READERLY ENGAGEMENTS:

POETIC PROCESSES IN T.S. ELIOT, GERTRUDE STEIN, AND JOHN ASHBERY

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly research on 20th century experimental poetry has highlighted the characteristic fusion of aesthetic difficulty and indeterminacy embedded in these texts, attending to the disruptive experiences of reading this literature. This research contributes to developing a critical vocabulary of readerly engagements as embodied affordances in three experimental poems: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), and John Ashbery's *Three Poems* (1972). Thus, I aim to re-cover the freeing potential of poetic reception, reified through three interrelated, but distinct, critical apparatuses for the readers: ingestion, digestion, and exhaustion. Far from acts of dissection, these experimental poems allow for re-generative possibilities, revealing the importance of the reader's role as they find themselves generated in the interstices of the texts. In dialogue with discussions around critical methods, this research employs experiential close reading, an approach that at once considers the poem's disjunctures alongside its potential proximity between reader and text.

Charting specific meaning orientations in the poems, I trace three specific sites of disorientation, cultivated between readers and the texts, in the poems' anti-logocentrism, disclosure, and openness. By shifting critical focus to the primacy of the reader, these poems delineate the possibility for soliciting a readerly re-generation. Compelled by the desire to articulate a critical vocabulary of these readerly engagements, I reify the affordances of reading experimental poetry through interrelated, but distinct, processes of digestion, ingestion, and exhaustion.

This research makes a case for the importance of the reader's role in poetry, interrogating their engagements in reading experimental literature. In developing a vocabulary of reading poetry, I aim to re-cover the act of reading as a creative act, generating new readerly practices, as readers find themselves engaging in the interstices of the texts. In so doing, I

highlight experimental poetry's freeing potential for reading, which is far from a methodical dissection, but an active digestion.

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Key Texts

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TB	*Tender Buttons* (Gertrude Stein, 1914)
TP	*Three Poems* (John Ashbery, 1972)

Readerly Engagements:

Poetic Processes in T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery

INTRODUCTION

'WE HAD THE EXPERIENCE BUT MISSED THE MEANING.' – T.S. ELIOT, 'THE DRY SALVAGES'[1]

'I BECAME THEN LIKE THE OTHERS WHO READ IT. ONE DOES, YOU KNOW, EXCEPTING THAT WHEN I REREAD IT MYSELF I LOST MYSELF IN IT AGAIN. THEN I SAID TO MYSELF THIS TIME IT WILL BE DIFFERENT AND I BEGAN. I DID NOT BEGIN AGAIN I JUST BEGAN.' – GERTRUDE STEIN[2]

'BUT IF YOU'RE LIKING [POETRY] ENOUGH TO PICK IT UP AND GO AHEAD, MAYBE ONE THING WOULD BE TO FORGET YOURSELF WHILE YOU'RE READING IT AND NOT THINK THAT IN ORDER TO APPRECIATE IT YOU HAVE TO HAVE READ A BOOK ABOUT IT.' – JOHN ASHBERY ON READING POETRY[3]

Beginning with three quotations, one from each of the three poets covered in this dissertation, which roughly represent the direction of each of my three chapters, I started this thesis with

[1] 'Four Quartets', in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 195.

[2] 'Composition as Explanation (1926)', repr. in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 409.

[3] Quoted in Larissa MacFarquhar, 'Present Waking Life: Becoming John Ashbery', *The New Yorker* (October, 2005) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/07/present-waking-life> [accessed 18 August 2023].

the objective of understanding how we engage with experimental poetry that is 'difficult' to understand. Against the backdrop of dwindling numbers of humanities students and reduced funding for the arts in Anglophone universities, *The New Yorker* published an editorial entitled 'Has Academia Ruined Literary Criticism?' in January 2023. In it, scholar Merve Emre argues for the importance of a new literary criticism: 'the profession of literary study', Emre writes, 'as it is currently institutionalised in the university may not be the place from which the journey toward a future criticism begins'.[4] Here, Emre's words recall Virginia Woolf's lament for the general state of literature, written coincidentally exactly 100 years ago: 'Men of taste and learning and ability are forever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead. But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones.'[5] Woolf's phrase here, a 'desiccation of the living tissues of literature' into a skeletal network, indicates a sense of deadness in reading and in literary analysis, one that seems to me to have affinities with the New Criticism, similarly offering an exegesis informed by disinterest and objectivity – critical dispositions that continue to inform literary criticism at present.

The overall enterprise of this research is to re-cover the sense in which literary study and reading itself are acts of re-generation, with the belief that consideration of the experiential response of reading poetry encourages a readerly relationality that, far from desiccated and dead, is instead active and alive. If the aim of re-covering the freeing potential of reading experimental poetry sounds too ambitious, I hope to advance a certain vocabulary

[4] 'Has Academia Ruined Literary Criticism?', *The New Yorker* (January, 2023) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/23/has-academia-ruined-literary-criticism-professing-criticism-john-guillory> [accessed 14 March 2023].

[5] From 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' (1923), quoted in Mark Goldman, 'Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader', *PMLA*, 80.3 (1965) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/461275?seq=9> [accessed 23 October 2023] p. 283.

and style to the readerly approaches this research advocates for, using physiological processes as critical apparatuses that reify how readers take in this experimental poetry.

Referring back to the quotations that began this introduction, the first quotation by T.S. Eliot points to meaning being irrevocably deferred, alluding to the difficulty of the relationship between experience and meaning in modernist literature. Clearly, it would be reductive to assume that the experience of reading Eliot as a modernist writer is similar to the experience of reading Victorian or Edwardian writers. As Harold Schweizer intimates, 19th century writers 'relied on language as a transparent medium for experience' in mimetic representation,[6] compared to the 20th century's focus on an ekphrastic, fragmented experience, reflecting modern existence amidst shifting geographical boundaries, the outbreak of wars, and the rise of media and mass consumption. For the 20th century reader, a poem, Schweizer continues, 'exists to testify to a number of linguistic, social, and political predicaments, exposing language as problematically related to truth and reality'.[7] More saliently for this research, we might ask how might a 21st century contemporary reader re-construct experience as fundamentally entangled with meaning?

As such, I aim to make a case for experimental poetry as a space that at once disrupts and yet powerfully opens up cracks for readers to be re-generated in experimental texts through their openness, an invitation for readers into these works. This research focusses on three seminal modernist and postmodern texts: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), and John Ashbery's *Three Poems* (1972). Hailed as poems

[6] 'Literary Theory and Poetry' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century,* ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 398.

[7] Ibid., pp. 397-398.

that have been variously described as 'peculiar esotericism',[8] 'a nightmare journey',[9] and a 'most challenging and innovative book'[10] respectively, I intend to examine the pluridimensional and multifarious nature of these 'difficult' compositions, elucidating how these three texts liberate the readers' gaze from established methods of reading poetry, by focusing on the primacy of the readerly experience. In doing so, I shall suggest that Eliot's, Stein's, and Ashbery's poetry can be read in a different orientation that situates the reader differently in each text. As a re-generative act, readers are, in my view, actively reconstructed in the poems through a continual process of engagement.

Each of the three texts chosen represent poems that are conducive to the affordance of readerly re-generation; while interrelated, each poem carries quite different valences. *The Waste Land* is the most widely read and studied of the three as the quintessential 20th century modernist poem, with Eliot's authority as a critic most explicitly delineating to readers ways of engaging with and unravelling the meanings of the text.[11] *Tender Buttons*, with Stein as the only female author studied here, has been analysed in light of elaborating an anti-patriarchal

[8] Gorham Munson, 'The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot', *Manchester Guardian* (October, 1923), repr. in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 157.

[9] 'Public Gets Peep at Extreme Cubist Literature in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 73.133 (June, 1914) <https://archive.org/details/per_chicago-daily-tribune_1914-06-05_73_133/page/n13/mode/2up> [accessed 12 August 2023] p. 15.

[10] Drew Milne, 'The Diamond Light of Pure Speculation: John Ashbery's *Three Poems*', *PN Review*, 44.3 (February, 2018) <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10123> [accessed 28 July 2023].

[11] Although it has been noted that Eliot's own critical writings contradict themselves throughout the course of Eliot's life, especially regarding *The Waste Land*'s notes. See Anthony Cuda, 'Coda: *The Waste Land*'s Afterlife: The Poem's Reception in the Twentieth Century and Beyond' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, ed. by Gabrielle McIntire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 194-210, for a concise account of critical attitudes, including Eliot's own revelations, that remain relevant to contemporary interpretations.

vision of language, as Lisa Ruddick and Marianne DeKoven maintain.[12] *Three Poems*, finally, emerges out of a different cultural milieu, amidst the mass consumption of postmodernism, in the 1970s. As this research shall argue, the multiple temporalities of the experimental poetry followed here explore all three as similar, but not identical, in soliciting an intimacy between the readers and the texts.

Insofar as these three works present different ends and approaches in this view, I feel it worthwhile to clarify why this investigation uses the term 'experimental'. I do not wish to overstate the formalist techniques by which these texts achieve their effects and which, moreover, are not unique to the discussed poems. Such techniques common to, but not exclusively used by, modernist works, in particular, include multiple points of view, a stream of consciousness, use of collage, and display of raw medium (language and sound, for instance). There is nevertheless, I would argue, an irreducible plurality of meaning inscribed onto these three compositions. For this reason, I use the term 'experimental', rather than 'modernist' or postmodern', not to single out these texts as formally innovative and unprecedented avant la lettre,[13] but rather to highlight the degree of radicalism in reshaping the conventions of language and, germane to this essay, the readerly experience. In comparing these three works alongside each other, I attempt to uncover these experimental works as disruptive to conventional modes of signification. As the quotation from Stein that

[12] See Lisa Ruddick, Excerpt of '*Tender Buttons:* Woman and Gnosis', in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/255/monograph/chapter/2157336/pdf> [accessed 12 October 2023]; and Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) <https://archive.org/details/differentlanguag0000deko> [accessed 23 October 2022].

[13] In point of fact, there were several long modernist poems that preceded *The Waste Land*, including Ford Madox Ford's 'Antwerp' (1915) and Hope Mirrlees' 'Paris: A Poem' (1919); the former, Eliot read, and the latter in many ways, with its fragmented voices and extensive notes by the author, anticipates Eliot's work. See Oliver Tearle, *The Great War, the Waste Land and the Modernist Long Poem* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) for a genealogy of modernist long poems.

began this introduction alluded to, this research endeavours to illustrate this process of 'beginning' these poems in order to re-cover their possibilities for readerly engagements.

The critical approach of this dissertation will encompass close readings, suggesting a methodological affinity with the New Criticism and, to a lesser extent, Poststructuralism. Perpetuating the ideology of the poem as an organic, non-referential object where meaning can be wrung out via an emphasis on 'objective' analysis,[14] the New Criticism has operated on the base of simultaneous proximity and paradoxically, distance and objectivity to the text. While operating much differently, Poststructuralism nonetheless likewise emphasised the textual object in its attempts to deconstruct and destabilise it. Construed then as an extended form of the New Criticism, Poststructuralism can be viewed as merely replacing the closed text with an infinite labyrinth of meanings. Yet given that this research attends to subjective dispositions and the readerly affective experience of these texts, to what extent can close reading uncover these apparatuses in the literature itself? This question is not as problematic as it might appear; the close readings covered in this research shall draw attention to the text's implicit participation in or resistance to particular textual situations. The sense emerging here is that experimental poetry opens up the cracks of the text's linguistic surface, inviting readers to inhabit and to re-generate themselves by so doing. Thus, any experiential account for a dialogic relationality, rather than a monologic singularity, must use close reading to disclose the texts' freeing potentiality. Neither taking the text as a privileged and closed object of study, nor focussing solely on dismantling the text's linguistic surfaces, this research is situated in understanding poetry speaking not only of the poet's experiences but *for* the reader's.

[14] Schweizer, p. 397.

In arguing for the necessity of a close reading of experimental poetry attendant to the reader's affective response and engagement, my methodology more precisely consists of *experiential close readings*. Used by Doug Battersby in his book, *Troubling Late Modernism*, I extend this term, not to ethically consider the reader's implicit participation in particular linguistic situations, as Battersby does,[15] but rather to consider how readers actively engage with the text. Giving careful consideration to the reader, I replace here the poetics of disinterest and objectivity, so advocated by New Critics in textually-focused analyses, with a poetics of communal intimacy. An act of welcoming,[16] my suggestion here is that experimental poetry encourages a movement into the formerly closed text via the reader's subjective affect and experience.

The poetry studied here at once disrupts and yet powerfully opens up a space for readers to be re-generated in the texts. In offering this diachronic reading, I aim to chart experimental poetry's disruptive nature. Such an approach is necessary to capture the reticulation of disorientation, difficulty, and the readerly relationship. In so doing, I hope to shift critical attention from the formalist and innovative techniques of these poems, to the importance of the reader's role and their engagement, as they find themselves re-generated in the interstices of the texts. Further, I aim to reconsider close reading as an embodied affordance, where we might rethink of how reading poetry functions as acts akin to physiological processes.

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[15] 'Introduction: Modernist Liabilities', in *Troubling Late Modernism: Ethics, Feeling, and the Novel Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192863331.003.0001> [accessed 15 February 2023] pp. 12-13.

[16] 'This prologue is not a poem / It is an act of welcome' – See David Herd, Sample of *Walk Song* (n.d.) <https://irp.cdn-website.com/12e499a6/files/uploaded/david-herd-walk-song-sampler.pdf> [accessed 29 November 2022].

It is my conviction that relocating these compositions in the complex cultural climate comprising a focus on experiential approaches to reading will enable us to reclaim the invisible components and the gaps of meaning[17] obscured by the experimental difficulty of the writings. In other words, this research is an attempt at looking at these experimental compositions as both an experience of multitudinous pluralities and a glimpse of how readers engage with poetry. Exposing the possibilities of how we may take in obscure, difficult, or disruptive poetry, closely reading these compositions allows us to pursue a critical vocabulary to define how we digest, ingest, and exhaust these readerly affordances in acts of reading. In opening ourselves as readers through the cracks and spaces of these poems, I thus reconsider the readerly engagements and processes *The Waste Land*, *Tender Buttons*, and *Three Poems* through the reification of physiological processes, suggesting the potential for re-generation and re-constitution in dialogue with the texts.

It follows that in considering readerly engagements in 20th century experimental poetry, this research does not seek to recapitulate philosophical and phenomenological approaches that have defined these modes of reading, but rather to gesture to what they may be for a 21st century contemporary reader. In Chapter One, I outline some theoretical underpinnings that inform my research around the difficulty of reading experimental poetry. In it, I trace three specific meaning orientations that sit between the reader and poet in the texts: anti-logocentrism in *The Waste Land*, disclosure in *Tender Buttons*, and openness in *Three Poems.* In Chapter Two, the focus shifts to the primacy of the reader in their role, where I situate each of the three poems in the possibilities for the reader to be re-activated

[17] 'One text is potentially capable of several different realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the *gaps [of meaning]* in his own way.' Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3.2 (Winter, 1972) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468316> [accessed 29 October 2022] p. 285.

and re-generated in the poems. Methodologically, this chapter employs ‘experiential close reading’, as well as ‘distant reading’, in order to study and delineate the different modes of relationality solicited for the reader. Finally, Chapter Three is an attempt at developing a critical vocabulary of what kinds of readerly engagements these poems articulate. Examined through the means of physiological processes – digestion, ingestion, and exhaustion/exhaustiveness – I posit that experimental poetry offers the possibility of reconceiving how to engage with poetry, not as a process of methodical dissection, but as one of re-generative digestion.

CHAPTER 1: ANTI-LOGOCENTRISM, DISCLOSURE, OPENNESS: THREE APPROACHES TO READING

> 'The critic […] establishes and argues *distance* in order to *penetrate* [the text…] The reader strives for *fusion* with the text via internalisation.' – George Steiner[18]

Anglo-American poetry of the early 20th century locates itself in a complex cultural climate marked by what academic Marjorie Perloff terms 'indeterminacy', implying a shifting relationship between the signifier and signified. As Perloff observed, modernist poetry is typified by

> the undermining of precisely this relationship [between signifier and signified] that characterises the poetry of Rimbaud and his heirs. For what happens […] is that the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not. This is the "undecidability" of the text. [19]

This concept of 'undecidability' as the key to uncover Anglo-American modernist poetry strikes me; Perloff is associating Eliot's High Modernism as a poetics indebted to Baudelaire, and Stein and Ashbery with a poetics of 'undecidability'. In comparing Eliot along Stein and Ashbery, Perloff's strain of argument is that *The Waste Land* displays a 'perfectly coherent symbolic structure', despite its dislocations and its multifarious references. Stein and Ashbery meanwhile employ, in her view, a poetics of indeterminacy, leaving images unanchored and suspended in the reader's mind. While Perloff's sense of 'undecidability' strikes me as right in relation to Stein and Ashbery, the term 'undecidability' indicates a valorisation of the author's intentions as the 'deciding' factor of the text's associations,

[18] George Steiner, '"Critic/Reader"', *New Literary History* 10.3 (Spring, 1979) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468921> [accessed 13 March 2023], pp. 423-424, 443.

[19] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 17-18.

however. In this chapter, I would like to shift critical attention to the possibility of an anti-logocentric orientation of meaning in *The Waste Land,* alongside *Tender Buttons* and *Three Poems.* It would therefore be prudent to turn to George Steiner's quotations beginning this chapter as an articulation of the different, but interrelated, orientations these texts produce.

George Steiner says that the 'critic' and 'reader' are 'not only different but antithetical': the reader *experiences* the text while the critic *takes possession* of it.[20] This dialectic between experience and possession accounts for the direction of this chapter. Whereas Eliot, I would argue, aims for *possession* of language, *The Waste Land* can be read as a text that allows for the possibility of dismantling logocentrism. In contrast, Stein aims for *liberation* from language, with *Tender Buttons* allowing for a disclosure of objects. Finally, Ashbery aims for a readerly *experience* of the text, creating an openness in *Three Poems*. In developing a critical vocabulary for these meaning orientations, the main focus on this chapter will cover these concepts of anti-logocentrism, disclosure, and openness, in *The Waste Land*, *Tender Buttons*, and *Three Poems*, respectively. While these terms certainly can inflect and mutually interpenetrate each other, these are ultimately different experiential ways of interacting with a text. It should be noted, however, that there is a difficulty of these interrelated thoughts particularly in *Three Poems*, since much of the book resists structure; however, my analysis of *Three Poems* will centre on the process of openness as a connected, but differentiated term from anti-logocentrism and disclosure, in Ashbery, illustrating the value of using the poem's difficulty as a way into understanding it.

In comparing these works alongside each other, I attempt to look at these experimental texts as disruptive to conventional modes of signification. Such modes of

[20] Steiner, '"Critic/Reader"'.

signification have a 'power' rooted in what Jacques Derrida terms the 'transcendental signified' of logos:[21]

> Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent […] or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general.
>
> […]
>
> That what *opens* meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.[22]

Suggesting that the openings of meaning and language are something independent of the 'signifieds' that abound in the text, Derrida's analysis is useful here as a critique of logocentrism – that is, the ascendancy of what the signified has come to possess as inherent meaning over the materiality of language in its signifiers. The poems, in my view, thus function as 'openings' between the interiority of meaning and the exteriority of language itself. As it arises, Derrida's 'transcendental signified' refers to something anterior to words, language, and particularly all writing;[23] that is, a fundamental and essentialist order of logos that would place an end to the inferior referencing of sign-to-sign signification – in other words, a privileging of the signified (meaning) over the signifier (language). Pertinent to this research is the notion that the poems studied here offer an alternative space to this privileging of meaning over language, with the sense that readers are able to develop a different

[21] Indeed, the 'power' rooted in conventional modes of signification holds weight for Stein as well; she is deliberately attempting to abscond it when she writes that 'all great art is *anarchy'*. See Jo-Anna Isaak, 'The Revolutionary Power of a Woman's Laughter' in *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (London: McFarland, 1990), p. 36.
[22] *Of Grammatology*, repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd edn. (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 1692.
[23] Derrida's claim that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte'*, translated as 'there is nothing *outside* the text', may seem to contradict this assertion. However, this, as editor Vincent B. Leitch notes, maintains an inside/outside binary, whose existence Derrida is questioning and attempting to overturn. The text is *always already* an attempt to include its own outside; any attempt beyond this does not transcend, but rather, repeats the structure. Hence, we see Derrida's transcendental signified as independent of a relationship to a system of signifiers.

relationality that is not dependent on such an apotheosis of meaning – by attending to the text's formal and linguistic qualities.

While an analysis of Derrida's critique of logocentrism is beyond the purview of this paper,[24] what the 'transcendental signified' represents, insofar as we concern ourselves with experimental writings, is the *hierarchical order* which this signified has come to possess – a status of ascendancy above the referents of language. Derrida reminds us that all Western theology and metaphysics endorses this transcendental signified, whether it comes in the form of God, the truth, reason, or Being. Hence, the reader's *search for meaning* – the thematic synthesis anticipated in the act of reading – functions as one form of the transcendental signified. The crucial component in conventional reading is the focus and primacy of the rationality and coherence of the signified, over the play and interaction of the signifiers. Particularly in experimental poetry where meaning cannot conventionally be uncovered, my suggestion here is that attending to the form and linguistic relationality, rather than simply exterior meaning, would allow us to re-cover a sense of the reader's orientation in these texts. As Wolfgang Iser commented on the reading process, a text's 'real meaningfulness [is disclosed] through the interaction of their correlatives'.[25] As we shall see, the act of reading is a convergence of the text and the reader, who fills in the gaps left by the text itself.[26]

Having established some key theories about language and the reading process, I then aim to shift critical attention in this paper from the hegemony of sense and coherence (as the apotheosis of hermeneutic synthesis) to the interplay and construction, of the compositions in

[24] Logocentrism per se functions as several concepts to Derrida, and a number of them are not relevant to this research, such as: the view that writing is subordinate to speech; and the relationship between presence and absence for the interlocutor/reader. See ibid.

[25] 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', p. 282.

[26] Ibid., p. 285.

the interaction between the text and the reader. Hence, the overall argument of this chapter explores the emergent meaning orientations that these experimental compositions convey, arguing that such a critical attention to the poetry enables us to critically disclose the possibilities of a reader and poem in a continual process of engagement. In so doing, this allows readers to find the cracks and fissures in conventional modes of signification under logocentrism's transcendental signified. As discussed above, these meaning orientations are: anti-logocentrism in *The Waste Land*, disclosure in *Tender Buttons*, and openness in *Three Poems.*

We begin by examining the process of reading: by conceptualising different approaches to experimental poetry, I hope to examine the spaces these writings can carve out for readers. In describing John Milton's impact on English poetry, T.S. Eliot notes the importance of two necessary attitudes for readers of any poet:

> One is when we isolate [the poet], when we try to understand the rules of his own game, adopt his point of view: the other […] is when we measure him by outside standards, most pertinently by the standards of language and of something called Poetry, in our own language and in the whole history of European literature.[27]

The latter attitude described by Eliot filters the individual poem through tradition; there is, to put it simply, a positioning within what he terms, 'the historical sense'.[28] The implication of Eliot's position dovetails with his oeuvre, through his evocations of the whole of history – a monolithic experience where the past is not merely invoked, but is absorbed into the cultural programme of meanings to explain contemporary writings. This line of thinking signifies that Eliot operates in a manner where contemporary poetry is in a dynamic relationship, altered by

[27] T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) <https://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.16237/page/5/mode/2up> [accessed 31 May 2024] p. 145.

[28] See T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926,* Vol. 2, ed. by Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuhard (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 106.

the past as much as by the present. Certainly, Eliot insists on the same kind of argument in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'No poet […] has his complete meaning alone […] you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead'.[29] There is something crucial in the construction of meanings here, if we wish to apply this concept to Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot may claim this notion of the importance of tradition, of a reader measuring their experience with the text against the 'the whole of the literature of Europe', 'adopting the poet's own view'; however, this research offers an alternative approach, seeing the possibility of an anti-logocentric approach to *The Waste Land*, where the reader is offered the possibility of dismantling the text. To begin, we shall turn to possible readerly approaches, given the poem's infamous disjunctures and difficulties, particularly with Eliot's notes.

A 1923 review in *The Times Literary Supplement* observes that the 'refractory haze of illusion must be very dense' in reference to *The Waste Land*'s notes, which the review further opines is 'of no poetic value' in our reading of the poem.[30] Certainly, the emphasis here is on the poem's academic anthropology, from the pedantic notes to the densely allusive neologisms, forming the fulcrum of what this early review terms the poem's 'magic-lantern show'.[31] This 'magic-lantern show' metaphor may appear disingenuous, especially given Eliot's ideal state for poets as 'impersonal'. Yet for Eliot, the use of classical allusions and esoteric citations, (some of which are unhelpful in reading)[32] gestures toward an affiliation

[29] Ibid.

[30] Edgell Rickword, 'A Fragmentary Poem', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1131 (September, 1923) <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=TLSH&u=uokent&id=GALE%7CEX1200206833&v=2.1&it=r> [accessed 29 October 2022] p. 616.

[31] Ibid. Also see 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', which similarly links communicative difficulty with a magic-lantern show: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean! / But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen.'

[32] For instance, Eliot's note to l. 68 about Saint Mary Woolnoth keeping 'the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine' is that this is 'a phenomenon which I have often noticed'. Similarly, the poet notes that the hermit-thrush's '"water-dripping song" is justly celebrated' in the note to l. 357, which only seems to be mystification, rather than clarification, for the reader. See T.S. Eliot,

with the forebears of the Western literary Canon. Nevertheless, a thorough look at the poem may offer us an idea of the synchronicity between the arcana of the manifold allusions and references and the discursive hermeneutics of the readerly experience. In the spirit of disruption outlined in this thesis, we shall turn to the passage that famously ends the poem, closing on a crescendo of heteroglossia – a cascading of different languages and sounds:

> London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down 426
> *Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*
> *Quando fiam uti chelidon* – O swallow swallow
> *Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*
> These fragments I have shored against my ruins 430
> Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
> Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
>
> Shantih shantih shantih[33]

Re-twining as many diverse strands of tradition as possible, the ending juxtaposes the destructive scene, underscored by its rich symbolism, erudite learning across different languages, and the geometrical 'falling down' of the present world, condemned to patch together the words of dead authors. Beginning with the popular culture London Bridge nursery rhyme, the section is mixed up with what is comprised of literary cultural capital, by way of Dante, Gérard de Nerval, and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy.*[34] This 'fallen' tower of Babel lays bare this poetics of fragmentation, wherein the different languages create a violent discordance, further emphasised by the rumbling thunderous eruption of the

'The Waste Land', in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), l. 68. Hereafter cited as *TWL*.

[33] *TWL,* ll. 426-433.

[34] Ibid.

multiple 'Da' instructions from the Upanishads. As each group of people understood the 'Da' instructions differently in the Hindu scriptures, I find this an apt comparison for how readers can interpret the text in multifarious ways. Moreover, the imbrication of high and low culture further highlights the textual discord; significantly the only phrase in this section that is not a reference is 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins'. To close, the poem ends with ancient Sanskrit fragments, evoking the historical past. Yet the lack of punctuation with 'shantih shantih shantih' indicates the irresolute nature of the poem. Far from what reviewer Edmund Wilson claimed to be 'some dry stoic Sanskrit maxims'[35] from the past, the repetition invokes ritual incantations, a noisy chanting or praying that refuses to end. At the same time, the lack of a full stop suggests a simultaneous incompletion and expansion, enjoining us to inconclusively translate the open-ended nature of the ending to uncover its sharp, discrete perceptions, violently juxtaposed against each other. We find ourselves at once able to read closely enough, identifying the anthropological and literary sources by virtue of Eliot's notes, and yet ensnared by the difficulties of reading and making sense of the ambiguities always already present in the text.

The manifold and adventitious heteroglossia, contiguous with one another, strike the reader most forcefully about the writing. The allusions, combined with Eliot's detailed notes, are constitutive of the difficulty of reading the text. Although meaning can be construed from the notes, this only accounts for a partial understanding of the text. It would not be bold to say that the various references overwhelm the search for meaning and coherence, however, such that Edgell Rickword's review of the poem intuits 'the theme is announced frankly enough in the title […] and in the concluding confession, "These fragments I have shored"'.[36]

[35] 'The Poetry of Drouth', repr. in *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 143.
[36] Rickword, p. 616.

The fragmentary nature of the poem *formally* expresses the discontinuous nature of modern experience. The pluri-dimensionality of the fragments are moreover constitutive of the deferring of meaning from the content of the text to its form. Here, the epistemological implications of 'waste', as Rickword astutely implied, are suggested. As William Viney observed, *The Waste Land* is not only composed of images of discarded things, but further it is significantly positioned by a poetics of residua in its compositional history.[37] In the experience of interpretative frustration, meanings are seen to be complicit in this act of waste, a form of re-cycling language. In this context, exposing the dynamics of writing, composition, and editing allows for readers to re-make the waste from these fragments, an aspect that will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3. Perhaps most strikingly is the possibility to leave the fragments as they are, beyond understanding. Anthony Cuda argues that this captures an emerging awareness of the poem's multiplicity.[38] Given this suggestion, we can read the historical figures throughout the poem, such as Dido and Cleopatra as disembodied personae assumed by Eliot, expressing the experience of the present through the past – in other words, an attempt at articulating the pluri-dimensionality of life and experience.

It would be partly correct to assume that Eliot's theoretical essays would not agree with this sentiment of the text's multiplicity.[39] Eliot's early theoretical oeuvre, prior to his

[37] *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 82-83.

[38] 'Coda: *The Waste Land*'s Afterlife: The Poem's Reception in the Twentieth Century and Beyond', p. 195.

[39] Only partly correct due to Eliot's own contradictory statements about the text and criticism, usually linked closely with the evolution of Eliot's own political, religious, and marital life. His statements particularly in the later period of his life, when Eliot embraced the Christian faith and when his literary work culminated in *Four Quartets* (first printed in full in 1943), notoriously call various aspects of *The Waste Land*'s history and meaning into questions – as, for instance, when he decries *TWL*'s notes as 'bogus scholarship'.

religious and national conversion in 1927, offers us a coherence and a way of reading the text, albeit at the expense of an emerging anti-logocentrism. The 'historical sense' – or the 'fragments shored' throughout the poem – serve, in this view, as a unification of the present and the past, one in which the history of logocentrism is served.[40] At the level of linguistic structure, we see the dominance of the speaking subject through the Fisher King who sits upon the shore 'fishing, with the arid plain' land.[41] This monologistic, closed, and hierarchal approach to the allusions offer us a clarity, determinacy, and order to read the text. Yet, for all this sense-making, there still exists what J. Hillis Miller describes as 'the irresolvable oscillations of meaning' in reading any text, recalling Iser's gaps of meanings.[42] As these words convey, the thematic syntheses we can make from *The Waste Land* – indeed, any text – are in fact infinite and open, rather than static and closed. Any single *correct* reading is at dispute here.

Eliot's theoretical oeuvre points to a single, correct reading, as, for instance, when Eliot aims to control, order, and give a shape to the anarchy of contemporary history through drawing a parallel with antiquity, which his description of the 'mythical method' alludes to.[43] However, this prevents us from interpreting the writing's polysemy and plurality. With experimental texts, such as *The Waste Land*, I suggest that its own indeterminacy and amorphousness in linguistic and textual strictures, encourage us to revel in a dialectical space that offers literary freedom, an unassimilable alternative experience: a glimpse, in other

[40] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 182. For this discussion, I associate logocentrism with coherence, mastery, and objectivity – a focus on the signified over the signifier.

[41] *TWL*, l. 424.

[42] 'Deconstructing the Deconstructors', *Diacritics*, 5.2 (Summer, 1975) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464639> [accessed 1 November 2022] p. 31.

[43] T.S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', in Modernism: An Anthology, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 165-167.

words, of a potential cultural order beyond logocentric hegemony through the possible anti-logocentrism in the poem. This idea ensures that the process of reading, far from being fixed in elegantly formed phrases, is formed instead in the thematic and hermeneutic exegeses by which we synthesise and attempt to understand or, more simply, appreciate the text at a rudimentary level.

It seems to me that to deny the poetic abstractions and indeterminacy inscribed in *The Waste Land* is thus to rely too heavily upon the notion of a unified framework generated by the poem's allusions and references. Eliot famously described this in an essay as the 'mythical method' used by James Joyce in *Ulysses*; that is, 'manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity'.[44] First published in 1923, it is appropriate in this reading that Eliot's order of controlling 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy of contemporary history' is the basis upon which *The Waste Land*'s object is to define a new kind of narrative structure during a time when artists and writers rejected the continuous, temporal, and logical underpinnings of narrative. With Eliot's formal, high-symbolist erudition, it appears that the contiguity of the complementary and contesting fragments offers a viable interpretation for understanding the contemporary moment. The past – through historical references and myths – is utilised to explain the present – and its primordial 'mythical method'.[45] As Jewel Spears Brooker excellently points out, 'the mythical method solves the chaos-unity dilemma by allowing the coexistence of surface chaos and subsurface unity.'[46] To be clear, there is an opposition between unity and disunity; this antinomy, upon

[44] Ibid., p. 167.
[45] Ibid., pp. 165-167.

[46] 'The Case of the Missing Abstraction: Eliot, Frazer, and Modernism', *The Massachusetts Review* 25.4 (1984) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089598> [accessed 10 July 2023] p. 549.

which critics have read and interpreted *The Waste Land,* can be unpacked more than Eliot's analysis of the mythical method in *Ulysses* quite allows.

While critics, such as Grover Smith insist upon the systematic unity of the fragments and sources throughout Eliot's corpus,[47] Eliot's later revelations in 1959 betray the apparent 'structureless' nature of the poem: 'I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying […] You get used to having *The Waste Land,* or *Ulysses*, about.'[48] Despite Eliot's later denouncements of the text's structure, I would like to shift critical focus to the purpose of the mythical structure in its unity. For Eliot, *The Waste Land*'s mythical method utilises the monomyth of the dying and reviving king from Frazer's and Weston's Holy Grail myth. The relationship of the Holy Grail myth to the poem resides in the quest for meaning: whereas the knight in the Holy Grail has to ask the meaning of what he has seen in order to restore the land to health, the reader's job is to make sense, connect, see, and understand, just as the Knight has.[49] Central to this tension then is the role of the reader in actively collecting the fragments of the poem to construct the framework of the text – a process in continual motion. Yet, G. Douglas Atkins, like Eliot, argues against the intrusion of personality as 'disastrous in a reader as in a poet'.[50] Rather than any meaning private to the individual, I recall Robert Boyers' conception of a 'shared discourse', which Boyers writes of John Ashbery's poetry, between the poetic persona and the reader.[51] Moreover, Atkins' view fails

[47] See Grover Smith, 'The Making of *The Waste Land*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 6.1 (1972) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777097> [accessed 13 August 2023].

[48] Eliot, quoted in Cuda, p. 197.

[49] '*The Waste Land*' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001) p. 205.

[50] Ibid.

[51] 'A Quest without an Object', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3987 (September, 1978) <https://link-gale-com.chain.kent.ac.uk/apps/doc/EX1200425324/TLSH?u=uokent&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=5627f4f7> [accessed 13 August 2023] p. 962.

to account for the poetics of inclusion involved in such an act; in my view, it is the readers that create and juxtapose the fragments whose generated abstractions not only provide the framework of the text, but also coalesce in the reader's experience of the text. In her excellent examination of Eliot's use of the mythical method, Spears Brooker recapitulates this view, noting that the poem 'assumes readers who are willing to take the fragments and re-collect them […Each reader] will construct a variant of Frazer's monomyth, a variant that will be refined and changed with each reading'.[52] In so doing, the reader effectively becomes a co-poet, creating and disclosing meaning in the process of experiencing the text.

As Eliot's earlier poem, 'Gerontion', intimates, 'history has many cunning passages and contrived corridors'.[53] It is within this specious 'wilderness of mirrors'[54] that we may find ourselves lost and adrift among the flotsam of ruins and fragments. Like the typist in 'The Fire Sermon', after reading we may find a certain 'one half-formed thought to pass: / "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over"'.[55] Because 'The Waste Land' demanded a different form of reading germane to its disruptive surfaces, reading it offers, as Roland Barthes termed, '*la jouissance de la texte'* – the pleasure of the text.[56] This idea needs unpacking, especially in relation to George Steiner's quote about the critic taking possession of language. Barthes understands this concept as an erotic celebration, a liberation of meaning from the structures of a logocentric, sensible order.[57] Sexual undertones aside, the ambiguity and inability to make a singular, logical, and definitive sense out of *The Waste*

[52] Brooker, p. 551.
[53] 'Gerontion', *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47254/gerontion> [accessed 6 February 2022].

[54] Ibid.
[55] *TWL*, ll. 251-252.
[56] 'From Work to Text', *Textual Strategies*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 77.
[57] Ibid.

Land opens up the possibility of an anti-logocentric readerly orientation – in other words, an endless reconstituting and regenerating of knowledge and meaning. How then might we describe the meaning orientation of the reader with the text in Stein's *Tender Buttons*?

The reader's orientation with *Tender Buttons* is, I would suggest, one of disclosure, whereby readers are able to disclose objects by rendering them anew. In describing Pablo Picasso's art, Stein notes that he attempted to express 'objects as perceived, not as interpreted'.[58] The artist is not valorised as the authority on the meaning of a text, as such – a view that is further recapitulated by critics such as Marianne DeKoven, who speculates that *Tender Buttons* amounts to an 'irreducibly multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning'.[59] For DeKoven, the text's open-ended, polysemous nature is intrinsically tied with Stein's gendered status as a writer, aiming for an 'anti-patriarchal, presymbolic' freedom in the text.[60] Yet my interest here lies not so much in elucidating Stein's attack on patriarchal language, as symbolised by this 'sacrificing' of meaning,[61] but instead to re-capture the ways in which Stein's text allows us to disclose the objects that populate *Tender Buttons*.

Indeed, by transcending the strictures of language, which offer logocentric descriptions, Stein instead affords readers the opportunity to disclose the objects more subjectively through repetition and rhythm.[62] For instance, the first sentences in 'A Substance in a Cushion' read: 'The change of colour is likely and a difference a very little difference is

[58] *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984) <EBook on Kindle> [accessed 2 November 2022].
[59] *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*, p. 76.

[60] Ibid.
[61] See Lisa Ruddick, Excerpt of '*Tender Buttons:* Woman and Gnosis'.

[62] Miguel T. Santos, 'Unmediated Experience in Stein and Eliot' (2016). University of Kent, unpublished paper. Parts of the section on Stein in this and the succeeding paragraph have been expanded based on an earlier, unpublished essay I had previously written about unmediated experience in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *Tender Buttons*.

prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable.'[63] The titular 'substance in a cushion' is obscured, its location vague and unclear in the section. Furthermore, the substance itself is undefined, beguiling readers in their search for uncovering what this substance may be. Stein tantalises readers with the idea that the cushion is being changed for a new 'prepared' one, only to rupture their understanding with the non-sequitur that sugar is not a vegetable. Proffering meaning conventionally in this brief section is a difficult task; however, on a subconscious, phenomenological level, meaning is proffered by recognising how readers are forced to engage with language anew, rendering the fact about sugar strange.[64] I posit that being stripped of memory association and conventional uses of the objects Stein renders enables readers to disclose their essentialist insight on such objects.[65] At once objective and subjective, this insight is heightened by the fact that, according to Nicola Pitchford, the poem 'proceeds not by presenting the "thing" but by exploring the set of assumptions through which the "thing" is known'.[66]

In breaking down the assumptions through which 'objects' are known and placed, Stein thus frames household objects and commonplace foods in a new light, indicating the subjective, epistemological cores as we perceive these objects. Unfixed and unfettered, meaning is viewed as provisional in Stein's deconstruction of language.[67]

[63] Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, repr. in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 374. Hereafter cited at *TB*.
[64] Mena Mitrano, 'Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation: Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons', Modern Language Studies, 28.2 (Spring, 1998) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195301> [accessed 21 June 2023] p. 89.
[65] Santos.
[66] 'Unlikely Modernism, Unlikely Postmodernism: Stein's *Tender Buttons*', *American Literary History*, 11.4 (Winter, 1999) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490273> [accessed 20 June 2023] p. 646.
[67] Santos.

Cushions and covers are displaced, as the titular cushion disappears from view, giving the sense that Stein's language destabilises language's semblance of structural integrity. As I have written in my undergraduate analysis on *Tender Buttons*, 'readers must hence rely on the words themselves (the 'substance') to guide them toward an unmediated experience of understanding the objects, rather than the actual semantic content (the 'cover') binding the meaning of the sentences together'.[68] To return to the first few sentences under 'A Substance in a Cushion', what exactly is represented and referred to remains ambiguous, but as Stein puts it, 'a very little difference is prepared', signifying the 'difference' of the readerly experience of the poem. Additionally, the repetition of 'a difference a very little difference' conveys the different ways of approaching the text – one that discloses the objects or the materiality of language. The text fluctuates in this difference between language as a means of linguistic cohesiveness and language as a tenuous production of meaning.[69] It is in this oscillation that the 'very little difference' is made visible and brought to the forefront, rather than hidden and couched. As Ariane Mildenberg intuits, Stein's linguistic difficulty stems from a desire to 'recapture', but not to take possession of the value of the individual word.[70] This aligns closely with Steiner's delineation of the reader, as opposed to the critic, as someone who *experiences* the text, as someone fused with it, that opened this chapter. Indeed, we find this fusion with the poem embedded in a textual level. The text's non-hierarchical,

[68] Ibid.

[69] See Mitrano, p. 95.

[70] 'A "Dance of Gestures": Hyperdialectic in Gertrude Stein's Compositions', in *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, ed. by David Ayers et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110317534.380> [accessed 12 August 2023] p. 390. This may seem as a pedantic distinction; however, to recapture acquires a more positive valence than to repossess, in *regaining* the signifier and its multifarious meanings.

decentralised nature opens up the potential for each word to have equal value to the whole structure, through its upheavals of grammar and syntax.

At this critical juncture, it is worth noting the connotations here with dominance and submissiveness that dovetail with this analysis of Stein, alongside Eliot, particularly in the readerly relationality with these texts. For readers approaching *The Waste Land* for the first time, its sheer breadth of reference is overwhelming, to the extent that Michael North refers to it as an 'annotational elephantiasis' inextricably linked to the poem in the contemporary age.[71] A sense of the poem's disruptions would have connected to the possible sense of submissiveness particularly for readers in 1922 approaching the poem without the total knowledge of its sources and meanings at hand. Nonetheless, this overwhelming nature of the poem is certainly not lost on readers in the 21st century, amidst the contiguity of the arcana of references alongside the excerpts from atavistic languages. The extensive research and detailed scholarship of the text's sources have led Eliot to write an apology of sorts in 1956 for 'having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail'.[72] What these notes emphasise is a sense of dominance in Eliot's text to current readers, one that contrasts quite strongly with Stein's decentralised, open-ended approach. Certainly, while both texts have disruptive disorientations marking their difficulty as reading experiences, *Tender Buttons* accounts in my view for a more submissive approach. By submission, I refer specifically to the relationship of current readers to the text, its scholarship, and its place in the Western literary canon.[73] Stein's voice and authority as poet

[71] 'Preface', in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. ix.

[72] Quoted in Cuda, 'Coda: *The Waste Land*'s Afterlife: The Poem's Reception in the Twentieth Century and Beyond'.

[73] I am not referring to the texts themselves as necessarily submissive or dominant, nor am I suggesting that *Tender Buttons* is far more submissive than the Eliot of the time. For instance, 'The

and author is, unlike Eliot's, obscured for readers, without any notes or indeed any 'plan' that can elucidate the text.

However, if under the presumption that the reader has an active role to play in comprehending the text, this opens up the freedom independent of the urge to make sense of this poetry. This urge to make sense is a point Stein recapitulates: 'I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. It is impossible to put them together without sense.'[74] Stein's focus on individual words, rather than the evocations of the whole of history a poet must relate to in Eliot's 'historical sense',[75] lends an orientation that is more submissive for readers than the imposing dominance of *The Waste Land.*[76] While there is the suggestion that this occasions the possibility for a resistance to patriarchy and gender roles inherently linked to Stein's status as a female writer (similar view have been espoused by Lisa Ruddick and DeKoven that I do agree with), my focus here lies more in the text's orientation with the readers as necessarily less authoritative and more open.

This sense of a less authoritative orientation is moreover enacted textually. *Tender Buttons* is replete with images of domestic life, from mundane household objects to

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Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' reads as more submissive, particularly with the speaker's own anxieties and the text's enjambments, suggesting hesitancy and indecisions; in contrast, Stein's impersonality (ironically a term more widely used with reference to Eliot) renders her as more dominant in this context.

[74] Quoted in Pamela Hadas, 'Spreading the Difference: One Way to Read Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*', *Twentieth Century Literature,* 24.1 (Spring, 1978) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441064> [accessed 30 June 2023] pp. 58-59.

[75] See T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

[76] Of course, this has been furthered by the widening circles of critical and hermeneutic interpretations of *The Waste Land* as a canonical modernist text; while Stein is acknowledged as a key modernist in her own right, *Tender Buttons* is not as widely read, making it more accessible than the imposing critical landscape of Eliot's oeuvre.

commonplace food. The sense of submissiveness in Stein allows for a gradual emergence of meaning, rendering objects anew. An act of disclosure, the experiential world of pre-linguistic meaning is emphasised. In the poem's second section, 'Food', we have a brief extract under 'Orange':

> ORANGE.
>
> A type oh oh new new not no not knealer knealer of old show beefsteak, neither neither.[77]

Most evident for this chapter is the act of disclosing the orange at a phenomenological level. As we read, my suggestion is that we are partaking in peeling and opening up the 'Orange'. In the act of peeling, we are confronted with repeated assonances of sounds ('*o*h *o*h', 'n*e*w n*e*w', 'kn*ea*ler, kn*ea*ler', 'n*ei*ther, n*ei*ther'). The various contours of the sounds suggest the essential characteristics of an orange. The long 'e' assonance in 'kn*ea*ler' and 'n*ei*ther', for example, illustrate at once a satiation of language. Moreover, considering the taste of an orange as sweet and tart, it strikes me as salient that this assonance is linguistically and sonorously similar to sw*ee*t, a word that recurs several times throughout *Tender Buttons*.[78] This is further compounded with its simultaneous contrast through the alliteration of the 'n' sound through 'new not no not', adding a sharpness to the sound and mimicking the tartness of an orange. This fluidity between sweetness and tartness further allows us to squeeze language together, just as an orange is squeezed for its juice. The final part of this extract I would like to draw attention to is the repetition of 'knealer' and 'neither', which I would offer can be understood as a stand-in for the sonorously similar 'nearer'. This implies at once that we as readers are moving closer to disclosing the 'orange' in suspending logocentric understandings about representation, as well as the possibility of moving closer into the text, a possibility which

[77] *TB*, p. 393.
[78] The word 'sweet' and its cognates appears five times throughout the section entitled 'Food'.

will be further expanded upon in Chapter 2. In effect, the possibility here is the pre-linguistic essence of the 'orange' coming into view and disclosed for the reader.

While I argue that *The Waste Land* offers an orientation of anti-logocentrism and *Tender Buttons* of disclosure, the rest of this chapter shall focus on the concept of openness as an orientation in *Three Poems*. As John Ashbery's most challenging and innovative work, the book represents, Ron Silliman speculates, 'one of the most intellectually ambitious literary projects ever written'.[79] Crossing the boundaries between poetry and prose, there is a sense of the text being both an attempt at capturing an *ars poetica* for writing poetry and simultaneously a critique of the project of prescribing how to write and read poetry. As Silliman suggests, *Three Poems* is a project of working through the process of meanings. The surface of *Three Poems* coheres rhetorically, in Margueritte S. Murphy's view, while the poem refuses to realise any single truth or voice.[80] Certainly, Ashbery's *Three Poems* emerges out of the different cultural zeitgeist of postmodernism, signalled by the poem's desire in its opening lines to 'put it *all* down' [emphasis mine]. [81] Compared to the modernist desire for wholeness as a 'complete expression of […] modern life',[82] Ashbery's poetry seeks an encompassing all-ness, to quote his words; *all*-ness, rather than wholeness, accounts for his oeuvre as an *overload* of textual material. In this sense, we as readers are 'hailed' (to use Louis Althusser's terminology) without end by signs and signifiers in the text that overwhelm the reading experience. Ashbery himself tellingly wrote of Erik Satie's work: 'You're

[79] 'Four Contexts for *Three Poems*: *Three Poems* (1972)', *Conjunctions*, 49 (2007) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24516475> [accessed 26 July 2023] p. 301.

[80] *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 169.

[81] *TP*, p. 3.

[82] 'Mr. Eliot's Poem', *The Criterion*, 1.1 (October, 1922), repr. in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 137.

surrounded by different elements of a work and it doesn't really matter whether you're focussing on one of them or none of them […] but you're getting a kind of indirect refraction […] It will be doing its job if its audience is intermittently aware of it while thinking about other things at the same time.'[83] Although he is referring here to music, this is the same enterprise undertaken in *Three Poems*. Reinforced further by the architecture of the poem, Ashbery's lines spill over one another, fostering a sense of discontinuity and refraction, an all-ness encompassing this process of 'leaving all out'. Central to this tension of what all-ness enacts in poetry is the question of the readerly re-generation. *Three Poems* asks itself how to involve the readers in this overload of textual masses, which will be more fully explored in Chapter 2.

This sentiment that *Three Poems* encapsulates reading and writing as Ashbery's subject is shared by Ron Silliman, who endeavours to establish Ashbery's poetics as a desire 'to include both the real and all of our difficulties getting in touch with that plane'.[84] But I am not suggesting that *Three Poems* enacts a movement for the reader to delve into solipsistic introspection; rather, I point to Bonnie Costello's argument that his self-reflexive writings 'escape banal solipsism and open onto larger questions of communication'.[85] Operating in the interplay between meditative solipsism and creative phenomenology is where I would propose *Three Poems* is, as a readerly experience. Opaque and self-reflexive, Ashbery's remark on Satie earlier feels especially relevant, given that poems, like music, are experiences whose engagement requires a Heideggerean Dasein ('Being-there'). In effect, Ashbery's poems are akin to immersive experiences, whose *all*-ness engages the reader, yet

[83] Quoted in Larissa MacFarquhar, 'Present Waking Life: Becoming John Ashbery'.

[84] Silliman, p. 301.

[85] Bonnie Costello, 'John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', *Contemporary Literature*, 23.4 (1982) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1207945> [accessed 21 August 2023] p. 493.

is unable to be contained. As he describes, 'A reader might understand [my poems] better in readings because […] he can't go back and try to make sense of this line or that […] He must simply […let] his mind catch on one phrase or another.'[86] The experience of reading is therefore paramount to his poetry. Facilitating intimacy between readers and text, the moments where 'one lets his mind catch on one phrase or another' cultivates moments of disclosure that enable readers to co-create the textual poem in this experiential process. Openness, therefore, is Ashbery's paradigm to bridge the ontological gap between the poet and reader, marking a means to unveil and apprehend the experience of the text.

It would be easy, but reductive, to assume that meaning in Ashbery's poetry is an instance of 'leaving all out'.[87] Suspending the reader with the tantalising possibility of a 'place of joining […the] intolerable mixture of reality and fantasy',[88] meaning, in this line of thinking, may be subsumed under the weight of Ashbery's poetic intensity. Yet, Robert Boyers' review of Ashbery's 1977 poetry collection, *Houseboat Days*, makes the case that meaning for Ashbery is relative; he remarks: 'If we take meaning to refer to the possibility of shared discourse in which speaker and auditor may participate more or less equally', then Ashbery 'eliminates meaning […on a quest to discover] the possibility of ordinary experience so disburdened of ordinary sequence and weight that it ceases to seem entirely familiar'.[89] It is correct to say that meaning becomes suspended and that the importance shifts to the evocations and resonances of the fragments; however, Boyer argues that meaning 'is left out […] to ensure the continuity of a quest for which ends are necessarily threatening'.[90] This view that the 'ends' of Ashbery's poetry portends no new meaning does not account for the

[86] MacFarquhar, 'Present Waking Life: Becoming John Ashbery'.
[87] John Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 3. Hereafter cited as *TP*.

[88] *TP*, p. 90.
[89] Boyers, p. 962.

[90] Ibid., p. 962.

possibility of other ways of creating meaning. Consider the following passage from 'The System':

> But I'm just a mute observer—it isn't my fault that I can really notice how everything around me is waiting just for me to get up and say the word, whatever that is. And surely even the eyes of the beloved are fixed on you as though wondering, "What is he going to do *this* time?" And those eyes as well as the trees and the skies that surround you are full of apprehension, waiting for this word that must come from you and that you have not in you. "What am I going to say?"[91]

This section, at once communicating the speaker's linguistic paralysis and the reader's suspended awareness, figures a process of 'leaving out', concealing the words that 'you have not in you'. Elucidating the moment of setting out for the words only for them to remain elusive, we ought to locate and understand the text using the poem's own suggestion of 'viewing it all from a different angle'.[92] In this spirit of viewing it all from a different angle, the word 'apprehension', I suggest, serves as the gateway into our different angle approach. As apprehension is both a physical and a mental act (at once meaning to grasp and to understand), [93] I find this an apt comparison for how we may read the text. Apprehension operates between the dynamics of ownership (as the physical sense implies) and reflection (as the mental sense implies); the juxtaposition of the two is moreover reinforced in the excerpt by the 'fixed' and 'wondering' eyes, converging in the reader's mind as both graspable and reflective. Both cases describe an antinomy of attention that characterises the poetry as between these two poles – at once fixed and authoritative, and yet contemplative and guiding.

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[91] *TP*, pp. 94-95.
[92] *TP*, p. 93.
[93] "apprehension, n." in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. (July, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1175403867> [accessed 17 August 2023].

Margueritte S. Murphy views *Three Poems* as Ashbery's experiment into a poetics of inclusion.[94] The shifting pronouns support this view of inclusion. Indicating aspects of consciousness, the speaking voice is indeed somewhat a 'mute observer', since the inclusion of 'you' mutes the central 'I' of the poetic voice. This suggests a desire to reach beyond the dichotomy of 'I-you', 'poet-reader' to a dispersion of voices, each on the brink of dissolving into the other. Ashbery echoes this idea, explaining that the project of *Three Poems* was 'to allow all kinds of prose "voices" to have their say in what I hoped would be poetry […] I was trying to "democratise" language'. [95]

This enterprise of 'democratising' language appears to contrast with *The Waste Land*, ostensibly presided by the central consciousness of Tiresias.[96] While *The Waste Land* was in its early drafts, Ezra Pound, writing to Eliot, penned the poem as the longest in 'the English *langwidge'*.[97] Although tinged with a hint of sarcasm, Pound was referring to Eliot's project of uniting the 'different voices' (as the poem's original title, 'He Do the Police in Different Voices', suggests) with verbal and linguistic complexity. Hence, we see that *Three Poems* and *The Waste Land* are not so different; the broader claim I gesture to is that Tiresias, like Ashbery's speaker, is a 'mere spectator'[98] whose voice does not 'apprehend' (i.e. dominate) over the different voices, but rather 'apprehends' (i.e. validates) them.

[94] *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery,* pp. 168-169.

[95] 'An Interview by Ross Labrie', *The American Poetry Review,* 13.3 (1984) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27777370> [accessed 17 August 2023] p. 31.

[96] *TWL,* note 218.

[97] Ezra Pound, 'Letters of Ezra Pound', *The Hudson Review*, 3.1 (1950), ed. by D. D. Paige <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3856837> [accessed 17 August 2023] p. 54.

[98] *TWL,* note 218.

*Three Poems'*s self-reflective gestures read as a kind of apologia for how to 'put it all down' in language.[99] Here, I see the poem's inability to speak and to find the words as redolent of the female speaker's obsessive demands in *The Waste Land*'s 'A Game of Chess': '"Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?"[100] As in Ashbery, her interlocutor remains silent, indicated by the lack of quotation marks in the succeeding lines ('I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.').[101] While my aim is to draw out the similarities between the two, I do not want to deny that the inability to speak in *The Waste Land* carries connotations with its undertones of gender relations.[102] In *Three Poems*, however, there is a broader question of the poet speaking and the role of a poet in putting the words down. Whereas Eliot's speaker is reduced to quoting lines from Shakespeare, Ashbery's speaker is immobilised by the inability to conjure language – a rather Prufrockian sentiment in that 'it is impossible to say just what I mean'.[103] Both poems are alert to the demands of experience that reading the texts offers; *The Waste Land* elides the experience of the speaker and reader, since both are left to re-collect the fragments. In *Three Poems*, the inability to speak conceals language, allowing readers to attend to attention, to experience *the* experience. In viewing it all from a different angle, there is, I would suggest, a presence inscribed in his poetry – a presence that is characterised by this process of leaving out. Ashbery's poetry moreover gestures toward the potentiality of this meaning that lies beyond the reader – at once evanescent, ephemeral, and enchanting. Indeed,

[99] *TP*, p. 3.
[100] *TWL*, ll. 112-113.
[101] *TWL*, ll. 115-116.
[102] This is the case even moreso reading this extract with the knowledge of Eliot's fraught marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Haigh-Wood writes, 'WONDERFUL Yes' alongside this section in an original draft of the text. See T.S. Eliot, 'Manuscript of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with Ezra Pound's annotations', *British Library* (n.d.) <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-t-s-eliots-the-waste-land-with-ezra-pounds-annotations> [accessed 21 August 2023] p. 5.

[103] See T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915).

Eliot's words from 'The Dry Salvages', which are referenced in this dissertation's introduction, echo with Ashbery here: 'We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience'.[104] What Ashbery points to, in short, is the experience in finding the words and approaching their meanings in this process.

Reading the poem, Silliman suggests, demands a process-centric, open approach to meaning; Ashbery's poems, he insists, 'resist going anywhere'.[105] It is precisely this approach to reading Ashbery that is most conducive. This is far from Boyers' conviction that Ashbery's 'ends are necessarily threatening' to the enterprise of meaning-making – a view that crucially underestimates the processes by which logic and syllogisms fall apart. Meaning is a process that is enacted between the 'you' and 'I' of the poem, a process that emanates from within the folds of the text. As 'The System' describes: 'The end is still shrouded in mystery, but the mystery diminishes without exactly becoming clearer the more we advance […] it is just that the mystery lessens and comes to seem the least important part of the whole.'[106] Although there is an intimation of loss and suffering, *Three Poems* advances by way of its 'new spirit' of poetry, one whose images of mystery and indeterminacy, through the perceptions, emotions, and concepts on the page, disclose the possibility of 'something fading out or just coming into focus'.[107] Rather than shunning ambiguity and concealment, this poetry embraces them. In Marjorie Perloff's words, 'language [is] always on the point of revealing its secret [… This pattern of] simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the

[104] T.S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', p. 195.

[105] Silliman, p. 295.
[106] *TP*, p. 78.
[107] *TP*, p. 79.

structural principle of Ashbery's poem'.[108] The poem's fluid texture, in play between those two modes of opening and closing, is the process through which meaning may be mercurial.

This chapter sought to articulate the meaning orientations that arise in these three experimental poems, through the triadic relationality of anti-logocentrism, disclosure, and openness. These orientations, sitting between the reader and the poet, account for possibilities of how we might reconfigure our relationship with these texts. It is this endeavour that will be more completely explored in the following chapter's focus on the primacy of the reader and their possibilities of re-generation in the texts.

[108] *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, p. 262.

CHAPTER 2: EMBODIED AFFECT: THE POSSIBILITIES OF 'LEAVING OUT'

Motivated by the impulse to capture a ludic framework, the zeitgeist of poetry in the latter half of the 20th century shifted to a poetics of indeterminacy as a critical term to read poetry, as Chapter 1 has demonstrated. Particularly in the post-war period, obscurity and nonreferentiality emerged as critical junctures to view poetry under the label of 'avant-garde'. As the poet-critic Randall Jarrell observed presciently in his 1942 essay, 'The End of the Line', modern poetry is rarely a revolutionary departure and more an evolutionary 'extension' of the period that precedes it.[109] Far from his pronouncement that 'modernism as we know it is dead',[110] there is rather a shared tendency, an 'extension' of the limits of possibilities carried by modernist to postmodernist poetry, in what Marjorie Perloff terms the 'poetics of indeterminacy'.[111] Broadly speaking then, readers in the 20th century were confronted with a self-conscious experimentation with language and forms, underpinned by the compulsion to find different forms of expression. It is no wonder then that reading Eliot's, Stein's, and Ashbery's poetry have been variously described by their early readers as 'deliberate mystification',[112] 'a hoax […] of parlour tricks',[113] and a 'way of nattering on the whole night', respectively.[114] Tellingly, what seems to strike early readers most forcefully is

[109] 'The End of the Line', *The Nation* (February, 1942), pp. 222-227.
[110] Ibid.
[111] *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*.
[112] Gorham Munson, 'The Esotericism of T.S. Eliot', p. 157.

[113] Alfred Kreymborg, quoted in Margueritte S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, p. 137.

[114] James Fenton, 'Getting Rid of the Burden of Sense', *The New York Times Archives* (December, 1985) <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/29/books/getting-rid-of-the-burden-of-sense.html> [accessed 18 September 2023].

the diverse instances of experimental writing in their encountered texts, effectively enforcing an exegesis of the text as contingent and subjective on the readerly experience.

The general objective of this chapter is to capture a sense in which readers engage in an affective practice through reading the poems studied in this thesis. Developing from the first chapter's analysis of the triadic meaning orientations that sit between the poems (*The Waste Land*'s anti-logocentrism, *Tender Buttons*'s disclosure, and *Three Poems'*s openness), my attempt here is to highlight the potential of experimental poetry for developing a relationality with the reader. At the heart of this relationality is a readerly re-generation wherein I suggest the reader is generated in the text. Alongside the modernist ambition to find new technical means for articulating individual experience, the development of experimental poetry principally lies in new forms for describing thoughts and feelings that capture the ephemeral and experiential moments that activate the reader's re-encounter with the text. In so doing, this chapter adapts Doug Battersby's conception of 'experiential close reading' as an approach to uncover affective responses induced by literary works.[115] While Battersby approaches this practice in comparing modernism's aesthetic difficulty and its ethically provocative and perverse modes of desire, my concern here underlines the extent to which reading experimental poetry is an act that co-creates the reader alongside the text. As such, the critical approach outlined here is underpinned by this methodological focus on *experiential co-creation*, whereby the reader is invited into and emerging from the interstices of the texts. Experimental texts, particularly with their fluidity and nondiscursiveness, allow for such an openness and an invitation for readers into the text.

[115] 'Introduction: Modernist Liabilities', in *Troubling Late Modernism: Ethics, Feeling, and the Novel Form.*

The centrality of reading for 20th century modernist writers is at once foregrounded and made explicit, articulating the expressive potential of experimental texts. Eliot and Stein's European contemporary, Marcel Proust, had a preoccupation with reading in his essay, 'Journées de lecture'.[116] In terms anticipating Barthes's '*jouissance' de la texte*, Proust writes of reading as an 'enjoyment [*jouissance*] that is both ardent and stale'.[117] Certainly, this dialectic of an ardent and stale enjoyment is pursued in the inexorable and complex interaction between the reader and the text. In terms not dissimilar to those of Wolfgang Iser, the creative experience of reading texts is a product of the coming together of the text and the reader's imagination. [118] These views on the various strains on engaging with experimental poetry are no less contingent on the reader's involvement with the text. In attempting to situate the readerly engagement with experimental texts, this research draws upon Proust's statements as paradigmatic of a modernist 20th century response to reading.[119] To elaborate, Proust presents reading as an 'atmosphere of […] pure friendship'.[120] Interestingly, then, he reads the process as one of 'silence', where the readers 'speak for others, but […] are silent for ourselves'.[121] Yet if this risks seeming unequal to the task of the reader's continual re-generation and re-activation in experimental poetry, these words nonetheless typify the modernist approach to reading: a form of 'leaving out' the reader's own experiences, in order

[116] First published in 1905 as 'Sur la lecture'. For a short discussion on this essay, see Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust's 'A la recherche': "le délire de la lecture"*' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3-4.

[117] Quoted in Watt, *Reading in Proust's 'A la recherche': "le délire de la lecture"*, p. 3. Translation mine.

[118] Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', p. 284. This is, in my view, the clearest and most succinct outline of Iser's central ideas.

[119] This research does acknowledge, however, Proust as a highly idiosyncratic figure, even within the field of modernism, particularly in the relationship between the reader's 'silence' compared to the prolixity of his narrators. Nonetheless, I find his statements on reading to be illuminating for this analysis.

[120] Quoted in Watt, p. 4. Translation mine.

[121] Ibid. Translation mine.

to inhabit the text more fully. However, my understanding of 'leaving out' acquires a more positive valence to the term, where 'leaving out' is full of possibility. Rather than the modernist silence exemplified by Proust, it seems to me significantly different in offering a constructive, open space, drawing on Iser's approach of the readerly experience through the critical lens of possibility.

Iser, by whose writings the direction of this chapter is most influenced, refers to the view of the reader's involvement in constructing the richness of the text. While the reader is processing the text, Iser says, they are 'also uncovering other impulses […] Thus the semantic possibilities of the text will always remain far richer than any configurative meaning formed while reading'.[122] For Iser, then, the *process* of reading, far from being a Proustian 'silence' for the readers, is rather inherent in 'the reader's mind […causing] the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections'.[123] Here, the nature of reading described by Iser, has surprising resonances with Perloff's sense of indeterminacy; reading, he writes, 'gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed, without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination'.[124] We can see that for Iser, indeterminacy is likewise a critical framework in the experience of reading literature – its purpose being to strive for, even if unconsciously, making everything fit together in a consistent pattern.[125] While I do not dispute indeterminacy as a framework in reading, Iser's concept incorrectly denies the possibility of reading intentionally incoherent experimental writing. The shortcoming in Iser's framework is in the reader assuming a Proustian silence, especially in texts that provide emancipatory experiences that allow for a regenerative, rather than a silencing, act for the reader.

[122] Iser, p. 290.
[123] Ibid., p. 283.
[124] Ibid., p. 288.
[125] Ibid., p. 284.

Instead, by drawing on engagements defined by the re-generative constitution of the reader, I shall suggest that a methodology drawing on Battersby's experiential close reading would be apt in disclosing the readerly relationality. In describing this relationality, this chapter's key term, 'leaving out' is described and understood as a generative process, creating spaces for readers to engage with and find themselves reconstituted in experimental poetry. Rather than a poetics of disinterest and objectivity, so advocated by New Criticism and poets such as Eliot himself, it is replaced here by a poetics of experience and intimacy. In so doing, the reading experience offers, I shall suggest, a capacious subjectivity, akin to Victoria Bazin's understanding of the experimental *ars poetica* as 'complex and unresolved, disclosing an ambiguous and multivalent world'.[126] In a similar vein, literary texts, for Derek Attridge, can be understood as *events* performed through the act of reading.[127] This sense of occasion lends to the text a sense in which the reader is re-generated and re-encountered in the activity of reading.

Yet this research's attention on close, experiential reading, while attending to the potential proximity and intimacy between reader and text, nonetheless betrays reading as a context-specific activity – that is, readings of the text as hermeneutically synchronic, rather than diachronic. The approach taken throughout this thesis suggests that reading prefigures its own posterity, indicating that reading is an act that anticipates the text's future readings. As Peter Middleton's *Distant Reading* persuasively argues, critical analyses of literature strive for an '"erasure of temporal distance," and therefore lose sight of what is involved in being a contemporary reader'.[128] Partly drawing upon these insights, I would add that meaning is

[126] *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 81. Although this book centres on Moore's writings, it offers incisive observations regarding modernist aesthetics.
[127] Battersby, p. 13.
[128] *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. 8.

constructed by readers in conjunction with the text, with certain factors (i.e. spatial, temporal) affecting their individual readings. This allows for a distant reading of the texts, acknowledging that while a contemporary, 21st century reader is independent to the composition of these 20th century poems, these individuals are nonetheless actively reconstituting the texts' proleptic afterlives. Accordingly, this chapter shall combine close readings with distant, zoomed-out readings. This thesis's understanding of distant reading takes on a different valence from Middleton's, attending to the poems' architectural qualities, while acknowledging that the text is neither fixed nor closed, but reconstituted by readers in their shifting spatial and temporal conditions from the texts' original publications.

Therefore, this analysis will focus on close and distant readings of various means of 'leaving out' as a generative process. Originally an Ashberyan term to describe an acknowledgement of slippages in negotiating the lacuna between words and between text and reader, I aim to use 'leaving out' as a critical apparatus for also reading Eliot and Stein. This chapter will explore 'leaving out' in a broader sense, as an act of creative possibility rather than closed-off silence, in each of the three texts: in *The Waste Land*, the 'leaving out' of punctuation; in *Tender Buttons*, the 'leaving out' of pronouns; and in *Three Poems,* the 'leaving out' of a constantly shifting and refracted 'you'. Unravelling the plurality and capacity for subjectivity, I aim to recover the sense in which their poetry occasions the possibility for readers to be involved with and intimate in the texts through invitations of re-generation.

In *The Waste Land*'s process of 'leaving out', we find the clearest possibilities for readerly engagement and generation in the poem's final section: 'What the Thunder Said':

> He who was living is now dead 328
> We who were living are now dying

With a little patience 330

[…]

Who is the third who walks always beside you? 359
When I count, there are only you and I together 360
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?[129] 365

Here are the only lines with pronouns in this section until the Datta-Dayadhvam-Damyata commands from the Upanishads, starting in line 400. Moreover, aestheticising the decay and degeneration of the land, we find a defamiliarising lack of punctuation, rhyme, and verse. These textual differences, compared to the poem's earlier sections, at once indicate an expansion and a withdrawal of closure. Signifying simultaneously an expansiveness and an incompletion to the poem that mark it as in process, my suggestion here is that the role of the reader in this textual enterprise is foregrounded.

Before closely reading this excerpt, it would be salient to note its textual operations. Firstly, Eliot's headnote to this section helps us to identify one of the central themes: the journey to Emmaus, following Christ's crucifixion.[130] Secondly, we have what I would argue is the metatextual, self-reflexive layer that allows for the reader to be re-generated. In the first, Eliot contrasts Christ's resurrection with the decay of contemporary civilisation ('We who were living are now dying'). The Christian overtones are continued in the second part of

[129] *TWL,* ll. 328-330, 359-365.
[130] Eliot's Notes to *TWL*, 'V. What the Thunder Said'.

the excerpt quoted above, which Eliot has attributed to a passage from Sir Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, in which three explorers had the belief that an incorporeal fourth member had joined them.[131] Further, the religious overtones are conjured in the story from Luke 24 of two travellers en route to Emmaus who encounter, but do not recognise, a third presence: the risen Christ.[132] This theme of rebirth and recovery is clearly indebted to the Holy Grail myth, where the Knight-Errant's quest is to restore the land from disease and decay, to health and fertility.[133] On a biographical note, it is no coincidence that composition of 'What the Thunder Said' occurred during Eliot's treatment under Dr Roger Vittoz in Lausanne, following a nervous breakdown, such that *The Waste Land* stands as a record of Eliot's cure and recovery.[134] Suffice to say, whereas the theme of rebirth and recovery has been studied and noted by critics such as Matthew K. Gold, what concerns this chapter is the resonance of this theme of 'rebirth' with the reader relationality, an area that has hitherto been studied only vaguely. We now need to refine this articulation.

While the possibility of rebirth is suggested in 'What the Thunder Said', I posit that the sense of a readerly rebirth through the text seems somewhat naïve. This research contends that readers are active, in re-encountering and re-engaging with texts as experimental as *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, the word 'rebirth' implies that the reader is brought into the text as a tabula rasa and negates the possibility of the reader's own memories, views, and ideas – in effect, invoking the Proustian silence. Rather, I would suggest that what is presented is a readerly re-generation, whereby reading Eliot is a process of 'leaving out' in order for the

[131] Eliot's Notes to *TWL*, l. 360. Also, see 'third man syndrome'.
[132] North, p. 17.
[133] G. Douglas Atkins, '*The Waste Land*' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 205.

[134] Matthew K. Gold, 'The Expert Hand and the Obedient Heart: Dr. Vittoz, T.S. Eliot, and the Therapeutic Possibilities of *The Waste Land*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.3 (2000) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/16576> [accessed 13 July 2023], p. 519.

reader to be *constituted* amidst the debris and cracks of the poem; however, far from being a blank slate, they are actively invited into the fabric of the text. The poet-critic William Empson's writings from 1958 are relevant here: 'I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him'.[135] Yet, far from Eliot 'inventing' the reader's mind, as Empson writes, what we have is a poem that acts as an invitation and engagement that comes from 'reacting' to the text or 'misreading' the text – the latter of which arises due to the poem's allusiveness, notes, junctures, and disjunctures, compelling us into widening circles of interpretation.

In this interpretative framework, we arrive at the second layer of Eliot's operation of this section: the metatextual, self-reflexive layer of this excerpt. At the level of content, this section reflects the reader's journey as they meander through the various textual 'roots that clutch […] out of this stony rubbish'.[136] Eliot's choice to recount the passage of an expedition strikes me as significant, as readers similarly find themselves ensconced in the poem's 'expedition', both spatially and temporally. Readers spatially explore the 'unreal city' of London; temporally, they move from Ancient Greece in the story of the Cumean Sybil in the poem's epigraph to the 'sound of horns and motors' of 20th century London.[137] Most salient then is this expedition at a textual level for readers, reminiscent of the Ashberyan self-reflexivity in *Three Poems.* Likewise finding themselves navigating the terrain of meaning and interpretation, readers are put into the journey of the Knight-Errant in the Holy Grail monomyth, as they explore a land (that is, the text) of fragmentation and desolation in the

[135] Quoted in Gabrielle McIntire, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, ed. by Gabrielle McIntire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107279612.001> [accessed 12 March 2023] pp. 3-4.

[136] *TWL*, ll. 19-20.
[137] *TWL*, ll. 60, 197.

quest for restoration. No less contingent upon Eliot's erudition in the poem's allusions and structure, Anthony Cuda, drawing upon Edmund Wilson's analyses of the poem, writes that the poem is best understood rather through its emotive and imaginative power.[138]

In this analysis of how Eliot wrenches and dislocates the shards and flotsam of language to make poetry, I would suggest that the line 'Who is the third that walks always beside you?'[139] signifies a readerly re-encounter in the poem. At a structural level, this line continues the motif of rebirth and resurrection, with G. Douglas Atkins noting that the 'key' of the poem lies in 'breaking out of our imprisonment within the self'.[140] While figures of imprisonment abound via the Cumean Sybil and Eliot's reference to Count Ugolino from the *Inferno,*[141] I would suggest that, as opposed to breaking out of the self, readers are more aptly re-generated in the poem. Against this proposed reading, the 'third' walking beside the speaker (whether it is Tiresias, a stand-in of Eliot himself, or a disembodied voice) is the reader, emerging out of the disjunctures and textual flotsam. In developing such a relationality, my aim is not to repudiate the sense of purgation in the text intimated by critics such as Atkins, but to illustrate the value of the poem's allowance for the reader to be generated alongside the text. Immediately striking is the composition of the quoted excerpt, which pairs periphrastic clauses with a lack of punctuation, to dramatise the search for this elusive third figure. The reader is acknowledged in the text, 'gliding' across the poem and 'walking' alongside the speaker. The words 'hooded', 'wrapt', and 'mantle' all evoke coverings, suggesting, however, that the reader is more inchoate than completely

[138] Anthony Cuda, 'Coda: *The Waste Land*'s Afterlife: The Poem's Reception in the Twentieth Century and Beyond', p. 195.

[139] *TWL,* l. 359.

[140] '*The Waste Land*' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 206.

[141] Eliot's Notes to *TWL,* l. 411.

reconstituted in the text. Further, it is not the reader who is the speaker's interlocutor, indicating that the reader is not the agent, but the object of this act. The 'you' in this excerpt refers rather to the text itself – the poem enacting its expedition at a textual level, given the lack of punctuation.

Suggesting an imbrication of simultaneous openness and withdrawal, this excerpt betrays an oscillation between these two poles. With an absence of commas or full stops between lines, the only punctuation beginning or ending the lines consists of two question marks (for the same question of 'who is the third who walks beside you') and an em dash beginning the final line of the excerpt (—But who is that on the other side of you?), implying the interruption in this generation of the reader. Eliot himself maintained that the punctuation in his poetry is deliberate: The value of punctuation, he writes, 'in poetry […] is more largely that of musical notation'.[142] He continues:

> The absence of commas in parts of the last section of *The Waste Land* is to indicate that the voice is not to be dropped, and that the passage is to be read aloud in a kind of monotone. Of course I should deprecate the development of any exact notation for poetry, indicating the changes of tempo etc. for I think that latitude should be left to different readings just as a musical piece can be interpreted very differently by different conductors. The author's way of reading a poem is only one possible way: certainly a good poem should be capable of meaning different things to different people.[143]

Despite Eliot's emphasis on the openness of interpretation for readers, he paradoxically maintains the poem's voice as monotonous. In effect, Eliot claims to ascribe a disembodied,

[142] Quoted in 'In Eliot's Own Words: *The Waste Land* – To Montgomery Belgion, 19 July 1940', *T.S. Eliot* (n.d.) <https://tseliot.com/editorials/in-eliots-own-words-the-waste-land> [accessed 30 October 2023].

[143] Ibid.

droning quality to the text, leaving out the voice of the reader. Hence, my suggestion with *The Waste Land* is not that the reader is completely re-generated in the poetry; the closings, the coverings, and the 'leavings out' deny the reader the space to be sustained throughout the text. It is within the cracks and fissures, in tension with the poem's dislocations and disjunctures, where the reader is engaged in a dialectic of generation and degeneration – a process of experiential engagement. While much of the analysis thus far has focused on the textual engagement, it would be prudent to now turn to the affective sense in which this poem operates.

Describing Eliot's aesthetics, Frank Kermode has labelled a particular sensation, identifying this as 'the shudder' – an experience 'one would rather not have, and which are roughly antithetical to moments of ecstasy'.[144] This betrays a sense of the readerly experience as an effect of Eliot's 'words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations'.[145] It is precisely this dialectic of the newness and suddenness that creates the reader's affective response to the poem – a paradoxical relationship between newness and re-encountering. Hence, the direct acknowledgement of the reader in 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?', is couched under the veneers of their wrapt, hooded mantles. Conjuring the chaotic 'hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains'[146] in the succeeding passage, we can infer a stage of continual re-encountering. This is further substantiated by Madame Sosostris's adumbration of 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring'.[147] Thus, the possibility of the 'shudder' in *The Waste Land* arises from, I would contend, the poem's

[144] 'Eliot and the Shudder', *London Review of Books*, 32.9 (May, 2010) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n09/frank-kermode/eliot-and-the-shudder> [accessed 16 August 2023].

[145] T.S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger (*Times Literary Supplement,* 27 May 1919 [Part 1]; *Athenaeum,* 11 June 1920 [Part II])', *T.S. Eliot* (2020) <https://tseliot.com/essays/philip-massinger> [accessed 20 October 2023].

[146] *TWL*, ll. 368-370.
[147] *TWL*, l. 56.

oscillation between degeneration and generation for the reader – an oscillation that is never fully resolved nor fixed. Affectively, reading *The Waste Land* is iterative of the poem's invitation of 'a heap of broken images', weaving and interweaving the multifarious contents and multiple forms of consciousness, implicating the readers in the text. Indeed, in 1923 Conrad Aiken noted the poem's 'rich, vivid, crowded use of implication is a virtue […] it gives the desired strangeness'.[148] Such strangeness or 'bewilderment'[149] are, for my part, different words to describe the affective phenomenon of readerly engaging in *The Waste Land*.

Yet, in describing the expressive potential of the text, a distant, zoomed-out reading of the poem enables us to attend to the poem's architectural arrangement. The 1922 Boni and Liveright publication of the poem is most striking, not least because of the first appearance of Eliot's notes. Pointing toward an architectural 'plan' indebted to the material of the Holy Grail myth via Jessie L. Weston and James Frazer,[150] the notes moreover cover the gamut of esoteric anthropological, classical, and anecdotal references, most of which are likely to exceed the readers' knowledge and expertise. Later in his life, Eliot attenuates the value of the notes in the late 1950s, notoriously dismissing them as 'a remarkable exposition of bogus scholarships' that have 'led critics into temptation'.[151] Eliot rather underplays their value in these statements. I shall argue, as Wayne Koestenbaum does, that the footnotes both imply and invite the reader in to the text, as they attempt to understand the poem.[152] In the poem's

[148] 'An Anatomy of Melancholy', repr. in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 152.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Eliot's Notes to *TWL*.

[151] Quoted in Cuda, 'Coda: *The Waste Land*'s Afterlife: The Poem's Reception in the Twentieth Century and Beyond', pp. 196-197.

[152] Quoted in Gold, 'The Expert Hand and the Obedient Heart: Dr. Vittoz, T.S. Eliot, and the Therapeutic Possibilities of *The Waste Land*', p. 519.

disjointed experience, it is nearly impossible to read the text uninterruptedly; readers must jump between the poem's text and Eliot's notes at the end of the main poem.[153] Paratextually, the physical act of the reader oscillating between the poem per se and its notes, figures as a material act that creates openings for the space of the reader to be invited into the text amidst its jolting and abrupt switches. Far from Eliot's later dismissal of the notes, they open up and enable the reader to be generated through their formal re-encounters with the poem. Nevertheless, to argue that the reader is sustained in their re-generation through the poem strikes me as slightly reductive.

Despite the poem's formal possibilities of leaving out, entreating readers into the poem, *The Waste Land*'s readerly relationship is not sustained but suspended in the dialectic between generation and degeneration. Hence, it is worth thinking about Eliot's distinction between poetry and poetic material when he writes in 1933: 'What we experience as readers is never exactly what the poet experienced […] What the poet experienced is not poetry but poetic material; the writing of the poetry is a fresh "experience" for him, and the reading of it, by the author or anyone else, is another thing still.'[154] In effect, the reader's experience, while distinct from the poet's and his intentions, underlies the potential for reconstruction and re-generation in the text. Yet this is limited by the distance of the poem's scientific 'material' – a distance that cannot be fully overcome, but is in a constantly shifting status. Attempting to demonstrate the process of 'leaving out' in *the Waste Land* as an oscillation between generation and degeneration for the reader, this research shall now turn to Stein's *Tender*

[153] This is how it was originally published by Boni and Liveright in 1922. See *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) for a facsimile of this publication.

[154] 'Excerpts from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933)', *T.S. Eliot* (2020) <https://tseliot.com/prose/the-use-of-poetry-and-the-use-of-criticism> [accessed 15 September 2023].

Buttons to examine a more iterative and generative readerly affect – one where the reader is persistently being made anew.

Suffice it to say, it would be remiss not to consider the literary distances separating Stein from Eliot as writers, despite being classified as modernists. Let us consider, for instance, the following section from *Tender Buttons:*

> OBJECTS.
>
> Within, within the cut and slender joint alone, with sudden equals and no more than three, two in the centre make two one side.
>
> If the elbow is long and it is filled so then the best example is all together.
>
> The kind of show is made by squeezing.[155]

Clearly, Eliot's and Stein's writings are not uniform. Comparable insofar as they cannot be read in a normal, conventional way, Eliot's text at least offers the possibility of comprehension, albeit with contextual support and with an active reader, invited into the gaps of *The Waste Land,* through its defamiliarising punctuation and textual re-encounters. The process of reading Stein is a more explicitly disruptive experience; my aim here is to illustrate the value of *Tender Buttons* in soliciting a different mode of engagement by deliberately 'leaving out' an interlocutor. In the passage above, notice both the lack of an interlocutor and the speaking 'I', juxtaposed with the binary of singularity ('the cut and lender joint *alone*', 'make two *one side*') and plurality ('sudden *equals*', 'the best example is *all together*'). Suggesting a 'squeezing' – a wringing out of language – the various threads that construct a sense of togetherness are unravelled to reveal their bare parts to draw depths of meaning from the simplest clusters of words. The spatial references ('*within*', 'at the *centre*', 'one *side*') convey an interiority to the section, closing off the spaces for the reader to be invited into the text, in conjunction with the closing punctuation via caesurae of commas

[155] *TB,* p. 379.

and full-stops. The title of this section itself, 'Objects.', succeeded by a full-stop, indicates another covering, limiting potential invitations into the poem. Simultaneously, we see this section enacting a movement between withdrawal and disclosure: the first sentence with its multiple incomplete clauses, dramatise this process of enjoining disparate elements together – that is, of synthesising meaning. Precisely the process being enacted, the succeeding lines are shortened, without paratactic breaks, in effect, 'squeezing' language together.

For all the new formal possibilities inherent in Stein, I highlight their potential for 'leaving out' the reader as an invitation to paradoxically allow them in. In the above section's 'squeezing' of language, Margueritte Murphy opines that Stein's disruptive poetry functions 'as if to purge oneself of the compulsion to name, to designate, to fix a single identity on an object'.[156] On a similar note, Marianne DeKoven identifies the obstruction of normal reading by the inability to form coherent, fixed meanings as the most seminal feature in Stein's writing.[157] While these arguments strike me as correct, my addition here is that the disruption of fixed, single identities extends not only to the objects strewn in *Tender Buttons*, but moreover encompasses the separation between the text and the readers themselves. This collapsing of the boundaries demarcating the text and the reader is illustrated in the quoted excerpt's movement between aloneness and togetherness, inciting a vacillation between the two. Like the multiple subjects scattered across the text, the reader is likewise unfixed and 'squeezed' together with the poem. As DeKoven intimates, there is no guide and no key to unlocking *Tender Buttons*, unlike *The Waste Land*'s paratextual addendums through Eliot's notes. Thus, the poetry is in tension between unmaking the word and ourselves in order to

[156] *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, p. 143.

[157] *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*, p. 5.

remake the world and ourselves.[158] Unlike *The Waste Land,* the reader of *Tender Buttons* requires no special knowledge to unlock what the poem is actually about. This section makes reference to an object 'within the cut and slender joint', for instance, yet we are not privy to what this object may be, with the title itself acting as a vague placeholder for 'objects', without disclosing which objects are being referenced. Further, as it is written in a passive voice, we can comprehend the objects of the sentences at a textual level, yet the subject of the act seems untenable and hidden. In the last sentence, 'the kind of show' serves as the object of the act, but the subject itself seems obscured: is it 'squeezing', by which the verb functions as a gerund, or is there a subject doing the squeezing?

In apprehending the subject of the sentence in Stein, I aim to highlight the potential for the reader's involvement and engagement as crucial to interpreting the text. In her book, *The Language Poets Use*, Winifred Nowottny argues that the 'meaning' of a poem's references is dependent on the poet's knowledge and awareness of them. [159] While Nowottny is referring to the use of allusions in poetry, what is germane to this section on Stein is the sentences' referents being out of reach for the reader, ostensibly only accessible to the poet herself. As we shall see, this argument underestimates the role of the reader and their response to the text in assimilating and engaging with these references to conjure meaning. While she notes that the meaning of the poem is coded in to the reader who is actively attuned to the allusions and referents, this argument presupposes that the reader must be deliberately aware of them, lacking their experience prima facie as a structure inherent in the

[158] See Ariane Mildenberg, 'A "Dance of Gestures": Hyperdialectic in Gertrude Stein's Compositions', p. 387: 'We must, Stein seems to say, lose the world and the word as we know them in order to gain them.'

[159] *The Language Poets Use* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1962), p. 204. Quite bluntly for Nowottny, the references function as 'compost', opining that the serve only as nourishment for the author's own composition.

poem's re-composition. This sounds obscurant, but there is something important at stake here: it is the reader's approach, experience, and engagement with finding referents and references in *Tender Buttons*'s sentences, despite the difficulties of unpacking meaning.

In this impossibility to say just what Stein means, *Tender Buttons* occasions the possibility for a fluidity of reference, whereby the pronouns are likewise indeterminate. I believe that the reader is deliberately left out of the text in order to invite them in. Unlike in *The Waste Land* where the speaker shifts from Tiresias to a voice reminiscent of a 1920s Eliot, and unlike in *Three Poems* where the speaker is refracted and shifting, Stein does not disclose the speaking 'I'.[160] In a similar vein, the speaker's interlocutor is not clear. There is a relationality between the poem's speaker and the reader. Readers are forced to be active in their attempts to disclose the substances in question, creating that space for themselves to enter a text that seems to be closed off and finite. Indeed, for Marjorie Perloff, Stein 'wants us to be able to fill in the gaps in whatever way suits us'.[161] At one level, this enacts the possibility of re-capturing and revealing the substances discussed, causing us to see these objects in their pre-predicative meaning rooted in our experience. Suspending language in its pre-signifier state allows these objects to be generated anew, as if we were 'expressing things seen not as one knows them' but as they are in the act of appearing and organising itself in our recollection.[162] My proposal here is that the same enterprise is occurring for the reader themselves.

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[160] The only exceptions in the entire text being the following two phrases where the pronoun 'I' appears: Once in 'Objects' under 'A Little Called Pauline': 'I hope she has her cow', *TB*, p. 381. The second in 'Food' under 'Butter': 'I spy', p. 390. Of course, in typical Steinian play, 'I's homophone, 'eyes', recurs throughout the text, e.g. 'Suppose an Eyes.', p. 382.

[161] *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, p. 106.

[162] Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984) <EBook on Kindle> [accessed 30 June 2023].

The process of reading Stein, unlike Eliot's, occurring in a dialectic between the degenerative and the regenerative, is an iterative process of generation. In this context, Stein's opaque prose, attempts to, much like a deconstructive reading, pull out the threads that give her sentences[163] and the reader relationships, thus unravelling them in order to *re-construct* them. The summative of the various signifiers cannot coherently construct the text's subject matter. However, in refusing to become a medium that values the apotheosis of the coverings of language, my position is that 'leaving out' the reader engenders the possibility of reconstituting the reader. As Stein writes in 'Roastbeef.', the surfaces, suggestions, and silences abound for the reader, so that 'any time there is a surface there is a surface and every time there is a suggestion there is a suggestion and every time there is silence there is silence'.[164] Consequently, reading *Tender Buttons* is an act that consciously generates the reader amidst the surfaces, suggestions, and silences, rendering them anew each time they read the text.

Turning to a close reading of the poem's first section, 'Objects', I shall analyse the ways in which 'leaving out' the pronouns and referents functions as an invitation to be generated in the text:

> A BOX.
>
> Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.[165]

Pairing syntactical obliqueness with linguistic similarities, Stein's unorthodox language foments greater interpretative focus on the words themselves at an individual level, as well as

[163] In terms, that is, of the words' existence as materiality, rather than coherence that builds on each succeeding sentence.
[164] *TB*, p. 383.
[165] *TB*, p. 375.

the flow of what Roman Ingarden refers to as sentence-thought ('*Satzdenken*').[166] Immersed in this sentence-thought flow, we attempt, Ingarden writes, to 'think out the "continuation" […] But if by chance the following sentence has no tangible connection whatever with the sentence we have just thought through, there then comes a blockage in the stream of thought'.[167] Yet in Stein, it seems this 'blockage' is never overcome; after all, this concept is predicated on the idea of sentence-sequences as a continual flow. I would surmise, however, that this rupture of the sentence-thought flow is precisely what allows readers to be reconstituted in the text. Without any sequential framework of meaning for the text 'to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely', readers are thrust into the text's twists, turns, and disjunctures. Immediately, in the first sentence for instance, we notice the syntactical similarity through the prepositional phrases ('*out* of'). Simultaneously suggesting the act of emergence and of opening, the words themselves betray linguistic pairing, at the level of suffixes ('red*ness*' and 'rude*ness*'), or at the level of alliteration ('comes' and 'cattle'). Yet, the word that is most striking to me is 'eye', both as the only monosyllabic noun and for its assonance in the long vowel sound, contrasting the shorter vowel sounds preceding the 'eye' (e.g. 'r*e*dn*e*ss').

This research proposes that this 'eye' stands as a homophone for the pronoun 'I'. The leaving out of the 'you' strikes me as pertinent. Because the speaking 'I' is similarly absent from the prose-poem, the ground separating the speaker and reader implodes, allowing for the reader to re-emerge out of this 'eye/I'. This is further reinforced by the 'research' that 'comes' out of 'an eye'. We can interpret this word in two ways. Firstly, 'research', as the word implies, is a systematic investigation by careful and thorough study of the text – exactly the enterprise undertaken by the reader, as they engage in the text's difficulties. Secondly,

[166] Quoted in Wolfgang Iser,' The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', p. 284.
[167] Ibid., p. 284.

breaking the word down into 're-search' indicates the actions of re-navigating, re-negotiating, and re-emerging – an action that is predicated upon the iterative generation of the reader's capacious subjectivity. This is moreover compounded by the fluidity of the sentence structure, one that is meandering and winding. This excerpt's final clause ('it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again') points to this fluidity of referents in Stein's writing; where exactly would the green be pointing to? Referents are undermined by what they do *not* refer to, but what they do refer to remains open to question.

Destabilising the fixed referents and signifieds, both of language and of the readerly identity at a textual, micro-level, this chapter shall now focus on a distant, macro-level, taking the page as a unit. In so doing, we comprehend the relationship between the open, fluid, pre-linguistic sense of *Tender Buttons* with the coverings and the vessels inhabiting the text. By doing so, I aim to uncover how carefully Stein has structured the sequence in its reverberations across the text in different sections. In the copy of *Tender Buttons* reprinted in *Modernism: An Anthology*, it is salient to me that directly opposite the page with the excerpt quoted above ('A Box.'), is 'A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.'[168] Marjorie Perloff intuits that the parts of *Tender Buttons* 'remain parts of an unspecified whole';[169] while Perloff is referring to here is the individual parts at a close, textual level, my aim is to illustrate the importance of provisionally extending this idea to the materiality of the text as a printed, paged unit. There is, I maintain, a significant relationality between these two vessels (a carafe and a box) that enact the dialectic of 'leaving out' as a way for the reader to be generated. While both vessels function as synecdochic coverings that are cognate to, but not explicitly at the centre of the poem, there are differences between the two as objects per se. A box suggests something that is solidly closed off and shut in, whereas a carafe, with its flared

[168] *TB*, p. 374.
[169] Perloff, p. 105.

lip, is registered as something more open, allowing for liquids to be fluid. Given that the argument thus far has been that *Tender Buttons* allows for an iterative generation for the reader through the text's capacious subjectivity, reading is a practice best understood as emanating from the folds of the text's materiality. Like the box and the carafe, the ground separating the two – one as closed and fixed; the other as liquid and fluid – is collapsed; as Stein intimates under 'A Carafe', 'the difference is spreading'.[170] Through the dialectic of closing and dis-closing, I argue that Stein's poetry is one where the reader is constantly being made anew, a process of unravelling the self's subjectivity as well as a polyvalent readerly engagement. This process of unravelling the self is most fully undertaken by John Ashbery in *Three Poems*, which, like in *Tender Buttons*, demonstrates a 'leaving out' closely linked to this sense of constant shifting and refraction. Closely reading *Three Poems* with a degree both of specificity and distance will involve elucidating the particular affect engaged by the re-generative 'you' emerging in Ashbery's prose-poem, an effect that I argue extends beyond the particular engagements achieved by Eliot and Stein, in the oscillation between degeneration and generation, and in the iterative generation of the reader, respectively. As we shall see, to account for this re-generative 'you' in Ashbery is to recognise the grounds of a process of gradual togetherness of the 'you'. Neither definitive nor final, it is more akin to a with-ness of change and refraction.

To begin unpacking this re-generative act in reading, Ashbery's *Three Poems* addresses the process of re-generation of the reader. As was indicated in the previous chapter, experimental poetry of the 20th century allowed for greater interpretative focus on the process of meaning-making, through which meaning can be disclosed by readers navigating the poems' cracks and disjunctions. *Three Poems's* second section, 'The System', conjures the

[170] *TB*, p. 374.

question first addressed by Eliot in this process of reading ('Who is the third who walks always beside you?'). Except instead of the speaker addressing the text as their interlocutor, Ashbery's speaker communicates directly to the reader: The words 'are the same words as before. Their meaning is the same, only *you* have changed: you are viewing it all from a different angle.'[171] Distilling the self in mediation with the process of viewing everything differently, Ashbery's elusive prose enacts the introspective, but transformative, process disclosing the reader's re-generation.

Three Poems develops its texture through a process of continual refocusing and refraction – or as Ashbery himself describes, a texture 'of bewildering luxuriance'.[172] This somewhat pithy conviction betrays the discourse of reading *Three Poems* – a simultaneous beguilement and openness, reminiscent of the slippages in Stein. 'Leaving out', the key term of this chapter, originates from the poem's opening lines, where the speaker begins with an acknowledgement of breaking the distance of poetry between the text and both the poet and the reader: 'I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.' [173] What strikes me as a reader is the sense of the beguiling aim of deepening understanding into the process of uncovering (or leaving out) poetry. Conscious of its own workings as a poem, the text develops through differentiations and shifts of attention; note, for instance, the lack of a direct object in 'leaving all out'. What, we might ask, is the speaker attempting to leave out? In a Steinian fashion, the referent is obscured, so that readers can guess the object of 'leaving out'

[171] *TP*, p. 93.

[172] Quoted in John Ashbery and Mark Ford, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford* (London: Between the Lines, 2003), p. 56. Ashbery is referring specifically to Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* and Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, and agrees with Ford that this is the same 'texture' he attempted for *Three Poems.*

[173] *TP*, p. 3.

as multiple possibilities, ranging from life itself, to the process of writing, to the subjectivity of the self. Ashbery's *Three Poems* seems to *exhaust* the possibilities, rather than affixing itself to any particular one. This sense of exhaustion and exhaustiveness in *Three Poems* shall be further explored in Chapter 3. The shift and disorienting lack of an object for the transitive 'leaving' indicates the gaps and blockages that, to recall Ingarden, a reader must 'overcome' if the reading 'is to flow once more'.[174] Given the motif of transformation and fluidity pursued in the text, transforming a 'scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble',[175] my suggestion here is that the 'blockages' exposed and realised in *Three Poems* are not 'dead ends' that must be overcome, as Ingarden speculated. Rather, they re-compose and re-generate the very process of reading. Ashbery's words, 'intimate and noble', moreover depict the register of *Three Poems* – a register combining a conversational, intimate quality, with a tantalising communicative and syntactical difficulty. Resultantly, reading Ashbery, one must, Ben Hickman posits, 'attend to their process and the individual, minor conclusions that their syntax prompts one to make along the way'.[176] In focusing our attention on the process of reading, my suggestion extends Hickman's argument by allowing the reader to conjugate in this manner the distance and the beguilement of the poem, offering the potential for Ashbery's poetics to emerge in a fluid texture.

The fluidity of Ashbery's text allows for slippages of 'leaving out' – unveiling and re-composing the reader. The succeeding lines of the book's opening make the slippages even more apparent at a textual level:

clean-washed sea

[174] Quoted in Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', p. 284.

[175] *TP*, p. 118.

[176] *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 154.

The flowers were.

These are examples of leaving out.[177]

This process of leaving out is embodied textually, in a manner conjuring Stein's 'the difference is spreading'. Visually, the text is spread out, engendering the possibility of catching ourselves as readers in the sudden gaps of meaning. [178] Betraying a sense of the fluidity of *Three Poems*, the text flows from prose to poetry, suggesting Ashbery working through how exactly to leave all out. As a textual event, the reader is confronted with various threads here to unravel. Immediately striking is the first word, 'clean-washed', which functions as a compound word. The hyphen, in particular, registers as an act of conjoining, at once metonymic of the readerly engagement as a with-ness to the text. The indication of cleansing and washing implies a vastation, a purification in 'leaving out'. As a self-reflexive word, it strikes me as reminiscent of Ashbery. What follows 'clean-washed' is the word 'sea' and a large unfilled gap, marking an elasticity as well as an openness to be the text. As if carried away by the current of the text, the mercurial texture of the prose-poem, Drew Milne notes, 'is forever slipping off into something different'.[179]

A mutable experience, language is stretched out, as the first line contains no full-stops or breaks; immediately succeeding is a sentence of only three words, marked by a full-stop, indicating the process of refraction – a syntax simultaneously elastic and taut. Further substantiated by the sound of the language, the assonance of the long 'e' sound in 'cl*ea*n-washed s*ea*' is emphasised, signifying a sense of openness and vastness, only to be followed by the short 'e' assonance in 'th*e* flow*e*rs w*e*re'. Ashbery's writing is attuned to absences, as

[177] *TP*, p. 3.

[178] Paul Zweig, 'Difficulty as a Means of Expression', *The New York Times Archives* (April, 1972) <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/09/archives/three-poems-by-john-ashbery-118-pp-new-york-the-viking-press-cloth.html> [accessed 27 July 2023].

[179] 'The Diamond Light of Pure Speculation: John Ashbery's *Three Poems*'.

indicated by that second line. While we may read this as an absence at a grammatical level (under the impression that 'the flowers' were doing something in a past progressive tense – the action of which is elided and not privy to the reader), we may also read this as a statement about the past existence of the flowers, which no longer 'are' but 'were'. This analysis offers that *Three Poems* creates a texture engaging in the possibility of re-generation, a possibility that is afforded to the reader.

It is this refraction, this inability to pin down the text that abuts the 'processes through which "you" take shape', forever coming 'in and out of focus, in a fluid texture'.[180] In conjunction with the quoted excerpt's line breaks and the spacing, the fragments set themselves afloat in this medium of elusive argument. Conventional narrative forms diminish and fall apart, broadening the possibilities of language as this medium through which the reader engages with the text and the potentiality of reading as an act of re-generation. Ashbery writes: 'Is there a reason to stay where we are […] supposing it would lead to knowledge? No, it is far better to continue on our way […] We might at least wind up with a knowledge of who they are, with whom we began and […] reached through a more perfect understanding of ourselves and the true way.'[181] This is a process by which readers may find themselves disclosed through a process of continual engagement. Discursively enacting this possibility of uncovering the self beyond the confines of language, the 'you' that emerges is mercurial and capricious, forever slipping off and elusive. 'They are the same words as before. Their meaning is the same, only *you* have changed: you are viewing it all from another angle.'[182] The emergent 'you' both refers to the speaking voice addressing itself and, more pertinently to this analysis, to the reader reading the text. It would be salient to

[180] Ibid.
[181] *TP*, pp. 69-70.
[182] *TP*, p. 93.

recognise the poetics of this 'you' as both a singular and plural pronoun. The mutability of this 'you' – as both speaker and reader, and as both singular and plural – resists any singular explication chaining the narrative to the voice of a speaker, allowing for multiplicity and mutability.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to read this relationality of the poet and reader as similar to what is presented in Eliot's poetry. Here, the poem's exploration of the 'you' acquires a different relationship with the reader, unlike in *The Waste Land*. Eliot as author, through his notes especially, is understood as an authority figure, limiting the possibilities of what the text means; although, as this research has demonstrated, *The Waste Land*'s turns of instabilities and de-generations offer spaces germane to the reader in navigating their ways through the text in modes of re-encountering. Readers of *Three Poems* are guided by Ashbery's speaker; although not simple but laborious, the poet promises readers the possibility of 'continuing, but ever beginning / My perennial voyage, into new memories, new hope and flowers / The way the coasts glide past you'.[183]

In this regard, the Ashberyan 'leaving out' is most clearly suggested in the polyphonic possibilities of how pronouns function as re-generative potential. Ashbery's own sense of pronouns in his oeuvre emphasises their intriguing newness in an oceanic field of narrative possibilities:

> The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. 'You' can be myself or it can be another person […] and my point is also it doesn't matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing at that

[183] John Ashbery, 'The Skaters', repr. by *Penn Sound* (n.d.) <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Ashbery/the_skaters.php> [accessed 23 March 2023].

> particular moment rather than a particular person involved. […] I find it very easy to move from one person in the sense of a pronoun to another and this again helps produce a kind of polyphony in my poetry.[184]

The motive here is not to represent the self as static and fixed but to engage in the way self-consciousness, like the arguments of the text, ebbs and flows in the poem's vicissitudes. The reader, accordingly, is transformed in the text, attendant to the loosening of the distinctions between 'you' and 'I'. The vagaries of the reader are coextensive with the speaker's, denoting the attention to these processes as ways of generating meaning. The book's final section, 'The Recital', displays at once this capacious consciousness of the self, inculcating the reader in so doing, and a self-reflexivity, aware of the readerly re-generation through the text: 'And it is true that each of us is this multitude as well as that isolated individual; we experience the energy and beauty of the others as a miraculous manna from heaven; at the same time our eyes are turned inward to the darkness and emptiness within.'[185] Constituting a complex fabric of selves, the reader is, in my view, enacting the process of reading as a continual change – a similar endeavour offered in *Tender Buttons* of creating a capacious subjectivity. If, as Ron Silliman notes, 'the privileged pronoun […in] the earlier stages of this book' is 'you, a term that is decidedly slipperier than either I or we, because, as here, it can – but doesn't have to – imply writer as well as reader',[186] then the multitudinous and plenitudinous 'we' is the privileged pronoun in this final section. Appropriately self-reflexive, this is one form of 'leaving out' – learning how to synthesise elements together, whose destinations were initially concealed to us. For what occurs in the poem is not a hierarchic movement of

[184] Quoted in Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 138.

[185] *TP*, p. 115.

[186] 'Four Contexts for *Three Poems*: *Three Poems* (1972)', *Conjunctions*, 49 (2007) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24516475> [accessed 26 July 2023] p. 293.

cause-effect, but rather a process-centric approach whereby the reader is co-opted in the textual event, a growing and generating process.

In turn, the poem's self-reflexivity gestures toward the intimacy imbued between the text and the reader, an activity predicated upon the reader's re-generation and transformation. 'The Recital' intimates this readerly engagement: 'There is only the urge to get on with it all. It is like the difference between someone who is in love and someone who is merely "good in bed": there is no vital remnant which would transform one's entire effort into an image somewhat resembling oneself.' [187] Suggestive of the readerly transformation, this moreover reads to me as the conventional urge and desire in reading to 'get on with it all'. Yet *Three Poems* constructs this space fostering intimacy and the activating the reader's imagination in the text. Attentive to the reader embodying the text through the gaps and spaces, *Three Poems* enacts a process of self-reflexivity, where the transformation of the readerly 'you' is refractive and open, soliciting the reader into the poetry. The varying subjectivities of the 'I' flow outwards here: 'In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself. But we must learn to live in others.'[188] Evidently, the reader's distance from the text collapses, slipping from 'I' to 'we', breathing life into the text's 'slowly unfolding expansiveness'.[189] Hence, in 'leaving out', Ashbery paradoxically allows the readers to be let in to the text, engaged in a re-generative process of transformation and self-reflexivity with the poetry.

The goal of this chapter has been to articulate the sense in which 'leaving out' solicits modes of invitations for the reader into the texts. It is ultimately the generative process afforded to the reader in these experimental poems that is offered here. Using the Ashberyan

[187] *TP*, p. 111.
[188] *TP*, p. 13.
[189] *TP*, p. 12.

term, ‘leaving out’, I have sought to situate each of the three writers analysed here in how their poetry ‘leaves out’ spaces for the reader to enter and be re-generated through texts, albeit in different ways: where *The Waste Land* offers readers the possibility of re-encountering the text in a fluctuation between degeneration and regeneration; *Tender Buttons* offers readers an iterative, re-generative relationality, whereby readers are consciously rendered anew in the text; finally, *Three Poems* offers a polyvalent, shifting change of the self, suggesting a multitudinous subjectivity. That the texts emphasise the readerly engagement in a re-generative affective response, is an indication of how experimental poetry creates spaces and gaps germane to the act of readerly reconstitution in the poems. Having done so, the next chapter shall extend this analysis, further exploring the acts of reading experimental poetry, reified through certain physiological processes. Far from the act of reading poetry understood as a process of dissection,[190] there is a sense of the poems’ aliveness, where the reader, much like Eliot’s ideal poet, is ‘conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living’.[191] With this thesis, much of the research has argued for precisely this iterative, and re-generative role of the reader as indeed already ‘living’.

[190] Or anaesthetisation, akin to Eliot’s ‘etherised patient’ in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’.
[191] ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, p. 112.

CHAPTER 3: INGESTION-DIGESTION-EXHAUSTION: LITERARY AFFORDANCES

Developing from Chapter 2's discussion on experiential close reading and the readerly re-generation, experimental poetry is underpinned by the importance of the readerly experience, an experience that is at once powerfully creative and self-reflective; reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's sense that 'I am rooted, but I flow',[192] the reader is similarly rooted in the linguistic surfaces of the text, while their imagination flows between the cracks and spaces offered in Eliot's, Stein's, and Ashbery's poetry. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited that philosophy is rooted in experience, in the flow of our interactions of Being-in-the-world; this 'fundamental interrogation', he continues, is what co-creates 'the world'.[193] The affordances of experimental poetry offer us a continual interrogation of the experience of reading as itself a critical practice – one that Merleau-Ponty claims would function as a movement toward understanding the world.[194] One such compelling effect of this idea is how phenomenology is inscribed into textual forms; I posit that this notion of experience as praxis resonates with the three texts chosen for this analysis. Accordingly, this chapter will consider ingestion, digestion, and exhaustion as key critical methodologies that underpin the readerly engagement in these texts.

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[192] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Alma Books, 2015) <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=4880938> [accessed 22 August 2023] p. 71.

[193] Michael Berman, 'The Hyper-Dialectic in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Fresh', *Philosophy Today*, 47.4 (Winter, 2003) <http://chain.kent.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/hyper-dialectic-merleau-pontys-ontology-flesh/docview/205379627/se-2> [Accessed 19 February 2023] p. 405.

[194] Ibid.

The twentieth century experienced a shift in ideas of consumption, both of food; and of knowledge and information, more broadly. In his seminal essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', Walter Benjamin writes, 'the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organised [and] the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances.'[195] Although Benjamin is referring here to film as a medium which has been induced by technological changes in production, the literature of the 20th century, especially in the innovative works of modernist and postmodernist texts, displays a similar affinity and awareness to the changes induced by capitalist mass production. Maria Christou draws upon these insights, believing that the treatment of the 'alimentary', in particular, adds to our understanding of experimentalism, and moreover constitutes important facets about engagement with 20th century literature.[196] Indeed, shifting attitudes to consumption, of food and of knowledge, are inscribed in these texts and demonstrate this relationship as more than passive consumption. In this analysis, I aim to anchor this discussion using digestion as a metaphor, not only of physiological processes, but of ingesting and exhausting knowledge, words, and meanings. I propose that there is a dynamic interplay between ingestion, digestion, and exhaustion as bodily and consumptive affordances that can be read in each of our three texts.

These critical apparatuses are not pursued in their bodily, physiological processes, so much as in their value in informing acts of reading and inscription. Maria Christou has indicated how modernism's fundamental enterprise is to rethink pleasure; authors, she states,

[195] Repr. in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 1098.

[196] Maria Christou, 'Introduction: You Are What You Eat: Thinking Food Otherwise', in *Eating Otherwise: The Philosophy of Food in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) < https://www-cambridge-org.chain.kent.ac.uk/core/books/eating-otherwise/introduction/40DB16D086B7467D6069C138E2EBDB01> [accessed 23 August 2023] p. 3.

'would also be inclined to think food, an everyday source of pleasure, otherwise.'[197] It is in the prospect of rethinking pleasure that I use the term 'affordances' – that is, an attempt at rethinking processes, acknowledging a shift to the possibilities of *jouissance*[198] that these texts afford us. Accordingly, this chapter employs three distinct critical terms, and I would like briefly to indicate the way I use and delineate these terms from one another. While each of these signifies in some capacity methods of taking in and receiving, there are subtle, but important, distinctions at play. Ingestion primarily functions as a means of taking in language, at a gustatory level; I am chiefly using ingestion as metonymy for the mouth, as I focus on the 'taste' of language. Digestion functions as a means of assimilation, of re-constructing and re-ordering meaning and language; its relation to the stomach is evident, as meaning is in a peristalsis of expansion and contraction. Finally, exhaustion, and its related term exhaustiveness, functions as an attempt to encompass a comprehensive utilisation of the text's 'nutrients' – in this case, it is related to the mind in consuming information.

In the context of the overall argument I am positing, the objective of this chapter is to disclose the relationship between phenomenological discourses using these corporeal conceptions and the experimental poetry examined here. In this chapter, the sense of 'disclosure' outlined takes on a different sense; namely, I trace how Eliot's, Stein's, and Ashbery's poetry unveils ideas about knowledge and information in the process of reading – affordances that can be better conceptualised through the proposed triadic paradigm of digestion, ingestion, and exhaustion. For *The Waste Land,* at an immediate level, conveys the experience of assimilating and re-collecting the discarded fragments and residua 'upon the

[197] Ibid., p. 19.

[198] While the Barthesian *jouissance de la texte* opens us up to the excesses reading experimental texts offers, what concerns me is the sense of rethinking literature through these physiological processes-as-pleasure.

king my brother's wreck'.[199] *Tender Buttons* is replete with Stein's defamiliarising poetics that disclose pre-reflective experiences of food, revealing and capturing their essence. *Three Poems* communicates the encompassing nature of this *all*-ness and how we may consume this overload of information. This chapter traces a triadic paradigm of these three poems, using the metaphors of digestion (*The Waste Land*), ingestion (*Tender Buttons*), and exhaustion (*Three Poems*) to explore the reading processes involved in these experimental poems.

To begin analysing this, we can see how digestion as a process figures in Eliot's writing, both in his prose and poetry. Turning to Eliot's formative essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' will allow us disclose the conception of digestion as a writing process. The digestive process as a readerly affordance is explicitly on his mind, as he compares the mind of the poet to a 'receptacle' that collects feelings, phrases, and images; he believes the ideal poet

> may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind *digest* and transmute the passions which are its *material* ... [italics mine][200]

Eliot employs scientific metaphors throughout this essay, which is rather fitting given his perception that 'the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium'. [201] The materiality of literature is, also, plainly on his mind. Digestion functions as a means to acknowledge flux in form; moreover, it is a generative process that allows the poet to re-collect and break down the various materials into a new concentration. The permutations of waste as a textual form indicate how literature must make recourse to its own materiality. A

[199] *TWL*, l. 191.
[200] 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', p. 109.
[201] Ibid., p. 155. The word *medium* is particularly interesting, given Eliot's interest in occultism, as implicated by the figure of Madame Sosostris; see Donald J. Childs, 'Fantastic Views: T.S. Eliot and the Occultation of Knowledge and Experience,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 39.4 (1997) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40755132>, for more on the relationship between Eliot and occultism.

Poststructuralist reading aligns with this digestive process of a text's materiality, reminiscent of the Barthesian 'tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture'.[202] This interest in literature as a textual form, for William Viney, accounts for its value residing in 'the relationship between its content and the textual medium'.[203] My interest here is in uncovering this relationship, which accompanies the act of reading.

Some of the earliest reception of *The Waste Land* points to the particular model underlying the poem's structural arrangement. One early critic opined that Eliot belongs to a 'contemptible class of artists whose mills are perfect engines in perpetual want of grist'.[204] That this review employs the metaphor of the grist mill becomes significant as *The Waste Land* 'must pile up wists and straws' from its allusions and quotations to be ground in the text.[205] The image of the mills in 'perpetual want of grist' suggests a reading experience that must consciously collect the references strewn across the poem, akin to eating without masticating. For Eliot, the poet's mind is the 'receptacle' that collects and 'masticates' these references; however, it is Eliot's engagement with the myth of the 'waste land' that allows these references to be assimilated or 'perfectly digested', as the words of the same reviewer earlier pointed to in his discussion of the poem.[206] The recursion to myth in this 'method' underlies the possibility for 'making the modern world possible for art'.[207] Eliot's phrase here is intriguing – if the mythical method makes art possible for the modern world for the poet,

[202] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd edn. (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 1324.

[203] *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 82.

[204] Clive Bell, 'T. S. Eliot', *Nation and Athenaeum,* 33 (September, 1923) <https://archive.org/details/sim_nation-and-athenaeum_1923-09-22_33_25/page/772/mode/2up> [accessed 23 August 2023] p. 772.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', p. 167.

what intrigues me is the *reception* of art in the modern world: how do readers take in, or *digest,* the information needed to receive art?

That the mythical method provides a means of rewriting the 'material of art'[208] has technical, as well as conceptual implications about the modernist making of texts. Texts are informed by the production of waste, both in form and content, and *The Waste Land* is composed of figures of detritus and waste at an immediate level.[209] I follow William Viney in tracing *The Waste Land*'s literary composition as embedded in the intersection of waste and literature; however, I am not so much interested in the conception of literary waste, but rather the conception of literary digestion, or even indigestion, in the poem. Maud Ellmann notes that commentators and critics have overlooked 'its broken images in search of the totality it might have been'.[210] This search for totality was undoubtedly influenced by Eliot's acknowledgement of the Holy Grail legend in *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough* for the poem's 'plan' and symbols. However, this indebtedness does not account for the poetics of residua, of strewn substances and fragmentary flotsam, which is most evident in the textual composition.

Whereas much scholarship has focused on Ezra Pound's revisions and deletions to the text's manuscript,[211] what is most relevant for this research is the constantly shifting dynamics in *The Waste Land*'s literary composition. I aim to uncover the text's history as

[208] Eliot, quoted in Brooker, 'The case of the Missing Abstraction: Eliot, Frazer, and Modernism', p. 539.
[209] Viney, p. 82.
[210] 'A Sphinx without a Secret', repr. in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 259.

[211] Of these, I would point to Grover Smith's 'The Making of *The Waste Land*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 6.1 (1972) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777097> pp. 127-141 and Lyndall Gordon's *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) for thorough details about Pound's involvement in the poem's composition.

embedded in modes of (in)digestion, that is, in taking a 'heap of broken images' and assimilating them (or the failure thereof) in the readerly experience. Evident in the publishing disjunctures and changes is the sense that there can be no definitive version of the text, with differences of capitalisation, punctuation, and spacing between its four original publication versions.[212] Built into its history thus is an unsettled, and undulating text at the mercy of attempts to uncover its 'totality', as Ellman described. Spacing, in particular, is an important indicator of the text's organisation. Consider, for instance, the final line of the ancient Sanskrit fragments of 'Shantih'. In the *Boni and Liveright* edition, the line is set off by itself, with extra spaces between each iteration.[213] Unfettered and irresolute, the spacing coveys a noisy, murmuring incantation that refuses to rest. Matthew K. Gold, interpreting the 'Shantihs' in light of Eliot's psychological care at the hands of psychoanalyst Roger Vittoz, suggests that a possible reading of this ending invokes 'rest, and a feeling of release' by the reader concentrating on Shantih as a 'repeated attempt to concentrate the mind on peaceful thoughts'.[214] However, the noises, full of sound and fury, throughout the poem seem not to be quelled by the Vedic mantra from the Upanishads, but rather intensified; like the frightened woman questioning '"What is that noise?" […] "What is that noise now?"',[215] readers find themselves assailed by the preponderance of sounds: birds twitting, the barman's closing announcements, the cries of the thunder, and the ritualistic praying. Far from what reviewer

[212] Of course, the most salient of the publication differences is Eliot's notes that were appended solely to the American book publication by *Boni and Liveright*. See Michael North, 'A Note on the Text', in *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. xi.

[213] Ibid.

[214] Matthew K. Gold, 'The Expert Hand and the Obedient Heart: Dr. Vittoz, T.S. Eliot, and the Therapeutic Possibilities of *The Waste Land*', pp. 531-533.

[215] *TWL*, ll. 117, 119.

Edmund Wilson claimed to be 'some dry stoic Sanskrit maxims'[216] from the past, the repetition and spacing invoke ritual incantations, a noisy chanting that ceases to end.

Permutations in the text's composition cause material and affective differences, signifying the objective to read *The Waste Land* as an open-ended textual space. As has been noted in Chapter 1, the lack of a full stop, in these final lines, suggests simultaneously incompletion and expansion, enjoining us to inconclusively translate the open-ended nature of the ending to uncover the sharp, discrete perceptions, violently juxtaposed against one another. The full stop, originally present in the poem's original draft,[217] was excised in the printed copies, indicating both the failure to say more and the inability for these words to be digested properly, left irresolute and in process. Far from the release into sleep and rest that Gold posited, we find ourselves at once defamiliarised by the punctuation and spacing, and yet withdrawn from the possibilities of closure and assimilation in digesting the text's ambiguities.

To illustrate, one salient difference in *The Waste Land*'s publication history is the song of the Thames-daughters in 'The Fire Sermon', where we may see the peristaltic motion of digestion, textually enacted in its spacing and arrangement – a cascading of words, visually reminiscent of the oesophagus. As we shall observe, however, this also functions formally as disruption affecting the reader's sense of taking this section in. Their song begins:

> The river sweats 266
> Oil and tar
> The barges drift

[216] 'The Poetry of Drouth', repr. in *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael North (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 143.
[217] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 80.

With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
The barges wash
Drifting logs
Down Greenwich reach
Past the Isle of Dogs.
Weialala leia
Wallala leialala[218]

Initially published flush to the left in all the early editions, later editions have, according to Michael North, indented the text to represent their song – clearly an attempt at disentangling and unravelling the text's heteroglossia.[219] In conjunction with the brevity of the lines (composed of two to four words), their song is juxtaposed with the Rhine-maidens' indented lament (lines 277-278), signifying onomatopoeic ululations in Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. The unevenness of the rhymes (Oil and tar […] To leeward, swing on the heavy spar | Drifting logs […] Past the Isle of Dogs) moreover are evocative of the poem's metrical and syntactical wrenching, foregrounding the poem's disruptive surfaces. Finally, the song, evocative of a nursery rhyme with its colloquial language and repetition, adumbrates the 'London Bridge' nursery rhyme at the close of the poem. The poem's echoes and resonances constitute how poetry, for Eliot, breaks up the 'conventional modes of perception and valuation […] and make[s] people see the world afresh'.[220]

[218] *TWL*, ll. 266-278.
[219] 'A Note on the Text', p. xiii. Interestingly, North notes that the indentation was not followed consistently in some editions, so the section's ending quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* was also indented, further muddling the range of speakers and voices in the text.
[220] 'Excerpts from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933)', *T.S. Eliot* (2020) <https://tseliot.com/prose/the-use-of-poetry-and-the-use-of-criticism> [accessed 15 September 2023].

The poem's deliberate and formal momentum entreats readers to the possibility of digesting these broken images, only to endlessly defer them through the temporal disjunctures and dislocations. The final lines of the Thames-daughters' song depicts this digestive difficulty:

> "On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing.
> The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
> My people humble people who expect
> Nothing."[221]

Illustrative of the linguistic fragmentation in the text, the speaker's words fall and break apart. Here is no completion and connection, but contradictions and nothingness. The line 'I can connect' points to an affirmative possibility of connection, which is immediately negated in the succeeding line 'Nothing with nothing'. Because the speaker's words are handfuls of phrases without completion, as in the first line containing a full stop, the fragments and parcels of sentences recall the poem's 'handful[s] of dust'.[222] The speaker is, in Gold's assertion, 'able to make meaning out of the […] bits of nothing' offered by the poem.[223] While Gold reads the poem in light of Eliot's neurasthenic treatment with Dr Vittoz and the revelation that could emerge from sickness, within the circumference of the poem's narrative this essay posits that the repeated anaphora of 'nothing' reinforces the irrevocable inability to connect.

[221] *TWL*, ll. 300-305.
[222] *TWL*, l. 30. This also recalls the Cumean Sybil in the poem's epigraph who asks for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand.
[223] Gold, p. 528.

Yet there lies a profound tension between this inability to connect and the passage's enjambment which pushes forward the lines at a syntactical level, to a future where connecting could be possible. The resulting ambivalence elides the two possibilities: the inability to connect and the implied potential to connect; *The Waste Land*'s deliberate and formal momentum, by Eliot's twisting and forging of phrases, entreats readers to the possibility of digesting these broken images, only to be endlessly deferred. Yet, early critical reviews of the poem, such as Clive Bell (who was largely critical of Eliot), note that 'the man can write! And the experience, if it be small, is perfectly digested and assimilated'.[224] Similarly, another review claims that Eliot has captured a 'singularly complex' vision and 'its labyrinths utterly sincere' in revealing the sordid and the beautiful of modern life.[225] Despite the poem's linguistic and structural labyrinths, it seems that the experience of the poem invokes a transformation of these flotsam into something new, recollected and assimilated – in other words, digested – in the reader's mind, not unlike Eliot's pronouncement that poetry is a 'concentration, of a very great number of experiences' that unite in the poet's mind.[226]

This new concentration allows ideas, even fragmented ones, to be transformed and digested in the reader's mind. Taken this way, it is the experience that is digestible, rather than the text per se. As Eliot described in an interview with Donald Hall, unfinished ideas are better 'left at the back of my mind than on paper in a drawer. If I leave it in a drawer it remains the same thing, but if it's in the memory it becomes transformed into something else'.[227] While Eliot is here describing erasure as part of the writing process of making

[224] Bell, p. 772.
[225] 'Mr. Eliot's Poem', p. 137.
[226] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', p. 113.
[227] Eliot and Donald Hall, 'T.S. Eliot, The Art of Poetry No. 1', *The Paris Review* (1959) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4738/the-art-of-poetry-no-1-t-s-eliot> [accessed 14 July 2023].

something new, what is worth mentioning is the potential of this transformative process for a readerly engagement. Here, I find resonances with Ashbery's *Three Poems,* particularly in 'The New Spirit', where Ashbery meditates on the art of poetry, by interrogating it through in a mix of verse and prose. One intuits this 'new spirit' as a means of countering the anxiety of influence exerted upon him by authors such as Eliot. On page 41, we hear Ashbery's voice that one is 'conscious of the multitudes that swarm past one in the street […] It may become necessary to shut them all out'.[228] The antidote is the potential to 'imagine everything that existed elsewhere'.[229] This notion of imagining elsewhere relates not only to the writing process, but the readerly engagement as exhaustion, as I will argue.

To begin to investigate this readerly engagement as an exhaustive process in *Three Poems,* it will be necessary to expand upon this notion of 'the new spirit' in the reader. In the 'mind's suburbs', this 'new spirit' is activated in some form; one such form is in 'getting used to inhabiting the ruins and artfully adapting them to present needs'.[230] The reader's mind inhabits these 'ruins' of the page, adapting to the text's needs, a fecund space. Not unlike the ruins and towers populating *The Waste Land*, we have a constant adaptation to realise these places as fertile. Ashbery's poetry, Ron Silliman suggests, 'never settles' because there is no '"there there", no topic sentence, no secret centre' in the work.[231] Recalling Derrida's logocentric critique of the 'transcendental signified' explored in Chapter 1, the unsettled elements, forever caught in the interplay of concentrating and drifting, effectively enforces an exegesis of the text that is continually in attempt to digest, but is overloaded by the information; the texture of non-sequiturs, mercurial and diffident, is slippery, unable to be contained or digested. That *Three Poems* can be read, as Silliman and Larry Eigner do, as a

[228] *TP*, p. 44.
[229] *TP*, p. 41
[230] *TP*, p. 28.
[231] Silliman, p. 300.

model of consciousness, with thinking as a form of anxiety,[232] enables the text to act as the metaphoric 'intrusion' in the reader's mind. Consequently, the text reads as an overload where information and ideas are consumed and exhausted. In comparison to *The Waste Land*'s digestive processes, *Three Poems* conveys an experience that exhausts and consumes the *all-ness* of language. In comparing Ashbery to Eliot, *The Waste Land*, is famously organised by its ostensible 'plan' and indebtedness to monomyth of the Holy Grail, via James Frazer's and Jessie L. Weston's books; reading *Three Poems* is much more unpredictable and bewildering. Ashbery has admitted that his poetry has an 'exploratory quality'; for him, 'I don't have it all mapped out before I sit down to write'.[233] This exploratory quality is reflected in the long, digressive phrases, or as Andrew Epstein describes, Ashbery's 'unsettling journeys into the unknown'.[234] Here is a section from 'The System':

> Today your wanderings have come full circle. Having begun by rejecting the idea of oneness in favour of a plurality of experiences, earthly and spiritual, in fact a plurality of different lives that you lived out to your liking while time proceeded at another, imperturbable rate, you gradually became aware that the very diversity of these experiences was endangered by its own inner nature, for variety implies parallelism, and all these highly individualistic ways of thinking and doing were actually moving in the same direction and constantly threatening to merge with one another in a single one-way motion toward that invisible goal of concrete diversity.[235]

Unlike Eliot's syntax of fragmentation, we are faced with a syntax of plenitude, an encompassing all-ness. The first sentence is brief and concise; 'your wanderings' adumbrate the permission to read differently, given the second sentence's long, labyrinthine structure. The second sentence's structural edifice, at once overwhelming and bewildering, conjoins a colloquial language with a meandering syntax. The convoluted, halting, run-on sentence is,

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[232] Ibid.

[233] Quoted in Andrew Epstein, 'John Ashbery' in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century,* ed. by Eric L. Haralson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 24.

[234] Ibid.

[235] *TP*, pp. 100-101.

however, difficult to unpack. At a syntactical level, note how the last few lines lack any breaks, propelling their momentum. The juxtaposition of the first and second sentence show the strange way in which the mind's 'wanderings' have indeed come full circle. The form, appropriate to the nature of the text, enables readers to experience this plurality of experiences, engaged in the diverse field of possibilities through its onrushing, serpentine language. Is this a new plurality in life, or a plurality in experiencing the text, however? My sense is the ambiguity of *Three Poems* enables readers to consume both possibilities at once, as 'all these highly individualistic ways of thinking and doing were actually moving in the same direction'. The effect of this is a self-referential text that, according to Murphy, leaves the reader in uncertainty due to its fluctuation between its reflection on life and its reflection on itself as a text.[236] This constant oscillation in Ashbery's poetry sustains this sense of self-reflexivity – unfolding in a process that conveys the formal syntax of the text in order for plurality to be built into the text and to premediate itself.

In offering explorations of consciousness and plurality, *Three Poems* reads as an exhaustiveness: of language, subjects, and possibilities. The resulting engagement of reading is one of continual change and refraction, I would suggest. The text tantalises the readers with a conversational language that belies a difficulty and obstacle of unpacking that language. Ben Hickman states that a reader of Ashbery must surrender to inattention.[237] Indeed, it is through this act of inattention that meaning becomes secondary to the 'haphazard field of potentiality' that the plurality of the textual locus enables.[238] *Three Poems,* in particular, articulates itself as an 'incessant pursuit of thoughts and ideas', as the quoted excerpt above

[236] Murphy, '*A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, p. 190.

[237] *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 156.

[238] *TP*, p. 60.

demonstrates.[239] In pursuing these endless possibilities that this barrage of text offers, there is an interminability, an inconclusiveness, and what I would refer to as an *exhaustiveness* to *Three Poems* that revels in the enterprise of '[leaving] all out'.[240] Yet this operation betrays a sense of secrecy, which Paul Zweig alludes to: 'I fear', he writes, that Ashbery's text is 'a marvellous, but maddening grammar of hermetic moments from which the reader, however willing to be seduced, may be excluded'.[241] As Chapter 2 has explained, such an optics of exclusion is embedded in this process of 'leaving all out', whose particular meaning the reader is not privy to, but nevertheless intuits. In the mass and plenitude of Ashbery's language, the dynamic of concealment and exhaustiveness is at play.

In an interview with Mark Ford, Ashbery says he thought of the poems 'as three oblong empty boxes to be filled with anything.'[242] Another analogy that Ashbery makes points to the constantly refractive and shifting lenses of the text:

> I said, 'I'm writing these three long prose poems, but I can't think of anything to put in them,' and [my analyst] said, 'Why don't you think about all the people who've meant most to you in your life, and then don't write about them, but write about what you think when you think about them?' I thought this a good idea, though I'm not sure I ever actually did it.[243]

Even in the poem's composition, Ashbery evades explication, instead encouraging this plurality, unable to be settled in its evocations. This evasiveness resists traditional modes of reading and, for Brian Glavey, 'the discourses used to describe avant-garde poetry.'[244]

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[239] Hickman, *John Ashbery and English Poetry*, p. 156
[240] *TP*, p. 3.
[241] 'Difficulty as a Means of Expression'.

[242] *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford*, p. 56
[243] Ibid.
[244] 'Reading Late Ashbery', *Criticism*, 50.3 (Summer, 2008) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/262609> [accessed 13 September 2023] p. 527.

Evidently for Glavey, *Three Poems* operates in different discourses compared to Eliot and Stein.

In the context of my argument, unlike Eliot or Stein whose poetics I read in readerly modes of digestion and ingestion respectively, I read *Three Poems* as concerned with exhaustiveness – that is in consuming and 'leaving out' all the possibilities of language and subject. Written in the different cultural milieu at the zeitgeist of literary postmodernism in 1972, if the preconditions for modernism negotiated the capacity to 'make it new' – that is, in remaking a fractured world – then postmodernist texts in the latter half of the 20th century have *exhausted* all these possibilities for newness.[245] As the poet and critic Randall Jarrell presciently wrote in 1951, 'the poet lives in a world whose newspapers and magazines and books and motion pictures and television stations have destroyed, in a great many people, even the capacity for understanding real poetry'.[246] Jarrell's pessimistic tone aside, we are bombarded with signification and masses of media, with which we are interpellated without end. In this over-consumption of mass media, *Three Poems* is invested in a discursive overload, imbued with ways of being and thinking. My suggestion is that rather than mass consumption destroying the capacity to understand poetry, *Three Poems* demonstrates the possibility to re-apprehend it, through the exhaustiveness of Ashbery's meditative language; it is in *Three Poems's* fullness that the dynamic of beguiling readers with colloquial language only to exhaust the possibilities of 'leaving all out' is enacted

In Ashbery's exhaustive method, then, we find a more collective poetics, one that incorporates a polyphony of views and voices. Margueritte Murphy attends to Ashbery's

[245] See Randall Jarell's 1942 essay, 'The End of the Line', where he ties the changes in Romantic to Modernist poetry as evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. Whereas Romantics were searching for 'originality', says Jarrell, Modernists were tied to 'novelty'.
[246] 'The Obscurity of the Poet', in *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 28.

discourse as expansive, moving 'always nearer a "truth" that is complex, relative, and inexorably fleeting'.[247] The frustration with reaching any definitive 'truth' qualifies the extent to which Ashbery presents all possibilities to the reader. In the final prose-poem of the text, 'The Recital', Ashbery writes: 'The point was the synthesis of very simple elements in a new and strong […] relation to one another. Why hadn't this been possible in the earlier days of experimentation […?] Probably because not enough of what made it up had taken on that look of worn familiarity […] that made it possible for the old to blend inconspicuously with the new.'[248] The temptation to believe this relation of old and new as a 'synthesis' belies the surface level of the text and fails to account for the experience of the text in that 'you have changed: you are viewing it all from a different angle'.[249] As I have endeavoured to demonstrate, this is not a synthesis, akin to a readerly digestion, but an act that exhausts all possibilities. In describing Ashbery's method, David Lehman believes that 'Ashbery does not reconcile contradictions; rather, he presents them in a state of more-or-less peaceful coexistence'.[250] This peaceful coexistence stands in conjunction with a digestive synthesis; however, *Three Poems* refuses to synthesise, never achieving finality or certainty, instead exhausting a plurality of ideas. 'It is true that each of us,' writes Ashbery, 'is this multitude as well as that isolated individual […]; at the same time our eyes are turned inward to the darkness and emptiness within.'[251] In other words, identity and language are in a constant flux, caught in the play of concealment and openness, singularity and polyvocality, and isolation and togetherness.

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[247] *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, p. 196.

[248] *TP*, p. 117.

[249] *TP*, p. 93.

[250] Quoted in Frank J. Lepkowski, 'John Ashbery's Revision of the Post-Romantic Quest: Meaning, Evasion, and Allusion in "Grand Galop"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 39.3 (Autumn, 1993) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/441686> [accessed 23 September 2023] p. 255.

[251] *TP*, p. 115.

Broadly speaking, the discursive heterogeneity in *Three Poems* enacts a praxis of exhaustiveness that never resolves the text, leaving it in a state of constant expansiveness, refractive and interminable. Far from being a detriment, Drew Milne calls the poem's imaginativeness a 'reflective voluptuousness'.[252] One way to think about Ashbery's poetry, following Milne, is to characterise it as tantalisingly teasing, especially as *Three Poems*'s latter two sections are written in prose. This irony, at once subversive of the text's philosophical intimations, also serves to underscore the plenitude that reading Ashbery offers. Take this excerpt from the final section, 'The Recital':

> One proceeds along one's path murmuring idiotic formulas like this to give oneself courage, noticing too late that the landscape isn't making sense any more; it is not merely that you have misapplied certain precepts not meant for the situation in which you find yourself, which is always a new one that cannot be decoded with reference to an existing corpus of moral principles, but there is even a doubt as to our own existence.[253]

I would offer that this parallels the reading process as one of continual change and refraction. The 'landscape', or the discursive meaning, is obscured, instead forcing the reader to engage in a different way of reading. Exhausting the possibilities and the resources, we find ourselves attempting to decode the text, only to be obfuscated by our subjectivity. Rendering a multiplicity of subjectivities, we can see how the experience of reading a poem is, in Jarrell's view, akin to 'entering a foreign country whose laws and language and life are a kind of translation of your own; but to accept it […or to reject it] is an equal mark of that want of imagination, that inaccessibility to experience, of which each of us who dies a natural death will die'.[254] Central to Jarrell's point is the foreignness and inaccessibility, as he put it, of experience that reading offers. In *Three Poems*, however, Ashbery offers readers not the

[252] 'The Diamond Light of Pure Speculation: John Ashbery's *Three Poems*'.

[253] *TP*, p. 114.

[254] 'The Obscurity of the Poet', p. 23.

opportunity to accept or to reject the text, but the affordance to revel in its liminality, consuming all options to inhibit the text, committing neither to acceptance nor rejection.

One might conclude hence that Ashbery's text provides little sustenance for the reader in its noncommittal positions, as poet-critic James Fenton does. For him, in the 'pages and pages of John Ashbery', there is 'not enough nutrition in this diet'.[255] Although Fenton is referring here to Ashbery's advice on reading his poetry as one of intermittent focus and distraction,[256] the key term here is nutrition. David Shapiro meanwhile recognises Ashbery's topic of 'exhaustion', since he 'has mastered monotony and made it moan'. [257] This 'exhaustion' provokes the question of how there might be any consumptive nutrition or energies in *Three Poems*. In the critical apparatus that I advance in this research, I would venture to say that the protean, unstable nature of Ashbery's text is in itself a substance that can never be fully consumed. For the diet of reading Ashbery thus is not one that lacks nutrients, but overflows with them. Meaning is wrung out from the poem's syntax not for any intention, in particular, but more so to explore lingering possibilities. 'The System' reads as if Ashbery were teasing out the multiple dimensions of subjectivity, beguiling readers with open pluralities:

> They were correct in assuming that the whole question of behaviour in life has to be rethought each second; that not a breath can be drawn nor a footstep taken without our being forced in some way to reassess the age-old problem of what we are to do here and how did we get here, taking into account our relations with those about us and with ourselves, and the ever-present issue of our eternal salvation, which looms

[255] 'Getting Rid of the Burden of Sense', *The New York Times Archives* (December, 1985) <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/29/books/getting-rid-of-the-burden-of-sense.html> [accessed 18 September 2023].

[256] Quoted in Larissa MacFarquhar, 'Present Waking Life: Becoming John Ashbery'.
[257] Quoted in Colin E. Nicholson, 'Review of David Shapiro's *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry'*, *Journal of American Studies*, 15.1 (April, 1981) <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-american-studies/article/david-shapiro-john-ashbery-an-introduction-to-the-poetry-new-york-columbia-univ-press-1979-1620-pp-xx-190/E3EBFA563499F70599D9D08CFA78A9A5> [accessed 23 September 2023] p. 146.

> larger at every moment – even when forgotten it seems to grow like the outline of a mountain as one approaches it. To be always conscious of these multiple facets is to incarnate a dimensionless organism like the wind's, a living concern that can know no rest: it *is* restlessness.[258]

We find Ashbery at his most open here; thinking and rethinking is followed by the salvation from ourselves, from the current of everyday language. Couched in a deceptively simple prose, the tone is one of immediacy, as the writer ponders 'how did we get here'. Even if unconscious of the issue of salvation, it 'grows'; readers are not given any respite or space. Far from being transient and ephemeral, it looms over the reader. What does this salvation translate to for the reader: Respite *from* the text or perhaps an escape *into* the text? This question is left irresolute to the reader, for, as Charles Altieri points out, 'multiplicity entails capturing the many levels of diction and explanatory possibilities'. He goes on to note that Ashbery's enterprise is not to confuse readers, but to 'dramatise qualities of mind and possible structures of coherence among dispersed particulars and interpretive codes'.[259] We can understand Ashbery as a poet working through each motion of the mind. These possible structures of coherence establish the whirling, dispersive syntax of the section. In place of paralysis is an overwhelming restlessness, simultaneously propelling the reader and plunging them back into the montage and folds of the textual locus.

Therefore, for Ashbery, the converse of meaning is not meaninglessness, but silence, a silence to which the reader is not privy and inaccessible. Indeed, Ashbery's expansive syntax is an attempt to capture the diversity of experience. In a Whitmanian vein to include everything, *Three Poems* annexes the reader into the poem's textual digressions. David Shapiro believes this process to be Ashbery's stylistic triumph, as 'his thesis tends to

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[258] *TP*, p. 61.

[259] *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 137-138.

deliquesce' in the aggrandised summations.[260] This statement needs unpacking; *Three Poems*, in its fluid and digressive sentences operates as an intricate, entangled pattern constantly weaving and reweaving the text. This sense of deliquescence threatens not the collapse of meaning, but its exhaustiveness and openness. Deliquescence, moreover, has associations with processes of decomposition, and my suggestion is that this a similar method enacted by the text. I read decomposition as de-composition; in this context, *Three Poems* is a literature that is aware of its own creation and re-creation. Read in this way, engaging with *Three Poems* enacts an active process, a text re-negotiating and re-inscribing itself in its own coming into being – a fertile, expansive, and encompassing space.

While I advance the critical apparatuses of digestion and exhaustiveness from biological processes to readerly modes of engagement in *The Waste Land* and *Three Poems,* respectively, it is Stein's *Tender Buttons* that is most obviously connected to my conceptualisation of ingestion as a readerly practice. At the level of content, we are presented with a series of the alimentary in the poem's second section, aptly titled 'Food'. Increasingly the poetry is full of the presence of foods, at once familiar, yet rendered strange. Stein's 'gyrations with words', as a 1914 review termed it,[261] underpin the *taste* of Stein's language – a taste that is in constant metamorphosis, becoming soft, linguistically rupturing, and in flux. There is no such meaning or answers to decipher, it will be recalled, in the text. In fact, Stein's brother perceptually used the phrase, 'Keep your eye on the object and let your ideas play about it'.[262] It is safe to assume that this influenced Stein's thinking; indeed, she

[260] Quoted in James Fenton, 'Getting Rid of the Burden of Sense'.

[261] 'Public Gets Peep at Extreme Cubist Literature in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*', *Chicago Daily Tribune,* 73.133 (June, 1914) <https://archive.org/details/per_chicago-daily-tribune_1914-06-05_73_133/page/n13/mode/2up> [accessed 12 August 2023] p. 15.

[262] Quoted in Pamela Hadas, 'Spreading the Difference: One Way to Read Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons', Twentieth Century Literature,* 24.1 (Spring, 1978) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441064> [accessed 30 June 2023] p. 59.

recapitulates a similar point in describing Picasso's art: 'No one had ever tried to express things seen not as one knows them but as they are when one sees them without remembering having looked at them.'[263] As much, however, as Stein is inclined to phenomenologically disclose these objects through sight,[264] this research contends that a more apt methodological means to read the poem is through the gustatory sensation the text affords us. In the following excerpt from 'Food', *Tender Buttons* affords us the pleasure to revel in the *taste* of the words:

> EATING.
>
> Eat ting, eating a grand old man said roof and never never re soluble burst, not a near ring not a bewildered neck, not really any such bay.[265]

Unlike Ashbery's overwhelming overload, what readers are confronted with here is a text in parataxis, marked by commas and repetitions. Conveying a continual change of ideas without any insistent rhythm, the sound of the words takes precedence. Meaning is wrung out from their rhythmical sounds; unlike Eliot, whose poetics are digestible in experience, Stein's writing is 'never never re *soluble* burst'. The key term here, I would posit, is 'soluble', as it disrupts the monosyllabic and disyllabic words that surround it. Clearly, Stein's linguistic construction is at play here, offering readers multiple ways to read the text. Firstly, the word 'soluble' allows us to register the text in two ways: as something that cannot be *dissolved*; alternatively, we may read it as *resolved*. Secondly, that this is immediately followed by the word 'burst' signifies an eruption of language, suggesting that the capacity to dissolve or resolve the text is assailed by the text's linguistic disruptions. We may read this a third way with the preceding 'never never', enacting a double negative to defer any possible attempt to

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[263] Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984) <EBook on Kindle> [accessed 30 June 2023].

[264] Here we may recall Merleau-Ponty's description of Cézanne's 'genius' as the 'impression of an emerging order' in natural vision, with the object *'appearing' before our eyes*. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 14.

[265] *TB*, p. 392.

dissolve or resolve the text. Margueritte Murphy is apt to point out that 'a given phrase may seem simultaneously in code and beyond a code, or nonsense, depending on the context or interpretative grid that the reader chooses, or refuses to choose, for the fragment'.[266] For Murphy, then, Stein's linguistic play leaves readers obfuscated in the 'interpretative grid' they choose for the text. I would like to extend this even further by advancing that *Tender Buttons* leaves readers *masticating* the text in their attempts to make sense of the poem.

In this affordance of masticating the text, there are significant differences from the readerly experience afforded by Eliot, for digesting Eliot's *The Waste Land* requires time and effort to read it. I more closely align *Tender Buttons* as a process of ingesting the text, recalling what Mena Mitrano's calls 'the text's promise to feed', as indicated by the title of the second section 'Food'.[267] Textually, this mastication is enacted by linguistically separating 'eating' in the first line as 'Eat ting'. At one level, this illustrates the rupturing of attempts to construe meanings out of the words; the separation moreover conveys a sense of immediacy unlike Eliot's slower process. This more immediate process suggests Stein as a precursor to Ashbery in the openness and, as Marjorie Perloff terms, the indeterminacy of the text. For Perloff, reading *Tender Buttons* is an attempt at revealing what is behind and beneath the skins and the coverings of the words.[268]

In investigating how Stein disrupts conventional modes of reading, we might consider first how the title presents itself as a method of 'understanding' the poetry. In *A Different Language*, Marianne DeKoven believes that 'there is no reason to struggle to interpret or unify […*Tender Buttons*] not only because there is no consistent pattern of meaning, but

[266] P. 147.
[267] 'Linguistic Exoticism and Literary Alienation: Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*', *Modern Language Studies*, 28.2 (1998) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3195301> [accessed 31 July 2023] p. 92.
[268] P. 108.

because we violate the spirit of the work in trying to find one.'[269] We may agree in part with this analysis; the multivalent nature of the text discloses multiple possibilities to read it. Nevertheless, to disregard attempts to find meaning is to deny the reader's experiential relationship to the text. This relationship is articulated through the sonorous taste of the text. Turning to the line 'eating a grand old man said roof' allows us to examine this taste; in the reader's palate is the alliteration 'gran*d* ol*d* man sai*d*'. At once suggesting an interdependence and interrelationship between the words, the materiality of the 'd' sound, furthermore, is one that is articulated in the mouth – the tongue against the upper teeth. Both as a bodily utterance articulated through the mouth and as a marker of the materiality of language, the sound simultaneously ensconces the reader in the world and enables the reader to ingest the sounds of the words, offering new possibilities to unravel them.

Following the modernist mantra of 'making it new', academics and critics interpreting *Tender Buttons* tend to discern endless new readings and possibilities for the text. DeKoven uses Stein to argue for experimental writings' polysemous pluridimensionality through her articulation of an open-ended lexical text.[270] Similarly, Lisa Ruddick recognises *Tender Buttons* as Stein's attempt into a feminist language and form unbound by the demands and limits set by logocentrism.[271] Perloff uses *Tender Buttons* to challenge the primacy of the text and to reshift the focus to 'writing as play' and 'the arbitrariness of [language's] discourse'.[272] While these arguments strike me as entirely right in deploying open-endedness as recourse towards 'a fresh starting-point from which to examine our relationship with [our

[269] *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*, p. 76.

[270] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[271] Excerpt of '*Tender Buttons:* Woman and Gnosis', in *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/255/monograph/chapter/2157336/pdf> [accessed 12 October 2023].

[272] Perloff, p. 101.

grounds for knowledge]',[273] what concerns this chapter is how readers take in this open-endedness. My suggestion here is that Stein's poetry is a poetics of ingestion, in which readers absorb the words themselves, thereby ingesting multiple possibilities for the emergence of meaning to arise. Despite the multiplicity of Stein's text, I nonetheless recognise moments of containment through sounds of words for meaning to arise; therefore, in this chapter, the close readings on Stein considered focus on the sounds and taste of the materiality of the words, as ingested by the reader. While a similar enterprise has been undertaken by critics such as Mildenberg and Perloff in attending to Stein's linguistic play as a means of disclosing objects anew,[274] these critics have not engaged with the sonorous nature of *Tender Buttons* in revealing the flavour of the text, a means of taking in poetry without the need for what the words signify per se.

In this context, Stein's *ingestion* as a process moreover differs from Eliot's, as an unfinished and continual process. The lines that succeed the section on 'Eating' demonstrate this process: 'Is it so a noise to be is it a least remain to rest, is it a so old say to be, is it a leading are been. Is it so, is it so, is it so, is it so is it so is it so is it so.'[275] The constant questioning of 'is it so' destablises the readers' initial understanding and perception of 'eating'. The lines, initially separated by commas, propels the momentum of the phrase, emphasising the assonance of the long 'o' vowels in 'so'. This suggests a kind of semantic satiation that encourages readers to revel in chewing Stein's language. For Margueritte Murphy, Stein's style in the 'Food' section resonates with a recipe, in that 'the items do not "describe" one

[273] Ariane Mildenberg, 'A "Dance of Gestures": Hyperdialectic in Gertrude Stein's Compositions', p. 387.
[274] Here, I recall how 'Aider' in 'This is the Dress, Aider' (*TB*, p. 374), the final section of 'Objects', has been understood as a pun on Ada, Stein's pet name for Alice B. Toklas, with the poem read as an allusion to sex and orgasms. See for instance, Perloff, p. 107.
[275] *TB*, p. 393.

object', they add up, assemble, and make sense of the section.[276] What this analysis has attempted to demonstrate is precisely this sense; that 'Food' is not what is described here, but rather the texts affords us the process of semantically tasting and ingesting Stein's oblique text. Ruddick views 'Eating' as Stein's attempt at constituting a meal of 'the making and unmaking of patriarchy',[277] and this dialectic of making and unmaking is enacted here in the consummation of language with a plurality of frames of reference. Stein famously believed in 'insistence' – that is, in disclosing the infinite threads of relatedness. I agree with Mildenberg that the enterprise of reading Stein is a simultaneous loss of the 'world and the word as we know them in order to gain them'.[278] Extending the arguments proposed by Ruddick and Mildenberg, this chapter further argues that, if re-gaining the world and the world is a possibility, Stein's poetry allows the reader to enact a multiplicity of the sonorous and gustatory in doing so.

In its heightened, sensual awareness of the linguistic medium, Stein's odd grammar, words, syllables, and sound coalesce to encapsulate the taste of language. The eating of the words themselves bridges the impasse between the experiential world of reading and the representational nature of the signified. In pursuing this line, Stein shifts the reader's attention to recursive linguistic play, highlighting the satiation of language. In developing this chapter, this argument is an attempt at finding the embodied process through which Stein's materiality and malleability of language affords us. When Pamela Hadas notes that one must 'give willing attention to the individual words as sound as well as sense' in order not to miss 'the sound sense of having so many possibilities',[279] Hadas is making a case for the

[276] P. 154.
[277] Excerpt of '*Tender Buttons:* Woman and Gnosis'.
[278] Mildenberg, p. 387.

[279] Hadas, p. 59

malleability of Stein's language games. A continuation of the analysis of the 'Eating' section shows how Stein stretches the materiality of language in order to better enable its ingestive affordances:

> Eel us eel us with no no pea no pea cool, no pea cool cooler, no pea cooler with a land a land cost in, with a land cost in stretches.[280]

As in the lines that precede it (the 'is it so' section), we are confronted here with the sonorous assonance of the 'oo' sound (c*oo*l, c*oo*ler) and particularly the 'e' sound (*ee*l, p*ea*, h*ea*t) that constitutes 'eating' – both in the materiality of the word itself and in the process of tasting the word. Redolent of elongation, the long vowel sounds function to savour the text in 'stretching' the words. Furthermore, it is significant that what follows this succession of long 'e' and 'oo' assonances in the first line are figures of demarcation ('a *land cost in*'). The land is defined by being 'cost in'; my suggestion here is to read 'cost' as a stand-in of its near-homophone, 'coast', which defines the edges or margins of the land. Coupled with the preposition 'in', which similarly expresses enclosures, readers are presented with words of containing, covering, and closing; these 'separate and hold the work […] together'.[281] In a constant interplay of the contained and containers, the word that finishes the line ('stretches') conjures up how we may read this dialectic. This word ('stretches') elongates the rhythm in its disyllabic sound (in contrast to the monosyllabic words that precede it), enabling the materiality of language to be savoured in the process of reading. Indeed, such is the practice enacted in the succeeding lines:

> Eating he heat eating he heat it eating, he heat it heat eating. He heat eating.[282]

Here, the lack of pauses in the first eight words is suggestive of Stein attempting to stretch out the sounds of the words – particularly in letting the assonance of the long 'e' sound

[280] *TB*, p. 393.
[281] Hadas, p. 59.
[282] *TB*, p. 393.

satiate in the reader's palate. Pamela Hadas senses that, in *Tender Buttons*, the sounds create 'more and more possibilities in verbal texture'.[283] Ariane Mildenberg recapitulates a similar point, adding that Stein's phenomenological enterprise can be seen as a liberation 'from preconceived notions about reading and language', disclosing the possibility to recapture the possibility of the individual word.[284] Further destabilising how readers are usually 'fed', the nutrients of the text are, as the previous chapter indicated, rendered anew. It moreover calls to mind the modernist enterprise of re-making literary 'tastes', an enterprise explicitly taken on by poets such as Eliot, in his reaction against all that was Tennysonian. *Tender Buttons* remakes and re-envisions the possibility for poetry in a style of poetry that is prosaic, deliberately unpoetic, and, as Murphy suggested, is similar to a cookbook. Rather than relying on previous linguistic tastes for poetry, Stein offers a text that itself remakes the world, letting readers taste poetry itself anew. It is clearly appropriate to read *Tender Buttons* as an undertaking of the mutable and multiple possibilities of ingesting the taste of the individual words. But there is an important caveat to this project that can be more precisely unpacked than Hadas or Mildenberg affords.

While it is correct to say that Stein's work is expansive, covering the multiple possibilities of the words through their sonorous taste, there is, nevertheless, a containment to them. The syntactical texture of Stein, at once expansive and pluralistic, is undermined by their coverings. Consider the following permutations of 'he heat eating' in the except above. Constrained by a full stop, the final variation is notably shortened to its barest parts, consisting of only the three bases for the different sounds – 'he heat eating'. It seems to me reductive to read Stein as dwelling in possibility when coverings abound in the poem – represented in both images of coverings and in closing punctuation. From this lens, Stein is

[283] Hadas, p. 63.
[284] Mildenberg, pp. 381, 390.

the precursor to Ashbery's exhaustiveness. Unlike the mass consumption that figures in Ashbery, Stein's can be viewed, as Marianne DeKoven does, as advocating for a presymbolic and pluridimensional 'female language'[285] that pieces together a 'new, woman-affirming vision'.[286] By presymbolic, DeKoven understands this as a pre-linguistic, pre-signified layer of language. While I agree with this strain of argument, I would like to adapt it to the sense of containment in its links to gender, whereby gender itself for Stein acts as a form on containment. Therefore, in Stein is a sense of containment with the various objects – both literally and textually – that fill the text. Hence, we read the text in a constant interplay between expansiveness and containment. Whereas 'the difference' – that is, the multiplicity and openness of the text – 'is spreading',[287] *Tender Buttons* is unable to textually exhaust all the possibilities of the text, in comparison to Ashbery.

In this poetics of ingestion, then, we see a finitude to Stein's open-endedness, a finitude I would most closely attribute to Stein's sense of containment felt through her gender. As exhaustiveness can never be fully absorbed the reader, *Tender Buttons* offers readers the possibility of ingesting possibilities from the poetry. In the sense that exhaustiveness drains out *all* the nutrients physiologically, there is a marked difference in Stein's pluridimensional space. Central to the text is this dialectic of disclosure and withdrawal, where meanings are indefinite, but can never be fully 'possessed'.[288] As a physiological act that brings the external (textual) and the internal (bodily) world together through the mouth, ingestion is an apt metaphor for describing the way in which Stein links the textual and phenomenological spheres, as in the opening section of 'Food':

ROASTBEEF.

[285] DeKoven, pp. xviii-xix.
[286] Ruddick, Excerpt of '*Tender Buttons:* Woman and Gnosis'.
[287] *TB*, p. 374.
[288] Mildenberg, p. 389.

> In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching.[289]

In referring to physiological processes (such as sleeping and resting), Stein is explicitly drawing a connection between these processes and food. Stein's inside-outside dialectic decentres the organisation and rhythm of this section, taking us to the fringes where 'meaning' and 'recognition' can 'recur'. In peeling off the layers of signification, Stein is revealing what is 'inside' the pre-reflective experience of language. *Tender Buttons* develops its texture through the play of 'resignation' and 'recognition' – that is, through 'resigning' ourselves to the sound and taste of the text in order to 're-cognise' them anew. The texture of this sequence develops from the sonorous contours of the words, assonantly (*e*vening, sl*ee*ping, f*ee*ling) as well as linguistically linked (redden*ing*, mount*ing*, pinch*ing*). The full meanings or intentions of the words can never be exhaustively expressed, as Mildenberg notes;[290] rather, Stein opens the words up to the readers in what I call an affordance of ingestion, absorbing their different valences and possibilities. In an Ashberyan fashion, *Tender Buttons* affords us as readers the possibility of *tasting* (rather than Ashbery's 'viewing') it all with a different palate.

This chapter, an attempt at articulating certain critical apparatuses involved in the way readers take in experimental poetry, explores readerly engagements through the means of physiological processes. This research situates these processes – digestion, ingestion, and exhaustion/exhaustiveness – as embodied, experiential affordances of reading. In my view, the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery offers insight into readerly engagements, suggesting an intimacy between the material of their poetry and the affordances

[289] *TB*, p. 383.
[290] Mildenberg, p. 389.

in the project of reading experimental poetry. In so doing, this research aims to shed further light on examining the experiencing of reading itself; the formal and material innovations of 20th century experimental poetry produce, not bewilderment in their 'nightmare journey[s] in unknown and uncharted seas',[291] but invitations and affordances to re-evaluate how we read poetry. This triadic paradigm engages in a similar task – that is, in digesting, ingesting, and exhausting poetry and the world anew – to re-read and re-understand how we might conceive of our engagements with poetry. In reifying these affordances as corporeal processes, I hope to elucidate the sense in which experimental poetry activates the means through which readers experience the text, permitting us to engage in subjective, personal, and embodied insight as a way into the textual locus. At once an expression of the immediate experience of reading and a reflection of a different tool for reading, this emphasises the readerly role in re-creating and re-assimilating the fragmented (as in *The Waste Land*), the decentralised (as in *Tender Buttons*), and the plenitudinous (as in *Three Poems*) worlds that had defined the experimental poetry of the 20th century.

[291] 'Public Gets Peep at Extreme Cubist Literature in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*', p. 15. Although the review is referring to *Tender Buttons*, a similar sentiment is shared by James Fenton in describing Ashbery's poetry as demanding of the reader; for Fenton, Ashbery's corpus is 'hedged about with obscurity' under 'a certain misconception, that it was asking to be, well, read'. See 'Getting Rid of the Burden of Sense'.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued for a careful consideration of the role of the reader in experimental poetry, tracing out the possibilities for readerly re-generation and embodied affordances in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and John Ashbery's *Three Poems*. The imbrication of aesthetic difficulty and experiential solicitations into the textual loci demands an understanding of poetry's relationality with the reader. Far from reading the poem as a distant and uninvolved textual object, advanced by the New Criticism, this research has sought to demonstrate the value of a process of reading that attends to the reader's proximity and intimacy in the text, suggesting the potential for readers to be re-generated in these textual spaces. My aim here is not to repudiate the importance of close reading from the New Criticism, as an approach to the text, but to illustrate the value of attending to a reader's imaginative, embodied affordances in reading a text.

Charting out readerly engagements with experimental poetry, I have sought to advance a critical vocabulary of the readerly relationality in this difficult poetry, through the affordances of digestion, ingestion, and exhaustion as key apparatuses that reify the ways in which we take in poetry.

Set against the backdrop initially outlined in the introduction of declining numbers in the humanities in the educational landscape, the various approaches covered in this dissertation demonstrate the value of rethinking the ways in which we engage with poetry. Instead of viewing critical appreciation of poetry as an act of dissection in order to systematically syphon off meaning, I consider engaging with poetry as an embodied act of digestion, suggesting that the practice of reading poetry is a creative and generative act.

Most pertinently, this research has demonstrated the value of experimental poetry's freeing potential in the possibilities of: liberating ourselves from the strictures of logocentric society;

in generating a capacious subjectivity of the self; and in digesting poems as a labour of appreciation.

Furthermore, in reconsidering poetic processes for 21st century contemporary readers, I hope that this analysis contributes in some way to future discussions around reading and appreciating poems, not necessarily for what they signify, but rather for the experiences they offer the reader – a generative experience that is at once affective and creative.

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