Form,” which Blake fiercely opposed. It is to “General Form” that detail is supposed (in Reynolds’ scheme) to succumb, and where Reynolds writes: “All smaller things, however perfect in their way, are to be sacrificed without mercy to the greater,” Blake comments: “Sacrifice the Parts. What becomes of the Whole [?]”⁵ Blake, however, is in complete agreement when Reynolds writes: “A firm and determined outline is one of the characteristics of the great style in painting; and... he who possesses the knowledge of exact form which every part of nature ought to have, will be fond of expressing that knowledge with correctness and precision in all his works.” Blake commends this as “noble” and a “Sentence Which overthrows all his Book.”⁶ This distinction between a “firm outline” and “General Form” is worth keeping in mind when reading such passages as the following, from *Night the Second*:

Then rose the builders; first the architect divine his plan
Unfolds – the wondrous scaffold reared all round the infinite.
Quadrangular the building rose, the heavens squared by a line.
Trigon and cubes divide the elements in finite bonds;
Multitudes without number work incessant; the hewn stone
Is placed in beds of mortar mingled with the ashes of Vala.

⁵ *Complete Poetry and Prose*, pg. 650.

⁶ *Complete Poetry and Prose*, pg. 649.

Severe the labour, female slaves the mortar trod, oppressed.⁷

This passage contains most of the vocabulary of Blake's negative portrayals of the work of Urizen; for example, "Quadrangular" is merely one of a variety of adjectives denoting mathematical forms that appear in higher concentration in a later passage:

Traveling in silent majesty along their ordered ways
 In right-lined paths outmeasured, by proportions of number, weight,
 And measure; mathematic motions wondrous along the deep
 In fiery pyramid or cube or unornamented pillar...
 Others, triangular, right-angled course maintain, others obtuse,
 Acute, scalene, in simple paths; but others move
 In intricate ways biquadrate - trapeziums, rhombs, rhomboids,
 Parallelograms, triple & quadruple, polygonic -
 In their amazing hard subdued course in the vast deep.⁸

As Frye observes, this passage is something of a parody of Plato in the *Timaeus* or of Pythagorean "pattern-making," which is an "intermediate stage between magic and science," which he also equates with the creation of Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*.⁹ This passage could also be describing the construction of a cathedral, for it is that type of architecture that can most be said to "flow forth, like visible out of the invisible,"¹⁰ thus continuing another debate of Blake's, which is with Deism. In either case, the individual, like the "detail" of a painting, is being subsumed for the construction of a "General Form" which will not, in the end, recognize the sovereignty of its builders (the beauty of its details), nor allow for a true kind of autonomy for the God in man.

These architectures, whether they be the laws of a society based on mathematic principles, the blueprint for a cathedral, or the proportions of a painting in the style of Reynolds (which offers no vision of Eternity), all contribute to the false notion of the division of Man, and often, indeed, rely on such divisions to bring about their construction. The result is not only the division of labor ("Sorrowing went the planters forth to plant, the sowers to sow:/ They dug the channels for the rivers, & they poured abroad/ The seas & the lakes, they reared the mountains... on pillared roofs & porches & high towers/ In beauteous order."¹¹), but also slavery, a repeated theme in *The Four Zoas*. The paradox is that the mundane shell is constructed to preserve the self, for it is Urizen's anxieties about "futurity," created by the "void" that is outside of his self, that drive him to the shell's construction.

⁷ For reasons of punctuation, quotes from Blake's poems in the present essay will all be from *Blake. The Complete Poems*, edited by W.H. Stevenson (London: Longman Group Limited, 1971), pp. 322-3.

⁸ *Complete Poems*, pp. 326-7.

⁹ Frye, pg. 33, 286.

¹⁰ *Complete Poems*, pg. 326.

¹¹ *Complete Poems*, pg. 325.

Urizen rose from the bright feast...
 No more exulting, for he saw eternal death beneath;
 Pale, he beheld futurity; pale, he beheld the abyss...
 Terrific, Urizen strode above; in fear & pale dismay
 He saw the indefinite space beneath, & his soul shrank with horror,
 His feet upon the verge of non-existence his voice went forth.¹²

The shell can therefore be seen as a creation of the Enlightenment specifically constructed to counter anxieties that have been created by the opening up of the Medieval shell – the Ptolemaic system, the Roman Catholic superstructure – that enclosed the world before Galileo and the Protestant Reformation. One wonders if Blake would have been so critical of these systems had they not been as petrified as they appeared to him in the late eighteenth century, since there are so many aspects of his thought that look back to a time before the Renaissance, and yet others that push for a further openness and even indeterminacy in the spirit of discovery that the Renaissance made available. In any case, Blake makes a clear contrast between the “void” and the “infinite,” a contrast like that of the emptiness that can exist between individuals (though that space may be filled with a social contract, like a marriage vow or a vote) and the fullness of a passionate relationship. It is the failure of the “weak,” those that can’t maintain the high level of intensity necessary for simple *being*, that requires the construction of those social institutions that detract from the total of humanity more than add. This can be further linked to vision, to the perception of “firm outline,” that Blake champions in his marginalia (and which Reynolds stifles), for Blake seems to be urging an aestheticization of the “self” in *The Four Zoas*, a continuous application of the self towards the poem that is society. If one is able to maintain a “firm outline,” a task requiring strength and wisdom, then one need not rely on the measures and compasses of institutions such as the church and state (which, consequently, take complete advantage of this reliance).

In *Milton*, which Blake wrote after abandoning the project of *The Four Zoas*, and which thus benefited from his explorations therein, Blake has his hero enunciate the “firm outlines” of this new social contract, which takes as its starting point the absence of selfhood:

Such are the laws of Eternity, that each shall mutually
 Annihilate himself for other’s good, as I for thee.
 Thy purpose & the purpose of thy priests & of thy churches
 Is to impress on men the fear of death; to teach
 Trembling and fear, terror, constriction, abject selfishness.
 Mine is to teach men to despise death, & to go on
 In fearless majesty annihilating self, laughing to scorn
 Thy laws and terrors, shaking down thy Synagogues as webs.¹³

¹² *Complete Poems*, pp. 315-6. These lines appear much closer to the beginning of Night the Second in Erdman’s text, in a position that would suggest that Urizen’s fears contributed to, rather than resulted from, his construction of the shell.

¹³ *Complete Poems*, pg. 562.

great contrast

explain

Blake's Milton scoffs at institutions that don't serve to expose the "laws of Eternity" but rather put themselves, like veils, between Man and these laws. The laws of Eternity are that the self should be continually annihilated, but specifically for the "other's good," which can only be truly known and felt in a state of existing with Eternity. "Webs" are always a stand-in, as they are in the *Zoas*, for static and time-bound societal institutions, which are the creations of Urizen and an attempt by the "weak" to create an artificially determinate universe. He takes direct aim at these institutions, but he also has Milton illustrate the program for life that is required in order to remain in a state of liberty. It is a program that requires a preternatural degree of attention and energy:

This is a false body, an incrustation over my immortal
 Spirit, a selfhood which must be put off & annihilated always...
 I come in self-annihilation & the grandeur of inspiration,
 To cast off rational demonstration by faith in the Saviour;
 To cast off the rotten rags of memory by inspiration;
 To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering;
 To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with imagination;
 To cast aside from poetry all that is not inspiration,
 That it no longer shall dare to mock with the aspersion of madness
 Cast on the inspired, by the tame high finisher of paltry blots
 Indefinite, or paltry rhymes, or paltry harmonies;
 Who creeps into state government like a caterpillar to destroy;
 To cast off the idiot questioner who is always questioning
 But never capable of answering, who sits with sly grin
 Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave;
 Who publishes doubt and calls it knowledge; whose science is despair,
 Whose pretence to knowledge is envy, whose whole science is
 To destroy the wisdom of ages to gratify ravenous envy,
 That rages round him like a wolf day & night without rest.¹⁴

Here are the variously layered architectures of Urizen brought to a crashing fall by Milton in the later poem. He begins by dismissing the physical body as so much wasted matter, and then annihilates his selfhood and professes a total faith in the Savior. From this space of self-annihilation, of absence, he finds the possibility for becoming "inspired." He proceeds from this space of mythic absence to condemn the major thinkers of his time, whom he accuses of weighing down all of England (and he speaks, here, *for* England). Having already cast aside "memory" for "inspiration" (this pair of contrasts have a special place in Blake's vocabulary), he "casts aside" from poetry all that is not the product of inspiration. There is a totalitarian aspect to this control that he imagines, though it never reaches the pitch of a political program, since he doesn't make anything *but* poetry the issue, nor does he create abstract, artificial and *imposed* organization in the manner of Urizen. He condemns uninspired poetry because the bad poets have condemned him, the "aspersion of madness cast on the inspired" (the creators of "paltry blots" and "paltry rhymes" are the Reynolds and Popes of the world, though he doesn't name them). Nonetheless, he

¹⁴ *Complete Poems*, pg. 567-8.

goes from poetry to the halls of state government, and then to the “idiot questioners.” Whether these questioners are cynical intellectuals, the parliament or census takers, they are impotent in their attention to statistics, or in their demand for information which they only turn against the masses. Finally, he condemns the scientists who (unlike the alchemists) do not pay any attention to that part of their study that serves to provide the vision of the Eternal, but rather serve platters of cold rationality, which is the product (like Urizen’s halls) of fear and doubt.

Blake, in this brief section of *Milton*, gives an anthemic voice urging the break through the divisions that he depicts Urizen creating in *Night the Second of The Four Zoas*; it is also one of Blake’s great moments of prophecy, for he manages to channel a plethora of themes through a relatively few number of lines, so that they seem to burst their container. However, though the leaps of thought are made on an associative rather than a rational level, a state of high and agitated order is maintained by the very profundity of what Blake is exposing. He declares his own self-annihilation, and from the security of that position proceeds to rip away successive veils of false “selfhood” as they are institutionally embodied on many levels of society. It is a testament to Blake’s skill as a poetic craftsman – and nowhere in his marginalia to Reynolds does he deny the importance of craft – that sound patterns, rhythms, and weight of the syllables in these lines are as suited as they are to what he is trying to express.

young
Joo!

Though there is no similar voicing of these disturbances in *The Four Zoas* (and no actual confrontation as clear-cut as the one here, between Urizen and Milton – Milton not being a zoa), there are other sections that enact this contest between a sorrowful concession to the tyranny of societal impositions and the desire for union with the Eternal. Another example is in *Night the Fifth*, in which Los, engaged in something like an Oedipal struggle with Orc, is bound to experience his days and nights as a series of new bondages and liberations:

Grief rose upon his ruddy brows, a tightening girdle grew
 Around his bosom like a bloody cord. In secret sobs
 He burst it, but next morn another girdle succeeds
 Around his bosom. Every day he viewed the fiery youth...
 Enitharmon beheld the blood chain of nights & days
 Depending from the bosom of Los, & how with grinding pain
 He went each morning to his labors with the spectre dark,
 Called it the Chain of Jealousy.¹⁵

Whereas Milton had a “false body,” which was an “incrustation” over his “Eternal self,” Los suffers from a “tightening girdle” that he is able momentarily to escape, but which reappears daily to enslave him. Even the day is divided against itself; and one could equate Los’s experiences with the psychological suffering (by humans) of repeated panic attacks that one is embarrassed (“in secret sobs”) to make public. This passage differs from that describing Urizen’s creations, however, in that an entirely different

¹⁵ *Complete Poems*, pg. 356.

physical universe seems to be responsible for Los's suffering. That is, whereas the section describing Urizen's building of "Twelve halls, after the names of his twelve sons... & three central domes, after the names/ Of his three daughters"¹⁶ could somehow be reconciled with the universe as it appears in a standard fictional narrative (like *Buddenbrooks*), the girdle that grows (of its own volition, it seems) and then is broken defies the laws that distinguish between matter and energy, between the animate (living) and inanimate.

One is given a brief glimpse in this excerpt of the fluid and cyclical nature of the "physical" universe, the level one step above the narrative on which Blake can be seen to transgress societal boundaries, of *The Four Zoas*. It is behind, in fact, the entire history of the battle between the four parts of Eternal Man, in such a way that nothing can be said to really *happen* in the poem except emotional eruptions on an epic scale: of jealousy, rage, anger, love, etc. For this reason (and not just its obscurity) the poem is very difficult to quote out of context, since the interrelations of the four zoas can not be called "relations" at all: the zoas are (nearly) one, without distinction between self and other. Blake's poem can, therefore, be seen as the exact opposite of a good essay (like Pope's poetry) or a novel, though one can appeal to these forms to provide significant contrasts. It is perfectly useless as the foundation for a practical philosophy or a religion, as a quarry for useful quotes, since its symbols only resonate in the universe that created them, and won't stand excision. It can only serve as a vision of the Eternal; it self-destructs when employed for any activity that takes place in the time-bound world.

Though it would be impossible to provide a description of Blake's "physical" universe in a few paragraphs, one transgression that continually occurs is that of orthodox notions of space. When Urizen constructs his twelve halls he employs all sorts of tools of measurement in order to find the "General Form" that will satisfy his ambitions; he seems, in this way, to respond and crumble to the anxiety that the new openness of Renaissance space could instill in someone, especially a painter when attempting to create the illusion of distance and proportion. Blake completely ignores the integrity of Renaissance space when discussing the movement and position of his figures in *The Four Zoas*. For example, each zoa always seems to be able to witness what the other is doing, despite assurances of there being enormous distances between them. It is as if Blake were depicting, in a painting, two figures who are only inches away from each other if measured along the flat plane of the canvas, but who appear miles apart in the context of the spatial illusion. The distances are emotional, not "physical," and one can cross these distances if one is willing to see through the illusions (death being, for the zoas, also one of these distances). Even when the distance is crossed in an apparently definitive way, the figure remains on the canvas and can immediately be made to appear not to have gone anywhere. Consider the following passage in *Night the Third*, in which Ahania seems to fall for miles into "non-entity":

So loud in thunders spoke the king, folded in dark despair,

¹⁶ *Complete Poems*, pg. 323.

And threw Ahania from his bosom obdurate. She fell like lightning.
 Then fled the sons of Urizen from his thunderous throne petrific;
 They fled to east & west & left the north & south of heaven.
 A crash ran through the immense, the bounds of destiny were broken...
 ... As when a thunderbolt down falleth on the appointed place,
 Fell down, down, rushing, ruining, thundering, shuddering
 Into the caverns of the grave & places of human seed,
 Where the impressions of despair & hope enroot forever,
 A world of darkness. Ahania fell far into non-entity.
 She continued falling. Loud the crash continued, loud and hoarse.¹⁷

By the end of this Night, Ahania looks as if she experienced the terrible fall described earlier, and yet her position in relation to “non-entity” has not changed.

Where Enion blind & age-bent wandered, Ahania wanders now.
 She wanders in eternal fear of falling into the indefinite,
 For her bright eyes behold the abyss. Sometimes a little sleep
 Weighs down her eyelids, then she falls, then starting wakes in fears,
 Sleepless to wander round repelled on the margin of non-entity.¹⁸

Of course, were Ahania to really disappear into non-entity, she would no longer be part of the poem; furthermore, she couldn't have been part of the history of the poem, since she wouldn't have existed in the Eternity upon which it is based. “Non-entity” is like the space beyond the four walls of the canvas, beyond sight of both artist and viewer, outside the boundaries of even a recursive, or cyclical, narrative like *The Four Zoas*. Ahania's fall, therefore, can be seen as a fall “downwards” approaching the edge of the narrative/canvas, where “her bright eyes beheld the abyss,” but once she disappears from the frame, neither the beginning nor end of her fall can ever again be described.

Blake seems to move between the use of a Renaissance space, which includes illusions of volume and measurable distance – perhaps a necessary concession in the fallen state – and a “Medieval” space which is flat, operating on a single plane, all of which is visible at the same time, and in which the positioning of the figure on the canvas directly relates to its position in a value system. Northrop Frye describes the complex differences that exist between the two concepts of space as Blake held them:

We see the fallen space as stretching away from us indefinitely to north, south, east and west. The fallen world knows nothing of position or direction: its center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere, as in some definitions of God. “In Equivocal Worlds Up & Down Are Equivocal,” said Blake, referring to Dante, and elsewhere he speaks of “supposing up and down to be the same thing, as all experimentalists must suppose” – meaning by “all experimentalists” the disciples of Hermes Trismegistus as well as of Bacon and Locke. But every “living creature” has an up and a down, and every “animal” has a front and a back. The imagination sees the east, not as one of thirty-two arbitrary divisions of what Blake calls a “concave space,” but as the quarter of

¹⁷ *Complete Poems*, pg. 337.

¹⁸ *Complete Poems*, pg. 339

beginnings, as the religion of newborn life and light. It sees the north, at least in Britain, as an attractive magnet pulling all things downward to it. The north, then, is a “nadir” and the east a “center” of renewed energy: the south, the region of intensest sunshine, is therefore a “zenith” and the west with its bounding ocean a “circumference.”¹⁹

Though Frye doesn't elaborate upon Blake's criticism of Dante's spatial configurations, the inference is that Dante's spatial schema fails because it is *too* relative, “equivocal,” rather than nailed down to the significances of its levels and the value hierarchies they create. Perhaps Blake's criticism of the *Commedia* is that the narrative doesn't alter in form as it moves through the spaces of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, hence reflecting the changing conditions of narrative, but rather remains adherent to the symmetrical form of the meter, the fictional trope (Dante remaining a clear personage throughout the poem), and the poem's symmetrical division into three books. Hence, the general criticism would be that Dante doesn't make his poem the total expression of the journey, but rather a text that doesn't respond, itself, to the psychic demands of the journey.

Blake's notions of space transposed different types of geography over each other, and each additional transposition, rather than blurring, adds to the specificity of meanings. One is reminded, again, of his criticism of Reynolds, in which he argues that detail should not be sacrificed to the “General Form” of the whole. As Frye writes, the “east” is not just one of thirty-two directions in which one can walk to experience a different type of weather, but rather the direction of origins – one goes there and finds genesis. Every point in space has its unique significance, its own name (and is never to be called a “point”); thus, he argues against space as understood in mathematics as only the area in which a series of anonymous meetings of linear vectors take place. To apply this understanding to *The Four Zoas*, Ahania's fall/near-fall into non-entity can be seen as an approach toward the Renaissance space of “equivocation,” in which the “center is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere.” If Ahania were to really fall out of the purview of the other figures, off the canvas, she would attain a selfhood and, like Urizen, would perceive futurity as one empty void that exists around her. Though one hesitates to apply strictly rational interpretations to any aspect of *The Four Zoas* – everything rational seems a reduction – it is clear that Blake's highly determined sense of space contributes, paradoxically, to the loss of the narrative permanence of movement by a zoa through space as one is accustomed to experience it in, for example, novels and histories. A zoa can't move to other side of the room or turn the corner, but only from a state of being, say, in the “north,” which is a total experience, into the dens of Urthona, which necessitates an entirely new state of being. Consequently, nothing can be hidden in a world that is so abundant with meanings, with so few borders, since communication among the zoas is always complete and *unequivocal*, though accompanied by a storm of high emotions (and movement *is* emotion in Blake), and able to be completely overturned or forgotten in a succeeding moment. It is like the universe of opera

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¹⁹ Frye, pg. 275.

in this way, a form of drama in which (as W.H. Auden wrote) none of the characters can express doubt, since doubt is not a quality of music – and even silence, incoherence, and dissonance is a *total* expression in music.

The third level on which Blake can be said to transgress boundaries is when he lifts narrative sections from literary works, such as the Bible and *Paradise Lost*, and incorporates them into the narrative of his own prophecies. In this way, Blake envisions himself as collaborator, like Shelley in “The Defense of Poetry,” in the creation of a great epic that begins at the very start of the canon. However, the uniqueness of his symbolic system excludes him from a “normal” engagement with these great works, for there is a defiance in the self-reflexive structure of *The Four Zoas* that doesn’t allow the language or events within it to be used in other poems the way he uses parts of other poems in his. This is a continuation of the “unpractical” or “unproductive” nature of the poem noted earlier, for it doesn’t offer a terminology that can be applied elsewhere without seriously endangering their efficacy as terms (though Allen Ginsberg, for one, has certainly used a *type* of Blake’s language for his own ends). What is different from Blake’s project and that of, for example, Chaucer’s in the *Canterbury Tales* (many of which were copied and circulated separately) and Pound’s in the *Cantos*, is that Blake integrates the narrative sections that he lifts into his own universe so thoroughly that they are no longer recognizable (or imaginable) as being from outside the poem. He also incorporates history into the poem, as David Erdman shows in his studies of Blake, such that events become so utterly transformed that they are no longer recognizable as “history.” His method is like that of a child who sees “things” in his surroundings and incorporates them enthusiastically but irrationally into his drawing regardless of how “realistic” his copying is, as opposed to that of the translator/poet (Chaucer, Pound) who makes meaningful adjustments in the lifted literature so that it applies to the form of the poem, though it maintains, finally, its own inner integrity. On its minutest level, this “childish” transformation appears in the names that Blake gives to his zoas, for they are each puns at their base, hence not “serious,” but they take a role in the hugeness of the drama that is *The Four Zoas* in such a way that one would think they had definitions that were centuries old. Blake thereby parodies the “Adamic” origin of names, the sort of “authoritative” permanence implied by it, by using names that he clearly “made up,” but which are weighted with all the significance of the world. In this way, he insures that the child is always visible in his heroes, and that the artifice never disappears beneath the weight of meaning. (It is, consequently, these names that he hurls at Bacon and Locke.)

The play of Blake’s physical universe, which saturates everything that happens within it (likewise the Newtonian universe saturates all within it, but stays clear of Blake’s), can be seen in the following section of Night the Seventh, in which Los eats of the fruit of the Tree of Mystery:

For beneath
Was opened new heavens, & a new earth beneath & within:

Threefold, within the brain, within the heart, within the loins,
 A threefold atmosphere sublime, continuous from Urthona's world,
 But yet having a limit twofold, named *Satan & Adam*.

...Enitharmon thus spake:
 'When in the deeps beneath I gathered of this ruddy fruit,
 It was by that I knew that I had sinned, & then I knew
 That without a ransom I could not be saved from eternal death,
 That life lives upon death, & by devouring appetite
 All things subsist on one another. Thenceforth in despair
 I spend my glowing time. But thou art strong & mighty
 To bear this self-conviction: take then, eat thou also of
 The fruit, & give me proof of life eternal, or I die.'
 Then Los plucked the fruit & ate...

The spectre of Urthona wept before Los, saying: 'I am the cause
 That this dire state commences; I began this dreadful state
 Of separation, & on my dark head the curse & punishment
 Must fall, unless a way be found to ransom and redeem.'

Los trembling answered: 'Now I feel the weight of stern repentance.
 Tremble not so, my Enitharmon; at the awful gates
 Of thy poor broken heart I see thee like a shadow, withering
 As on the outside of existence. But look! behold! take comfort!
 Turn inwardly thy eyes, & there behold the Lamb of God
 Clothed in Luvah's robes of blood descending to redeem.'²⁰

This section of *The Four Zoas* is the most obviously "borrowed" of Blake's in that he has offered a sequence of events that can be directly contrasted with the Biblical schema of the Fall. However, there is no easy way to compare this version with, say, Milton's, since Blake's vocabulary and the physics of his universe are so unusual and seem to alter themselves to fit each situation. No clear or shorthand interpretation offers itself, since the criteria for interpretation are so (seemingly) fluid. The presence of figures other than those generally understood to have been present at the Fall moves the action outside the frame of a possible one-to-one symbolical or metaphorical correspondence, especially since both Adam and Satan are acknowledged as distinct from the spectre of Urthona and Los. Therefore, one is forced to learn the new vocabulary as well as the new physics. Frye defines the spectre of Urthona as somewhat like the psychological notion of "the will," and he writes of this section of the *Zoas*:

[T]ime in our world exists in an abstract as well as an imaginative form, hence from Urthona is born not only Los but the "Spectre" of Urthona, clock time. The crisis of the action of *The Four Zoas* comes with the merging of these two descendants of Urthona in Night VII... The Spectre of Urthona is the isolated subjective aspect of existence in this world, the energy with which a man or any other living thing copes with nature. It is neither the Selfhood, which is Satan, nor the "vegetable" existence, which is Luvah; it is that aspect of existence in time which is linear rather than organic or imaginative.²¹

²⁰ *Complete Poems*, pp. 399-401.

²¹ Frye, pg. 292.

Satan is associated elsewhere with limit of "opacity" or eternal death, and Adam with the limit of "contraction," which is as "far as man can fall without losing his imagination all together and the ability to recreate himself along with it."²² Thus, before taking the fruit, Los has a vision of the eternal human contraries of Satan and Adam, and afterwards he is forced into the narrowness of a linear existence (perhaps mathematical in character) that could be equated with the beginning of "human" history. He has a vision that is in his brain, heart and blood of the contraries circling below him, while he is yet unfallen, but the fruit pushes him into the selfhood which, as Frye observes, is the necessary corollary to "clock time." The spectre of Urthona bewails the "separation" that defines existence on the fallen level, and even attempts to claim responsibility: "I began this dreadful state/ Of separation, & and on my dark head the curse & punishment,/ must fall."

Even understanding that much of what happened, there are two aspects relating to Blake's poetics that keep this interpretation entirely fluid and inconclusive. The first is that the Creation/Fall has already been enacted a number of times in *The Four Zoas*, even as recently as the early part of Night the Seventh, in which Orc is turned by Urizen into a serpent, knowing "that wisdom reaches high & deep, & therefore he made Orc./ in serpent form compelled, stretch out & up the mysterious tree."²³ (Is this Blake's parody of rational knowledge, that understands "deepness" as merely serpentine length?) In this way, the spectre's self-condemnation seems a bit ludicrous, though is not really since the spectre could be responsible for all of the Falls anyway, for they happened for the same general reason, at the same time. As G.A. Rosso writes in *Blake's Prophetic Workshop*:

[Blake] does not swerve his eighteenth century precursors: he transmutes their most cherished theme of creation, refusing, even more radically than Milton, to separate Creation from the Fall.... [He] sets the various creation narratives of the zoas and emanations on a collision course. Through his composite artistry, Blake deploys the prophetic narrative strategies of repetition, juxtaposition, and allusion to bind each creation story to the fallen conditions of its telling. In effect, Blake filters creation through each speaker's divided consciousness, internalizing, as he arrests, the fragmentation of eighteenth century poetic cosmology.²⁴

The "physics" of Blake's poetic universe thus absorbs this most orthodox of his Creation/Fall myths (not unlike the various ^{graftings} bindings, almost alchemical in nature, that occur throughout the *Zoas*), transforming it completely. Blake also shows, in these repetitions, that no action is conclusive in the context of the Eternal, and that historical agency is something of a myth itself, since we are each playing roles that can be understood as typological, in which our actions are repetitions of previous actions, and have been completely anticipated. Boundaries between past and present, therefore, are also exploded, since there is

²² Frye, pg. 130.

²³ *Complete Poems*, pg. 379.

²⁴ G.A. Rosso, *Blake's Prophetic Workshop* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1993), pg. 264.

no sense of completeness or a causal network (which seems implies completeness once an "effect" has occurred) to make them visible as units. Furthermore, past *poems* can no longer be visible as units, since no poem has a beginning or end, a closed selfhood, but can be integrated (as Blake implies) within another poem. The entire canon of literature thus becomes a conversation in the extended "real" world that mimics the psychic activity of a presumed interior world, not unlike the Cubist collaboration described at the beginning of this essay.

The second aspect of this enactment of the Fall to consider is that the spectre of Urthona, who is mostly "responsible," is able to empathize and express the grief ("unless a way be found to ransom and redeem") that would normally be expressed by the fallen. The physics of Blake's universe, in which orthodox notions of the self that are the necessary precursor for the process of placing blame do not exist, actually short circuit the concept of blame, though the language of blame is present in Blake's text. In this way, total empathetic repentance can be spurred from the "third" party. Because of the play between the forces of unity and separateness, in which the zoas can be seen as neither whole or singular, judicial concepts like blame and responsibility are checked, for the self has no boundaries, and it is absurd to think that an inchoate presence can be punished. It is, indeed, partly a concern of the "Tree of Mystery," the symbol of the veil of the type of religion that Blake despised, to maintain these divisions between individuals who are "chosen" and those who are not, and to allow the former to feel they can be judged distinct from the rest of humanity.

The present essay has attempted to highlight some ways in which Blake's poetic in *The Four Zoas* confront, overturn or simply ignore notions of societal boundaries on three levels: the narrative level, which depicts constructions of rational systems that are enslaving as much as they momentarily impress with their grandeur and complexity (on the model of Pythagorean society), the "physical" level in which the story takes place, characterized, for instance, by the possibility of a tragic "fall" that is not a movement from one point in Cartesian space to another (or one point in the "plot" to another), but rather a shift on a multi-dimensional table of meanings, and the "authorial" level, on which the poem acts as borrower of past narratives, or as filter through which past works can be witnessed. (Blake doesn't go so far, on this final level, as to plagiarize, but he can be said to "re-originate" certain themes in his own poem, which, after all, approaches the status of scripture – though pointing always to its artificiality.) The unifying quality of these levels of transgression is that they each imply a confrontation with society on a contractual level – the level of mutual agreement – whether official or not. That is, if one were to follow through on the implications of any of these transgressions enacted on the level of poetry, certain laws and codes that exist in "real" civil society would be threatened.

The law theorist Jennifer Nedelsky, in her provocative essay "Laws, Boundaries, and the Bounded Self," provides a description of "boundary" as it is used in law that helps illustrate the power of Blake's transgressions. The argument of the essay itself is that "boundary," typified by the use of the

A religion of mystery is a religion of sin, blame + damnation

Note Blake's
rejection of
Stefans 15
walls in FZ
133
& formal lines

"wall" metaphor, is outmoded as a term, and the essay crosses many themes that are applicable to Blake, whom she doesn't, however, mention. "Property defines what the society, or its representative the state, cannot touch (in the ordinary course of things)," she writes, "It defines a sphere in which we can act largely unconstrained by collective demands and prohibitions."²⁵ (Already, one can see that Blake, who was not a landowner, took complete advantage of the property of his poetic space, creating within it a visionary world that would completely subvert societal mores that he felt constrained his "natural" or physical person. At the same time, he chooses to make this interior property a communal space that takes its communality as a theme.) Property is, however, a "right that requires collective recognition and enforcement," and therefore society and the individual meet on the bounding walls of property; it is there that the social contract is most dynamic. The essay continues to describe the boundary of the "safe space" that a parent creates for a child, as well as the sexual boundary that is (in the opinion of Andrea Dworkin, quoted in the essay) only crossed in an act of "invasion," on a level that is always "nonconsensual." Nedelsky discovers, by analyzing these various understandings of boundary as simply a wall, that they are mostly inadequate for descriptions of the complexities of social interaction.

At one point Nedelsky offers the replacement metaphor of human skin, which is "permeable, slowly and constantly changing while keeping its basic contours."²⁶ (*The Four Zoas* can, likewise, be seen as a skin, rather than as a wall, since it doesn't define Blake's relation to the world so much as his artistic *reaction* to it.) In her call for the rejection of boundary/wall metaphors as inadequate, she recognizes that they are impossible to entirely dump because they are so ingrained in judicial thought; nonetheless, she writes:

The boundaries so central to American law are the boundaries that feel desperately necessary to the separative self to keep the threatening others at bay – a task whose impossibility only fuels the desperation. When I say the task is impossible, I do not mean to imply that the boundaries do nothing. They do protect us from certain kinds of threats. But equally (or more) important, our boundary-setting rights protect us from the seemingly overwhelming responsibility that would flow from a recognition of unity. This is, I think, a frightening form of the "oceanic feeling," intimations of which have reached us. We fear being "invaded," "taken over," not just by threats but by demands – the overpowering demands of those in pain and hunger all around us. We wall ourselves off from their cries – genuinely do not hear them most of the time, even though we "know" they are there – by telling ourselves that we are "within our rights," that rights define our obligations as well as our entitlements, and that as long as we have violated no one's rights, we are doing nothing wrong in our daily nonresponsiveness.²⁷

Though Nedelsky's language is a bit dry and "rational," there is a passionate quality to it which Blake no doubt would have appreciated. Whereas she could borrow Freud's term, the "oceanic," to describe the

²⁵ Jennifer Nedelsky, "Laws, Boundaries, and the Bounded Self," *Representations* (Spring, 1990), pg. 165.

²⁶ Nedelsky, pg. 176.

²⁷ Nedelsky, pg. 183

sensation of “unity” that causes anxiety to the bounded self, Blake invites this feeling, and recreates it in his poem. What is even more intriguing is how Blake is able *through* his poem to hear “the overpowering demands of those in pain and hunger all around us” – *The Four Zoas* is haunted by these very cries of pain, of regret and longing, even as it rages against the oppressors. Blake’s poem doesn’t serve as a wall that separates him, and encloses his property, from an “outer” world, but is itself a perceiving agent that becomes transformed as the world approaches it. It maintains a clear “outline,” rather than a weak “General Form,” primarily because it does not fear invasion from a presumed “outside” or (to ~~dryly~~ apply one of Blake’s terms) a “futurity” beyond its selfhood.

The irony about Blake as a social revolutionary²⁸ is that one must learn a difficult vocabulary that doesn’t exist elsewhere in the world to read him, and yet having learned it (on some level) in order to gain access to his private, unique space, one is paradoxically brought even closer to the “unity” that Nedelsky describes, but with all the force of a total art (like Wagnerian opera) rather than the careful arguments of a philosophical text. One is brought closer to “experience” rather than an adequate language to describe experience, which is what other poets mistakenly feel compelled to provide. There is no way to read Blake lightly, nor is there a way to feel one has learned enough about the poems once having started, since the poems, the synthesis of so many types of discourse, infect, on as many levels, any perception of the world that one can call “free.”²⁹ It is for this reason that one can call Blake “useless,” for nothing can be lifted from his private universe and applied in a “rational” discourse, and yet the very act of engagement with it corresponds to the engagement one must have with the world in order to be the fullest type of historical agent.

So true

²⁸ One can compare Blake’s politicized poetics, which certainly never “caught on” in his time, nor even during his rediscovery in the mid-nineteenth century to its full extent, with that of the Surrealists, who, as Walter Benjamin describes in his essay “Surrealism,” in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978) provided the world, for a brief moment, with a “moral exhibitionism, that we badly needed.” In writing of the Surrealist aesthetico-political program, Benjamin writes: “They are the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom, because they are convinced that ‘freedom, which on this earth can only be bought with a thousand of the hardest sacrifices, must be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation, as long as it lasts.’” He then asks: “But are they successful in welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience that we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution?” His answer is no, but he observes that “to win the intoxication for the revolution – this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises.” Like the Surrealists, who attempted to destroy the boundary between the waking and dreaming states, and thereby boundaries between the rationalizing ego-ridden self and other (a self that is nowhere), Blake provides something of this “intoxication,” and yet it is clear that his prophetic poems, which never speak of “unrestricted freedom,” imply a sort of discipline of attention, of continual “self-annihilation,” and even the discipline of learning how to read them. This discipline, which leads to joy and is voluntarily undertaken, may be just that type that leads to decisive action, and for the sake of others. Blake provides something like the pure Utopian vision.

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Edward Taylor's "Lists" and Scales of Value

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Edward Taylor's "Lists" and Scales of Value

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One recurring feature of Edward Taylor's poems is the appearance of lists or brief catalogues of items which attempt to illustrate by example an idea being proposed. The use of this method points to an element of Taylor's poetic that keeps him a cool distance from the "caricature of the grim, high-hatted Puritan, [who] sacrifices the fine art of poetry to the sterile dogmatics of religion,"¹ as one critic has written about Michael Wigglesworth, author of *Day of Doom*, for it involves a very direct and mostly unembarrassed relationship with the sensual and temporal world. These lists are a key element to a poetic that has often led readers to speculate that Taylor may have had Anglican leanings, and it contributes in many ways to, or may be entirely responsible for, the baroque quality of his writing. The lists are also often used in the elaboration of some sort of value system, whether it be religious or cultural, or they allude to the existence of a system though not intended to illustrate it directly. Occasionally, they are also productive of overtones that can only be described as "economic"; that is, these lists illustrate Taylor's thinking about things in terms of production and consumption as well as value – in general, with the *currency* of his images – though the only consumer is, of course, God. These overtones are apparent in "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children," in which he comes to terms with his grief over the death of his daughter by deciding that he has been chosen caterer of choice flowers to God:

But oh! a glorious hand from glory came
Guarded with Angells, soon did Crop this flowre
Which almost tore the root up of the same
At that unlookt for, Dolesome, darksome houre.
In Pray're to Christ perfume'de it did ascend,
And Angells bright did it to heaven tend.

But pausing on't, this sweet perfum'd my thought,
Christ would in Glory have a Flowre, Choice, Prime,
And having Choice, chose this my branch forth brought.

¹ This is a quote by Alan H. Pope taken from an essay by John C. Adams, "Alexander Richardson and the Ramist Poetics of Michael Wigglesworth," in *Early American Literature* (Vol. 25, 1990), pg. 271. *as quoted by*

don't do
we know?

Lord take't. I thanke thee, thou takst ought of mine,
 It is my pledg in glory, part of mee
 Is now in it, Lord, glorifi'de with thee.²

He concludes that his own love for his daughter, and his father's sense of her uniqueness, is shared by Christ, for she was taken because Christ, who had a "Choice," wanted and chose to have a flower that was "Choice, Prime." Though this falls well within the borders of the contract that Taylor believes he has with God, and which he is always bargaining to renew, there are clearly allusions to the specialness of the deal here, in which Taylor, with much regret, has provided God with the best available, a flower that is the envy of all; it is only when he is able to remind himself that he has again merely fulfilled his end of the contract that he is solaced. Soon he loses another child, another flower; the "economic" metaphor becomes more pronounced when the first "Flowre, Choice, Prime" takes its place as merely the model in a reproducing series. There is an odd quality to the following verse, which describe the births of his next two children, for he clearly imagines himself in a passive position, caught in the act of praying when his "branch did sprout":

But praying ore my branch, my branch did sprout
 And bore another manly flower, and gay
 And after that another, sweet, brake out,
 The which the former hand soon got away.
 But oh! the tortures, Vomit, screechings, groans,
 And six weeks Fever would pierce hearts like stones.

He finds himself no longer able to believe that Elizabeth was the "choice" flower, for he would have to denigrate his second daughter, Abigail, to a secondary position. Moreover, some of the assurance and power that the contract instills in him sinks beneath his profound physical reaction: "tortures, Vomit, screechings, groans/ And six weeks fever." When he finally comes to terms with this second stage of the transaction, he is only able to appreciate its incompleteness, and he seems to have to deal with the fragmentation of his own personality. He never ceases to think of these children (neither of whom lived longer than a year) as extensions or manifestations of himself; and they are, for the meantime, his sole communication with Christ:

That as I said, I say, take, Lord, they're thine.
 I piecemeale pass to Glory bright in them.
 I joy, may I sweet Flowers for Glory breed,
 Whether thou getst them green, or lets them seed.

² The text being used for excerpts from the poetry is *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1960). This poem appears on pp. 344-5.

Though it is reductive to read in this poem Taylor's inscription of himself as nothing more than a factory producing priceless gewgaws for God, it is clear that he elevates the worth of his children by comparing them to some "choice" product or commodity that are engaged in his image-laden transactions with God. The first child is, of course, special, like the first poems of a young poet, in that she seems to embody a complete communication, for which Taylor thanks God in accepting (despite his assurance that she is of extraordinary worth). The second is taken, or given, with much less ceremony, and indeed is not productive of anything that could be mistaken for a closed deal, but is the transaction in which Taylor comes to discover how "piecemeal" his giving has been and will be, and that the contract even extends to those children of his that will die in their "seed."

medieval poem?

signature

It is also in this second deal that Taylor comes to realize what God provides for himself in terms of consolation for his grief, and he writes (remaining within the conceit of a business transaction):

prose reference

Grief o're doth flow: and nature fault would finde
 Were not thy Will, my Spell Charm, Joy, and Gem:
 That as I said, I say, take, Lord, they're thine.
 I piecemeal pass...

connection? 'erone?

There is a play of contrasts throughout the poem between fluid or gaseous states (of grief, vomit, or even the "perfum'de prayer" that he names his child's death) and the solidity of the objects of the transaction (flowers, gems) in which Taylor believes he is engaging. This sort of solidity or concreteness returns often in Taylor's poems, and in his search for metaphors he often stumbles upon making value statements about a wide range of subjects. His use of lists such as "Spell Charm, Joy, and Gem," an attempt at hyperbole by accumulation, returns throughout his poetry in a way that distinguishes him from a poet like Donne, for example, who would use one image and beat it to "airy thinness" by teasing out the conceit. Taylor's method is more like that of a hawker of miracle cures; he provides the context and concept, which is the promise, and then demonstrates its efficacy by providing a list of examples, often in a manner that works by bewilderment more than reason.

generalization? concrete?

good / needs elaboration

There are many reasons why Taylor would choose this method over that of the metaphysical conceit that was prevalent among his English near-contemporaries. One has already been alluded to, which is that Taylor, being an American of the frontier, might have had some understanding of the importance of the markets for the future of his township. In this way, he may have had a heightened awareness of the commodification of the things of nature, in the manner of the first reports to the Old World about the fecundity of New England, or may have absorbed some of their habits of language, which involved lists that impressed by their variety and abundance. Another is that Taylor would have understood the "things" of nature as being terms in God's language when communicating with man, which Taylor would then need only take, or "lift," once he is sure he has heard them. As Robert Daly writes in his essay "Puritan Poetics: The Word, The Flesh, And God," the "fear of graven images was an

okay - I see it being promised

This could have been researched, why leave with might have may have

confusing substance

obsession with the Puritans," and a "verbal idol, such as might be found in poetry, would be as great a sin as a material idol carved in stone"³; in this way, one would expect far fewer flowers in Taylor's poetry, and certainly not the choice, prime and perfumed ones that he glorifies. Daly continues to consider the lack of consensus among critics of the effect upon the strong iconoclasm of the Puritans that Ramist philosophy had, a thorny question since poetry was considered a subset of rhetoric by the Ramists, and rhetoric itself merely ornamental language; a triviality divorced from serious dialectic. He reaches a resolution to some of these difficulties by a new understanding of what the Puritan poet thought he or she was doing when using imagery, which is really a new understanding of the position the poet imagined him/herself in relation to language, the world, and God:

are you the
using
figure itself?
evidence?

Not
quite
signature

Had the Puritan poet considered his figures merely decorations, the products of his own mind and imagination, he would have considered them and his poetry trivial. For the Puritan, however, such figures and symbolic correspondences were not created by the rhetorician and therefore part of elocution; they were created by God and found in the world by the poet. If they were to be put into the Ramist classification at all, then, they would be classified under *inventio* as part of dialectic. For the Ramist, *inventio* (coming from *in venire*) meant to "come upon," "discover," or "lay open to view"; it is not well translated if we take it to mean "invent" in the same sense as "create" or "make." Although the Ramist system implies no particular poetics to the exclusion of all others, it clearly obtains in the poetics of the Puritans, who considered their poems descriptions of God's world, *not creations* of the poet's fancy. Though Anne Bradstreet's poetry, for example, evinces skill and a deep concern with her art, it was designed neither to demonstrate that skill nor to assert her role as a maker of verse, but to respond to the glory of God immanent in the created world and seen, *not made*, by the poet.⁴ (emphasis added)

The poet is ~~not one who~~ ^{does not} actually creates a poem (or an image), but who merely discovers (in its meaning as "uncovers") it for the world to see; the poem itself, then, takes its immediate place as a ~~more or less~~ ~~unobtrusive~~ part of the world. It is worth noting, however, that the poems of Taylor's that most fit under Daly's understanding of a Ramist imagist poetic are those that he composed in private, and that the poems of *Gods Determinations*, which were probably intended for publication as some sort of "sugared" sermon in the manner of Herbert or Wigglesworth, are not nearly so image-laden. (There may be *inventio* in *Gods Determinations*, but it is not in the manner of the "symbolic correspondences" of the *Meditations*.)

One can, then, speculate that Taylor did not have this understanding of his poetic entirely resolved within himself. Also, many of the images that do appear in the *Preparatory Meditations* approach a sort of sensuality (of smell, of the physical body) that lead one to believe that he was using the images that were most effective to him on a poetic level rather than concrete and "reasonable" on the level of dialectic.) However, many of the *Meditations* directly state Taylor's understanding of himself as an extension of God

It is your task
to look
identify
whether
inventio or
other
rhetorical
device re
at play.

what does this
mean?
Retracted
Reconceptualizing

³ Robert Daly, "Puritan Poetics, The Word, The Flesh, and God" in *Early American Literature* (Vol. XII, 1977), pg. 139.
⁴ Daly, pg. 146.

(through a sharing of blood, for instance), and his poems as being “songs” that can be sung in heaven; that is, there is little that one can believe Taylor thought merely “fanciful” in the *Meditations*, since he was submitting them to the highest authority.

There is a natural progression from this Ramist poetic to one based on Bible exegesis, which posits elements of the natural world as “types” or symbolic doubles that mirror or express God’s immanent will in the world. (Indeed, Perry Miller has credited Taylor with being original in his use of the typological method for a reading of the “spiritual” reading of the sensible world, though Daly argues that he had Medieval precedents⁵.) With the typological method, the Puritan poet is “able to delight in the sensible world, to state its vanities only in comparison with the joys of God and heaven, and to use the former to figure the latter.”⁶ This method implies a strong correspondence between a material and spiritual world, and it is indicative of yet another type of correspondence – more mystical and unique for the New World – that exists in Taylor’s poetry, which is that between the “microcosm” that is man’s body and the “macrocosm” that is Christ’s, or the “World Soul’s”. This correspondence is developed by Karen Gordon-Grube in “Evidence of Medicinal Cannibalism in Puritan New England: ‘Mummy’ and Related Remedies in Edward Taylor’s ‘Dispensatory,’”⁷ which centers around Taylor’s choice of Paracelsian medicinal theory, which advocated among other things the ingestion of mummified human body parts, over the less mystical, materialist and “official” Galenist school of medicine. In Galenist theory, human illness was caused by an imbalance of the four humors, and so cures sought to restore to the body what had been lacking; the basic paradigm, then, was that “contraries cure,” that a “hot” disease, for instance, was cured by a “cold” treatment. The Paracelsian system was the opposite: “like cured like” in their cosmology, in which the human body was considered a miniature duplicate of a divine form. Though both Galenists and Paracelsians often used the same medicines, the Paracelsians’ use was centered around the spiritual essence of the matter, and not the matter itself; hence, paradoxically, as Gordon-Grube observes, the Paracelsian school of medicine conformed more to the iconoclasm of Puritan thought, for it did not propose that the material (mummified flesh, for example) itself cured the illness (generally mirroring the Roman Catholic view of the presence of the *physical* body of Christ in the Sacraments), but rather that it contained only a spiritual essence that required faith from the patient to work.⁸ “Paracelsians saw the universe as a ‘living unit’ in which the occult or magical influences of the World Soul were everywhere at work; every part of the universe bore a sympathetic relationship the rest,” Gordon-Grube writes, “That man was microcosm meant of them that he had within himself all the forms of external nature – minerals, plants, animals, and the celestial bodies”⁹ Oddly enough, this means that, for Taylor – whose

⁵ Daly, pg. 150.

⁶ Daly, pg. 157.

⁷ This essay appears in *Early American Literature* (Vol. 28, 1993), pp. 185-221.

⁸ Gordon-Grube, pg. 203.

⁹ Gordon-Grube, pg. 188.

Bible
exegesis
points?

structure

5 mirrored in

actually the
same thing
no.

very
confused

“Dispensary” contains a variety of uses to which the human body can be put in the service of medicine – the body itself could be dissected and commodified, though Gordon-Grube is unsure of the degree to which Taylor put this knowledge to use. Nonetheless:

That Taylor was a confirmed believer in the idea of microcosm and in sympathetic healing can be seen perhaps most explicitly in his metallic remedies – whereby metallic and mineral remedies were typically Paracelsian. *Silver* “Sympathizes with the Macrocosmicall *Moon* and with [the] Microcosmicall,” which is the “*Brain*”; *tin* “Sympathizes with the Macrocosmicall *Jupiter* and also with the Microcosmicall, viz. the *Liver*”; *copper* is “called *Venus*,” “Sympathizing with [the] macrocosmicall celestiall *Venus* and the Microcosmicall *Generative*”; *gold* is called “*Sol*,” “in that it Sympathizes with the Macrocosmicall *Sun* in the Heavens, and with the Microcosmicall in man, viz. the *Heart*”, says Taylor. Thus when one used, e.g., gold as a remedy, one channeled a diluted form of the emanations from the supracelestial world (via the sun) – as *spiritus* – into one’s own heart.¹⁰

The elements are thus understood as middle elements between a “supracelestial” or “macrocosmicall” world and the microcosm which is the human body. However, that microcosm, because its component parts houses these spirits, can also serve as the middle element in this transaction, as a few entries from Taylor’s “Dispensatory” illustrate. For instance, he writes that “*Earwax* drunk in Beer is chiefly recommended as a present cure of the Colick,” that “*The hair* yields a liquour distilled which makes hair grow anointed with it and hony,” and that “*Menstruall Blood* dried and took is recommended for the Stone, falling sickness and Externall for Gout in the feet.”¹¹ Such an understanding on a practical, perhaps “everyday,” level of the relationship of the human body as microcosm of a larger celestial organism no doubt informed Taylor’s understanding of his role as poet, since he was able to understand the human body, dead or alive, as the transport of spirits between the macro- and microcosmic worlds. The image of the human body becomes, then, something like a cluster of *inventio* in the Ramist syllogism,¹² but also a store of physical vehicles that can bring medicinal doses of *spiritus* to another ailing body.

Gordon-Grube concludes her essay by quoting from Med.II.40, in which Taylor inscribes this very understanding of his own body, and by extension his own poems, when he asks:

¹⁰ Gordon-Grube, pg. 189.

¹¹ Gordon-Grube, pg. 192.

¹² Perry Miller writes in *The New England Mind* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1939), that “The *res*, in which the artificial or inartificial argument resided, could be indifferently a pan, a lever, the wind, justice, law, the Trinity, an act of murder, inequality, priority, or the color blue; in logic all these would become arguments. Each world would stand for something objective, even ‘though I thus consider it in my mind.’ A man is composed of arguments – hands, passions, causes, form, body, spirit, size; he is a son, a father, a prisoner, or a king; and yet he is also an argument in and by himself, as is each of these attributes when considered by itself. ‘As many as are the relations of ideas, so are the topics of invention,’ says a Harvard thesis.” (pg. 148) Miller’s rather heterogeneous list of “arguments” is mirrored in some of Taylor’s own poems.

But doth my sickness want such remedies,
 As mummy draind out of that Body spun
 Out of my bowells first? Must th' cure arise
 Out of the coffin of a pious son?¹³

The "pious son" is his own son James, whose body is seen as providing the physical materials for the medicine that God, acting as physician, will provide the poet to cure him of his sinful nature (in contrast to the flowers in the divine transaction of "Upon Wedlock"). Remarking on the final stanzas of the poem, Gordon-Grube writes: "[B]ecause of the correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm (i.e. the *son* in the lower world corresponds to the *Son* in the superior world; and *mummy*, particularly of the son, corresponds to the *body of Christ* the Son in the superior world), the contemplation of the image of mummy leads to knowledge of the flesh of Christ."¹⁴ Her analysis demonstrates how different systems of correspondence – the Paracelsian and the typological, in this case – are synthesized in Taylor's poetry, though always serving to sharpen the focus of his relationship to God.

The effect of these overlapping systems of correspondences is that there is a tendency and capacity for the use of lists or catalogues to bolster an argument, since these various systems expand to include a wide variety of images within their philosophical purviews, leaving, however, none of them free to be merely decorous or fanciful ornaments. Taylor asks in the "Prologue" to the Meditations: "Can a Crumb of Dust the Earth outweigh,/ Outmatch all mountains, nay the Crystall Sky?", and he pursues, in many of the Meditations that follow, to add other things to the "dust" on the scales, hence creating, almost as a byproduct, a populated and somewhat intricate hierarchy of values for the imagery he permits to enter his poems. For instance, he writes in Med.I.23, considering his marriage to God:

I know not how to speak't, it is so good:
 Shall Mortall, and Immortall marry? nay,
 Man marry God? God be a Match for Mud?
 The King of Glory Wed a Worm? mere Clay?

...
 My Maker, he my Husband? Oh! strange joy!
 If Kings wed Worms, and Monarchs Mites wed should,
 Glory spouse Shame, a Prince a Snake or Fly
 An Angell court an Ant, all Wonder would.
 Let such wed Worms, Snakes, Serpents, Divells, Flyes.
 Less Wonder than the Wedden in our Eyes.

I am to Christ more base, than to a King
 A Mite, Fly, Worm, Ant, Serpent, Divell is,

¹³ *Poems*, pg. 150.

¹⁴ Gordon-Grube, pg. 206

Or Can be, being tumbled all in Sin...¹⁵

Taylor replaces the metaphysical conceit, with its teasing out of the implications of an image based on relationships that exist in a Platonic "ideal" state, with the accumulation of empirical details that fit into a somewhat common-sensical or "rational" table of values, such that relationships between the things serve to illustrate, by analogy, his relationship to God. It is a method that incorporates the images themselves into the value system being expounded, rather than speaking of this system in the abstract and using images merely to ornament the thought. The drawback, in this example at least, is that the relationship of a "Mite" to a king does not quite fit the proposed analogy with the mortal and immortal; the list serves to point to the differences *in scale* that might exist between a man and an anthropomorphic god, but it doesn't illustrate the philosophical contrasts between the finite and infinite. However, there is an open-endedness to the list of "Mite, Fly, Worm, etc." that implies that nothing in the physical world will match that which is beyond physics, and that, indeed, all that can be seen is somehow part of that which can't. Another characteristic of this Meditation that might either be a flaw or a virtue is that the primary elements, the "godly" side, in the various parallels don't follow each other in a very reasonable order, but rather go from an abstraction ("glory") to a position in the aristocracy ("prince"), and finally to a spiritual being ("angell"). These leaps may initially seem jarring, but one soon realizes that it is the highly rationalized form of Taylor's poetic that is responsible for the great dissimilarities rather than a lack of care for consistency, since these dissimilarities point to the overlapping systems of correspondences that characterize the poems. Were the primary elements in the analogies to have been more homogenous, Taylor would then fall prey to the criticism (as he might in "Mite, Fly, Worm, Divell, Serpent") of merely decorating his poem.

Taylor pursues a similar sort of compare/contrast method in many of the other Meditations, mostly in a manner that mirrors its use in Med.I.23. In Med.I.29, Taylor uses the list to illustrate the very idea of relationships:

I being grafft in thee there up do stand
 In us Relations all that mutuall are.
 I am thy Patient, Pupill, Servant, and
 Thy Sister, Mother, Doove, Spouse, Son, and Heire.
 Thou art my Priest, Physician, Prophet, King,
 Lord, Brother, Bridegroom, Father, Ev'ry thing.¹⁶

That final "Ev'ry thing" points to the exhaustive nature of Taylor's covenant with God, for he has run out of concrete examples to illustrate his relationship, and must finally point at the roof and simply say "there." A variety of overlapping correspondences are implied in these lines – between physician and

¹⁵ *Poems*, pp. 38-9.

¹⁶ *Poems*, pg. 47.

patient, for example, which involves the Paracelsian language explored earlier, or between pupil and teacher, which implies an entirely different language, especially if one understands the teacher, being God, teaching his young pupil with the simplified imagery of letter blocks.¹⁷ It is as if Taylor were aware that he was involved in a cross-circuit of value systems and were struggling to join them by listing the two poles, or the dichotomies, in each system. None of these images could be mistaken for being poetic "fancy," however, since there is a logic that is responsible for the presence of each element in the list. The supra-rational passion or awe in his relationship to God is expressed by the very accumulation of titles.

(
) how/why?

One struggles to determine, however, the rational system that backs the group of images in Med.II.77, which seems to be his attempt to match Dante's *Inferno*. The poem begins "A State, a State, Oh!", this "state" being that of living in sin, and it continues:

had he know
Dante's
Inferno?

I in this Pit all Destitute of Light
Cram'd full of Horrid Darkness, here do Crawle

...
Here for Companions, are Fears, Heart-Achs, Grief
Frogs, Toads, Newts, Bats, Horrid Hob-Goblins, Ghosts:
Ill Spirits haunt this Pit: and no relieve:
Nor Coard can fetch me hence in Creature Coasts.
I who once lodgd at Heavens Palace Gate
With full Fledgd Angells, now possess this fate.¹⁸

Meaning of
St. Anthony

↑ One reading of this section of the poem which can reintegrate the seemingly arbitrary, almost childish string of images – "Frogs, Toads, Newts, Bats, Horrid Hob-Goblins, Ghosts" – with the Ramist poetic

¹⁷ Elisa New's provocative essay "Both Great and Small": Adult Proportion and Divine Scale in Edward Taylor's 'Preface' and *The New England Primer*" in *Early American Literature* (Vol. 28, 1993) explores the relationship between the list of images in Taylor's poem and the illustrated ABC's of the *Primer*. The main thesis is that the "Preface," modeled on wood-cuts, teaches the "reader who is a child" a lesson in the contrast of human and divine scale, and she writes: "To this reader, Taylor proffers an ABC of a theology, a bright and enticing beginner's garden of verse. The lyrics' opening lines please with primary colors and elementary shapes; its middle introduces the lesson in relative values – big and little, above and below – while its last lines serve the now initiated scholar truth he has been prepared to absorb: the truth of his insignificance.... The ABC of the poem, in other words, makes us children not to protect us from grown-up truths, but to unscroll before us a comprehensive illustration – A to Z – of our ultimate nothingness." (pg. 121) New provides yet another rationale for the abundance of images, many of which are uncomplicated but very sensual and value-laden, in Taylor's poetry, as well as for the unusual number of lists that appear in the *Meditations*. New concludes her essay: "When we do not reduce to bromides ? children's theological curiosity, we perhaps do not notice that their fascination with dinosaurs, cartoon ? hulks, and later, with *Nightmare on Elmstreet* may come from needs the *Primer* credited more seriously than we do: the need to confront ends, to contemplate human scale, to learn not only all one can, but also all one cannot see and be." (pg. 129) Like Miller, New has used a heterogeneous list to wrap up her statement, and consequently alludes to what may be the theme of the entire *Meditations* series, which is the contemplation of this scale.

) what's?

but/
scale
sty

¹⁸ *Poems*, pg. 213.

described earlier, in which the elements of the list were the *inventio*, is to consider their very arbitrariness as illustrative of what Taylor is describing, which is a fallen state. If one defines the postlapsarian state in the Ramist system as a fall out of pure reason, and hence away from an Adamic use of language (which always posits the "interconnections of things"¹⁹), then the use of words that don't have any great symbolical meaning, like "Frogs" (unless this is an image from one of the Biblical plagues)²⁰, or those which are the products of delusion like "Hob-Goblin," would be indicative of the ultimate state of darkness, of linguistic indeterminacy, and even of imagery as mere ornament. It is interesting that Taylor writes, earlier in this poem, that his "Bugbeare State" of sin is as "black as any inke," ink being a substance in the *Meditations* that can be either "liquid gold" (in "The Prologue"), or, like all fluids, vomit. If the poem, therefore, is one in which ink is suspect from the very start, then one can probably expect a disjointed use of language in it later on.

Indeed, Taylor describes his fall from innocence in Med.II.77 as resulting from a "Fiery Dart pilde with Sins poison strong" shot by "Th'Infernall Foe" from Hell, as if he had been struck by a loose pen. His long poem *Gods Determinations* is mostly concerned with the effects of the duplicitous words of Satan on the Elect ("Then Credit not your Enemy/ Whose Chiefest daintie is a lie," remarks Christ in the poem), and one can surmise that Taylor may be also describing a state of duplicitous "indeterminacy" in this poem – in which the darkness of the pit of sin can be compared to the darkness that the unenlightened Ramist dialectician experiences when the two arguments, or *inventio*, don't produce a judgment. The result, then, is not images of flowers and gems which can take their place in the uncovering of God's immanence (and thereby partake in the business-like transaction described earlier), but loose and silly terms like "Hob-goblin" and "Toads." One last thing to notice about this list of horrors is that it is prefixed with a brief list of emotional states – "Fears, Heart-Achs, Grief" – which are themselves far from arbitrary, but which describe the sort of feverish or nightmarish state that produces the later terms. There is an unmarked transition from this list of emotional states to the "frogs" (all of which Taylor calls his "companions") that are the next term, hence augmenting the sense of chaos; that is, even divisions between *types* of language have fallen to the wayside, as this list shows with its undifferentiated inclusion of emotional states, creepy animals, and specters.

The most fascinating use of the list method is in Med.II.56, in which Taylor catalogues some of humanity's greatest technical (or "artistic") achievements, which leads him to consider his own role as artist or cultural producer. He begins by stating that, should he continue "with silver tooles [to] delve" for "rich thoughts" in order to make "a Damask Web of Velvet Verse thereby/ To deck thy Works up," he

¹⁹ Miller, pg. 111.

²⁰ The editor's glossary to this edition of the *Poems* defines "Frog" as a "disease of the throat or mouth" (pg. 357), a meaning that is probably not applicable here, since none of the other items in the list are glossed as diseases – though they could be *treatments* for diseases.

SS

really?
 Is that what
 Miller says?
 About
 divine
 use?

}

?

SS

very
 confused
 at

would only become confused, "snicksnarld to the thrum." This leads him, possibly with a degree of envy of the skills he claims to lack (and after praising the perfection of God's art) to consider:

Art, natures Ape, hath many brave things done
 As th'Pyramids, the Lake of Meris vast
 The Pensile Orchards built in Babylon,
 Psammitch's Labyrinth. (arts Cramping task)
 Archimedes his Engins made for war.
 Romes Golden House. Titus his Theater.

The Clock at Strasburgh, Dresdens Table-Sight
 Regiamonts Fly of Steele about that flew.
 Turrian's Wooden Sparrows in a flight.
 And th'Artificiall man Aquinas slew.
 Mark Scaliota's Lock, and Key and Chain
 Drawn by a Flea, in our Queen Betties reign.²¹

Taylor seems to approach a sort of cultural phantasmagoria that is more characteristic of the poetic of a much later time than his, or the epic scale of *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Regained*; indeed, there is something of an encyclopedic range to his references, even if one or two of them appear to be trivialities or frauds to contemporary readers. Mark Scaliota, for example, was an Elizabethan blacksmith who created a tiny lock and forty-three link chain that was so light it could be drawn by a flea. Taylor puts this on a level with the "Clock at Strasburgh" (there is a something that one might call a "postlapsarian" quality in the use of European names in Taylor's poems), for though he is aware of the triviality of the one and the very practical achievement of the other ("All which are but Inventions Vents or glory/ Wits Wantonings, and Fancies frolicks plump/ Within whose maws likes buried Times, and Treasures/ Embalmed up in thick dawbd sinfull pleasures" – an evaluation that seesaws between admiration and condemnation), he positions them all on the scale and weighs them against the perfect art that is found in nature:

Nature doth better work than Art: yet thine
 Out vie both works of nature and of Art.
 Natures Perfection and the perfect shine
 Of Grace attend thy deed in ev'ry part.
 A Thought, a Word, and Worke of thine, will kill
 Sin, Satan, and the Curse: and Law fulfill.

His dismissal of humanity's "greatest hits" is not, as one might expect, that their authors trespassed on a territory of creation that is God's alone (like the "artificial man" that Aquinas is said to have slain) but that they don't possess the unequivocality of the thought, word, and work of God – that they don't serve to

²¹ *Poems*, pp. 175-7.

no reflection
 in subjects of
 a beginning
 secondarily
 informed
 order

what is
 your view?

same X

illuminate his will, nor to “fulfill” his “law.” These various creations are dismissed as being, themselves, fanciful *ornaments* to the immanence of God, for (one presumes) God does not “attend” every part of them as he does “Natures Perfection. Something obscures God’s presence in them, which might be the presence of the secondary creator, the artist. Originality is being criticized here, and by extension Taylor’s enterprise as a poet (and so one understands why he could not permit himself to engage in more invention, i.e. “innovation,” or to experiment with more poetic forms than he did). It is worth noting that none of the creations listed in the poem are themselves commodifiable, or reproducible, items (or are not described in this way), but rather are “feats”; they are each unique both as scientific and historical achievements, and doubly serve as milestones in a secular history of the world. They are, in other words, the *boasts* of humanity rather than the products of honest work; they are also false icons, rather than transports of God’s immanent will. Taylor, in the last stanza of the poem, turns away from them – “Lord feast mine eyes then with thy doings rare,/ and fat mine heart with these ripe fruites thou bearest” – opting not only to cast his sight on the simple wonders of the natural world, but also towards a poetic that promises to be as unobtrusive as the fruit on a tree, simple and unequivocal in its glory as a gem.

Less elaborate lists appear in numerous other Meditations, often in a context suggestive of the bounty of the interconnectedness of things that Taylor experiences in his covenant with God. There are a few in Med.I.4, in which he writes of the “Wealth, Sports, Honours, Beauty, slickt up all” that he finds in the “Downy Bosom” (or “Silver Chest”) of Love, which he also calls a “pedlars Stall”; later in the poem, he writes of the “Wealth, Pleasure, Beauty Spirituall will line/ My pretious Soul, if Sharons Rose be mine.” He proceeds to pursue the conceit of God as “Chymist” who “doth Sharons Rose distill,” and he provides a short list of the ingredients of the divine “Cordiall,” which is “Oyle, Syrup, Sugar, and Rose Water such.”²² In Med.I.9, he writes of the “Spiced Cups, sweet Meats, and Sugar Cakes” that “Are but dry Sawdust to this Living Bread”²³ of Christ, again weighing, as he does in Med.I.23, a group of things from the physical world against something that is of divine nature. In the next verse of the same poem, he writes of the “Baosting Spgyrist” (alchemist), who:

vaunts he hath rife
The Water, Tincture, Lozenge, God, and Gem,
Of Life itselfe. But here’s the Bread of Life.

He then pledges his life that the alchemist’s “Aurum Vitae Red” is worse than “DEAD HEAD,” which is “the residuum remaining after distillation or sublimation; figuratively, worthless residue,”²⁴ pointing again to the spiritlessness of the material substances, much like the spiritless materiality of language when serving as mere poetic ornament – what would be the “residue” after the divine correspondences have

²² *Poems*, pg. 13.

²³ *Poems*, pg. 19.

²⁴ Glossary to *Poems*, pg. 354.

been ^{was} subtracted. The Ramist paradigm is most apparent in the following verse, from Med.I.16, in which he asks for vision to see the "Heavenly Light," which is, perhaps, the "judgment" of a syllogism:

Thou Lightning Eye, lest some bright Beames of thine
Stick in my Soul, to light and liven it:
Light, Life, and Glory, things that are Divine;
I shall be grac'd withall for glory fit.
My Heart then stufft with Grace, Light, Life, and Glee
I'l sacrifice in Flames of Love to thee.²⁵

The mediation following this begins by asking for "A King, a King, a King indeed, a King," whom he describes as "A King, Wise, Just, Gracious, Magnificent," again providing a brief list of what can be termed merely divine attributes, but listed in a way the ^r makes them seem Ramist arguments. He writes in Med.I.18:

Hence Vengeance rose with her fierce Troops in Buff,
Soul-piercing Plagues, Heart-Aching Griefs, and Groans,
Woes Pickled in Revenges Powdering Trough:
Pain fetching forth their Proofs out of the boanes.²⁶

One can speculate whether the "Proofs" that were "fetched forth" from the bones are not the plagues, griefs, groans and woes of the verse itself, for later in the poem he writes, "Then Vengeance's Troops are routed, Pickled Woe/ Heart-aching Griefes, Pains plowing to the boanes,/ Soul piercing Plagues, all Venom do foregoe." There is a Miltonic (or even Blakian) quality to the description of this battle between the forces of Love and Vengeance, which is also, in Taylor (as it might be in Blake) a battle of the words that embody, in almost anthropomorphic form, the sensations they name.

It would be pointless to quote from all of the lists in the *Meditations*, for each involves its own sort of contextual analysis; Med.II.29, for example, about Noah's Ark, contains the expected inventory of animals that "jar not" but rather "breed" in divine concord, the poem not otherwise fitting into any of the systems of correspondences described earlier (except perhaps the letter blocks). Certain overarching characteristics might become discernible in an exhaustive, perhaps statistical, analysis of the poems, but that is reserved for a more ambitious essay than the present. It is worth looking, however, at a list Taylor uses to illustrate his frustrated attempts at developing his poetic. He writes:

What shall I say? Such rich rich Fullness would
Make stammering Tongues speake smoothly, and Enshrine
The Dumb mans mouth with Silver Streams like gold
Of Eloquence making the Aire to Chime.
yet I am Tonguetide stupid, senseless stand,

²⁵ *Poems*, pg. 29.

²⁶ *Poems*, pg. 31.

Indeed -
you should
spend time
circulating
or already
what you
present
highlight here.

And Drier drain'd than is my pen I hand.

Oh! Wealthy Box: more Golden far than Gold
 A Case more Worth than Wealth: a richer Depth,
 Than Rubies; Cabbinet, than Pearles here told
 A Purse more glittering than Glory 'tself
 A Golden Store House of all Fulness: Shelfe,
 Of Heavenly Plate. All Fulness in thyselve.²⁷

Taylor seems to be saying that he need not even be "creative" or "imaginative" in poetry, but only list what appears on "Gods shelfe"; in this way, the "Dumb mans mouth" (his own) can become "enshrined" with "Silver Streams like gold." He compares the rich store of the world, which is really the quarry of poetic images, with a jewelry box, and uses the most basic symbols indicative of "wealth" to elevate his expression of his perception of God's bounty. Again, one is confronted with the paradox of the infinite and divine being compared to material things, but also with the economic overtones, which appear so often in the *Meditations*, that seem to glorify these symbols of earthly wealth in an almost fetishistic way. >

Taylor seems to be attempting to replace, item by item, the earthly "fetish" of the object with the spiritual fetish of the symbol, hence engaging both himself and his reader in the divine transactions that are part of his contract with God. (It is clear, then, that Taylor is aware that he opts to list items, whether they be gems, physical and spiritual states, occupational titles, or chemicals, rather than to create a metaphysical conceit, for example, or to use more elaborate adjectival structures. His poetic implies that the use of these abstract structures – potentially "deep," absorbing, and drawing attention to themselves – places a distance between the poem and the bare objects of the world that it seeks to describe or represent. The poem itself cannot, for Taylor, become a mere design that will only have decorative (or worse, *iconic*) use, and hence divorced from the main transactions of the day – whether they be the transactions of the covenant with God, the shuttling between microcosm and macrocosm, or even business transactions – but must always point to itself as "poem" – God' work – as simply as an apple is an "apple," or a product a "product." These strictures do not, however, mean that the poem must close itself off from the use of imagery and the sensible world; on the contrary, Taylor's poems, which are fixed at the nexus of so many overlapping systems of correspondences, grow by their ability to absorb and contain these images, though they are then understood as composing something like a terminology. >

For this reason, one can speculate that Taylor may have been dissatisfied with those poems of his that could be called experimental, like "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly," for a similar reason that those one-of-a-kind wonders of humanity's invention were deemed unsatisfactory in Med.II.56, for such poems tend to point to the skill of the poet (and the signature *style* of itself), rather than to the reproducibility of the form, of the "poem." "Upon a Spider" is, indeed, one of his few poems that develops an extended metaphor, and as Taylor writes in Med.I.22: "My Quaintest Metaphors are ragged Stuff,/ Making the Sun

²⁷ *Poems*, pg. 44.

see suggestion!

This is
 key collect &
 you should
 begin from
 here! & in
 with
 this
 when you
 move

overlord

good

seem like a Mullipuff.”²⁸ There is a peculiar arrogance in his belief that he could write a poem that could share the same degree of “thingness” as an apple or gem, and thereby return himself to a pre-lapsarian state (he even places himself higher than the angels, and nearer to God, in one Meditation). In this way he anticipates what will become something like an “anxiety” for many American poets after him, which is how to write a poem that is itself a product of some objective force – world culture, the Jungian realm of archetypes, or even communism – rather than of the puny, singular imagination. The poet who would take this concern to the farthest degree is, of course, Ezra Pound, and his *Cantos* (like the *Meditations*, the *Four Quartets*, the *Dream Songs*, the volumes of *Paterson*, “Steinspeak,” etc.) are an attempt to create a form that is reproducible, “natural” by virtue of repetition, and hence divine in scale, and which seeks to uncover the implications of *itself* as form rather than simply display a signature style and mastery. Once an “original” poem becomes a “form,” then it is able, from that point, to speak from the authoritative position of being engaged in a sort of transaction with the divine (and can no longer be mistaken for a “Mullipuff”). Pound, of course, would use the list form throughout his “epic,” for instance in Canto XLV:

nice idea /
poor choice
of words

too much /
needs
unpacking

Usura is a murrain, usura
blunteth the needle in the maid’s hand
and stoppeth the spinner’s cunning. Pietro Lombardo
came not by usura
Duccio came not by usura
nor Pier della Francesca; Zuan Bellin’ not by usura
nor was ‘La Calunnia’ painted.
Came not by usura Angelico; came not Ambrogio Praedis,
Came no church of cut stone signed: *Adamo me fecit.*
Not by usura St Trophime
Not by usura Saint Hilaire...²⁹

Pound seems to mimic Taylor’s method in Med.II.56, having replaced, however, Nature with Culture, and even God with economics – the Victorian contribution to Pound’s poetic. Nonetheless, many of the rudiments of Taylor’s Puritan poetic have been transferred to Pound’s, which can be seen in the tendency to take the “things” of the world and juxtapose them, make a list, so as to weigh them in a scale of values (whether the pole opposite the “human” is “God” or “genius”), to expose the immanence of some sort of superior will in the world, and to populate the poem with objects that glow, like the gems in a jewelry box, with transparent “meanings.” In this way, the poem even alludes to the presence of itself in that divine ordering, since the poem, by its inclusiveness as well as its plainness, becomes a “vortex” (Pound’s term)

what was
mediating?

are you
making
a
claim?

²⁸ *Poems*, pg. 37. “Mullipuff,” which is glossed as “fuzz-ball, used as a term of contempt” is, of course, the furthest thing from a Ramist “argument.” This very image makes a reappearance centuries later in John Ashbery’s “Decoy,” in which he writes that “our pyramiding memories, alert as dandelion fuzz, dart from one pretext to the next/ Seeking in occasions new sources of memories” – by which time American poets have grown more comfortable with the ornamentality of poetic artifice, and with a scale of values that has collapsed, so that the mind can be equated with floating fuzz (a not entirely un-Ramist position).
²⁹ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1972), pp. 229-30.

over blow
This is like
short-hand
for your stuff.

through which the rush of culture – or the terms of the exchange with God, or the transports to and from the supercelestial “macrocosmic” realm – are channeled. In this way, both poets are able to indulge in a guilt-free appreciation of the sensual world, and to steal its intoxicating imagery, since images – Taylor’s “gems” and “flowers”, Pound’s “Duccio” and “Pier della Francesca” – are transformed into concrete terms or “arguments” in a divine, semi-rational equation, not unlike the “lifeless air become sinewed” of the second of Pound’s *Cantos*.

Kevin.

There are many provocative points touched on in your paper. I applaud your interest in Taylor + his lists and the analogies to certain modernist parallels. It's clear where your interests lie and that you will profit greatly from immersing yourself deeply and long in the earlier poetry represented by Taylor here. You have insights that need further elaboration – longer meditation. I encourage you to pursue the idea you have uncovered/paired here and to think of reversing this – if well, I think, take some time and major reworking – for possible publication. For, is a chapter for your dissertation perhaps. One of your problems here is that you were overly ambitious & moved too quickly over terrain that has not yet been trodden. You are obviously excited by this material & that's wonderful. Now I love that – but cultivate it carefully & well.

**Epic Vessel and Video Style:
The Recent Poetics of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite**

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Epic Vessel and Video Style:

The Recent Poetics of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite

Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott are presently the two most visible Caribbean poets to English-reading audiences, and in the past decade each has gained an even greater notoriety from having received major literary awards, the Neustadt International Prize (1994) and the Nobel Prize (1992) respectively. For anyone even remotely familiar with their careers, the contrasts are already present in the publication history preceding the awards: Walcott had published several volumes with his New York publisher – along with the epic poem *Omeros* – by 1992, while Brathwaite, a historian whose first book of poems was published when he was thirty-seven, was published by Oxford University Press in London, and his work didn't appear widely in the U.S. until 1994, when New Directions released *Middle Passages*. Such facts are only suggestive, and yet they hint at the nature of the each poet's engagement with both "mainland" and European culture, an engagement that would need research of a different sort than will appear in this paper to ~~tease out~~. However, there is another, far more accessible story lurking within the careers of these two poets in the years preceding the awards, for there is an important development in Brathwaite's poetics that occurs concurrent with Walcott's writing of *Omeros* – a 99 canto-long novel/epic written in alexandrines and terza-rima – and that is (in his words and visuals) "the post-modern Sycorax video-style poetry employing 'new' vocabulary + koumblas of techniques/procedures/visions: *nams*, *icons*, *mkissi*, *font ios* & *dream-structure(s)*."¹ Each poet has made extreme leaps in their poetics in the last ~~decade~~, which makes a comparative look, of which there have been a few already, worth undertaking.

The contrast between the two poetics – each courting an extreme in both attention-getting formality and over-formalized dismissibility – is obvious, and yet this gulf between them is not surprising to any reader familiar with the schism between "conventional" and "experimental" poetic theory and practice that has characterized American and European (and possibly Asian and African) letters since Modernism. Neither of these poets, however, fall out of the "postcolonial" rubric – or *into* Western literature's familiar paradigms – because of this tie to the narrative of Modernism, and there appears, on the surface, to be no animosity between them, but rather a curious, however distant, respect. Brathwaite, for example, goes out of his way to describe himself as "an antiseptic critic of anglo America who love Derek Walcott & why not & the restrain poems of Jan Me Donald"² at the beginning of his long poem "Dream Haiti," and mentions Walcott's "first major nation

¹ "Newstead to Neustadt," *World Literature Today* (68:4), 658.

² Fonts and letter-sizes are only loosely approximated throughout this text, since photocopying would be too complicated, and the ideal method of scanning the text impossible due to limits of available technology. It will be noted when the fonts are not approximated; letter-size, however, will not be noted since it doesn't appear that Brathwaite cares about the exact size of the letters when he reprints his work.

language effort” with respectful attention in his essay on Caribbean oral poetics *History of the Voice*, in both cases not naming their differences, but rather shoring their fragments against Anglo-American culture. While Walcott doesn’t make similar gestures in, for example, his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, “The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory,” the lecture seems oddly more descriptive of Brathwaite’s poetics than his own, as he tries to describe the oral, griot-based poetics of *Omeros*, and he dedicated a poem called “Names” to Brathwaite, a poem that operates along some of the modalities of the latter’s poetics. The recent developments of each poetics, however radically different, do share a deep aspect, in that each points to the invisibility of the underlying orality of their works to the silent reader of the poem, to the *presence* and change that can exist only in the voice of the performer. While Walcott foregrounds this in the variable, virtuostic tercets of his epic as they move through different narrative modalities – the tercet becoming the *body* of the performer, donning new masks and roles – Brathwaite operates with a barrage of font, icon, line-spacing, and other idiosyncrasies such as the use of a period within a word – “but yes. / taday when a was tell. / in a certain girl...”³ – that corrupt, intrude upon and manipulate any flat, page-based reading of the text and suggest, always, the possibility of variation.

An early, clearly-written but brief comparative analysis of their poetics appears in a chapter of O.R. Dathorne’s 1981 book *Dark Ancestor: The Literature of the Black Man in the Caribbean*. Dathorne writes that “one feels that Walcott’s voice is the “more interesting of the two, although Brathwaite is more strident,” an interesting way to begin his analysis that doesn’t arrive at too many conclusions regarding Walcott’s poetry, except that the poet, himself, seems to be mired in ambivalence. “Brathwaite seems more at home with a style that he has himself invented,” Dathorne writes, “Walcott, still struggling for a style, once remarked a trifle sardonically that ‘as long as I write in the West Indies, I will always seem to be a visible imitator.’”⁴ Walcott’s “resolution... is a tenuous one,” he “cannot opt for any one ancestor; the choice would seem to easy for him,” and his “world is hazy and unsure, but his poetry derives its greatest strength from this lack of certainty.” In a sense, Walcott is the “more interesting” precisely for reasons that have to do with academic reading styles that revel in ambiguity, and in the transparency of the struggle for cogency and coherence within an powerful literary tradition. For Dathorne, both Brathwaite and Walcott, born in the same year and each spending a large amount of time in Jamaica and England, had to make similar choices, but whereas Walcott “began with no memory... began with no future...” (lines taken from one of his poems), Brathwaite does not settle for such ambivalence, but rather augments it with what Dathorne calls “the ranting side of the positive.” Later in the essay, when discussing why Walcott found it impossible to stage a production of Wole Soyinka’s play *The Road*, he quotes the poet as saying that the god in the play, Ogun, “was an exotic for us, not a force” and “the naming of the god estranged him.” Dathorne concludes that “For Brathwaite, this has to be a problem, but he has chosen to do, not what Walcott implies – follow a beaten track – but instead carve out a new territory,”⁵ which is to say that Brathwaite ignores or supersedes the “exotic,”

³ Brathwaite, “Neustadt,” 658.

⁴ O.R. Dathorne, *Dark Ancestor: The Literature of the Black Man in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 235.

⁵ Dathorne, 242.

pushes past estrangement, and becomes one with the tradition that produced the god, though in a contemporary context. This is a sort of resolution that is unattractive, one feels, for the scholar searching for matter for exegesis.

The big difference between the poets according to Dathorne lies in their relation to oral poetry and the social "group." Dathorne writes that "Walcott utilizes all kinds of sources to substantiate his argument; Brathwaite has seemingly found his answer in the exercise of Afro-New World religions and Akan songs, especially dirges," and proceeds to quote the translator J.H. Kwabena on these songs: "In dealing with the Akan dirge then, we are dealing in the main with traditional expression stored up in the minds of individuals and re-created by them in appropriate contexts, traditional expressions cast in forms which individuals learn to handle because society expects them to use them in the situation of the funeral." Dathorne concludes:

The main point is this: Akan oral verse (like all African verse) is group oriented. The singer is a group spokesman who is allowed little room to maneuver and develop his own individuality. This brings us to the second major difference between the work of Brathwaite and Walcott. Brathwaite is not, and cannot be, an individual; his art is on behalf of a group, and he views himself as the spokesman for this group. Walcott, on the other hand, admits to ignorance about any such group. If such a group did exist, it did not offer security: "My generation had looked at life with black skins and black eyes."⁶

The irony in this statement, of course, is that the poet who cannot be an "individual" is forced into the more radical innovations in form. It is also significant, in light of Dathorne's suggestion that Walcott's voice is the "more interesting," that his description of the poet's practice is almost entirely in negatives, whether in relation to European, African or Caribbean culture. This shouldn't be surprising, of course, as theories of Caribbean culture, whether it be that of Creolité or the "repeating island," are concerned with the decenteredness or "chaos" of the poly-vocal islands, whether in language, history, or economics, so that Walcott, in his search for form and voice, would seem to grow nearer to the situation of his nation as he becomes more troubled by ambiguity.

Indeed, Dathorne does not take his analysis to the final step, and fails to enter upon what appear to be two important approaches which might provide singularity, and resolution, to both Brathwaite's and Walcott's achievements. The first is whether there is something unique, not just in Caribbean culture but in world postcolonial culture, in Brathwaite's decision to be an "expert joiner," to be a poet concerned with a single group though he has the experience of a university-educated, global intellectual. One might initially say No, since there is a paradigm of the foreign-educated cosmopolitan choosing to focus his or her attention on a single group and location, thus gaining a rootedness that might have been unavailable in "interstitial" (to use Homi Bhabha's term) cultural exile. However, Brathwaite is more than an anthropologist or political agitator, but (for Dathorne) "the re-fashioner [and] inventor of a mythical past," a story-teller who has sacrificed Western Romantic subjectivity to pool his expression with that of the social body. In this way, his poetics resemble those of Bertolt Brecht's "epic theater," a poetics that was inspired by traveling Bavarian story-tellers who utilize illustrations, music and rhetorical virtuosity, and which similarly did not intend to expose the "individual" in Brecht so much as the undercurrents of material culture, a totally original aesthetic approach in his time. Brathwaite's poetics, like

⁶Dathorne, 238.

Brecht's, represent a turn from a subjectivity that can't escape the solipsism of its own text, and that is compromised in its engagement with political and social realities, since the "personal," with its complexes of bourgeois subjectivity, is always having to be dragged along. Each writer, then, through the model of the storyteller, enters into a "tribal" realm that circulates information – group interpretations, for example, of political events – that compose the communication-sphere of the culture. This aspect of Brathwaite's poetics, and its relationship to his "video-style," will be examined in more detail later.

↑
I trust that you've setting up Dathorne here

The second consideration is whether Walcott does, indeed, have a "group," and whether it is simply not located in the Caribbean islands. Walcott finds, then, his Modernist precursors in figures like Joyce or Pound, mythological spokesmen for the "tribe" that was early-twentieth century Western (and "Eastern") culture. What is unique about Walcott's situation – especially in light of the form and idiom of *Omeros*, not available, of course, to Dathorne when writing his study – is how much he takes being an "imitator" to task, constructing a work that is extraordinarily *literary* in the context of Caribbean oral poetics, but is decidedly *oral* in the context of his precursor poets – Homer (an oral poet known only in books read by the university-trained), Dante, Racine and the French neo-classicists, and Eighteenth-century translators of Homer like Pope, etc. In this way, he uses the stage that he has constructed for himself, with its defiant regularities and unwillingness to be truly "original," to perform that fragmented, poly-vocal, ambiguous history that is the Caribbean's. *Omeros* is unusual for Walcott in being so regular – most of his poems, except the somewhat longish "The Gulf," also written in terza-rima, are a sort of loose free-verse – and he could be said to use this regularity, along with the sureness of the *vessel* of the poem itself, which he knew would float, to create his own sort of "passage," though into as wide a variety of histories as the ship itself is singular. Whereas the Modernist bases an entirely individualized poetics on an oral model – Pound humming as he composed the *Cantos*, and Joyce attempting to inject the sound of the Liffy into his impenetrable *Finnegans Wake* – Walcott writes a poem whose conventionality is foregrounded, hopelessly "literary" and even Victorian (not unusual, considering the identity that English-speaking Caribbeans have with the literature of that time), hoping then to spill the soul of the griot into the lap of the reader. *Omeros* thus becomes a Trojan horse, of sorts, one with no patience (or less than *Finnegans Wake*) for artful obscurities that need the clarifications of literary scholarship, but with an attention-grabbing foregrounding of "craft" that cries Achievement while, offering its least "original" aspect, its meter and form, for initial consideration and acceptance.

Such distinctions in the poetics of these two poets could not have been made by Dathorne, for Walcott's relationship to "the tradition" had not been so outwardly projected as it has since in *Omeros*, and Brathwaite was still being seen as a primarily "local" poet, whose presence through text was highly compromised, one might say, by the flattening that occurs when much oral based poetry – like the material he quotes in *History* – is translated to the page. This isn't to say that Walcott has resolved all of his ambiguities with his epic, but that he has discovered a vessel in the epic that contains the breadth of his sea-voice. Indeed, he seems to long for this sort of resolution in a poem of his from 1965, called "Codicil":

you might elaborate on this point

("video" flattens the image in a similar way)

Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,
one a hack's hired prose, I earn
my exile. I trudge this sickle, moonlit beach for miles,

tan, burn
to slough off
this love of ocean that's self-love.

To change your language you must change your life.

I cannot right old wrongs.
Waves tire of horizon and return.
Gulls screech with rusty tongues

Above the beached, rotting pirogues,
they were a venomous beaked cloud at Charlotteville.

Once I thought love of country was enough,
now, even if I chose, there's no room at the trough.

I watch the best minds root like dogs
for scraps of favor.
I am nearing middle

age, burnt skin
peels from my hand like paper, onion-thin,
like Peer Gynt's riddle.

At heart there's nothing, not the dead
of death. I know too many dead.
They're all familiar, all in character,

even how they died. On fire,
the flesh no longer fears that furnace mouth
of earth,

that kiln or ashpit of the sun,
nor this clouding, unclouding sickle moon
whitening this beach again like a blank page.

All its indifference is a different rage.

This poem, one of Walcott's most direct and in some ways finest, could have appeared in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* or *For the Union Dead*, with its theme of madness, its suggestion of unfulfilled mission, its weird longing for a "republic" of sorts ("once I though love of nation was enough"), bodings of impending impotence, its rich rhymes and even richer off-rhymes, re-writings of famous lines of poetry (the last line of Rilke's sonnet "Archaic Torso," for example), and, finally, the rich symbolist-inspired ambiguity that occurs with such images as the "sickle... beach" and "sickle moon," not to mention the Mallarméan "beach... like a blank page." What becomes clear, in such a reading of the poem, is that Walcott is looking both for a way out of and a way into language, a desire that is clear in such a line as "Waves tire of horizon and return," as well as the ultimate line, which mimics this flow-back with the recursive "indifference" becoming "a different rage." Walcott clearly wants to "project," and yet is faced with something worse than the indifference of the sea, which is his own failure returning in the

guise of his voice. The problem is that the door that opens the possibility for movement and exchange is not yet visible to him, nor is the political mission that is needing engagement. This points to what Dathorne calls his "ignorance about any such group," for every poet could be said to need a "group," and yet Walcott doesn't seem to know, yet, what it is, and is not, on the other hand, satisfied with solipsism. A distinction, then, can be made between Lowell and Walcott in this stage in his career, which is that Walcott can't be said to have found his escape in language, a way of leaving his self behind in the circuits of communication, for his language shouts his own meager name – "the love of ocean that's self-love" – back at him. That is, Walcott's singular situation in the context of Caribbean culture gives him a group neither in the Caribbean or in Europe, for his vocabulary and sense of cultural allusion has been the pure product of ambition, of a self-ishness, thus leaving him with a language that is the wash-up from the cultures that exist on its far-side of the horizon. Lowell could be said to have had it easier, for he was trying to "escape" the unity and impersonality of an aristocratic past, one with deep roots in Boston culture (not to mention the literary culture of his predecessors James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell), so that his delvings into psychology and confessional modes act as a countering to the forces of tradition and social responsibility (the Beat poets, especially Ginsberg, came in useful for him in this way). Walcott has his own sort of aristocratic past to deal with, but it is fragmented, and he hasn't yet found the metaphor that acts best for him as him, that of the sea, with all of its suggestions of transience and irresolution, not to mention breadth (ambition).

how are you trying this?

Homi Bhabha, in a chapter from *The Location of Culture* called "How Newness Enters the World," makes many suggestions about how the act of naming, dependent upon form for its stage, operates in Walcott's poetics. Bhabha writes:

Nowhere in contemporary postcolonial poetry have I found the concept of the right to signify more profoundly evoked than in Derek Walcott's poem on the colonization of the Caribbean as the possession of a space through the power of naming. Ordinary language develops an auratic authority, an imperial persona; but in a specifically postcolonial performance of reinscription, the focus shifts from the nominalism of imperialism to the emergence of another sign of agency and identity. It signifies the destiny of culture as a site, not simply of subversion and transgression, but one that prefigures a kind of solidarity between ethnicities that meet in the tryst of colonial history.⁷

It is ironic that Bhabha, who quotes extensively from the poem called "Names" that is dedicated to Brathwaite, seems to be describing an aspect of the latter's poetics as much as Walcott's in this paragraph, so that the "solidarities of ethnicities" includes both poets in that "tryst of colonial history." Nonetheless, as Bhabha is aware, Walcott's poem contains aspects that relate as much to the phantasmagoria peculiar to Modernist conceptions of history, a synchronistic melding of present and past, as they do to the interstitial ambiguities and meetings of postcolonialism. In fact, the engagement with the past by the two poets are worth contrasting, for the "tryst of colonial history" is more riveted, and riveting, in Brathwaite's group poetics than it is in Walcott's static late-Modernist. The first excerpt here is from "Names," the second from Brathwaite's poem "Noom," in which he describes Africans as Western slave-traders saw them:

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 231.

good point

Being men they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of everything to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated and changed them.

Listen, my children, say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,
for no man made them,
their fallen columns greater than Castille,
no man unmade them
except the worm who has no helmet,
but was always the emperor...⁸

*

they knew maize: yes: and yam & cassanova
could fashion aztecs of beads to cover their naked zon.
goes were skilful with muddum & clayfish

they used wood well & pounded their grain into their own
fashioned mortars. were mortal
and worshipped the devil like

henry viii like leo x like francis i like pope joan
of arc like baptists like jesuit priests like ni
collo machiavelli like the niggers they were

they caught alligators to make tooth
charms against the spine
ache. against spear thrust & man

drake
but they didn't know bulls barcelona or bullets
they couldn't claim comfort of clergy

fine

we'll let columbus deal with the matter. he has three ships
that will import them...⁹

The differences between the two approaches are clear: whereas Walcott's engagement with the history of naming is distant, the stroller examining the archaic meanings inscribed in the landscape and the various schisms between,

⁸ Derek Walcott, *The Collected Poems 1948-85* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux), 305-308.

⁹ Kamau Brathwaite, *Middle Passage* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 16.

say, a written dictionary and the one yet to be created, Brathwaite, in the manner of the griot, has occupied the place of the *named* in his poem, and thereby includes his auditors in the hurricane of his re-inscription of the middle passage, the exchange of identity for commercial objectification. This aspect of Brathwaite's poetics will be considered in more detail later, but for now it should be noticed that the *tone* of Walcott's poem seems to conflict with the radical nature of its reinscription of names, especially since he seems to be describing something that occurs in the aural, oral or tribal realm, and yet he is rooted in the private/textual, which is an area in which certain ambiguities invariably exist that are resolved in the performance of a text in public. That is, whereas Walcott's "African acquiesced" somewhere in the dim past of philological history that is made present with its inscription in a crafted free verse poem, Brathwaite, exiled from those corridors, has the ability to *speak* the part of the colonizer, an act that takes presence, and the presence of the past, for granted.

This is a vague distinction, of course, but there is an aspect of Bhabha's description of Walcott's poetics that describe, though do not identify, Walcott's inability to deal with the ambiguities of the whiteness of the page, that empty, static Symbolist space, and with the potential for literary canonization, all of which hides behind his narrativization of the erasure of culture. Bhabha writes that Walcott is not opposing the pedagogy of the imperialist voice so much as "going beyond... such binaries of power" in his poem, but this is a going beyond that, by necessity, troubles the notion of historical agency, whether of poet or text. He writes:

this might need more connecting - its sharp given contrast to the preceding pages.

Walcott's history begins elsewhere. He leads us to that moment of undecidability or unconditionality that constitutes the ambivalence of modernity as it executes its critical judgments, or seeks justification for its social facts. Against the possessive, coercive 'right' of the Western noun, Walcott places a different mode of postcolonial speech; a historical time envisaged in the discourse of the enslaved or the indentured. The undecidability from which Walcott builds his narrative opens up his poem to the historical 'present' which Walter Benjamin describes as a 'present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop'. *For this notion defines the present in which history is being written.* From this discursive space of struggle, the violence of the letter, the terror of the timeless, is negotiated the agency of the goldsmith from Benares, the Benin bronzsmith, the Cantonese stonecutter. It is a collective agency that is, at once, pronomial and postnominalist.¹⁰

C.R. V. ...

Bhabha seems to be describing a sort of synchronic sense of history that, again, finds its predecessors in a writer like Joyce, himself arguably a "postcolonial" figure. He imagines that Walcott is countering modernity's right to name not by re-naming, but by "leading us" to a moment of "undecidability" where such "social facts" cannot find the episteme in which their definitions become clear. In an odd way, Bhabha can be said to be making a "language poet" out of Walcott, for he is far more interested in the agency of language in the writing of *itself* in history beyond the episteme or translational paradigm, and seems to be positing Walcott, with his troubled double-I (described later by Bhabha) as the site of origin for this language – not as a biographical, Caribbean poet, but as an "interstitial" locus. Bhabha's sense of Walcott, however, is slightly disfigured by his lack of attention to Walcott's troubled, deep relationship to mainstream "mainland" writing, such as that of Lowell, for he does not posit that some of his struggle is with his sense of the dead-letter office of the sea. Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," for example, probably plays as much a role in Walcott's unsureness of footing as does his presence in

¹⁰ Bhabha, 232. Italics are Bhabha's.

the interstitial. In this way, while Bhabha sees history brought to a standstill in a text such as Walcott's, others might suggest that history has never started to move, either because of the stasis that is characteristic of Caribbean history, or Walcott's failure to find form and a place in or out of tradition. Consequently, Bhabha doesn't even suggest that the influence of Brathwaite, or the oral tradition itself, provides the backbone to this poem, the grounding of its authority (though corrupted by its bland free-verse poetics), and may make the "present in which history is being *written*" a troubled formulation.

Nonetheless, Bhabha's take on Walcott is very useful for a discussion of *Omeros*, for it is in this poem that he submits, most surely, to the rules of literary culture, while at the same time finding the arena in which the aural plays of language can proliferate, and in which the sea operates not as an enemy or "other" but as the mode, or vessel, of discourse. It would be impossible to discuss the poem in detail here, as it involves many layers of symbolism and many nuances of narrative structure that would take paragraphs to describe. The poem is remarkable, however, for the transparency of the writing, such that small moments of illumination strike the reader, and then depart for possible reengagement later in the text. For example, early in the poem the character Achille carves into his canoe the name, "In God We Troust,"¹¹ a suggestive misspelling that Achille retains ("Leave it! Is God' spelling and mine."), and which is suggestive of the sort of verbal (counter-)terrorism that is characteristic of a the Caliban-nistic poetics of Brathwaite, or even someone like Amiri Baraka. What is interesting, however, is that the boat becomes the site of textual warfare – the "troust" becoming "joust" – again creating a white page out of the beach, a theme that is returned to again in such metaphors as the "asterisks of rain puckering the sand," or the blank, opaque, symbol of the swift:

Then Achille saw the swift
pinned to the orchids, but it was the image of a swift

which Maud had sewn into the silk draping her bier,
and not only the African swift but all the horned island's
birds, bitterns and herons, silently screeching there. (52:2)

*

I followed the sea-swift to both sides of this text;
her hyphen stitched its seam, like the interlocking
basins of a globe in which one half fits the next

into an equator, both shores neatly clicking
into a globe; except that its meridian
was not North and South but East and West. One, the New

World, made exactly like the Old, halves of one brain,
or the beat of both hands rowing that bear the two
vessels of the heart with balance, weight, and design. (58:3)

¹¹ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 8. Further quotes from this poem will be cited by canto number: section number.

The swift is thus something like Mallarmé's swan, a sign that is a sign for the sign, empty in its formality but necessary as the locus of correspondences, or for the creation, by linking, of narratives. Thus, the African swift meets the poetic sign of the swift in the silk draping of Mrs. Plunkett, a representation that nullifies the politics of colonial naming, creating in language only the empty space of communication, but not the uni-directional thrust of submission and re-education. It is for this reason that Walcott seems to be a far less radical poet than Bhabha suggests, for it is not clear whether Walcott sees the avenues of cross-cultural naming a neutral area of indeterminacies, or as the site of linguistic conquest. Is the "New / World made exactly like the old" an ironical statement? One would like to believe so, and yet the "vessel" here, the heart of "balance, weight, and design" is the poem itself, a poem that could be described as, indeed, "neatly clicking," having resolved, as has been suggested, the problematics of Walcott's poetics within it. While this may seem an inter-contradiction, Walcott seems, nonetheless, aware of it, and of how his poem's machinery, with its almost Tennysonian somnolence, threatens to dream every particular in it into annihilation. *Omeros* begins with the lines: "'This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.' / Philoctete smiles, for the tourists, who try taking / his soul with their cameras." The camera reappears later in the poem, but significantly not in the position of photographing individuals so much as text itself:

Its life adjusts to the lenses

of cameras that, perniciously elegiac,
took shots of passing things – Seven Seas and the dog
in the pharmacy's shade, every comic mistake

in spelling, like *In God We Troust* on a pirogue,
BLUE GENES, ARTLANTIC CITY, NO GABBAGE DUMPED HERE.
The village imitated the hotel brochure

with photogenic poverty, with atmosphere.
Those who were "people" lovers also have
a snapshot of Philoctete showing you his shin,

not saying how it was healed... (62:1)

What Walcott does, in this passage, is provide a frame in which the Calibanism takes place, neutralized as it is being communicated. The irony, of course, is that the frame, or the snapshot, is the tercet itself, the sweeping of its textual waves over the lives of the island inhabitants, so that "people" becomes the object in quotes, and the text the concrete presence – Jameson's presentness of postmodern poetics is suggested, here – of these inhabitants. There is a certain element to Walcott's chosen verse form ^{here} ~~in this poem~~ that doesn't exist in "Names" and "Codicil," for the return again to the rhyme every second line, coupled with the invisible false closures of the revolving scheme beneath the spiraling, or centrifugal, motion of the three-line stanzas, creates a sense of the poem's inevitability and progress, such that they reenact the imperial moment of naming, but again with the postmodern disclaimer that text, indeed, is indeterminate.

*to the extent that words and lines
b'm not sure they work
follow*

Despite all of these over-formalities and submissions to the ambiguities of the text, there is a way that the poem does “subvert” its chosen mode. This has to do with the poetics of orality within the alexandrine and stanza, for orality troubles the containment of the form, though it, conversely, needs the *possibility* of regularity to foreground its presence in the variability of the line. His stanza in *Omeros* is, indeed, a postcolonial variation on, for example, the line of Shelley’s “Triumph of Life” (a famous use of this stanza in English), but also bears a resemblance to postmodern practices such as A.R. Ammon’s poetic line in his long poem “Extremes and Moderations,” a line which he calls “variably invariable,” and which has as much to do with the *look* of the stanzas on the page as with their sound (meter and syllable count are entirely discarded). Before contrasting these line-types with Walcott’s, however, it should be pointed out that Walcott was not motivated by purely formal concerns, but rather by the attempt to approximate oral poetics into a regular form. As Brathwaite writes, famously, in *History*, “The hurricane does not roar in pentameters,” and later in the essay:

In order to break down the pentameter, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso. This is a form that I think nearly everyone knows about. It does not employ the iambic pentameter. It employs dactyls. It therefore mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way. It is a model that we are moving naturally towards now. Compare

(IP) To be or not to be, that is the question

(Kaiso) The stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands
Cuba San Domingo
Jamaica Puerto Rico

But not only is there a difference in syllabic or stress pattern, there is an important difference in shape of intonation. In the Shakespear (IP above), the voice travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming movement of the first line, we have a distinct variation. The voice dips and deepens to describe an intervallic pattern.¹²

The line that Brathwaite quotes, from one of his own poems, is indeed a 14-syllable line, and it is not grammatically unlike something that would appear in *Omeros*. What Brathwaite is writing about, here, is how the natural rhythms of the calypso can operate within, but then subvert, the regularities of a line of poetry, but that it is most effective (in English) when it operates in excess of the “natural English poetic line,” the iambic pentameter. Walcott constructs an entire form out of this realization, using its regularity (along with the terza-rima) to secure his vessel, but using the operations of tonality and rhythm to make the vessel itself fluid. That his line is erratic, and may indeed be a “slap in the face of public taste,” becomes clear when it is compared to what Jacques Barzun describes in “An Essay on French Verse” as the ideal neo-classical alexandrine line, one in which “the break (cesura) must come exactly in the middle; that is, each half must make up a complete unit of meaning; the whole line must also be self-contained – no runover.”¹³ Neither of these qualities – the regular caesura, nor the self-contained line – are present in *Omeros*, but there is a rather improvisational quality, and decided looseness, in the tercets that change both rhythm and syntactical style often. The struggle with the form of the alexandrine, and his

¹² Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 18.

¹³ Jacques Barzun, *An Essay on French Poetry for English Readers* (New York, New Directions, 1990), 21.

engagement with French poetics – putting Walcott, indeed, on two Caribbean stages of postcoloniality – along with his engagement with English poetics, become clear when lines from *Omeros* are contrasted with the regularity of the terza-rima pentameter of “Triumph of Life,” and the loose typewriter-based method of “Extremes and Moderations”:

As in that trãnce of wóndrous thóught I láy
This wás the ténour óf my wáking dréam.
Methóught I sáte beside a públic wáy

Thick stréwn with súmmer dúst, and a gréat stréam
Of péople thére was húrrying tó and fró
Númerous as gnáts upón the évening gléam,

All hástening ónward, yét none séemed to knów
Whíther he wént, or whénce he cáme, or why...¹⁴

*

Hurly-burly: taking on whatever is about to get off, up the
slack, ready with prompt-copy for the reiteration, electronic
to inspect the fuzzy-buffoon comeback, picking up the diverse
gravel of mellifluous beauty, the world-replacing world

world-irradiating, lesser than but more outspoken:
constructing the stanza is not in my case exceedingly
difficult, variably invariable, permitting maximum change
within maximum stability, the flow-breaking four-liner, lattice

of the satisfactory fall, grid seepage, currents distracted
to side flow, multiple laterals that at some extreme spill
a shelf, ease back, hit the jolt of the central impulse...¹⁵

*

“O-méros,” she láughed. “Thát’s what we cáll him in Gréek,”
stróking the smáll búst with its bóxer’s bróken nóse,
and I thóught of Séven Séas sítting néar the réek

of drýing fishnets, listening tò the shállows’ nóise.
I said: “Hómer and Vírg are Név Éngland fárners,
and the wínged hórse guárds their gás-stàtion, you’re ríght.”

I félt the fóam hèad wáatching as I stróked an árm, as
córd as its márble, then the shóuldres in wínter líght
in the stúdio áttic. I sáid, “Oméros,”

and Ó was the cónch-shèll’s invocátion, *mér* was
both móther and séa in our Antílleian patóis,
ós, gréy bóne, and the white súrf as it cráshes

¹⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 456.

¹⁵ A.R. Ammons, *Selected Longer Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 53.

and spréads its síbilant cóllar on a láce shóre. (2:3)

Suffice it to say, *Omeros* is a difficult poem to “scan,” for there is little regularity carrying over from one line to the next, and yet much run-on sentence structure. In fact, the very use of speech in the text, with an effective transference of the dramatic patterns, makes the poem difficult to read at moments. Reading Ammons poem is actually easier, since the thrust is mainly iambic with a strong possibility of dactylic movement, and one can read them like prose. For this reason, the excerpt doesn't seem worth scanning, since the lines are so “variably invariable” – a phrase that suggests Williams' “variable foot” – that one is sure no patterns would emerge. While Ammons poem alludes to, and contains examples of, a variety of different poetics, one doesn't hear the intrusion of actual spoken voices, and one sense in his lines, as in Shelley's, the movement of (in Brathwaite's words) “a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end.” Walcott's poem, however, contains as a sub-current the possibility of orality, of variations in timber, and the potential for the dip of the voice in a phrase like “listening to the shallows' noise,” which requires a change of speed. There are some dactyls in the excerpt from Shelley, but they seem to represent lengthened syllables – they could almost be elided – and don't intrude in the same way that they do in Walcott's poem, in which dactyls abound, or alter the tonality of the line. In this manner, Walcott, for all of his submission to the many deconstructive codes of textuality (and of the operations of deconstruction on the textual existence of his islanders), recognizes the room that performative improvisation can play in his poem, though, indeed, he rarely exploits this possibility in his own public readings from *Omeros*, in which he is as monotone as T.S. Eliot.¹⁶ Thus, by taking his poetics to the ultimate point of conventionality, with its reinscription – one might almost suggest “renaming” – of several Western poetics in one handful, he also brings to the forefront the main quality of the oral poetics of his own island, which is their defiant variability in the face of colonization.

its difficulty
to gain any
point based on
a
single
example

Much of Brathwaite's early poetics have already been described through the excerpts from *History*. An additional element, a part which plays no role in Walcott's poetry, is that of the extraneous sound, that which exists outside of the text presentation of the poem. Brathwaite described nation language poetry as “in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning.”¹⁷ Such a formulation is recognizable to readers of, for example, Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, in which he describes how a white jazz saxophonist would prefer to play “softer...cleaner, rounder tones,” and a black player something that would be called “raucous and uncultivated.” “Parker would... literally imitate the human voice with its cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs, while Desmond always insists he is playing an instrument, that it is

¹⁶ Brathwaite writes of Eliot in *History*: “For those who really made the breakthrough, it was Eliot's actual voice – or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council – reading ‘Preludes’, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* – not the texts – which turned us on. In that dry deadpan delivery, the riddims of St. Louis (though we didn't know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy and Klook.” (30-31, footnote)

¹⁷ Brathwaite, *History*, 17.

an artifact separate from himself. Parker did not admit that there was any separation between himself and the agent he had chosen as his means of self-expression.”¹⁸ He later writes:

The point, it seemed, was to spend oneself with as much attention as possible, and also to make the instruments sound as unmusical, or as non-Western, as possible. It was almost as if the blues people were reacting against the softness and “legitimacy” that had crept into black instrumental music with the advent of swing. In a way, this is what had happened, and for this reason, rhythm & blues sat as completely outside the mainstream as earlier blues forms.¹⁹

In this way, Baraka understands the “cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs,” as the site of the engagement, somewhat like the “misspellings” in *Omeros* being the site of warfare on dictionary English, though in that poem, of course, it occurred within the frame of the photo. Nathaniel Mackey’s commentary on this paragraph, in his essay on Baraka’s poetry “The Changing Same,” suggests how noise within the paradigm of “music” operates as the gate through which anger with the dominant order is channeled:

A deliberate affront to the dominant culture’s canons of musicality, “honking” challenges and delegitimizes that culture’s distinction between music and noise, its imposition of hegemonic expectations as to what constitutes acceptable sound. “Honking” strikes a deliberately discordant “note.” Its recourse to what would otherwise be thought of as noise marks the divide between black and white, accenting the dissonant relations within a white-supremacist society, the discrepant rift between racist practices and professed democratic ideals.²⁰

In this last paragraph, one could probably substitute “Euro-centric” for “white supremacist,” and “liberal capitalist” for “democratic” and arrive at something like how Brathwaite’s poetics operate in the global sphere. That is, though it would be unwise to read the Caribbean discourse on poetics in these quotes on African American music and history, there is clearly a way that oral poetics, with its attention to the presence of the poet or griot and their subversion of the primacy of the page – the foundation of theoretical discourse from New Critical to post-structuralist, and the vehicle by which literature is distributed in the world – along with its attention to noise over syntax, works as a defining, perhaps divisive, element in literary culture. *History*, for example, describes an active community of writers and performers that have their work distributed on record album or through live performance, with little dependence on publishing houses, though many of the poems have a life in print (Brathwaite quotes from some of them). Of course, this limits the degree of distribution possible for such poets in, for example, the United States, at least outside of the major urban centers, and it doesn’t permit the sort of international currency that translation affords. Nonetheless, there is a defiance involved in the community-based poetics of the Caribbean, not to mention a sense of loss for those interested in the work, who experience it exclusively in print. The following description offers a window on the experience of the best of this poetry:

¹⁸ Amiri Baraka, *Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), 31.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, “The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka,” in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 29.

²⁰ Mackey, “Changing Same”, 29.

Here, first, is *fundamental nation*, the language of a *kumina* queen, with its *kikongo* base. Again, although there is no question about the beauty and power of Miss Queenie's language and images: she is, after all, priestess, prophet and symbolist: without hearing her (*seeing* her of course completes the experience because then you would know how she uses her eyes, her mouth, her whole face; how her arms encircle and reject; how her fingers can become water or spear); but without hearing her, you would miss the dynamics of the narrative: the blue notes of that voice; its whispers and pauses and repetitions and stutters and eleisons; its high pitch emphases and its low frill trails; and that hoarse quality which I suppose you know from Nina Simone.²¹

This evocative description, involving the tantalizing description of fingers "becoming water or spear," points to the invisible element in Brathwaite's own poetics, described earlier in this essay as "public", "strident" and "from the ranting side of the positive," since the reader of his work as it appears in, say, the New Directions edition of *Middle Passages* is invariably left to create the tonalities and physical reverberations that are only suggested on the page, though the poems be highly crafted, contra-puntal (a pleasure to read simply in terms of syllable resonance), and involved with a rich, troubling vocabulary. However, there is clearly a level of his poetry that is denied the private reader of his work, an element that, as shall be seen, is partially made-up for in his development of the "video-style."

The American poet Nathaniel Mackey, author of "Changing Same" cited earlier, and who has been writing illuminatingly about Brathwaite and other Caribbean writers like Wilson Harris for some time, offers the best survey of the many elements of Brathwaite's poetics leading up to the video-style in his essay "Wringing the Word."²² Mackey describes "the escalation, the movement from landscape to wordscape, language thematized and acted upon" in the long poems *Islands* and *Mother Poem*, as he sees a departure from the "literal / littoral" toward "linguistic play and experimentation" in Brathwaite's poetics, beginning with the use of puns – *chatter / shatter*, *umpire / empire* are two that he notes – and on to several new types of linguistic doubling and shattering that are unique to his poetics. For example, in a manner that represents the fragmentary, "cracked ground" of the topography of the Caribbean identity, Brathwaite engages in some idiosyncratic line breaks in *Mother Poem*, breaks not always marked by the hyphen, that band-aid of sorts that stanches meaning and signs temporary closure, but rather maintains the jagged quality that the breaks create, as if the lines were broken teeth. In the part of the poem that Mackey quotes, the breaks are suggestive: "loco / motive" for instance, which examines a familiar word at its etymological base, and "vi / olet" and "miss / ile," which don't perform any task so neatly. Another break occurs within a neologism, "far / ward," enacting a "version" (turning) of English that is as cultural as it is personal. Mackey continues to discuss how this shattering of language maintains the centrality of language within a "sense of the emergence of an alternative cultural order," and arrives upon the metaphor of the practice of speaking with pebbles in the mouth to improve pronunciation to offer a reading of the appearance of pebbles in Brathwaite's poem:

²¹ Brathwaite, *History*, pg. 43.

²² Nathaniel Mackey, "Wringing the Word," *World Literature Today* (68:4), 733-740.

One of the poems in *Islands* is called "Pebbles," and in "Eating the Dead" he writes "I will return to the pebble." It is in this latter poem that he says his tongue is "heavy with new language," going on immediately, however, to add: "but I cannot give birth speech. // Pebbles surround me." The pebble is a multivalent figure whose meaning cuts more than one way. A figure for the resistance active in the encounter between conflicting orders of speech, the pebble simultaneously signifies promise and impediment. Even in the practice referred to above it functions antithetically, improving speech by impeding speech.

He then goes on to contrast the pebble with a new figuration in Brathwaite's *Sun Poem*, called "stammaments," which "refer to one of the forms of material inscription whereby imperial authority sanctifies itself, statues monumentalizing the agents of colonial rule." In this way Brathwaite's reading of the Caribbean can be said to cross that of Walcott's, for whereas Walcott had "asterisks of rain" to mark the importance of a line in the sand, Brathwaite reads the earth of the Caribbean as punctuated by these tags of conquest. In the section of the poem which begins "But heroes were in books / and few of our fathers were heroes," he considers how "when one of us made the monuments / then it was brass balloons and military music / parades and peacock feathers," and ends the poem with his "version" of language that points to the version *within* perception (or proprioception) as the colonized gaze acts back upon these monuments:

and yet there are those stammaments in stone
that smile

are fat or romanesque, athletic like good traffic
cops

piercing or blind to the world but never look
in like us²³

Mackey's commentary – in which he also reads the word "stamen" in stammament – is again very illuminating: "The statue is symbolic, the pebble is semiotic. In accenting the pebble, Brathwaite counters the apparent solidity, impermeability, and permanence of social relations monumental statuary is meant to reinforce. His insistence upon the pebble is an insistence upon the particles and provisionality, upon the gaps, fissures, and volatility masked by monumental appearance." In a way, the pebbles are where the individual neologisms and unmarked line-breaks reside, for they never settle into system, but are always there to be used when chancing upon them, hence destabilizing not only the norms of standard English, but the very notion of a consistent norm, of a regularity that underlies everyday security.

Brathwaite not only drops hyphens, but even uses other typographical symbols to replace them, examples being "pen/nies" and "jee/sus" from *Mother Poem*. Colons are used perhaps more effectively, simply because they imply a list, so that words like "i:ron" and "us:ed" become their own short sentences. Something that Mackey calls "annagrammatic rearrangement", appears in *Mother Poem*, so that words like "name" become "mean," and then move into the play of "ann, "nam," and "man." The word "godderal" derives from "doggeral" (suggestive of the

²³ Kamau Brathwaite, *Sun Poem* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 62.

line quoted above from *Omeros*: “Is God’ spelling”), and the fantastic “for/nicalia” deriving from “california.” “The phonic and semantic slippages Brathwaite cultivates resonate with reminders of injury and deprivation, wounds which run deep in the social fabric,” Mackey writes, and in this way Brathwaite’s puns, with their immediacy of meaning that, at the same time – because they are the crossing of two vectors, hence wedge-shaped – dig into the reader, are something different than the literary “Joycean” pun, for they want to produce change and create cuts in the fabric, not new weavings that surround with a lulling “monumental” impermeability. Brathwaite coins another term, “skeleton,” that supports this idea of the wedge, though perhaps the hoe would be more fitting in this case, for it is the “ringing of the bones” that will “disinter the dead and recall the injustices they were done.” Mackey quotes the following section from the poem “Cherries”:

she will bend forward with the hoe: *huh*
 and the gravel will answer her: *so*
 she will swing upward with the hoe: *huh*
 and the bones of the plantation will come ringing to meet her: *so*

As even this brief excerpt (rather elegantly) shows, Brathwaite will use the entire arsenal of grammar to create the “skeleton” and the entire palette of his oral – and now defiantly textual – art, as colons and italics come into play, interacting to create a new sort of provisional syntax to express the tonality of this small section of the poem (so that a system can be a pebble, too). “Rooted in social disaffection and critique,” Mackey writes, “‘skeletonality’ submits the ground to a qualitative audit,” the ground being the literal acres of the plantation past and the large swath of language called “English.” Mackey then contrasts the sound of the bone to the sound of the bell – “the cat’olic bell” in *Mother Poem* – and writes that “bone is an alternate bell, an antithetic bell... [T]hrough the figures of bell and bone he offers a thematization of sound which is concomitant with his work’s phonic dislocations.”

The final element of Brathwaite’s poetics that Mackey describes is one familiar to many readers of Caribbean postcolonial theory, and that is the “Calibanism,” a concept which Mackey opens up to include an entire reworking of syntax and grammar to create “a third lexicon”:

Nation-language grammar and syntax do with words and parts of speech what anagrammatic rearrangements do with letters: “an to know that he hads was to walk down de noon / down dat long windin day / to we home.” Inspired by nation-language, Brathwaite increasingly takes grammatic and syntactic liberties with English, as when in *Sun Poem* he writes of the fishermen “walking out of the night down the street ahead of he sun and under the leaves of the seagrape and cordia trees whose flowers were fast fading stars in the touching them softly light.” The adjectival placement of *touching them softly* reorders accepted usage, “the light which was touching them softly.”

D ya

What Mackey is describing here is far different than Walcott’s own usage of nation-language in his poem “The Star-Apple Kingdom” (the poem mentioned by Brathwaite as nation-language in *History*) for again, as in *Omeros*, Walcott seems to figure nation-language as subservient to, or framed by, a dominant European or Anglo-American meter:

I stood like a stone and nothing else move

but the cold sea rippling like galvanize...
I pass me dry neighbor sweeping she yard
as I went downhill, and I nearly said:
"Sweep soft, you witch, 'cause she don't sleep hard,"
but he bitch look at me like I was dead.²⁴

The distinction seems to lie in a difference in music, for there is clearly a similar sort of "liberty," in both cases conveyed in an alternative English derived from the speech of the Caribbean, but whereas Brathwaite's "third lexicon" bulldozes over any sort of normalcy, Walcott's nation-language exists within the "clear, rounded tones" of a formal poetic English. This is not to suggest that Walcott's project is necessarily less "revolutionary" than Brathwaite's, for indeed his poem will strike a different readership, perhaps of an entirely different class and level (or type) of education, so that his variations in English may have the greater currency, as well as make an effect deriving from a communal, oral-based poetics upon the urban, literary poetics typified by the publications of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. However, there is an element of Walcott's usage of nation-language that makes it far less subversive, and less expressive, in direct comparison to Brathwaite's, and this has to do with the framing of the verse itself. Mackey's near-exhaustive discourse on Brathwaite's poetics in "Wringing the Word" ends, in fact, with a consideration of the role that music – or more specifically silence – plays in his poetry:

Silence, as John Cage, Pierre Machery, and others have pointed out, is unacknowledged sound. The Calibanic gesture is one of sounding silence, plumbing sounds which would otherwise not be heard. Brathwaite's thematization of silence is part and parcel of his thematization of the word, for silence is meaning and sound suppressed by a linguistic-cultural regime calling itself "the Word." We find his recourse to the figure of silence accompanied by images of hyperaudition, another aspect of qualitative audit.

The silence that is now a comfortable element of postmodern poetics becomes a space embodied by "the non-being of the African," so that it is the shattering of the frame, or the chattering beyond the quotations marks, that signifies the anger and the being of an absent African past. The oral-base of the poetics of both Walcott and Brathwaite serve as the slippery undercurrent subverting norms of Western print-based poetics, and yet it is clear that Walcott found it necessary to re-construct the machine of this poetics in his own way, falling into the trap of "the Word" – the "swift" is where this engagement occurs – using a sort of theorization of silence to signify this fragile, fragmented grounding of his poetics. In contrast, Brathwaite constantly, though not consistently, disturbs the sense of normalcy with his "pebbles" of momentary innovation, thus creating a space that is defined more by its possibility as it exists outside the systemization of language than by the impossibility of its coherent frame to contain language, and by extension history.

This idea of the non-framing of sound to point to silence becomes, in the video style, with its use of fonts and text-sizes, the pointing to the "white space" outside of the graphemic appearance of text on the page. That this "silence" is bodied by the orality of the poet is clear in a transcription of Linton Kwesi Johnson's "Come wi goh

²⁴ Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 345.

dung deh" in *History*, for the reggae meters and accents, familiar to some extent to listeners of reggae who don't know Johnson's work, are strongly suggested by the variations in capitalization and italics:

night number one was in BRIX/TON:
SOFRANO B sounn sys / tem

was a-beatin out a riddim / wid a *fyah*,
commin down his reggae-reggae *wyah*;

it was a sounn shakin down you spinal col / umn,
a bad music tearin up you *flesh*;
an th' rebels-dem start a-fightin,
th'yout dem jus tunn *wild*.

*

th' song of blades was *soun* / ded
th' bile of oppression was *vom* / ited
an two policemen *woun* / ded

righteous righteous war²⁵

in fact the emphasis in the spoken poem is on the last syllable. (you may want to check article on PMC UKS)

One can see how much of the techniques for textual dislocation through the use of slashes and periods that Mackey describes in "Wringing the Word" were partly based on the difficulty of transcribing oral rhythms accurately to the page. The interesting thing about Caribbean oral poetics, as opposed to, say, the alliterative tradition of Old English (Brathwaite cites *Piers Plowman* in *History* as an example of an art lost beneath the standardized French imports of Chaucer's iambic line), is that Caribbean poetics do not gravitate toward a mnemonic system like the four-beat alliterative line. This is partly because of the distaste for regularity inherent in African oral poetics (as noted by Baraka above), and the postcolonial counter-paradigmatic drive of a communal poetics, but it is possibly also due the fact that Caribbean poetics, like jazz improvisation, is a recorded art as much as performative, engaged in interactions with the technology of sound-recording that are too intricate to puzzle out here. While it would be possible to believe that all oral poetry is based on a pure "oral tradition," the life that the poet's voice has even after death must play some role in the sense of repeatability and variability in the performance, so that history does not eat up every singular expression of a text, swallow last year's rendition, but rather plants it in the construction-line of repeatability, hence regularity and the need, again, to variegate. In any case, both the text and the recording operate as some sort of score or counter-point upon which to base a performance, thus (one speculates) making the use for any sort of mnemonic system, like an alliterating word in a second hemistich, unnecessary. On the other hand, the inadequacy of the printed text is made apparent by the superiority of the recorded voice – as in the case of Johnson – over the manipulations of letter-text in the page transcription, so that a dialectic is created between the page and the voice that is not so much synthesized in Brathwaite's video style, as much as spotlighted.

²⁵ As cited in Brathwaite, *History*, 34-35.

The final poem of Brathwaite's first American-published book, *Middle Passages*, called "Letter Sycora" is addressed to his "mamma," and it seems to contain much of the "theory" of the video style. It is the most explosive-looking text in the book, for while the earlier poems use such techniques as different fonts (in one case) for each *letter* within a word (almost in the manner of a ransom note) to suggest the volcanic orality beneath them, along with center justification and right-margin justification, they all appear to be printed mainly in about a 12-point font, while "Letter Sycora" appears to be at least about 22-point. The play with graphics and justification gives the book a strangely insubstantial feel, as if his first trilogy *The Arrivants*, simply because of the left-justification, were the "substantial" material. The poem begins:

Dear mamma

*i writin yu dis letter/wha?
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists!*

well not quite!

*i mean de same way dem tief/in gun
power from sheena & taken we blues &*

gone

...

say

wha? get on wid de same ole

story?

okay

okay

okay

okay

*if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle*

No mamma!

*is not one a dem pensive tings like ibm or
bang & ovid
nor anything glori. ous like dat!*

*but is one a de bess tings since cicero o
kay?*

*it have key
board &*

evva

*- you should
check out
LKT's Sony's
letter for comparison
(the text / distillated
in class)*

ting. like dat ole
remington yu have pun top de war. drobe up
there ketchin duss

only wid dis one yu na ave to benn dung over to out out
de mistake dem wid white liquid paper. de papyrus
ribbid & soff

before it drei up flakey &
crink. like yu was paintin yu house

um doan even nuse no paper yu does have to roll
pun dat blk rollin pin like yu rollin dough pun a flatten

& does go off ping pun de right hann wing a de paper
when de clatterin words start to fly & fling like a ping. wing²⁶

I like how like
this - despite
their priority

The politics of textual approximation are inscribed in these lines, as there is no clear way to read the font size of the “original,” but rather one must instinctually feel the significance of the font when reproducing it. There are many suggestive puns in the text, for instance “bang” from “Wang” and “ovid” coming from “Olivedi”(?), along with the “bess,” suggesting Bessie Smith, “the empress of our shattered blues” in another poem in the collection, “Duke,” here contrasted with the rhetorician Cicero. He assures “mamma” that he did not “jine the mercantilists,” which suggests his own discomfort with the technology, which he knows is an extension of colonial homogenization, the potential integration of himself and his writing into the “tribal space” of MacLuhan, and it is this fear of disappearance into the “norm” – already an element of his poetics – that he takes on directly. The big bold “wha?” at the head of the poem signals his awareness of the “Emperor’s New Clothes” as he struts onto the stage of print-technology, offering both apology and humorous disclaimer for what he knows must be an unusual sight. Other puns suggest an even deeper engagement; for example, the “pensive tings” suggest that he is aware that his attention to the computer drives him into a solitary engagement that could bring him into the realm of the individualist Romantic, working his tricks for his own delectation, and hence away from the public. In other words, he suggests a fear with of visual dialectic of the poet/page, one that will become recursive and alienating, not to mention strange. However, it is clear that he is not sacrificing this public engagement, but rather enhancing it, with his use of lay-out, especially when one considers the relation of such uses of font and letter-size in early Modernist manifesto-like works such as the English publication *Blast*, or the “liberated words” of Marinetti’s concrete poems. Finally, he offers something like a mythical history of print technology that is, at the same time, a domestic history, starting (or ending) with papyrus and moving to typewriter technology that involves “benn ung over to out out / de mistake dem wid white liquid paper,” the double “out” signifying, perhaps, the double erasure, or the neo-colonizing masking, of [Caribbean culture under the imposition of computer technology.] In fact, the ambivalence that Brathwaite feels toward computer technology is clear in the final metaphor, in which he describes how the “words start to fly & fling like a ping. wing.” Penguins, of course, don’t fly, and yet the metaphor is apt,

more accurately
fictitious
capital

²⁶ *Middle Passages*, 95-98.

since the boldness of the black text against the white page signifies his very discomfort with being a visible – now ever more so – Caribbean poet in what must seem a white Antarctic of print-based letters.

What is clear, in even this hasty reading of the poem, is that Brathwaite, a communal poet, is not going to sacrifice the specificity of his situation to the cyborg-like march of technological culture, but is rather going to use it to elaborate his oral poetics even further. As Thomas A. Vogler writes in his essay “‘Into / The Very Silence’: Reading Susan Howe,” the last section of which is about Brathwaite: “He do the police, and everybody else, in different voices, different videos,”²⁷ thus pointing to the way Brathwaite finds plurality where others find homogenization. The very use of bold face, for instance, with the words “No mamma!” represent a sort of explosion of breath that one is forced to imagine, the performance of the shifting rhythms conveyed not through meter but through size. Brathwaite, in an interview, links his oral poetics to his video-style in a way that points to an even deeper historical context:

I think that oral traditions do have a very strong visual aspect. In the African tradition, they use sculpture. Really, what I’m trying to do is create word-sculptures on the page, but word-song for the ear.

That happens in Africa, if you look through the imperishable nature of African art, it is there in the Griot, that is the man who does the singing and the history, orally. It is also there in the sculpture. It is a very intimate relationship between what he has to say and what he carves. There is always a visual underpinning. You think of Egypt and the Sphinx and the pyramids and all that. It is a strong oral tradition, which is underpinned by this remarkable visual monument. The monument itself is an abstraction, like a Miles Davis trumpet solo. It is a skeleton of the song.²⁸

Music, sculpture and poetry alternate in Brathwaite’s mind, such that the abstract quality of his visual presentation of his poems become like a trumpet solo, like music, and the carving of wood sculpture becomes his own digging – suggesting the “wedge” again – into language. This also becomes a digging into the public sphere, for as Graeme Rigby writes in “Publishing Brathwaite: Adventures in the Video Style,” the cultural relevance of the poet’s break into computer/print-culture has vertical, non-historical resonances with such media as the newspaper. Rigby was planning on publishing a poem of Brathwaite’s as an insert in an arts paper called *The Page*, and he writes, “In a newspaper format and with such a diverse readership, visual impact is crucial, and his “video style” offered the chance to experiment with territory, to create new illuminations for a cultural democracy with texts that were a genuine cause for wonder.”²⁹ As he soon discovered, though, there were some unforeseen legalities that hindered the appearance of this “heretic” (Rigby’s term) into what he had already posited, in the essay, as the most open communication medium (in contrast to film, radio, and television, which are expensive), that “the main body of [“I Cristobal Colon”] was in a face to which we had no access, and even if we had, our host newspaper would not have had copyright permission over the software.” What he ended up doing was an elaborate “cut and paste” job, thus literally transporting the sculpture of the text from one location to another. The ironies as they resonate in

²⁷ Thomas A. Vogler, “‘Into / The Very Silence’: Reading Susan Howe,” *Hambone* 12 (Fall 1995), 248.

²⁸ Cited in “Publishing Brathwaite: Adventures in the Video Style,” by Graeme Rigby, *World Literature Today* (68:4), 708-709.

²⁹ Rigby, 709.

Brathwaite's poetics are many, and yet the main points of resistance between the work and the "norms" possible with even the most comprehensive technologies are still further aggravated, as they become the loci for the destabilization of print-culture.

This surety of position is important for an understanding of the last poem to be considered in the present essay, "Dream Haiti," a smorgasbord of print and oral techniques that was published in a recent issue of Mackey's journal *Hambone*. The poem is filled with historical and cultural allusions that cannot be puzzled through here; in many ways, however, it must be noted that this poem is as jammed with languages, resonances and allusions in its 55 pages than the 99-canto *Omeros*, significant only because the "video style" offers a way of making transitions between ideas with the turning of a page (or changing of a font) in a way that is unavailable to the singular, though variable, "sea-voice" of the formal epic. In fact, the entire attitude taken to the sea offers a way to contrast the two works, since "Dream Haiti" has as its primary locus a ship that is being tailed by a US Coast Guard Cutter, a hunt that signifies (to quote from the first pages of the poem) "the seemingly endless purgatorial experience of black people." The sea, like the page, again becomes the sight of cultural detritus, but this time the "detritus" is Haitian refugees, whom he later identifies as all "artists and strangers," including himself among the group. Since the poem is, indeed, a dream, this sight becomes the Caribbean itself, and this detritus eventually accumulates to become the entire history of the plight of black people on the islands, a history that includes as a natural component the image of the US Coast Guard Cutter. He writes, "i mean we was not goin anywhere although the ship is movin i suppose & the sea is also movin impeccable & so are the waves & yet in my dream it is juss like on board anyship anytime & anytide," this last neologism suggesting that the sea is still determined by the land and its cycle of tides, as the dream is by the cycle of day. Brathwaite's directness of address – his ability to imagine, even when involved in creating a visual text, that he is speaking to "you" – is apparent in the various "you know what i means" throughout the work. What the video style also gives, however, is the experience of the identification of the Coast Guard ship via the text on its side (horizontal lines signify page-breaks):

& you swimmin there in the dark or the
water & throwin them screamin to som-
body else out there w/ a splashed-up
face & hann like the flash of a fish or
the feather of a sunlit bird tryin to
dream or drown & there was suppose to
be some kind of rape or chord of music
or a anthology call

we need
more
of
font here

life-

line

*there iere had senn me from the land of
flamngoes*

*that your gripp in yr hanns when you toss
its little white sweetie ove the side w/
the legend*

US
COAST
GUARD
GUTTER

**stencil & chill upon its both
sides in black on wjat
i suppose was suppose to be
like top & bottom**

US
COAST

GUARD
GUTTER

& then

RETTUG
DRAUG
TSAOC
SU

w/i suppose the

US COAST GUARD
GUTTER

part for yr head & the

RETTUG DRAUG

TSAOC SU

for yr foot or coffin³⁰

What the video-style enables, in this case, is the very enactment of the “gutter” breaking in on the lethargy of the dream, a dream that, nonetheless, takes as its base the very in-betweenness of the transition from one “culture” to the next in the search for “wruk.” A sort of hyper-Calibaning, in contrast to the “In God We Troust” of Walcott’s poem, occurs when Brathwaite offers the mirror image of the stencil “for yr foot or coffin,” alluding, perhaps, to the film *The Shining*, in which the words “red rum” were uttered repeatedly by two little ghost girls, signifying their mirror double, “murder.” There seems to be a multi-language pun beneath it, as the Spanish “su” suggests, along with the German word “Rettung” (“salvation”) and “re-tug” implied in “RETTUG.” There is, further, a sort of

³⁰Kamau Brathwaite, “Dream Haiti,” *Hambone 12* (Fall 1995), 123-185.

gurgling evocation of the word "drowning" in "druag," a meaning supported by the reversal, as it seems to resemble what the words might look like upside down, though of course they wouldn't appear that way. A similar reversal happens later in the poem, when the words "SEA / COME / NO / FATHER" are reinscribed as "REHTAF / ON / EMOC / EASE," the final word adding a vowel where there was not one in "SEA." In this way Brathwaite takes verbal dislocation right into the place where the blockade – here conveyed through language – confronts the shipful of "artists and strangers," telling the story with both a directness and a complexity that is at once musical (some of these passages are his most evocative) and sculptural. The poem then moves on into more elaborate confrontations with history and its "endless purgatorial passages," and with its eerie meeting of the stasis of a Stygian transition with violence of an annihilating history, the poem begins to resemble Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*.

Though it is clear that Walcott and Brathwaite approach their poetics in very different ways, they do meet on the common ground of the "stammament," Walcott attempting in his own way to construct one – to build a vessel that floats him and his culture into canonicity, though away from direct political engagement – and Brathwaite opting for the variability of the pebble, the third lexicon, and the "noise" – which the excesses of the font and sizes emulate – finding a need for difference as he finds the system encroaching like a U.S. Coast Guard Cutter. This isn't to put Walcott in the place of the neo-colonial, rather the contrary, for as Brathwaite's coinage points out, it is the stammament that is one of the major sites of exchange between cultures, a locus of conflict, and there is no doubt that *Omeros* is a major literary event, the first real engagement of an oral Caribbean-based poetics with the large universalizing form of the epic poem, one that does not describe the "heroic" founding of a culture but which, nonetheless, finds and elaborates the stitching that provides a frame, or is the metaphor, for a telling of its history. He sacrifices, however, an aspect of direct engagement that is open to Brathwaite, though as Dathorne suggests, the possibility of this engagement was one that Brathwaite, the "expert joiner," had to conjure for himself. Walcott, in other words, becomes a bit of the postmodern, or the "interstitial" postcolonial, while Brathwaite finds an anchoring in a smaller, representable community, and thereby maintains his role of the griot. As Brathwaite himself has moved onto a larger global stage, and has come to depend on print-culture for his transportation, he has just as quickly discovered new ways to subvert, and to tell his stories with as much directness and communality. One can say that Walcott found a way of projecting his voice – of throwing it out so that it does not return with his own inadequacies – in the tight formal exercise of his cantos and in his conquest over tradition, not to mention his re-naming of the epic as a Caribbean, calypso-inspired form, while Brathwaite found it in the very concretization, de-stabilizing and de-traditionalizing, of his poetics, emphasizing both the singularity and the communality of his expression in their determined effort to both grab attention and to manipulate the text's silent, clamorous performance.

I have you got to grips with this observation?

There is much to like here Brian. You are a keen and cogent reader of the poetic line. In general, I agree with the contrasts you elaborate between Brathwaite and Walcott, but one wonders whether the conversation might be more polemical. Part of Brathwaite's poetics is his challenge to the

comfortable categories of poetry and criticism of poetry.
(it is interesting that the marginalization of poetry in
the public space in the West came with its culmination
in the colonial imaginary - "It is territory, or SPA or
as Olson speaks it, that explodes its formalism")

There is an engagement with the political in both sites
that is the ideal space of Walcott's poetics. Why?
Perhaps your essay here only begins to address this
disjunction. Certainly Walcott plays the ~~gentlemanly~~
game - moving with the epic still has its
epicenter. But perhaps an alternative imaging is at stake
- one in which both, from different perspectives and
modalities, address a crisis in identificatory politics. Yes,
the hurricane does not roar in pentameter - but does
authentically roar in hurricane? Here a large argument
about Antillean poetics is at stake.

A -

I think we should talk about your poem separately
- I found it enjoyably difficult which probably means I should
be reading it more closely. Drop me a line at EFSBB
at CONVERM.CONVERM