

Poetic Dehiscence: Readings at the 'Upper Limit'

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Abstract

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This essay uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of phenomenological 'dehiscence' to perform readings of poems that happen at or around Zukofsky's 'upper limit.'

'Dehiscence,' for Merleau-Ponty, describes an interface of subjective and objective modes of experience; in the essay I explore some of the ways in which poems enact dehiscence in language. I do this by close-reading particular syntactical and musical structures in which aural and semantic sense is doubled or conflicted. The techniques described include polyrhythm, counterpoint, and puns. Poets include Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Hart Crane, Jennifer Scappettone, and Joyelle McSweeney.

I

The perception of a paradox, as an unstable, wavering experience of irreconcilable difference, is a vexing thrill. To describe the particular kind of tangled, frustrated pleasure that is the feeling of a paradox, we attend to the processes of its phenomenological apprehension. In the case of paradox (we will consider other rhetorical structures aside from paradox) this is – somewhat paradoxically – a phenomenology grounded in the *cognition* of semantic meaning, a kind of cerebral (that is, non-somatic) phenomenology. The cognition is uniquely dynamic – an oscillatory movement in time back and forth between each case as the opposite poles of meaning are considered in turn.

Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man” ends with a description of a listener who “beholds/ Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.” Excerpted from its sonic context (and read silently), the difficult paradox of contemplating a “nothing that is” tugs the mind back and forth between incompatible contemplations of absence and presence – an inexorably failed attempt to understand the forked unity of a “present absence.” The temporal experience of the statement begins with an attempt to make meaning out of the first word, “nothing.” But already, the ghost of the looming inevitability of presence (that which *is*) threatens to negate even that preliminary idea of nothingness – it haunts and it beckons. And the mind is quickly drawn into its world of *being*. Now, having jumped into the thought world of that-which-exists, the haunting happens in reverse – a ghost of nothingness, of void, shatters the terms of the present contemplation of ‘isness.’ And the process reverses. So the constant, repetitious haunting of the other perpetually offers an alternative reality, and begins to produce the sort of terrifying, tantalizing humility that is

the experience of existential contingency. The experience of the multiplicity is not itself a stable, positive occurrence, but a condition of departing one challenged individuality for another – which itself becomes a new sense of partial certainty from which the mind will also inevitably drag itself away. The movement is incessant, frustrating, an anathema to the neat closure of typical logic. If the feeling is a pleasurable one, it is only intellectual – the body shares in none of the mind’s excitement.¹

Deprived of its sounded context, the proposition that “a nothing is,” while interesting to the intellect, lacks the ability to affect, to mean in ways other than semantic. Its peculiarity reduces completely to the kind of linguistic chimera Wittgenstein accuses of posing as philosophical quandary in his *Tractatus*: “Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. (They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.) And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all” (4.003). The end of Stevens’ poem, then, asserts a philosophical condition that, when *thought*, dissolves into a self-referential meaninglessness, whose statement is grammatical, not ontological. This paradox, when excerpted from the sonic and semantic tapestry of the poem, reduces to the insufficiency of its linguistic logic, interesting or not.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the “reversibility” of phenomenological experience, in ways that both echo and differ from

¹ I readily admit that this reading ignores the poem’s movement as a whole; for the purposes of my discussion here, however, I am content to abbreviate a discussion of “The Snow Man” as such. An ordinary reading of the poem might understand the sense of “Behold[ing]/ Nothing that is not there” as part of a command to not project subjective, self-laden ideas and sentiments onto the objective world. This interpretation ultimately collaborates with my more localized reading of the sonic construction of its statement.

our account of the dualist flailing of the mind in paradox. He takes as paradigmatic the conflicted case of holding one's two hands together:

I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection (93).

But this “reversible reflection” is, importantly for Merleau-Ponty, not a reinstatement of the kind of subject-object dualism that frustrates the understanding of the last words of Stevens’ poem when they are taken in isolation. The experiences of touching and being touched are, rather, co-implicated, blent in a chiasmic middle ground between production and reception. For Merleau-Ponty, “a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two... between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 123).

The case of paradox is, in a sense, extrasensory. The experience of its difference is an oscillation between the very dualism of possibility Merleau-Ponty attempts to revise out of accounts of phenomenal experience. That is, the experience of paradox – confined as it is to its theater of semantic logic – lacks dehiscence. Its ghosting is a nervous, non-vertiginous oscillation stricken with doubt and contingency (“But how can nothing be *somewhere*, if it is, by definition, *nowhere?!*”). The non-dualist experience of sensing the world is, by comparison, a kind of release from the bind of binary existence. The value of a sounded lyric is its offering a place in which this sort of physical dehiscence might be represented, since no set of purely logical propositions is capable of engendering such

a blended, oscillatory interface of subjective and objective modes, but is fated to record only the distressing dualism that is the experience of the fallen.

The ability to objectify dehiscence, then, is what distinguishes “The Snow Man’s” last line when experienced in sonic context from when it is excerpted; the ritualistic performance of the sounded poem in full allows its potentially apophatic, paradoxical logic to achieve its (dis)embodying effects more fully. To read Stevens’ language poetically (not prosaically) is to ask how lyric music represents, dramatizes and provokes realizations of ‘encroachment.’ Susan Stewart, in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, suggests that the history of lyric is the history of the attempt to objectify sense perceptions in such a way that they may be received, or listened to, for “it is only by finding means of making sense impressions intelligible to others that we are able to situate ourselves and our experiences within what is universal” (3). But if the subjective experience of sense impressions is not so separable from the objective world it perceives as our conventional narratives would have us believe, how might such a non-dualist phenomenology be made “intelligible to others”? How might such an interpenetrating middle-ground – the troubled essence of perceptual experience for Merleau-Ponty – be objectified in lyric? What does the objectification of dehiscence sound like?

dehiscence, *n.*

Pronunciation: /dɪˈhɪsəns/

Etymology: < modern Latin *dehiscētia* ‘quum fructus maturus semina dispergat’ (Linnæus), < Latin *dēhiscent-em*, present participle of *dēhiscēre*: see -ence suffix. So in modern French.

Gaping, opening by divergence of parts, esp. as a natural process:

a. Bot. The bursting open of capsules, fruits, anthers, etc. in order to discharge their mature contents.

1830 J. Lindley *Introd. Nat. Syst. Bot. Introd.* 29 In *Hamamelideæ* dehiscence is effected by the falling off of the face of the anthers.

1861 R. Bentley *Man. Bot.* i. iv. 251 The anthers... open and discharge the pollen contained within them; this act is called the dehiscence of the anther.

b. Animal Physiol. Applied to the bursting open of mucous follicles, and of the Graafian follicles, for the expulsion of their contents.

1859 Todd's *Cycl. Anat. & Physiol.* V. 56/1 The ova... drop by internal dehiscence into the cavity of the ovary.

1870 G. Rolleston *Forms Animal Life Introd.* 38 The ova are set free by dehiscence into the perivisceral cavity.

c. Said of the elytra of insects when they do not meet at the apices; also of antennæ divergent at the tips.



“Patients with Superior Semicircular Canal Dehiscence can experience vertigo and oscillopsia (the apparent motion of objects that are known to be stationary) evoked by loud noises and/or by maneuvers that change middle-ear or intracranial pressure (such as coughing, sneezing, or straining). Auditory manifestations of the syndrome include autophony (increased resonance of one’s own voice) and hypersensitivity to bone-conducted sounds.

“Patients with SSCD may also complain of symptoms such as hearing their eye movements.”

- Vestibular Disorders Association

“I could hear my heart beating in my left ear.... It drowned out regular sounds”

- Reader’s Digest Magazine, April 2013

III

The experience of the kind of *sounded* poem this essay will read functions according to the Merleau-Pontean scheme. To theorize the experience of paradox is to theorize a logical doubling, the effect of which is familiar, a dull riddle. But what would it mean to read a sensual doubling? And what would it mean, more specifically, to read lyric music not through some more traditional lens of mapping meter, or of discovering certain meaning-making managements of consonance and assonance, but through an attention to the ways language is experienced as the time-bound vanishing of its own sounded dehiscence? It would be to perform a reading of the poem as palimpsest – a static, dynamic artifact of self-revising sound. It would be to speak of ghosts. Ghosts across lines, within syntax, within words – heard ghosts, the combination of which constitute the poem as the experience of its polyvalent prodding of the mind into a shivering, oscillatory, but always self-encroaching process of re-hearing.

We might divide the various mechanisms of such doubling into two kinds – the temporal and the spatial. In the doubled poem, meaning may be torqued across lines, as they condition the temporal unfolding of the formation of the poetic thought as it comes into being. Syntax might perform a related function, withholding (in grammatical irresolution) or disclosing (in grammatical resonance and cohesion) various incarnations of meaning in time. Over the course of its traveling the torqued sentence and line, the mind becomes a living record of the flashes of half-sense and correspondence that have bloomed and wilted on its way towards the poems final incarnation of meaning, which is the inarticulable memory of having had the temporal experience of those various entwined constructions and erasures. Dictional and allusive sorts of doubling – as

experienced in puns and in allegory, respectively – might be said to operate on the spatial plane. While the experience of their doubling is no less inscribed in a temporal world, it is produced, if not experienced, instantly (out of time), and does not depend on the same kind of re-hearing that characterizes the temporal ghost.²

Each of these doubling techniques creates a local chaos of pleasure, a designed obscurity continually in the process of becoming resolved. Mechanisms of sonic doubling frustrate the so-called left brain, as its efforts to cobble meaning from the wreck of twisting syntax and multi-valent significations are constantly interrupted. This frustration of sense heightens attention to music. That is, to the extent that the poem conducts the reader's performance of a sufficient quantity of such temporal-spatial palimpsests and forkings, the mind will experience a kind of release, an attunement to the sonic fascia always already structuring its complex of semantic meaning. The sturdiness of the signified relaxes into the aural materiality of the signifier. A heightened perception of music – which may or may not then also be compensated by consonantal or assonantal clatter – is the effect of this dehiscent opening, as the taut weave of semantic substitutions the poem has effected over the course of its performance unifies into the single strand of its own pure, unitary sound.

To experience this transformation of sense into sound is to experience a kind of vertigo. In certain poems, this vertigo is sustained, sounded continuously in a subject-shifting philosophical release of meaning in sound. In others, the vertigo is isolated,

² Allen Grossman prefers the term “surmise,” and mentions its after-effect – “semantic dissonance” – only in passing: “As the eye scans the line, it surmises the outcome of the excursion, and these surmises remain as dissonance after the outcome of the linear excursion is disclosed. A similar process of surmise and discovery takes place at the syntactic level as the eye surmises possibilities of grammatical closure arising from the possible combinations of morphemes which do not become actual. These surmised possibilities remain as semantic dissonance after the actual syntactic structure of the morphemic string is distinguished” (281).

controlled, used locally in strategic rupturings of a previously established semantic veneer. In vertigo, poetry ceases to perform its social function – which, following Susan Stewart and Allen Grossman – is the cultural work of uttering sensory and intellectual experience into intersubjective space – and achieves a kind of metaphysical lift-off. What begins as a careful enactment of non-dualist sense experiences ends in a dehiscent lifting up, into, and – ultimately – out of the perceiving body.

When taken out of its own sonic context, the end of Stevens' poem masquerades as a kind of inert syllogism; in its context, the effect is vertiginous. We can begin to feel its effects even when restricting our analysis to the sonic textures and reversals of the last line. In it (“Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is”), the first “nothing” lacks an article; and so it functions as a kind of naked, non-noun that is then, in the drastic re-hearing that happens across its syntax, reshaped – surprisingly – into something that *is somewhere* (if not there). The mind has already experienced one torqueing within the line's first hemistich, as its initial perception of “Nothing” as a negative value has mutated into a contemplation of the word as some kind of positive non-entity. This shift then flares again, in confirmation, when the word is finally given its article in the line's last phrase: “*the* nothing that is.” By this point, “nothing” has been completely revised, paradoxically, into a normal, article-bearing, positive noun. The paradox of that hemistich, as we've said, is logical, but the sonic symmetry of its performance, the slurring dental fricatives of the “th” sound that occur three times on each side of the caesura, links modifier and modified (subject and object) in a sonic unity, and enacts the same conflicted unity of dehiscence of which it speaks. That this unity is a conflicted one is also born out in sound: the two “nothings” are the only voiceless dental fricatives of the

six, which are otherwise voiced; so there is both sameness and difference – an *encroachment*. The poem’s paradox – and this is Stevens’s genius – is at once thought and felt.

IV

The history of sonic dehiscence is traditionally written in terms of the tension between rhythm and meter. Whenever a poem establishes a meter, and then counterpoints its own metrical grid, the language as it happens (rhythm) has separated from the ghost of the expectation as engendered by the abstract metrical pattern. We could take any metered poem and read it for the way its sonic unfolding breaks away from its grid. The history of poetic criticism is filled with such accounts. According to Susan Stewart: “the sound of the poem emerges from this dynamic tension between the unfolding temporality of the utterance, and the recursive temporality of the fixed aspects of the form” (77). Here, we gloss “unfolding temporality” as rhythm, and – for now – “the fixed aspects of the form” as meter.

My argument is somewhat less concerned with local substitutions used for expressive effect (we might call these controlled, or partial dehiscences) than it is with more sustained kinds of deviation (complete dehiscence). I am not, that is, so interested in reproducing the critical commonplace that reads a particular way in which the metrical expectation is disturbed as an enactment of some expressive extremity – a flash of anger, say, manifesting as a brief, disturbed dissonance (not that all metrical substitutions are expressive in this way). Such explanations are, to me, insightful, but only predictably. I am more interested in exploring the music that happens at the tipping point, the rhythmic

tensions that unfold – and are sustained – at the border of extreme counterpoint and the complete (if temporary) dissolution of the metrical grid.

Sustained counterpoint would be a kind of cross-rhythm, which is itself a kind of systematic polyrhythm – a term used to describe the overlay of two or more conflicting rhythms. Cross-rhythms are a characteristic of Sub-Saharan African musical traditions in which the meter is in a permanent state of contradiction. The overlay is disorienting to an ear trained to hear a single, non-conflicted rhythmic base over which may be overlaid various momentary syncopations. Cross-rhythm is not a set of controlled deviations from a unitary pattern, but a yoked duality. Referencing the 3:2 relationship as a foundational unit of cross-rhythmic effects, Victor Kofi Agawu suggests “[The] resultant [3:2] rhythm holds the key to understanding.... There is no independence here, because 2 and 3 belong to a single Gestalt.” A cross-rhythmic poem could not be scanned according to the traditional method of first determining one meter, and then tracking its ruptures; its scansion would, rather, need to discover a method for annotating an inherently overlaid base, and then following whatever more complicated “substitutions” might then play over such a bifurcated foundation. I wonder if there are or even could be English poems that are perfectly cross-rhythmic in such a way, and I wonder how such a contradictory pattern could be achieved. So I grant that my destination here may be merely some musical, phenomenological ideal.

Still, the interest here is not theoretical, but experiential; and jazz is our justification. Particularly in post Be-Bop music, the various instruments of any ensemble are constantly pulling at each other in ways that suggest and rescind the tantalizing disorientations of split rhythms. At times the disorientation is constant; the rhythmic



foundation becomes an absent center, a suspension across a mess of cross-contaminating primary rhythms that make the “beat” a kind of space, an opening, a dehiscence. In Charles Mingus’ four-track album *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, the aural condition is an approximation of the Merleau-Pontean scheme. There is no rhythmic vantage or instrument – no pure subject – from which the other droning, rhythmic lines – as objects – can be perceived in a way that relegates them to separate, contingent addenda to the coherent base. The vantage shifts; the instruments hold hands. Each line is, at the pressure of the ear’s caprice, at once subject and object, and neither – a dehiscent opening out into gridless, embodied space.

Typical readings of early- to mid-career Gwendolyn Brooks observe the relative adherence to traditional formal structure that her earlier work exhibits in comparison to her later, less “slavishly conventional” poems, which emerged, it is said, out of a more concerted rejection of inherited (white) formal modes. Such a poem as “old relative,” from the collection *Annie Allen*, would, according to such a reading, attend to the well-handled, highly substituted iambic tercets and neat rhyme scheme of an “integrationist” lyric:

After the baths and bowel-work, he was dead.
Pillows no longer mattered, and getting fed
And anything that anybody said.

Whatever was his he never more strictly had,
Lying in long hesitation. Good or bad,
Hypothesis, traditional and fad.

She went in there to muse on being rid
Of relative beneath the coffin lid.
No one was by. She stuck her tongue out; slid.

Since for a week she must not play “Charmaine”

Or “Honey Bunch,” or “Singing in the Rain.”

My purpose here is not to revise the popular literary historical account of Gwendolyn Brooks’ development as a poet, but to suggest that even in her early work, Brooks was – with others – using essentially African rhythmic constructions (cross-rhythms), that were then read hegemonically as partaking of a white, Western, male inheritance. In the first stanza, the rhythmic effects – disregarding the more technical scansion – do not feel like brief polyrhythmic disruptions of the iambic meter, but a preliminary (alternating) overlay of dactylic and trochaic patternings. The first two lines are identical in their rhythmic scheme, two alternating dactyls and trochees, followed by a final, catalectic foot (“After the **Baths** and **Bowel** work **He** was **Dead**. /**Pillows** no **Longer** **Mattered**, and **Getting Fed**”). Traditional scansion may read “bowel” as an elision, and the whole line as neatly iambic, except for a trochaic substitution on the first foot. I don’t disagree with this technicality, but merely wish to observe that the rhythmic *feeling* of the lines (hinging, perhaps, on the variable reading of “bowel”), consists of this alternating triple and double feel. On this reading, the tercet’s third line then pulls tight that double rhythmic stitch into a “perfectly” iambic line – another enactment of the disorienting metrical overlay the poem uses to enact a child’s-eye, playful, uncomprehending attitude towards death. While that third line (“and **anything** that **anybody** **said**”) does adhere to its iambic meter, it uses distinctly three-beat words (“anything” and “anybody”) to do so. The dactyls and iambs now no longer alternate, but share space; the duple and triple rhythms have converged. The effect is a counterpointed cross-rhythm in which we know but cannot so easily feel the base meter to be double, and instead float along with Maud uncomprehendingly grieving, singing in the rain. The effect here is not as radiantly open

– as dehiscent – as, say, Coltrane’s *Pursuance* – which would come later – but the sonic choreography’s akin.



African three-over-two cross-rhythm written within the standard western metric scheme.

IV

In *The Sighted Singer*, Allen Grossman argues that “the function of poetry [is] keeping alive, across the abysses of death and of the difference between persons, the human image” (6). And elsewhere: “The existence of poetry requires the existence of something which is deathless” (16). If an incommunicable, mortal experience in time is the setting in which metered poetry intervenes, we must also consider what sort of intervention can be made not simply by the grip of meter, but by the elaborate tapestry of managed felt temporal paradox, of polymeter. Rhythmic patterning is, by definition, a *keeping* of time – a striving for immortality. According to Grossman, “the vehicle of care in the poem is meter, which masters the tendency of speech to disappear... syllable count, and linear order in general, represent the care which keeps world in being” (Qtd. in Stewart, 64). The urge to make language in rhythm – the urge to repeat – is the urge to continue. A pulsing, white-knuckled grip on presence, on being.

But when two such rhythms are overlaid – either briefly or continuously – the body registers conflicting plods towards a receding future simultaneously (the univocal lub-DUB of the iambic march, say, against a circular, dactylic waltzing), and experiences

a kind of space. The strands of timekeeping, in refusing to resolve completely into one another, produce a cancelling of time, a dance of two incompatible, but woven immortalities (what's left sparking in the void, as we'll see, is music). For Grossman, poetry is both preservation and relationship. What flourishes in temporal contradiction is the preservation of relationship as *absence*. Rhythmic simultaneity – as an interplay of incompatible time-keeping immortalities – is a coalescence of two “volitions towards mastery,” two individuated rhythmic propulsions, that, in each other's presence, negate their own twinned undying, and disappear (Stewart 66). A pursuance of immortality, but in death – a *thanatos*.

We have arrived, then, at an understanding of dehiscence not as birth, but as a drive towards non-being. Or an understanding of sonic fray as the equal, opposite implication of birth – as its endgame. There is a sense of dread, a dark fatality in the seeds flung by the kind of excessive musicality that is the song of dehiscence. It's the hellish, destructive lilt of Mingus circling a gap. Stewart corroborates this issue, if she doesn't confront it directly, when she suggests that “poets who have worried the relation between sound and sense... are also poets for whom the stance of the ‘natural person,’ or any enthusiasm in the presentation of the self, is unbearable” (Stewart 84). Plato may have recognized the dangers of intersubjective musicality in articulating his own anxiety about poetry. Through *The Republic*, Stewart tracks “a recurring anxiety” that “centers constantly on the question of whose agency is speaking the poetic voice... It is an anxiety that affects poet and reader alike; indeed, it is often expressed as an anxiety about the *contamination* (my emphasis) that might arise between these two positions” (111). Plato, then, knew lyric's susceptibility to “contamination” – its ability to yoke the dyad of

self and other into feeling, felt intersubjective space – as a kind of death, and he heard its dying in the various kinds of sonic paradox that are the objectification of that phenomenology in language. So did Keats: “For Keats... the predicament of the self and the predicament of the other have tended to converge, so that the instability of the objectivity of the other... suggests why the poem is situated upon fear at all” (Grossman 15). Merleau-Ponty’s figure of intersubjective touching is, radiantly, the case – it may just be our ego’s grief at its discovery that paints it black.

But meter, or course, is not the only means by which to produce sonic paradox. Sources of non-metrical counterpoint are various, and can be found in syntax, across lines, within words. And they can be grouped, as we’ve said, into temporal and spatial categories. I’ll use the rest of the essay to explore some of these doubling techniques through readings of the experiences of the present absence left in their wake. As always, the discussion will be necessarily codified, rhetorical, and rigid in its categories. It only humbles the discussion to recognize the gross scale at which we’re forced to talk about such techniques. Were we to look more microscopically, that is, at the intricacies of linguistic tone and rhythm, what counterpoints would we discover? Stevens could produce them, but himself lacked the vocabulary by which to appraise them. At the end of his essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” he remarks a “deepening need...which makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them” (663). What sorts of sounds contain such a “finality, a perfection? What infinitesimal constellation of counterpoints can conspire to produce “unalterable vibration”? We feel them, and we

gesture crudely; they speak for themselves. How to speak of that unfixed palimpsest of polyrhythmic tensions that is *A Love Supreme*? What if we could not simply feel, but know all syncopation as the collection of brief, ghostly flashings of unnamed overlaid rhythmic and tonal schema that it is? What if we could see all pleasure in language as deriving from some dyadic tug of war between concurrent polarities? What would we say?

VI

Stevens' poetry is often thematized around a dramatized breakdown of language's perceived ability to mean only univocally. The deliberate (but inevitable) troubling of sense-making, by way of various syntactical doublings, becomes the philosophical crux of his poetic thinking, which systematically exposes the imagination's (in language) troubled coveting of the real ("things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar"). Here, the blue guitar of the imagination, as manifested in the poem, asserts – semantically – the irreconcilable duality of imagination and phenomena. But if the *content* asserts the familiar dualism, the poem's *formal* feeling deconstructs the division, and creates – syntactically – an experience that embodies Stevens' claim that "the relation between the imagination and reality is a question, more or less, of precise equilibrium. Thus it is not a question of the difference between grotesque extremes" ("The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" 646). So, while the poem laments explicitly the unbridgeable gap between imaginative subject and real object, its syntax gestures at their dehiscent merging. The example is, perhaps, not so radical as others, since the semantic argument is conserved. But the syntactical construction – highlighted by the location of the line break – forces

together “are” and “are” in a way that simultaneously foregrounds their sameness and difference. The first “are” is the “are” of reality – that unreachable object – but the Husserlian sense of “are” as irreducible essence is quickly juxtaposed with the artificial “are” of the creative imagination. Here their dehiscent blending is not complete, but the poem enacts the beginning of that phenomenological revision able to feel subject- and object-hood as a *yoked* difference. The reverse parallelism of the syntax, and the chronological doubling of its central verb, strains against the rational argument of its own making, as the once opposite senses of “are” converge – incompletely – into their own sounds. The line stutters across itself, the verb is doubled, confused, extracted into its own sense as sound.³

A quick scan of almost any of Stevens’ poems gives examples. If the formal effect I’ve read into *The Man With The Blue Guitar* pulls provocatively against the statement of its content, a poem such as “Poésie Abrutie,” from *Transport to Summer* (1957), pairs its formal and semantic arguments. In the poem’s second stanza, the technique is familiar – a syntactical inversion resulting in the spatio-temporal coupling of a single word: “The water puddles puddles are/ And ice is still in February./ It still is ice in Februar.” What the poem gives is not the vacuous intellectualism of “the water puddles are puddles” – but the felt disturbance of any possibility of asserting otherwise. “Puddles puddles” intervenes in the normative experience of the poem’s language, lifts it from its

³ Differently stated, the language has provoked a change in its own mode of aural perception. In Reuven Tsur’s terms, the language has gestured at a transition from the “Speech Mode” to the “Nonspeech Mode”: “In [the ‘Nonspeech Mode’ of aural perception], the perceived natural noises or musical tones are very similar to the acoustic signal that conveys them. In the [‘Speech Mode’], the perceived phonetic category is restructured, or ‘recoded,’ into abstract phonetic categories and does not reach awareness” (viii). Here, we have the case of a poetics that exists consciously at this boundary between the two modes, and alerts us to the physicality of the process of making sounds meaningful, so that our apprehension of language becomes preempted, disrupted, and defamiliarized. The language effects a retracing of the child’s ability to perceive in “Speech Mode,” and turns that reverse perceptual process into the product that is the poem.

own quick march towards the not-death of its closure, highlights the constructedness of its assertion, and becomes, in the body of its sound, the broken idea of its meaning.

This dehiscent event is not in isolation. By the stanza's second line, the transiently ambiguous syntax of its first line has reappeared as a complete indeterminacy. That is, "Puddles" in "The water puddles" is, before the line's second half, experienced indeterminately as both verb and noun. The confusion – a brief flash of sense-breakdown – is quickly resolved, and we know the word to function as a noun (even as we continue to feel the haunting of its evanescent being as verb). In the next two lines, the effect is reproduced with a difference. "And ice is still in February" would seem to present an absolute doubling. Here, "Still" signifies both non-moving and not-yet-gone; it means doubly, and the sentence does not correct itself. The following line, however, does clarify the difficulty, rescuing the understanding of "still" back into a life-giving univocality of single meaning (of not-yet-gone). The poem is uncomfortable with its own demonstrations of dehiscence, and commits intentionally to reconciliation.

The two sorts of doubling in this stanza stand for what I've called temporal and spatial doubling, respectively. The first case of doubling happens in time – the sentence unravels and ravel over the course of itself. The second is a simultaneity. In "Poésie Abrutie," these effects are playful, philosophical, and the difference between them is, perhaps, only nominal. But the cases portend a different sort of yet more expressive, yet more death-driven intervention into normative language experience, in which the stakes of the difference matter not merely intellectually. Hart Crane and Gerard Manley Hopkins provide examples.

VII

It's probably the case that an implicit biographical mode of criticism has prepared for a reading of *thanatos* in what becomes a poetry of suicide. But the dehiscence of its language is a thing apart, and bears no relation (at least that I am willing to see) between the man in the water and the sound-pulse of its fusing music.⁴ *Voyages III* evinces a more expressive – that is, not primarily self-referential – manipulation of syntax into doubling. So far, I've read poems that double between and within single words; Crane's example demonstrates that the effect can also be organized more generally, by parts of speech. By clumping two verbs together – in this case attributed to different nouns – their proximity, as the dissolution of their difference, congeals into a heightened musicality that represents the condition of the poem's nameless speaker: "While ribboned water lanes I wind/ Are laved and scattered with no stroke/ Wide from your side...." Here, the effect is localized, and by excerpting the instance, I've done damage to the context that endows this dehiscence with its particular experience. In the example, the line break once again acts as the absent hinge between the sentence's only verbs: "I wind/ Are laved." The subject "I" is at once yoked to and divided from the object on which it acts, their verbs self-circling in binary orbit. The sentence action is the fulcrum at which dehiscence flares, the normative semantic sense is challenged, and what is present is an absence – the fled sound that marks the experience of embodied disembodiment.⁵

⁴ Grossman: "The assignment of the poem to a historical speaker is an instance of anxiety about cause (habitual consent to which limits response to the fact) (260).

⁵ In Grossman's terms, this would be a poetry of "aperture": "In aperture, the self is characterized as identical or 'flowing with' the world. In Blake's terms aperture is 'seeing through [not with] the eye,' where the self derives its structure from the nature of the object.... Aperture incorporates Death" (332).

forked crash of split thunder parts/ Our hearing momentwise” describes its own phenomena of temporal dehiscence (the “split thunder,” in this case, is a frequency of spondees, a tactic we’ll hear later in Hopkins). In *Cape Hatteras* sonic revision often happens across sentence constructions beginning with “what” – a technique of syntactical torquing that also happens frequently in Hopkins. So in the following passage, the transformation of the language from sense into sound is not only performed by the high musicality of its consonance:

Warping the gale, the Wright windwrestlers veered
Capewards, then blading the wind’s flank, banked and spun
What ciphers risen from prophetic script,
What marathons new-set between the stars!

The doubled syntax takes the already clattering diction and jerks it into a yet deeper experience of its own music. “Windwrestlers,” as the main subject of the sentence, are described to have “banked and spun/ what...” such that the language continues in what is potentially assumed to be the elaboration of that deceptive “what” as pronoun. The sentence is propelled forward by the anticipation produced by its syntactical structure, which seems to have delayed the final revelation of whatever verb will become attributed to the “ciphers,” which will ultimately have been shown to have been already performed on the pronoun “what.” This anticipation builds across the anaphoric repetition of the what, until the end of the sentence does not reward that expectation with a verb, and instead twists, retroactively, the last two clauses into exclamations begun by “what,” the *adjective*. Instead of a verb, what is exclaimed is an absence, which is stated only by that action which is *not*. The effect is a confusion, a difficulty, which, in the thunderclap of its re-hearing, sounds more than it means, and enacts its prophecy.

By Hatteras bunched the beached heap of high bravery!

Only by the passage's end – after the crash – does the language recover, and regain its concern with shaping distinct divisions between subject and object. In the penultimate line, the preposition (“into”) is repeated, as the poem takes care to distinguish who owns what piece of language. The line is ridden with ellipses, as an enactment of the absence to which that crash has given birth.

In *The Sighted Singer*, Grossman quotes from Plato's *Symposium*, to help him distinguish between the creation of selves and the creation of persons: “Those whose procreancy is of the body... raise a family.... But those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than of the flesh... bear the things of the spirit.... It is the office of every poet to beget them” (211). But what this crash has begotten is not a pure presence; it is, rather, a kind of present absence – a spaciousness, a gap, an opening. Despite the semantic recovery staged in this section's final line, the presence recovered is a broken heap, simultaneously acting and acted upon (was or had the heap “bunched”?). The poem's vertiginous fall only reluctantly achieves what is, on Grossman's view, the inevitable “visibility of the speaking person” (233). If, qua poem, the poem is necessarily a presence, the self-destructing drive of its slipping, weaving, sounded syntax is but a staged erasure, a framed gap, a present absence from which its seeds fall.

In “To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life,” one of Hopkins' so-called “sonnets of desolation” we find a precedent for the effects we've seen in Crane. In the sonnet's sestet, a “what”-phrase, this time used, unlike in Crane, as a pronoun, provides a turn within the turn, as the poem launches itself yet further into its own musicality:

I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third
Remove. Not but in all removes I can
Kind love both give and get. Only what word

Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban
Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.

The false multiplicity of reading "Only what word" simultaneously as exclamation and assertion builds up a kind of suspense. The sentence, pulled taut against two possible grammatical reconstructions, becomes neither; its "word" *words*. The construction also creates other grammatical mishearings, in allowing for the momentary (in this case visual) misunderstanding of "dark heaven's baffling ban" (emphasized by its positioning at the end of the line) as the grammatical object acted upon by the speaker's heart. But the sentence continues, and this object resolves with its verb ("bars") back into its role of subject, which the ultimately unambiguous sentence has ordained for it. Merleau-Ponty would recognize the effect of a single entity flowing across its own subject and object boundaries to become a kind of both.

Hopkins' poems are littered with such effects, which are often characterized by like parts of speech used in such close syntactical proximity as to create a kind of nesting effect, in which object becomes subject over the course of the poem's temporal movement. In Section 24 of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," the speaker's language approximates the fervent, stuttering prayer of the nun with its own kind of grammatical repetition. She "Was calling 'O Christ, Christ, come quickly':/The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst Best." Worst and best are like antonyms, yoked by the same christening. This sort of doubled, exalted exclamation ("Christ, Christ," "worst Best") reappears at the end of "Carrion Comfort," another "desolate sonnet" in which

Hopkins' spiritual crisis mounts to full pitch in an inescapably dyadic contemplation of God and Man as opposed, separate:

Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my god.

The contemplation of dehiscence from afar ("O which one? is it each one?") culminates in a highly alliterative last line, which, at its climax, pits two uses of the same word together (God as exclaimed and seen in visions, and god as inert faith-object) in a panicked marriage of opposites. But the speaker remains painfully undehisced, unable to die fully out of duality into any fully permeable interpenetration of God the subject and God the object.⁶

There are classical rhetorical names for some of the grammatical constructions and inversions I understand to characterize the dehisced, ear-bound poem. "(My God!) my god" is a kind of antanaclasis, the repeated use of a word in opposite senses. For the purposes of my discussion, the device is interesting to the extent that its use turns words into shells of themselves – hard, material, rung hollows of music harmonizing with semantic ghosts. In certain hands, the device is comical, punning. In others, it is the inevitable destination of a linguistic *thanatos* ("Pitched past pitch of grief"). A condensed, acute flaring of chiasmus to exalted effect.

⁶ Anthony Hecht notes a partial such permeability in the last section of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," which ends: "Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord." The high density of nested possessives can be "diagrammed as a set of concentric circles enclosed within one another" (120). The inner circles function as both object and subject, acting and acted upon in an inextricable tangle of possessed possession.

VIII

Antanaclasis is a kind of pun in time. Its effects are revisionary; the memory of the first use of the word prepares for the experience of the second. What I call spatial puns are kinds of antanaclasis that happen within a single object. Their experience is no less in time (the mind is), but the rehearing of spatial puns is less managed, less enacted by the physicality of the poem as it moves from start to finish. Pitch and pitch, as homonyms, are alike in both their sonic and their visual aspects, but differ in their meanings. Heterographs (two and too) – also homophonic – are divergent in both their visual and semantic aspects. The heterograph thus enacts a unity, being only sonic, that is not also manifested in the visible text. The word looks and means one way, but sounds in two – and the doubling does not depend on its repetition in time.

Jennifer Scappettone, in *Of Dame Quickly*, makes frequent use of the kind of spatial vertigo that results from the sameness-with-a-difference of the heterograph. The peculiarly complex overlay such a spatial doubling presents is at once the manifestation of an existential drama, and a social one. The result is a uniquely self-deconstructing, sounded poetics divorced from fixed semantic meaning:

till total information/ wareness/ of host is past texted/ the pyx and ewm/
waitressed/ omnicorporal beauty you must/ swear to me upon a parcel-gilt goblet,
sitting in my Dolphin chamber,/ at the round table, by a sea-coal fire, upon
Wednesday in Wheeson week/ whose frequency makes of ugliness a duty til
Daybreak/ we will be capsule sleepers fleeing spectral prison buzz of glass maws
sung after all/ hims, & our etceteras own/ allowed (51).

In the last two lines, the visual typography is rendered contingent by the heterographic use of “hims” and “allowed,” which double as “hymns” and “aloud,” if we take “sung” as

our encouragement to do so. What's ghosted here is the visual representation of two words that stand for sound. The poem has in a sense refused to sing so clearly about itself, and slips into the mask of the heterograph as a means of implicit self- and social critique. The third to last line is particularly noisy in its five successive trochees that hammerblow the lyric into an announcement of its own dehiscence. In this particularly sounded pun, the doubling is simultaneously a function of an extreme metaphysical strain (as in Hopkins), and a socially-inscribed, postmodern anguish. The infected aurality that proclaims the end of language results not only from the spiritual expansion of the self, but also from the social situation of being (getting) "past text." In this flash of dehiscence, this recognition by the language that one must appear to sing of how the "hims... allowed" in order to more secretively sing "hymns... aloud," the broken utterance of oppressive postmodernity masks a kind of spiritual expansion. Social and metaphysical purposes are yoked in sound. To sing hymns as "hims" releases dehiscence from the province of the unoppressed by foregrounding it.

In Scappettone's satirical soundplay, sonic vertigo is at once the product of living complicitly within a patriarchal capitalist system, and of performing ecstatic lyric. The excess is a liberation by way of reproducing – but with dehiscent difference – those sturdy, Saussurean couplings of signifier and signified that compose the hegemonic discourses of capitalism. A series of poems titled "Derrida is Dead" lifts poetry out of the colonial thrall of its state as visual text, and loosens the link between language as it is seen and language as it is heard.⁷ In the poem's terms: "here will be an old abusing of

⁷ Harryette Mullen's work is groundbreaking in this regard. For lack of space, I will not read her particular "synthesis of innovative poetics with cultural critique," which is perhaps even more densely punning than Scappettone's. A poetry "hooked on phonemes imbued with exuberance," *Muse & Drudge* becomes the archetypal figure of lyric's slipped singing out of social hierarchies (147).

got's patience and the King's English" (26). Scappettone's mock high style is a version of what Joyelle McSweeney calls "The Necropastoral." The poems magnetize a glut of oppressive discourse into a sonically and vocally excessive, "anachronistic" vortex of high lyric, spewing political and technological soundscapes towards dehiscent ends. In McSweeney's terms: "The crossing of this membrane [separating the Pastoral from the Urban] is Anachronism itself.... Another name for it is Death or Media" (3).

Scappettone's poems are fully permeable to the "outside" world; they act – like McSweeney's – as porous membranes vibrating feverishly as they are crossed and re-crossed by the various discourses in which they live. This sort of open poetics is mediated, and also, following McSweeney, a kind of Death. Scappettone's glossolalia doubles as both earnest song-making and satirical recycling, complicit in the hegemonies it announces. How does one sing as a tax-paying patron of war? In "outbursts of ... Double-natured name(s)":

And like that O/outburst/ of idle being but by where wars are rife. And everything./ We a full never fully developed fact Now burn, new born to the world, Double-natured name, there not where (63).

In Scappettone's sound-storms, each word is its opposite, every essence splintering across its own multiplicity. When not actually dehiscent across its heterographs, the poem's excessive porosity performs a kind of thematic vertigo. The infected lyric is at once self and other, King and subject, not alternately, but simultaneously.

In "Delection Even" the United States' Pledge of Allegiance functions as the poem's ghost text, the colonizing discourse reappropriated by a language that knows the conqueror's tongue by heart. The revolt is noisy:

I dredge allegedly
to repair and upgrade the Port of Umm Qasr
I edge a legibly duty free
transrational contract drag
well I pledge alien
lesions will be doled
expensively (not on the cheap)
and not to um miss explosives
who shell
Bechtel by the – that is Shell it by the
shore Bechtel sells
unflaggingly... (14)

A self-proclaimed “semifree colonist in gall,” the poem’s speaker can only acknowledge the verbal difficulty presented with more difficulty. The poem stutters to cite the well-known tongue-twister of selling sea-shells by the seashore, as a way of explaining, by way of its own porosity, its soundplay. But even that children’s play-phrase mutates into its own microcosm of the poem’s anachronism. The seashell becomes Shell the oil conglomerate; and what’s sold is the spilled crude choking Sally’s shores. At intervals throughout the poem, the language is doubled, as the ghost text flashes back sporadically to become the poem’s structuring guide. At the beginning, “I dredge allegedly” is ghosted by “I pledge allegiance.” The case is not quite homophonic, but the effects are nonetheless vertiginous, as a unitary sound-stream means multiply. The poem is understood only when misheard; sound becomes the fixed axle around which meanings turn. Scappettone presents a much different sort of sonic vertigo than the kind we hear in cross-rhythmic meter or managed syntactical multiplicity. But its principle effects, as turnings *wordward*, still resound:

That is listening/hoard: vertigo/ of the living & livid/ broad, chorus of ideals fat/
unaccompanied by projection's banjo/ thrum, mutual self found/ confounded in
'dead letters,'(90).

*

If we read Scappettone's necro-lyrics through a feminist-activist lens, we can understand the permeable membrane of its language to function homeopathically. "Similia similibus curantur," or "Like cures like," – Paracelsus 16th century proclamation about the function of medicine – would be the archetype. From Paracelsus' adage arose a tradition of homeopathic medicine that functions on the principle that by heightening the body's symptoms in a controlled way, that body can be prodded into a more robust self-treatment. In poetry's case, letting in hegemonic, capitalistic, paternalistic, racist discourse into the poem is not capitulation, but a salve – a controlled heightening of symptoms. Paracelsus' adage is archetypal both in content and in form. The naturally inverted syntax of "Similia similibus curantur" is undone in the English translation, which creates space between two "like" words functioning oppositely as subject and object. But to the English ear, the Latin acts as a kind of reverse heterograph, for its declension: "Like like cures" – and the sudden sounds of its slack semantic strings are a salve. Be the malaise social or metaphysical, controlled *thanatos* cures; the death-urge, in its devolution into absence, is also a presence.

IX

Stein's *Tender Buttons* is so apt as to function as a kind of ars poetica for the various sorts of vertigo I've been charting, and is a direct forebear of Scappettone's. The

book is the archetype of dehiscence, and its whole makes – by way of its syntactic experimentation – an argument for the ongoingness of the dehiscent event, and its resistance to closure. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein unfetters syntax into a constant beginning again, which is the experiential mark of the irreconcilable: “suppose this and an elegant settlement a very elegant settlement is more than of consequence, it is not final and sufficient and substituted. This which was so kindly a present was constant” (18). The “present”, in Stein, is not ontological, but temporal, and it’s the “constant” happening of the unclosed syntax that is its object in language. Finality, consequence, and settlement is subjected to the continuance of its own language, its paused persistence in time. The tense of the final fragment is instructive – “this was constant” is the language’s elegy for its own happening; the subtextual meaning of the dirge is “this *is*.” “A present” is always described and describing, dative and accusative. The Now is by turns object and subject. Unlike in what we’ve seen in Hopkins, here dehiscence manifests as fragment, and exchanges the flickering revisability of closed syntactical structures for a more blown open field of endlessly associative verbal energies. Words are things in Stein – she does not dramatize or contextualize the achievement of dehiscence, but operates within the perpetuity of its non-logic. The following section begins: “What is the current that makes machinery, that makes it crackle, what is the current that presents a long line and a necessary waist. What is this current” (18). The doubled experience of “what is this current” becomes its own unending, interrogatory meaning, as “current” entails both electricity and now. In this sense the question is multiply self-reflexive.

The experimentation of *Tender Buttons* is both socially inscribed and socially active: “Anything that is decent, anything that is present, a calm and a cook and more

singularly still a shelter, all these show the need of clamor. What is the custom, the custom is in the center” (42-3). The “need of clamor” responds to the cult of presence, the privilege inherent in the ability, opportunity, and inclination to manifest oneself in language. According to Grossman, “poetic art begins as the representation of privileged consciousness, the speech of kings” (26). If “the custom is in the center,” what happens when the center drops out? What makes it fall?

The strangeness of Stein’s syntax turns its words into sound: “*A Sound – Elephant* beaten with candy and little pops and chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats, this is this” (28). Repetition (“this is this”) is one tactic: “Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful beautiful” (29). Here, the sentence tracks in phases the evolution of its own meaningful, descriptive adjective into an estranged collection of only residually meaningful phonemes.⁸ Elsewhere, the tactic is one of foregrounded grammatical doubling: “*Roast Potatoes – Roast potatoes for*” (52). Here the verb is simultaneously an adjective, and the open-ended syntax flaunts the issue. There is heterography: “Sauce sam in” as the end of one section, becomes the “Salmon” that titles the next (58). And: “Excel lent not a hull house, not a pea soup, no bill no care, no precise no past pearl pearl goat” (31).

There is no center in such language; syntax refuses to finish into a presence. “Clamor” replaces “custom,” and the referential usage of “the sign that means that really means a necessary betrayal” becomes its sound (20). The language is revision: “A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake” (28). It is timelessness: “A

⁸ The effect is close to “scat,” or language *as* music. Stevens and Zukofsky frequently resort to such an onomatopoeic use of invented words. Ella Fitzgerald brings the tactic to conclusion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Ji4uG4cac>

change, in a change that is remarkable there is no reason to say that there was a time” (25). It is pain: “Pain soup, suppose it is question, suppose it is butter, real is, real is only, only excreate, only excreate a no since/ A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since...” (59).

“Anything that is decent, anything that is present.... all these show the need of clamor.” Stein, perhaps, at her most closed, her most referential, dualist, logical. Custom requires interruption, requires sound, requires Death. But in the no-place of that interruption, that sound, that Death, cause and effect swirl and tangle: “The reason that there is a suggestion in variety is due to this that there is a burst of mixed music” (42). The reason why there is music is music is the reason there is music is the reason that there is....

X

Louis Zukofsky is another poet whose manipulations of sonic dehiscence as an end in itself is a precedent for work like Scappettone’s and Mullen’s, although Stein is perhaps the more frequently cited.⁹ It is a tactic he locates at the “upper limit” of his poetic range: “I’ll tell you,/ About my *poetics* – ... / An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music / No?” Much of his life-work “A” is a concerted exploration of this upper limit; he is constantly in search of new ways of approaching – if never actually crossing – this musical asymptote. The 24th movement of “A” emerges from Zukofsky’s interest in the classical fugue, and the managed overlap of like melodies to effect. “A”-24, as “a five part score” written for five voices, literalizes the workings of harmonic counterpoint in language (564). In so doing, the poem forswears traditional lyrical tactics for producing such counterpoint (or polyrhythm) within a nominally single voice, which

⁹ “Him to – hymn to – Latinity. –” (Zukofsky 77).

has been our focus here. But the movement is instructive nonetheless, in the way it points to Zukofsky's poetic ambition to "voice a voice blown: print/ Must not overlap, but the notes of the voices would" (53). Earlier in "A," Zukofsky explores sonic vertigo within a single voice. Heterography short-circuits the language into vertiginous, elliptical silence: "Cite... Sight.../ The body/ lies awake sitting,/ Bodies step over their own bodies" (90). A slackened tether between language as it is seen, as it is heard, and as it is understood, leads to a phenomenological experience of oneself as both subject and object. Not ecstatic, out-of-body self-transcendence, but a body-bound experience of body as body. Deprived of a more traditionally bound lyric context in which such dehiscence can intervene expressively, as the climax of some drama, Zukofsky's poetics becomes *about* the effects produced by its own language.

"A"-9 is a more extended experiment with sonic-semantic mirroring. The following is excerpted from the second and seventh sonnets of the poem, which is, in full, a sequence of ten:

Broken/ Mentors, unspoken wealth labor produces,/ Now loom as causes
disposing our loci,/ The foci of production: things reflected/ As wills subjected;
formed in the division/ of Labor, labor takes on our imprecision – (106).

Broken/ Plea, best unspoken, a lips change produces/ Suffers to confuse this
thought and its loci,/ The foci of things timelessly reflected –/ Substance
subjected to not human prevision,/ Free as exists it loves (109).

As the sequence progresses, the sonnets are revealed to be syntactical doubles and thematic opposites. The experience of encountering this macrocosmic instance of syntactical doubling in the sequence's second half enacts the thematic turn that happens

simultaneously, and which remarks that formal dehiscence.¹⁰ The first five sonnets make a sort of Marxist argument, as they announce the poems' ongoing self-creation as a "division of labor," in which poetic capital is akin to a kind of "surplus value." The language is felt to be mechanically recycled, a kind of bland currency subject to the pressures of free-market exchange. The second half of the sequence, however – almost syntactically identical to the first – achieves, in the felt experience of its doubling, a vertiginous release from the bounded, cause and effect logic governing the manufactured language of the poem's first section. In this "timeless" reflection, a "Broken/Plea... suffers to confuse this thought and its loci." So, as in heterography, language is split across its visual and aural dimensions. The poem's presumed semantic essence disappears, as the poem circumscribes an absence, the experience of which has lifted away from the Marxist nightmare of the first section to become "Free as exists it loves." Within each sonnet, nested syntax produces a microcosmic version of the poem's structural doubling. In the "broken plea... a lips change produces suffers," the nouns and verbs are thrust back-to-back, and grammatical coherence opens onto its own sound. The "plea" is what "suffers," but that clause is interrupted by the modifying "a lips change produces"; so the "plea" is, in quick succession, both acting and acted upon.¹¹

¹⁰ Tim Woods reads all of "A" for its doubling and punning, and suggests that "puns may be regarded as the structural mode for much of Zukofsky's work, where overlapping, approximating, intersecting, linguistic otherness, intersections, chance, and accidental coincidences in language are frequent" (127). He suggests much of "A" is specifically structured upon forms of interruption, hiatus and discontinuity in frequent situations of 'doubling'... where there is always a hesitation between at least two mutually exclusive meanings," and that such doubling is "the principal mode in which Zukofsky can really achieve his musical language" (130, 127). Zukofsky, Woods argues, in foregrounding "surface games with letters, words, phonemes and grammatical units," performs "an understanding of language which perceives the homonym, or the pun as an archetype for all language, in which all words carry an 'unseen' but audible 'otherness'" (124, 129-130).

¹¹ In *The Sound Mirror*, Andrew Joron uses anagrammatic sound-play to similar effect. In his poems, the phonetic chiasmus achieves an even more concentrated auralty than such syntactical mirroring.

XI

The radical poetics of Stein, Zukofsky, and their sounded descendants – and the luminous difficulties they can present – recall the previously discussed difference between polyrhythm and cross-rhythm. If these are poems truly interested in – at least for a time – dwelling at the punning, musical “upper limit,” we might call their doubling, in a sense, sustained. The effort would be – in theory – towards a cross-rhythmic action, a perpetual dehiscence enacting and reenacting its subject-object interminglings at a fever pitch. Grossman reads such an aspiration as being not towards poetry, but towards suicide. According to Grossman, “Poetry is antignostic as it is antimystical..... when humanity becomes established in the whole, the ontological whole (truth) or the social whole (the collective), poetry ceases” (269). Any successful establishing of oneself “in the whole” – through some kind of ritual – would necessarily proclaim the cessation of poetry, the crossing of the upper limit. But if dehiscence enacts this sort of mystical *aspiration*, it never fully achieves it. Even so, for certain poets, poetry must be approached (for it to be poetry) as the ritual of contextualizing ritual, failed or not. And dehiscence is understood to happen only in the context of the undehisced, happen across an edge – say, between Tsur’s Speech and Nonspeech – that “edge across which transcendence is effected” (Grossman 291). Such poetry would be categorically polyrhythmic. For being an essentially temporal experience, which is not a time-bound monotony (Eliot calls good poetry a “subtle deviation from monotony”), nor a complete erasure of time, poetry would be understood to be the ritual of a controlled emergence out of time, a record of a duet of *individuality* (The Apollonian) and *merge* (The Dionysian) operating in a ghostly balance, in which one is never achieved without the other.

Other poets sing dehiscence as an end in itself, cross-rhythmically. The inevitable failure of its ritual, the failure of its drive towards that expansion (merge), which is also a contraction (death) – manifests as a relentlessly forked, individuated weave of the two, which is felt to be sufficient for poetry. Such a use of poetry is, perhaps more accurately, a kind of prophecy. In *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel distinguishes the peculiarities of Hebraic prophecy from its popular representation as a kind of oracular mysticism. For Heschel, the Hebrew prophet does not have “the paraphernalia of nimbus and evidence, such as miracles, at their disposal”; they have language (20). Their prophecy is, like Scappetone’s, at once “overwhelmed by the grandeur of divine presence,” and speaks in a “style charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of nonacceptance” (19,7). As prophet, the dehiscent poet castigates – in siphoned speech – the “moral confusion and oppression” in which she participates (9). “Contradiction is inherent in prophecy” (28). Dehiscence, a yoked multitude, is the speech of a God in the voice of the person – a speech which ““is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally”” (Qtd. in Grossman 294).

Heschel distinguishes the poet from the prophet on the basis that the latter is marked by an “unequivocal awareness of the Source of his experience” (495). In all other senses, poetry of extreme dehiscence is markedly prophetic: “The prophet, unlike the ecstatic, is both a recipient and a participant” (467). Singing on the limit between sound and sense, the poet sings language into this same bothness – a voice that hears itself, subject and object. The poetics of dehiscence functions as an incomplete mysticism; subject and object categories are not dissolved, but yoked; the upper limit is toed, but not crossed. Sustained dehiscence is a drive towards death and merge, but one

kept alive and individuated, an indissoluble dissolution perpetually enlivened by the propulsion of its own music.

Secular prophecy might contextualize its ritual, in the way of a Poem, and balance its Apollonian with its Dionysian; or else it enacts its fevered fugue, its yoking, out of time, and comes down in silence.

*

in taut banners of shadow, the scrolled motto of the vacuous,
unraveling...

annulled, in successive pairs, by the impact, the discharge, of their matched percussions.

a 'nothing,' then, propelled by a 'neither.'

a conveyed omission.

...

a death *kept alive*

- Gustaf Sobin

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