Acts of Extended Inquiry
Idiosyncrasy and Phenomenology in American Poetics (1960s-Present)

PhD English and American Literature
School of English
University of Kent
2015

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Thesis Abstract

The driving ambition of this thesis lies in identifying and disclosing distinct and divergent examples of 20th century American long poems. This task will be carried out with a particular focus on stressing the idiosyncrasies of these practices rather than merely revising previous attempts at constructing a lineage or history of the American long poem. What is crucially at stake in this proposed critical movement is a distinction between 'The Long Poem' as an object of literary history as opposed to an 'act of extended inquiry' which can be comprehended in and on its own terms. In this task, I employ three key terms: Idiosyncrasy, Extension and Inquiry, which together frame my project as a disclosure of how poetic texts extend idiosyncratically over significant length, breadth and depth.

In discussing 'idiosyncrasy' I necessarily negotiate questions of subjectivity, perception, intersubjectivity— namely, the questions which are proposed and explored by phenomenology. In this regard, my methodology is informed by a phenomenological taxonomy, developed from the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. The grouping of poets featured in this thesis are all American writers who have published extended works since the 1950s, and each is associated to varying extents with schools of avant-garde, post-Modernist or 'New' poetics. George Oppen has been regarded as an 'Objectivist' poet and is often discussed alongside his contemporaries Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker and Charles Reznikoff; James Schuyler's close association with Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest and John Ashbery locate him among the New York School in the 1950s; Robin Blaser was instrumental in many of the publications and events which surrounded the San Francisco Renaissance; Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino all published poems and works of poetics in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* school publications in the 1970s-80s; and Rachel Blau DuPlessis has worked since the 1970s with both Language and Objectivist poetics, though her sustained interest in and engagement with 'the long poem' distinguishes her as a leading figure in the discourse of extended poetics in her own right. In each of these readings, significant efforts are made to discuss each poet outside of their conventional place within their 'school' or 'tradition'. The purpose of this is to seek access to the idiosyncrasies of poets and their works as opposed to merely relying on generalised reckonings. In this manner, the specific ways in which individual poets extend their poetics into substantial inquiries will be made apparent using the terms employed by the poets themselves.

It is my intention for this thesis to stand as an opening of the discourse of 'The American Long Poem' to complex and developed questions of extension in poetry, with a view to framing 20th century American poetics as being particularly oriented towards carrying out intellectual and perceptive inquiries in the form of works of poetic extension.

Contents

Introduction— Critical Models of the American Long Poem—

Idiosyncrasy, Phenomenology and Poetic Extension— Acts of Extended Inquiry

Introduction

In 2013, Rachel Blau DuPlessis finished her 40-year work *Drafts,* an extensive poetic project which takes as one of its major objects of interest the history of the long poem in America, and furthermore makes the claim that the long poem is the dominant form of 20th century poetic inquiry. Her work demonstrates Peter Middleton's claim that "the long poem continues to represent the peak of poetic achievement" (2010, np). 'Poetic achievement' in this context is not intended to imply a hierarchy wherein bigger equals better, but rather, it gestures at the fact that American poetics, which arguably began the 20th century with an intense focus on compression in the hands of Ezra Pound and his contemporaries, has successfully developed a variety of procedures for carrying out extended inquiry through the long poem form. Pound exemplifies this movement; known at first for his involvement in Imagism and Vorticism, his work began in the 1930s to pursue what he called 'epic' ambitions, becoming larger, longer and more sustained in *The Cantos*.

It would be wrong, however, to characterise the American long poem by virtue of one example of its practice, and it is precisely this thesis' intention to present an alternative framing of extended poetics which does not rely on narratives of influence or tradition. The ways in which American poets arrived at their models of poetic extension differ vastly and

cannot merely be contained within such narratives. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, as the critical discourse surrounding them suggests, it is unclear what actually constitutes 'the American long poem'; and secondly, whatever examples do constitute 'the American long poem' rely on their own idiosyncratic procedures and processes in order to gain the designation 'long'. What I mean by this is that the wide variety of long poems which have been composed since the 1950s— in the work of The New York School, The San Francisco Renaissance, The Deep Image Poets, The Objectivists, Black Mountain Poets and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets, among others— can be rewardingly discussed in and on their own idiosyncratic terms of extension, rather than based on any single and disingenuously cohesive model. In this regard, the major ambition of this thesis lies in identifying and disclosing distinct and divergent examples of American long poem forms, with a particular focus on stressing the idiosyncrasies of these practices rather than merely revising previous attempts at constructing a lineage or history of the American long poem. What is crucially at stake in this proposed critical movement is a distinction between literary history as an external order imposed in hindsight as opposed to a desire to engage with long poems as their composers conceived of them. These are obviously not mutually exclusive options, but, as will be demonstrated throughout this introduction, there has been a strong trend in critical works on American long poems to overemphasise the role of influence in determining subsequent poetic forms. However, before these issues can be discussed in detail, it is necessary first to address the two claims I have presented concerning the present critical status of the American long poem: (1) its lack of clear definition as a term and (2) the necessity of articulating the long poem in terms of its capacity for extended poetic inquiry.

There have been a variety of responses to this first problem of definition. For many critics, the American long poem is an historical form with its origins in the classic epic mode. In this regard, Burton Hatlen writes:

The long poem arrived in North America carrying a heavy weight of

associations. The august lineage that passes from Homer through Virgil and

Dante to Milton and Wordsworth has meant that whenever an American poet

has chosen the long poem form, that choice has had cultural and even

political implications.   (Hatlen 2004, 489)

Here, Hatlen describes the long poem as 'arriving' from a European lineage of writers, before

undergoing a transformation into a specifically American form in the work of Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow, Joel Barlow, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville in

the 19th century. This notion of the American long poem as taking place within the confines

of a linear tradition is supported by Stephen Fender, Thomas Gardner and Rosenthal and

Gall, all of whom argue that the American long poem begins in earnest with the work of Walt

Whitman in the mid-19th Century. In contrast to this, however, Margaret Dickie describes the

American long poem as a fundamentally modernist invention, inaugurated in the works of

Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane:

The long poem was to be a new experiment not only with form but also with

poetry as a public language. The poets declared that their long poems were to

be celebrations of the city, models for good government, values and visions by

which to live. Openly didactic, the poets set out to teach not necessarily

difficult lessons, but simple precepts that required new and complex forms of

expression responsive to the conditions of the modern world.   (Dickie, 8)

In arguing that the American long poem as we now recognise it began roughly a century ago

rather than, as Hatlen argues, in Classical literature, Dickie underscores the sense in which

the American long poem is an inherently experimental form. However, the notable omissions

in Dickie's account— Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Melvin Tolson's

Harlem Gallery, H.D's *Helen in Egypt* and *Trilogy*, Mina Loy's *Songs To Johannes*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and *Stanzas In Meditation*— serve to undermine her thesis. Whilst her conception of the American long poem as a fairly recent activity is a liberating gesture, the lack of any poets who were not white, middle-class men paints an entirely inaccurate picture. If, as Dickie seems to suggest, we are to envisage the American long poem as a wide variety of fundamentally modern textual strategies, we must necessarily also bear witness to the diversity of poets engaging with extended poetic practice.

More recent works of criticism on the American long poem have begun to acknowledge the plethora of works which merit discussion in terms of their methods of extension. In a lecture entitled 'Genre Problems', Rachel Blau DuPlessis presented the thesis that "to use a genre— The Long Poem— or a historical entity— 'the 20th or 21st century long poem'—with any hopes of achieving a genre definition is a doomed undertaking, doomed to be undermined by plethora" (2006, np). DuPlessis articulates a concern prevalent throughout the criticism of American long poems; namely that genre definitions or historical models are insufficient in coming to terms with the specific acts of extension which characterise individual long poems. Joseph Conte's 'Seriality and the Contemporary Long Poem' locates this concern in the misdirection intrinsic in the term 'Long Poem' itself. He writes that "[t]he difficulty lies in the apprehension that the term 'long poem' refers only to volume, and says nothing about the form or the content of the work" (1992, 35). Conte here gestures at the fact that the quantities involved in long poems differ so vastly from work to work that the measure of length itself is only a small part of what constitutes a 'long poem'. Peter Middleton displays a similar suspicion towards what the phrase 'long poem' might signify:

> What significance does the adjective 'long' carry when we talk about the long
>
> poem? Is it literal or metaphorical, or a more or less implicit proper name (a
>
> disavowed categorisation that really means 'modernist' or 'world-
>
> encompassing')?; and whichever of these best describes the work of this
>
> measure, is it then a value [...] or a category [...] or a metonym for some
>
> extended poetic theory?   (Middleton, np)

Middleton's range of associations here gestures at both the indeterminacy of the term and

some possible ways of entry into the meaning of poetic 'length'. It is the intention of this

thesis to move beyond these complications inherent in the term 'long poem' by instead

characterising what are referred to as long poems as acts of extended poetic inquiry.

Discussing the long poem through its practices of extension allows these works to be framed

within the terms individual poets use during the process of composition. Specifically, then,

the poetries of extension which will undergo explication in this thesis will be characterised as

idiosyncratic, and understood as individual acts of poetic experimentation.

The desire for a critical vision which emphasises the difference rather than the

similitude of acts of poetic extension finds its justification in, to use DuPlessis' term, the

'plethora' which undermines previous attempts to subject the American long poem to

generic classification. This can be demonstrated with reference to the fact that American

poets in the last fifty years have used a vast array of terms to refer to their acts of poetic

extension, few of which can be understood simply in terms of their length or historical

precedents. The American long poem is an "infinite archive" (Susan Howe), a "grand collage"

and an "open field" (Robert Duncan), "a long wonder" (Berryman), "undone business"

(Charles Olson), "a restless surface" (James Schuyler), an articulation "of being numerous"

(George Oppen), an "Alphabet" (Ron Silliman), a "fluid far-off going" (Langston Hughes), a

series of 'Drafts' and 'Folds' (Rachel Blau DuPlessis), a "loom" (Robert Kelly), a network of 'rivers' and 'flows' (John Ashbery), a process of 'Occurring' (Leslie Scalapino), a "compulsion to repeat" (John Taggart), a setting of foundations (Ronald Johnson), a Diary (John Cage; Bernadette Mayer; William Carlos Williams), a series of letters (Thomas McGrath; Lyn Hejinian; Olson) or songs (Amiri Baraka; Olson; Berryman), a 'Descent' (Alice Notley), a process of 'absorption' (Charles Bernstein) and a 'Practice of Outside' (Robin Blaser; Jack Spicer). The term 'The Long Poem' is insufficient in holding together these disparate activities, and a more developed, site-specific means of reading is required in order to understand how acts of extension function *in the terms* that their composers develop for the purpose. DuPlessis' sense of the 'plethora' which constitutes the American long poem begs the question— if 'doom' characterises previous efforts to make these works cohere into a genre or historical lineage, how then might we come to terms with the American long poem without oversimplifying or undermining its idiosyncratic site-specific instances of poetic extension?

The kind of oversimplification against which this thesis seeks to establish its argument can be witnessed in Burton Hatlen's entry on 'The Long Poem' in the *Oxford Encyclopaedia of American Literature.* Hatlen cites such a plethora of activities, influences, traditions and lineages that the compositional scope of the American long poem becomes lost in a series of subcategorizations. Whilst this is determined somewhat by the fact that an encyclopaedia entry has to deal in compression and comprehension, it can still be reasonably contested that Hatlen fails to attend to the ways in which poems extend, opting instead to characterise the 'long poem' by virtue of its size and even occasionally by its page count. Hatlen quotes these frequently throughout the piece though at no point does he state what the minimum requirements might be. Furthermore, the subcategories into which he divides the American long poem display a great deal of overlap and seem to suggest that such categorisations

cannot ultimately define the poems themselves. For Hatlen, Whitman is "clearly the prototype of all later American serial poems" (3), and it is from this position that he suggests categories which are based on their relation to Whitman, Pound and Olson. Hatlen's subcategories are: The 'Mock Epic', the 'Long Poem as Community Portrait', the 'Serial Long Poem', the long poems of the 'Pound Circle', the 'Meditative Long Poem', the 'Objectivist long poem', 'Language Writing', 'Olson and His Heirs', long poems of 'Magic, Myth and Ritual' and 'Mainstream Poets'. Despite referring to an impressively varied field of poets in this process, their individual processes of extension are somewhat obscured by Hatlen's desire to neatly pose them as discrete lineages beginning in Whitman. This overemphasis on the historicity of the form undermines the idiosyncratic procedures American poets have developed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, whilst it is indeed the case that Charles Olson influenced a number of poets working with long poems these relationships themselves are subject to significant disputes which destabilize the sense in which 'influence' can be coherently read in the long poem. Susan Howe, for example, celebrates Olson's advancements with page-space and the inclusion of archival material, but has serious reservations concerning his treatment of the female figure in his work.

Of course, it is important to remember that the object and formal constraints of Hatlen's encyclopaedia entry is, as DuPlessis contends, "doomed to be undermined by plethora" (2006, np), and as such the task he undertakes is both difficult and bound to provoke dissent. What is at stake in this dissent is a desire to retain the wide variety of idiosyncratic practices which constitute the history of the long poem in America. This is not to say necessarily that history and idiosyncrasy are at odds, but rather that studies of the long poem are compelled to weigh the balance between the advantages of close-reading and of contextualising. This is a question peculiar to works of extended poetics by virtue of the fact that the close-reading of long poems is itself a substantial task, owing to their size,

complexity and length, and seeking to characterise large texts by virtue of their smaller parts runs the risk of obscuring their wider ambitions. It is precisely for this reason that my argument suggests that long poems are best read in their own terms of extension, with a view to disclosing the idiosyncratic ways in which extended poetic forms have been utilised as modes of inquiry. It is necessary before moving towards a fuller explanation of this methodology to outline the critical positions against which this thesis will present its own terms of inquiry.

Critical Models of the American Long Poem

Every long poem will defeat its creator.
(Dickie, 15)

As indicated, the critical discourse surrounding American long poems is also subject to the 'plethora' DuPlessis describes as a 'doom' to genre definition. The long poem has been described variously as a "monstrosity" (Williams 2009, np), a "noble failure" (D. Allen, 79) and a "difficult whole" (McHale 2004, 3), whilst Peter Middleton writes that the long poem is a "field that does not lend itself to definition, and frequently takes advantage of this absence of expectation of any defining characteristic" (Middleton, np). This 'absence of expectation' underscores the extent to which the composition of a long poem involves idiosyncratic acts of extension, wherein various structural and formal procedures are performed on the text. This variety of practices necessarily requires a variety of reading strategies. This is a central aspect of Brian McHale's thesis in *The Obligation Towards The Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems*. He writes: "[E]ach alternative [reading] implies a different hypothesis of what constitutes the 'whole', how its parts are articulated, what lies inside that presumed whole

and what outside it" (McHale 2004, 17). In this conception of the long poem, reading the 'difficult whole' requires open hypotheses rather than strict conclusions. This resistance to closure is complicated further by the editorial concerns involved in the composition of long poems—"Some long poems don't even have a 'whole' in any obvious sense, since they were added to, had sections removed and there is no definitive edition" (Middleton, np). Furthermore, there are practical matters involved in the production and reading of extended works; they are "expensive to print; tricky to handle digitally; too long to be read in their entirety at poetry readings; too big for anthologies; much too big for little magazines […]; almost always too long to teach within the constraints of a timetable; exorbitantly demanding of a reader's time; and sometimes barely readable until extended scholarly labours have provided guides and critical readings" (Ibid., np). If individual long poems display such a plenum of idiosyncratic features which define the contours of the work, how then can any cohesion be sought in a genre which brings these radically disparate works together?

It is Peter Middleton's contention that the answer to this question lies in 'failure'. His 2010 essay 'The Longing Of The Long Poem' is one of the most recent summations of the critical field of long poems. He writes:

> If when reading the debates around long poems one rarely experiences a triumphalist tone, it may be partly because in practice the long poem is also marked by failure to the point where it could be said that failure is constitutive of the long poem. (2010, np)

Middleton's sense of the 'failure' of the long poem gestures towards both its teleological difficulties and its structural cohesion. Whilst failure is certainly associated with the fact that a variety of long poems have supposedly outlived their writers (Olson, Zukofsky, Carlos Williams, Pound), Middleton also seems to be inviting failure himself by adopting too strict a

definition of what constitutes the long poem. This is a concern prevalent in the work of Lyn

Keller, whose *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems By Women* argues against this

conception of the long poem. Her work presents a model of inquiry into extended poetics

which develops a view of the long poem as involving individual efforts of "expansion". She

writes that "critical models [of the long poem] tend to recognise as long poems only works

which fit a single pattern based on a particular generic precedent" (1997, 1). What the

criticism of long poems requires in order to circumvent this critical rather than compositional

failure is a means of reading which maintains the sense of the extended poem as an

experimental practice for which 'failure' is only a measure of prospective ambition. Despite

Middleton's attempts to circumnavigate the implications of his proclamation of 'failure', still

there remains a sense of the critic as having already determined what a successful long poem

might look like, and holding existing examples of the form against this Platonic ideal. This

sense of the critic as judge of the long poem is inhibiting, and this thesis will seek to develop

a stance antithetical to Middleton's. 'Failure', in this regard, characterises not the activities

which constitute the American long poem but rather critical views of the long poem which

deterministically pre-conceive its limits. This, however, still leaves a vital question

unanswered: How do we know a work of poetic extension when we see one? There are of

course a number of nominal factors involved— for example, if a poet describes a work as a

'long poem', this can act as an initial indication. If it is described as a 'series', a 'book-length'

work, an 'epic', a 'project' or a 'sequence', we can assume that it is also likely to be a poem

which deals with extension. Foremost, however, the American long poem, as this thesis will

argue, is concerned with establishing modes of poetic inquiry. In this sense, what qualifies a

long poem, in the context of American poets of the late 20th century, is a capacity— both

spatial and in terms of ambition— to carry out sustained inquiry. This is not to construct an

artificial distinction between short poems as uninquiring and long poems as inquiring, but

rather to gesture towards the fact that extension in the American long poem is always related to a desire to carry out a task, be it an explicit theoretical task, as in the example of Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous', or to record one's temporality, as in the example of James Schuyler's 'The Morning of The Poem', or even, as in the example of Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts,* to write a long poem *about* long poems.

In this regard, Middleton's argument is notable elsewhere for the emphasis it places on the importance of coming to terms with individual long poems. He writes: "If *anything* can happen in a long poem, reading may require induction into the peculiar practices of a specific long poem" (Ibid.). These 'peculiar practices', or what this thesis will term idiosyncrasies, characterise individual works of poetic extension. In the process of arriving at his thesis, Middleton considers the conclusions reached by the critics of the long poem which precede him. It is worth bearing witness to this in order to more firmly establish the discourse with which this thesis will be engaging. In particular, Middleton refers to Vincent Sherry's 1985 article 'Current Critical Modes of The Long Poem and David Jones's *The Anathemata*'. Sherry's article is written in response to Rosenthal and Gall's 1983 book *The Modern Poetic Sequence,* which argues that "poets surmount the problem defined by Poe [that the "long poem is a contradiction in terms"] by writing long poems as sequences of short lyrics, sacrificing overall structure for the sake of momentary intensity (Sherry, 239). *The Modern Poetic Sequence* has received significant attention as an impressively comprehensive work— and, as a result of its attempted comprehension, it has also received criticism (Conte; Keller; Middleton) for its univocal take on 20th century long poems. Gall and Rosenthal's argument that the long poem is always a 'poetic sequence', defined by its 'intensities', is based on a thesis that this is a method derived from Whitman's 'multitudinous' model. As with Hatlen's account of the American long poem, they contest that 'Song of Myself' offers "an emotional centre energising the poem" (11), and suggest that a similar authority is at work in the long

poems produced in Whitman's wake. Furthermore, they discuss each grouping of poems—

'The Modern Sequence', 'Poetry of Psychological Pressure', 'Meditative Modes',

'Confessional' and 'Post-Confessional'— in terms developed from Whitman's 'Song of Myself'.

Rosenthal and Gall are not alone in proposing this lineage. Thomas Gardner in *Finding*

Ourselves In Whitman writes:

> Whitman's model— one adopted by an impressively elaborated sequence of
>
> modern and contemporary poets— has two parts: Whitman's work in creating
>
> a self-portrait, and his attempt to understand that portrait as representative
>
> of his age.   (Gardner, 3)

In his own work, Gardner argues that John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Robert Duncan,

John Ashbery and James Merrill all develop their 'long poems' from the model Whitman

establishes in his lifelong *Leaves of Grass.* Stephen Fender is another critic who reads the

American long poem in this manner. He writes:

> Even 'open-ended' gives too restricted a sense of the long poem in the
>
> Whitman tradition. […] T.S Eliot, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and
>
> William Carlos Williams all belong to this tradition, whatever their differences.
>
>   (Fender, vii)

It is my not my intention to argue that Rosenthal and Gall, Fender and Gardner are wrong in

emphasising the importance of Whitman in the history of American Long Poems— however,

it is crucial to underscore the fact that whilst this tradition can be proposed, it is another

matter to claim that subsequent acts of extension themselves are explicitly determined by an

earlier figure like Whitman. As such, this dominant history of the long poem overlooks the

'plethora' of activities which characterise the long poem.

To counter this notion of the long poem as depending on pre-existing models of extension, Middleton turns to Brian McHale's thesis in *The Obligation Towards The Difficult Whole.* McHale proposes a notion of the long poem which "resist[s] rushing to invoke conceptual explanation that amounts to a setting aside of what is said in the poem and treating it as an overall aesthetic paradigm, while retaining our commitment to line by line interpretation" (Middleton, np). Whilst this thesis will present close-readings of acts of extension, it is important to underscore the risk involved in characterising long-form poems by their small-scale details. Allen Dick articulates this concern: "Critics have for too long been unchallenged when they dismiss long poems by quoting from their lesser parts— offering these, unfairly, as characteristic of the poem as a whole" (79). These two impulses— characterising the long poem by virtue of its precedents or performing close-readings on its individual parts— situate the critic of the long poem in a tenuous position.

As indicated, it is this thesis' purpose to argue that the 'long poem' can be rewardingly discussed in terms of extended poetics. The list of texts which might qualify as works of poetic extension in America in the 20th and 21st centuries and merit critical attention is far too numerous to include here in full, but can be gestured at with reference to the poets who receive attention in recent critical works on long poems. Lyn Keller's *Forms of Expansion* reads the work of Susan Howe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Rita Dove, Sharon Doubiago and Beverly Dahlen, whilst Joseph Conte's *Unending Design: Forms of Postmodern Poetry* focuses on Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn, John Ashbery, Lorine Neidecker and Robert Duncan and Brian McHale's *The Obligation Towards The Difficult Whole: Postmodern Long Poems* brings together Melvin Tolson, James Merrill, Edward Dorn, Geoffrey Hill, Thomas McGrath and Bruce Andrews. In each of these examples, efforts are made by the critic to cover a span of poetic styles in order to underscore the extent to which acts of poetic extension are not limited to any one age, generation or 'school' of poets, though all characterise the long poem

15

in America after the 1950s as being concerned with experimentation. Furthermore, these works bear witness to a conception of the 'long poem' which does not seek to subject a variety of practices beneath the auspices of one generic category or ambition. Joseph Conte's article 'The Smooth and The Striated: Compositional Texture in the Modern Long Poem' frames this desire, claiming that "many studies of the modern long poem address problems of genre" and as such he wishes to "suspend the question of genre in favour of making some qualitative distinctions based on compositional method and poetic texture" (1997, 57). This thesis will seek to adopt a methodology which circumvents delimiting questions of generic qualification in favour of site-specific readings of 'compositional method', specifically in terms of the idiosyncrasy of these methods. In this regard, perhaps the most informative work to date on the relationship between American long poems, idiosyncrasy and phenomenology is Peter Baker's *Obdurate Brilliance: Exteriority in the Modern Long Poem*. Baker offers a critical model in which the poetic voices of long poems are figured in terms of exteriority and intersubjectivity. Baker's 'Exteriority' is defined in Levinsian terms— "The philosophy of Levinas claims that an ethical stance, open to the address of the truly other, will keep faith with the need to resist […] violence. […] This openness to the other he terms exteriority" (6). His range of poets includes "the American poets Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, John Ashbery, Michael Palmer, Clark Coolidge, and Bernadette Mayer" (3), though his thesis, carried out at the Saint-John Perse Foundation, begins with five chapters on Perse's poetics in order to establish a more general association between the late French intersubjective phenomenologies of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida. In particular, Baker characterises the modern long poem as being written "against interiority […] in an attempt to reorient the analysis of modern long poems away from the idea of the individual self as the centre of interest and organization" (2). Baker's intention is not only to disclose the intersubjective stances prevalent throughout

American long poems but also to perform critique on these works in a manner which does not do "violence" to "the truly other". Baker's argument as such defends the idiosyncrasies of works by virtue of an ethical necessity. This ethical necessity lies in regarding the poets and poems themselves as 'exterior'. In this regard, he writes that "the modern long poem turns deliberately outward in order to address the experience of others, at the same time inviting the reader into the process of making sense out of the text. The exteriority of the modern long poem is one form of ethical practice in our time" (3). In this argument, Baker highlights the specific sense in which the long poem involves a prolonged and sustained engagement with the text, and as a result implicates the reader in 'exteriority' which the long poem, in Baker's thesis, articulates. Furthermore, he argues that the 20th century long poem displays a similar theoretical progression to that which takes place in continental philosophy. For Baker, this is primarily a similarity in ethical ambition, and is "beyond any question of influence" (4). He writes:

> This view of the ethical subject of poetry based on an outward orientation
> runs parallel to the view of the subject in the philosophy and critical theory of
> the twentieth century. (Ibid.)

As indicated, of particular importance to Baker are phenomenological theorists for their discussions of the workings of the ethical dimensions of subjectivity. Baker's work establishes a generative meeting of two distinctly ethical practices which brave the contradictions and aporias of articulating the intersubjective. Baker's overarching argument concerning the 'exteriority' with which American long poems are occupied can be seen perhaps to over-generalise the specific ethical stances developed in these works. This thesis intends to reorient Baker's argument towards characterising the phenomenological themes of a variety of poets working in America in the last fifty years, with a particular focus on the 'plethora'

and alterity which characterises American extended poetics. It is necessary now to present the frame in which my argument will take place, and articulate the phenomenological methodology and taxonomy through which idiosyncrasy will be discussed throughout this thesis.

Idiosyncrasy, Phenomenology and Extended Poetics

Concentrating
On stretching the theoretic elastic of your conceptions
Till the extent is adequate
To the hooking on
Of any— or all
Forms of creative idiosyncrasy
(Mina Loy, 20)

In her introduction to the 2009 anthology of contemporary poetry, *American Hybrid*, Cole Swensen writes that

> American poetry finds itself at a moment when idiosyncrasy rules to such a
> degree and differences are so numerous that distinct factions are hard, even
> impossible, to pin down. Instead, we find a thriving centre of alterity, of
> writings and writers that have inherited and adapted traits developed by
> everyone from the Romantics through the Modernists to the various avant-
> gardes, the Confessionalists, Allen's margins, and finally to Language poetry
> and the New Formalists.   (2009, i)

For some critics, the notion that "idiosyncrasy rules" might provoke a desire to "pin down" these works into "distinct factions". In this regard, the task of developing idiosyncrasy as a

meaningful term in the study of poetics sets itself against more conventional conceptions of poetry as occurring within the bounds of lineage and tradition. A focus on idiosyncrasy can be witnessed in a number of the existing critical works on American long poems, though not articulated as such because each critic has other preoccupations— McHale's focus on the postmodern elements, Conte's sense of texture in "the smooth and striated", Keller's insistence on a feminist reappraisal, Baker's occupation with 'exteriority'. The task of this thesis then lies in emphasising idiosyncrasy as a means not only of coming to terms with works of poetic extension but also underscoring the phenomenological themes in these poems. By this I mean that the question of idiosyncrasy in poetry is an inherently intersubjective one. As Peter Baker has indicated, intersubjectivity is integral to the American long poem not only because of the natural situation in which meaning is constituted between subjectivities but also because the American long poem displays a recurring concern with the articulation of being-with-others. This is a constitutive effect of the long poem because, as the long poem takes an extended interaction with to comprehend, it develops an implicit ethics in the idiosyncratic way in which the text is extended.

At this point, it is necessary to explain how 20th century phenomenology articulates intersubjectivity. After the initial important developments in methodology by the likes of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that "Existence cannot be anything— spatial, sexual, temporal— without […] taking up and assuming its 'attributes' and turning them into the dimensions of its being, such that a relatively precise analysis of each of them in fact has to do with subjectivity itself" (2012, 433). What is at stake is a misdirection away from "the world [as] a mass without gaps, a system of colours across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrat[ing] as it is formed" (*Cézanne's Doubt* 65). The primacy of this 'force' in the experience of reality as in the text is the understanding that subjectivities have limited perspectives, but

limited specifically by virtue of an imagined 'totality' of perception and the existence of other

subjectivities. We are largely aware in the happening of our being that there is a similar

experience of embedded perspective in a world by all other subjects. This notion of

phenomenology as starting out from a pre-conceptual basis is, for Merleau-Ponty, essential

in coming to an understanding of the relationship between self and world. In *The*

Phenomenology of Perception, he writes:

> I am the absolute source, my existence does not come from my antecedents,
>
> from my physical and social environment; it goes toward them and sustains
>
> them. It is me who makes exist for myself (and therefore exist in the sole
>
> sense that the word can have for me) the tradition that I choose to take up or
>
> this horizon whose distance from me would collapse […] if I were not there to
>
> traverse it with my gaze. (Ibid. 56-7)

This 'taking up' is not so much a critique of those who claim themselves as a part of a

tradition but rather a directive that those who do must explicitly regard themselves as such.

By foregrounding the constituting-subject who is responsible for the conceptions and

articulations they arrive at, phenomenology seeks to ground investigation in a radical

contingency which regards objects at hand as dependent for their immediate reality on the

perceiving subject. Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenological 'event':

> When an event is considered at close quarters, at the moment when it is lived
>
> through, everything seems subject to chance: one man's ambition, some lucky
>
> encounter, some local circumstance or other appears to have been decisive.
>
> But chance happenings offset each other, and then this dust of facts
>
> coalesces, outlines a certain way of taking a position in relation to the human

situation, an *event* whose contours are defined and about which we can speak. (Ibid., 66)

Following this model, the "lucky encounter" might describe the way in the process of reading leads to our conception of a poetic text as a 'long poem'. This "dust of facts coalesc[ing]" would therefore be our conception— and Merleau-Ponty's use of the term 'dust' seems additionally fitting in that it suggests the text as something with a surface that can be unsettled by intervention, in which finger prints can linger and be seen by others. As such, Merleau-Ponty develops a sense in his later work of the 'chaismic' relationship between the subject and objects of perception:

> What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, that would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing 'all naked' because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.   ('The Intertwining— The Chiasm' 131)

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'flesh' in which both self and world are embedded establishes an indeterminate situation in which it is difficult to decide where one ends and the other begins. Merleau-Ponty arrives at this point in his philosophy as a result of his earlier investigations into Husserlian intentionality. Intersubjectivity requires this sense of proximity, and indeed Emmanuel Levinas goes on to develop Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology into an open ethical relation with the absolutely Other. These conceptions of intersubjectivity will act as the grounding on which this thesis will develop. It is necessary, however, to underscore the ethical dimension of intersubjectivity as conceived by Levinas. As we have seen, Baker's thesis seeks to establish a sense of the long poem as an inherently intersubjective and ethical

practice. He articulates this in terms of the relationship between the writer of the long poem and its readers:

> The modern long poem, often through experimental strategies, works to break down the identification of the poetic speaker and the poet/author. […] As readers, our ethical response is thus engaged, as we are confronted with works in which the very structure of intersubjectivity is worked out in the disposition of their textual strategies. (Peter Baker, 177)

The 'ethical response' here requires an understanding of the specific ways in which intersubjectivity is 'worked out'. Idiosyncrasy and intersubjectivity are not necessarily at odds in this argument. Idiosyncrasy is not a measure of interiority, of how successfully the critic can frame the personal or psychobiographical aspects of the work. It is, rather, intended to articulate the particular stances adopted by individual poets. In stressing this intertwining of terms, it is essential to underscore the extent to which intersubjectivity, concerned as it is with the Other, cannot become generalised. This is a primary tenet of Levinas' phenomenology, which he discusses in terms of the Other and the Same. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes:

> A calling into question of the same […] is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (1999a, 43)

Levinas' work seeks to allow the other to remain absolutely other. This task requires the polarities of 'same' and 'other' in that the latter cannot ethically be comprehended in the

terms of the former. In Baker's thesis, this extends to encompass not only our interactions with other subjectivities but also our encounters with texts, and the subjectivities they frame. Specifically, the long poem sustains subjectivity by virtue of the compositional decisions which constitute poetic extension. To read a variety of long poems in terms of their similarities is as such an act of 'neutralization'. In this regard, Levinas writes:

> The neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or an object—
> appearing, that is, taking its place in the light— is precisely his reduction to
> the same. (Ibid.)

The methodology at work throughout the thesis thus seeks to avoid assimilating the poets and their poems in terms of the 'same', and instead reads them based on their own terms as developed in their extended poems.

It could be argued, however, that this sense of the idiosyncratic in poetry risks overstating the peculiarity of a given work. Justin Lawler, in his 1999 study of British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, contends that reading poetry in terms of idiosyncrasy causes three problems: (1) "[T]he uninitiated reader […] simply refuses to seriously consider the poems at all" and as a result "cannot hear the poet speak in his own voice" (Lawler 16); (2) "the preoccupation with idiosyncrasy encourages academicians to ferret out the most arcane and exotic readings of the poetry, on the specious grounds that if the text is acknowlegdly awry, critical interpretations are licensed to be askew" (Ibid.); and (3) that "the emphasis on idiosyncrasy inhibits the open-minded novice reader from drawing on his own intellectual and imaginative resources" (Ibid.). Lawler's sense of 'idiosyncrasy' is pitched towards peculiarity more so than subjective particularity. He wishes to correct works on Hopkins which characterise him as odd or unusual. Whilst we should be wary of taking Lawler's comments out of context, his argument serves to illuminate the very reasons why

idiosyncrasy is such an important question in the criticism of long poems specifically. Lawler contends that there is a problem in that a 'preoccupation with idiosyncrasy' leads to 'askew' critical interpretations which emphasise the strangeness of poetic forms rather than their similarities. As has been indicated at length already, the range of works which can be discussed as developing poetic extension is broad and varied enough to merit, if not necessitate, an intense focus on the specific procedures at work for individual poets. This is not to misrepresent the poetic activity of the late 20th century as taking place in a fragmented and solitary fashion— indeed, many of the poets who receive attention in this thesis can be characterised in terms of their friendships and dialogues with others. Rather, it is to insist on the importance of bearing witness to these specific activities rather than generalising them into an order implicit with hierarchies, margins and, as we have seen, the 'doomed' auspices of success and failure.

This thesis' contention that a rewarding relationship can be constructed between the discourses of phenomenology and American long poems will take two forms: (1) as a methodological guide and (2) as a taxonomy of terms which allow access to questions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as explored and manifested by works of poetic extension. The most significant advantages of adopting the terms of phenomenology— as manifested in the diverse and interrelated writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas— is that the study of poetics is offered as means of engaging seriously with the implications of subjectivity in experimental poetic practice. Most importantly, however, phenomenology offers a sustained interrogation and explication of the workings of intersubjectivity. Long poems disclose certain stances and attitudes towards Others and The Other in their extensions. Besides the terms used by the poets themselves, phenomenological discourse allows us not only a means of discussing subjectivity but also extension as it occurs between subjects. In this regard, it can be argued that the late 20th

century American long poem is overwhelmingly concerned with being-with-others, and as such questions of proximity, intimacy, exteriority, expansion and intertwining recur throughout and across a variety of disparate poetic projects. To address this plethora of intersubjective themes, it is appropriate to resist adopting any one specific 'mode' or 'model' of phenomenological inquiry as an authoritative account.

Acts of Extended Inquiry

As indicated, this thesis will engage with a variety of phenomenological texts throughout its reading of individual works of poetic extension. This will take place, however, as and when their relevance becomes apparent in the course of individual chapters. For example, George Oppen, whose 'Of Being Numerous' opens this thesis, engaged in his poems and prose with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Whilst it would not be completely accurate to characterise Oppen as a Heideggerian poet, he adopts and adapts the terms of Heidegger's philosophy, most notably 'being' and 'disclosure'. Oppen can, in this regard, be discussed rewardingly alongside Heideggerian phenomenology, even outside of the auspices of a phenomenological critical methodology like that of the present thesis. As indicated, James Schuyler's work, on the other hand, does not engage with philosophical texts or discourse in an explicit way, and as such discussing him in phenomenological terms runs the risk of misappropriating his work. These risks are discussed at length in Chapter Three, which focuses on James Schuyler, but for now this example serves to underscore the fact that in each of these instances, it is necessary to remain aware of the specific relationships between the poet and the philosophy, rather than imposing an external model of phenomenological inquiry which is somehow equally weighted between the poets. It is precisely these differences in extent which go towards constituting idiosyncrasy as a critical measure. What

is at stake in maintaining these distinctions is not repeating the same mistakes prevalent throughout past works of criticism of long poems, namely, as has been discussed in detail already, the imposition of a narrative which seeks to 'authenticate' some examples of the long poem whilst overlooking others. This is not to say, however, that critical narratives are in and of themselves bad or misleading, but rather that such narratives absolutely must be foregrounded as narratives and not as a matter of incontrovertible historical record. In this regard, the loose narrative which this thesis will articulate is based on a desire to present extended poetics in America in their heterogeneous plethora. Beginning with George Oppen's 1968 work *Of Being Numerous* and ending with Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts,* finished in 2013, the seven poets featured in this thesis represent diversity foremost in their radically disparate varieties of poetic inquiry. They remain thematically and philosophically united, however, in their shared ambitions to articulate and elucidate questions and problems of intersubjectivity. My narrative, then, seeks to tell a story of the American long poem as being not only conceivable in terms of idiosyncrasy and extension, but also crucially and constitutively concerned with being-with-others. It is not appropriate to the materials at hand to seek to justify this narrative by virtue of historical detail, except where such details illuminate the workings of intersubjectivity in a particular act of poetic extension. For example, Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's collaborative long poem *Sight*, which occupies Chapter Five, can be rewardingly read in the light of their correspondence throughout the period of composition, and in this instance this epistolary relationship features heavily in my reading. On the other hand, past accounts of Robin Blaser's *Image-Nations* have relied heavily on his relationship to San Francisco Renaissance poetics, and efforts have been made in Chapter Four to maintain Blaser's idiosyncrasy whilst simultaneously deferring to his contemporaries Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan as and when such deferrals illuminate Blaser's intense occupation with intimacy and friendship in his poetics. The most salient point

in these observations is the fact that it is always first and foremost an idiosyncratic matter whether or not it is appropriate to discuss a certain poet in a certain light, and this thesis, whilst certainly aware of the narrative it is proposing, seeks to remain true to this principle. My narrative— that the American long poem in the 20th century can be better understood as a series of acts of extended inquiry— seeks to emphasise the fact that the history of experimental poetry cannot be understood merely in narrative terms. Instead, I seek to propose something of a phenomenological narrative, which is to say, a framework based on my own readings in and of American poetics which brings together a variety of poets rarely discussed alongside one another. The purpose of this is not merely to subvert convention or articulate dissent towards a tradition, but is rather intended to bear witness to extended poetics in America as a series of acts of extended inquiry.

This thesis will present six examples of poetic extension composed in America in the last sixty years by virtue of a variety of figures known foremost for their association with the 'schools' of The New Poetry. It is not my intention to present the poets as 'belonging' to their groupings other than in instances when the act of extension itself arises from collaboration and poetic exchange, such as we will see in Chapter 3, which addresses Robin Blaser's poetics of 'friendship' with Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, or in Chapter 4, which presents the epistolary relationship that constitutes Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's extended work *Sight.*

The grouping of poets featured in this thesis are all American poets who published extended works since the 1950s, and each is associated to varying extents with schools of avant-garde, post-Modernist or 'New' poetics. George Oppen has been regarded as an 'Objectivist' poet and is often discussed alongside his contemporaries Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker and Charles Reznikoff; James Schuyler's close association with Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest and John Ashbery locate him among the New York School in the 1950s; Robin

Blaser was instrumental in many of the publications and events which surrounded the San Francisco Renaissance; Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino all published poems and works of poetics in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* school publications in the 1970s-80s; Rachel Blau DuPlessis has worked since the 1970s with both Language and Objectivist poetics, though her sustained interest in and engagement with 'the long poem' distinguishes her as a leading figure in the discourse of extended poetics in her own right.

In each of these cases, efforts have been made in each chapter to isolate the poets from their groupings; which is to say, I seek to develop the terms with which I discuss each poet from the poet themselves and not from the poetic school with which they are associated. This has variable consequences; for Susan Howe, who worked alongside but rarely under the explicit auspices of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school, general critical discussions of Language Poetry are less useful than specific readings of aspects of Howe's own work. For Robin Blaser, however, whose life and texts are often entwined with the lives of the San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, it might appear more difficult to identify 'idiosyncrasy' when he himself insists on the necessary communality of poetry.

In most cases, this argument is assisted by the poets' themselves regarding their works as 'long poems' or 'projects', and often writing at length about the process of extended composition. Each chapter will start out with the same ambition to frame the key terms of each extended work, though where the investigation goes following this is dependent entirely on the poems themselves and what they demand of the reader.

It is necessary now, before moving on to the chapters themselves, to outline the themes and formal interests of each of the poets who occupy this study. The opening chapter

seeks to conduct a reading of George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968). Oppen's major

serial poem is concerned with numerousness both on the page and in the intersubjective

world. He seeks to create an analogue in his poem between serial poetics and being-with-

others. In approaching this ground, Oppen works 'thru' Martin Heidegger's writings to arrive

at an idiom which is not beholden to philosophy but rather establishes its own taxonomy "of

being numerous."

The second chapter of this study reads James Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem, A

Few Days* and *Hymn To Life,* all of which are consistently grounded in an introspective and

self-correcting poet-speaker. Schuyler's diaristic meditations take the form of a series of

disclosures of the 'daily', in which proximity with the people and objects which populate his

life establishes an empathic poetics.

The third chapter is concerned with Robin Blaser's *Image-Nation* and *The Holy Forest.*

Again, as in my readings of Oppen and Schuyler, the primary feature of Blaser's sense of

poetic extension is intersubjectivity as a means of extension. By this I mean that Blaser's

works extend by virtue of the lives they seek to communicate with, and as such a

complicated sense of the 'chiasmic' nature of quotation and textual appropriation comes to

the fore. Specifically, Blaser's 'practice of outside' seeks to work towards what transcends

subjectivity in the poem. One such transcendence is articulated in Blaser's attempts to

foreground 'friendship' as the grounding upon which his poetry develops.

The fourth chapter of the study seeks to develop Susan Howe's account of historical

tyranny and American phenomenology. The former is disclosed at length in *The Birthmark*, a

collection of essays which establish Howe's sense of authoritative history as generating a

series of margins and marginal figures whose recovery it is the poet's ethical duty to perform.

In her trilogy of extended poems *Pierce-Arrow,* one such recovery is performed on the life of

logician and philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, who is notable for developing a form of

phenomenology in 19th century America. In the writing of this work, Howe visited both Pierce's and Edmund Husserl's archives in order to encounter the materials of her poems first-hand. It is a crucial feature of Howe's work that the archive is home to the marginal, and she labours to give articulation to these margins.

The fifth chapter conducts a reading of two poets— Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. Their collaborative extended work *Sight* is a long poem which extends on epistolary principles. It is a work the ambitions of which are deceptively simple: to enumerate vision and its implications in poetry. Their shared sense of the primary role of sight and vision in perceptual experience leads to a meditative dialogue which is constantly in a state of being re-envisioned. In this regard, this chapter challenges the way in which my sense of 'idiosyncrasy' functions, in that by addressing two poets at the same time it is more difficult to make clear arguments concerning subjectivity and perception. The fact, however, that the work is so thoroughly one of collaboration, and that the alternating instalments are designated as being written by either Hejinian or Scalapino, allows a clear conception of the individual efforts which together constitute the epistolary serial form of the work.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts* stands as the sixth and final chapter of the work. Her 30-year project, completed in 2013, encompasses a dizzying array of long-poem forms through the two procedures of 'drafting' and 'folding'. My chapter seeks to frame *Drafts* as a work of poetic extension concerned first and foremost with the act of poetic extension itself. DuPlessis' idiosyncrasy lies largely in her willingness to engage with seriality on a far larger scale than that of her close friend and mentor, George Oppen, in that rather than bringing together small discrete units of poetry, DuPlessis brings together 114 long poems into one larger structure. It is in this sense arguably the first work of poetic meta-extension, a long poem about long poems which denies that anything ultimately defines 'the long poem'. For this reason, DuPlessis' *Drafts* also acts as a bridge to the conclusion of this thesis. The main

reasons for this lie in her position as a scholar of long poems and as a composer of the first major 21st century American long poem. From the vantage point of having read *Drafts*, the mid to late-twentieth century American long poem can be witnessed not merely as a series of poetic traditions and histories, but of individual acts of formal manipulation, structural expansion and thematic disclosure which extend poetry.

2   Finding a word for ourselves   George Oppen

I write of things

Endless, endless,

innumerable

(Oppen 2008, 186)

Introduction

George Oppen is notable among poets working in the 20th century for developing a serial

poetry concerned with an ethics of sincerity. Seriality for Oppen is not merely an

organisational principle; it can also be put to use to evoke the contingent and ambulatory

nature of perception. Of reading George Oppen, Robert Creeley writes: "One begins to

recognise this active, restless intelligence, often brooding in its preoccupation […] tracking

and retracking an implacable ground of apparent consequences" (Oppen 2002, 4). This

evocation of Oppen's procedure is useful in outlining the characteristics of what I will be

arguing are his phenomenological poetics. In his works of poetic extension— *Discrete Series,*

'Route' and 'Of Being Numerous'— Oppen's poetic voice works through questions of

intersubjectivity and being-in-the-world from a stance which embraces the contingency of

perception. In his third daybook, which was written parallel to the composition of 'Of Being

Numerous', Oppen writes: "I can see nothing at all except that one encounters the thing.

And, it is impossible not to say, encounters oneself" (2007, 142). This grounding in the

subjectivity of perception is a pervasive theme throughout his work. This is not to say,

however, that Oppen's poetics is merely subjective; rather, the inquiry at the heart of his

work is oriented towards determining how numerous subjectivities can co-exist ethically.

In this light, describing Oppen as a phenomenological poet could be construed as a problematic claim, in that it might serve to misrepresent the relationship between philosophy and poetry evident in his writing. This claim can be somewhat justified in the light of existing Oppen criticism. One such example can be found in L.S Dembo's statement that "when Oppen put pen to paper again, it was […] as an Existentialist, not as a Socialist" (Dembo 1969a, 137). Whilst it is not my intention to argue the case for Oppen as an existential poet, Dembo usefully gestures towards the fact that Oppen's poetics are highly informed by existential and phenomenological philosophy, though never in a prescriptive manner. The crucial difference between existentialism as Oppen understood it and phenomenology lies in the fact that the former seeks to outline a certain attitude towards the world whereas the latter merely seeks to clearly and intensely determine what constitutes this 'world' in the first place. As Eric Hoffman writes: "Oppen explained that his agreement with existentialism […] began and ended with the belief that existence precedes essence, or, as Oppen writes elsewhere, that we "get born into the thing, we just find ourselves here and we are as we are" (2008, 169). Oppen tellingly positions himself against Jean-Paul Sartre, offering a critique of what he perceives as the misanthropy of the latter's work— "My difference with Sartre is that I don't in the least dislike the world" (Dembo 1969a, 140). Oppen criticism has rewardingly engaged with phenomenological ideas and texts seriously— For example, Marjorie Perloff writes that Oppen is concerned with "the phenomenology of the mind" (1985, 7); Abby Shapiro that Oppen's is a "phenomenological world" (1981, 224); and Michael Heller describes a "phenomenological poetics which evolves [...] to the more subtle complexities of language-in-the-world, of the holds on thought of the philosophical" (2004, 70). Oppen's is a poetry of process, of being always-already caught up in the goings-on of what he perceives to be the actual.

This chapter will seek to conduct a reading of Oppen's poetics with a view of underscoring the dialogue in his work between poetry and phenomenology, with particular attention to the extended serial work 'Of Being Numerous'. In carrying out this task, it is necessary first to frame curiosity through specific examples of Oppen's poetic sight. Following this, the relationship Oppen constructs between serial form and intersubjectivity will be discussed, before moving towards concluding. This chapter will seek to disclose the idiosyncratic terms of Oppen's practice— a practice driven by the ambition to "[find] a word for ourselves" (2003, 8).

Oppen's 'Actualness'

First, however, it is necessary to dwell on the *use* to which Oppen put his readings in philosophy. Oppen writes that his quotations "are not allusions; they are thefts" (Oppen 2007, 380). One can take from this that Oppen's use of embedded quotations, particularly those of philosophical figures such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Maritain, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Søren Kierkegaard, are not intended to assemble an explicit philosophical tradition so much as appropriate a taxonomy through which a poetics responsive to philosophy can be composed. Stephen Cope writes that Oppen's use of materials displays "a social ethos in which the poem is created out of conversations with others— including the poet himself" (Oppen 2007, 380); whilst Michael Davidson extends this thought to associate 'conversation' with the state and the question of being numerous: "The poem is made up from extensive quotation from correspondence, conversations, books, and news articles to give vivid form to the theme announced by the poem's title" (Ibid., xxv). Oppen's textual materials, especially those he notated first in his *Daybooks*, are not a 'repertoire', in the same way that he never forcefully put forward a prescribed method or system of poetics. Oppen

attests to this fact: he "do[es] not care for systems" (2007, 70). Cope expands on this aspect of Oppen's writing:

> Oppen was highly suspicious of Pound's egoistic and didactic use of poetry, which he felt should not be used to 'prescribe an opinion or idea, but to record the process of thinking it.' (Oppen 2007, 20)

Oppen is uninterested in Pound's "poetics of nostalgia" (Heller 2004, 5) or, to use Oppen's own phrase, his "organisation of the world around a character" (Oppen 2007, 16). The double-meaning of 'character' here can be quite appropriately directed at the voice of the *Cantos* and Pound's ideogrammatic method of composition. In both cases, the dominance of what Oppen calls "Pound's ego system" is a perceived failure in its "drive toward the establishment of an authoritative and didactic voice" (Hoffman 2008, 10). This leads Hoffman to conclude that "Oppen's unique compositional process [is] meant to achieve [an] openness and ambiguity of meaning that, unlike Pound's *Cantos*, resists the closure of authority" (Ibid. 8). What makes Oppen's work reject closure in the most immediate sense is its serial organisation, in which the terms of the series together form the whole. In this regard, Alan Golding writes:

> Narrative, Oppen has said, with its implications of an ordered universe apprehensible in a unified work of art, runs counter to his feeling that poetic form is local and temporary and that meaning is constructed disjunctively out of momentary insights. (Ibid., 229-30)

Oppen's resistance to 'the closure of authority' comes from his situating the poet-speaker as the figure working patiently 'thru' language to present perception in 'momentary insights'. 'Thru' is a signature term in Oppen's poetry— it appears throughout his *Collected Poems* but in particular in 'Of Being Numerous', and seems to display on a small scale the ambition working 'thru' his poetics. It is necessary to explore the significance that Oppen's preference

of 'thru' over 'through' evokes: in a superficial sense, it is merely a north American variation,

but in Oppen's hands it carries also the senses of both teleology— of being *thru*— and of a

route, of having to get to meaning *thru* things. Grammatically the word is condensed, the

superfluous letters of 'through' (the unsounded o, g and h) themselves cut thru, omitted to

suggest a sense of immanence and immediacy. This working 'thru', and the poetic stance it

implies, echoes a quotation of Heidegger Oppen records in Daybook III: "Man creates not

<u>being</u>, but the *there* of being-there" (2007, 146. Oppen's emphasis). In German, Heidegger's

term for human consciousness is 'Dasein', a compound word which brings together 'Das'

(that or there) and 'Sein' (Being), and specifically gestures at the there-ness of being. It is

Heidegger's contention that the self-conscious 'thereness' of human perception is its defining

characteristic. In this regard, Heidegger's '*there*' is a deictic term. 'There' has to do with

location and locating, both of which suggest one's orientation in relation to a world. It is from

this position that Oppen locates sites of meaning— the shipwreck, the city of corporations,

the killing fields, the world of stoops, the poem itself— and moves 'thru' them to his sense of

clarity, of sincerity. 'Thereness' and 'Thruness' are significant concepts in Oppen's poetics,

foremost in the sense that both are concerned with addressing deixis as fundamental to

subjective perception. In Oppen's 'Psalm', for instance, the poetic voice evokes 'thereness' in

the "small nouns/crying faith" (2003, 99) as well as 'thruness' in the perceptive movement

from the mere existence of the deer— "that they are there!" (ibid.)— to their eyes and teeth,

which get to the literal and metaphorical "roots of it" (ibid.). The 'it' here refers not only to

the grass of the "small beauty of the forest" but to the site in which this perception unfolds,

the grounding of the scene. There is an implicit relation between this forest and the way it

simultaneously discloses and obscures the life within and Oppen's sense of the potential of

poetry. Oppen's poems, like the forest of 'Psalm', seek to present things in their 'thereness',

though subject always to the 'thruness' of subjectivity. In this regard, 'thereness' and 'thruness' are brought together towards the end of the poem, as both sight and site:

> Their paths
> Nibbled thru the fields, the leaves that shade them
> Hang in the distances
> Of sun   (Ibid., 99)

The distinction to be made here is that the deer's paths are not merely a means of moving 'through' the fields but rather, for Oppen, stand as a figure 'thru' which the deer are both manifested and witnessed. In *Of Being Numerous* a similar working thru can be witnessed, though the object of perception— human numerousness and its correlatives— is more elusive than the "wild deer" of the former poem.

It would be a mistake, however, to label Oppen as an explicitly Heideggerian poet. Throughout his work, Oppen appears to read 'thru'— in the contingent, immanent sense of the term discussed above— his materials, never taking a statement as the final matter of fact, as *the* state of things. Forrest Gander assists in this reading:

> It might be said that [Heidegger] becomes more absorbed with Being, capitalised, than with beings in particular. But in Oppen's oeuvre, *being* remains writ insistently small. It is evidenced in small words, in the small marvels of the commonplace.   (Gander, np)

It is a crucial and pertinent distinction that Oppen engages with Heidegger but does not merely adopt his terms unreservedly— this would be antithetical to the operations of his poetics. Peter Nicholls writes that "'Of Being Numerous' was written while [Oppen] was reading Heidegger" (2007, 85). In the latter's work, the notion of disclosure— the situation in which a thing openly projects its thingness— finds articulation in 'The Origin Of The Work Of Art'. Heidegger writes:

> Van Gogh's painting [of a pair of peasant shoes] is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being. The Greeks called the unconcealedness of being *aletheia*. We say 'truth' and think little enough in using this word. If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work.
>
> (Heidegger 2010, 35)

This 'disclosure'— or the 'happening of truth at work'—is an idea complimentary to both Oppen's way of seeing and his seriality. The present tense 'happening' invokes the sense in which disclosure is a contingent occurrence, and furthermore is reliant on the act of witnessing. Oppen's desire to bear witness is the basis of his poetics, and it is from this desire that his poetry extends.

Oppen's expansion is thus based on a personal optics, attempting to see the thing clearly— 'thru' but not according to philosophical discourse. Furthermore, the 'personal' in Oppen evokes not interiority or solipsism but anecdote and empiricism. It is also in this way that Oppen presents a poetry which compliments phenomenological analyses of sight and 'actualness'. Michael Davidson writes that Oppen's stance "is not a passive looking onto the world but a means of touching that invests the world with particular, site-specific meanings" (Oppen 2003, i). In this regard, 'sight' establishes a crucial idiosyncrasy of Oppen's work— it is, for Oppen, the way to *truth.* In concerning himself and his poetic agency with that which is *true*— that is, *that* that *is*— Oppen develops not a philosophical framework but instead a turn towards 'the actual'. He comments:

> I am not speaking of a philosophic naivete, I am not speaking of kicking the rock and saying By God, Sir, that's here, and certainly I'm not speaking of any remarkable philosophic sophistication. I am thinking of actualness.
>
> (Oppen 2007, 49)

It is crucial to remember, however, that this 'actual' 'being there' is constantly in a state of numerousness: and, furthermore, it is also true for Oppen that there is "not truth but each other" (Oppen 2003, 183). This further complicates Oppen's idea of 'the actual', and brings us to what is really at stake in 'Of Being Numerous': that is, the actual, *that* that *is*, is at once singular and numerous:

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'.   (Oppen 2003, 163)

Oppen's opening statement contains the ambiguously sourced speech of another. The effect of the word 'we' and the quotation immediately presents the poetic voice in an ambiguous stance; at once at a distance describing 'things' in the barest detail, and simultaneously engaging intersubjectively, in both content and address. The quotation which splits the voice halfway through the second line finishes the speaker's phrase, complimenting the 'We' with 'Ourselves', both terms being voiced from different sources, implicating a mutuality of condition. Furthermore, the evenly way it is quantifiably 'balanced' with the words of the poetic voice suggests from the poem's opening articulation a sense of 'numerousness', with Oppen's voice standing in dialogue with the voices of others.

To return to Creeley's remark at the outset of this chapter, the term "preoccupation" is useful in underscoring Oppen's commitment to an open poetics which can respond to the vicissitudes of 'the actual' in perception. It is, however, important to stress that, whilst committed to the disclosure of existential numerousness, Oppen writes, in 'A Statement On Poetics', that as a poet, he "cannot hope to prescribe" (2007, 47). The arrangement of syntactic fragments, especially in his extended poetic works, is the act itself of the disclosure of meaning, not the employment of any rehearsed or predetermined register. Oppen wrote in a letter to his sister that "Poetry has to be protean, the meaning must begin there"

(Quoted in Heller 2004, 70). This 'protean' aesthetic requires coming to an understanding of the relationship between the subject and his or her 'actual'. It is necessary to turn to Oppen's terms for consciousness, one of the most important of which is 'curiosity'.

Consciousness and Curiosity

Marjorie Perloff writes that Oppen's "poetic structure mimes the fits and starts by means of which his consciousness comes to terms with its new condition" (1985, 7). Whilst Perloff's argument is useful in bringing attention to the exploration of subjectivity Oppen's poetics constitute, the use of the term 'mime' is perhaps inaccurate. Oppen's serial procedure evokes or, more precisely, *inaugurates* perception in its sparse diction and the space it allows for individual terms to resonate. Whilst his processes of disclosure enact consciousness, they do not seek to 'perform' it. This distinction is, as Oppen terms it, "the line between histrionics and openness" (2007, 24). Perloff's estimation is problematic because Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous', for all its structural grounding in figures of perception, is not a work of mimesis. Perloff's reading requires reorientation: Oppen's poetic structure does not 'mime consciousness' in the sense of seeking to accurately represent thought, but rather it discloses the process of thought itself in the midst of perceptual encounters. This is a nuance Oppen himself underscores in his essay 'The Mind's Own Place':

> The distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its
> materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet, is the
> distinction between poetry and histrionics. (Oppen 2007, 32)

In his review 'Three Poets', Oppen names Ginsberg as one such performer, though not necessarily in a dismissive way: "This is declamatory form: to quarrel with that is simply to quarrel with the heart of his work" (Ibid., 23). In contrast, the heart of Oppen's work is

resolutely non-declamatory— instead Oppen's work displays an active agency, stressed in the predominantly present tense of his work, wherein bearing witness takes precedent over argumentation or pedagogy.

Oppen's procedure displays a process by which, to adopt Perloff's phrase, "consciousness comes to terms" (1985, 7). The stance cumulatively adopted in Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous' shows a voice actively dealing not only with language but with the ethical implications constitutive of being a language-using subject. Gander takes this sense of Oppen's openness to relate him to Merleau-Ponty:

> Oppen's words continue to emerge from a stance that acknowledges perception as a product of a participatory relationship with the world, a relationship that closely aligns his poetics with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.   (Gander, n.p)

This sense of 'participation' is pervasive throughout Oppen's work, not only in his frequent quotation of friends and philosophers but also in his wider poetic ambition to "find a word for ourselves" (2003, 8). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology envisages "a return to the speaking subject" wherein the subject is in "contact with the language [he is] speaking" (1964, 85). This 'contact' is held as being distinct from "the scientist and the observer [who] see language in the past. They consider the long history of a language, with all the random factors and all the shifts of meaning that have finally made it what it is today" (Ibid.). For Merleau-Ponty, this logic inevitably arrives at an impasse: "It becomes incomprehensible that a language which is the result of so many accidents can signify anything whatsoever unequivocally" (Ibid., 85). His response, as articulated in 'Indirect Language and The Voices of Silence', is to conceive of language "more like a sort of being than a means" (Ibid., 43) in which "it unveils its secrets itself" (Ibid.). This notion of language as an ongoing revelatory process rather than an archive of connotations "throws out of focus and regroups objects of

the world for the painter and words for the poet" (Ibid. 52). Merleau-Ponty concludes, however, that "the consequences of speech, like those of perception (and particularly the perception of others), always exceed its premises" (Ibid., 91), and acknowledges the extent to which the 'return to the speaking subject' will always be exceeded by the plenum which constitutes language and the subject's 'contact' with it.

In a similar manner to Merleau-Ponty's desire to 'participate' in and with language, Oppen's response to the responsibility of being a language-using subject is to adopt a stance of 'curiosity'. The closing gesture of 'Of Being Numerous' takes the form of a passage from Walt Whitman's American Civil War correspondence ending with the word "curious…", which Oppen isolates from the main body of the section with a line-break (Oppen 2003, 188). Zack Finch argues from this that Oppen's procedure is "a perceptual poetic practice of being curious" (Finch, np). The relationship between the poetic and 'curiosity' is explored by Lyn Hejinian, who writes in *The Language Of Inquiry*:

> The term *curious,* just as it names both a subjective condition ("marked by desire to investigate and learn" or by "inquisitive interest in others' concerns," nosiness) and a condition of some object ("exciting attention as strange, novel or unexpected"), it also names an interaction between curious subject and curious object, an interaction within the terms of *curiosity*. (Hejinian 2000, 350-1)

This interaction is often the position we find Oppen's poetic voice in: encountering the things of his immediate perception in their particularity—which is to say, as curiosities. Hejinian suggests that 'curiosity' involves a receptivity between subject and object. A similarly reciprocal relationship can be seen in Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

> The basic state of sight shows itself in a peculiar tendency-of-Being which belongs to everydayness- the tendency towards 'seeing'. We designate this tendency by the term 'Curiosity', which characteristically is not confined to

seeing, but expressed the tendency towards a peculiar way of letting the world be encountered by us in perception. (1962, 214)

The disclosures which constitute the individual sections of Oppen's extended poems can arguably be read as instances of "letting the world be encountered by us", wherein 'the tendency towards seeing' is a necessary aspect of human experience. Oppen's 'curious' placement of the word itself at the very end of 'Of Being Numerous' closes the poem with a further gesture of opening, a provisional conclusion. The 'curious' world Heidegger invokes is a place of constant revelation:

Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere. This mode of Being-in-the-world reveals a new kind of Being of everyday Dasein— a kind in which Dasein is constantly uprooting itself. (Ibid., 217)

Everyday curiousness is not dependent on specific sites of meaning— rather, it is the 'everywhere and nowhere' of the 'world'. The 'constant uprooting' of curiosity is evocative of the necessary contingency with which human subjectivity encounters its perceptions, which is to say, Heideggerian curiosity is a matter of tracing and retracing meaning and its flux rather than grasping as static any one perception as indicative of determinate form. For Oppen, 'curiosity' is a figure for man's engagement with his world. As Oppen comments in an interview with L.S Dembo, "Men are curious, and at the end of a very long poem, I couldn't find anything more positive to say than that" (1989, 186). This might at first appear a pessimistic response; however, curiosity establishes a reciprocal relationship between subject and object, and is an ethical gesture, particularly in the existential situation of numerousness. Curiosity for Oppen is a means of witnessing which foremost involves an openness towards things encountered. This is distinct from a mode of witnessing which might seek to make perceptions cohere in a recognisable form of order. This conception of Oppen's 'curious' stance will become a recurrent figure in the process of this chapter. As

indicated at the outset, I will now turn to reading Oppen in three ways: first, it is necessary to frame curiosity through specific examples of Oppen's poetic sight, particularly in relation to his idea of 'actualness'. Secondly, the focus will shift to the serial processes of *Of Being Numerous,* with a view to explicating the notion that Oppen's seriality works as an analogue for the prevailing condition of intersubjectivity. Finally, Oppen's complex dialogue between numerousness and singularity will be considered, with particular reference to language the problem of "finding a word for ourselves" (2003, 8).

The thing seen each day: Seeing

Seeing is Oppen's means of 'coming to terms' with reality. He writes in his essay on subjectivity in poetry— 'The Mind's Own Place'— that "The image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet's perception, the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness" (2007, 31). For Oppen, seeing is not a passive act; we are by necessity curious witnesses. The poem is constitutive of the encounter between poet and thing. The opening of section 12 of 'Of Being Numerous', by way of undisclosed quotation, attests to this idea:

> 'In these explanations it is presumed that an experiencing
> subject is one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual
> world.'   (2003, 169)

The methodology Oppen gestures towards here conceives of the 'experiencing subject' as an 'occasion', a conception which again underscores the sense in which perceptive experience is, for Oppen, a matter of curious encountering. This is a profoundly phenomenological

articulation of vision and sight, and can be clarified with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a similar conception of seeing:

> We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes. […] What is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this *we,* what *seeing* is, and what *thing* or *world* is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions.
>
> (1968, 1)

Here, Merleau-Ponty expresses what is for him a fundamental aspect of phenomenology; that seeing is an act of perception we have 'faith' in, but rarely are able to explicate. Furthermore, the questions Merleau-Ponty poses— What is 'thing', 'world' or 'we'? What is seeing?— are all questions which circulate throughout Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous'. Both Oppen and Merleau-Ponty can be seen to address immanent forms of experience. Oppen's desire for a poetics of 'actualness' has much to do with seeking to articulate perception itself rather than formally arranged perceptions. Merleau-Ponty expands on this sense of perceptual faith, invoking Oppen's figure of 'actualness':

> If I see an ashtray *in the full sense of the word 'see'*, then there must be an ashtray over there, and I cannot repress this affirmation. To see is to see something. To see red is to see an actually existing red*.
>
> (2012, 393. Author's emphasis)

The affirmative presence of the 'actual' is a pre-conceptual knowledge of one's being embedded in a world. That objects are tactile and our senses are triggered is an 'actual' situation. 'Actualness' does not imply, however, that one's sense of the real is reality; rather it is a more immediate sense of being among things. Hoffman writes: "Oppen's truths are necessarily provisional and might at any time be rejected or re-envisioned" (2008, np). That is

to say, whilst the poetic form of 'Of Being Numerous' evokes provisionality through its processes of serial organisation, the perceptions disclosed in the individual sections are presented as measures of Oppen's 'truth' rather than as illusory and contradictory evidence of an ultimately 'provisional' world. Oppen presents a return to seeing as the inaugural gesture of the poetics with which he was involved:

> Modern American Poetry begins with the determination to find the image, the thing encountered, the thing seen each day whose meaning has become the meaning and colour of our lives. Verse, which had become a rhetoric of exaggeration, of inflation, was to the modernists a skill of accuracy, of precision, a test of truth.   (2007, 30)

Oppen's assessment here of the context in and from which he was writing is useful in moving towards a clearer understanding of the relationship between seeing and the other major concerns of Oppen's serial poems. One of the recurring motifs of 'Of Being Numerous' is the prevailing situation of 'the thing seen each day' or what Oppen terms "That which one cannot/ Not see" (185). In section 36 of the poem, he writes:

> Tho the world
> Is the obvious, the seen
> And unforeseeable,
> That which one cannot
> Not see
>
> Which the first eyes
> Saw—
>
> For us
> Also each
> Man or woman
> Near is knowledge   (2003, 185)

The closing line here gestures at a phenomenologically-oriented epistemology: that is, that 'knowledge' is a matter of proximity to 'the obvious'. This 'obvious' is articulated as 'the seen/ and unforeseeable', that which is actual and apparent alongside that which is inconceivable. 'Obviousness' is akin to 'actualness' in that it makes subjectivity a witness faced with "that which one cannot/ not see". Oppen's writes in 'A Statement On Poetics' that the "image is the moment of conviction" (Oppen 2008, 49). Similarly, in 'Of Being Numerous', he describes "[t]he discovery of fact" as "a paroxysm of emotion/ Now as always" (2003, 166). To think of Oppen's encounters with the phenomenal world as paroxysms— bursts of meaning— adds to the sense in which they are themselves only contingent. This is an attempt at capturing "the moment of conviction". An example of this appears in Oppen' poem 'The Hills':

> That this is I,
> not mine, which wakes
> To where the present
> Sun pours in the present, to the air perhaps
> Of love and of conviction.   (2003, 75)

The 'present/ [s]un' which 'pours in the present' appears as a figure of epistemic and literal illumination. Furthermore, the distinction between 'I' and 'mine' lies in the ownership implied in the latter; Oppen figures subjectivity here as curiously witnessing the world, rather than as constituting the 'moment of conviction' itself. Significantly, the 'that' which opens the stanza is not a preparation for an argument but rather an emphasising of the 'this' which follows it; again, these are the "The small nouns/ Crying faith" of 'Psalm' ("They who are there"; "That they are there!"(Ibid. 99)). Although these small nouns are deictic and ambiguous, their use is in disclosing things—in the case of 'The Hills' the 'I'; in 'Psalm' the deer— without interfering with their presentation in the poem. Furthermore, the

homophonic 'I' (eye) underscores the visual element of 'the present'; this is meaning which is "an instant in the eye" (Oppen 2003, 167).

Oppen's poetry is concerned with constituting and opening a site in which things can be disclosed, in which seeing can occur in the poem. Heller relates this ambition to the openness of Oppen's poetry:

> Seeing precedes verbalization and therefore offers an opportunity for an open response to the world. This opportunity is, of course, hedged round with all one's conditioned reflexes, the material of which the poet must work through to arrive at a sense of the real. It is in this 'working through' that Oppen's poetics, though concerned with ambiguity and paradox, strive for clarity that is both immediate and complex.   (Heller 2004, 79)

The phrase 'coming to terms' is intentionally polysemic: it is through the process(es) of seeing that Oppen finds the materials of his poetry. It is, however, also the case that the visual is the way of coming to poetic and philosophical terms. Many of the figures Oppen uses to elaborate sight establish an intrinsic link between philosophical language and the taxonomy of seeing. In adopting such terms as 'vision', 'clarity', 'transparence' and 'witness' (Oppen 2003, 163-188), the act of seeing is itself given philosophical grounding based on the fact that it is a primary point of contact with the world. The existential situation of being-as-witness occurs when "the known and unknown,/ [t]ouch" (Ibid., 182-3) in the 'image as the moment of conviction.' This moment of contact between known and unknown makes witnessing an ethical event— by bearing witness, one carries the conviction of actualness. A further complication of this to which I will now turn is the fact that consciousness, in phenomenology and for Oppen, is always held in relation to other subjects, whose sense of actualness we encounter by engaging with and in the world.

An unmanageable pantheon: Numerousness and Seriality

One of the most prominent and pressing motifs in 'Of Being Numerous' is that which the title announces: Numerousness. The title itself— and its curious use of the word 'Of'— is indicative of the larger ambitions of the work. In Oppen's *New Collected Poem*s there are at least 300 instances in 280 pages of lines in poems which begin with the word 'of', 35 of which appear in the 40 sections of 'Of Being Numerous'. This raises the question— what is the particular appeal of 'of' to Oppen? The definition of 'of' is: "expressing the relationship between a part and a whole" (*OED*). From the initial opening gesture of the title onwards, the word holds a privileged position in the knit of the poem's form: the scattered 'refrain' of 'of' throughout codes the poem with a greater sense of the interrelations between the individual sections rather than merely their numeric ordering. In this sense, the relation between the parts and the whole of 'Of Being Numerous' gestures at the correlation between subject and world. Throughout the poem, Oppen writes 'of an infinite series', 'of the mineral fact', 'of the singular' and 'of days'. The accumulation of this figure adds to the sense of contingency the serial form and the emphasis on 'seeing' create; perceptions are always perceptions 'of' something, and this of-ness constitutes a primordial contact between the experience of the thing and the subject it is 'of'. This 'small word' is an idiosyncratic means of extension for Oppen; not only does it often begin lines, spurring his articulations of perception, but it also sustains a situation wherein 'Of Being Numerous' is a site of of-ness, an open encounter in which final conclusions— including what the 'meaning/ of being numerous' might be— are themselves subject to 'of-ness', which is to say, their necessary relations between other objects of consciousness which form the 'parts' of the 'whole'.

The title establishes the poem as an open investigation, taking into consideration multiple possible meanings 'of being numerous'. By leaving the matter 'of being numerous'

open to a variety of referents Oppen establishes at the outset the kind of open serial

procedure with which the poem proceeds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that "Seriality's

vectored, oblique argument and modular construction [is] the central mode of modern, late

modern and contemporary practice" (2008, np). This modulation will become an important

trope in what follows in suggesting how hermeneutics cannot fully take place without the

interpenetrative perspective of intersubjectivity. It is in this sense that I mean to argue that

seriality is an analogue for intersubjectivity.

In an immediate sense, seriality complicates our sense of the poem's extension.

Oppen's rigorous questioning of materials itself extends the poem: the further implications

and ideas grow, the more "detours and cul-de-sacs, […] hesitations and reworkings" (Heller

2004, 1) are embarked upon. As Joseph Conte writes:

> The series is an ongoing process of accumulation. In contrast to the epic
> demand for completion, the series remains essentially and deliberately
> incomplete. (1992, 39)

The lack of completion is a subversion of epic narrativity, the desire for coherence. But

coherence and clarity are not the same thing: an ambiguous object of perception can be

clearly seen but not necessarily understood or explained. It is necessary to turn to Oppen's

earlier work *Discrete Series* in order to outline his own conception of the meaning of seriality.

In a 1969 interview, Oppen speaks of the 'discrete series':

> A pure mathematical series would be one in which each term is derived from
> the preceding term by a rule. A discrete series is a series of terms each of
> which his empirically derived, each one of which is empirically true. (Dembo
> 132)

The distinction made here between a 'pure mathematical series' and a 'discrete series' is

significant in that it underscores the 'empiricism' upon which the latter is based. This

empiricism distinguishes seriality as a process which does not proceed according to a rule,

but instead involves a direct encounter with each of the terms in the series. As such, to describe a poem as serial is not merely a formal measure, but also announces a concern with a phenomenologically-oriented mode of perception. In Oppen's work, this desire to create a series of terms each of which is 'empirically derived' is made manifest in the fact that his poetry is overwhelmingly concerned with encounters between the poetic voice and specific objects and events. The temporal implications of seriality are therefore that the individual terms in the series stand in relation to the other without hierarchy. Narrative is eschewed in favour of what Conte calls 'modular form', in which recurring motifs, themes and taxonomy hold the work together across its parts. As Conte writes: "The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method" (39). This has the effect of making the individual terms in the series equivocal to each other rather than held in a more conventional chronological linearity. As such, early in Discrete Series, Oppen writes: "From this distance thinking toward you,/ time is recession" (Oppen 2003, 24). The 'recession' in question concerns the various 'distances' involved in thinking towards another. Spatially and temporally, 'recession' is a movement away. For Oppen, the distance between the perceiving subject and an object of perception is of vital importance in that these distances themselves can be said to shape or contour the encounter.

Temporal distance, however, is not necessarily a problem of memory. Later in the same section of *Discrete Series*, Oppen writes of the shared temporalities the subject necessarily finds itself involved in: "The pulse cumulates a past/ and your pulse separate doubly" (Oppen 2003, 24). The separation in question here might be taken to mean that the pulse, a biological measure of time, is encountered in intimacy with an Other. Oppen's small gesture towards a conception of time based on the heart's beat is significant in that it offers

a bracketing of so-called Objective time. This is not the only instance within the poem of

Oppen offering a conception of temporality. In the following section, he writes:

> People everywhere, time and the work
>
>   pauseless:
>
> one moves between reading and re-reading,
>
> The shape is a moment.   (Oppen 2003, 25)

Oppen describes the plenum of 'pauseless' work as a movement between reading and re-

reading, and despite the feeling that these lines might refer to a busy metropolis, they also

appear to evoke the subjectivity of temporality. This is to say, if time is viewed as a pauseless

series of moments, and these moments themselves involve a process of constant re-reading,

then time is 'serial' in the sense that the organisational significance of its parts is not

immediately clear.

Again, Oppen can be seen to articulate this in 'Of Being Numerous' 'thru' his figure of

the relation between "the known and unknown". This Oppen attests to in Section 22 of his

long poem, specifically in relation to his desire for 'clarity':

> Clarity
>
> In the sense of *transparence,*
> I don't mean that much can be explained.
>
> Clarity in the sense of silence.   (2003, 175)

The third line seems to address the act of disclosure at hand, whilst Oppen's definition of

'clarity' as 'the sense of transparence' presents a polysemic figure in which clearness and

invisibility are entwined. This figure suggests that being able to see 'thru' something gives

clarity. Specifically, the serial form of Oppen's extended poem can be seen as an act of

'clarity' in that it establishes a situation wherein, in order to make a 'whole' of the text, the

reader must read 'thru' each term in the series. Conte describes this serial form as 'modular':

> [I]ndividual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination, distinguish[ing] it from the thematic development or narrative progression that characterises other types of the long poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method. (Conte 1992, 38)

Recombination occurs in 'Of Being Numerous' in the seeing of a specific brick (Sections 5 and 21), the subway (Sections 17 and 20) or, perhaps most prominently, shipwreck (sections 6, 7, 9 and 19) (Oppen 2003). The poem is 'protean' not only in its procedures of disclosing meaning, but also in the way its form holds together. Oppen's procedure allows the articulation of 'truth' to occur through a contingent accrual around certain terms—*actualness, clarity, numerousness*— each of which is disclosed discretely as the inquiry proceeds in series. It follows that historical narratives too, invested as they are in histrionic predetermined constrictions of the raw contingent vicissitudes of reality, cannot be 'ready at hand'. It is not a case of arguing how the myriad materials of existence 'fit' but rather disclosing them *as* they appear— 'as' here meant both in its temporal and perceptive senses. In this regard, Cope comments that Oppen's work "resisted dramatic narrative arcs as much as it refused traditional modes of exposition and argumentation. He sought discrete moments of clarity, sincerity, epiphany and vision— 'lyric valuables'" (Oppen 2007, 2).

There is an ethical charge to this writing as 'lyric valuables' rather than a developing thesis or structured argument. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* invokes the relationship between the form and content of didactic statements:

> Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it. The deduction may proceed logically or dialectically; in either case, it involves a consistent process of argumentation which, because it thinks in terms of a process, is supposed to be able to comprehend the movement of

the suprahuman, natural or historical processes. […] Once it has established its
premise, its point of departure, experiences no longer interfere with
ideological thinking, nor can it be taught by reality. (1985, 471)

To write within terms which exclude one's being "taught by reality" is an act of closure.

Oppen's explicit concern for the horrors of totalitarianism throughout 'Of Being Numerous' –

"The air of atrocity […] // A plume of smoke, visible at a distance/ In which people burn"

(2003, 173)— underscores the fact that his poem is engaged in the world not only in a

phenomenological but also a profoundly ethical sense. Further than this, what I am

describing as Oppen's phenomenological vision is itself inherently ethical, by virtue of its

desire to articulate the act of witnessing. Section 14 of 'Of Being Numerous', the most

explicitly concerned with Oppen's own experiences of war, announces this sense of ethical

'engagement':

> I cannot even now
> Altogether disengage myself
> From those men
>
> With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents,
> In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies
> Of blasted roads in a ruined country,
>
> Among them many men
> More capable than I—   (2003, 171)

The verb 'disengage', which invokes a military idiom, is pointed, suggesting not only Oppen's

engagement with the world in a phenomenological sense but in the sense of combat against

and camaraderie with other soldiers. It would be wrong, however, to insist that Oppen's

poetics is one purely of numerousness; it necessarily dwells on numerousness' opposite,

singularity. Oppen writes elsewhere in 'Of Being Numerous': "We are not coeval/ With a

locality/ But we imagine others are,// We encounter them" (2003, 164). As such, it is

necessary now to contrast Oppen's evocations of intersubjectivity against his figures of singularity.

Intersubjectivity & Singularity

In Oppen's work, seriality works as an analogue for intersubjectivity, but this does not preclude the fact that singularity, or 'the figure of shipwreck', is a pressing concern throughout the work. Peter Nicholls articulates Oppen's sense of intersubjectivity in epistemic terms: "An understanding of others is the crucial condition of any self-knowledge" (2007, 87). Oppen's meditations on the singular in 'Of Being Numerous' are significant because they often give way to reflections on the impossibility of remaining 'shipwrecked', away from society and the immanent collaboration of intersubjectivity. Or, to use Oppen's phrase: "The isolated man is dead, his world around him exhausted/ And he fails!" (2003, 168) Nicholls continues:

> The 'shipwreck of the singular' and the 'meaning of being numerous' are not antithetical options, as might first be thought, but are rather mutually implicated possibilities.   (Nicholls 2007, 97-98)

This sense of 'mutual implication' evokes the intersubjective analogue of Oppen's serial form, and furthermore underscores the sense in which the meaning of being numerous cannot be held merely as a dialectical opposition between self and other. Rather, numerousness is an existential fact, just as, in 'the figure of shipwreck', singularity can be experienced as such.

Oppen's most prevalent figure of singularity in 'Of Being Numerous' is Robinson Crusoe—: "Crusoe//We say was/'Rescued'./So we have chosen" (2003, 266). Crusoe represents the site of shipwreck, but also closure – before having any empirical evidence of there being dangers on the island, Crusoe puts his literal guard up, establishing a private

ground and effectively colonising his area. Crusoe's relation to the *things* he encounters also manifests existential singularity. The materials at Crusoe's disposal are most frequently seen in terms of negation, in terms of what he doesn't have rather than what he does. Furthermore, the items he retrieves from the shipwreck itself he sees as gifts from God, immediately interposing a deliberate metaphysic between himself and the thing. It is in this sense that the reality Crusoe inhabits on the island is only superficially singular. By this I mean that, though he has ended up in a situation wherein he and things are not impeded by the intersubjectivity of societal existence, still Crusoe *chooses* the meaning of his singularity— it is to have been castaway *by* God, *from* the world. Oppen discloses this logic as an 'obsession' in the 7th section:

> Obsessed, bewildered
>
> By the shipwreck
> Of the singular
>
> We have chosen the meaning
> Of being numerous.   (2003, 166)

One *will* be bewildered by the bind of singularity and numerousness if one seeks resolution, a static understanding of our engagements with the world. 'Obsession' and 'bewilderment' seem to have echoes in 'curiosity', in the sense that a curious inquiry, open to the vicissitudes of the phenomenal world, is still fraught with existential difficulties which might 'obsess' or 'bewilder' perception. As such, the meaning of being numerous remains unclear in the poem in an explicitly stated sense— rather, this meaning is itself necessarily deferred, for to conclude would predetermine the individuals who together constitute numerousness. In a complimentary fashion, Merleau-Ponty writes of the meaning of being numerous in the sense of "taking up of the other's experience in my own" (2012, 67):

> The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which shows
> through at the intersection of my experiences, and at the intersection of my
> experiences and those of others, by their engaging each other like gears—
> this world is therefore inseparable from the subjectivity and from the
> intersubjectivity which find their unity through the taking up of my past
> experiences in my present experiences.   (Ibid., 67)

Merleau-Ponty's proposed 'inseparability' of subject, intersubjectivity and world at 'the intersection of my experiences' evokes the sense in which our phenomenal engagements occur *en masse*, which is to say as "a paroxysm" in present experience (Oppen 2003, 166). One cannot, to use Oppen's phrase, "altogether disengage" these perceptions of self, world and others; each reciprocally frames the conditions of the other. Furthermore, this notion of "taking up" experience, both personal and of the other, not only underscores the role agency plays in the construction of meaning but also the ambiguity in which the experience of the other necessarily remains. This ambiguity is the major focus of Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenology. His is perhaps the most explicitly concerned with being-with-others, with the ethical complexities of intersubjectivity. He writes:

> If the relationship with the other involves more than relationships with
> mystery, it is because one has accosted the other in everyday life where the
> solitude and fundamental alterity of the other are already veiled by decency.
> One is for the other what the other is for oneself; there is no exceptional place
> for the subject.   (Levinas 1999a, 89)

The claim that 'there is no exceptional place for the subject' echoes Oppen's repeated gesture towards the impossibility of true shipwreck. Levinas' evocation of the bind between 'oneself' and 'other' as being based on a 'for-ness' raises the question of how this reciprocal relation can be surpassed and articulated as a transcendent 'we'. In 'Historic Pun', Oppen writes:

> […] What we see is there
>
> Find a word for ourselves
>
> Or we will have nothing, neither faith nor will   (2003, 189)

Oppen's desire to articulate 'we-ness' is stated in absolute terms— without it 'we will have nothing'. The preceding line is at once a straightforward statement of 'actualness' and an insistence on the necessarily intersubjective nature of this actualness, evoked by Oppen's *there.* To attempt to think and articulate 'We-ness' is not, however, a utopian notion— it is an ethical response to the existential condition of being numerous. In section 7 of 'Of Being Numerous', Oppen writes:

> We are pressed, pressed on each other,
> We will be told at once
> Of anything that happens   (Ibid., 165)

The use of the first person collective here is notably insistent. This is a tense passage, a sense evoked by the pressing repetition of both 'We' and 'pressed', the latter verb seeming to at once falter and reiterate. Furthermore, the polysemy of 'pressed'— in the sense of a literal closeness and an urgency, a need or demand to come to terms with— serves to underscore the constancy of this situation. In this regard, Levinas continues:

> The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not.
> The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or
> psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity. […] It can be said that
> intersubjective space is not symmetrical. The exteriority of the other is not
> simply due to the space that separates what remains identical through the
> concept, nor is it due to any difference the concept would manifest through
> spatial exteriority. The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor
> conceptual.
>
> (1999a, 89-90)

We are pressed on each other, but this is not a meeting of equivocal forces. The 'separation'

between self and other is based on alterity, a total difference. For Levinas, this has nothing to

do with 'character', 'physiognomy' or 'psychology' but rather the brute fact of their

existential otherness, their being what "I myself am not". Furthermore, this press of

intersubjectivity is "not symmetrical", owing to the absolute alterity of the other. Oppen

phrases this in similar terms in section 27 of 'Of Being Numerous':

> It is not
> precisely a question of profundity but a different order of expe-
> rience. One would have to tell what happens in a life, what
> choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what hap-
> pens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and there-
> fore what art is, and the isolation of the actual   (2003, 180)

The 'different order' of the other cannot be 'told', in both the epistemic sense and in terms

of articulation. Furthermore, this order, which witnesses 'the isolation of the actual',

underscores the sense in which 'actualness' is a subjective condition. The ambition to

transcend this, to discover "what the world is for us", or to "find a word for ourselves", is

what drives the inquiry of 'Of Being Numerous', though this is not to say that Oppen feels his

ambition can be achieved. Rather, it is in remaining curious towards the actualness of others

that the search for a 'word for ourselves' can be sustained.

Conclusion

Paul Naylor argues that the omission of the word 'humanity' from *Of Being Numerous* is

because the "word is too sacred or too dangerous" (103)— and this 'danger' is related not

only to the anthropocentrism the term evokes but also the homogenisation it performs in its

denotation. Oppen's 'word for ourselves'— 'we'— is used carefully in his work, in a manner

which suggests a desire to avoid appropriation. This desire is, as this chapter has sought to demonstrate, phenomenological, in the sense that its major concern is the relation between subjectivity and that which it is not, the Other. By working 'thru' Oppen's terms of extension, it has been possible to argue that poetic seriality, composed from a stance of 'curiousness' and concerned with 'numerousness', can extend the text by virtue of an analogue established between intersubjectivity and the organisation of the text's parts. The idiosyncrasy of Oppen's process of composition in 'Of Being Numerous' can be witnessed in the 'curious' model it offers for poetic inquiry, where curiosity indicates a stance receptive not only to existential numerousness but also to the vicissitudes of perception. It is in this manner that the content of 'Of Being Numerous' consists of an interrelated knit of perceptual anecdotes, direct philosophical inquiry, 'lyric valuables', 'paroxysms of emotion' and quotations of the words of others. The text responds to the poet's actualness but also to itself, establishing a site of meaning in which 'curiosity' organises the movements between its parts.

3   A Restless Surface   James Schuyler

I can't get over

how it all works in together

-'February' (Schuyler 1995, 3)

Introduction

If Oppen's idiosyncrasies arise from his serial investigations of the first-person collective pronoun "We", James Schuyler can be seen to traverse similar issues of intersubjectivity from a more explicitly finite subject position. Schuyler's works of poetic extension constitute a 'framing' of a self-critical and self-reflexive 'I'. In addressing the "restless surface" (Schuyler 1995, 215) of both 'life' and text, he "accommodate[s] the random trivialities of experience without either loading them with significance, or making them seem mere illustrations of chaos and contingency" (Ford 2002, 61). Schuyler illuminates processes as they are perceived by the subject— his attention is attuned to, for example, the way colours shift before the senses, denying nominal signification, like "the blue looking pink" of 'February'. (Schuyler 1995, 4) Furthermore, Schuyler's writing foregrounds its own process of composition by reflecting throughout on the particularity of certain words and phrasings in their contingently determined contexts. His aesthetic displays, as Daniel Katz writes, an "openness to the alterity of what is beyond him and beyond subjectivity" (Katz 145). This is not to say, however, that Schuyler works to make language 'transparent' in the manner which, for example, I have argued Oppen does; rather, Schuyler frames subjectivity in order to reveal

the process by which it is constituted in language.

As such, this chapter will seek to disclose Schuyler's idiosyncratic means of poetic extension in 'The Crystal Lithium', 'The Morning of The Poem', 'Hymn To Life' and 'A Few Days'. First, I will articulate his desire to evoke "the restless surface" of "the what of which you are a part" (Schuyler 1995, 223; Ibid., 105). For Schuyler, "the what of which you are part" refers to 'life' and its 'totality of days'. Secondly, I will articulate the ways in which Schuyler's works of poetic extension are profoundly temporal, with reference to his extensive diaries and the diaristic structures of his texts. Thirdly, and by way of conclusion, I will argue that his framing of subjectivity articulates a distinct form of empathic exchange. His is, as will be explored, a 'local empathy' characterised by proximity, a term which will be developed with reference to Emmanuel Levinas. As such, what this chapter seeks to add to critical discourse concerning Schuyler is a developed sense of the relationship between Schuyler and phenomenology, a discourse which is notably absent from his work but which, I will argue, he contributes to in a profound sense through his articulations of 'life'.

Life and Phenomenology

Before beginning to read Schuyler's poetics, it is necessary first to ask and address the question: *How do we approach a poet philosophically if the poet himself does not 'read' philosophy in his work?* Overlooking this question risks alienating Schuyler from the discussion at hand. Unlike the other poets featured in this thesis, Schuyler did not engage explicitly with phenomenology in his work or his limited writings on his own work. The sources he cites, as in 'The Faure Ballade', consist of a coterie of friends (Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Ron Padgett) as well as diarists (Sir Thomas Browne, Rev. Francis Kilvert and

Madame de la Tour du Pin), French poets (most notably Rimbaud) and art criticism. My

strategy in this chapter is to adopt the terms of Schuyler's poetry in order to frame his

compositional process in a manner which does not alienate his poetics from his poems. This,

however, does not in itself constitute a case for reading Schuyler as a phenomenological

poet. What is at stake in this argument is developing a sense in which Schuyler's poetry

develops its own terms for articulating 'life' rather than adopting those of a philosophy, as

Oppen can be seen to with Heidegger's 'disclosure' and 'being'. Schuyler's 'life', furthermore,

is not meant as a figure for 'humanity' or 'the world', but rather the specific experience of his

living. The contrast here lies in the fact that Schuyler addresses his observations about 'life'

to life itself, rather than to a body of thought which might estrange the poet from this lived

experience and the things and people that are proximate to him.

This desire to articulate life takes the form of both short and extended poems. An

example of the former can be found in 'A Name Day' (1995, 236-8). Schuyler opens the poem

by gesturing towards what is framed by "da Vinci's painting of/ The Virgin" before moving

from the 'beauty' of the names "Mary, Jesus and St. Anne" to the beauty of what appears

outside the window nearby. Schuyler writes:

> The sun shines
> Here and out the window I see green, green
> Cut into myriad shapes, a bare-foot-
> Caressing carpet of fresh-mown grass (a
> Gift from Persia, courtesy of D. Kermani),
> Green chopped into various leaves: walnut, maple,
> Privet, Solomon's-seal, needles of spruce:
> Green with evening sunlight on it,
> Green going deep into penetrable shade: (1995, 236)

The window frames these 'myriad shapes', and Schuyler treats the 'green' he perceives as one might colour in a painting— it is green "chopped into various leaves" rather than being various leaves possessing their own 'greenness'. The process of framing takes place in a variety of ways— first there is the allusion to Da Vinci's painting, then the window-frame, followed by the 'frame' the poem constitutes as it presents its portrait of the self-reflecting poetic voice. The 'frame' here is not so much the literal process of delimiting the canvas with certain specific dimensions but rather what occurs in this process— the 'framing' of 'life'. A similar process can be witnessed in the opening pages of Schuyler's extended poem 'Morning of the Poem':

> The truth, the absolute
> Of feeling, of knowing what you know, that is
>   the poem, like
> The house for sale buried in a luxuriance of
>   overgrown foundation planting
> Across the street upon this hill (taxus,
>   contoneaster), the doctor has more
> Patients in Buffalo: he moved there: I'd rather
>   stay here and starve, well,
> Sort of starve […]   (1995, 262)

Schuyler constructs a simile between his conception of the poem as "knowing what you know" and what is beyond his window frame— in this instance, a house for sale across the street, abandoned by its previous owner. Schuyler's desire to 'stay here' and 'sort of starve' is equivocated with 'knowing what you know', in the sense that there is both a confidence and comfort in the subject position of looking out the window, of seeing what is in being framed. 'The poem' is presented as being a 'truth' akin to the simple act of looking out the window across the street. Again, what is significant here is that Schuyler articulates 'life' by virtue of its related parts in their simultaneous appearance. This can be related to Schuyler's

art criticism, and in particular the aspects of contemporary art which appealed most to him. In 'An Aspect of Fairfield Porter's Paintings', Schuyler sees in Porter's work "an unquestioning instinctive feeling for what specifically are his natural subjects: the people and places he knows best" (1998, 13). He continues:

> It is doubtful that he would paint well a subject with which he was not well acquainted, if only by way of a prototype. He once said to a painter who was thinking about moving away from a familiar landscape to an unknown one: "Any place becomes interesting when you get to know it". (1998, 13)

So too in Schuyler's work we can see a desire to remain proximate with the contents of his life in order to "get to know it". One of the most prominent features of Schuyler's art criticism is that he knew most of the painters he was writing about, and was close enough with them that the reviews themselves are populated with anecdotes and personal details which evoke the world in which the painting was composed. In 'Appearance and Reality', for example, Schuyler writes of Porter and his 'group': "Bowden, Dash, Koehler, Burckhardt, Button, Katz, Porter know the fogs and water of Maine and/or Sausalito: the new reality that abstract painters create they find already there, in changing light and weather: in seeing" (Ibid., 52). In a likewise manner, Schuyler's own 'new reality' is found already *there*, in the 'restless surface' of life, and the desire to 'see' is what drives the act of poetic composition, in both his shorter and extended works.

If the principles from which Schuyler's longer and shorter poems are composed are similar, how then might we explain the act of extension itself? The difference between the stances adopted by the poetic voice in 'A Name Day' and 'Hymn To Life' lies in the fact that the latter undergoes shifts in tone and mood the longer Schuyler's poem continues for— which is to say, it is a matter of Schuyler framing and reframing the day as his subject position necessarily modulates over the course of time. There is a sense, real or not, that many of

Schuyler's poems could be 'extended' into longer poems, based on the fact that the stances

adopted and terms circulated remain consistent across the formal range of his texts. The

purpose of underscoring the close relationship between Schuyler's shorter works and his

extended works is to establish the sense in which Schuyler's poetics are largely consistent

regardless of length, and that therefore what we find in Schuyler's *Collected Poems* is a

variety of differently sustained 'framings' of Schuyler's conception of 'life'. This is to say, the

specific materials of, for example, 'A Name Day' and 'Hymn to Life' have the same source in

'life', but the difference in length indicates the extent to which Schuyler wished to bear

witness not only to this 'life' but to the process of 'living', which itself includes for Schuyler

the act of poetic composition. As such, one can describe Schuyler's poetry as 'framing' life,

and the poems themselves as constituting this 'frame'. This sense of the 'frame' can be

extracted from Schuyler's commentary on the process of writing an early poem, 'February':

> The poem turned out to be laborious and flat, and looking out the window I
> saw that something marvellous was happening to the light, transforming
> everything. It then occurred to me that this happened more often than not (a
> beautiful sunset I mean) and that it was 'a day like any other', which I put
> down as a title. The rest of the poem popped out of its own accord. Or so it
> seems now.   (Schuyler 1999, 3)

The fact that for Schuyler, the process of composition was compelled by the realisation that

the poem framed "a day like another other", and as such has the potential to present 'life',

establishes the relationship between the act of writing poetry and the 'day'. The window,

which frames a perspective on the day, 'transforms everything' by virtue of the way in which

it holds the 'restless surface' of the daily within a consistent measure. As such, in his 'Poet

and Painter Overture', Schuyler argues that "poets face the same challenge [as artists], and

painting shows the way, or possible ways. 'Writing like painting' has nothing to do with it"

(Allen 1960, 256). That 'writing like painting' is undesirable to Schuyler highlights the sense in

which it is the formal properties of art rather than the techniques themselves which Schuyler seeks to emulate in his work.

This figure of the 'frame' will become important throughout the course of this chapter. The purpose of introducing it at this point is to ground the subsequent remarks on a conception of Schuyler's work as performing the work of phenomenology without recourse to its terms or discourse. Schuyler's poetics of life do not, therefore, necessarily require the intervention of phenomenology, because Schuyler himself approaches similar questions of perception without an external framework. The corollary of these observations is that further justification is required in employing phenomenological discourse alongside Schuyler's poetry. In the course of this chapter, I will seek to discuss Schuyler's process of 'framing' life and his sense of 'proximate' local empathy with reference to Merleau-Ponty and Levinas respectively, the intention being to develop a sense of a phenomenological Schuyler through his own 'frames' and terms.

Schuyler's Frames

Raphael Allison comments that "[i]t has become axiomatic in commentary on James Schuyler to call him a poet who celebrates everyday experiences and ordinary things" (Allison 106). Many of the aspects of Schuyler's poetry which are critical commonplaces— that, for example, Schuyler is a poet who accurately and joyously observes particulars in quotidian contexts— arise from Schuyler's attention towards 'life'. Whilst these are certainly not entirely incorrect observations, they fail to take into account the importance of Schuyler's poetics as a self-reflexive framing of a perceiving subject. As indicated, the term 'framing' will become pivotal as my argument develops: it is appropriate in the context of Schuyler's occupation as an art critic, and furthermore underscores the sense in which Schuyler's works

of poetic extension enact a framing of both quotidian incidences and of the poet-subject himself. The term captures the idiosyncrasy of Schuyler's aesthetic: it is pitched towards the visual, particularly in the sense that much of Schuyler's life was spent looking at framed things: the world through the window and the painting in the frame. One such example can be seen in Schuyler's 'February':

> I can't get over
> how it all works in together
> like a woman who just came to her window
> and stands there filling it
> jogging her baby in her arms.
> She's so far off.   (Schuyler 1995, 4)

Here Schuyler's lyric reads as a joyous appraisal of life. However, as Allison argues, Schuyler's poetry is also "deeply sceptical of the everyday and ordinary, and 'celebration' is only half the story" (107). This scepticism is evident here in the ambiguity of Schuyler's phrase "I can't get over". It draws our attention to a number of things— not only amazement but also the nature of articulation itself; that is, how one really can't get over, in the sense of 'explaining' "how it all works in together". Paul Bauschatz claims that Schuyler's method is "creating order and structure for a sequence of seemingly unregulated events" (267). Daniel Katz offers a means of coming to terms with this: "The prevailing tendency of Schuyler's work is to deny that a 'literal description' can ever exist outside a network of comparisons, differentiations and discriminations" (147). This is evident in Schuyler's reflection that "Not knowing/ a name for something proves nothing" (Schuyler 1995, 77). Together, this sense of a restless structure holding together restless language can be seen to characterise the way in which Schuyler's poetry extends.

In this regard, the phrase "I can't get over" from 'February' seems to refer to the aporetic situation of attempting to articulate perception. The woman and her baby are "so

far off", distanced from the poetic voice by the very act of articulation. The seemingly

innocuous closing phrase— "It's a day like any other"— ends the poem with a further

ambiguous use of an idiomatic locution which simultaneously celebrates the quotidian whilst

acknowledging that the inability to "get over/ how it all works in together" is the condition of

"the everyday" and every day. The 'day' in Schuyler— a constant temporal reference and

essential 'measure' throughout his work— is framed, in the sense that a 'day' is distinct as a

specific type of human endeavour rather than merely an ongoing present. David Herd

highlights this perceptual openness in Schuyler's procedure, highlighting the term 'life' as key

to Schuyler's poetics:

> In the process and experience of composing, Schuyler opened his writing up;
> to other voices, but also, as he was able to confidently put it in 'Slowly' to 'the
> what of which you are a part'; where 'the what' was, as Schuyler called it,
> 'life'— as distinct from a Romantic 'nature', or, say, from a Heideggerean
> sense of 'being'— and with which he understood himself to be continuous.
>
> (Herd 2007, 168)

Herd suggests here an idea of process which is both "continuous" and yet-to-be

systematically determined. His selection of the phrase "the what of which you are part" is

apt; here, Schuyler's diction steers from formally appropriating "the what" as anything other

than gestured at by deictic nouns. Herd's reading highlights Schuyler's own equivocation of

"the what of which you are a part" as 'life'. In attempting to illuminate Schuyler's

idiosyncratic means of extension, it is crucial to come to an understanding of Schuyler's 'life',

which is his phenomenal site of meaning. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> I am not a 'living being', a 'man', nor even a 'consciousness', possessing all of
> the characteristics that zoology, social anatomy and inductive psychology
> acknowledge in these products of nature or history. Rather, I am the absolute
> source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, nor from my

physical or social surroundings; it moves out towards them and sustains them.

<div align="right">(Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxii)</div>

As 'the absolute source' the subject can be said to be self-consciously aware of his or her investment of meaning in particular perceptive phenomena, be that an object, a person, a judgement, an opinion or a word. The immanent experience of life, however, commonly transcends this phenomenological perspective— we 'merely' live— and whilst it cannot strictly be denied that our window onto life is our own subjectivity, it can be counter-argued that life isn't necessarily always experienced as an emanation from the self as the 'absolute source'. This is to say that 'life' seems to have a life itself, separate to ours. Rather than seeking to decide the distinct parameters of what constitutes 'self' and 'life', Schuyler proposes a chiasmic situation in which 'life' and 'self' constitute each other. As Schuyler writes in 'Hymn to Life':

> [...] each day is subjective and there is a totality of days
> As there are as many to live it. The day lives us and in exchange
> We it.   (Schuyler 1995, 215)

The 'totality of days' which constitute 'life' live us, which is to say, we are an object of life as much as it is our object of intention. What this means for Schuyler's practice is that just as writing about the self articulates life at large, so writing about life and its "totality of days" reveals the self. The poet-speaker in Schuyler is situated in this liminal site— and as such the terms 'life' and 'day' are essential in coming to an understanding of Schuyler's idiosyncratic means of extension. Later in 'Hymn to Life', Schuyler writes:

> Time brings us into bloom and we wait, busy, but wait
> For the unforced flow of words and intercourse and sleep and dreams
> In which the past seems to portend the future which is just more
> Daily life.   (Schuyler 1995, 215)

Schuyler's seemingly anti-climactic conclusion— "just more/ Daily life"— should rather be read as a gesture towards the importance of the diurnal as a measure for Schuyler. As such, in the act of writing about his days and articulating 'dailiness', Schuyler can be said to present propositions about life whilst acknowledging the finite subjectivities responsible for such propositions. Though he only rarely reflected publicly on his own work, he comments in his 'Letter to Miss Batie':

> In the past I have declined to comment on my own work: because, it seems to me, a poem is what it is; because a poem is itself a definition, and to try to redefine it is to be apt to falsify it; and because the author is the person least able to consider his work objectively.　　　　　　　(Schuyler 1999, 3)

That a text 'is what it is […] a definition' is revealing in that it suggests a strong continuity between the poem and 'life'. That is to say: to insist on the lack of distinction between 'life' and a poem about life is to not valorise the poetic. It is to underscore the fundamentally phenomenological nature of the poetic; and, in turn, the poetic nature of phenomenology. In this sense, Schuyler's aesthetic, grounded on the continuity between life and the text, is a framing of the event of articulation. Schuyler's work displays a notion of the text as having an ability to frame questions of subjectivity. In this regard, in 'The Dog Wants His Dinner', Schuyler writes:

> The sky is pitiless. I beg
> your pardon? OK then
> the sky is pitted. The yard
> is sand and laced with roots
> afloat on rock encasing fire.
> You think so do you. No.
> Yes. Don't know. Check one.
> Forget all you ever knew.　　　　　　　　　(Schuyler 1995, 113)

The poetic voice here self-interrogates and interrupts its own act of articulation, redressing its own description of the sky as 'pitiless' to 'pitted'. The conclusive claim— "forget all you ever knew"— underscores the sense in which the present moment bears upon subjective experience, making determination an inherently polysemic task. This present is filled with affirmations, negations and ambiguity— "No./Yes. Don't know."—and as such articulating it is subject to the vicissitudes of the contingent present. The 'problem' this situation presents to articulating this present appears in 'The Morning of the Poem':

What's the problem?
No innate love of
Words, no sense of
How the thing said
Is in the words, how
The words are themselves
The thing said […]   (Schuyler 1995, 268)

This recalls Schuyler's 'Letter To Miss Batie', where the poem "is what it is". Schuyler's states that the 'problem' lies in there being no "innate love of words", or a conception which would hold that '[t]he words are themselves/ [t]he thing said'. Schuyler seems to be gesturing towards a sense of language wherein language itself inaugurates 'the thing'— which is to say, where perception is textual. This sense of perception and the text as being subject to similar vicissitudes is articulated in Schuyler's phrase 'a restless surface', where the restlessness in question refers not only to the contingency of perception but also to the contingencies of poetic language. In moving towards describing Schuyler's 'restless surfaces', the 'frame' will remain important as a means of reading the ways in which 'life' is articulated throughout his work.

The 'Restless Surface' of 'The Day'

As indicated, one of Schuyler's most important works is 'Hymn to Life', a long lyrical poem which reflects on the passage of months and their effect on Schuyler's environment and moods. Towards the end of 'Hymn To Life', Schuyler writes:

> In
> A dishpan the soap powder dissolves under a turned on faucet and
> Makes foam, just like the waves that crash ashore at the foot
> Of the street. A restless surface. Chewing, and spitting sand and
> Small white pebbles, clam shells with a sheen or chalky white.
> A horseshoe crab: primeval.   (Schuyler 1995, 223)

The phrase itself— 'A restless surface'— stands out among a dense series of clauses on either side. This restlessness is one of disjunction in many senses. Structurally, Schuyler's extended poems deviate in a seemingly aleatoric fashion between the observed and the reflective. William Watkin describes this process as "an ongoing parenthetical series of interruptions of interruptions, negotiating between the two forces of the poem, the general and the specific" (2001, 88). Watkins' phrasing is apt: Schuyler's deviations are *parenthetical* and *interruptions of interruptions,* suggesting that the ontology of his poetry is shifting— as Schuyler writes: "A story/ Not told: so much not understood, a sight, an insight, and you pass on" (1995, 215). Whilst, however, it is true that Schuyler's tone moves between addressing things generally and specifically, to make this distinction risks misunderstanding the modulation at work in his texts as dialectical rather than contingent. There is always the "not told" and "not understood". These are not, however, a dialectical opposition. As has been argued, Schuyler's process—and in particular that of his works of poetic extension— is always already taking place within the further formal restlessness of his framing of the event of writing. It is necessary to distinguish between these two overlapping 'restless surfaces' of perception and

text, for the purpose of marking the latter as being a compositional effect and the former as a phenomenological condition. These 'restless surfaces' overlap because the text is a condition of life, just as life becomes a condition of it in Schuyler's extended poetics.

As indicated, this sense of perceptual 'restlessness' in Schuyler can be articulated in phenomenological terms. As Merleau-Ponty writes, phenomenology "is an ever-renewed experience of its own beginning that consists wholly in the description of this beginning" (2012, lxxviii). For Schuyler, this 'ever-renewed experience' takes place within the site of the everyday, and he articulates this contingency in his texts with disjunctive self-reflection. This is particularly true of his works of extension, which, by virtue of the fact that they frame multiple and contradictory perspectives, present an 'ever-renewed' contact with the daily which necessarily modulates as the day progresses. Schuyler's first-person poetic voice is at once deeply *subjective* in the sense that it acknowledges its temporal and perspectival finitude, whilst being an object in the sense that it is manifested by the text itself. This view of Schuyler is developed by Watkin:

> The poet must attend at each turn, not merely as to how his observing and inscribing point of view relates to the things he is observing and writing about, but also how this process itself is not only changing the nature of the things being written about, but how the very act of writing is a thing in itself. (66)

Superficially, Schuyler 'inscribes' subjectivity in his texts by writing almost exclusively from the first person perspective of the poet-subject, but additionally, he 'frames' the subject by opening his poems to authorial digression, self-critique or editing which remains in the text. Most significantly, Schuyler's acts of extension maintain this revelation of subjectivity over a space and duration which allows for multiple shifts and modulations in tone, as well as recurring motifs and the accrual of the poetic voice's 'restless surface'.

Schuyler's framing of subjectivity in turn frames the everyday, in the sense that there

is only ever "a restless *surface*" to "the what of which we are part" which can be constituted, rather than reflected upon, in language. Schuyler's attention is directed towards, to use Merleau-Ponty's phrase, "the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things" (2003, 68), and as such the forms—textual and temporal— Schuyler composes to articulate this in his texts undergo a likewise 'vibration' or restlessness. The consistent measure in Schuyler's long poems is the 'day', which, a 'restless surface' itself, is both an event in the poet-subject's life and a manifestation of that life.

Schuyler's "Each day is subjective" (1995,215) in 'Hymn To Life' invokes a sense of revelation. This 'revelation' is achieved in a sensitivity to the minutiae of the diurnal. This is evinced in the passage quoted earlier ("In a dishpan…") from 'Hymn to Life', which develops a motif of dish washing that stands in tension between its place as a quotidian observation and a meditation on the substance of the daily. Whilst in places the poetic voice adopts a stance— "The truth is/ That all these household tasks and daily work [...] are beautiful" (1995, 218)— these moments of reflection and self-interrogation are themselves, for Schuyler, the truth of his everyday. Kaufman describes this situation in Schuyler as an "attempt to seek the world in a day or series of days that can never quite encompass it" (Kaufman, np). This can be witnessed again in Schuyler's reflections on dish-washing earlier in 'Hymn To Life':

> Attune yourself to what is happening
> Now, the little wet things, like washing up the lunch dishes. Bubbles
> Rise, rinse and it is done. Let the dishes air dry, the way
> You let your hair after a shampoo. All evaporates, water, time, the
> Happy moment and- harder to believe- the unhappy.   (Ibid. 219)

Schuyler asks us and himself to 'attune' to "what is happening/ Now", a phrase the deixis of which echoes 'the what of which you are a part' of 'Slowly' (Ibid. 105). The gesture itself is

polysemic; it suggests not only that Schuyler's poetic voice is 'attuned' to the act of composing its immediate perceptions, but also that there is something to discovered or learnt from a daily routine. This simple process of dishwashing is described briefly, but provokes and extends into a meditation on the transience of the 'all' which constitutes life. This bathetic shift in tone, where a desire to 'attune' to 'the little wet things' of life leads to a conclusion that 'all evaporates', evokes an analogous sense of the 'flow' of life evaporating in its 'moments'. In this instance, the framing of a daily task becomes a site of revelation in which 'life' itself is also framed. In this regard, Kaufman describes Schuyler's 'day' as "serv[ing] as the background of Schuyler's experience while it is also the experience itself" (np). This sense of the 'inner' and 'outer' of Schuyler's writing underscores the fact that his poems are both articulations *and* manifestations of 'life'.

This revelation of the life in the daily occurs not only in the carrying out of routine tasks but also in the contingencies of the lived day. Later in 'Hymn to Life', Schuyler writes:

> […] A bird shits on my window ledge. Rain will wash it off
> Or a storm will chip it loose. Life, I do not understand.   (1995, 223)

The tone ambiguously hangs between marvel and grim resignation at having his window ledge shat on, either reading of which makes Schuyler's conclusive remark comedic in its exasperation, and 'daily' in that the event of watching the bird is as much the 'what of which you are a part' as the act of composition the poem frames. Furthermore, the fact that this seemingly conclusive passage is embedded in a ten-page poem which elsewhere contains contrary estimations of life underscores the sense in which the poetic voice is 'attuned to what is happening/ [n]ow' and as such responds repeatedly to life as it continues to live him, and he it. This is related to the ongoing revelation of subjectivity in Schuyler's extended poems— by framing events and multiple contrary perspectives from a consistently sustained poetic voice the text extends by virtue of the life it continues to manifest.

The measure of the day in Schuyler's work is often contained within larger orders, most commonly in seasons and months. This can be displayed with reference to Schuyler's evocations of 'March', 'April' and 'May' in 'Hymn to Life'. 'May' in particular acts as an example of how Schuyler articulates the experience of a temporal event which occurs over a significant span. This movement from Schuyler's 'day' to his 'May' is intended to progress this chapter's argument that, if Schuyler's idiosyncrasy is located in the particularities of the 'day', then the way in which he situates these days within the larger measure of a month can be seen as a temporal means of poetic extension. In this manner, temporality acts as a further frame in which Schuyler's articulations are held.

Temporality and Schuyler's 'Months'

As has been indicated, Schuyler's poems frame temporality as an ontological restlessness. His aesthetic of the commingling particulars of dailiness echoes Merleau-Ponty's figuration that "Time is neither a real process nor an actual succession that I could limit myself simply to recording. It is born of my relation with things" (2012, 434). Temporality is, as Kaufman writes, "Schuyler's great subject" (np). The fact that his longer poems are all articulations taking place from the finite perspective of the poet reflecting on the process at hand makes them 'events' with a temporality both personal and objective. Schuyler's works are often directly concerned with the particular evidence of objective time (growth, the seasons, the weather, natural cycles, the day, the month) but these are only ever given in the texts through subjective espousals of the personal relevance of that particular unit of time. Merleau-Ponty articulates the phenomenal 'event' as being subject to a contingency and a coalescence:

> Chance happenings offset each other, and then this dust of facts coalesces,
>
> outlines a certain way of taking a position in relation to the human situation,
>
> an *event* whose contours are defined and about which we can speak.
>
> (2012, 66)

This seems true of Schuyler's framing of subjectivity in his works of poetic extension, in the sense that the proximity his texts develops across their span with the poet-subject itself constitutes an event. The 'contours' of Schuyler's procedure include not only the lived events he describes but also the very event of describing these events. By framing the events of friendship, love, longing, desire and care, Schuyler exposes empathy as a temporal process, an active event which must take place in the poem, rather than merely be projected as a sentiment. What Levinas describes as the "disturbance of [...] rememberable time" of the proximate relation can be seen in the restless temporal surface in Schuyler's composition. This characterises Schuyler's idiosyncratic poetic extension in that, whilst he writes within the units of 'days' and 'months', the range of temporalities invoked with reference to events which have occurred in the past or which are soon to occur creates a sense in which temporal duration is itself subject to the same digressions which populate Schuyler's texts. This suggests a sense of temporality as textual; which is to say that it functions through a series of signifiers, including objective indications like the setting of the sun or human need for sleep, and as such its articulation in a text constitutes a 'framing' of time.

Schuyler's last long poem 'A Few Days' can be seen to present this sense of temporality as itself being textual. The poem ostensibly concerns the death of Schuyler's mother, but the revelation of this fact— "the weary journey done" (1995, 379)— only occurs in the tightened closing lines of the poem. Prior to this, the reader is confronted with a variety of meditations on the phrase 'A Few Days':

> [A few days] are all we have. So count them as they pass. They pass
>
> > too quickly
>
> Out of breath: don't dwell on the grave, which yawns for
>
> > one and all.   (1995, 354)

> > A few days: how to celebrate them?
> >
> > It's today I want
>
> to memorialize but how can I? What is there to it?
>
> > Cold coffee and
>
> a ham-salad sandwich?   (Ibid., 356)

> > > > > There is
>
> > No place to put
>
> anything. These squandered minutes, hours, days. A few days, spend
>
> > them riotously.   (Ibid., 357)

The first of these passages, which opens the poem, might suggest at first a fairly sentimental reflection on time and life. This sense of sentiment, however, gives way to Schuyler addressing the particulars of the day: travel, reported conversations, observations of landscapes, flowers and animals. The second passage quoted above then cuts short these meditations, making explicitly synonymous the regularity of the day with the problem how to celebrate 'Life' in the poem. The third reflection, which advises to spend life riotously exhibits a variation in thought from the opening passage. The structural effect is that as the poet-subject articulates both life and reflections on these articulations the thought process alters. That the poem ends with speaker's bereavement shows that the temporal process of the poem is one of having sat down to write a poem the overarching subject of which—bereavement— exerts a cumulative pressure on the sentiments expressed. Schuyler's equivocation of 'life' with 'a few days' gives way by the poem's end to an embedded phone call in which the news is broken. The poem in this regard is a contingent elegy, a self-reflexive

articulation of grief. Again, underscored throughout by Schuyler is the overwhelming significance of paying attention to the particularity of the daily. He writes:

> Tomorrow is another day, but no better than today if
> you only realise it.
> Let's love today, the what we have now, this day, not
> today or tomorrow or
> yesterday, but this passing moment, that will
> not come again.
> Now tomorrow is today, the day before labor day,
> 1979.   (1995, 362)

'The what we have now' is both a temporal and an existential statement; in fact, those two adjectives are almost indistinct from each other in this context. As suggested earlier, Schuyler's measure of 'the day' is often framed within the context of its respective month. This is frequently the case in his extended works, where the passage of time between seasons is marked for Schuyler by the weather and the effect this has on his mood and tone. In 'Hymn To Life', Schuyler addresses March:

> After snowball time, a month, March, of fits and starts, winds,
> Rain, spring hints and wintry arrears. The weather pays its check,
> like quarrelling in a D.C hotel, "I won't quarrel about it, but I made
> No local calls."   (Ibid., 215-216)

The 'fits and starts' of short paratactic clauses evoke not only Schuyler's experience of the month but the days which constitute it, distinguished by the weather they bear witness to. There are no quarrels, as Schuyler voices it, because the season is ambiguous, a commingling in which 'spring hints and wintry arrears' blur the clarity of the relation between March as a fixed notion and as a transitional 'restless surface'. Earlier in the poem, Schuyler writes:

> The turning of the globe is not so real to us
> As the seasons turning and the days that rise out of early gray

>   – The world is all cut outs then— and slip or step steadily down
>
>   The slopes of our lives where the emotions and needs sprout.
>
>   (Ibid. 215)

The 'realness' of the seasons here lies in the fact that they and 'days' are the sites where "emotions and needs sprout". Emotions and needs— the content of the daily— are as such more 'real' than 'the turning of the globe', because the day is lived and the turning of the globe is not. This is a notably phenomenological perspective in the sense that Schuyler bears witness to 'life'— and the act of poetic extension— as an ongoing project which is perpetually beginning, in the same manner that days are lived in succession and constitute a recurring determination of what characterises the measure of the 'day'. Schuyler further distinguishes March with reference to April

>   And if you thought March was bad
>
>   Consider April, early April, wet snow falling into blue squills
>
>   That underneath a beach make an illusory lake, a haze of blue
>
>   With depth to it. That is like pain, ordinary household pain,
>
>   Like piles, or bumping against a hernia.   (Ibid., 217)

What might be an allusion to Eliot's 'The Waste Land' undermines the tone of the latter by reimagining the cruelty of April as being akin to the pain of piles. This does not dominate the passage, however— it stands rather in contrast to Schuyler's earlier evocation of March in that the subjective 'ordinary household pain' evoked (Schuyler's speaker tells us he has suffered a hernia earlier in the poem (Ibid. 214)) marks the month as a sensation rather than through its formal denotations. This sense of the month as a manifestation of the poet-speaker's mood is continued in Schuyler's conversation with May:

>   Thank you, May, for these warm stirrings. Life
>
>   Goes on, it seems, though in all sorts of places—nursing

> Homes—it is drawing to a close. Abstractions and generalities:
> Grass and blue depths into which the evening star seems set.   (1995, 223)

'Warm stirrings' suggests the 'exchange' between Schuyler and 'life', and furthermore underscores the poetic voice's self-consciousness by allowing 'stirring' to mean both the desire to articulate and those articulations themselves. The exchange— in the sense of dialogue— which takes place between the speaker and 'May' and other temporal figurations (March and April; 'Life'; the day; the seasons) is the driving impetus of the poem. 'Hymn to Life' concludes with a dialogue with May itself:

> May mutters, 'Why ask questions?' or, 'What are the questions you wish to
> ask?'   (Ibid., 223)

The questions May asks are themselves concerned with the poet-subject's relation to his world, and effect a kind of paradox, first questioning the need to ask questions before inviting further questions. This oscillation captures the stance we frequently find Schuyler adopting: he has a desire not to question, to commit to "the pure pleasure of simply looking" (1995, 220), but he finds life—here in the form of May— prompting him to question. Merleau-Ponty articulates a similar compositional aporia with reference to Paul Cézanne, who, he writes, desired not to have to "choose between feeling and thought, as if he were deciding between chaos and order. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting ways in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation" (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 69). In a similar manner, Schuyler seeks to articulate this instability, this restless surface, and to bear witness to, for example, the day or the month as 'spontaneous organisation' rather than as a totality. This is not to say, however, that the revelation of subjectivity in Schuyler's work is consistently maintained; rather, the acts of composition the poems frame adhere to an internal logic of contingency, in which digression is difficult to define as such because of the

'digressive' character of the poem itself. Emmanuel Levinas, to whom I will shortly turn in order to discuss Schuyler's sense of the 'proximate', articulates this necessity for digression as a form of transcendence. He writes:

> To contain more than one's capacity does not mean to embrace or to encompass the totality of being in thought, or, at least, to be able to account for it after the fact by the inward play of constitutive thought. To contain more than one's capacity is to shatter at every moment the framework of a content that is thought, to cross the barriers of immanence. (1999a, 27)

Schuyler 'contains more than his capacity' in his extended poetics by seeking to develop a mode of address which can articulate proximity not only with the phenomena of the month or of the day, but also with the lives of others. This is not to say that Schuyler's poetry succeeds at the task of "cross[ing] the barriers of immanence", but rather to gesture at the fact that one of the most significant features of Schuyler's idiosyncratic means of extension can be found in his ambition to articulate, as Katz writes, "what is beyond him and beyond subjectivity" (145).

Empathy & Proximity

Schuyler's 'Empathy and New Year' articulates empathy through a series of observations and encounters around the heavy snowfall of the season. It opens with an epigram from Claude Lévi-Strauss: "A notion like that of empathy inspires greater distrust in us, because it connotes a further dose of irrationalism and mysticism" (1995, 77). This sense of empathy as involving 'mysticism' is articulated in the poem. After describing the indeterminate weather—which "isn't raining, snowing, sleeting, slushing,/yet it is doing something"—Schuyler states that "To look out a window is to sense/ wet feet" (ibid.). Schuyler comes to

terms with the world outside the window, populated by other subjectivities like his own, through an empathic attempt to understand what it is like to be outside. This extends Schuyler's description of the weather to include a proximate example of the effect it has on an imagined Other. The following line self-consciously shifts the poem's focus— "now to infuse/the garage with a subjective state"— and furthermore gestures towards Lévi-Strauss' sense of 'irrationalism and mysticism' in its desire to 'infuse' a sight with 'subjectivity'. The 'empathic' is developed later in the poem when Schuyler writes: "New year is nearly here/ and who, knowing himself, would/endanger his desires/resolving them/in a formula?" (Ibid. 78) Towards the poem's close, a verbal exchange takes place between the poem's I and an unknown Other:

> "A snow picture," you
> said, under the clung-to
> elms, "worth painting." I
> said "The weather operator
> said, 'Turning tomorrow
> to bitter cold.'" "Then
> the wind will veer round
> to the north and blow
> all of it down." Maybe I
> thought it will get cold
> some other way. You
> as usual were right.
> It did and has. Night
> and snow and the threads of life
> for once seen as they are,
> in ropes like roots.   (Ibid. 79)

Levinas' phrase "the one-for-the-other" (Levinas 1999b, 80) indicates the extent to which our being axiomatically signifies, not only in the sense of revealing a subjectivity but in revealing

how subjectivity itself is encountered by others. This is a profoundly ethical phenomenology by virtue of the fact that the site for all meaning and thought is itself constituted of the relation between 'Same' and 'The Other'. As Levinas writes, this relation involves both the risk of endangering the self and of totalising the other:

> The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say 'you' or 'we' is not a plural of the 'I'. I, you— these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concept link me to the Stranger, the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power.* He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site.
>
> (Levinas 1999a, 39)

The phenomenological 'site' as such marks the ambiguous point at which Same and Other meet in 'uncommon' terms. The double bind this effects— wherein our subjectivity is *absolutely* subject to the plural world, whilst the Stranger is subject to our meeting with him— is developed further by Levinas with reference to the 'site' as conversation. He writes: "Conversation, from the very fact that it maintains the distance between me and the Other [...] cannot renounce the egoism of its existence; but the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognising in the Other a *right* over this egoism" (Ibid. 40). In this figure, engaging with the words and intentions of others constitutes a recognition of the 'right' this Other has to articulate its own sense of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of subjectivity as always being entangled "certain relationships with others" and Levinas' articulation of intersubjectivity as 'one-for-the-other' are as such useful means of coming to terms with Schuyler's extended poetics. This is particularly true of 'The Morning Of The Poem' (1995, 259-303), which at various times directly addresses a number of You's— family members, poets, artists, friends. In these

85

examples, it is the particularity of the relation which characterises Schuyler's empathic exchange. In the 'Anne Dunn' section of 'The Morning Of The Poem', for example, Schuyler quotes a letter from his recently bereaved friend Anne, followed by his reflections:

> […] I know how harrowing it must
> have been for you, but, though I'm not much of
> A mystic, I'm sure in that last long handclasp he gave you
> something: not just love, the electric flow of his failing
> Power: a gentle charge: and in exchange took with him from your
> physical grip all that you felt for him all those
> Years, condensed in a red pulsation.   (1995, 299)

Schuyler considers, in a series of complimentary clauses formed into a 'process' by the connective colons, "the electric flow of […] power", a phrase reminiscent of Whitman and 'Hymn To Life's' 'Energy!'. This is not intended to be 'mysticism', a phrase which recalls the epigram to 'Empathy at New Year' adopted from Lévi-Strauss, but rather has to do with the act of articulation itself. The passage is caught in a tension between the empathy being articulated and the inadequacy of the medium, leaving Schuyler to conclude "yes,/ I wish I had been with you" (Ibid.), a phrase which addresses the significance of the encounter over its inscription in the text. This, however, reveals a logic wherein, for Schuyler's poet-subject, the encounter occurs in the text itself, in his articulation of it as an event. In a certain sense, this bereavement is textual. As such, the phrases 'touch', 'handclasp', 'a red pulsation', 'your physical grip', 'condensed' and, in particular, 'exchange' underscore the extent to which Schuyler wishes his textual encounters to be 'proximate' to the encounters they detail. In this regard, it is useful to turn towards Levinas' writing on 'proximity'. In *Otherwise Than Being,* he writes:

> Proximity is to be described as extending the subject in its very subjectivity,
> which is both a relationship and a term of this relationship. […] As

> signification, the-one-for-the-other, proximity is not a configuration produced
> in the soul. It is an immediacy older than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it
> fusion; it is contact with the other. (1999b, 86)

This immanent sense of the proximate illuminates the meeting with the Other as occurring in a phenomenal site 'older than the abstractness of nature'. Levinas here seems to be gesturing towards the 'abstraction' that occurs in the anthropocentric designation of certain aspects of the world as 'nature'. This analogue establishes a sense in which proximity bears witness to a transcendental being. This is not, however, a Heideggerian sense of Being, which, as Levinas writes, "affirm[s] the priority of *Being* over *existent*" and, as such, "already decides the essence of philosophy" (1999a, 45). The reading Levinas performs on Heidegger's *Being and Time* helps distinguish his conception of Being as being concerned first and foremost with the proximate "ethical relation" (Ibid.). As Levinas writes:

> Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy or suffer *by* the other. But I can enjoy and
> suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other, am signification, because
> the contact with skin is still a proximity of a face, a responsibility, an obsession
> with the other, being-one-for-the-other, which is the very birth of *signification*
> beyond *being.* (1999b, 90)

The 'responsibility' and 'obsession' which characterises our relation with the other is the 'very birth of signification beyond being'. Levinas differs from Heidegger in that it is fundamentally the relations between beings, in the sense of *existents*, as opposed to a totalising Being in which lesser beings participate. Proximity as such is evoked in Schuyler's poetics in his ongoing concern with 'life' as a series of encounters and events characterised by being-one-for-the-other. For example, in 'The Morning Of The Poem' the second person 'You' shifts throughout the poem, implying the address of various people, including the poet himself. Schuyler reflects on this:

> When you read this poem you will have to decide
> Which of the "yous" are "you." I think you will have no trouble,
> as you rise from your chair and take up your
> Brush again and scrub in some green, that particular green,
> whose name I can't remember.   (1995, 294)

This gesture towards particularity is ironic in its situation, in that the deictic 'you', itself without referent, evokes through its address a sense of the particular. The closing line echoes this ambiguity in its inability to name 'that particular green'. This ambiguity, however, evokes proximity in the sense that the 'particularity' in question has been witnessed by both the 'I' and the 'You', and by forgetting its name— rather than, for example, adopting a simile— but leaving this omission in the poem, Schuyler refuses to appropriate the Other's perception, instead evoking the green through 'that-ness'. This kind of deixis is used throughout Schuyler's interactions with Others in his work, and furthermore establishes a sense of the temporal in his extended poems which seeks to evoke but not appropriate the temporalities' of Others. Again, Levinas phrases this as a matter of 'proximity':

> Proximity, suppression of the distance that 'consciousness of...' involves, opens the distance of a diachrony without a common present, where difference is the past that cannot be caught up with, an unimaginable future, the non-representable status of the neighbour behind which I am late and obsessed by the neighbour. This difference is my non-indifference to the other. Proximity is a disturbance of the rememberable time. (1999b, 89)

This "non-indifference to the other" is based in a 'diachrony without a common present", which is to say, one's receptivity to the other establishes a sense of the temporal in which the "rememberable" is disturbed by proximity. In Schuyler's works, which often extend to encompass past memories when provoked by present perception, the texts frequently refer to the past with reference to the articulations of others. This is particularly the case of his last extended poem, 'A Few Days', which progresses through a series of anecdotes concerning

the poet-speaker's mother before meditating on the experience of her death in the closing

lines.

Life as a continuous snack

> I wish it
> were lunch time. I wish I had
> an appetite. The day agrees
> with me better than it did, or,
> better, I agree with it.
>
> (Poem (the day gets slowly started)

I would like to conclude by dwelling on Schuyler's sense of "life as a continuous snack" (1995,

357). Herd writes of the lip-smacking nature of Schuyler's enthusiasm for life, adopting the

term 'relishing' to characterise his poetics. For Schuyler, the act of enjoying eating has a

fundamental relation to life. Levinas articulates a similar stance towards the relation between

the subject and their 'nourishment'. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes: "We live from "good

soup", air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc… These are not objects of representations.

We live from them" (1999a, 110). This 'liv[ing] from them' is characterised by Levinas as

'Enjoyment':

> Enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity. To
> live from bread is therefore neither to represent bread to oneself nor to act
> on it nor to act by means of it. To be sure, it is necessary to earn one's bread,
> and it is necessary to nourish oneself in order to earn one's bread; thus the
> bread I eat is also that with which I earn my bread and my life. (1999a, 111)

Levinas articulates a self-sufficient sense of 'life', wherein "life's relation with the very

conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life" (Ibid., 112). We can

see a similar process taking place in Schuyler's revelation of subjectivity— and, despite the

fact that he was often destitute throughout his life and relied on the hospitality and financial

assistance of friends to live, the poet-subject of his extended works can be said to 'earn its

bread' in the act of composition. Furthermore, because of the circularity Levinas evokes—

"the bread I eat is also that with which I earn my bread and my life"— the act of composition

is generative. This can certainly be witnessed in Schuyler's work, where extension occurs as

the subject continutes to compose itself in the text. As such, it is necessary to remind

ourselves of the three idiosyncratic features I sought to address in the course of this chapter.

Schuyler's poetic extension has been characiserd in terms of its 'restless surface' of 'life'

and its 'days' and 'months; it has also been addressed in terms of his sense of the 'proximity'

of social relations and local empathic exchanges and the temporal questions these raise. To

read Schuyler's four works of extended poetics alongside each other is to witness the

revelation of a consistently articulated subjectivity, albeit one prone to digressions and self-

interrogation, which seeks a receptivity with the proximity of the things, people and events of

his life. Schuyler's texts not only articulate a finite perspective upon life but also frame it.

Levinas offers us a means of concluding on this sense of Schuyler's extended poetics as being

characterised foremost by its desire to address and 'relish' life:

> Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear
> than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in
> the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents reflect
> the worth of my life. (Ibid. 112)

The 'contents' of life that give it its worth, and which Schuyler bears witness to in his poems,

involve an engagement which underscores the sense in which life is a continuous activity.

Schuyler articulates this in the 'continuous snacks' of his 'days' and 'months', the arranged

and extended commingling of which constitute both the idiosyncrasy of his poetic extension

and his sense of 'life'.

Here, in an endless narration, you, dear reader, are visible in a nexus
-'The Stadium In The Mirror' (Blaser 2006a, 30)

Introduction

Oppen, Schuyler and Robin Blaser are all poets for whom questions of how to live in a world with others take foremost importance in their extended poetries. For Blaser, more so than for Schuyler or Oppen, his close personal and poetic relationships with what he calls his 'coterie' is in many ways constitutive of his poetics. His poetry is seriously concerned with friendship. In this regard, determining the idiosyncrasy of Blaser's procedures of extension is somewhat complicated by the extent to which his poetry circulates terms developed as a collective rather than individually. Blaser acknowledges this himself in 'The Fire' when he writes: "In San Fransisco, I was tied to two other poets who, it was my superstition, wrote my poems for me" (2006b, 9). For Blaser, this is not merely a superstition; it is fundamentally related to the project of "The Recovery of The Public World" (Ibid. 64), a phrase he adopts from Hannah Arendt. Furthermore, Blaser's engagement with Arendt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Giorgio Agamben throughout his 30-year work of poetic extension *Image-Nations* furthermore grants his poetics access to a variety of discourses on the intersubjective, and underscores the sense in which Blaser's poetry offers a sustained inquiry into the fact that "the Other is present and primary to our speaking" (Ibid., 32).

As such, this chapter will seek to disclose the idiosyncrasies of Blaser's poetic extension in 'Image-Nations'. This will be carried out with reference to three terms which

characterise Blaser's poetry. First, I will address Blaser's sense of 'outside', both in his essay on Jack Spicer's *Collected Book Poems* 'The Practice of Outside' (2006b, 113) and throughout the individual sections of *Image-Nations*. Secondly, Blaser's serial method of arrangement— in which the parts of his extended work appear in numerous volumes across and amidst shorter poems outside of the 'frame' of 'Image-Nations'— will be discussed in terms of its varieties of 'movements' and what Blaser calls the 'folding' between its parts. Finally, and by way of conclusion, I will seek to develop a sense of the 'chiasmic' in Blaser's poetry, with specific reference to his own writings on the term and Merleau-Ponty's in *The Visible and The Invisible*. The chiasm— the "reciprocal insertion and intwining of the one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty 1997, 138)— will offer a means by which I can bring together the observations of the chapter and offer a sense of the idiosyncrasy of Blaser's acts of poetic extension.

Outside

Exteriority—that which is outside— is a prevailing theme in Blaser's poetry. In 'Anecdote', a poem from 'Pell Mell', he articulates the movement language compels in the meeting between Self and Other:

> what did I think language
> did, as I grew up   well,
> it pulled me into
>
> and out-of, upwards-of
> and downwards-of, the
> side-by-side, serpentine friendship   (2006a, 274)

Blaser locates in the figure of "serpentine friendship" "a pull" "into and/out-of, upwards-of/ and downwards-of" the 'I'. These stances are perspectival but also indicative of orientation— the repeated use of 'of' suggesting, as it does in the work of George Oppen[1], the singular importance of a subject's relation to things as determining their meaning. This is held in opposition to a conception of objects being accessible in and of themselves, somehow independent to the witnessing subject. The 'serpentine', that which does not follow a straight path, is evoked in the relation between these movements— and it is important to note at the outset, particularly in the context of Blaser's long poems *Image-Nation* and *The Truth Is Laughter*, that 'movement' is a key term and measure in his poetics. As Scott Pound writes, "the effect of Blaser's syntax and spacings […] is not a build-up of accumulated significance, but a mere setting in motion" (Nicholls 2002, 170). The most significant of these "setting in motion[s]" in Blaser's work is towards the Other. Blaser's stance in this regard can be understood in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas. The latter writes in *Totality and Infinity*:

> Speech first founds community by *giving,* by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematising. The given is the work of a sentence. In the sentence the apparition loses its phenomenality in being fixed as a theme; in contrast to the silent world, ambiguity infinitely magnified […] It defines. (2013, 98-99)

Levinas proposes a conception of language as simultaneously *giving* and arresting the *given.* He does not present this as a problem, but rather establishes this as the founding of community. In this sense, the 'given' is subject to a further 'giving', which occurs between

[1] The similarities between Blaser's and Oppen's serial long poems have been gestured at by Andrew Mossin in 'Recovering The Public World' (*Even On Sunday.* Ed. Miriam Nichols) but have not been fully explored or explicated. In particular, Mossin is interested in the mutual attention each poet pays to the functioning of communality in the face of the struggles of the late 1960s, particularly the Vietnam War— though far more importantly, so far as I am concerned, both poets work in a serial form as a direct result of their reading of and investigations into a variety of philosophies and phenomenologies.

the Other and the self. The perceived world, figured as 'ambiguity infinitely magnified', is 'given' by virtue of community, making the 'definition' involved in language use a fundamentally intersubjective process. Blaser's poetics is of 'friendship' not merely in the sense of his acknowledgment of the importance of poetic coterie but in a far more constitutively intersubjective manner. In Blaser, as in Levinas, "the primacy of the ethical" (Ibid., 79) arises as a result of "the relationship of man to man" being "an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest" (Ibid.).

This generative sense of linguistic 'communalism' is, as this chapter will argue, the nature of Blaser's idiosyncratic poetic extension. In this regard, Georgio Agamben, a philosopher Blaser engaged with seriously towards the end of his life, is illuminating in seeking to come to terms with the political implications of intersubjective thought. In particular, he offers a Levinasian understanding of what it means to be a 'friend':

> One could say that 'friend' is an existential and not a categorical. But this existential—which, as such, cannot be conceptualised—is still infused with an intensity that charges it with something like political potentiality. (2009, 35)

It is useful to lead with such a conception of friendship as it underscores the extent to which what constitutes Self and Other— 'Me' and 'My Friend'— for Blaser is a contingency wherein each pole of a friendship defines and shapes the contours of the other. This imperative sense of the Other as instituting and compelling various 'movements' is articulated by Blaser in 'The Stadium In The Mirror' through reference to Merleau-Ponty on several occasions— in particular, the notion that "the mind is only the body's invisibility" and that, as a corollary, "[w]e are never in possession of ourselves" (Blaser 2006b, 31). Miriam Nichols draws attention to Blaser's affinity with Merleau-Ponty, describing how "*The Primacy of Perception* (1964), *Signs* (1964) and *The Visible and Invisible* (1968) would become important sources for

Blaser in the 1970s, especially when he was writing the first twelve *Image-Nations* and 'The

Stadium In The Mirror'" (2002, 185). Nichols continues:

> What is of particular significance in Merleau-Ponty is the argument that
> human perception is chiasmatically entangled with non-human nature. The
> relationship between words and chaos, self and world, visible and invisible or
> inside and outside is that of complicated non-equivalence; the polarities are
> not ontologically distinct but neither do they collapse into each other.
>
> (Ibid.)

For Blaser, the meeting of 'self' and 'world' is asymmetrical, in the sense that the ontological

distinctions which distinguish one from the other are both 'inside' and 'outside'. What

characterises the 'chiasm', as such, is a sense of the 'pell-mell', a phrase which Merleau-

Ponty uses and which Blaser adopts as the title of his 1988 collection of poems. As such,

Merleau-Ponty writes:

> Once again [we] must recommence everything, reject the instruments
> reflection and intuition have provided themselves, and install [ourselves] in a
> locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have
> not yet been 'worked over', that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both 'subject'
> and 'object', both existence and essence. [...] Seeing, speaking, even thinking
> [...] are experiences of this kind, both irrecusable and enigmatic.
>
> (Merleau-Ponty 1997, 130)

Merleau-Ponty's move beyond subject-object relations to a sense of the encounter or

moment of interaction between subject and object establishes a 'locus' in which the act of

distinguishing or 'working over' is problematized by the presentness of the perceptual

experience at hand. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty writes of 'seeing, speaking, even

thinking' as active present-tense events occurring 'all at once'. The role language plays in

establishing this situation in 'the social', 'friendship' or, to use Nichols' term, 'companionability', is, as Blaser argues, a matter of being 'Outside' the subject. His comments in 'The Fire' explicate this conception of language further:

> It is not language which is the source: it is the record of the meeting, and the magical structure of sight, sound and intellect is indeed a personal responsibility. Language is given to us and in the most insidious way it controls sight, sound and intellect, but it is also the medium which can be shaped. (2006b, 4)

Blaser's emphasis on subjectivity and agency— our 'personal responsibility'— is a corollary of that fact that language is not "the source" but rather "the record of the meeting"— which is to say that one's handling of 'the record' is where responsibility lies. Put another way, this "record" establishes a language of encountering, both in the sense of the radically Other and with the phenomenal world. As Blaser writes in 'Particles': "In a profound sense, poetry always remains at the beginning, where the body is involved in thought" (2006b, 39). Our experience of language is, as such, chiasmic, impossible to distinguish as being wholly 'inside' or 'outside' the subject. The meeting is precisely this intertwining of body and thought— and in this sense, Blaser's poetics is 'embodied' in its insistence on illuminating selves as selves rather than as 'subjects'; for to conceive of the latter is already to have objectified the Other.

The serial for Blaser is not simply a form which can be adopted, but rather a condition to which all poetry is always-already subject. Charles Bernstein, in describing the nature of Blaser's poetic extension, paraphrases Olson's 'Projective Verse':

> One poem must follow instanter on the next, a next always out of reach until in hand, in mouth, in ear. (Blaser 2006a, 507)

Olson's emphasis on the projective push of perception becomes, in Bernstein's estimation, a fitting analogue for Blaser's serial method. Whilst Olson is clearly a presiding and oft-

referenced figure in Blaser's poetry and poetics, it is also clear that Blaser's explicit focus on the 'Outside' and what he calls 'the real business of poetry [as] cosmology' establishes him as a distinctly idiosyncratic poet an appreciation of whom needn't occur in Olson's terms. Bernstein's phrase 'in hand' is useful, however, in establishing a contrast—the 'in hand' is distinct from Olson's 'mouth' and 'ear', both of which terms undergo considerable development as key terms in Olson's poetics. Blaser's poetry, concerned throughout as it is with what friendship means for poetry, develops open-handedness as a crucially receptive stance.

Folding and folding and folding

As Scott Pound writes, it is "the absence of subjectivity as an organising principle in Blaser's poetry" which opens up the possibilities of form and syntax outside of the delimitations of "either the lyric self or the epic world" (171). Blaser figures 'intimacy [as] the loveliest/ part of thought', (Blaser 2006a, 250) echoing his close friend Robert Duncan's fondness for the adjective 'lovely' in his serial poem 'The Structure Of Rime' and simultaneously conjuring an example of such 'intimacy' though the sharing of the term. Elsewhere in Image-Nation 18 '(An Apple', Blaser writes:

> the mind I want, like an
>   apple, childish
> I've followed every great friend
>   I've known— Spicer, Duncan,
>   Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky—
> not to own it   (Ibid., 249)

Again echoing Merleau-Ponty's comment that "[w]e are never in possession of ourselves" (Blaser 2006b, 13), Blaser here advocates "following […] great friend[s]" in order "not to

own" "the mind [he] wants". In one sense, the testament of such a poetics is seen in the

frequency of Blaser's quotation, reference to and dialogue with figures such as those

mentioned above in the bodies of his poems— in such instances, Blaser's poetic voice is

constitutively 'social'. More significantly, however, Blaser's poetic extension is as an effort to

offer a hand, a gesture of friendship writ large— a 'record of the meeting' of the poets,

writers and thinkers he counted amongst his actual and philosophical companions.

This 'record' is often explicitly concerned with contemporary philosophy of the

intersubjective and social, and the intersections at which his poems and prose works meet

various writers are always further openings onto an 'Outside' to the notion of a closed poem.

As such Blaser's serial poems constitute

> narrative[s] which refuse to adopt an imposed story line, and complete itself
> only in the sequence of poems, if in, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition
> of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves.
> The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much
> of a tale is told.   (Blaser 2006b, 5)

What this developed sense of narrative seeks to enact is the argument that "the idea that

you can write a single poem, is a lie" (Ibid., 4). In this regard, Blaser sees his collected works

in 'The Holy Forest' as a one long poem which contains many shorter long poems, the limits

of which are permeable and indistinct. In this manner, his serial poems which drop in and out

across the span of 6 books, creating further instances of seriality in the distances between

concurrent poems— for example, the gaps between poems of the *Image-Nations* series

become varyingly meaningful depending on how one moves between them. If the book is

read as 'The Holy Forest', as Blaser offers, rather than a collected sequence of sequential

poems, the interrelations between the long poems also become examples of different forms

of poetic extension. Matthew Gagnon argues that

> in a larger frame particular to *The Holy Forest*, [Image-Nation] is withdrawn
> from any synchronous elevation of materials functioning outside of history.
> […] They orchestrate specificity against a backdrop of memory, textual
> companions, and a community of travellers within language. (6)

For Blaser, the serial can articulate 'specificity' in the midst of 'companions' and the constant backdrop of memory. In particular, this 'backdrop of memory' evokes the sense in which the serial process establishes a modular field of meaning in which recurrent terms and motifs complement each other across the scope of a poem the composition of which stretches over three decades. He comments:

> *The Holy Forest*, what I had in mind there when I pulled that title was Dante
> and the whole sense of being in a forest, wandering in a forest, lost in a forest,
> finding yourself in a forest, or other people finding you and all that. […] The
> Holy Forest itself is an imagery in which you really are lost in a forest, of
> thought, of people, of things, and I have continued to work it all these years
> because it allows me my conversation with everything I can think of. I use
> quotation, I want them there in their own voices, I want my voice there with
> them so the interchange is a constant folding, I think of reality as a constant
> folding, and The Holy Forest is my way of folding tree after tree. I can wander
> through the forest, but I'm actually folding whatever reality I can find.
>
> (Sakkis, np)

The real is thus figured as 'whatever reality I can find', a non-idealistic conception which is combined with Blaser's imagery of moving through a forest. The phrase "Interchange is a constant folding" also gestures at the remarks made at the outset of *Image-Nation,* the first poem of which is called '(the fold'— and the effect of the serial organisation is just such a folding of meaning, narrative and image, where combined and alternating meanings, as in reality, are subject to "a constant folding". Andrew Mossin, in this regard, writes that Blaser is a poet who "enfold[s] discrete observation and detail in [a] poem's movements" (156), whilst Charles Bernstein sees 'folding' as a defining procedure of Blaser's poetics, which "dwells in

pleats and upon folds: pleating and folding being Blaser's latterday Deleuzian manner of extending his lifelong project of seriality" (Blaser 2006a, 507). Bernstein is right to describe Blaser's method as working towards an "extension of his lifelong project of seriality". To follow Bernstein's own hint, an understanding of 'folding' is presented in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> Folding does not make it possible to go from one type to another; quite the contrary, the types testify to the irreducibility of the forms of folding. (53)

Deleuze's discourse, here and elsewhere, appropriates concepts from a range of scientific fields in order to undermine philosophy as a repetition of metaphysical errors. Among these terms is 'folding', which undergoes significant explication in Deleuze's *Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993). He writes:

> A labyrinth is said, etymologically, to be multiple because it contains many folds. The multiple is not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways. A labyrinth corresponds exactly to each level; the continuous labyrinth is matter and its parts. (1993, 3)

This is not to suggest that Blaser's poetry is labyrinthine, though certainly an argument of this nature could be developed based on the workings of seriality. The fold here is characterised not only by multiplicity but by being generative— the fold establishes further folds. Deleuze expands on this:

> A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern in a cavern. The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point which is never a part, but a simple extremity of the line. (Deleuze 1993, 6)

This "simple extremity of the line", the point at which the fold becomes visible, is the smallest element of the labyrinth, though Deleuze extends this notion further in that a fold is never without its own smaller folds. The significance of the fold therefore lies in the fact that

it attempts to bear witness to the minute contours which go towards shaping the wider structure, which is, in Deleuze's terms, the labyrinth. An analogue can be developed here between the fold, the labyrinthine and the intersubjective. The social world, a labyrinth of unexpected and unpredictable Others, is 'folded' throughout by the relations between its members, and each of these folds is subject to further foldings in which the labyrinth itself extends to encompass. The salient point here lies in the fact that the 'fold' extends across further space within the wider form by virtue of allowing co-existing surfaces and textures to become proximate. In this regard, Charles Stivale argues in *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship* that this 'folding' is also indicative of the way in which friendship is inaugurated and nourished. He writes:

> The fold is […] highly important for Deleuze, not merely as a philosophical concept, but as a practical means by which all manner of intersections between ideas and cultural and existential practices can be developed, maintained and appreciated. (10)

These 'intersections' between disparate 'existential practices' can be seen to illustrate the social situation in which Blaser conceptually places himself. In interview he addresses this to the extended poem:

> They're sequence poems that I'm very particularly interested in, work that doesn't stop until you do. […] The Holy Forest is set up to go on as long as I can keep folding and folding and folding. (Sakkis, np)

Seriality is 'outside' in the sense that it acknowledges and wilfully establishes vast fields of interrelated, associative, augmentative and counter-narrative meaning which, as Blaser writes, inaugurate 'the real' by virtue of their relational multiplicity. In this sense, the serial form is a coming to terms with the outside. This moves us towards Blaser's conception of his own poetics as pertaining to a 'cosmology'. In his work, this cosmological sense refers not

only to the cosmological origins of being but more specifically to the figures who formed

Blaser's own subjective world. It is, as Joseph Conte characterises it, "a cosmology in a

perpetual state of composition" (17).

Cosmology

The notion of outside, figured as the exteriority of subjectivity, is as such of great concern to

Blaser's poetics. He sees it as being related directly to 'open poetics' which he furthermore

sees as being idiosyncratically American, influenced by untamed space. Blaser terms this

'cosmology.' In 'The Fire', he establishes a male lineage of American writers who explicate

this theme— Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Henry Adams and Pound—"The

whole thing," he writes, "came in a geography where the traditional forms would no longer

hold our purposes" (2006b, 5). His explication by way of reference to a fairly traditional

lineage of American writers collects what is disparate in their discourses together to

consolidate this sense of 'cosmological' poetics. The term seems initially to refer perhaps to

Blaser's and Spicer's descriptions of the latter's poetics as 'Martian'— but it also refers more

generally to the etymologically derived meaning— discourse of the order of the world

(Ancient Greek). As Matthew Gagnon writes:

> We have in Blaser's cosmology a territorial remapping of consciousness.
> According to Blaser "We need to know how old we are... We need to trace the
> consciousness of that ageing". The exegesis inherent in this thinking folds not
> into a neat category of the "simply subjective or personal", but recasts the
> management of materials, the recombination of dissimilar discourses into a
> flexible poetic practice.   (Gagnon, np)

This 'flexible poetic practice' is made possible by the 'fold'. The cosmological for Blaser refers not only to the processes by which being initially came to being but also the processes by which Blaser's own specific sense of Being is generated. In this sense, the 'world', the folds of which are perceived by the subject, can in turn be articulated in terms of a cosmology of subjectivity. This cosmology, which would seek to bear witness to the perceptual and textual influences and sources of which it is formed, constitutes the organisation of 'Image-Nations', in the sense that Blaser's poetics conceives of extension as an ongoing task of acknowledging the intersubjective elements which shape and reveal the self. Conceived in this way, Blaser's cosmological poetics is an attempt to find an articulation for and of the social in which the self is constituted.

Cosmology is also, as Blaser has it, constitutively serial, and so in the various radical moves he sees in Poe, Emerson, Whitman and the other figures mentioned above the concern is always towards the way in which form is expanded or distorted to more accurately get at 'the order' of the world. In 'Image-Nation 9 '(half and half', Blaser writes:

> face to face   always outside
> ourselves   the astonishment is
>   that it is kosmos   (2006a, 167)

This sentiment that "the astonishment is/ that it is kosmos" suggests that the 'cosmological' is a matter of not only the outside, but "ourselves". Furthermore, this occurs 'face to face', a phrase which echoes the title '(half and half', and establishes the extent to which for Blaser 'wholes' are constituted by the 'face to face'. Charles Bernstein underscores this aspect of Blaser's poetics, describing it as a site "where *you* is always in the plural" (Ibid., 507). This process can be witnessed in *The Moth Poem,* in which the forms of observation take their cue from and respond to the flitting appearance of a number of moths. The first poem in the

series, 'The Literalist', describes such an encounter:

> the eye catches
> almost a tune
>
> the moth in the piano
> wherein
>   unhammered
> the air rings with
>
> an earlier un
> ease of the senses
> disturbed   (2006a, 67)

The 'disturbance' to the senses is a synesthetic meeting of "eye" and "ear" which 'catches' the moth, or more particularly, as Blaser traces it, the 'ringing air' of its being there. Whilst the word 'unease' is split into 'un'/'ease', the line 'ease of the senses' remains intact. Blaser seems to suggest a form of 'sense' which occurs with 'ease', that is, effortlessly, but which is itself 'uneasy', disturbed by the outside. As such, Blaser seeks to illuminate the sense in which what comes to perception from 'outside' is dictated by a particular 'medium', a term Blaser uses to describe Spicer's poetics (2006b, 121). In 'The Fire', he writes of *The Moth Poem* that it is "a translation of the record of the burning light and death of certain presences," (2006b, 12) a comment that echoes another made at the outset of the same essay: "Burning up myself, I would leave fire behind me" (Ibid., 3). This sense of poet as medium leaving a trace has implications for the functioning of poetic voice in his works. Blaser foregrounds such problems in a variety of ways, perhaps most characteristically in 'The Practice of Outside', an essay published alongside Jack Spicer's *Collected Books* which

explicates the processes of both Spicer's and Blaser's poetics. The latter work is undeniably a major publication in the history of long poems. It is fitting that one of Blaser's most incisive works of poetics is an elegy for and meditation on the long poetry of Jack Spicer. In this regard, he writes in 'The Fire':

> An accusation is levelled at many poets. 'He writes for a coterie, the poets talk only among themselves. They live in a world of flattery and selfhood' It is my belief that it is somewhere in this messy denial of the thought of poetry that an explanation can be found for the importance of community. […] Such communities tend to build a structure for men who wish to keep, hold, and record the passionate relation with the outside that the world, the nation, need. (2006b, 12)

The structure Blaser describes here gestures towards not only the dynamic of the coterie but also what Duncan, Blaser and Spicer developed as a distinct form of 'serial poetry'. For Blaser, the form community takes is itself *serial*— and this can be seen in David Sullivan's reading of 'Image-Nation' as 'an amalgamated nation of friends who correspond with, to, and for each other' (Nicholls 2002, 117). The question of nation, repeatedly asked and interrogated throughout Blaser's life-long 'Image-Nation', is of finding a form for community. In this regard, he writes: "We have reached a point now here where discourse must include the nation, or politics, the scholarship in which we tend to lay down the images of poetic thought" (2006b, 12). This constructed relation between the 'image', 'poetic thought', 'discourse' and 'nation' establishes the major motifs which Blaser's most substantial long poem considers. In interview with John Sakkis, Blaser relates his realisation of the importance of the 'nation' to his encounter with phenomenologist Hannah Arendt:

> Hannah Arendt was on campus for a year, and her way of speaking about politics became very influential for Jack [Spicer] and me, we wound up with an extraordinary sense of having to take on the whole crappy mess around us, to

106

try and find what was there that could last, or even that could be changed. (Sakkis, np)

Though it might be tempting to relate this image of a "whole crappy mess' to Blaser's serial method, it is more compelling to take it as a figure of 'nation', particularly in the light of Arendt's post-Holocaust discourse concerning the origins of totalitarianism in the establishment of nations. In his essay 'The Recovery of the Public World', the title of which is taken from Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Blaser writes that "[Arendt's] work begins with a major effort to understand the totalitarianism that dogs the political, social and artistic life of the twentieth century and of our modernity" (64). In this sense, distinguishing between generalities and particulars would constitute a rejection of 'the real', that which imposes on us from the outside. Often in Blaser this 'outside' is, as in Levinas, the radical alterity of the Other— but just as frequently it is a being external to the speaker's being which, in being as such, reifies the speaker's 'real'. Crucially, it is distinct "from poetry as simply personal expression, as feeling and emotion" which, as Blaser tells us, "is of course insane" (Sakkis np). 'The Practice of Outside' is a document of shared poetic ambitions in a number of senses— but it is also clear that Blaser's understanding of Spicer is entirely his own, and as such, the text is itself performing the *praxis* of its title. This praxis can be seen throughout Blaser's 'Image-Nations', to which this chapter will now turn.

Image-Nation

Scott Pound writes that the *Image-Nation* poems have "as their primary characteristic a resistance to absolutism, or that which is without relation" (167). This resistance can be seen in the title of the sequence— the word 'imagination' is visibly and phonetically present in the combination of 'image and 'nation'— but it is crucially the relation between these three

terms, and the necessary relations between all terms, which acts as an initial disclosure of the polyphonic, serial and deeply intersubjective form of Blaser's extended poetics. Andrew Mossin argues that the poetic, for Blaser, is a "process of encountering images in language" whereby "we inhabit a transpersonal site of knowledge in which the distinctions of "I" and "Other" achieve particularity and clarity" (160). This 'transpersonal site', it could be argued, is disclosed at length across the span and scope of *Image-Nations.* It is crucial, however, to maintain a sense of the 'fold' as an ongoing process, which is to argue as Pound does that "the title *Image-Nation* does not denote a totality that the poems represent; it names the activity the poems enact" (172).

In compositional terms, Stan Persky writes that "Image-Nations […] is an intermittent, rather than consecutive poem, one that would continue, concurrent with other poems, over the next three and a half decades" (18-19). The poems of Blaser's 'Image-Nation' series begin in 1962's *Image-Nation 1-4* and end with 'Image Nation 25 (Exody' in 1993. Chronologically, they begin after Blaser's serial experiments in *The Moth Poem*, and intersect with his other major serial work 'The Truth Is Laughter', which begins in *Syntax* (1979). The twenty-five poems which constitute 'Image-Nation' are as such scattered throughout Blaser's body of work. This "profound scattering" (Mossin 160) is in itself a measure of the poem's extension; which is to say, particularly in the context of Blaser's overall project of *The Holy Forest*, the nature of Blaser's differing modes of seriality generate meaning through the distances they create between their parts. The point of making this clear is to distinguish between a 'serial' series poem, such as *Cups* or *The Moth Poem*, and a serial work which, as Blaser tells us, is a form of narrative of the outside.

As such, the preoccupations of *Image-Nation* are found not only in the discourses Blaser engages with, but also in the process of image-creation his serial method constitutes. *Image-Nation* is concerned with a proposed relationship with the two words of its title, and

as such recurring images accrue meaning from the 'outside' of the poem they might be found in. As such, the most prevalent feature of Blaser's serialism in *Image-Nation* is leaving each poem open to the outside— the most immediate of which is the surrounding poems, many of which, in the placement of the *Image-Nation* series throughout *The Holy Forest,* are seemingly unconnected to their neighbours. It seems appropriate to read *Image-Nations* in a variety of ways to meet the varieties of seriality on display. The preface to *Syntax*, for example, constitutes a commentary on moments in the *Image-Nation* series as well as individual poems in the collection. Here, Blaser writes:

> I read, walk, listen, dream and write among companions. These pieces do not belong to me. *Syntax*, a personification, looking for a predicate and *vice versa.* (2006a, 203)

Such a prefatory comment has a wide reach; it reflects on not only the individual poems in *Syntax*, including Image-Nation 15, 16 and 17 and the first sixteen poems of *The Truth Is Laughter*, but on the wider whole of which *Syntax* is a part, *The Holy Forest*. The preface, then, works as a reification of certain motifs— the justification of personhood closely tied to an 'amongness' and a lack of ownership over the language out of which the poems are composed. As he writes in the 'Author's Note' to *The Holy Forest*: "Those poems called Image-Nations come and go throughout, as I come upon them" (Ibid., xxv). Blaser develops a seriality the relations between the parts of which are difficult to clearly delineate, instead suggesting a compositional desire to avoid 'clear delineation' in favour of permeable extents— which is to say, a 'practice of outside'.

As such, a wider scope is required in approaching *Image-Nation* as a part of *The Holy Forest*— and to not have so broad a notion of Blaser's seriality would be to misrepresent the idiosyncrasy of his poetic extension. It is tempting to read the following moment in 'Image Nation 5 (erasure' as an explication of this process:

    the constant

          movement

               of a finitude

    which re   opens

             converging

    backward   with primal elements,

    syllables   of

           a longing

    for completion

    the task of a man   and his words

    is at the edge

          where we are

    translated   restless   men   (2006a, 153)

The 'longing/ for completion' which arises from the "constant/ movement" of the disparate

parts of the serial poem inaugurates a process of "re-open[ing]" and "converging/backward".

In this 'fold', Blaser figures 'the task of a man' as being "at the edge", where a similar

"restlessness" constantly moves man. Of this 'edge', Blaser writes later in the poem

    inside   the work

    at the edge

        of the words

    the silence   is the Other

    at the edge   of my words

    a

        move

           ment   (Ibid., 155)

This movement and 'move meant' by the words themselves here gradually delineate the

equivocation that the 'edge', the threshold of the 'Outside', *is* the silent 'Other'. Blaser's

poetry often figures the Outside as precisely the voice of another, perhaps one who

articulates a mutual sensibility (Spicer, Duncan, Olson) or a philosopher whose investigations

guide Blaser's stance towards reality (Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, Agamben). More specifically,

the relationship Blaser constructs between poetry, language and the Other is a matter of

delicacy. Again, in Image-Nation 5, he writes:

> a translation of oneself into the Other
> is
>   so
>   delicately
>   perched among words
> this technē   binding the heart
> like small poems read from
> vast stages   (Ibid., 150)

This 'binding' 'perched among words' sees, as Blaser writes, "the translated men/ disappear

into what they have/ translated" (Ibid., 149). This process is evoked by the term 'techne', the

etymology of which is given considerable explication in Heiddeger's *The Question Concerning

Technology,* in which he announces a project of "finally tak[ing] seriously the simple question

of what the name 'technology' means" (1993, 340). He argues:

> The word stems from the Greek. Technikon means that which belongs to
> techne. We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this
> word. One is that techne is the name not only for the activities and skills of the
> craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Techne belongs
> to bringing-forth, to poiesis; it is something poetic. (Ibid.)

Existence for Heidegger can be understood poetically by virtue of the similitude of aesthetic

and existential disclosure, an equivocation stated in the penultimate sentence above and

elsewhere in 'The Origin Of The Work Of Art'. Heidegger develops this sense of 'techne' by

virtue of its relation to 'episteme', a term of Platonic origin for 'justified true belief':

Both words are names for knowing in the widest sense. They mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and be expert in it. Such knowing provides an opening up. As an opening up it is a revealing. […]It reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another. (Ibid., 184)

This equivocation is significant in that it emphasises how 'knowing' requires an awareness and invitation of an 'opening' akin to Blaser's 'outside'. In this regard, in the quoted section of 'Image-Nation 5' above, Blaser's 'techne' is the possibility of a translation of 'oneself into the Other' which 'bind[s] the heart'— a bind which is both a bond and tangle. It is in this sense, then, that Miriam Nichols describes Blaser's view of language as "a human *techne*, rooted in the primacy of the social" (2002, 200). That this process is figured as 'small poems read from/ vast stages' is additionally significant in that it suggests that, for Blaser, intersubjectivity is an inherently poetic existential condition. Furthermore, this 'poetic process' is, in Heideggerian terms, a mutual act of dis-closure, one subjectivity revealing itself and having its contours defined through the encounter with the radically Other. Matthew Gagnon relates this sense of 'techne' to Blaser's project of the development of "world-image" in *Image-Nation*:

The insistence of subjectivity as explored through the Other is acted upon within a search for a world-image wrested from the seat of personal agency. Polarities such as darkness and light are employed, not as metaphorical elements by which meaning is implied, but to engage the reader in a wayward oscillation.   (Gagnon, np)

Gagnon's taxonomy here is illuminating. The prominent terms— 'insistence', 'Other', 'acted upon', 'personal agency'— gesture at the imperative significance of that which is deemed 'Outside' the subject. I remain wary of designating the momentum of *Image-Nation* as a

search for 'a world-image', though Gagnon is certainly correct to underscore the emphasis Blaser's procedure throughout the long poem places on developing recurring images, as in, for example, the first four poems and their various perspectives on 'the moon'. Such images are and act as 'outsides' against which subjectivity finds itself illumined.

Crucially, as Blaser writes in 'The Practice Of Outside', it is a matter of subjectivity as distinct from 'personality'. He writes that this project "cuts the ground from under a poetry that ceaselessly returns to wrap itself around a personality" (2006b, 272). The nuanced distinction between the two terms stands as an indication of the extent to which Blaser wishes to avoid appropriation of subjects with 'personhood'. Instead, subjectivity is figured as a movement between subjects— which is to say, for Blaser, the subjective is only ever an intersubjective phenomenon.

We are journeying in company with the messenger

Blaser's fascination with the workings of 'movement' in his poetry are enacted in relation to intersubjectivity in the second poem in the sequence '(roaming'. Here the 'wayward oscillation' Gagnon describes find articulation in a deictic diction. The poem begins:

we are journeying in company with the messenger

       but there, it was
there   'you' saw
the head of a horse burn,
its red eye flame   'you' stepped
to the fireplace where the meta-

> morphosed log lay without a body
>
> and put 'your' hand over the seeing   (2006a, 90)

The titular 'roaming' is enacted through the 'journeying' in the first line, which forms a chorus appearing three times in the poem, each time modulating. It is also gestured at in the deixis of the first stanza's diction. The ghost of a volta— 'but there, it was/ there'— sets the poem against an indiscernible presence or location. This vagueness of reference is further reiterated in the scare-quotes surrounding 'you' and 'yours' in the stanza, which suggest not an ontological scepticism but rather a respect for the hypothetical nature of what constitutes the 'you' when witnessed by an Other. Which is to say, that which is 'you' is, in so far as I am its witness, only conjecture, for the I which I constitute is only another 'you' in another's eyes. The diction Blaser utilises thus seeks to preserve the radical alterity of that which is not 'I'. This is figured later in the poem as an oscillation between the 'public' and the 'private':

> turned by that privacy
>
> from such public perils as words
>
> are, we travel in company with the messenger   (Ibid.)

Words considered as 'public perils' seems to gesture towards the 'outside' Blaser conceives language as constitutive of. Intersubjectivity is enacted in the act of articulation. As such the movement between the choruses of "travel[ling] in company with the messenger" throughout the poem suggests the roaming of the poem's title.

The identity of the 'messenger' is, of course, unclear, but as the second poem in the sequence it would suggest at least a superficial affinity with Dante's Virgil in the second canto of *Inferno.* The function of this figure is as a companion who makes witnessing possible, often at times directing the poet's gaze. In many of the early Image-Nation poems, however,

114

it is Dante's figure of 'Amor' which Blaser institutes as a motif in this stance of companion and witness . As such, in 'Great Companions: Dante Alighieri', Blaser writes:

> Dante, drawing upon the Provençal experience of
> the reason of poems, brings us to Amors— Giorgio
> Agamben tells us *Amors is the name the Troubadours gave to*
> *the experience of the advent of the poetic word... It is difficult to*
> *understand the sense in which poets understood love, as long as we*
> *obstinately construe it according to a secular misunderstanding, in*
> *a purely biographical context. For the Troubadours, it is not a ques-*
> *tion of psychological or biographical events that are successively ex-*
> *pressed in words, but rather, of the attempt to live the topos itself,*
> *the event of language as a fundamental amorous and poetic experi-*
> *ence—*   (2006a, 440)

Dante's 'amor' is related to though distinct from 'love', and signifies the inaugural nature of poetic language. Agamben's phrase— "the event of language as a fundamental amorous and poetic experience"— equivocates the 'poetic' and the 'amorous', and furthermore presents both as forms or 'lived topos'. This latter phrase seems to gesture towards what we might otherwise term a 'site of meaning', which is to say an instance, spatially and temporally, whereby signification occurs. That this occurrence is 'amorous' brings together the sense in which signification is an intersubjective phenomenon— 'amor', the greek name for Cupid, etymologically comes before 'love', and suggests 'affection' and 'friendship' in the same term, denoting a variety of relationships and not merely what we commonly today understand as 'the amorous'.

As such, the influence Blaser professes to take from Dante is a matter of the effects of poetic voice rather than a structural or formal affinity. Blaser writes that "the intimacy of sound discloses the Amors of othernesses" (2006a, 441), a comment which bears witness to his own use of the words of Others, both close friends and those with whom he shares

115

intellectual and philosophical affinities. Blaser cites. His collection *Syntax*, the title of which is

taken from Olson's challenge to Blaser in 1964, ends with a section entitled "Some Voices In

Syntax", which takes the form of an annotated bibliography. The body of the work *Syntax*

extends into the margins of the pages with citations, an effect which is less a matter of

scholarly accuracy than an extension of and into the diction of Others. Blaser describes this

as "the ever-changing polyphony of amorous thought" (Ibid.). Andrew Mossin identifies this

as a constitutive feature of *Image-Nation*, which he sees as "travers[ing] a space of the multi-

voiced rather than the 'voice', the polyvalent rather than the singular" (157). Again, this is a

question of friendship understood intersubjectively— and of seeking a syntax fit for the

purpose of articulating this understanding.

It is important also to recognise the distance between Blaser's supposed inheritance

of Dante with that of Ezra Pound in his *Cantos.* In the latter case, Dante's use of literary-

historical figures to bear witness to the perceived violence of contemporary life is a guide in

itself, and Pound follows in circulating the perspectives of his own collective of literary-

historical figures. In this regard, Andrew Mossin writes that "Blaser's work attests not so

much to the 'tale of the tribe', to recall Pound's phrase, but to the multiple narratives of self

and other that are by their very nature public *and* social realities" (161). These constitutively

public-social realities are figured by Blaser in relation to Dante as:

> Love's reason reasoning, which Dante tells us it would
>
> be shame not to explain, enters into the discourses of
>
> the territory called world— the poetic is the language of the mapless
>
> (2006a, 440)

This 'language of the mapless', or the 'roaming' syntax inaugurated in Image-Nation 2 and

developed throughout *Image-Nations* and *The Holy Forest,* is indicative of the movement

Blaser sees as necessary to both language use and an acknowledgment of the 'outside'. The

term 'roaming' denotes a particularly aleatoric and wide-ranging form of movement without destination. In 'Image-Nation 8 (morphe', Blaser relates this process directly to the constitution of poetic form:

> I know nothing of form
> that is my own doing   all out
> of one's self   our words were
> the form we entered,   turning intelligible
> and strange   at the point of
> a pencil   (2006a, 164)

Again, the movement 'out/ of one's self' is where form appears. In this sense, form is praxis, a movement the momentum of which comes from the Other. This movement is not achieved by the 'I' though— it is not "my own doing"— rather, it is a 'turning intelligible/ and strange', a reorientation to Otherness. Furthermore, the hinge, as it were, on which this movement swings is "the point of/ a pencil". The word 'point' suggests both the pencil's lead and its purpose. This latter reading is instructive in that it argues for a further Otherness which is encountered in the record of the meeting, a phrase which recalls Blaser's 'Anecdote' quoted at the outset of this chapter. In 'The Stadium of The Mirror', Blaser writes:

> The Other is present and primary to our speaking. There is no public realm without such polarity of language. The operation of its duplicity is the poetic job. A peril and an ecstasy. [...]Transcendence is not a position somewhere else, but the manner of our being to any other (Merleau-Ponty). A co-existence.   (2006b, 32)

Blaser's use of the term 'ecstasy' fittingly gestures at the phenomenological notion of exstasis, developed most recently by Michel Henry. For Henry, exstasis is a specific term for the 'going beyond' involved in transcendental subjectivity. Blaser, quoting Merleau-Ponty above, makes clear that transcendence is not *to a place* but rather the existential situation

always-already at work. If the Other, as Blaser, Levinas, Henry and Merleau-Ponty contest, is vital to the experience of Self, then the prevailing situation is 'co-existence'.

A Continuum of Utterance

The "continuum of utterance" (Gagnon, np) which characterises the contingency of *Image-Nation* is not, from the outset, a means of establishing limits to which the successive poems in the sequence adhere. The forms of the individual poems vary depending on the content being worked through, and in this sense Blaser's project-poem resembles projective poetics. Blaser himself figures his form as distinct from Olsonian practice based on a comment Olson made to him in 1958 which Blaser repeats in 'Diary, April 11, 1981':

> Olson said, 'I'd trust you
> anywhere with image, but
> you've got no syntax'   (1958)
> this comes to mind out of the
> night and morning, rebelliously   (2006a, 223)

Rather than conceiving of Blaser's modular form in *Image-Nation* as a projective measure, then, it is instead a matter, as Blaser writes, of "question[ing] syntax" (2006b, 30). In particular, he emphasises the fact that

> by extension in the series, the absence of syntax becomes polar to another language— of presences alongside absences, of speech alongside a silence of words, of visibility tensed alongside a love which traces its invisible open-work. (Ibid.)

In this sense, then, a crucial measure in *Image-Nation* is the syntax of form, a contingency of organisation. No one poem in the series determines the nature or shape of any other— which is to say, outside the demands of narrative, Blaser's poetics of communality are open

to the vicissitudes of meditative lyricism.

This is not to say that *Image-Nation* is entirely without moments of narrative. Towards the end of the Image-Nation series, poem 24 ('oh, pshaw', is "a long meditation on the forming of the poet's life" (Gagnon, np). Stan Persky goes as far as to describe the poem as an "Odyssean way homeward" (37). The comparison is insufficient; here Blaser's 'journey' is not literal but etymological, and the contrast between the two movements is significant in explicating the process at work in the poem. The poem in particular addresses specific Blaser family expressions of disdain— "'Drat!' I heard her say through the window— rewinding the bobbin, 'Drat!'" (377). Of this, Kerenyi writes:

> The "drat!" which opens the poem and resonates throughout the body of its words, draws us into a labyrinth of thinking and sounds, of sounded thinking, the splendour of which, like the lingering god in drat, is all too often lost to monotony. (15)

As such, the extension the poem documents is phonetic and genealogical. Two senses of the familial— of the social and of the relations between words— are evoked in this genealogical extension; as Gagnon writes, the poem "finds Blaser's psyche circulating around memory as a mechanism for testing what might make the composition of a self" (np). Again, as in earlier *Image-Nation* poems, this 'composition of self' is only ever attempted by a process of determining what permeates subjectivity from the outside. The 'labyrinth' Kerenyi describes is first indicated in the poem's second stanza:

> God, she meant— a block pattern— gawdelpus— gawking,
> I gaw-along now, giddy with salutations from bigots, better
> known as by-gods, godbwyes, and gossips, a.k.a, godsibbs,
> kin of some Indo-European past participle- *ghat— *id est,*
> an adjective acting like a verb, an epithet of Indra— Mind—
> who has almost disappeared into the gods of everything—   (2006a, 377)

The associative movement between clauses, separated by hyphens, traces a relation between sound and memory. In the above passage, this movement seeks to find the presence of the word 'god' in his greatgrandmother Ina's expletive "drat". The term 'block pattern' seems to refer to 'mathematical manipulatives' which aim to demonstrate to children how one shape can contain or be constituted by other shapes. This conception of words as shapes which always fit into or encompass other shapes— as 'manipulatives'— informs Blaser 'fitting' 'drat!' and 'God' into the same articulation. The syntax tracks the process of thought in an aleatoric fashion, and this process undergoes a further and wider opening in the succeeding stanza, where Blaser manipulates individual letters and syllables:

> g & d retained become *gad, gawd, gud*
> or only the g becoming *gog, golly, gosh, gum*
> or disguise g as c and *cock, cor, cod* appear
> or drop g for untold suffixes, *od, ud,* etc.
> or add relationship, *begad, beggar, bedad, egad*
> or take up possession, *swounds, zounds*
> or reduce the whole busyness to 'drat'
> I said, mouthing back through the window   (Ibid., 378)

Working back from 'drat' as a reduction of 'the whole busyness'— a pun but also, one feels, an avoidance of the connotations 'business' in favour of a feeling of 'being busy'— Blaser can be said to gesture at phonic and semantic possibilities the overwhelming effect of which is a plenum of dissemination. Which is to say, this vision of language as everywhere instigating and implicating 'outsides', differentiations from the Same to the Other (to adopt a Levinasian diction), is concerned with radical alterity and the desire to avoid objectification. It is in this sense that the poem's seemingly-dialogic riffing between the curse 'drat!' and the sacred 'God' exposes the vastly populated phonetic and semantic middle-ground. As Stan Persky writes, the poem "works and reworks the facts of that life [... It] delivers us to a world of

astonishing details, details in which the common and the marvellous are indistinguishable, in which they, it, constitutes the matter of life, of any life" (38). This working and reworking— which Blaser has termed 'folding'— is essential both to the compositional process of *Image-Nations* and Blaser's lifelong dedication to serial poetics, as displayed across the course of *The Holy Forest*. In this regard, Andrew Mossin writes:

> The *Image-Nations* develop from [an] intense awareness of the circumstances of the serial as a compositional and ethical mode invested in the collected, the gathered-together, and communal. (156)

It is crucially this equivocation of the compositional and ethical in seriality which Blaser's work develops. As he comments, the "*Image-Nations* are not devoted to my logic of desire, but to a nation invaded by what is other than itself— a continuous forming" (2006b, 33). This 'continuous forming' is, for Blaser, an ethical necessity, as it regards contingency as the real content of communality— which is to say that regard for the radical alterity of otherness absolutely depends upon a lack of closure, figured by Blaser as 'the practice of Outside'. He continues:

> The *Image-Nations* will have no formal end, no completion of what they feel or know. They are too adventurous for that. And too nearly overwhelmed by the *intentionless and non-communicative utterances of a world.* (Arendt)
>
> (2006a, 34)

The 'formal end' of which Blaser writes is a gesture towards seriality's proposed unending continuation of relations. It is, as he writes, an 'adventure', again recalling the term 'roaming' from Image-Nation 2— a movement conceived in itself rather than dependent on two points of a proposed axis. Furthermore, the integrated quotation from Hannah Arendt is instructive in that it gestures at the 'invisible' (a term Blaser acknowledges as being most significant in the work of Merleau-Ponty) which acts as the 'outside' of any proposed centre. The point

being not that at any one static moment a subject can determine once and for all what constitutes inside and outside, but that the process of relationality between two such categories— as with other likewise pairings: subject/object, self/other, visible/invisible— is where, for Blaser, the 'real' occurs.

The Chiasm

> I wish to let the reader loose in the invisibility where the text leads him. He is after all a perception of the text. (2006b, 30)

This is a sentiment which illumines the nature of Blaser's grasp of intersubjectivity as a pervasive entanglement between subjectivities. Miriam Nichols locates in Blaser a "chiasmatic quality of perception that makes the real a process rather than a system and entangles human thought in a world that it does not fully possess" (Nichols 2002, 191). In this sense, the reader as a 'perception of the text' is an evocation of the process by which a subject encounters phenomena. This is a deeply phenomenological notion. In 'The Intertwining- The Chiasm', Merleau-Ponty writes of "two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in on another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them" (1997, 139). This is to say a number of things; firstly, that this meeting, in poetic terms, wherein text and reader cannot be distinguished from each other, is "more real than either of them"; and secondly, that neither one can be said to fully objectify the other. The situation Merleau-Ponty describes is 'the chiasm'.

Nichols writes that Merleau-Ponty "begins with the embeddedness of the human

creature in the world and argues that the mind and the world fit because they were never separate" (Nichols 2002, 193). In the phenomenology Merleau-Ponty was writing at the end of his life, any perceived conceptual divisions between object and subject are untangled and instead explained through the concept of 'the flesh'. This requires some explication— "The flesh", Merleau-Ponty writes, "is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things" (1997, 148). It is a concept, he argues, that "has no name in any philosophy" (Ibid., 147)— it is, instead, more akin to "the old term 'element', in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire" (Ibid., 139). This is not to gesture at a metaphysical-universal; rather it is a question of the scope Merleau-Ponty's vision seeks to disclose. In 'The Stadium of the Mirror', published alongside the first twelve *Image-Nation* poems, Blaser employs and cites the term himself:

> The Other is not an object, but acts chiasmatically (Merleau-Ponty's word). Not a stillness. Not a rest. Always the opposite and companion of any man's sudden form. This is the unrest given to thought.   (2006a, 28)

It is important to note the inflection of Blaser's account of Merleau-Ponty. 'Chiasmatically' is equivocated with restlessness— it constitutively *cannot* be a static encounter; it is a "sudden form". Scott Pound argues that this is "a matter of repeatedly exposing relations rather than a substance" (168). Again, this is the distinction between method and *praxis*, the latter never resolving into a clearly defined or contoured fixture. For Blaser, the chiasm characterises the 'unrest' which results from encountering the unobjectifiable 'Other', and furthermore offers an analogue for his serial poetics which seek to articulate a poetic voice responsive to a polyphony of voices.

123

Blaser writes that: "An actual directive of all serial poems is that the series is other than, not simply more than, its parts" (2006b, 33). This 'Other than' is significant in gaining a sense of the serial as a means of thought, clearly indebted to and in dialogue with phenomenological discourses. Referring to the preface to Blaser's collection *Pell Mell*, the title of which is a term used by both Dante and Merleau-Ponty, Joseph Conte writes that Blaser "tells us that 'these poems follow of a principle of randonnée - the random and the given of the hunt, the game, the tour' [...] The aleatory nature of the series thus suggests that it is anarchic— not that it resorts to total riot, but that it refuses to impose an external order on its subject matter" (1992, 45). Conte is right to warn against thinking of Blaser's work as 'riotous' or 'random'— as I have sought to show throughout this chapter, Blaser's work could only be described as aleatoric in terms of the refusal to presuppose a structure, and not in the sense that his work addresses the 'randomness' of subjectivity.

This refusal, furthermore, is more than merely a rejection of closure, an inability to conclude. Rather, it is an ethics. Blaser goes as far as to describe the serial as 'honest, if dangerous ground'. He continues:

> The serial poem constantly circumscribes an absence that brings its presences to life. An indefiniteness that is one of the providing aspects of the world. The reader is disclosed in an act of such worldliness, or rather, he is open to it, and has not constituted the real himself. He may enter a disclosed obedience, different from the polis imposed upon our time.
>
> (2006b, 34)

To conclude, I would like to return to a passage in Blaser's 'Image-Nations 9 (half and half'. Blaser opens the poem by invoking 'shining masters' who 'are not ourselves' but are 'equivalents of action'. The poem opens with this sense of the 'half and half' of Blaser's

poetic voice, before moving towards a wider sense of the relation between 'things' and the 'action' they emerge in. He writes:

> wordlessness   no thing is so simply
>
> personal   I put my hand out to catch
>
> beauty in the act of   I know no beauty
>
> which is not permanent   not invoked
>
> in splendour   the words are meaningless
>
> until they emerge in the action   (2006a, 167-168)

The gesture of the outstretched hand which is ready to 'catch' an impermanent beauty echoes the movement outside Blaser suggests in his statement that 'no thing is so simply/ personal'. The 'action' in which things emerge in words, which is not personal but rather an engagement with Others, takes place in the 'motions' and 'movements' Blaser's poetry inaugurates. This is particularly the case of his 'Image-Nations', which extend according to a series of unpredictable movements towards the Other. In Blaser's taxonomy, however, the Other does not necessarily remain anonymous in an effort to retain its absolute alterity. Rather, Blaser develops a poetics of friendship in which the concept of 'nation' can be articulated through the 'co-existence' of voices of others, and each poem in the series constitutes 'the record of a meeting'.

5   *A Grand Essay On Perception*
Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's *Sight*

> Equally marvellous, as Gogol said,
>
> are the lenses that contemplate a star
>
> and those that study a bug.
>
> —*Oxota: A Russian Novel.* Hejinian.

Introduction

In moving from Robin Blaser's *Image-Nations* to *Sight,* a collaborative long poem written in alternating instalments between Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino, the most salient point of comparison is in the extent to which intersubjectivity develops and shapes the contours of the form of the poetry. Specifically, intersubjectivity is a condition of extension in both *Sight* and *Image-Nations.* In *Sight*, however, the work of collaboration constitutes rather than informs the extension at hand. Working together in this manner allows Hejinian and Scalapino to develop extension from the act of attending to the words of the Other. This intertwining practice furthermore establishes an analogue between the two poets seeing, envisioning and witnessing together and the act of seeing itself, specifically in the phenomenological sense of perception being augmented and supplemented by the perception of others. As such, this chapter aims to disclose the collaborative phenomenology of Leslie Scalapino and Lyn Hejinian's work *Sight*, with a particular emphasis on vision and eidetic thought. 'Vision' in this sense should be taken in its myriad denotations— as indicative not only of the seen, but also the seer, and of the correlative themes of perspective, vantage,

scope, range and dis-closure. As such, what Hejinian and Scalapino together work towards in *Sight* is an intersubjective idiosyncrasy.

It is essential at the outset, however, to address the fact that in seeking to disclose the workings of this 'intersubjective idiosyncrasy' in a collaborative long poem, the same intensive focus on individual idiosyncrasy on display in the rest of this study cannot be maintained without either obscuring the effect of *Sight* as a complete work or placing too heavy an emphasis on either the similarities or differences of the two poets whose efforts make up the poem. This is to say, a questioning of the possibility of idiosyncrasy as an intersubjective measure is necessary and inevitable. The task of working through these difficulties should not, however, be seen as a distraction or diversion from the principle thesis of this work; rather, approaching the problematic is an unavoidable test of this project's thinking, and will serve to further distinguish idiosyncrasy as a means of discussing poetics and phenomenology alongside one another in American poetics. Idiosyncrasy pertains to collaboration in the sense that the idiosyncrasy in question retains its provisionality— to claim that a feature of *Sight* is indicative of a shared poetics is not to state emphatically that such features define the poets involved. Rather, idiosyncrasy is a measure directed at the contingencies, peculiarities and strategies of *texts* rather than *persons.* In this regard, Hejinian writes in *Sight*: "I seem to be doing something in a wide perspective— but without/ idiosyncrasies removed" (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 20). For Hejinian, the perspective is 'wide' by virtue of the two perceivers working to articulate visual perception in tandem, and this, for Hejinian, does not constitute a removal of idiosyncrasies, but rather an extension towards the idiosyncrasies of the Other. This chapter will seek to argue that collaborative work discloses the idiosyncrasies of the individual subjects all the more by virtue of the necessary compromise and dialogic interaction involved. Again, this does not stand as a rule; the workings of collaboration are themselves subject to the idiosyncratic, which is to say,

collaboration must be understood in the terms its collaborators approach the work with. In the present case, Hejinian and Scalapino's *Sight* is surrounded by a substantial body of correspondence and prose reflection which assists in the task of gaining a sense of the nature of their working together.

Furthermore, Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino have a long and well documented literary and personal relationship. This relationship condenses these two terms, presenting instead through a complimentary vision and listening a radicalisation of poetic form which comes about through the intercourse of two shared preoccupations with vision. I will now turn to *Sight* in order to explicate its epistolary serial form, its development of the notions of occurrence and estrangement, and the relationship between vision and poetic extension.

Collaborative Sight/Site

> What about our collaboration?
> Who should begin?
> Or should we both begin simultaneously, book one and book two?
> And am I right that we are proceeding in twos— adding 2 lines or two
> sentences at a crack? […] I like two, I think, because we are two.
>
> (Hejinian, 1992)

These questions mark the beginning of the epistolary relationship in and of poetics which, seven years later, was to be published as *Sight*. The questions Hejinian asks are answered in the poem's final form— the 224 'instalments' alternate between Hejinian and Scalapino, reflecting their composition as attachments to letters, faxes and emails sent between 1992 and late 1997, when the poem was edited, performed and published. Significantly, the poem's eponymous theme was provoked by a chance encounter; Hejinian and Scalapino,

holidaying in Point Arena with their families separately, spotted each other from afar whilst

walking on a beach. This fortuitous meeting is alluded to in the poem's opening instalments.

Hejinian writes:

> I accept a greeting at a place I've never seen, leaning
> toward the wind, as someone moving forward is coming to mind—
> and the moment itself is being remembered at the same instant, with
> the event recognised
> At a beach with breakers, in the absence of whatever there
> is between anything and me   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 3)

Sight here is figured as 'coming to mind', a sentiment which suggests the aleatoric nature not

only of the contents of vision but of the structure which *Sight* goes onto manifest. Following

this meeting, the two agreed to collaborate, the first 'instalment' (a term used by both writers

throughout their correspondence of the time) was sent from Hejinian to Scalapino on

December 18th, 1992. Early in the composition of the poem, Hejinian and Scalapino prepared

six 'instalments', alongside a brief explanation of their project for the February 1994 issue of

Sojourner: The Women's Forum. In these comments, Hejinian outlines what grew to be the

structure and compositional process of the work:

> The sections do conform to the two 'rules' we agreed upon, namely, that we
> would write about things seen, and that each 'poem' or 'instalment' or
> 'response' or 'section' (we've referred to the parts in all of those terms) would
> consist in twos— two paragraphs, a paragraph and a stanza, two stanzas, two
> words, two pages, two sentences, two 'takes' (to use film vocabulary) or any
> other conceivable manifestation of binocular and stereoptical perceiving.
>
>   (1994, np)

The plurality of types of binary operation indicated here are evident throughout the text. This

'dialogic' (Hejinian's term) mode can be seen both in the instalments themselves— their form

most commonly consisting of two distinct blocks of text— and in the oscillation between the alternate writers throughout the piece. For Hejinian, this process is the 'underlying logic' of the composition "since it rhymes with the fact that we are two people seeing, two people writing, we each have two eyes, and we are trying to peer at both thing and word, with the double point of view implicit in that, with perceptions simultaneously immediate and mediate, in time and out of time, and so forth." (Ibid.) The fact that the structure of the work is chronological in the sense that the 'instalments' remain in the order in which they were composed is, furthermore, an indication of the epistolary relationship which underpins and to some extent constitutes *Sight.*

In regard to the thematic content of their collaboration as opposed to the structure, Hejinian asks later in the same letter:

> Should we limit ourselves to eyesight, or can we include what we see with it? And can we interpret what we see, or should we just name/describe what comes to view? squiggles, shoppers, the shadow of my nose.
>
> (Hejinian, 1992)

Here, Hejinian asks a number of questions about the limits involved in their collaboration. These limits pertain both to conceptions of vision and the limitations involved in the act of seeing; there are proposed differences between 'eyesight' and 'what we see', as well as a distinction between seeing and interpretation and the processes of description and naming. These distinctions undergo manipulation throughout *Sight*, with the result that the work constitutes, as Hejinian phrases it, 'a grand essay on perception'. This sense of perception as a locus of the work is manifested throughout by the provisionality of forms employed. Most immediately striking in this regard is the text's compositional back-and-forth which necessitates an embrace of contingency. During the composition of *Sight,* both poets discussed the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and in particular his writing on

vision in 'Cézanne's Doubt' (Hejinian, 1996). In *The Visible and The Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher— the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute 'opinions' implicated in our lives. But what is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this 'we', what 'seeing' is, and what 'thing' or 'world' is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions.   (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 3)

Here, Merleau-Ponty addresses the 'mutedness' of seeing— a conception which suggests both the habituality through which vision is taken for granted as a constant and the 'muted' sense in which visual metaphors populate all discourses. This latter observation is the thesis of Martin Jay's work *The Downcast Eye,* which proposes that vision is primary to philosophy not only in its investigations but in the stress epistemic questions place on seeing and sight as analogues for knowledge and truth. Jay's critique of anti-occularism— or to put it differently, his defence of vision as a primary means of access to our world— is grounded in an argument which seeks to identify a first order error in philosophical discourse dating back to the ancient world and remaining improperly challenged in subsequent philosophical movements in France. In a chapter dedicated to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, and in particular their critiques of Cartesian vision, he writes: "In our post-Euclidean world [...] we are now aware that space is no longer what it seemed to Descartes, with his geometer's eye outside and above the scene it surveyed" (Jay, 45). Instead, phenomenology, especially in Merleau-Ponty's later work, develops an embodied I/eye which is simultaneous with perception. His thesis begins:

> Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them,

vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on

the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of

perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of

view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an

aid to our knowledge of reality. (Jay, 1)

Hejinian offers a commentary on this and Jay's thesis in general in a letter written to

Scalapino during the composition of *Sight*:

I'm reading another book, which I just began: Martin Jay's *The Downcast Eye.* It

is, or will be, I think, a defense of seeing, an argument against anti-ocular-

centrism in contemporary French thought. [...] Sight, he contends, is pre-

eminently the sense of simultaneity, capable of surveying a wide visual field at

one moment. Intrinsically less temporal than other senses such as hearing or

touch, it thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed

essences over ephemeral appearances.   (Hejinian, 1995)

Jay's thesis interests Hejinian as it displays a parallel between continental philosophy and

contemporary American poetics. Early in *Sight,* Hejinian writes:

I remember feeling upbraided when reading a comment in a

journal accusing 'contemporary poetry' of being 'optico-centric'

'It', said the author, 'arrogantly privileges the eyes'

'It,' the essay continued, 'colonises the other senses'

(Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 26)

In these observations, Hejinian displays a concern for the denigration of sight not in defence

of her own work or practices but in relation to the flawed conception she finds in

contemporary discourse. This can be articulated further with reference to Levinas, who in

Totality and Infinity considers the primacy of vision in the constitution of perception. He

writes:

> Vision has over touch the privilege of maintaining the object in this void and receiving it always from this nothingness as from an origin, whereas in touch nothingness is manifested to the free movement of palpation. Thus for vision and for touch a being comes as though from nothingness, and in this precisely resides their traditional philosophical prestige.   (1999a, 189)

Sight in Hejinian's work is not an 'arrogant privileging' but rather an opening investigation the givenness of which pre-exists any formulation which seeks to arrest it. This is indicative of the sense of contingency with which *Sight* proceeds, by virtue not only of its collaborative composition but also the thematic openness of the topic with which it deals. The notion of 'vision' encompasses not only the act of seeing but 'vision' in the sense of one's conception of being in a philosophical manner. This latter connotation is explicitly necessary in the work of Scalapino and Hejinian as both write clearly about the philosophical implications not only of the act of seeing but the act of writing and thinking about seeing. Furthermore, these two conceptions of sight, vision itself and scope, are so closely interrelated that discerning what qualifies as 'mere sight' and 'world-view' is difficult to the point of impossibility. Indeed, Hejinian, in the introduction to *Sight,* determines this as a phenomenological question:

> As I look at this work now in retrospect, I see it as elaborating problems in phenomenology but not in description, and this, given our topic, seems curious. Of course description is often phenomenological in intent— aimed at bringing something into view, trying to replicate for (or produce in) the reader an experience of something seen. But it seems as if our emphasis was not on the thing seen but on the coming to see. As I see it, this book argues that the moment of coming to see is active and dialogic.
>
>   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, iv)

One of the most salient problems in coming to terms with sight is very much the act of 'coming to see'. Hejinian and Scalapino can be seen to respond to this conception of the 'problem' of vision— not that vision is necessarily *problematic* nor should be perceived as

such— through idiosyncratic means; Hejinian develops notions of estrangement from her involvement and engagement in Russian poetics and literary theory, whilst Scalapino seeks to comprehend sight as a radically temporal process through the term 'occurrence'. These two terms— estrangement and occurrence— will undergo significance explanation throughout the course of this chapter. I will now move to disclosing specific instances of the collaborative phenomenology of *Sight*, first through a conception of the work as an 'epistolary seriality'.

Epistolary Seriality

Sight is a serial poem by virtue of its mode of composition; as has been demonstrated, Hejinian and Scalapino wrote the poem in an exchange of letters, alternating one 'instalment' at a time. As such, the poem and its serial arrangement constitute not only a form conceptually appropriate to the work's theme but also an investigation of the intersubjectivity of collaborative practice. As Hejinian writes in the *Sojourner* submission:

> A writing collaboration increases one's chances and options for finding new things and new ways to think and see. One of the other reasons I am so interested in collaborations is that the collaborative process invites and insists that one acknowledge the social impetus and impact of writing. One seems literally to go 'out of one's way' to speak to one's fellow writer, and this applies a kid of perceptual pressure to the work. [...] This search for 'clarity' is another rhyme with our theme. (1994, np)

Hejinian's conception of collaboration here is revealing; the 'perceptual pressure' collaboration causes is directly related to exteriority expressed in the notion of "going out of one's way". This movement towards what is exterior to the subject recalls what Levinas

describes as the 'deficiency' of individual subjectivity when confronted its intersubjective condition:

> The epiphany of exteriority [the meeting with the Other], which exposes the deficiency of the sovereign interiority of the separated being, does not situate interiority, as one part limited by another, in a totality. [...] The contradiction between the free interiority and the exteriority that should limit it is reconciled in the man open to teaching.   (1999a, 180)

The 'contradiction' Levinas illuminates here pertains foremost to the fact that subjectivity has a degree of control over the way it perceives the world, but that world is itself an exteriority which is not a totality that can be limited. The phrase 'open to teaching', as such, seems an appropriate way to describe the interaction manifested in *Sight,* though this is not to suggest that either poet is pedagogical in her contribution. In this regard, collaborative practice like that of *Sight,* which extends by virtue of response and responsiveness, manifests the transcendence ontically forced by the existence of the Other. As Hejinian phrases it, this reveals a social 'clarity', which 'rhymes' with the theme of sight because, again, the visual is inextricably bound to intersubjectivity.

As such, to argue that the instalments are 'replies' is to retain the sense in which *Sight* is explicitly dialogic. The point of arguing the case for *Sight* as an epistolary poem lies in the fact that the alternating instalments respond to each other parallel to the letters to which they are attached. This is to say that an epistolary dialogue both frames the composition and is intrinsic to its structure. Hejinian expresses this as "The 'we' of collaboration is not the we of a gang; instead it can be the we of supervention, the we of surprise" (Hejinian 1994, np). This 'surprise' and 'supervention' creates a situation in which the oscillation of phrases, themes or individual terms between the two poets carries the work in contingently determined directions. A phrase to describe this effect might be contingent intertextuality—

which is to say, when a theme appears, such as that of Shakespeare's *King Lear* or a particular

image (the moon, for example, in the opening instalments), the engagement each poet

makes with the previous 'response' is itself a display of idiosyncrasy. Whilst a vast array of

images populate the work, the specificity of those images and their narrative elements within

the extended poem rely entirely on acts of repetition or reference whereby Scalapino or

Hejinian maintain scrutiny on something the other poet has suggested. In Hejinian's 48th

instalment, she writes:

> Arkadii Dragomoshchenko writes that events are a form of co-existence (he
> can say this in a single word, since in Russian *event* (sobytie) can be divided
> into the prefix so (with or co—) and the noun bytie (existence or being)) What
> holds us to our events might not be threadlike but cloudlike (and always
> contradictory).   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 49)

The 'event', conceived as 'co-existence' of disparate elements caught together, finds

expression through Hejinian's interest in Russian Formalism and poetics. The event is

'cloudlike' rather than 'threadlike', and is co-existent to other such events taking place

simultaneously. This notion is framed later in the same instalment— Hejinian writes:

> She and what she sees are simultaneous. But what she sees is what she saw,
> so she lacks loss. She is deprived of grief and of
> relief
> She is completely deprived of a void and its clarity and blue.
>
> In an emotional cloud, no comparisons are possible.
> Coexistence is true of its own accord.   (Ibid., 50)

Rather than perception and event being thought of in narrative terms, here Hejinian hinges

her conception of 'event' on 'relief'. This meaning is akin to Hejinian's interest in Viktor

Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or estrangement— if 'She and what she sees are simultaneous', then

she is without the 'void and its clarity'. In this sense, the witness *is* the act of witnessing.

Shklovsky writes, in 'Art as Technique':

> Life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. [...] And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (1990, 12)

Perception is, as such, a more vital source than knowledge. In *Sight,* the object is vision, and in 'defamiliarising' it by writing about a perceptual experience which is constitutively untranslatable, Hejinian develops a poetics which, to use her own phrase from the prefatory note to *Sight*, "argues that the moment of coming to see is active". This radical sense of contingency is also at the heart of Scalapino's poetics. Continuing Hejinian's meditation on 'coexistence' of sight and seer, Scalapino replies:

> Herself and the sights co-exist. This is 'age' also. Supposing
> the sights either beautiful or frightening co-exist with one, one's
> dreams move— ? (or don't so one is near death-saturation). Maybe
> they move heavily in her. or she doesn't see them?)
>
> We're not to see events in the same constellation.
>
> (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 20)

The simultaneity of the event is figured temporally as 'age', which provokes Scalapino to consider sight in dreams. The dream problematizes the notion that seer and sight coexist in the same moment— they do not appear to take place 'in the same constellation'. Scalapino maintains the contingency of Hejinian's instalment— the final line convolutes the sense in

137

which 'we' and 'events' are related, suggesting the discrete nature of their conception of 'event'. Events are 'constellations' but separate from each other. This stands to some extent in contradiction to the serial form of *Sight*, which could well be described as a constellation of figures and interrogations of particular moments of vision, or 'events'. Scalapino's instalment can as such be seen to raise questions in response to Hejinian's previous reply, as well as acting self-reflexively on the poem as it proceeds.

Continuing this reflexivity, Hejinian's reply addresses their project by its proper noun for the first time in the text:

> *Sight* is lyrical, because its subtext is annihilation
> The descriptions (witnessings) (then), which are of co-existence,
> 'age' contain both aphorisms and saturations, although this
> seems contradictory
> the interrupted continuing, seeing and blind   (Ibid., 50)

The negation presented in the final line of Scalapino's prior reply is figured here as 'annihilation', evoking both the sense of a reduction to nothing and, in physics, the conversion of matter into energy. The latter sense prevails in that neither Scalapino nor Hejinian seem to display nihilistic intent; rather, the chiasmic notion of sight as somewhere between 'matter' and 'energy'. This recalls the long epigram to Scalapino's extended poem *Way* from David Bohm's *Causality and Chance In Modern Physics*:

> Nature may have in it an infinity of different kinds of things […] In terms of the
> notion of the qualitative infinity of nature, one is led to the conclusion that
> every entity, however fundamental it may seem, is dependent for its existence
> on the maintenance of appropriate conditions in its infinite background and
> substructure   (Scalapino 1988, i)

One of these 'appropriate conditions', from a phenomenological perspective, is vision. Hejinian's statement that "*Sight* is lyrical" thus suggests a radical notion of the lyric, in which

the 'instrumentation' embedded in lyricism is concerned with giving voice to vision, a process the 'subtext' of which is matter being annihilated into energy.

This explication of the way in which the instalments in *Sight* are serially organised will now be extended to address a number of 'events' in *Sight* which demonstrate the nature of Hejinian and Scalapino's collaborative method. In this regard in it necessary to make reference to their own reflections on their work throughout their correspondence, made available by Michael Davidson's important work at the Mandeville Special Collections Library in UCSD. One of the most revealing moments in the correspondence which traces the composition of *Sight* appears when Scalapino raises concerns about the dialogue in progress. To Hejinian, she writes:

> It has occurred to me that our way of seeing is now working at some cross purposes trying to change each other's seeing, back and forth out of necessity. So trying to address, so as to allow, the difference seemed to me the way to go. I guess this is description of 'one's poetics' so as to be in the dead cornea, relaxing.
>
> (Scalapino 1993)

The unsettlement which occurs from a feeling of having tried to 'change each other's seeing' is described as a 'necessity'. Scalapino wants to 'allow […] difference'. To this, Hejinian replies that the 'quarrel' is 'pertinent […] since examination and reviewing and adjusting perspective are all a part of *sight*" (Hejinian 1993). This reciprocal reorientation is not, Hejinian states, 'arguing, but rather perpetually grappling with the problem of having to acknowledge that 'this too is accurate' or even 'this too is visible' (Ibid.). The plenum which seems to underlie the 'quarrel' is appropriate to their theme, in that the measures of exclusion and inclusion are only provisional before vision, which constantly renews perception with images. Hejinian describes this modulation with direct reference to a phrase from Scalapino's letter:

> For example, where you say 'so as to be in the dead cornea, relaxing' I

immediately thought one could equally aptly say, 'so as to be in the live cornea, relaxing' and the difference between the two phrases would have to do with *tone,* not *truth.* (Ibid.)

Tone, then, seems a measure of idiosyncrasy; the difference between the two poets cannot be described according to 'truth'. In this sense, the distinction here between 'tone' and 'truth' is very much at the heart of the project, and furthermore underscores the extent to which *Sight* is a work which, to appropriate the title of Hejinian's collected prose, is composed of a 'language of inquiry'. This is witnessed most clearly in that the 'quarrel' does not display a problem being solved, but rather inquires and reorients, allowing the work to reflexively alter its own process of composition. Hejinian concludes that the 'problem' stumbled upon is not only generative in terms of forcing a consideration of the poetics at hand, but intrinsic to the nature of collaboration, particularly one concerned with vision:

> I like the bipartite, dialogic quality to our collaboration, because if nothing else it rhymes with the fact that we have two eyes, and our lefts see something different from but complementary to what we see with our rights.
> But you sound a little worried about the 'cross-purposiveness'? Are we getting cross-eyed?
>   Reading your last response confirms my faith that we are writing a grand essay on perception (as a conveyance of meaning)   (Ibid.)

This moment in the correspondence explicitly establishes the contingency of the project which, whilst consisting of an accumulation of pairs, is never dialectical. Hejinian's terms 'dialogic' and 'bipartite' more accurately capture the form; two discrete logics, ordered serially, with response as momentum, raising question of reflection, of double-vision, of separate-together subjectivities exploring their own intersubjectivity. The poems which accompany this exchange extend their self-interrogation, referred to as a 'quarrel', into the body of the poem itself. Hejinian's instalment, which ends with a desire to 'drop the quarrel'

is first:

          A history of perception (composition, or of a single

perception (a woman in black gazes at the sea in the blue)

remaining but differing in memory over time, or of a single percept

(pure light glints on glossy green-brown swoop of water in fog) as

a phenomenon (a thousand suns) in itself rather than in an instance

of witnessing, or of an object of perception seen (but never caught)

by a series of perceivers— any of these might be a sphere rather

than a narrative, affixed to the sun's logic

(Being seen 'as a woman' divides one conspicuously which

is what threatens (from the outside) the physical body

      The man is worried by *A True History* (by women) of

      perception with no end which could be written in the

      dark (to include a black butterfly).)

[…]

But they are joined by an almost-invisible swift

but rational 'and'— a flowing conjunction, 'transitions in our moving

life'—which it is my goal to see

with no end

      in the sun

as a quarrel to be dropped   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 35)

This instalment considers a number of things in detail, and suspends a great deal of its

contents in parentheses and inverted commas, giving a sense of a clear awareness of the

provisional uses of certain phrases. The first stanza seems to draft the structure of 'a history

of perception', later qualified as '*A True History* (by women)', and holds distinctions between the perceptual realms of memory, single percepts, phenomena in themselves, the instance of witness and objects of perception seen intersubjectively. This 'history' is, as Hejinian notes, 'a sphere rather than a narrative'. If we take this instalment to be a self-reflexive consideration of *Sight,* it evokes the sense in which Hejinian and Scalapino's own 'history of perception' is serially organised, as a constellation 'affixed to the sun's logic'— that is, of 'natural' time and light as the origin of vision. As such, Hejinian's comment that "The man is worried by *A True History* (by women) of/perception with no end which could be written in the/ dark" suggests a visual dynamic which parallels patriarchy elision. If the patriarchal history of perception is dominant, seen 'in a better light' than that of women, then there is a marginal shadow-space in which perception occurs infinitely by virtue of the covering over constitutive of patriarchy. This argument concerns Scalapino, who replies in the following instalment:

> I don't know if I can drop the quarrel of transitions and conjunctions
> when....seeing one's decomposing sack of flesh playfully and
> calmly— 'Their' view is the actual world is symbolic and permanent
> where a higher authority 'gives' meaning to 'scenes' (decomposing
> having meaning)   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 35)

'Their view' identifies patriarchy as 'the actual world' as a 'symbolic and permanent' 'higher authority'. The 'transitions' and 'conjunctions' which Scalapino sees as structuring patriarchal discourse (which, Scalapino seems to suggest, *is* discourse) are a quarrel which cannot be dropped. The tension between Scalapino and Hejinian here has to do with the extent to which the workings of patriarchy should be witnessed in writing. The 'correction' of vision the pair refer to in their accompanying letters as such has to do with the perception of ideology. Whilst it is clear that neither poet wishes to force (a) vision on the other, disagreement arises

from a discord in shared witnessing.

The differences between the poets can be indicated with reference to the fact that during the compositional process, both poets continued working on their own texts— and in both cases, Hejinian and Scalapino admit to the fact that their collaboration spills over into their own work. In interview with Elizabeth Frost, Scalapino commented:

> I was re-writing *King Lear* in a recent work of mine, called *As: All Occurrence In Structure, Unseen—(Deer Night),* which I was doing alongside *Sight.* I was also writing *The Front Matter, Deal Souls.* Passages of mine originating in *Sight* got into *The Front Matter* as being alongside it. (Frost 1996, np)

Scalapino's occupation with *King Lear* appears first in their correspondence in relation to the theme of their collaboration. Scalapino writes: "Our theme was also Shakespeare's favourite. Together, are we one bard? One of us Shake and the other Spear? Those are interchangeable roles" (1993). This playful evocation of the nature of their collaboration as an alternating interchange between the acts of 'shaking' and 'spearing' is useful in its suggestion that each poet's perceptions, as explored and given form in *Sight,* undergo a process of unsettlement and arrest by virtue of their responsive epistolary structure. That is to say, merely by virtue of sharing observations, perceptions and sights, these very images and conceptions are subject to, in Hejinian's phrase, "seizes and leaps". In their correspondence, Hejinian is at first unsure about the comparison with Shakespeare— "But what is Shakespeare's theme? […] It makes me insecure to be writing in that place therefore"— which prompts Scalapino to consider the importance of Shakespeare to their work:

> When I referred to Shakespeare's theme, it was only because I happened to think about *King Lear* and its play on the tragic side of seeing— so, I was thinking about the dilemma of sight, in which the seeing are blind and the blind insightful and in which to see is not yet to know and to see again is not necessarily to recognise. (Ibid.)

Again, the concept of sight is complicated almost inevitably by the multivocality of perspectives which open upon it. The measures of blindness and insight are, in the context of the play, a matter of contingency in the sense that, whilst there are multiple disguises and deceptions, there is not one whole truth being disclosed which can be witnessed. As Scalapino indicates, the tragic side of seeing is blindness. Vision is inscribed with blindness, the closing of the eyes, fear of the dark, blind spots— not least the 'blind spots' of other subjectivities. That is to say, intersubjectivity constitutively demands awareness of one's own blindspots; and much of the tragedy of *Lear* can be found in the impossibility of characters' coming to this awareness. One of the richest ironies of *King Lear* is the play of 'blindness' and 'vision' as metaphors for personal competence. The Fool's insights are undermined by his look, that is to say, the way he is perceived by virtue of his role and station. The play's opening also stresses the incompatibility of witnessing between Cordelia and Lear— where she sees in 'nothing' a plenum by virtue of difference, Lear can see only absence, and by furious logic, this absence then characterises their relationship until the play's bloody denouement. Scalapino conceives of the mutual territory of *King Lear* and *Sight* in terms of a series of questions the former asks of the latter:

> Questions like, do we see what we know? Do we know what we see? Does what we see exist? Does what we know exist? Have (in one way or another) been your questions and my questions throughout the course of our writing lives. If we are to be unsettled and excited, we can be unsettled and excited by each other and ourselves. (Ibid.)

Scalapino here suggests that she and Hejinian are united poetically in the inquiring nature of their poetics. Furthermore, these questions 'unsettle' and 'excite' by virtue of the interplay

between the two poets. Hejinian describes *"Lear'*s notion of ignorance of the self as the

igniting quality"— by working intersubjectively, both Scalapino and Hejinian address this

ignorance through the primary sensory perception of vision.

It remains to further interrogate the specific relationship between the shared

conception of 'event' in *Sight* with the workings of seriality, both in terms of the alternating

instalments and in the epistolary dialogue which underpins the compositional process. Joseph

Conte writes that seriality is distinct by virtue of "its modular form- in which individual

elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination- distinguishes it from the

thematic development or narrative progression that characterises other types of the long

poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring

constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method." (39) Conte's

taxonomy here is useful in designating the effect serial organisation has on the materials of

the parts themselves. In most cases, as in Oppen's *Of Being Numerous,* Blaser's *The Holy*

Forest or Duncan's *Passages* and *The Structure of Rime*, the serial form itself stands as a

manifestation of the poetics at hand in the work itself. Which is to say, questions of

discontinuity, accident, change, constancy and modulation are both organisational devices

and arguments themselves. Conte continues:

> The series describes an expanding and heterodox universe whose centrifugal
> force encourages dispersal. The epic goal has always be encompassment,
> summation; but the series is an ongoing process of accumulation. In contrast
> to the epic demand for completion, the series remains essentially and
> deliberately incomplete. (1992, 39)

Conte discloses the working of seriality in direct contrast to 'epic' modes. Conte's designation

here applies to 20th century epics, namely Olson's *Maximus* and Pound's *Cantos.* As such, the

'essential' and 'deliberate' incompletion of seriality should be understood as exposing a false

totality naturally striven towards in epic modes. For *Sight,* this is most clearly evident in

Hejinian and Scalapino's investigation of theme, which can be seen as 'an ongoing process of accumulation' as opposed to 'summation'. This reflects the 'dispersal' of their investigation, not only thematically but also in terms of the poetics which inform their writing. Scalapino again relates this to her conception of 'event' in *Sight*:

> events occurring are their chronology in the serial we're
>   concocting only movements on a retina
>   producing elation are outside, so one could just
>   produce that elation as such in order to see what
>   they are   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 34)

The phrase "the serial/ we're concocting" is self-reflexive, and underscores the sense of *Sight* as a poem which dwells on itself as it progresses. The accrual of 'movements on a retina' are ordered 'to see what they are'; for Hejinian, this produces 'elation'. This elation is furthermore bipartite, and takes place by virtue of shared witnessing. In this light, what does it mean to describe *Sight* as an epistolary serial form? The exchange of letters is itself subject to certain modes seriality takes; discontinuity, series, polyvocality, modulation, continuity. The letter itself, however, raises particular phenomenological issues in terms of the intersubjectivity it manifests. The 'address' to which a letter is sent is twofold; it establishes not only physical locations as sites to and from which the dialogue can occur, but also the 'address' the letter manifests, that is to say, its specific mode of personal interaction. The fact that the letters which 'carry' the composition of *Sight* are 'addressed' in these two ways constitutes the seriality of the work. This is specifically the case because the instalments work, as has been demonstrated, by 'addressing' the material brought forward in responses and replies. This momentum constitutes the extension of the work, moving it forward in simultaneity with an epistolary friendship over the course of several years. In this sense, the idiosyncrasy of *Sight* is indelibly linked with its specific mode of serial composition.

Occurrence and The Rejection of Closure

Many of the observations concerning *Sight* here can be strengthened with reference to Scalapino's and Hejinian's works of poetics, as well as their discussions of each other's work. In particular, the seriality of *Sight* and each poet's experimental poetics together display a counterpoint the nature of which constitutes the idiosyncrasy of their collaboration. As such, in *A Bride is a Thought to What Thinking,* Hejinian describes the opening position from which composition occurs:

> I can only begin a posteriori, by perceiving the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one's ability to make distinctions. (2000, 41)

These 'distinctions', however, are themselves subject to being perceived as vast and overwhelming. The agency involved in this, in working with and against the world 'as vast and overwhelming', is poetic in essence. In this sense, Hejinian's poetics are grounded in a phenomenological vision of the relationship between subject and content. In a likewise manner, in *Autobiography/Zither*, Scalapino addresses the notion of occurrence which appears throughout her body of work:

> to 'occur'
> before
>   there's its action [its occurrence]
> isn't existing— is before its action then— 'their'
>   is one 'as' dawn's-action?—
> there's action— and they're not— nights
> not as a base 'one' or as their occurring— nights not being
>   and which is before— throughout-is— before its-night
>
> > > > > > (2003, 109)

Here, Scalapino's notion of 'occurrence' is central to the logic being developed. Occurrence is *not* predictable; it is utterly contingent, dependent on the moment of its action rather than any projected conception. This aspect of Scalapino's writing raises Gertrude Stein as a major influence for both Scalapino and Hejinian. The nature of Stein's influence is most frequently described in terms of Stein's advancements in poetics, in particular the notion of the 'continuous present', as explored in 'Composition As Explanation' and as manifested in the extended poem sequence *Tender Buttons.* In interview with Elizabeth Frost, Scalapino states that Stein "has a sort of phenomenological approach." She continues:

> I took her writing as not describing, but having to do with wanting to be able to write the essence of something, of an emotion or a person. It's similar to the continuous present, but also to her portraits of objects and people in trying to get the present time's reverberation of something. (Frost, 1996)

Hejinian's feelings towards what Stein developed in and for poetics are explored in 'Two Stein Talks' and 'Strangeness', collected in *The Language of Inquiry.* In the latter essay, which takes the form of a diaristic meditation on dreams, Hejinian brings together a conception of 'introspection', the experimental psychology of William James and Stein's writing to express the relationship between writing and consciousness: "My use of the term *introspection*, and my sense of the introspective method and its effect on experience and ultimately their emergence in poetics, are indebted to William James's philosophy of consciousness and thereby of language" (Hejinian 2000, 143). This equation is vital to an understanding of Hejinian's writing; her treatment of 'consciousness' and 'language' as synonyms indicates the extent to which 'consciousness' is an ever-present question and concern in her manipulations of language. She continues: "In essence, Stein proposes the act of writing as the organisation and location of consciousness in legible units, and not just of consciousness but of the consciousness of consciousness, the perceiving of perception" (Ibid., 143-144). This notion of

the 'perceiving of perception' secures in both Stein and Hejinian herself a sense of the act of writing as a retracing of the "location of consciousness" which necessarily involves a folding back upon the act of composition itself. In conversation with Charles Bernstein for his podcast *Linebreak,* Hejinian expands on the relationship she sees between herself, Stein and phenomenology:

> I tend to begin in a maybe Steinian fashion, Gertrude Stein of the *Tender Buttons* writings, and then proceed and come up with whatever language is occurring in response to whatever I'm thinking about, so it's a description which in part is looking at something intensely, making some kind of radical observation, and in part, letting the language that emerges from that take me to some perception or sense of the object. It's like an interplay between perception, object of perception and the language that is transacting, that zone between.   (Hejinian 1996)

Hejinian's sense of 'radical observation' seeks to foreground vision as an act of letting language emerge. This 'zone between' constitutes a phenomenological site. The aspect of Stein she evokes here can be seen most clearly in *Tender Buttons* and 'Composition As Explanation'. In the latter work of poetics, Stein writes:

> A composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world as it has been these thirty years it was more and more a prolonged present. I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one. (Stein 2008, 220)

The 'prolonged present' is a natural aspect of the 'composition of the world', and as such, any poetic act of getting 'towards the things themselves' would necessarily have to adopt the same vision. This embrace of the extended-instantaneous necessitates a 'beginning again and again'. Scalapino reflects on this in 'Pattern- and the Simulacral':

> Stein's conception of a continuous present is when everything is unique
> beginning again and again and again. A does not equal A, in terms of Stein's
> view of the continuous present. This leads to lists; which leads to romanticism
> in which everything is the same and therefore different. (Hejinian and Watten,
> 2)

The notion that 'A does not equal A' is significant for *Sight,* in that the 'A' in question (for

example, the moon in the opening sections of the text) does not equal itself when witnessed

by two distinct subjectivities. A clear example of the differentiation this encourages can be

found in the fact that, in her own words and in numerous critical articles, Scalapino identifies

her poetics as being influenced by Buddhist practice. In 'As: Occurrence in Structure, Unseen',

Scalapino writes:

> Phenomenology and Stein's view of the continuous present and her view of
> perception have some similarity to views of perception and phenomena in
> Tibetan and Zen Buddhist philosophy (such as that of the early Indian
> philosopher Nagarjuna), which writings seem to me far more radical that
> Stein's, and which had already influenced me before I came to read her.
> (1999b, 22)

This meeting of Stein and Buddhist philosophy, specifically in terms of the notion of a

'continuous present', is generative in that it establishes a desire throughout Scalapino's work

to foreground experiential perception as the initial means by which the subject encounters

the world. Furthermore, Scalapino's argument that her readings in Buddhism appeared "far

more radical" than Stein's poetics establishes a sense in which Scalapino's interest in a

phenomenological 'continuous present' is not merely a matter of poetics. Concerning this

aspect of Scalapino's work, Hejinian commented at Scalapino's memorial service in 2010:

> Buddhist philosophy, which Leslie studied throughout her life in great depth
> and detail, makes two observations of particular relevance to Leslie's work:

first, that pain and suffering are ubiquitous; and second, that empirical reality is solely phenomenal — a matter of appearances; we can never see anything as it is (or *per se*, to use Leslie's term). This is the case in part because reality doesn't show itself as it is, but also because, after an infinitesimal space of time, whatever perceptions we might have of reality are taken over by the distorting power of the mind, with its many preconceptions and fixations, and the conditioning force of the social sphere, which seizes, rather than observes, the world around it. (Hejinian 2010, np)

The notion that 'empirical reality is solely phenomenal' but that it is 'seized' rather than 'observed' in habitual thought leads Hejinian elsewhere to describe Scalapino's poetics of occurrence as producing an 'as effect'. In their correspondence, Hejinian offers a reading of this as grounded in contemporary philosophy— "I realise that what you are producing through the 'as effect' is what Deleuze and Guattari, in *What Is Philosophy?*, cite as a revolutionary moment, a 'moment of Becoming'." This is also apparent in Hejinian's writing, in particular 'The Rejection of Closure'. She writes: "Each written text may act as a distinction, may be a distinction. […] The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating" (2000, 41). In *Sight* a mutual ground is apparent between Hejinian's and Scalapino's disparate poetics, and it is in part because of this that *Sight* is an 'open text'. In particular, Hejinian's evocation here of the 'distinctions' which constitute perceptual experience suggests a sense of the instalments as each being a 'distinction'. The serial organisation of alternating 'distinctions' in *Sight* as such constitutes a work concerned throughout with 'occurrence' and 'rejecting closure' by virtue of the intersubjectivity manifested in the text itself.

Conclusion

In moving towards concluding it seems appropriate to turn to the closing pages of *Sight*, and

in particular to test Hejinian's and Scalapino's intentions in their prefatory comments which

open the text. The penultimate 'pair' of instalments are not explicitly conclusive, though do

display some awareness of the project they mark the ending of. Hejinian, who originally

began the exchange, writes:

> 'Perception of a vivid constellation' (criticism) 'requires
> correct distancing.'
> > Girls from the moon, in the 'new' position;
> comparisons begin here.
> Are we close?
>
> The perception of a work is bound to its position.
> > Waking, blinking, reflecting – securing double
> being: happiness (which can lead to a sense of unhappiness, even to
> illness (replacement)).
> The metaphysical material can no longer be discerned
> through contemplation— girls from our times act accordingly
> > > (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 111)

Here, what Hejinian calls "double/ being" underscores the compositional method of the

work; the first stanza introduces a proposition in the form of a quotation, appropriated to

describe Hejinian's notion of criticism as the 'perception of a vivid constellation'. This

measure of distancing raises the chiasmic nature of sight once more, of the coexistence of

sight and seer. In the 'new' position, presumably at the 'correct distan[ce]', Hejinian asks 'Are

we close?'— suggesting both a comment on the 'grand essay on perception' of *Sight* and also

on the dialogic nature of the epistolary composition. The second stanza modulates this

material, and comments too on the 'metaphysical material' than 'can no longer be discerned

through contemplation'. It is difficult to determine whether this 'metaphysical material' is desired, or whether it is treated with ambivalence. This latter reading is suggested by the following clause, which introduces 'girls from our times act[ing] accordingly'. This seems a hopeful gesture towards the experimental form of the poem itself, which 'acts' according to the contingencies the work addresses itself to— in the present case, sight and the visual. In this sense, the failure of 'contemplation' can be described as a critique of retrospective thinking, favouring instead 'waking, blinking, reflecting' as operations of the eye, the sensory data of which is handled imminently.

Scalapino's response introduces the witnessing of 'arctic swans', and includes this perception in the first half of her instalment, before moving to speak directly to Hejinian's proposal that 'The perception of a work is bound to its position':

> Observation or sight or critical being distinct from each
> other, faculties, and the swans being one's faculty— them. Not
> being one's own eyes or any eyes – and by this separation / this
> absence— (the swans floating on flood) one's direct faculty (as 'by'
> not being one).
> Dismantling or sight or critical being distinct from each
> other, faculties, and the swans being one's faculty – them. Not
> being one's own eyes or any eyes— and by this separation – (the
> swans floating on flood) one's direct faculty (as 'by'/beside not
> being one).
> Dismantling or dropping one's own primary early basis and
> seeing that is not occurring, cannot— as being what would be that
> occurring— is a state that is actually experienced 'outside' either
> material or contemplation.   (Hejinian and Scalapino 1999, 111)

A similar process of modulation occurs in Scalapino's reply; in this instance, the three stanzas seem to draft an idea and edit it down to a sentence bereft of parenthetical remarks. The

circulation of terms— "observation", "sight", "critical", "dismantling"— all gesture towards

the processes by which vision involves a constant 'reading' of what is seen. This reading

occurs without distinction between what occurs as mere 'observation' and what occurs as

'criticism' or 'dismantling'. What this emphasises, then, is a sense of sight and indeed *Sight* as

being concerned throughout with the ways in which vision is always a multifarious activity,

and reflections upon it are bound to a likewise contingency of perception.

Perhaps for some readers, the absence in this chapter of extended discussion of the

Language School or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetics might seem conspicuous. The ambition of

this reading of extended poetics, with its emphasis on idiosyncrasy, has made it necessary to

suspend certain 'objective' perceptions surrounding works in order to read them from the

experience of the text first and foremost. One such 'objective' perception might be the fact

that poets associated with the language school This is a particularly important notion to

employ in relation to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetics, individual examples of which have been

arguably misrepresented by more general manifestos and mission statements from leading

figures like Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein. This is not at all to say that these poets and

their ambitions are not in themselves vital and interesting examples of poetic extension—

indeed, Silliman's body of work constitutes one of the most substantial and voluminous

collections of extended poetics of the 20th century— but rather it is a question of what

happens when a proposed school of poetics begins to take critical precedence over the

poems themselves.

A further complication specific to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetics can be witnessed in the

object of its interest; namely, language itself. The stated ambitions concerning the political

implications of all language-use in texts such as Silliman's *The New Sentence* and *In The*

American Tree or Bernstein's *A Poetics* cannot be taken as the final word in the workings of

language in Lyn Hejinian's and Leslie Scalapino's texts. This is the case not least because the

latter two are ardently feminist poets associated with a male-dominated school of poetry, but also because the extent to which language is the fundamental occupation of these writers differs in terms of intensity, focus and orientation. This is a question of what is at stake in making grand political claims for poems. In this regard, the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* school demands to be read in terms of idiosyncrasy, far more so than, for example, the New York Poets or the San Francisco Renaissance, precisely because of the scope and scale of their stated ambitions. To be clear, what I mean by this is that to generalise *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetics as being, for example, about redressing the role of signification in capitalist hegemony serves to undermine the individual acts of resistance to this hegemony that the works themselves seek to constitute. In the present case, working from Hejinian and Scalapino's correspondence and reading *Sight* for the first time as a series of attachments to letters, faxes and emails, I was struck by the lack of insistence on dogma or theoretical frameworks in both the act of composition and the finished text itself. One can imagine, however, a reading of *Sight* based on the principles of, for example, *The New Sentence*. I am not claiming that this would be an incorrect frame in which the work could be situated, but rather that it is not in the interest of idiosyncrasy— nor of Hejinian and Scalapino themselves— to relegate the poetry itself to the status of being a vehicle of rhetorical arguments established elsewhere, under the auspices of a 'poetic movement'. This is not merely a claim I have nuanced to suit my own ends, but rather can be seen in Hejinian's own estimation of the work, as articulated during her eulogy for Scalapino in 2010:

> Our project was an experiencing of the senses, a foray into sensation. But it was also an investigation into shared time — what one might call our historical moment, postmodern and besieged by various forms of social violence. Leslie Scalapino could be infuriated by events but she was never abashed by them. She lived with ardor and honesty to the very end.
>
> (Hejinian 2010)

155

In this light, *Sight is* "an experiencing" involving "shared time". This simultaneity or what we might call the collaborative moment is the foundation of *Sight,* and furthermore acts as a frame in which the work can be witnessed as an exploration of perception rather than the carrying out of rhetoric. This chapter has presented *Sight* as a work of intersubjective idiosyncrasy, and in doing as had sought to bypass the criticisms one might direct towards the void between ambition and practice which for many characterises *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetics. It is not a question of feigning ignorance to these problems, but instead of moving criticism beyond an assessment of poetic/political rhetoric in favour of engaging seriously with Scalapino and Hejinian's text as a moment of profound collaboration based first and foremost in exploring perception contingently, of experiencing, to use Scalapino's phrase, "how phenomena appear to unfold".

That this book is a history of
a shadow that is a shadow of
Me mystically one in another
another another to subserve
-*That This* (2010)

Introduction

Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino's *Sight* displays how extension can come about through collaboration and retain its idiosyncratic character by virtue of the frame of an epistolary relationship. Susan Howe's poetic practice is also crucially concerned with collaboration— however, Howe's collaborations occur between herself and the absent voices of historically marginalised writers and figures. These figures are predominantly female and Howe, acting as 'THE REVISER' (1990, 70), enters their narratives in order to address acts of 'enclosure' which have occurred in the production of literary history. The site of these collaborations in Howe's work is the margin, most commonly a marginal space between texts which exclude those without voices.

Howe's extended poems evoke without seeking to manifest what she calls 'infinite articulation' (1993, 6), a situation wherein the fractured syntax and scattered arrangements of her poems gestures towards an extension which is 'infinite' in the sense that the margin exists wherever a narrative of authority is proposed. This chapter will present Howe's explications of phenomenology in *Pierce-Arrow* and *Incloser*. The former work performs a recovery of American philosopher Charles Sanders-Peirce with a particular focus on his writings on phenomenology, whilst the latter proposes a stance towards literary-historical research deeply committed to giving voice to those who have been silenced. From this I will seek to argue that Howe's poetic practice establishes an idiosyncratic sense of the 'infinite'.

This will be articulated with reference to Emmanuel Levinas, for the purpose of presenting Howe as a poet whose practice arises from a 'difficult' engagement with the ethics of textual history.

Encountering Howe

In an interview with Lynn Keller, Susan Howe states that "[y]ou impose a direction by beginning" (Keller 4). This is a fitting caution to consider before beginning to record reflections on the relationship between Susan Howe's extended poems and phenomenology. As indicated, Howe's poetry is concerned throughout with instances of historical, philosophical, personal and linguistic marginalisation. To adopt Howe's terms from 'Incloser', this would constitute an act of 'enclosure' which frustrates the possibility of the reader being 'in, closer' to the event of the text itself— discovering the 'nearness of poetry' (Howe 1990, 50). To start out thereby with a sense of Howe as a phenomenological poet is instructive in part for disclosing the ambitions of Howe's engagements with history, literary criticism and material historicity as discovered in fragments and marginalia materially 'at hand'. Howe does not 'use' these fragments innocently— Hélène Ali writes in this regard that:

> Images, or documents at that, in Howe are not illustrations, this seems
> obvious from the start, they are not factors of fragmentation, and they are not
> content coexisting with other texts and configurations for the sake of 'defying
> syntactical logic'.   (9)

Ali's argument is oriented towards distinguishing Howe as a poet for whom materiality is at stake, the materiality of lives and lives as evoked by texts; this is a solely conceptual defiance to a contemporary "syntactical logic". Howe's fragments are not mere evocations of chaos, of a kind of total scattering— they are often site specific; they restore to the notion of the

fragment in poetry a materiality. This is in stark contrast to perhaps the most famous

modernist example of the fragment:

> *Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*
> *Quando fiam ceu chelidon*—O swallow swallow
> Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
> These fragments I have shored against my ruins
> Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.   (Eliot 11)

Eliot's compression of references— Dante, Tennyson, Kyd and Desdichado— shored against

'ruins' (both a plural of the noun ruin and that which remains after the ravages of time),

evokes a sense of surface rather than material fragmentation, which is to say, a

fragmentation itself constituted by the poet's process of gathering 'poetry' from various

sources— which feign disparity but find a cohesion in the difficulty of articulation— the poet-

speaker. Eliot's fragments are vocalised, and as such the poem's extension of voice— as a

kind of 'broken' dramatic monologue— makes 'The Waste Land' distinct as a *process of*

fragmentation rather than an account of the fragment.

The same cannot be said of Howe. Her fragments are not "figures for things, but they

acquire the capability of being figures *of* things, performative entities" (Aji 8). Her fragments

are determinedly 'material'— that is, they are often presented in as much 'actuality' as the

publication allows— for example, mimeographs and facsimiles of Emily Dickinson, Charles

Sanders Peirce or attendance to the handwritten marginalia of Melville's library. Howe's

sense of materiality can be witnessed, for example, in 'Fragment of the Wedding Dress of

Sarah Pierpont Edwards' in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (Howe 2007). The poem explores the

relationship between text and textile through the measure of 'the fragment' in a variety of

senses, including 'the fragment' itself, reproduced in a rough black and white Xerox on the poem's first page.
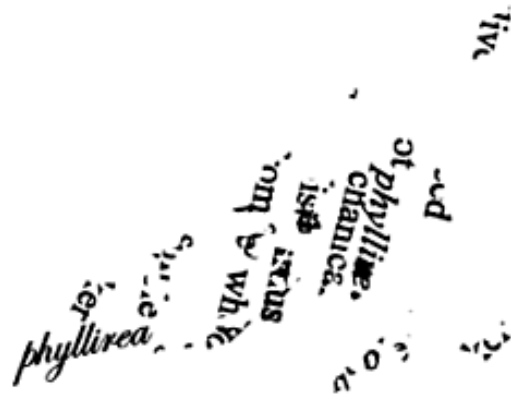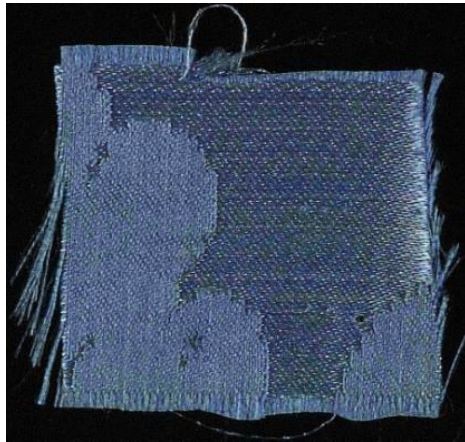
(Howe 2007, 55-56)

Without turning to another source to corroborate the history of the wedding dress, merely witnessing the image of the fragment on the page, it is unclear how the fragment came to be a fragment— whether it was torn in anger, or cut for posterity, salvaged from ruin or has merely deteriorated over time. This critical naivety is justified in the fact that the corresponding fragmentation of the poem which follows (seen above on the right) cannot be clearly described by any of these procedures. In this sense, the threads, in particular the frayed edges, are materially present in the text(ile), with threads appearing as tangles of characters in different fonts. The boldness of the left of the image is also replicated in the legibility of 'phyllirea', facing the reader rather than fraying away into illegible fragments. In this sense, the poem's title holds text, image and the proposed textile 'object' of the work together in a compact of overdetermination. Which is to say, there is no one leading 'frame' in which the poem can be comprehended. This unsettles the reader's ability to 'grasp' the fragment, which is of course delicate and already torn and fraying. The interpenetrating forms of text and textile here press onto each other in a way which creates a generative 'difficultly', or, as Howe phrases it in 'Scattering as Behaviour Towards Risk', a 'cumbering'.

This latter term, meaning 'to make difficult', takes its root from the medieval French *en-combre*, meaning to block up, in particular a river. This sense of lyrical 'flow' being blocked brings together the space of the page and the difficulty of the language employed as a necessary 'cumbering' which takes place between contemporary subject and historical anecdote.

These difficulties in and of Howe are important to address. In reading her work, it is very often difficult to tell precisely *what* one is reading. In interview with Keller, Howe commented: "People often tell me my work is 'difficult'. I have the sinking feeling they mean 'difficult' as in 'hopeless'" (McLane 113). This 'hopelessness' may well be the reaction of some readers to Howe's pages— one could be forgiven for being intimidated by a poetry described as "documentary poetic historiography" (Keller 1997, 188) and particularly one which, as in the above example, is in places seemingly "unreadable" (McLane 114). These formal concerns are further complicated, as Rachel Tzvia Back writes, by Howe's "writing-over-writing technique" which "produces the […] effect of simultaneity of voices–and of tales–speaking at once, cutting into each other and being, visually and aurally–as well as thematically–at cross-purposes" (139). The question then is not one of determining a method of reading the wild(er)ness of the page, but rather recognising, coming to *terms* with the process already at work when one 'stumbles' through one of Howe's texts. Howe's texts may be difficult then, but, as Hélène Ali argues: "[w]e are not presented with aporetic provocation" (Aji 9). An example of this might be seen in the title and final page of 'Scattering As Behaviour Towards Risk' (1990, 70):

Human |authoritative| human!
They cumbered the ground.
Human
Record
Freak inside the heart
Secret fact a title given
THE REVISER

This compact of overdetermination presents its materials as a plenum, all at once, destabilizing the conventional hierarchy of the page. The repeated call of 'Human human!' separated by the bracketed 'authoritative' might be the first phrase the reader encounters, though the eye could just as equally be drawn to the bold typeface THE REVISER, confidently upright in contrast to the slants and leanings of the other phrases. This phrase ends the poem; it is the ghost of signature, as though the voice of this work were a bold archetype. The last phrase before THE REVISER: "Secret fact a title given" ('title' and 'given' overrun with 'heart', making all three words slightly illegible) offers a trace of appropriation— the movement from 'secret fact' to 'title'— an appropriation which perhaps Howe is suggesting is addressed by 'THE REVISER'. The constellation of phrases seems to generate meaning by virtue of their literal overlaps; which is to say, the phrase 'They cumbered the ground.' sheering off to the right evolves from the T of 'authoritative' in the connected phrase. The square brackets which contain 'authoritative' seems to phonetically adapt the title of Friedrich Nietzsche's work 'Human All Too Human' to the phrase 'Human Authoritative Human'. The word 'Authoritative', which occupies the place of Nietzsche's 'All Too', traces a sense of totalisation into Nietzsche's title. The effect of this is to read 'authoritative' into the 'all too humanness' of the human. It is the 'All Too' which delimits, which totalises and thus undermines the validity of its claim. This final page could be construed as a critique of the will to power— a recurring motif in Howe's work— and the authority 'parenthesised' by it, which is entangled with a 'blocking up' of the ground. Howe discloses an ideology of enclosure and erasure at work in a philosophy which implicitly presupposes the limits of the human and a totalising primal drive which has ethically problematic overtones. This process of disclosure is evoked in the poem's title— scattering *as* behaviour *towards* risk— a tight and odd syntactic unit which offers three nouns the functioning of which elides only an elliptical sense of the ethical and the aesthetic. This 'scattering' is evoked in the arrangement of units on the page,

itself seemingly displaying a 'behaviour' whilst simultaneously 'behaving' themselves in a variety of ways— all this 'towards risk'— the risk necessarily run by 'THE REVISER'. This risk is articulated by Howe: "The selection of particular examples from a large group is always a social act." (1993, 1) In this sense, Howe seeks to foreground her agency in the poem as a 'social act', suggesting that her subject-positon is one keenly aware of its own role in the revision of history. As such, the absences and lacunas of Howe's pages can be read as attempts to create a space in which her 'particular examples' can be disclosed in their particularity, rather than pre-arranged into a cohesive authoritative narrative. Howe's procedures throughout her poetry are concerned with developing a means of intervention in history which does not repeat the mistakes of historical record which lead to marginalisation. This sense of the constitutive 'difficulty' of Howe's project as such illustrates the 'marginal' position the speaker-poet necessarily occupies in pursuing the ethically imperilled task of historical revisionism.

Stumbling Phenomenology

These senses of the fragmentation, difficulty and readability of Howe's work can be witnessed in what Howe calls "stumbling phenomenology" in 'Articulations of Sound Forms in Time'. The range of this phrase's reference is tantalisingly wide— it could refer to the stumble that constitutes phenomenology or its radically cautious nature; or, read in sequence with the line it follows— "Consciousness grasps its subject"— "stumbling phenomenology" might perhaps be this very process of phenomenal 'grasping'; further still, stumbling underscores the prescient theme of hesitation and stuttering in Howe's work and manipulation of 'voice'. Howe reflects on this in 'Incloser':

> [Poetry] involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. Interruption
> and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is an other voice, an
> attempt to hear and speak it. It's this brokenness that interests me (1993,
> 192)

It is often tempting in the 'stumble' which characterises a reading of Howe to 'grasp' a

singular phrase— like 'stumbling phenomenology'— and wield it as a torch with which to

illumine the surrounding syntactic forms and traces. It should, however, be clear that Howe's

work is constantly struggling against such 'grasping'— which is to say, the 'stumblings' of her

writing are a response to the immanent ethical question of how to approach the radically

Other. In this regard, Howe writes in 'Incloser':

> Mountains are interrupted by mountains. Planets are not fixed. They run
> together. Planets are globes of fire. Imagination is a lense. Pastness. We find
> by experience. A sentence tumbles into thought. A disturbance calls itself free.
> (1993, 12)

This last sentence evokes the way in which the responsive subject 'answers' the call of

'pastness', finding 'by experience'. These prose sentences 'tumble into thought'— "are

interrupted [...] are not fixed [...] run together"; if 'planets are not fixed' and 'run together',

then constellations— of meaning, of relativity, or ideas— are themselves unfixed, subject to

vicissitudes and the delimiting perspective of the perceiving subject. There is a constitutive

difficulty to this project of articulating the marginal, not only in the sense of giving a voice to

the voiceless, but also in presenting this without appropriation in the text. In this regard,

Howe writes: "Perception of an object means loosing and losing it" (1985, 23). This 'loosing'

and 'losing' is presented by way of the 'difficult' form of Howe's poetry, where often, as

McLane writes, she "occasionally flirts with the unreadable—with words crossed out or

phrases collaged and typeset to interfere with one another" (1). This articulates a

constitutive difficulty of Howe's work, made more complex by Howe's punning, word deformation, neologisms, archaicisms and (often uncited) quotation. Howe's work requires such moments of 'unreadability' in the presentation of history which, due to the authority of certain narratives, also makes marginal narratives 'unreadable'. Howe's work, as such, can be conceived as extending in order to create a space in which the 'unreadable' can be read, where the slightest marks on the page suggest a plenum of associations. This play between presence and absence makes Howe's work 'difficult' in a primarily ethical sense; if the page presents history as a question of 'readability', then the act of 'reading' is itself an ethical engagement.

It might at this point seem that Howe is in some ways the most appropriate poet for this thesis' ambition to explore works of extension which engage with phenomenological notions. Indeed, her early work *My Emily Dickinson* is in one sense a work of phenomenological literary criticism by virtue of its explicit foregrounding of Howe's place as the engaged and enthused critic, with a particular emphasis on the act of going to and exploring the original documents penned by Dickinson. Howe writes: "I learned, examining the facsimiles, that Emily Dickinson, in her carefully handwritten manuscripts— some sewn into fascicles, some gathered into sets— may have been demonstrating her conscious and unconscious from a mainstream literary orthodoxy" (1985, 1). It is a deeply experiential work, and adopts a position of personal embeddedness in Dickinson in knowing contradiction to academic discourse— this is Howe's own distinction, gestured at in interview with Edward Foster: "Behind the façade of Harvard University is a scaffold and a regicide. Under the ivy and civility there is the instinct for murder, erasure and authoritarianism" (Ibid., 176-77). Elsewhere, in *The Birth-Mark,* she writes: "I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with civil government" (Ibid., 34). As works like *My Emily Dickinson,* 'Arisbe' and 'Articulations of Sound Forms in Time' show in their 'recoveries' of the lives of

'marginal figures', this erasure is not only an editorial matter, but also a phenomenal question. Howe is not a writer who can be made ultimately clear or be fully realised by deferring from the page to another work, a master text somewhere. Peter Nicholls writes that "Howe has no desire to send us back to her sources, or, indeed, to encourage us to read them in tandem [...] Perhaps, then, the source is irrelevant" (595). Instead, the spaces of Howe's pages, which bring together disparate voices and sources in order to articulate the marginal, offer an encounter with historical absence through a paradoxical 'presencing' of materials. Howe's difficulties force a reorientation of the reader, often literally in instances of the page being rotated and mirrored, which invites at its most rewarding a disclosure of vision to the generative multifariousness of the marginal and fragmentary.

This chapter will now turn towards specific instances in Howe which illuminate her sense of the infinite margin, a notion which brings together history, language and ethics in her poetics. With this in mind, I will first address Howe's marginal phenomenology through close readings of two different works of poetic extension; first, in *Pierce-Arrow*, a text which works to recover the phenomenology of nineteenth century American logician Charles Sanders Peirce; and second, in *Incloser,* an early statement of poetics by Howe which occupies a liminal position between criticism and poetry.

Pierce-Arrow: Susan Howe's Peirce

Pierce-Arrow (1999) discloses the life and thought of the philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce. This distinction— life and thought— is provocatively unclear throughout the book, which contains three interrelated extended poems: 'Arisbe', 'The Leisure of The Theory

Class' and 'Ruckenfigur'. Whilst it is true that, as Peter Nicholls writes, *Pierce-Arrow* is concerned with "a poetics of loss and remembrance which […] restlessly interrogates the nature of human temporality" (Nicholls 442), such a reading orients *Pierce-Arrow* in the same direction as much of Howe's other work. This serves to underscore a consistency of her writing— 'loss', 'remembrance' and 'human temporality' as pervasive motifs— and at the same time runs the risk of missing the idiosyncrasy of the work's materials and morphologies. The extent to which Howe explicitly includes phenomenology in the discourse of *Pierce-Arrow* is far greater than in any of her other works. Furthermore, the work it performs in 'recovering' Peirce as a phenomenologist is notable in its own right as a generative moment in the meeting of a largely European constellation of thinkers with American philosophy. The composition of the work involved visits to the archives of both Peirce and Edmund Husserl, and Howe includes not only details from these visits but also commentary on the experience of going to the archive. This emphasis on *praxis* is a motif developed from Peirce himself. Howe treats Peirce far less as a logician or semiotician and instead emphasises the ideas expressed in his essay 'The Principles of Phenomenology'. She refers to this aspect of his thought in 'The Theory of The Leisure Class':

> Mr. Charles Sanders Peirce
> introduced "practice" and
> "practical" into philosophy
> As when someone planning a
> journey blind-eyed solitary
> prepares a lamp and fastens
> linen screens and the fine
> linens from that moment end
> with a question of fire in
> flight the word "pragmatism"
> spread pleading particulars   (1999, 111)

The contribution Howe claims Peirce makes to philosophy is an orientation towards *praxis*, not only in the words 'practice' and 'practical' but also figured as a 'solitary' journeying forward to ask "a question of fire in/ flight". This question lights the fire that "spread[s] pleading particulars"— the particulars of experience. In this regard Peirce writes in 'The Principles of Phenomenology':

> We perceive objects brought before us; but that which we especially experience— the kind of thing to which the word 'experience' is more particularly applied— is an event. We cannot accurately be said to perceive events. […] We experience vicissitudes, especially.   (1986, 88)

This distinction between perception and experience in the lived world distinguishes experience as a 'compulsion', 'the absolute constraint upon us to think otherwise than we have been thinking' (Ibid., 88-89). This is figured as a plurality of vicissitudes. Peirce continues:

> We cannot experience the vicissitude without experiencing the perception which undergoes the change; but the concept of *experience* is broader than that of *perception*, and includes much that is not, strictly speaking, an object of perception. (Ibid., 88)

Howe's *Pierce-Arrow* evokes a similar sense of 'experience', wherein individual perceptions— of words, letters, pages, poems collected into a book— are best conceived as the experience of vicissitude rather than as clear designations between perceptions. In this sense, *Pierce-Arrow* approaches Peirce the historical figure, the man and the philosopher by virtue of the disparate details of his life, and as such articulates him not as 'an object of perception' but rather as a series of vicissitudes. In this sense, she aligns her practice with Peirce's in the sense that, for Howe, the poem is always a matter of *praxis.* In this regard, Howe engages

with Edmund Husserl in 'The Leisure of The Theory Class', the second extended poem of the

book:

> Husserl's *Nachlass* his
> transcendental phenomenology
> Cartesian Meditations
> Appendixes to the main text
> Fink's own copy of the
> Sixth Meditation a massive
> system the urgency of his
> position in context of
> the times then preparing
> *Nachlass* for the future.   (1999, 122)

Howe's treatment of Husserl on this page is not explicitly engaging with his thought but

rather gesturing towards the dramatic story of the rescue of his manuscripts. *Nachlassen* is a

German word for 'leaving after' and refers in academia to the manuscripts, notes, marginalia

and correspondence left behind after death. For Howe, the *nachlass* is often the source and

motivation of her writing. Husserl died in Nazi Germany in 1938 and his estate, as a Jewish

intellectual, was expected to be destroyed by the fascists— Howe evokes this as an "urgency

of his/ position in the context of/ the times", urgency figured both as the nearness of terror

for a Jew and the vitality of Husserl's transcendental reduction. Herman Leo Van Breda, then

a postgraduate student, went to Nazi Germany in the year of Husserl's death to secure the

nachlass with a view to publishing and explicating Husserl's unpublished manuscripts. Van

Breda is not mentioned in Howe's book, though it is clear that Howe is both familiar with and

invested in the story of Husserl's *nachlass*.

This implicates phenomenology in the same kind of problematic master narratives

and textual erasures to which literary history is subject. In this sense, Howe seeks to

illuminate Peirce as a marginal figure in order not only to emphasise his place outside of institutions and phenomenological tradition, but also to establish an early point at which phenomenology is being written in America. There is something at stake for Howe in underscoring the existence of a phenomenological source who, as an American, writes an idiosyncratically American phenomenology, distinguished nominally by Peirce at the outset of his essay as 'phaneroscopy', though this term and the former are used with liberal overlap in his reassembled writings. In addition to historical questions concerning the place of phenomenology in Howe's work, she also seeks to address problems of the textuality of phenomenology throughout 'Arisbe'. Early in the poem, she writes:

> Phenomenology asks what are the elements of appearance. In my nature (cross out with) it is a sort of instinct toward (slash to) a solid (cross out visible) instinctive attraction for living facts. (1999, 14)

Here, Howe's plain opening statement juxtaposes with the complex self-editing second sentence. Articulation is followed by parenthetical notes which alter the text outside the bracket but don't replace it— for example, "a solid (cross out visible)", where it would seem that the 'crossed out visible' is invisible, or has been written over with 'solid'. This happens three times in the sentence, marking the process by which articulation of perception must necessarily fold back on itself to adhere to the contingency of perception. This textuality of phenomenology is an unavoidable complication of its methods. Many of its research interests— perception, intersubjectivity, contingency, philosophy as *praxis*— encounter irreconcilable problems on the page. How can a constantly developing thesis *of* phenomenology *on* phenomenology ever rest? Which is to ask, as Howe does, "If experience forges conception, can quick particulars of calligraphic expression ever be converted to type?" (1993, 4) Howe evokes this sense of phenomenology *as* poetry later in 'Arisbe':

A person throws a stone

as fact through air not

fact but appearance of

fact floating in vacuua

Blind existential being

may possibly not occur

at all we know nothing

with absolute certainty

of existent things not even

the single 'word' the   (1999, 6-7)

The distinction made in the hinge from the second to third line makes of 'stony fact' an

appearance. There is a taut contradiction between the direct diction of the opening line and

the lines which follow, which gradually 'abstract' both the person and the stone. The 'vacuua'

which characterises this makes 'existential being' 'blind', equivocated as 'possibly not

occur[ing]'. The stanza moves from 'a person' and 'a stone', general and unspecific, to a

statement of the "absolute [un]certainty [of] the single 'word' the". This deixis gestures

towards what Howe describes elsewhere as a process of "unawakened finite infinite

articulation" (1993, 111), the latent potential of finite signifiers to signify infinitely depending

on the vicissitudes of context. This account of fact as 'appearance of fact' is addressed later

in the poem:

What is the secret nature of fact? What is the fact that is present to you now?
[...] Let y be y you cannot gasp at blue. (1999, 14)

The sense of wonder that might provoke a gasp at the secret nature of 'blue' is denied ('let y

be y")— this 'secret nature' of fact, which is not 'present to you now' is unreachable. This

speculative categorisation of fact as distinct from appearance appears to be derived from

Peirce's philosophy. His answer to 'Blind existential being' is categorisation, a kind of logical

deduction of the contents of appearance, which is to say, the 'phaneron' (Peirce's term) or

phenomena. For Peirce, everything is first encountered as a phaneron. To test the reliability

of this totalisation, he invites the reader to engage in the same process of reduction his text

is an account of:

> There is nothing quite so directly open to observation as phanerons; and since
> I shall have no need of referring to any but those which (or the like of which)
> are perfectly familiar to everybody, every reader can control the accuracy of
> what I am going to say about them. (1986, 74)

What might seem wilful obscurity can instead be seen as a grounding in the deictic, that

which always pertains to a subject, which at once appears to locate something specific but

takes the form of unspecific gesture. Peirce further explicates the phaneron as a totality,

albeit a totality unsettled by its constitutive deixis:

> By the phaneron I mean the collective total of all that is in any way or in any
> sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any
> real thing or not. If you ask present *when,* and to *whose* mind, I reply that I
> leave these questions unanswered, never having entertained a doubt that
> those features of the phaneron that I have found in my mind are present at all
> times and to all minds. (Ibid., 74)

The phaneron is met as 'three modes of being'. He terms these Firstness, Secondness,

Thirdness, which roughly equate to the phenomena of 'qualities', 'facts' and 'thoughts'.

Howe writes that "Peirce's ideas of the Categories—Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness as a

way to explain the process of artistic inspiration—are dear to me" (McLane, np). For Peirce,

anything that "is at any time before the mind in any way" (1986, 75) can be classified as

either firstness, secondness or thirdness— qualities, facts and laws. Howe does not take this

system on wholesale but rather uses it "in a magpie fashion" and dedicates as much

attention in the poem to the life-world of Peirce and his wife Juliette as she does explicitly to

aspects of Peirce's writings. In particular, Howe is interested in the mimeographs she

observed at Peirce's archive, both in the texts themselves and the experience of going to the

archive. The attention paid to the site of the source at the work's outset affirms the singular

importance for Howe of the archive as a lived experience rather than a notion. Thus, Howe's

evocation of the archive, both as an idea and as a locus of meaning, is figured by Howe as

secondness: "Peirce calls secondness all naked feeling and raw life. Originality is in being

such as thus this being is" (1999, 14). The taut syntax here again invokes the deictic, a motif

in Howe which is not only an opening on and regard of radical alterity but a constitutive

feature of her poetics. This can be demonstrated with reference to a mimeographed page

reproduced early in *Pierce-Arrow*. The handwriting is fairly neat, though problematized by

edited passages which have been heavily scrawled out. The page is titled 'The First Chapter of

Logic':

> The earliest occupation of man is poetizing, is feeling and delighting in feeling.
> That is what the infant in his cradle seems mainly ~~to be saying~~ to be about. But
> feeling generates dreams; dreams, desires; desires, impulses to do things. So
> the main business of a normal man's life comes to be in action.
>
> (1999, 3. My transcription)

Howe later writes that this work was never published, but by beginning her own poem with

the opening words of an unpublished fragment of Peirce she establishes an analogue

between the ambitions of each work. In this passage, the source is 'the infant in his cradle'—

a radical move is made to the apparently originary in order to establish the scope of Peirce's

work. He locates poetizing as constitutive of the beginnings of human experience,

understood by Peirce's equivocation as 'feeling' and 'delight in feeling'. In the reproduced

mimeograph, Peirce scores out 'to be saying' in favour of 'to be about', moving *from* speech

to 'aboutness', a relation which is both outside, which is to say marginal, and 'encompassing' by virtue of reference. Peirce's statement that poetizing is what man is 'about' underscores the sense in which the poetic is an extension of already present faculties, which is to say, a phenomenal undertaking.

It remains to address how Howe's work on Peirce demonstrates the idiosyncrasies of her poetic extension. One particular measure through which this can be illuminated is, as Howe writes, "the tychic encounter, as Charles Sanders Peirce might say" (McLane, np). She continues:

> This is what attracts me so strongly to the ideas of Peirce, the philosopher and logician. I don't begin to understand logic, but I see things through the visual quality of his manuscripts that a professional Peircian might miss or ignore.
>
> (Ibid.)

For Howe, her relation to Peirce's writings is, as she says, primarily aesthetic— "I see things through the visual quality of his manuscripts"—, an effort which again displays a focus on the marginal, not only in terms of Peirce as an often destitute and dismissed academic, but also in the sense that to restrict Peirce to the function of 'logician' is to overwrite the varied intentions of his often vastly dissimilar writings. Art historian Richard Shiff's ascribes an uncannily similar process to materials, designating it with the same term:

> I sometimes take a book from my library shelf at random and let it inspire the next stage of an unfinished essay. Any writing can be useful in this way, especially if it's good writing; any theoretical concept, removed from its intended context of use, is likely to provoke a profitable turn in imagination and reasoning. If I wanted to give this method a theoretical identity, I would call it "tychic," [...] It's like an outside party introducing a healthy moment of

It is "the chance element, the luck in a turn of thought, whether good fortune or bad fortune" which "proves itself pragmatically, experientially" (Ibid.). The 'tychic' is as such constitutively marginal, an encounter which takes place against expectation, the 'chance' element'. Howe adopts this concept from Peirce, and furthermore employs it in her approach to his work. This revitalises not only his writing but the conditions of his life, and furthermore establishes a sense of Howe as embracing the vicissitudes involved in the act of going to a historical body of work. As such, Howe writes of her method more generally in recovering the histories of marginalised figures:

> It is strange how the dead appear in dreams where another space provides
>
> our living space as well. Another language another way of speaking so quietly
>
> always there in the shape of memories, thoughts, feelings, which are extra-
>
> marginal outside of primary consciousness, yet must be classed as some sort
>
> of unawakened finite infinite articulation. Documents resemble people talking
>
> in sleep. To exist is one thing, to be perceived another. I can spread historical
>
> information, words and words we can never touch hovering around
>
> subconscious life where enunciation is born, in distinction from what it
>
> enunciates when nothing rests in air when what is knowledge?   (1993, 6)

Howe here presents a number of things which are vital to her procedure, perhaps most importantly the fact that the Other— manifested in their 'other way of speaking'— is classed as 'unawakened finite infinite articulation'. This 'finite infinity' comes about by virtue of the fact that 'exist[ing] is one thing, [being] perceived another'— a situation which makes words

'untouchable', both in the sense of their quiddity and the fact that a total control of language always remains out of reach. The fact that 'nothing rests in air' prompts the question 'what is knowledge?' This seems to evoke a sense in which knowing something is, for Howe, subject to a relation between self and 'thing' rather than some achievement where the 'thing' is grasped. This locates phenomena 'outside of primary consciousness', in a position which is 'extra-marginal' to the subject. These motifs can be seen throughout *Pierce-Arrow* in the sense that, as we have seen, Peirce and in turn Howe seek to encounter perception as a plenum of vicissitudes. The implications this perspective has for Howe's sense of history can now be developed at length, specifically in regards to Howe's conception of literary history, as articulated in 'Incloser', an early critical work the arguments of which can be seen throughout Howe's poetry.

Incloser: History & Phenomenology

Due to the pervasive sense of Howe's historical mode as a tychic encounter throughout her work, the distinction between 'poetry' and 'criticism' is often incredibly difficult to make. The orientation it forces is to absorb what constitutes criticism for Howe into what constitutes poetry— which is to say, Howe's poems and essays display significant overlap to the point that considering the latter in terms of the former is a generative move in eliding Howe's evocations of history. This is particularly the case of Howe's long poem-essay 'Incloser', which explicates and reflects on her critique of historical appropriation and the processes of marginalisation.

However, Howe's relationship with the historical, which constitutes much of the source material of her long poems, is problematic for the reader in a number of ways. Her project is charged with over-determination— which is to say, whole poems and books are

unclearly situated within the texts they quote from, read or appropriate. As such, the surface difficulty of Howe's poems can be difficult to reconcile with her explications of method and historicist vision elsewhere. One of the distinguishing features of Howe's poetics is its idiosyncratic extension into the margin and towards the marginal— but this gesture of unsettling the centre against which the margin is always located itself establishes a 'marginal' centre which requires further investigation for its prejudices and biases. This logic has its source in Howe's own work— to trust the authorial voice is to trust a process of omission and enclosure. In 'Incloser', she writes:

> The selection of particular examples from a large group is always a social act. By choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization although I know there are places no classificatory procedure can reach where connections between words and things we thought existed break off. For me, paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation are particularly compelling. (1993, 1)

The statement identifies both the object of Howe's criticism and a self-consciousness towards her own place in the 'installation' of 'certain narratives'. The "places no classificatory procedure can reach" (Ibid., 1) are produced by virtue of the "paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation" with which Howe deals in her compositions. Howe describes in 'Personal Narrative':

> My retrospective excursions follow the principle that ghosts wrapped in appreciative obituaries by committee members, or dedications presented at vanished community field meetings, can be reanimated by appropriation. (Ibid., 15)

Howe's relationship with history is indelibly one of 'appropriation'. She figures her work as that of reanimating ghosts through appropriation, underscoring the self-consciousness and contradiction of a body of work which asks: "Is a poetics of intervening absence an

oxymoron?" (Ibid., 27). This question haunts Howe's poetry. The 'oxymoron' here is what

makes Howe's a work of the marginal; the reorientation away from the centre always

establishes a new centre, and therefore new margins. Howe pays particular attention to this

haunting, and as such occupies a position which necessarily has to appropriate its materials.

In the opening of *The Birth-Mark* she writes:

> You are straying, seeking, scattering. Was it you or is it me? Where is the
> stumbling block? Thoughts delivered by love are predestined to distortion by
> words. If experience forges conception, can quick particulars of calligraphic
> expression ever be converted to type?   (Ibid., 4)

Howe foregrounds her sense of the historic— which itself is notably consistent in its process

of disclosing lives and material fragments from marginal history— as knowingly problematic.

Here 'love' is 'predestined to distortion by words'— a phrase which gestures toward the

prevailing situation in Howe's writing— which is to say, that "experience forges conception"

does not make clear this process of conversion into 'type', "the quick particulars of

calligraphic expression". In Howe's work, intentions are distorted by language, particularly

those "delivered by love". In a sense, then, it is the care with which Howe approaches her

materials which places them in tension; by wanting to avoid over-appropriation, the product

is necessarily fragmentation and difficulty. A major aspect of the project, then, is not just an

investigation of the marginal-historical, but also an account of the difficulties of pursuing

such a poetics.

These issues can be seen at work in 'Incloser'. As Redell Olsen writes: "Susan Howe

cites Webster's definition of *enclose*, a synonym for 'inclose'*,* merges distinctions between

property, boundary, containment and concealment" (1). Above the Webster's definition

there is a longer more varied range of definitions:

> **EN-CLOSE.** See INCLOSE.
>
> 1. To surround; to shut in; to confine on all sides; as to *inclose* a field with a fence; to *inclose* a fort or an army with troops; to *inclose* a town with walls.
>
> 2. To separate from common grounds by a fence; as, to *inclose* lands.
>
> 3. To include; to shut or confine; as to *inclose* trinkets in a box.
>
> 4. To environ; to encompass.
>
> 5. To cover with a wrapper or envelope; to cover under seal; as to *inclose* a letter or a bank note.   (1993, 1)

Here, surrounding, shutting in, separating with a fence, including, confining, encompassing evoke being 'enclosed' as a duality of shelter and confinement. In this sense then, the definitions are ironic in that they enact a process of enclosure. Whether an enclosure shelters or confines is a matter of context, and of one's specific relation to that environment. The question of enclosure has to do not only with language and narrative but also subjectivity. Howe writes:

> Every statement is a product of collective desires and divisibilities. Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression. National histories hold ruptures and hierarchies. On the scales of global power what gets crossed over? Foreign accents mark dialogues that delete them. Ambulant vagrant bastardy comes looming through assurance and sanctification. (1993, 1)

This developed sense of an epistemology of history has as its object a pervasive sense of 'exclusion and repression', 'rupture and hierarchy'— the 'mark' of 'foreign accents' looming over the production of literary history. Howe's distrust of "assurance and sanctification" informs a process of epistemology which explicitly searches for the unassured and unsanctified, which is to say, the marginal.

Against such high stakes, Howe's poetics, presented as an alternative to a perceived dominant patriarchal model of the writing of history, are figured not as the offering of answers concerning historical questions, but rather an incessant questioning of the centre which takes place in the margins. Kaplan Harris writes that Howe "quotes extensively while withholding her own commentary, as if to let documents speak for themselves" (Harris 446). In this regard, Howe writes:

> A poem can prevent onrushing light going out. Narrow path in the teeth of proof. Fire of words will try us. Grace given to few. Coming home though bent and bias for the sake of why so. Awkward as I am. Here and there invincible things as they are. If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices. (1993, 3)

This is poetry as tychic encounter. The sense of chance illumination— "onrushing light going out" caught in a "narrow path" is caught "awkward[ly]". The roving deixis of the sentence "[H]ere and there invincible things as they are" foregrounds the 'truth' of such tychic encounters, grounded in the poet's contact. Howe writes that it is "fun to be hidden but horrible not to be found— the question is how to be isolated without being insulated" (2003, 127). The difference between 'isolated' and 'insulated' is a measure of what is at stake throughout Howe's poetry. One possible explanation of how this distinction is made is suggested by Hélène Aji, who describes Howe's project as profoundly interrogative:

> As she runs the gamut of the possible intrusions of history in the poem, Susan Howe asks her readers the same questions over and over, without ever providing more than adumbrated answers. Is history coherent? Is it the poet's domain to make it cohere? Shouldn't one accept living among the uncertainties of impossible coherence? How is one to understand the persistence of assemblage and composition even in the face of scattering and decomposition? (Aji 4)

The adumbration Aji describes here recalls Charles Peirce's term 'synechism', which brings together Howe's historical and institutional radicalism as a *praxis*. Howe writes:

> *Synechism* is the tendency to regard everything as continuous in the way no "scholarly interpretation can be." It suggests the linkage of like and like-in-chance contiguities and alignments. That idea is in my writing generally. He was willing to carry the doctrine so far as to maintain that continuity governs the domain of experience, every part of it. Synechism denies there are any immeasurable differences between phenomena. (1999, 14)

Synechism signifies a phenomenological notion— derived not only from its denial of a separation between phenomena, but also in its ramifications against "scholarly interpretation". This chance contiguity and alignment is indicative of consciousness itself, and is instructive in underscoring the work of subjectivity in research and criticism. This "idea is in [Howe's] writing generally"— which is to say, this sense of the continuity of everything, its contingent ongoingness, bears on the process of her compositions. Howe expresses a similar sentiment in an interview, making clear the elliptical—and therefore thoroughly idiosyncratic—nature of her research:

> I love history, I love scholarship, but I'm an autodidact. I have never touched down in a disciplined way. I get these obsessions and follow trails that often end up being squirrel paths. There are huge blanks. (McLane, np)

Howe's ungrounded 'discipline' is self-generating and personal involving obsessions which create 'huge blanks'. Her historical vision seeks to articulate the infinite production of margins inaugurated in violence and oppression. As in 'Incloser', Howe's self-awareness of her autodidactic method both announces and seeks to address the constitutive problem involved in all engagements with history— the risk of enclosure and erasure.

An example of how this historical vision comes to bear in her critical work appears in

My Emily Dickinson, in which Howe dedicates roughly half of the work to an esoteric reading of Dickinson's poem 'My Heart Had Stood—', which involves associative readings of Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barret-Browning, Louis Zukofsky, Henry Adams, Emily, Anne and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Keats, Wallace Stevens, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare and Friedrich Nietzsche. *My Emily Dickinson* displays various methods of reading, the most prescient of which is a complementary poetic-critical meditation on the unspoken margins of even the slightest moments in Dickinson's poetry. Howe writes at the outset of this reading:

> The fact that 'My Heart had stood— a Loaded Gun—' is placed dead center may be chance or choice. It consists of six four-line stanzas loosely rhymed. Written in the plain style of Puritan literary tradition, there are no complications of phrasing. Each word is deceptively simple, deceptively easy to define. But definition seeing rather than perceiving, hearing and not understanding, is only the shadow of meaning. (1985, 35)

Howe plainly describes the poem's form in order to underscore how "deceptively simple" it appears. Howe's claims at the end of this paragraph establish the importance of agency in a reading of the poem; definition-seeing is made distinct from definition-perceiving, as the former is "only the shadow of meaning." It is from this principle that Howe's critical work begins, steadily retracing moments in texts in order to display their shadowed parts. This is not, however, a simple act of 'illumination'. For Howe, a text cannot be explained merely by the definition of its parts, but rather involves a process of coming to understand both the compositional decisions involved in the production of a text and the histories in which the text is embedded. *My Emily Dickinson* displays Howe's historicist ambition by gesturing towards the proliferation of meaning which takes place in the margin, beside the work, not

anterior to it but simultaneous to it. With this sense of Howe's historical mode, it is necessary now to turn towards Howe's poetics as exploring the 'infinities' involved in textual history.

Infinite Articulation: Howe and Levinas

Howe's extension, as has been claimed throughout this chapter, is into the margins, and her long poems are an account of this movement. It remains to disclose the nature of Howe's extension as inaugurating a poetics of the infinite margin. In order to best illuminate what I mean by this, I will turn to Howe's extended poem 'Thorow' from *Singularities,* which discloses Howe's encounter with native American history "during the winter and spring of 1987" at Lake George, New York. At the end of the first page of the poem, Howe figures this encounter as a going "down to unknown regions of indifferentiation." (1990, 40) Before section 1 of the poem begins, Howe arranges a series of prefatory quotations, the associations between which set a grounding for the phonic investigations of the poem itself. Through Thoreau, Deleuze, Daniel Ricketson and Mrs Chester French, the poem's opening gesture is towards how problematic proper nouns become in recollections of history. In this regard, Howe quotes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 'One Of Several Wolves':

> The proper name does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of depersonalisation, that he or she acquires his or her true proper name. The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity. (Howe 1990, 41)

In a crucial sense, then, 'Thorow' delineates an encounter with an Other with particular attention to the significations of Otherness. Of her relation to materials from the field generally referred to as Continental Philosophy, Howe comments: "I never approached Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, Irigaray, Lyotard, or Derrida on a systematic basis. In magpie fashion, I went for the bits and the pieces, the fragment and usable quotation" (Mclane, np). Again, Howe's vision is marginal here in that not only is her interest "unsystematic" but it also admits to the "usability" of quotations. To become systematically invested in Derrida or Foucault would, for Howe, constitute a totality the margins of which threaten the voices of less centralised figures. In this sense, one can conceive of *Pierce-Arrow* as an extension of this vision— Husserl is treated unsystematically, whilst Peirce receives a meditative recovery involving the particulars of his *lebenswelt* as accrued from marginalia and unpublished manuscripts.

A radical sense of an Other is inaugurated in 'Thorow', specified only by their "unknown region". Howe's poetics of an infinitely-produced margin/alisation are, among many other things, American— which is to say, Howe's account of her personal encounter with the words and objects of New York native American history is a necessary task which, chronologically, grounds much of Howe's later work in a poetics the radicalism of which seeks to capture the likewise radicalism of the encounter with the Other. Towards the end of the poem, Howe writes:

> you are of me & I of you, I cannot tell
> where you leave off and I begin   (1990, 58)

The couplet evokes intersubjectivity as an indeterminate chiasm of "me" and "you", which acts as a frame within which Howe's poem encounters its Others. Specifically, the 'me' of the poem seems less an intrusion by Howe reflecting on her place in the poem than a gesture by

the poetic voice towards the fact that in appropriating the historical narrative, the distinction between the appropriator and the appropriated becomes difficult to distinguish. Levinas articulates this sense of embeddedness alongside the Other as a major ambition of his work. He writes: "In the communication of knowledge one is found beside the Other, not confronted with him, not in the rectitude of the in-front-of-him" (1985, 57). This sense of non-confrontation also establishes a situation in which "being in direct relation with the Other is not to thematise the Other and consider him in the same manner one considers a known object" (Ibid.). The Other necessarily transcends the knowledge we can obtain concerning them in the facticity of their presence. Howe evokes this infinite process at the end of her preface: "Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universe flux" (1990, 41). In Levinas' terms, the 'Same' is the antithesis of the Other, and any act of reconciliation of the latter with the former constitutes a violence. Levinas argues that the encounter with the Face of the other, their living presence, inaugurates a situation wherein either the Other is grasped *in the terms* of the Same, terms which originate from the finite perspective of the appropriating subject— or the radical alterity of the Other is maintained and they are held at a respectful distance. He continues:

> We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where
> totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a
> situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the
> Other. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed
> by the term infinity. (24-5)

The fact that the encounter with the Other is so vital to the "situation where totality breaks up" is expressed by Levinas by the equivocation: "Ethics is an optics." The alternative, totality, is glimpsed in war:

The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals [...] is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning. (21-22)

Levinas counters this by proposing the notion that metaphysics precedes ontology, particularly in relation to the perception of the outside world through signification and the encounter with the face of the Other. Furthermore, Levinas' phenomenological ethics locate as their motivation 'desire'. He writes: "Desire is desire for the absolutely other [...] A desire without satisfaction which, precisely understands the remoteness, the alterity, the exteriority of the Other" (62). In a complimentary fashion, Howe writes in 'Thorow':

> The track of Desire
> Must see and not see
> Must not see nothing
> Burrow and so burrow
> Measuring mastering   (45)

The track of desire Howe describes is both visible and invisible, a will to not see, or to see no thing— a burrowing. The equivocation or progression of 'Measuring mastering' takes this sense of an infinite track of desire towards the ethical problems of appropriation. In this regard, Levinas figures desire in relation to infinity: "It is desire that measures the infinity of the infinite, for it is a measure through the very impossibility of the measure" (62). It is worth dwelling on Levinas' phrasing, as it announces a fruitful resonance in Howe's poem. Levinas writes that desire is "a measure through"— and it is clear that this 'throughness' is significant to the articulation of such desire for the Other. It could be argued that Howe's 'Thorow'—

the title of which seems to avoid becoming an appropriating 'third term' by virtue of its

compound polyvocality— seeks to articulate a similar sense of 'throughness'. The echoes of

Thoreau's name, themselves considered in the poem's outset, combine with a note by Sir

Humfrey Gilbert, Sir Walter Raleigh's half-brother and an architect of the colonial empires in

North America and Ireland: "There is no thorow passage navigable that way" (41), in

reference to the access 'Indians' had to Newfoundland from the northeast. Of Gilbert, Ward

and Waller write:

> At the conclusion of [*A New Passage To Cataia*], he writes: "He is not worthy
> to live at all who, for fear of danger or death, shunneth his country's service or
> his own honour, since death is inevitable and the fame of virtue immortal."
> This discourse has the true ring of a scholarly and patriotic Englishman, and
> there is much freshness in its persuasive earnestness. (Quoted in Sobecki, 98)

These juxtaposed voices of throughness mark the intersection at which Howe's poetic voice

begins its inquiry. Whilst Thoreau is indicative of an intellectual and literal movement

through the woods, Gilbert's voice is one of the most distressing colonial interest. This latter

judgment is made clear in a quoted fragment in *The Invasion of America*:

> The heddes of all those (of what sort soever thei were) which were killed in
> the daie, should be cutte off from their bodies and brought to the place where
> he incamped at night, and should there bee laied on the ground by eche side
> of the waie ledying into his owne tente so that none could come into his tente
> for any cause but commonly he muste passe through a lane of heddes which
> he used ad terrorem…[It brought] great terrour to the people when thei
> sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kindsfolke, and
> freinds… (Jennings, 168)

The dismemberment and aestheticisation of Others here involved not only murdering but desecrating a site, making terror a presence. The pathological tendency here, creating a "lane of heddes […] of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kindsfolke, and friends", composes a colonial movement 'through' a path lined with such massacre.

In this regard, Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes of Howe's extended poems: "The page is not neutral. Not blank, and not neutral. It is a territory" (1984, np). Howe's movement "through the word Forest" found in the Adirondacks is towards a clearing where her "whole being is Vision" of "the machinery of injustice" (1990, 49). This is evoked in an explicitly Transcendental manner in the opening statement of section 2 of 'Thorow'— "So many true things// which are not truth itself/ We are too finite// Barefooted and bareheaded/ extended in space// sure of reaching support" (Ibid., 49). The echo of Emerson's 'Nature' suggests not only a shared sentiment but a statement of the poem's process— which is to say, the complex figuration of finite subjectivity surrounded by 'truth' but not 'truth itself' as Emerson's invisible eyeball 'sure of reaching support' also acts as a model for the poem's voice. The distinction between 'truth' and 'truth itself' again raises the question of the margin, which I will return to now by way of conclusion.

Ethics is an optics: Conclusion

The way in which Howe and Levinas seek to explore the 'infinite' in lived intersubjective experience differ radically in their forms but have similitude in their ambitions. To measure Howe's marginal-infinite against Levinas' phenomenology of ethics is unfair, though it does illuminate the possible problems of the work Howe produces. Which is to say, the ambition of Howe's project, evoked in *The Birth Mark* and in the many prose prefaces to her extended poems is problematically related to the page. Furthermore, such prefaces and explication of

poetics are themselves subject to the multifarious signification of the more immediately 'poetic' pages of Howe's poems.

The focus needs to be brought back to what constitutes the marginal for Howe. In the margin, etymologically 'at the edge', Howe seeks to disrupt the supposed centre or totality which institutes the marginal in its very being. It is this process of the inauguration of margins which constitutes Howe's infinite. There will always be margins as long as centres are claimed. The ethical presides precisely in illuminating the marginal and the process by which that marginalisation took place. The project is undoubtedly impressive, but in practice it is not always the case. Howe herself constructs margins. Her margins are in fact particularly wide in many poems— there is often, as in *Pierce-Arrow* and *Singularities*, an oscillation between prose pages which occupy the majority of the page and establish small margins; 'word squares' (Reed, np) which establish margins which occupy more space on the page than the central form; and pages which wilfully disrupt the inauguration of the margin. For example, to refer back to 'Fragment Of The Wedding Dress…' discussed at the outset, the shape of fragments of words and letters is set on the far right of the page, almost slipping off beyond the margin. The simultaneous effect of this composition of the page is that the surrounding blankness does not seem to constitute a margin— rather, the word fragments themselves become the margin.

Howe's particular focus on historical narratives as the site of such marginalisation is problematic in the sense that this move itself marginalises the contemporary. Howe's poems are aesthetically some of the most radically generative poems being written in American poetry, but it would be wrong to confuse Howe's sites of meaning in history with a more general all-encompassing History. Which is to say, her project is idiosyncratic in a variety of senses— it formidably constitutes the etymologically derived meaning— 'own with mixture'— in its personally invested interrogations of marginalisation— but it also runs the

risk of being hermetic to the point of solipsism. It might seem wrong to judge a poet by what their poems don't address, and it might also appear to be placing too fine a point on the reader's encounter with Howe's poems— but the alienating potential of not only Howe's difficult compositions but the relation between her poetics and her poems runs the risk of instituting the kind of totalising subjectivity the project avows to critique. This concern does not constitute an intimidation in the face of difficulty; rather it seeks to treat seriously the marginalisation of the reader by a poetry whose central concerns are constitutively marginal, which is to say, idiosyncratically related to Howe in the guise of THE REVISER. What this amounts to is a problem arising from a perceived lacunae in the sophistication of Howe's compositions and the way in which, by occupying a margin, they necessarily establish other margins. Howe reflects on this in *Pierce-Arrow*:

> Another language another way of speaking so quietly always there in the shape of memories, thoughts, feelings, which are extra-marginal outside of primary consciousness, yet must be classed as some sort of unawakened finite infinite articulation. (1999,11)

Since it is not explicitly Howe's ambition to write a Levinasian poetics, she does so to an extent which is rewarding to the model of poetic extension she offers. Howe's idiosyncrasy is found in her vision *against* totality, figured as an occupation and elucidation of the margin, the infinite "surplus always exterior to the totality" (22-23). In this sense, Howe's poetic extension, which involves the tychic encounter as described by Peirce, involves a compositional method which attempts to arrange fragments so as to not merely disclose meaning in the Heideggerian sense but to inaugurate an encounter with the marginal-infinite which seeks to "appropriate" whilst "sheltering", thus disclosing Others in their alterity. This is the radical 'difficulty' of her work. In working "*beyond the totality* or beyond history", her poems demand the reader's reorientation from familiar means of reading and encountering

history. An encounter with Howe's work involves regarding this difficulty as a unique type of witnessing, an idiosyncratic vision. This vision, to use Levinas' words, "breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak. It does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality" (23). For the most part, the relation with the infinity of being Howe institutes is in excess of totality through the necessary fragmentation involved in pursuing margins. Her long poems and critical work— both taken as extended poetics— thus generate extension by virtue of the poet's relationship with and investment in history, history understood as an infinitely produced margin whenever and wherever totalisation looms.

7 *The book withdraws into itself*   Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Imagine the reader who
would persist and still persists
Something so small; something so large;
how to get a handle on it.
-- Draft 87: Trace Elements (107)

Introduction

Following from Susan Howe, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' poetry one can witness a similar

process of seeking to magnify and illuminate the marginal. For both poets, this engagement

often takes the form of addressing the 'marginal' status of female poets. For DuPlessis,

however, the most significant margins she bears witness to are those of her own texts. Her

major extended poetic work, *Drafts,* is composed from the initial principle of 19 poems being

re-drafted six times in series, creating a 114-part extended poem. Each 're-drafting', or to use

DuPlessis' term 'fold', adopts the themes of its source-text, expanding on specific terms or

further developing themes and motifs established in the first 19 Drafts. The marginal

becomes magnified in the processes of what DuPlessis terms 'folding' and 'drafting'. The

former term will recall my observations concerning Robin Blaser— and indeed there are

similarities not only in approach but also in their shared interest in Gilles Deleuze. For

DuPlessis, however, the 'fold' is less a metaphorical basis for a poetics than a specific and

idiosyncratic process of composition in which the six books which constitute the complete

Drafts write across and alongside each other. This is at once an aleatoric and structurally

precise process— the 'grid'[2] into which the 114 poems fit displays spatially the links between

the drafts in their 'lines' (the term DuPlessis uses to indicate the manner in which each draft

sits alongside its 'folds') and the books they are collected in. As such, DuPlessis' extended

poetic project is accompanied by a 'map' from which the reader can seek to get their

bearings. However, to confuse the order of the grid with the movements between the drafts

themselves is to overlook the extent to which DuPlessis conceives of her project as

fundamentally provisional. This is gestured at in 'Drafts: Precis', an instalment in the series

which has no number, though it is published between Drafts 57 and 58, at the 'hinge' of the

fold. This centre-outside-the-centre which unsettles the relation between form and content

establishes *Drafts* as a work occupied with a variety of resistances to totality. These

'totalities' take a variety of forms in DuPlessis' practice, specifically the totality of the

Modernist canon, the hegemony of patriarchy and the totalitarianisms of the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries.

In this task, DuPlessis has a number of recurring figures, the most significant among

whom is George Oppen. In Oppen, DuPlessis finds a method of articulating resistance to

totalities which is responsive to both philosophical and political discourse but never merely

dealing in rhetoric. As indicated in the opening chapter of this thesis, Oppen is a poet for

whom the ambitions of Heidegger and Socialism are appealing but are ultimately too

dogmatic. The main reason for this, as Oppen articulates in 'Of Being Numerous', lies in the

fact that the subject who wishes to articulate 'we-ness' is still faced with the danger of

shipwreck, of solitude. It is in this sense then that DuPlessis also avoids the problems

associated with such prescriptive bodies of thought. There are of course other important

moments of interaction between the two writers, many of which will be explored in the

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[2] The grid itself can be found in Appendix A.

present chapter, but it is important to underscore how important Oppen's poetry—

cautiously balanced between the philosophical and political— is for DuPlessis specifically in

this sense of poetry being a mode of inquiry rather than a vehicle of rhetoric.

This chapter will work characterising DuPlessis as a poet whose idiosyncratic poetic

extension arises from a desire to develop and critique poetic extension itself. Lyn Keller

writes that, in the light of DuPlessis' avowed poetic resistance to totalities, "it is hardly

surprising that DuPlessis should be grappling quite deliberately with the question, "What to

do about the long poem?" (Keller 1997, 277) This question is posed specifically throughout

Drafts in variety of ways, and I will seek to illuminate these as they appear. As indicated, the

sheer volume of DuPlessis' *Drafts* makes reading it as an entire work an ambitious project

which would require more space than can be dedicated to it here. As such, I will adopt a

number of strategies in seeking to come to terms with DuPlessis' extensive practice. In

particular, I am interested in the different layers of DuPlessis' folds— the terms, the lines, the

stanzas, the sections and the drafts themselves. As such, I will begin "inside the middle of

[the] long poem" (DuPlessis 2006, 194), reading a Draft which stood out in my initial reading

of the work for its discussion of the motif of the 'trace' and the implications this has for the

traces in and of *Drafts.* Following this, I will move to discussing the drafts in their 'lines',

taking as examples the first and the fifth lines, referred to by DuPlessis respectively as 'the

line of it' and the 'line of gap' according to the title of the first draft upon which it is based

(DuPlessis uses the term 'donor' draft). These strategies will allow me in turn to disclose

DuPlessis' procedures of 'drafting' and 'folding'. Following this, the chapter will seek to

conclude by addressing the ways in which DuPlessis' *Drafts* constitutes a self-conscious

examination of the historical and existential 'problems' which arise in the composition of

extended poetic works.

In the 'Preface to Surge: Drafts 96-114', Rachel DuPlessis writes that her "poems since 1986 are part of one large work called *Drafts.* In 2012, this work reached the numerical goal that [she] had established in 1993" (2013, 1). The dates in question here are revealing in a variety of ways— they show that all of DuPlessis' poetic writing in the last 30 years finds its place in *Drafts*; that the 'numerical goal' of the work was not established at the outset but rather arrived at seven years after the project's inception; and that the work has something of an end, at least in terms of the production of subsequent works, which has now been arrived at. The publishing of the final book of *Drafts* in 2013 offers for the first time the project 'as a whole'— though it will quickly become clear why discussing *Drafts* as a whole is a particularly difficult task— and as such, offers something of a 'settling' to a work which at all moments points explicitly to other moments in the work through the idiosyncratic procedures of 'drafting' and 'folding'. This experience of encountering the work as a totality is successfully articulated by Harriet Tarlo:

> Holding and reading Rachel DuPlessis's drafts gathered together in one solid and serious volume confirms a conundrum about her draft-work. There is the provisionality of this writing, running through it at all levels, and there is the completeness of each draft, each fold, each individual volume and, now, the culmination of one volume. The contradiction or tension between these apparent oppositions creates an endless series of questions as to how to read the writing presented here. (Tarlo, np)

The "tension" Tarlo identifies as provoking "endless" questions of "how to read the writing" is key to approaching *Drafts*, and will be one of the main focuses of this chapter which aims to disclose the varieties of reading which *Drafts* provokes. This anxiety in approaching *Drafts*

is on display in several critical approaches; for example, Thomas Devaney poses these

anxieties as questions:

> We are prompted to ask our own questions, and the first may simply be: How
> does one read an avant-garde epic like *Drafts*? One approach is to begin at the
> beginning and to forge ahead. But another path that I have found, musing on
> the conventions of the epic itself, is to start in the middle. (Devaney, np)

DuPlessis confirms these conceptions of the work, commenting that "one can begin

anywhere and read in any desired direction" (2013, 1). This is something of a practical

question; whilst one can appreciate the labyrinthine complexity of the structural

manipulation at play in *Drafts*, one can simultaneously "despair" at the possibility of

achieving any particular 'vantage' over the work. This is, of course, much of the meaning of

Drafts, which explores epistemic questions in and of the long poem from the microstructure

of syllables and words to the larger framing questions of form, seriality and order.

Furthermore, the question of 'desired direction' in *Drafts* often has much to do with

what in her essay 'For The Etruscans' DuPlessis calls 'writing as feminist practice' (DuPlessis

1990, 5). DuPlessis' concern for feminist discourse is not exclusively a matter of bearing

witness to Feminist philosophers like Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, but is

rather a radical project of seeking to hold poetic history to account for its exclusions and

marginalisations of major female figures. As she writes in 'Otherhow': "My desire has led me

to construct counter poems— counterfactual poems—postulating that there are many

woman poets throughout history (some real, some imagined) who have written poems

uncannily positioned as having views aslant of dominant views of themselves" (Ibid.., 149).

This poetics is informed by the memory DuPlessis has of being told, when proposing her PhD

thesis on Virginia Woolf, that "she shouldn't be working on Woolf" (Ibid., 3). One can see an

irony in the fact that DuPlessis' PhD thesis was ultimately written on Carlos Williams' and

Pound's long poems. These male modernists and others undergo significant critique and

revisionism in the works— both poetic and critical— DuPlessis was to go on to write. We

must enter *Drafts* with an awareness not only of its philosophical rigour but also its deeply

engaged feminist project. Specifically, this is a case of maintaining a sense of feminism as

praxis, rather than as a prescriptive body of thought which can be 'employed'. Again, this is

reminiscent of Oppen's treatment of Heidegger, in that whilst key concepts and terms

circulate throughout his work, to describe Oppen as explicitly Heideggerian would risk

misrepresenting his engagement with phenomenology. Similarly, DuPlessis writes as a

feminist rather than as a poet articulating feminism— and this distinction is important in

highlighting the fact that DuPlessis' feminist praxis is oriented towards destabilising

hierarchies wherever they might appear.

One of the most striking features of the span and scope of *Drafts* is that throughout

the process of composition DuPlessis spoke and wrote extensively about the long poem as a

form. DuPlessis states conscious desire "to contribute to the American long poem tradition"

as a woman in the 21st century (McCreary 2015, np), which finds articulation in discrete

dialogues with other, mainly Modernist, writers of the long poem, specifically H.D, George

Oppen (in 'Hard Copy'), T.S Eliot (in 'Wall Newspaper') and Ezra Pound (throughout, as

indicated in *Drafts'* allusion to 'A Draft of XXX Cantos', but perhaps more explicitly in 'X:

Letters' and its 'folds' poems). Additionally, the vast majority of DuPlessis' critical work, as

represented in the critical trilogy *The Pink Guitar*, *Blue Studios* and *Purple Passages*, is

concerned with redressing patriarchal histories of Modernism as represented by Pound and

Eliot (and in particular the former's editing of Mina Loy and H.D). Perhaps the most extensive

of these works of Modernist revisionism and inquiry is *HD: The Career of that Struggle*, which

offers prolonged analysis of H.D's long poems— *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the*

Angels (1945), *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946) and *Helen in Egypt* (1961). DuPlessis is committed both 'inside' and 'outside' *Drafts* to "contribute to the American long poem tradition" not only in writing her own project but also in redressing the elision of women poets and female voices from that tradition in her critical work.

      Drafts as a whole is a work consisting of 114 long poems arranged together into 6 'folds' of 19 poems. Each book of 19 reworks and meditates upon its counterpart in the preceding book, establishing a 'grid', to use DuPlessis' term, in which the individual Drafts are placed in a variety of sequences at once, belonging to their 'book' but also their 'line', as well as sitting in juxtaposition to neighbouring poems. Tarlo describes this situation:

> We are always in the "middle muddle" of the fold and the grid. DuPlessis's
> *Drafts* refer back to themselves along the same numerical line in groupings of
> nineteen (i.e., 1/20/39/58 or 7/26/45/64).   (Tarlo, np)

This circulation establishes a distinctly idiosyncratic means of extension, and furthermore allows DuPlessis to combine a procedural principle (*Drafts* will be 114 poems long) with an embrace of what DuPlessis calls 'provisionality' (as evident in the connotations of 'drafting' at work in the various ontological levels of the long poem 'as a whole'). The chiasm here between procedure and provisionality is a key point of access to the work. Of this, Catherine Taylor writes:

> *Drafts* offers an account of the speaker's complex subject positions and
> through them, we are offered the opportunity to consider our own. *Drafts*
> represents a material, and immaterial, life in such a way that we are forced to
> encounter it not just as mere representation, a place for identification, but as
> an ethical and phenomenological practice wherein issues of human autonomy
> and agency are experienced.
>
>   (2015, np)

As such, the procedural and the provisional are necessarily taken together, the attempt at one always collapsing into the other. Furthermore, Taylor highlights the position this places the reader of the full *Drafts* in— held in a tension between a desire for procedural 'holistic' understanding and obfuscated from this throughout by the provisionalities of the work.

If we take seriously DuPlessis' claim that "one can begin anywhere and read in any desired direction", it appears fitting to do precisely that in order to directly encounter the effect of finding oneself, as DuPlessis terms it, 'inside the middle of a long poem" (DuPlessis 2006, 194). As such, this chapter will begin by reading 'Draft 87: Trace Elements' (2010, 78-111) as a means of determining the ways in which it is indicative of and distinct from the other poems which constitute *Drafts*. Following this engagement, this chapter will then discuss three of DuPlessis' most prevalent compositional methods— Drafting, Folding and the Grid. Once these have been established, I will turn to specific moments in *Drafts*, with a view to observing the ways in which 'folding' and 'drafting' constitute her idiosyncratic means of poetic extension.

Trace Elements

'Draft 87: Trace Elements' constitutes a 53-part meditation on the engagement with traces involved in writing poetry. The poem, as its name suggests, is concerned with those 'trace elements' which provoke meaning, in particular the graphic trace or mark. The endnotes to 'Trace Elements' list a wide variety of sources, some familiar (Derrida, for example, or the Objectivists) whilst others are more oblique (T.R.A.C.E –"Transition Region And Coronal Explorer"— and sardine poisoning). There are over fifty-three uses of the term itself, most frequently in the context of presenting a further aphoristic reflection on the uses and connotations of the 'trace'. Here are the first ten 'definitions' DuPlessis offers for the term—

Trace is "a hold/a hole of evanescence through which/ travel small powerful things" (Ibid.,

78); a "readable signage" (Ibid.); a "perceptual unsettling in the/ peppy depths of daily/

anything" (Ibid.); or "trace exists before all this/ and beyond none,/ yet buoyed/ and

endlessly impalpable" (Ibid., 79); it "indicates almost meaningless propulsions of smudge and

grit" (Ibid., 79); it is a "specific trail through an exacting landscape// made by the indigenous"

(Ibid., 80); it is "like a missing cry" (Ibid., 83); Trace is "the enemy of fill/ but sometimes it is

fill/ trace props intensities/ of emptiness open" (Ibid., 85); but "What trace is found depends

on your readiness" (Ibid., 86); "the trace and its/ undertones emerge as a small largeness,

and subtext flips to text" (Ibid. 88). Some observations are necessary here. The unifying

feature of all DuPlessis' various explanations of the trace lies in epistemic questions—

dependent on 'readiness' in the face of 'a perceptual unsettling', the trace here invokes

Derridean grammatology:

> The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that
> dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly
> speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace.
>
> (Derrida 1973, 156)

This reference 'beyond itself' locates the 'trace' as an ecstatic phenomenon, albeit an

exstasis without site which effaces its own structure. All this is to say that the thing-concept

which sustains a trace as any one thing is immediately a question of the subject. Trace as

such describes the ephemeral location from which meaning arises. This is a situation, in

Derrida's argument, always-already in effect: 'Every process of signification [is] a formal play

of differences. That is to say, of traces. (Derrida 1981, 26). In a work so concerned with

processes of signification as *Drafts,* this 'formal play' can be seen as a fitting description of

the provisionality with which DuPlessis composes the individual works. 'Trace Elements' is, as

such, a fitting place to start with a text wherein a poetics of the trace is inscribed throughout.

This is true not only of the page itself, with its various 'draft' procedures which leave the text in a state of indeterminacy, but also of the wider structure of the work as a series of serial compositions simultaneously 'present' in each of the 'Drafts' to which it is structurally related. As such, Derrida writes:

> Nothing, neither among the element nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (2001, 157)

In specific relation to DuPlessis' *Drafts*, the variation of definitions offered and employed throughout 'Draft 87: Trace Elements' are themselves rubrics for the larger work. The 'donor' texts (DuPlessis' term) for 'Draft 87', which is to say, the previous drafts which often establish the thematic and formal ambitions of the later Drafts, are 'Draft 11: Schwa', 'Draft XXX: Fosse', 'Draft 49: Turns, & Turns, an Interpretation', 'Draft 68: Threshold'; it is followed in the final book of *Drafts* by 'Draft 106: Words'. It could be argued that each of these moments in *Drafts* can be seen to mutually address a thematic of the indeterminacy of language, but this would suffice to undermine the 'folding' mechanism which constitutes the extension of DuPlessis' work. Often the 'fold' can elide as much as it discloses. The ambulatory manner in which specific thematic interests reappear makes the 'logic' of the poem difficult to calculate; which is to say, the work is not 'improvised' but rather drafted in the sense of 'left unfinished'. This denial of *telos* is not meant to imply a commitment to avoiding closure, but rather of acknowledging at large and at length the provisionality in which even supposedly 'closed' works rest. As she writes in 'On *Drafts*': "'Drafts' are an examination from the ground here, not elsewhere. No matter what" (DuPlessis 2006, 209). Whilst we should be careful to think too strongly of DuPlessis as a writer of interiority, it is important to stress the extent to which *Drafts* deals with itself, which is to say, concerns itself with the implications of its own mode(s) of articulation.

As such, Derrida's place in a reading of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, or any writer of long poems, is complicated from the off by the proposed expansiveness of the former's thinking. It would not be doing Derrida justice to merely adopt 'différance', 'the supplement' or 'the trace' *metaphorically*; which is to say, as a structural model which neatly designates the workings of seriality. In her lecture on the long poem entitled 'Genre Problems', DuPlessis speaks about the problem of "straining to be Derridean." One might speculate that this hesitance is a reluctance to commit to the totality of Derrida's avowedly anti-systematic thinking. Specifically, DuPlessis is interested in Derrida's essay 'The Law Of Genre' (Derrida 1992). DuPlessis writes:

> If we believe Jacques Derrida, this attempt to define the long poem can have only one finding. If ever there were a genre of the "modern and contemporary long poem" as a "law," that law of genre has been mooted—as is true of any genre, according to the slidy sort of "law" illegally handed down in Derrida's essay. Any genre can only be self-different, contaminated and parasitic [terms from *Acts of Literature*]. Derrida: "I submit for your consideration the following hypothesis: a text would not belong to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging"
>
> (2008, np)

This discussion of genre is central not only to DuPlessis' concerns elsewhere with the legacy of Modernism but also with the interplay of genre in her work. *Drafts* develops its own forms, establishes generic hybrids and pays homage to a variety of established generic forms in the titles of its parts. For example, 'Draft 32: Renga' adopts a three-line Japanese form in which the first line is written by one person, and the other two by another; whilst 'Draft 13: Haibun' is a Japanese combination of prose and haiku; 'Draft 36: Cento' is a literary work made up of quotes from other authors; Drafts 34 and 35— 'Recto' and 'Verso'—reflect on the

relationship between left-hand and right-hand pages; 'Draft 109: Wall Newspaper' is mapped on Eliot's 'The Waste Land'; 'Draft 94: Mail Art' is a collage work; 'Draft 55: Quiptych' is a double diptych, in which a painting is spread across two panels with a hinge connecting the two; 'Draft 56: Bildunsgedicht with Apple' is a "formation poem" in which the creation of community parallels the creation of character; 'Draft CX: Primer' is an extensive introduction to the topics of *Drafts*; and 'Draft Unnumbered: Precis' is summary or abstract of a text.

These smaller questions of individual generic forms are brought together under the same chiasmic auspices of the movement in *Drafts* between the provisional and the programmatic. One can witness the 'program' in the taking up of individual forms and their histories; but ultimately the 'meaning' of genre is not so much an attempt at working *with* specific genres but of querying the workings of genre *as such.* DuPlessis' response to this situation is to conceive of genre not as a category, but rather as an activity:

> In a more cunning universe, to use a genre—the long poem—or a historical entity "the 20th and 21st century long poem"—as a rubric with any hopes of achieving a genre definition is a doomed undertaking, doomed to be undermined by plethora simultaneous with inadequacy. A network of genre relationships overcomes, even clogs any text, so all literature becomes one extensive textual landscape, while the individual text, if it has borders at all, is always just a feature in that larger intertextual landscape.
>
> (Duplessis 2008, np)

The 'doom' here is a correlate of seeking to bind the workings of a highly experimental poetic form into neat generic categories. The 'larger intertextual landscape', which refers to literature as a cultural and social body as well as the overwhelming plenum of *Drafts*, is the context in which 'genre' performs. Genre is, as such, an activity which is engaged with, an

'undertaking' rather than a rule. DuPlessis expands this conception of the long poem with reference to Gertrude Stein's 'continuous present':

> Just as Stein might be said always to have multiple subplots without there ever being "plot," so the long poem may be said to have multiple genres without having a single genre. What long modes do claim is the space-time to register and elaborate multiple generic activities.
>
> (Ibid., np)

These 'multiple generic activities' take place within the smaller structure of the poem, which is to say, the poems themselves are subject to this multiplicity of genre. As such, the cultural and ideological implications of a given generic form— such as the 'Letter', 'Lyric' or 'Book'— can be placed under scrutiny by virtue of being stripped of their closure— for example, the 'Letter' Drafts are without replies; the concept of the 'Book' is interrogated across six books; and the 'Lyric' becomes a question of poetic commitment, primarily an ethical argument in 'Draft 52: Midrash' in the context of Adorno's notions of the poetic. This is not so much a probing investigation of genres but of genre *as such*.

Genre also raises questions of gender and sexual difference. In her dialogue with Derrida, DuPlessis argues that the 'law of genre' is inherently relevant to matters of sexual politics. Derrida underscores the fact that 'genre' in French refers to modes of writing as well as gender. As such, DuPlessis writes:

> The startling evocation of gender in the middle of "The Law of Genre" is peculiar in its trace of binarist thought, no matter what Derrida does in queering and critiquing. The pun in French on genre makes the "genders/genres pass into each other," a generative "mixing of genders" and genres apparently answering the "madness" of polarized genders (and rigidly distinct genres). (Ibid., np)

204

Derrida's reading of the double-bind of genre and gender is oriented towards exposing the 'madness' of polarized thought. However, DuPlessis' critique here is significant in that it sees even in Derrida's supposedly total deconstructive project the reiteration of traditional— and therefore patriarchal— ideologies. She comments that "Derrida does half-hold onto the life jacket of conventional gender notions" (Ibid. np). As such, claims towards the différance which undermines stable categories (speech and writing; male and female) require further critique based on the assumed notions and sedimented ideological traces which are maintained within a discourse. DuPlessis continues:

> For really, it does appear as if Derrida is talking here […] about desire, passionate activity […] yet because of other ideological tugs, this magnetism gets imagined as female-y or feminine in a heterosexual economy. By the end of the essay, one does separate desire from the more sclerotic, if important, sex-gender ideas that undergird it, but to me, at any rate, the tinge of commonplace binaries remains. (Ibid., np)

To a certain extent, this 'tinge of commonplace binaries' is an unavoidable conceptual situation the philosophers necessarily finds themselves in. A writing of complete *différance,* in which any and all conventional binaries and assumptions are absent, would seemingly be an ambition rather than a practically realisable task. In the light of this, DuPlessis' conception of the long poem seeks to embrace the "endless cultural acts" which constitute the text, rather than holding any one means as the more or most successful:

> Maybe we can have a taxonomy but no final definition; this endless putting in and taking out of category mimics the endless cultural acts of the long poem itself: creolized, inclusive, errant, omnivorous, palimpsestic, and over-written with more writing. (Ibid., np)

Derrida's account of post-phenomenological thought embraces to a great extent what I have referred to as the 'radical contingency' of perception, and his work throughout is rich with discussions of the poetic. In many ways, DuPlessis' work can be seen to acknowledge and work with notions of 'trace' and 'genre' in their Derridean senses, but her work is not restricted to a deconstructive project. Whilst this question will be returned to frequently throughout the chapter, for now it is worth concluding that *Drafts* deals with a provisionality in which inherited notions are themselves subject to the contingency of their being experienced. *Drafts* as such can be seen to develop a model, always radically provisional, which proposes a plenum of meaning rife with present-absences and absent-presents, wherein even a body of thought like Derrida's, concerned as it is with these questions of the generation and deferral of meaning, is challenged by the unsettled contradictions and serendipities of the 'draft' text. This is not to say that 'drafting' surpasses *différance* in the extent of its project. Rather the indeterminacy of DuPlessis' poetic form across the 115 *Drafts* explores a perpetually unanticipated ground, in which a (deconstructive) totality like the non-concept of différance is present alongside a multitude of similar effects and affects, and is as such used in a draft form— the endnote to 'Trace Elements' mentions *The Derrida Dictionary* alongside more than 30 other sources, and as such is subject to the same non-hierarchical impulse which also allows the reader to start anywhere and read from there. This is to say, *Drafts* functions (or fails to) on the premise that each of its parts is related to other poems, both 'inside' and 'outside' the work, whilst simultaneously consisting of 115 self-contained long poems. In this regard, this chapter addresses Derridean notions as they appear in *Drafts,* with a view to establishing the implications Derrida's post-phenomenological readings of 'reading' has for 20th and 21st century long poems.

These complications are on display in the twentieth section of the 'Trace Elements', where DuPlessis explicitly reflects on the process of writing the Draft in hand:

It's hard enough

writing with traces,

alluding to trace elements,

and bargaining with the strange—

without the fact of ultimate loss

untold, untellable, with no ear to tell,

no bell to toll, no sound to read

within the out-flung pitch of cosmic time

except such unspeakable

force or residue as will unknow itself

inside gigantesque vibrations

that we-the-missing theorized once,

once upon a time.   (2013, 90)

The act of composition figured here as a "bargaining with the strange" entails a situation

wherein 'ultimate loss' is 'untold, untellable', as there is always "such unspeakable/ force or

reside". The trace as such also implies a conception of reality where humanity is a trace ("we-

the-missing"), a fairy-tale ("once upon a time"). This notion that the logic of the trace

anticipates demise is essential to understanding DuPlessis' work to challenge totality, which

is to say, in developing a poetics of the trace DuPlessis commits herself to the necessary

elision and incidental contingency that this implies.

DuPlessis further complicates this constellation of ideas surrounding the trace by

juxtaposing its theorisation with its 'employment' in research. The following questions are

found in the opening sections of 'Trace Elements':

"Does the researcher have the knowledge and the skill to

   carry out

the proposed research?"   (Ibid.)

[…]

> "Is the problem 'researchable', that is, can it be investigated
> through the collection and analysis of data?"
>
> "Was each piece of data subjected to external review? To
> internal criticism?"   (Ibid.)

Most academic readers will detect the origin of such questions, inextricably tied as they are

to the justifications a researcher must have to carry out their work and secure funding.

Placed in this context, these questions open onto far larger questions concerning the

ontological status of research, particularly that which deals in the workings of 'traces'. As

such, the above inquiries evoke competing affects: they are literally 'academic', in the sense

of arbitrariness, whilst betraying, almost against themselves, an opening into the thinking of

'piece[s] of data', and what this might even begin to mean in the context of poetics. DuPlessis

offers us one response:

> [...]   Data as every
> part of the poem on
> every scale, with every layered
> possibility for shim, split, and
> juxtaposition, that prismatic
> hedron for the faceted refraction
> of choices and debris.
> These pensive intersections
> are what demands research
> are what research demands.   (Ibid., 82)

 This poetics concerned with thresholds of meaning— "These pensive intersections"— can be

seen to work on a much larger scale, where the poem of 'data' is a 'prismatic hedron'. The

play between 'research' and 'demand' is crucial to the shape of DuPlessis' inquiry. Again, a

chiasmatic situation is invoked— DuPlessis' means of interrogation are clearly highly

influenced by academic criticism, perhaps most clearly in the extensive bibliography and

endnotes which substantiate the work. The demand of research into a topic is distinct from the research of this demand, which is to say, directing attention specifically towards the 'demand' on which all research is based is a meaningful way of exposing that which falls outside of the 'demand' in the question of research. If we recall the subversive presentation of research questions earlier in the poem, we can begin to see an argument in *Drafts* which seeks to retain the provisional starting-out of research, the original demand, rather than a subservience to the 'demands' of institutional research. As such, 'Draft 87' also presents something of a cosmological view, a 'tracing' back to the source(s). Tarlo reflects on this in relation to the long poem form, stating that *Drafts* deals with

> the cosmological sense of the bigness of this space in contrast to the
> fragmentary smallness of words, objects and tiny narratives which appear
> within it.   (Tarlo, np)

In the work of Quentin Meillassoux, questions concerning the origins of human life are used to establish a strong critique of, in particular, the phenomenological insistence upon phenomena being a process of perception rather than a question of there being such a thing as a 'thing-in-itself'. Meillassoux aims his argument towards what he calls 'correlationist' philosophy, as represented in the perceptual contingency of Heideggerian phenomenology and the language-games of Wittgenstein, and establishes this argument from cosmological premises. 'Correlationist' here is the term Meillassoux uses to refer to a post-Kantian insistence on the inaccessibility of the 'thing-in-itself', a position which instead argues for epistemic and ontological questions being answered by a 'correlation' between Self and Thing, rather than any determined conclusion that phenomena have their existence wholly in Self *or* Thing. In particular, the deceptively simple question of whether we can attest to the existence of pre-human phenomena such as the big bang or primordial life if no subject is

perceptually or linguistically aware of its happening acts as a starting point for Meillassoux's investigation. If there is no witness to the 'arche-fossil' (Meillassoux's term for a pre-human artefact), how can anything reliable be said about what preceded human life? In particular, this sense of the 'ancestral' "does not designate an absence *in* the given, and *for* givenness, but rather an absence *of* givenness as such" (21). Meillassoux is not addressing naïve empiricism in his postulation concerning the arche-fossil; rather, it is the cosmological question of conceiving existence *without givenness as such*, which is to say, without the means of interpretation found necessary by 'correlationist' philosophies.

Aspects of DuPlessis' sense of the 'trace' relate her writing here to the scepticism which Meillassoux grounds his 'speculative realism' in, and additionally directs questions concerning what constitutes the 'beyond' of poetry. In the nineteeth section of the poem, she writes:

> Pedestrian acronyms will boil right down to atoms
> and leave no Earth,
> leaving what we would have called 'nothing'
> had we seen it or not even 'nothing': it's that all our eons
> that were known and lived
> will just have been
> some ashy smudge that's now incipient…
>
> (2010, 89)

These "pedestrian acronyms"—seemingly both banalities of life and a greater sense of all language depending on one's interpretation of 'pedestrianism'— boil down and leave "what we would have called 'nothing' had we seen it". This invokes the 'ancestral' in Meillassoux's sense; the trace 'some ashy smudge' is "not even 'nothing'", for the apparatus which judges presence and non-presence is itself absent. To reiterate: no judgment of presence takes

place without a correlationist present to judge. This concept of the trace, and the burden it places on subjectivity, becomes a focus of a later section of the poem:

> I've known parallel days of unreadable
> alphabets, unutterable
> languages unravelling, in which
> materials bubble up (from what?
> and how?)— an engram sent by chemistry, a dream-plot
> out of sedimented fossil-thought,
> a locale or event in which there is as much
> forgetting, salvaging, evoking, condensing
> losing rearticulating, interfering and mixing
> as any single memory trace,
> taken, that is, as actually remembering something…

(Ibid., 81)

DuPlessis' engagement with questions of the relation between the subject and the trace allow for a writing which occupies a distinctly liminal position. With a sense of the trace as inextricably bound up in questions of provisionality, DuPlessis develops a subject position in which the poetic text allows for indeterminacy. One response, therefore, to Meillassoux's critical position lies in the potential opened by the poetic text. This is more than merely a designation of the philosophical status of the poem; rather, it displays a more general potentiality of writing itself, of the act of making and leaving traces. As such, DuPlessis' meditation on the 'trace' in 'Draft 87' establishes a sense of the radical contingency of meaning-generation (and elision) in the poetic text. Having gained a sense of the ways in which DuPlessis' texts can function on a small scale, it is necessary to frame these poetic effects within the wider structural procedures of 'drafting' and 'folding'.

Drafting & Folding

DuPlessis writes that "'Drafts' are never final":

> 'Drafts' are freshly drawn and freely declared, as if a preliminary outline or sketch. In 'Drafts', completion is always provisional. 'Drafts' involve the pull or traction on something a drain on something, conscription into something.
>
> (2006, 21)

This constellation of terms— the preliminary outline, the sketch, freshly drawn, freely declared, provisional— is held in tension by a 'drain' and 'conscription' whereby the 'draft' is compelled to resist its own closure. Of the notion that 'completion is always provisional', this refers not only to the various ways in which DuPlessis elides signification with complexes of language but also to the structural implications of writing over each set of 19 poems six times in sequence. Additionally, the 'drafting' of *Drafts* is apparent in the many "graphic interventions" on display throughout the work. Often these typological manipulations have the effect of deferring the closure of a line, stanza or image. In the first 19 Drafts, one can roughly trace these 'interventions', as Ron Silliman has in 'Ur-Scene, Ur-New': Draft 1 'It' has large N' and 'Y' scrawled in pencil in the body of the text, as well as having its divisions marked by equals signs; Draft 2 'She' features moments in lines where two words are written above each other; Draft 3 'Of' has its first half marked in the margin by the word 'CUT', indicating erasure or drafting; Draft 4 'In' features bold typeface lines written through the body of the text; Draft 5 'Gap' features large blocks of redacted text, marked by black squares; Draft 6 'Midrush' features a large hand-drawn incomplete letter O— and so on. The recurrence of these draft techniques is not systematic throughout the folding process, but often, as in the 'Line of Five', each subsequent draft considers the same thematic mode of draft or erasure.

These 'draft' techniques are reminiscent of collage aesthetics— a notion which DuPlessis herself acknowledges:

> Another way of reading my work sees in it the visual art tactic of collage,
> taking disparate materials and setting them by juxtaposition in relation to
> each other. Collage uses a lot of citation and materials from the "real world"
> imbedded, and it features oblique angles and edges, a sense of startle at the
> relations of the elements.   (McCreary 2015, np)

This 'relational' principle of collage, whereby indeterminacy is embraced through the coexistence of disparate themes and forms, is not so much a means of defining DuPlessis' *Drafts* as a work of collage as gesturing at one of the 'generic activities' at work. The point of stressing this distinction lies in making clear that *Drafts* is not necessarily a work which relies on disparity to generate its meaning. However, collage, and in particular the combination of visual and linguistic signs in the poem-space. These take a variety of forms— on display most clearly in the collage poems, which offer an example of DuPlessis claim about the work above. 'Draft CX: Primer' is a collage work with one page-poem per letter of the alphabet. DuPlessis begins with a preface:

> This is a work from bursts of the visual in the verbal, and round about again,
> verse visa. This is a work primed with letters, with colours, read and seen, red
> and scene, the magic and oddity of daily life ripped to bits   (2007, 47)

Quotidian 'magic' and 'oddity' becomes meaningful by virtue of the tension it is held in between image and word— "read and seen, red and scene"— and as such "the visual in the verbal" establishes a sense in which, for DuPlessis, collage is not so much encountered in perception but rather a mode of perception, an activity. DuPlessis' embraces the fragment in its literal presence rather than by virtue of its occlusion— which is to say, collage is appropriate to the notion of Drafts as a grid, made up of vastly different forms and textual interventions, a collage tapestry folded over and over. Ron Silliman comments on how integral this sense of the collage is to DuPlessis' work:

It is in this sense, right at the edge of the written, of writing, that I take the collage poems to be in many ways the sections closest to being a core thematic statement for the whole of *Drafts.* I am not kidding in the slightest when I say that I think that M could be the topic sentence for the entire project. Unlike much that today calls itself asemic writing, DuPlessis demonstrates/explores that such marks upon paper are never without meaning.   (Silliman 2015, np)

Each 'poem-page' of the Collage poems features its corresponding letter of the alphabet, and often several other words which extend the letter's meaning. 'M' for example, has a small cut out white M in a red box in the top left corner, whilst the rest of the page is occupied by shapes of string surrounding and interweaving between cut out geometrical blocks of colour. The shapes of string elicit the appearance of human figures, particularly the lower-central dark blue shape which resembles a female with her arms held out as if to cradle a child. A reading of this might propose that the figure of the caring female is strung together and only vaguely visible beneath the letter 'M', the ghost of 'mother' on the page and in the letter itself. This interpretation is of course an act of seizure on the work— a motif observed in the collage poem 'S', which features images of clouds cut out to seemingly create shapes, under which appear the words "Sad and clouds and sky/ Are veiled and become silent" (2007, 50). Both the words and the clouds are obscured by a sheet of gauze stapled to the page. These combined elements— the poetic commentary on the image, the clouds' invitation for spatial interpretation and the gauze which elides both— disclose the process of collage, wherein the work is reliant on the fragments' relations to each other rather than their individual presences. The Collage Poems then can be seen to extend many of the techniques at work throughout *Drafts*, just as the Collage Poems, as Silliman argues, are a vital means of reading the larger body of *Drafts.* For example, in the 'line of five', each

six Drafts of which are entitled 'Gap', DuPlessis uses 'textual interventions' to establish a collage between differing processes of erasure and mourning. The process of erasure in 'Draft 5: Gap' is not systematic. The meaning of the 'gap', or its absent-presence, takes a variety of forms, perhaps most literally in the 'black outs' of inked squares seeming to cover over writing. For example, in Draft 5, DuPlessis writes:

Strange

██████

(2001, 28)

The 'gap' is an aporetic poetic device. In order to simulate erasure, the black ink squares can only be said to present the process of omission *in general* rather than specific acts of erasure. What I mean by this is that the 'gap' itself is not so much the blacked out squares but rather the 'distance' between this manipulation of the page and the intelligible text surrounding it to which it is related. What is important to stress, then, is that unlike the redacted FBI files on George Oppen's communist activity which DuPlessis accessed with the Freedom of Information Act in the process of editing his *Selected Letters*, the 'gaps' in 'Draft 5' simulate a variety of effects of erasure in a subversive manner. DuPlessis writes:

> The repeated title, about loss, is on the "line of 5"—there is a "Gap," "Draft 5: Gap," that refers to the death of my father, and to the blacked out files of the poet of George Oppen. The next "Gap" is also about loss.
>
> (McCreary 2015, np)

'Gap' as such refers to a series of erasures. This 'gap' is often related to mourning, and as such the Drafts on the 'line of five' are often concerned with elegiac modes. For example, in 'Draft 81: Gap', DuPlessis writes of the figure of the gap as "The what is-ness of it./ The nothing is-ness of it" (2010, 23). The 'is-ness' is ambiguously held between presence and absence; the gap stands between things, but is itself a new and different presence. As such,

later in the poem, DuPlessis writes: "A box of black for everything./ What is everything; what

is nothing?" (Ibid., 24) The 'box of black' here seems to refer literally to the act of redaction,

but also appears to allude to what, in computing and mechanics, is known as a 'black box', "a

complex system or device whose internal workings are hidden or not readily understood"

(OED). The 'gap' in question is enigmatic in its signification, though this does not mean that

the materials surrounding it are likewise obscured. Rather, the presence of gaps can be said

to generatively develop a specific site of meaning— in these cases both the text and the act

of mourning. This typographical feature, then, can be seen to prompt a variety of semantic

effects in its literal and etymological aspects.

As such, collage is a concern in specific moments of *Drafts*, as above, but also

throughout by virtue of DuPlessis' 'folding' technique, in which drafts, in books of 19,

become 'donors' for the subsequent groups of 19. There are 6 of these books, creating 19

lines, establishing a grid. This grid allows the reader to locate themselves at any point in the

poem, able to see the neighbouring drafts and thematic recurrences— for example, a

diagonal line extends from 'X: Letters' through 'XXX: Fosse', 'L. Scholia & Restlessnes', 'LXX

Lexicon', 'XC Excess' to 'CX: Primer', the roman numerals of which invite the spectre of

Pound's *Cantos* to bear on the work. There are 114 drafts created in this way, in addition to

the highly collagistic 'Unnumbered: Precis', which sits outside of the grid and is constituted of

lines of the first 57 drafts. DuPlessis describes it as such:

> The "folding" of one poem over another—in which any draft corresponds in
> some sensuous, intellectual, allusive, or even simple way to a specific "donor
> draft" on a periodicity of nineteen. The tactic of randomized repetition is a
> way of constructing the work like a gigantic memory of itself. The tactic of the
> fold creates a regular, though widely spaced, recurrence among the poems,
> and a chained or meshed linkage whose regularity is both predictable and
> suggestive. My inventing both a vertical and a horizontal way of thinking about

> the relations of these poems was very liberating—the work became malleable
> and porous, and yet framed.   (McCreary 2015, np)

Here, the work conceived as a 'gigantic memory of itself' establishes the sense in which

DuPlessis' procedure is not programmatic— which is to say, it undergoes the vicissitudes of

"regular [...] recurrence", at once 'predictable' and 'suggestive'. This is crucial to DuPlessis'

extension— it cannot be formulaically determined, but it has a trajectory. The 'fold' is what

establishes the radical contingency of the composition, which is to say, it is in the process of

creating a poem out of the materials and inquiries of another which opens the text to

indeterminacy. Harriet Tarlo identifies this as a compositional mode whilst simulateneously

seeking to identify the disorientation the 'draft' and 'fold' mechanisms have on the reader

herself:

> Here we become involved in a constant **re**-reading of the work. Yet, however
> closely we follow the folds of the drafts, however many connections we draw,
> the effect is that of moving in a series of concentric circles, a spiral which
> gradually homes in to the place where we are, but which never gets there.
> This endless desiring deferral of presence enacts its own brand of *différance*.
> The enfolded nature of the work prevents us from settling into reading the
> drafts **either** as a seamless whole **or** as a series of discrete pieces. Instead we
> find that we have a continual, overlapping sense of beginning again and again:
> we are always "incipit" (the title of the twentieth draft). (Tarlo, np)

Tarlo explicitly makes the same move we performed earlier, seeking to understand the

'spiralling' structure of *Drafts* by virtue of 'endless desiring deferral of presence', which is to

say, in Derridean terms. The 'fold' itself, however, has a critical precedent in the work of Giles

Deleuze, a notion that Patrick Pritchett argues: "[T]he fold recalls Deleuze's comment that

the challenge for the fold is how to multiply itself to infinity" (2015, np). Questions of the

infinite and composition are implied throughout by *Drafts*, but it would be more correct to

say that *Drafts* interrogates the infinite rather than actually displaying an 'aesthetic of the infinite'. This is of course a matter of one's definition of the infinite. In *'What Is Philosophy?'*, Deleuze and Guattari address this in relation to the fold:

> There are always many infinite movements caught within each other, each folded in the others, so that the return of one instantaneously relaunches another in such a way that the plane of immanence is ceaselessly being woven, like a gigantic shuttle. (1994, 19)

The diction here is illuminating— 'The fold' involves being "instantaneously relaunche[d]" between parts of a "ceaseless" weaving. In relation to *Drafts*, one can see Deleuze's address of the fold as indicative of the movement between the individual poems plotted in their grid. Furthermore, as Deleuze writes, "[t]o turn toward does not imply merely to turn away but to confront, to lose one's way, to move aside" (Ibid., 19). This ambulatory gesture is useful in conceiving of the reader's encounter of the 'fold'— a movement of orientation is always polysemic, simultaneously a turn away and toward, a confrontation and a getting lost, an avoidance. This question is one of simultaneity. How does a reader experience a poem the parts of which take place in variety of sequences and serials *at the same time*?

As such, and to return briefly to Derrida's taxonomy, the fold creates a relationship between the poems which can be discussed in terms of supplementarity. In '…That Dangerous Supplement', Derrida writes:

> The concept of the supplement […] harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. […] But the supplement *supplements*. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.
>
> (1992, 146)

This unequivocal dualism, which is far too 'surplus' to be understood merely dialectically, is at once an exposition of Derrida's *différance* and an instructive means of coming to terms with the poetic encounter as a seemingly infinite "plenitude" accumulating and simultaneously 'filling in' a void. More than just 'filling', the supplement replaces and therefore defers meaning. What this means for the relationship between one Draft and another is a play of presences and absences is always at work, most significantly in the form of citations, the extensive bibliography and the folding process. Whilst the *Drafts* themselves are often self-contained long poems, their reliance on neighbouring works makes them subsistent on the arguments developed elsewhere. This logic, extended across the work, would seem to suggest that ultimate conclusion is deferred by the generative multiplicity of the structure of *Drafts.* This is a convenient conclusion, but might overstate the extent to which DuPlessis rejects notions of closure. This is to say that closure functions like any other theme in *Drafts*— provisionally. In this sense, there are moments wherein *telos* can be seen to settle, but this closure is axiomatically imperilled by the 'grid' in which each Draft sits. This conception of *Drafts* allows us vantage to, as DuPlessis writes, "Think of the whole work with all its poems as a grid." She continues:

> There is a place for any poem before it is written. This is a wonderful fact. What relationships are created in these "lines"?—well, any that can be imagined, from the repetition of the simple color red, as in "Draft 2" and the "line of 2," to complex reconsiderations of materials and ideas. There are funny rules, amusing pulsations, mini-runs (like the use of Roman numerals on a diagonal pattern from the Poundean XXX), necessities, intentions that reveal themselves seriously and teasingly, and must be honored. The "line of 1" seems to honor the word "it," which is buried or encoded in all of the titles to date along that line.   (McCreary 2015, np)

Furthermore, the establishing of these 'lines' does not simply situate or fix an individual Draft in a single position. The 'Drafts' are instead held in a series of non-narrative arrangements at once. As such, within the 'grid' of *Drafts*, the various 'folds' are arranged into 'lines'. This is to say, the 19 poems from *Toll,* the first book of drafts, are each followed in sequence by five other poems, each of which 'folds' the original and establishes a 'donor' draft for those that follow. DuPlessis comments:

> By line, I mean what I have taken to calling the "line of 1" or the "line of 'N'": all the poems that occur every 19, such as "Draft 1: It," "Draft 20: Incipit," "Draft 39: Split" and Draft 58 (apparently called "In Situ," as I write, but one never knows)—you can see the warp/woof, even/odd in the sequence 1, 20, 39, 58. [...]   (Ibid., np)

In order to, as I have proposed, work with the various levels of *Drafts,* it seems wise, though not strictly necessary, to now move back to the beginning of the work, and follow the first 'line', beginning with 'Draft 1: It'.

'the line of one': 'It'; 'Incipit'; 'Split'; 'In Situ'; 'Pitch Content'; 'Velocity'

DuPlessis comments that "the "line of 1" seems to honour the word "it," which is buried or encoded in all of the titles to date along that line" (Ibid., np). One way in which this 'small noun' can be seen to function is as representative of the notion of deixis— uses of language the meaning of which is elided without context. First and foremost, 'Draft 1: It' opens the poem *in medias res* raising the deixis of its title as a key motif in the work to come. Furthermore, the opening Draft also establishes a dialogue with a number of other openings of long poems, in particular Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Ezra Pound. For example, Ron

Silliman writes, the two pairs of Ns, the first typed, the second handwritten, which open the entire work of *Drafts* can be seen to function within a nexus of meaning. He writes:

> "Draft 1: It" begins with two single capital letters, each punctuated by a period so that they might be read as abbreviations or as sentences. That each is "N" echoes, maybe even puns the Zukofskian *An.* This is followed immediately by a pair of hand-drawn capital Ns, interlocked, one larger than the other, giving an effect of a mountain range (the Alps?). [...] You might also, if you were inclined as I, see in that first peak of the larger N an echo there of an *A,* not just a further hint of the Zukofskian *An,* but of the idea of an Alpha Bet, the Roman written character as a medium for poetry perhaps not as divorced from the natural world as we might imagine. (Silliman 2015, np)

The 'alps' to which Silliman alludes are Basil Bunting's, in his reckoning of Pound's Cantos, and indeed the N's written across each other evoke a mountain range. Silliman reads even this opening graphic gesture as indicative of a variety of allusions and intertextual references. This continues in the opening lines, where the dialogue can be seen to begin:

> And something spinning in the bushes   The past
>
>   Dismembered   sweetest
>
>   dizzy chunk of song
>
>   one possible: there is a
>
>   in another   strange erosion and
>
>   dready fast flash   all the sugar is reconstituted:
>
>   sunlight
>
>   silver backed   as 'stem': sugar as dirt.
>
>   light this
>
>   governed being: it?   that?   (DuPlessis 2001, 1)

In contrast to Pound's setting off down to the ships, or Maximus offshore by islands in the blood, or a quartet playing Bach, DuPlessis opens *Drafts* with a counter-gesture, one concerned with indeterminacy of image, rather than a clear figure or stance. "Something"

spins in the bushes, out of sight, and DuPlessis concerns herself with the 'strange erosion' of this past, a past which is both 'sweetest' and 'dismembered'. The disjointed stanza ends with a call to the deictic— "light this/ governed being: it? that?" (Ibid.). The 'light' in question is perhaps the context which grants meaning to the deictic, a being which is 'governed' by the epistemological light of context.

The second poem in the line, 'Draft 20: Incipit', allows us to witness a poetics of deixis folded. This is the first 'folded' poem of *Drafts*, and as such, its discussion of perpetual beginning through the 'incipit' not only establishes a thematic of the fold but also embeds the 'it' of the opening Draft as the last two letters of 'Incipit'. This establishes a fold in the titles themselves which to some extent indicates the nature of the specific fold in question. In the opening lines of 'Draft 20: Incipit', DuPlessis writes:

> Curious, this querying letter from a stranger
>   Just when I had in fact
> turned back to begin,
>   it made me think again
> where I had been.   (Ibid. 130)

The large 'C' which opens the folded Draft is carried from the final line of 'Draft One: It', which ends with the phrase "darker, antecedent sea". In this sense, a continuity is established, albeit a continuity which undergoes modulation— 'Sea' becomes 'C', and furthermore the line seems to reflect back on the process of the 'fold'. The writer of 'It' is figured as a stranger, and the 'letter' ('C') queries by virtue of the connotations it opens. Later in the poem DuPlessis again explicitly responds to 'Draft One: It', reflecting on the scrawled 'N' and 'Y':

> The beginning was, as these things go,
> negation. But
> 'twas also setting forth of signs to read or tell.

> Moonlit refraction by a strange heap
>
> counted on base "N" and on base "Y."
>
> Yes and no. Both and and.   (Ibid. 131)

For a beginning to be figured as 'negation' perhaps implies the tradition in which it takes place. This again recalls supplementarity; by 'adding' to the tradition in question, DuPlessis sees herself as negating as well as "setting forth [...] signs to read or tell". The 'Moonlit refraction' seems to allude to the 'governed being' 'lit' in 'Draft One: It'— and as such "yes and no" are deictic terms, reliant on their context to be either/or. DuPlessis expresses this in the phrase "Both and and", which seems to use 'and' as a noun, bringing together 'bothness' and 'andness' in relation to the deixis of 'yes' and 'no'. At the end of the poem, in an italicised endnote, DuPlessis writes:

> *It's because I ran out*
> *of paper that I'm writing this*
> *on another draft.*
>
> *So here and there*
> *a stranger word*
> *comes through.*
>
> It being the only canvas
>
> wide enough for human sadness.   (Ibid. 133)

What appears as a practical solution, a paper-saving exercise, is the opening experience of the fold. This gesture at the economy of drafts again recalls Derrida, whose work on Hegel in *Writing and Difference* seeks to work past dialectics towards a 'general economy', a 'play' of signs. DuPlessis' final line here works in two distinct ways— it seems to suggest first that the folded-draft is "the only canvas/ wide enough for human sadness", the implication being that the possibilities and potentialities of the long poem allow for an interrogative mode. At the same time, taken in its deixis, the "it" which is the "only canvas/ wide enough" could be

itself— which is to say, the deixis of 'it' might well be this 'canvas'. By locating the 'it' in 'Incipit', DuPlessis begins *Drafts* again, restating its inquiry. The notion of restatement itself undergoes critique in 'Draft 39: Split', which attends to problems of articulation. DuPlessis writes:

> When you are powerless
> > you say the same things
> over again
> > and over it seems
> the opposite of poetry,
> > no plumping sumptuous brocade
> with self-
> > fashioning diction.
> So writing is impossible,
> > my dog eats and is
> vaccinated, unlike some people,
> > and I am helpless— can this be?—
> hardened from the concrete
> > infrastructure rigid through me.
> What would it take
> > to articulate it?
> Is writing this way
> > legit?
> Why is this entitled
> > split?
> It's like I jolt my former hopes
> > with a rhymed bit.   (2004, 3-4)

Here, a critique of the powerlessness of repeating oneself is expressed throughout a stanza which becomes parodically repetitive, relying on tight rhymes at the end to "jolt [...] former hopes". These former hopes seem to refer to an illusion created by "sumptuous brocade/

224

with self-/fashioning diction." Instead, the poet is 'helpless' as well as 'powerless', wondering

what it would take/ to articulate *it*?*"* [My emphasis]. Again, deixis is revealed here in an 'it'

which itself seems 'powerless', lost in repetition and oblique in reference. 'Draft 39: Split'

begins with a statement that:

      Eyes glaze; pen

      loose, inattentive

      Limp hand

      falls, adaze,

      and, from

      nothing, an

      "It" marks dots

      down on the page.   (2004, 2)

Here an image of the inexorable power of writing is contrasted with the later helplessness.

Even inattentive and from a limply held pen, from nothing "an 'It' marks dots/ down on the

page". This 'It' seems to gesture towards neither the hand nor the pen, but something

indeterminate between them. The 'itness' of inscription itself is, as such, figured as being

neither an act purely of the pen or the hand, but a chiasmic interplay. These concerns are

developed further in the following fold, which concerns itself with the self-reflective question

of "how call 'it' to account?" (7). In 'Draft 58: In Situ' DuPlessis writes:

      This was to be a beginning,

            a simple beginning, in situ,

                that is, in the middle, here.

      An impossible task

> but tempting.
>
>   Since all words dismember into invention.
>
> For in (or by) the act of starting (staring, stating)
>
>   something else takes shape.
>
>   How
>
> could It be otherwise?   (2007, 1)

"It" is articulated as something that 'is', a state of the object, its quiddity. The act of beginning is related to this "itness" by virtue of presence. The beginning of a thing, of a literary work, establishes for the first time this 'itness', this Being of the thing. The opening phrase— "This was to be a beginning"— itself indicates a prior establishment of a desire to begin, which itself raises the question of the immanence of such a recognition. The event of 'beginning' is as such indeterminate— as DuPlessis has it, "an impossible task,/ but tempting". These developing questions across the 'line of one' regarding questions of context, articulation, quiddity and deixis find a direct voicing in the following fold, which seeks to question structure and arrangement, particularly in regards to the Drafts themselves as each opening a 'book' of *Drafts.* 'Draft 77: Pitch Content' begins with a Hélène Cixous quotation which opens the poem onto an investigation of its own place in the book and books of *Drafts.* DuPlessis quotes Cixous in the poem's endnote:

> Books are characters in books. Between authors and books, not everything
> can be taken for granted. It [the book] wants to write. It wants me to write *it.*
>
>   (2010, 173)

The poem's opening suggests these anxieties concerning the place of each draft in *Drafts* and the place of *Drafts* in each draft:

> A
>
> first page empty, blank and null.

> The table clear.
>
> Begin. But how? as Empty? Full?
>
> And where? (Ibid., 3)

Again, the problem of beginning is reiterated, and, with reference to tabula rasa, the prospect of beginning again is troubled simultaneously by a vacuum and a plenum. The 'whereness' of this beginning is both inside and outside the book:

> The Book
>
> or B
>
>> would show itself as wall,
>>
>> writing scribbled on off-cuts,
>>
>> marks smuggled into cracks,
>>
>>> opening, penetration, fold, hinge;
>>>
>>> leave something, leaving anything.
>>>
>>> A dot, a smudge, a scrap. (Ibid., 2)

This wall which the book shows itself as, carrying its smuggled marks, prompts a taxonomy of procedures we recognise from throughout *Drafts.* The 'hinge' aspect of each of these drafts on the 'line of one' is clear from their pensive meditation on processes of beginning, all of which seems implied in DuPlessis' sense of the line's opening word 'It'.

'Draft 96: Velocity', the final poem in the line, carries the deictic 'it' into 'velocity', addressing speed and pace in the context of perception. The poem opens with the image of a swallowtail:

> Pulses uneven, pushes
>
>> surging air gusts, gusts plunge
>>
>>> horizontally, sweeping
>
> wings, its wings

open and shut, balancing

                                    the swallowtail

                gripping down.

                            It snorkels precariously,

                                    fast as it can.   (2013, 23)

These lines cascade in a style reminiscent of late Carlos Williams ('Asphodel, that Greeny

Flower'), whilst the syntax and organisation of line breaks recalls the relation between form

and object of perception in The Falls sections of *Paterson.* This modernist lyricism is used to

enact velocity, offering five clauses before indicating the noun to which these velocities are

occurring. DuPlessis acknowledges in the following stanza that "This is a well-known dream-

genre— No consolation" (Ibid.), indicating perhaps a resistance to a lyric which would

pretend to find some transcendental consolation. The form of the poem is bipartite: the

second half is subtitled 'Remarks', and consists in a series of paragraphs which reflect back on

the language used in the more conventional stanza shapes of the first half of the poem. The

question of consolation arises again in the parallel section of 'Remarks':

> That gust of pulsing, wide and fast *plunging crosswise* push and change
>
> that *made this mark, this / this \ like any brightness blown, any wing or leaf,*
>
> I wanted to say it was *Parnassius Mnemosyne* (clouded Apollo) *for its*
>
> *fancier name-* which wasn't true. It was just a swallowtail in which the
>
> word 'memory' did not appear nor the touch of 'poetry'. *It was* just
>
> ordinary, not endangered, no more than anything.   (Ibid., 24)

Here DuPlessis reflects on the process by which the Swallowtail was arrived at— making clear

that a desire to resist a sense of reading the poetic in objects, rather than the reverse. This

discloses the process of the poet having followed etymology and dismissed its rigours in

favour of an attempt to measure its movement, its velocity in flight. The mythic origin,

situating the swallowtail as a representative of 'memory', is simply not true— "*It was* just

ordinary". The deixis is still severe, as when DuPlessis states: "The 'it' emerged almost

unseen,/ lurking" (Ibid., 25). Indeed, she concludes in the essay 'On *Drafts'* that "What I

learned from the first Drafts was that there was a lot of 'it' out there; that it was all 'it'"

(2006, 213).

Conclusion

In 'Haibun: Draw Your Own Draft', DuPlessis writes that she has "a cultural responsibility to

the absent woman" (Ibid., 237). As such, DuPlessis' poetics— whilst clearly home to a variety

of structural and linguistic indeterminacies— has a clear orientation in terms of its ethical

commitment. These commitments aren't merely explored in the long poem, but, in

DuPlessis' view, are problems *of* the long poem. 'Draft 59: Flash Back', which is situated on

the line-of-two beginning with 'She', reflects on acts of "covering women over/ with gigantic

cloths, of snagging them in nets" (2007, 8). Much of DuPlessis' work, particularly in her

critical prose, seeks to untangle these nets and unfold these coverings over. In 'Marble

Paper: Towards A Feminist History of Poetry', DuPlessis articulates this anxiety as a desire

and necessity to "reconceptualise" "all culture and cultural products":

> I am the ghost of the future; under the rubric 'feminist' all culture and all
> cultural products would have to be reconceptualised. In particular, it is time
> for a totally different History of Poetry talking about "woman/women",
> "man/men", femininity, masculinity, sexuality, effeminacy, female masculinity,
> and queerness, torqueing and resisting binaries. (2002, 101)

DuPlessis seeks to orient the 'History of Poetry' towards questions concerning not only the

specific binaries of male/female but also binaries more generally. The notion that DuPlessis'

female authorial voice 'ghosts' the future suggests the fact that the conventional 'History of

Poetry' is itself haunted by its omissions of female and feminine voices. Again, the double-play of 'gender/genre' can be seen to establish the sense in which, for DuPlessis, a feminist project is necessarily textual, and involves a task of redressing the development of poetic forms themselves as well as individual acts of poetry. As such, she continues:

> Poetic traditions, genres of poems, poetic authority as textual manifested, representations of subjectivity and social location, discussions of relationships including romance, love, desire, inspiration, and repulsion— all elements deeply constitute of poetic texts— can reveal gender assumptions that open the 'field' of poetry to new ways of envisioning its purposes, problems of representation and meanings. (2002, 102)

Here, DuPlessis articulates her feminist project as pertaining not only to the emancipation of women but also to the emancipation of meaning, as the former is inextricably bound with the latter. This relationship is articulated in terms of voice. DuPlessis writes:

> Oh, the poet! Some of her, in or for any given poem, is the subjectivity of the enunciation. However, there is something left over, left out. This involves another relationship half textual and half in 'biography' (that is, in history, in temporality) between the subjectivity of any poem's enunciation and the historically existing writer. (2006, 103)

DuPlessis insists on the existential basis of feminist articulation in order to clarify what is 'left over, left out' as pertaining to the specific situations surrounding composition. DuPlessis' phrase 'the subjectivity of the enunciation' is as such useful in distinguishing between the 'historically existing writer' and the process by which the female Poet is formed in the act of writing. In 'For The Etruscans', DuPlessis defines this 'Female aesthetic' as: "the production of formal, epistemological, and thematic strategies of the group Woman, strategies born in struggle with much of already existing culture, and overdetermined by two elements of sexual difference" (1990, 5). These formal, epistemological and thematic strategies of

resisting the totalisation of gender and genre constitute the individual 'drafts' which

DuPlessis assembles in her project. Their coexistence in the 'grid' of *Drafts* establishes a

sense of the whole work as an encyclopaedic inquiry, adopting and manipulating a range of

traditional poetic forms and bringing them together under the auspices of a provisionality

which, whilst rife throughout the work, is not 'totalising'. This chapter's reading of DuPlessis

brings this thesis' disclosures of poetic extension to a likewise provisional end. It remains in

the conclusion that follows to bring together these observations concerning idiosyncrasy and

extension and to seek to underscore precisely what my argument has offered to the

discourse surrounding American poetics, the long poem and the relationship between poetry

and phenomenology. DuPlessis will as such remain a prominent figure in this discussion, as

her *Drafts* and critical prose constitute what is arguably the most sustained and developed

commentary on the long poem so far in the 21st century.

Inconclusion

It would be inappropriate in closing this thesis to seek to 'conclude' in any final sense, as though I had settled a debate or solved a problem once and for all. To make such a move at the end would be apt to undermine the project's guiding ambitions and the work performed by the individual chapters. It is still necessary, however, to re-affirm the principles with which this thesis set out and to indicate where they have taken us. Most importantly, it is crucial that I reframe the model of extended poetics espoused in my introduction in the light of my observations of Oppen, Schuyler, Blaser, Hejinian, Scalapino, Howe and DuPlessis. In this regard I am seeking to emulate the inconclusive conclusion of Lyn Keller's important work *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*. In closing, Keller writes: "One of my primary aims in bringing together into a single book readings of eight very different long poems by contemporary women has been to convey a sense of the amazing variety— and vitality— of women's work in extended forms." (1997, 303) As indicated at the outset, I favour this embrace of difference as opposed to models of criticism (for example, those of Rosenthal and Gall, Stephen Fender, Margaret Dickie, Burton Hatlen and Peter Middleton) which have sought to command coherence in the form of historical narratives and lineages of influence.

Furthermore, it is characteristic of phenomenological practice— in the hands of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, the two most prominent theoretical figures throughout this work— to embrace provisionality, inconclusiveness and open-endedness as not only valuable rhetorical devices but as fundamentally authentic aspects of the writing of criticism and philosophy. In many ways, it is this ambition of phenomenology which is most relevant to my

argument. What I have sought to redress in the criticism of 'The American Long Poem' is

similar to what Merleau-Ponty saw as the crucial mistakes of scientism and psychologism in

the early 20th century; namely, the insistence on erasing contingency from intellectual inquiry

in favour of cohesion. In the process of characterising extended poetics as a series of

idiosyncratic acts, I have in each instance by necessity worked from the poems themselves

and the terms they employ, rather than seeking to impose an external agenda informed by

the desire to make the works conform to a single model of practice. In 'What Is

Phenomenology?', Merleau-Ponty articulates the basis of this ambition:

> To return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes
> knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks* and in relation to which
> scientific determination is abstract, significative and dependent, as is
> geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt first what a
> forest, a prairie, or a river is. (2012, 57)

Following this metaphor, to seek now to draw a map of American extended poetics based on

my journey through them as sites of inquiry would abstract the features to which I have

borne witness, would misrepresent the contexts in which these features were encountered.

This is not to claim that maps are useless— but rather that the landscape remains the initial

point at which, in a contingent and undetermined manner, meaning is first encountered.

What is at stake here is a nuanced appreciation of what it means to overlook. A point of

vantage— such as that offered after a long period of research— allows one at once to look

over a range of things, but also risks overlooking these things in favour of the abstraction of

their assembled parts. Again, Merleau-Ponty articulates this concern:

> All of what I know of the world, even through science, I know on the basis of a
> view, which is mine, or on the basis of an experience of the world without
> which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (Ibid., 56)

This is not to suggest that studies of 'The American Long Poem' which emphasise historicity

and narratives of influence are themselves 'meaningless', but rather that they risk

meaninglessness if they lose sight of the experience of the poems from which these concepts

develop. Crucially, in the case of works of poetic extension, what constitutes the 'poem' is itself subject to structural, formal, thematic, generic and temporal ruptures. It is specifically for this reason that a phenomenological methodology has allowed me to address idiosyncrasy in extended poetics, because "to return to the things themselves" in this context means to return to the individual acts of inquiry from which the larger structures of long poems develop. To be clear: not only is this a question of how one ought to go about research in poetics generally, it is also a specific question of how one can best retain the quality of idiosyncrasy when exploring a form of intellectual practice that is inherently highly specialised and site-specific.

A further difficulty exists in that my emphasis on idiosyncrasy throughout this thesis would be threatened by an attempt to impose artificial cohesion at this point. This is not to say, however, that similarities do not exist, nor to deny that it might be possible to find common ground between these poets as a means of bringing this thesis to a close. There might be a strong temptation, for example, to suggest that my readings have illuminated the fundamentally intersubjective nature of many 20th century American works of poetic extension. This, to my mind, would be an accurate statement, but it would also undermine the very nature of the intersubjective inquiries at hand. This is because in order for an engagement with an Other to be ethical, it must not appropriate nor generalise. This follows Levinas' sense of ethics, wherein encountering the Other must necessarily involve a negotiation of that which is *absolutely* other, an entity which cannot be comprehended in terms of the Same. One vital question, then, remains. Has an insistence on idiosyncrasy, extension and the poem-as-inquiry successfully circumvented the problems associated with the historicist narratives of Fender, Rosenthal, Gall and Gardner which I addressed at the outset of the work?

The answer to this lies in the importance of taxonomical distinctions. In addition to

my own three guiding terms— extension, idiosyncrasy and inquiry— I have been able to add

to these the specific terms of extension employed by the poets themselves. Oppen's

'numerousness', Schuyler's 'life', Blaser's 'outside', Scalapino and Hejinian's 'sight', Howe's

'margin' and DuPlessis' 'draft' have been crucial in allowing me to frame extension in

American poetics. By dealing with poets in their own terms, it has been possible to articulate

a variety of divergent poetics whilst retaining an intense focus on idiosyncrasy. My use of the

term 'idiosyncrasy' throughout this work has been central in my attempt to re-conceptualise

the long poem as a work of extension rather than as a cohesive generic category. Perhaps

most importantly, what has come to light in the disclosure of the six poets in this work is the

fact that idiosyncrasy can itself function as a way of framing compositional practice. By this I

mean to make clear the fact that in each of my readings, it has not been my intention to

emphasise oddity or peculiarity, but rather to develop idiosyncrasy as a measure of the way

in which individual poets organise their acts of extension. In this case, then, idiosyncrasy is

primarily a matter of compositional form, of how a poet inaugurates their poetics across a

significant span. The limits of this 'span' are not easily enumerated, precisely because works

of poetic extension are inherently idiosyncratic— which is to say, subject to their own

internal logics which can only be arrived at with close-reading of their parts in tandem with

an engagement with the structural organisation of these parts. That is to say, there are as

many modes and means of extension as there are poets who have written works of poetic

extension.

Of course, it could reasonably be argued that poetic idiosyncrasy is not necessarily

limited to works of extension. The counter to this is that the complex arrangements and

multiple temporalities of extended poems allow the reader to witness the poetics implicit in

shorter works writ large, in increasingly complicated, complex and self-referential structures.

This is to say that extended poems are always in some way a development of 'poetics', the

thought *about* poetry as opposed to poetry itself. Indeed, one way of characterising the

extensive practices in this thesis together is that they each adopt strategies in order to

maintain the momentum of their works. In some instances, this might appear a

fundamentally formal matter— as in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts* or George Oppen's *Of

Being Numerous*— where it could be argued that the quantity of the poem comes about

through the development of a structure into which the poem fits. In both instances,

however, the wider structures of the work are arrived at in response first and foremost to

ethical questions. Similar ethical questions arise in the far more aleatoric works of Robin

Blaser and James Schuyler as a reaction to proximate social relations, rather than an explicitly

stated intellectual project, while for Susan Howe, Leslie Scalapino and Lyn Hejinian,

collaboration with present and absent voices allows poetic discourse to extend into the

margins and into the lives of others.

For these reasons, I have entitled this brief final chapter of my thesis 'Inconclusion' in

order to gesture at the fact that what has been presented over the previous seven chapters

argues first and foremost that it is openness as opposed to 'closure' with which American

extended poetics are concerned— openness of form and of compositional process, but also

openness manifested as the articulation of exteriority, of what lies beyond subjectivity and

the text.

In closing, I will now briefly turn to this sense of generative poetic and

phenomenological 'openness' by addressing the two poets who bookend my thesis— George

Oppen and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. It seems appropriate that this final encounter with

extended poetics should involve close reading of two poets both well-versed in

phenomenology who collaborated closely and wrote major works of poetic extension.

DuPlessis' 'Draft 85: Hard Copy' is a poem which is 'mapped onto', 'responds to' and 'thinks

about' Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*. It is, for Libbie Rifkin, "a crucial juncture for her long

poem" in that it addresses "Oppen's stance with respect to social collectivity". (np) Again, it is important to underscore the sense in which I am aware that it is a contrivance to bring the disparate materials of this study under the auspices of a single closing gesture, but Oppen and DuPlessis, brought together in 'Hard Copy', stand as a particularly compelling instance within the nexus of poets and poems I have brought together here. The following comments regarding DuPlessis' work of poetic extension can be seen as an attempt to consolidate the methodology I have developed throughout this thesis, with a view to clarifying, in closing the advantages of re-conceiving 'The American Long Poem' as a range of diverse acts of extended inquiry.

Of Being Numerous opens by placing a profound emphasis on what is at stake when we discuss things in terms of 'we-ness' and 'our-ness'. Oppen begins:

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'.
>
> Occurrence, a part
> Of an infinite series,
>
> The sad marvels;
>
> Of this was told
> A tale of our wickedness.
> It is not our wickedness.   (Oppen 2003, 163)

The 'tale of our wickedness' which 'is not our wickedness'— Oppen's characterisation of the early 20th century— becomes, in DuPlessis' poem, a matter of "distortion and elongation" in which we are "held hostage to ourselves". She writes:

> To refuse this "we"—
> in one sense easy, and already done,
> in another sense
> seems almost impossible.   (2010, 62)

DuPlessis reframes the aporia of Oppen's opening lines, establishing the refusal of 'our-ness' as both the cause and the effect of 'wickedness'. This is reminiscent of Oppen's own bewildered obsession with the bind of singularity and numerousness. It also has clear politico-historical implication. As Rifkin suggests, 'Hard Copy' was "written at the moment when the costs of the Iraq War were poised to exceed Vietnam". (np) The crucial difference in the perceptive stances of Oppen and DuPlessis has to do with, to use the latter's term, plethora. In this regard, DuPlessis writes:

> It's a question of "among" or some
> shatter of the reflection
> "to see them"
> and "to know ourselves."
> The distortion and elongation,
> the stupor.   (2010, 62)

We do not simply see ourselves in the things we live among; this reflection, for DuPlessis, has become shattered, distorted and elongated. This seems closely related to what DuPlessis describes as Oppen's "use of the fragment negatively, as moving among contradictions, and propos[ing] that vectored movement as veridical— constructing situational truth." (2006, 189)

Contextually, a number of features can be enumerated from the relationship between Oppen and DuPlessis in 'Hard Copy', perhaps most significantly in the sense that DuPlessis frames Oppen's 'Of Being Numerous' as the major act of extended poetic inquiry of the 20th century, not in terms of quantity but crucially in terms of Oppen's insistence on the intertwined relationship between the poetic, the perceptual, the singular and the numerous. It remains true, however, that Oppen is never explicitly conclusive on the question of what it is we have chosen the meaning of being numerous to be. Rather, he leaves this question open in the sense that if to see the numerous things of existence is to know ourselves, it is an entirely situational context which reveals what constitutes 'ourselves'. Furthermore, Oppen

insists upon the difficulty of using this term 'ourselves', specifically in the sense that as soon as one seeks to articulate 'our-ness', they have appropriated its meaning. In this regard, DuPlessis' evocation of the act of seeing ourselves in things as a process of distortion underscores the sense in which both Oppen's and DuPlessis' poetics are grounded not only on an ambition to describe phenomenal, communal and poetic numerousness but to do so sincerely, with an intense scrutiny directed towards those who would seek to curtail 'numerousness' according to a single definition.

This theme of the 'open' which Oppen's poetry articulates occupies the closing section of DuPlessis poem. The final word in 'Hard Copy', as in 'Of Being Numerous', is Whitman's 'curious'. She writes:

> Lack of a door labeled "door."
> And then the lack was a door.
>
> The poem
> being archive of feelings to come—
>
> And of what else we don't know.
> It is really "quite curious . . ."   (2010, 66)

The 'lack of a door labeled "door"', which itself constitutes a door, is both an entrance and exit, an indeterminate way in and way out. This is likened to "the poem/ being archive of feelings to come", a seemingly contradictory evocation of the poetic as a repository of that which has not yet been. This recalls Merleau-Ponty's conception of phenomenology as "an ever-renewed experience of its own beginning", which "consists wholly in the description of this beginning." (62) This 'ever-renewed' beginning seems closely related to what Oppen and DuPlessis see as Whitman's 'curiosity'. I am aware, of course, that it is ironic that I should end this thesis with the words of Walt Whitman, given my reservations at the outset concerning his role in the history of 'The American Long Poem'. It is Oppen and DuPlessis, however, who locate in Whitman an idiosyncratic sense of the 'curiousness' of the long poem as extended

poetics. Both poets end their poems with a curious gesture towards Whitman's curiosity, a curiosity which for them stands as the foundation from which the meaning of being numerous can be explored, interrogated, defended and addressed— but never finally settled.

What 'Hard Copy' offers us by way of conclusion is an example of what poetic extension in the American 20th century has achieved. DuPlessis has not settled the question of the meaning of being numerous. Even so she proves powerfully and profoundly that this question remains fundamentally open, not only to those who ask it but also to those it is asked of. If I were to condense my claims in this thesis to a single term it would probably be Oppen and DuPlessis' term 'numerousness'. Not only are acts of poetic extension numerous in their volume, their methods of composition and their varieties of inquiry, but they are numerous also in their preoccupations with the simultaneous and the intersubjective. To which it should be added that idiosyncrasy, the etymological basis of which derives from the Greek *Idios-Sun-Krasis,* or 'own-with-mixture', has functioned as a vital means of coming to terms with these varying denotations of numerousness in and of extended poetics.

In answer to the question of whether my proposed reorientation of critical approach towards 'The American Long Poem' has succeeded in circumventing the problems of oversimplification inherent to historicist narratives, I certainly cannot claim finally to have settled anything through the idiosyncratic method. It was never my intention, however, to solve the critical problems surrounding the long poem once and for all. Instead, in the course of this thesis, I have been able to loosen and unfasten the strict binary oppositions and deterministic narratives surrounding 'The American Long Poem' in pre-existing works of criticism, whilst also bringing together more recent expansive and 'open' appraisals by the likes of Lyn Keller, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Peter Baker and Joseph Conte. By virtue of a phenomenological taxonomy and praxis, and a desire throughout to engage with the poets

and poems with and on their own terms, this thesis has made the claim that idiosyncrasy is a means through which works of substantial volume, ambition and extension can be encountered. The act of poetic extension is, without doubt, the most ambitious form of Twentieth Century Poetics in America. In addressing such acts of extension through the medium of idiosyncrasy, this thesis has captured the relation between self and others that, for all their differences, is the shaping concern of the exemplary poets in whose work this inquiry has been grounded.

Word Count: 78,906.

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Appendix:

1. It	20. Incipit	39. Split	58. In Situ	77. Pitch Content	96. Velocity
2. She	21. Cardinals	40. One Lyric	59. Flash Back	78. Buzz Track	97. Rubrics
3. Of	22. Philadelphia Wireman	41. Of This	60. Rebus	79. Mass Observation	98. Canzone
4. In	23. Findings	42. Epistle, Studios	61. Pyx	80. Envoi	99. Intransitive
5. Gap	24. Gap	43. Gap	62. Gap	81. Gap	100. Gap
6. Midrush	25. Segno	44. Stretto	63. Dialogue of Self & Soul	82. Hinge	101. Puppet Opera
7. Me	26. M-m-ry	45. Fire	64. Forward Slash	83. Listings	102. One-on-One
8. The	27. Athwart	46. Edge	65. That	84. Juncture	103. Punctum
9. Page	28. Facing Pages	47. Printed Matter	66. Scroll	85. Hard Copy	104. The Book
X. Letters	29. Intellectual Autobiography	48. Being Astonished	67. Spirit Ditties	86. Scarpbook	105. Pilgrimage
11. Schwa	XXX. Fosse	49. Turns,& Turns, an Interpretation	68. Threshold	87. Trace Elements	106. Words
12. Diasporas	31. Serving Writ	L. Scholia & Restlessness	69. Sentences	88. X-Posting	107. Meant to Say
13. Haibun	32. Renga	51. Clay Songs	LXX. Lexicon	89. Interrogation	108. Ballad and Gloss
14. Conjunctions	33. Deixis	52. Midrash	71. Headlines with Spoils	XC. Excess	109. Wall Newspaper
15. Little	34. Recto	53. Eclogue	72. Nanifesto	91. Proverbs	CX. Primer
16. Title	35. Verso	54. Tilde	73. Vertigo	92. Translocation	111. Arte Povera
17. Unnamed	36. Cento	55. Quiptych	74. Wanderer	93. Romantic Fragment Poem	112.
18. Traduction	37. Praedelle	56. Bildungs-gedicht with Apple	75. Doggerel	94. Mail Art	113.
19. Working Conditions	38. Georgics & Shadow	57. Workplace, Nekuia	76. Work Table w. Scale Models	95. Erg	114.

Unnumbered, Précis (after 57, before 58)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis done in December 2011