Third Way Poets: Navigating the Streams of Modern and Postmodern Poetic Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines the career arcs of four representative current poets in order to develop a tentative narrative to account for recent and emergent poetic practice. Poets who began publishing between the 1970s and 1990s inherited two powerful aesthetic traditions. On the one hand, they write in the shadow of postmodern poets who find liberation in the embrace of radical linguistic, epistemological/ontological, or subjective uncertainty and exhibit intense skepticism about intellectual closure or claims of privilege for aesthetic production. On the other hand, they also find aesthetic reserves in the work of high modernists who felt they faced similar philosophical or aesthetic uncertainties, but whose poems generally made claims for privileged aesthetic construction to contain or manage them. However, the poetry crafted by Jorie Graham, Frank Bidart, Carl Phillips, and Henri Cole neither wholly embraces radical ontological/epistemological, linguistic, or subjective uncertainty, nor wholly puts faith in permanent aesthetic resolutions of it. Rather, their poems negotiate between the poetic terms set by immediate and less immediate predecessors in a “neither/nor” fashion. This entails the crafting of poems which exhibit history as neither continuous nor discontinuous, but as ongoing chaotic evolution; which employ self-conscious linguistic strategies to give tenuous parameters for the self; which act as neither solely public nor solely private communications, but public methods of intimate exchange between reader and writer; which re-use a large body of self-generated work to connect the self of the writer to that self’s material history; and which make claims, though chastened, for the value of a high art aesthetic. The poems produced by these “third way” poets, work to rehabilitate, in a chastened way, the function of the poem as a space for the development of a contingently coherent sense of self in relationship to the self of the other/reader. Once this relationship
is established, so the poems of these writers often claim, both reader and writer, as selves stabilized by the readerly/writerly relationship, can begin to counteract the alienation produced by ontological and epistemological uncertainty and ongoing historical flux.
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Dedicated to the Memory of Donald Moffett Richie

1944-2006
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Introduction

Poets who began publishing between the 1970s and 1990s have inherited two powerful aesthetic traditions. On the one hand, they write in the shadow of their immediate poetic predecessors, postmodern poets who have expressed a significant distrust of epistemological and ontological certainty as well as the role language and poetic crafting can play in attaining such certainty. Those predecessors often attempt to find liberation in the embrace of radical linguistic, epistemological/ontological, or subjective uncertainty and exhibit intense skepticism about intellectual closure or claims of privilege for aesthetic production. On the other hand, many poets whose first works emerged in the 70s, 80s, or 90s also find aesthetic reserves in the work of high modernists who also saw themselves faced with epistemological/ontological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty and a sense of historical rupture, but whose poems generally are thought to have made claims for privileged aesthetic construction in order to make manageable such uncertainty, claims which still hold attraction for some late 20th and early 21st century poets. The wide variety of poetry and poetic practices which make up contemporary writing attest to the fact that aesthetic inheritance is in no way uniform, and critical examinations have heavily interrogated the claims for a hegemonic “modernism” or “postmodernism.”¹ A varied plurality of camps, and camps within camps, compose the scene at any given historical moment and utilize a wide range of methods for crafting taken from all manners of precursors and for all manner of purposes.

¹ Cary Nelson’s Repression and Recovery, for instance, offers a compelling critique of the concept of hegemonic modernism. Furthermore, Matei Calinescu’s Five Faces of Modernity and Hans Bertens’ The Idea of the Postmodern offer histories of the concepts of modernity and postmodernity which reveal the varied, sometimes contradictory, ways each term has signified, illustrating the flexible terms of those concepts.
However, poetry which exhibits a concern for ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty in tandem with a sense of unprecedented historical rupture has been a dominant strain in American verse throughout the 20th century, a strain which has led to the response produced in the works of a particular group of writers whose poems suggest an emergent trend, specifically in regards to the poetic inheritance of the terms generally accepted for modern and postmodern poetry. The poetry crafted by this group neither wholly embraces radical ontological/epistemological, linguistic, or subjective uncertainty, nor wholly maintains faith in containment or other attempts at permanent aesthetic resolutions to these dilemmas. Rather, it negotiates between the poetic terms set by immediate and less immediate predecessors in a sort of “neither/nor” fashion. The poems produced by these “third way” poets, represented here by Jorie Graham, Frank Bidart, Carl Phillips, and Henri Cole, work to rehabilitate, in a chastened way, the function of the poem as a space for the development of a contingently coherent sense of self. Often, this self is found in relation to the other self of the reader. Once this relationship is established, so the poems of these writers often claim, both reader and writer, as selves stabilized by the readerly/writerly relationship, can begin to counteract the alienation produced by ontological and epistemological uncertainty and ongoing overwhelming historical flux. The primary purpose of this project will be to provide a tentative narrative which can account for the emergent modification of modern and postmodern poetic practices by some prominent current poets, a modification which engages the ongoing philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic dilemma described above. This modification entails the crafting of poems which exhibit history as neither continuous nor discontinuous, but as what might be called ongoing chaotic evolution; which employ self-
conscious linguistic strategies to give tenuous parameters for the readerly and writerly self; which act as neither solely public nor solely private communications, but rather as public methods of intimate exchange between the private worlds of both reader and writer; which re-use a large body of self-generated work to connect the self of the writer to that self’s material history; and which make claims, though chastened, for the value of a high art aesthetic.

I have chosen this set of poets for several reasons. First, despite their differences in style, tone, subject matter, or formal proclivities, their works share versions of the traits elaborated above. Second, they all have reached at least the mid-point of their careers and have produced a large enough body of work for significant similarities or patterns to emerge among them. In particular, each of these poets exhibits a career arc which begins in a hesitant embrace of the terms of their immediate poetic predecessors, then quickly swerves away from those precepts in search of new contingent stabilizing structures found through modification of their predecessors’ poetic terms. This arc is present even in poets as diverse as Graham and Cole who both emerge producing works which embrace different tenets of postmodern poetry (radically renewing perspectivization in Cole, dismantling of linguistic and aesthetic structures in Graham), then quickly move away from those tenets as they become untenable. A third reason I have chosen these poets is because these writers have all been recognized by the contemporary critical establishment through awards, positions, positive reviews and the like, a valorization which endorses the practices of these poets as significantly representative of the historical moment.
At stake for this group of poets is a set of issues which have concerned writers since at least the late 18th century, specifically the intertwined relationship between language, knowing, and being and the tandem ethical dilemmas which parallel, rise from, or cause the philosophical or aesthetic ones. That is, ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainties give rise to a sense of alienation, either from the culture, the self, or from others that many writers attempt to overcome through aesthetic crafting. Earlier critical narratives of the shift from modern to postmodern poetry have generally seen these two sets of poetic practices as diametrically opposed in their ways of engaging their shared ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemmas.

According to those narratives, “conservative” modern poets feel threatened by an emergent, overwhelming and unprecedented sense of historical rupture, marked by rapid social, political, economic, and technological change. In this reading so-called high modernist poets respond to the ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty created through this rupture by crafting works that serve as projected containers or structures which can hold together the fragmented pieces of the poet’s mind. The result is the creation of poetry which emphasizes ironic distance as a method for containing the cultural moment. Charles Altieri cites Pound’s Cantos, with their explicit aim of containing history, and Stevens’ Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, with its ironic projection of a “major man” in search of meaning in a fragmented world, as examples of this variety of modern poetry.

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2 Charles Altieri’s Enlarging the Temple makes the case for this version of philosophical/aesthetic inheritance.

3 This brief retelling of the narrative for postmodern poetry borrows heavily from several different sources, most prominently Altieri’s Enlarging the Temple, but also Charles Molesworth’s Fierce Embrace, Marjorie Perloff’s Poetics of Indeterminacy, James Breslin’s From Modern to Contemporary, and Jerome Mazzaro’s Postmodern American Poetry. Each of these authors uses different terms to describe this narrative, but each one emphasizes some version of a shift from poetic/philosophical stability to poetic/philosophical instability, an instability generally characterized as liberatory.
Postmodern poets, according to these oppositional narratives, work in reaction against the works of their immediate forbears. Faced with a similarly threatening sense of historical rupture, an attendant sense of ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty, as well as a sense of constriction created by encounters with the enclosed poetic structures of their predecessors, these poets craft poems which undo such closure in an attempt to find liberation. According to this narrative, the poems of this set of poets, necessarily avant-garde and therefore (supposedly) politically radical, embrace rupture and radical ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty and find opportunity or liberation in dismantling constricting social, linguistic, political, philosophical, and personal structures. Marjorie Perloff sees these traits at work in poems like John Ashbery’s “These Lacustrine Cities.” Critics have used varied terms to describe this “break” narrative, but the arc they describe remains consistent. Charles Altieri in *Enlarging the Temple* opposes modern symbolic projection with postmodern immanentist embrace of the numinous; Charles Molesworth in *The Fierce Embrace* sets modern ironic distance, or impersonality, in opposition to postmodern psychological immersion with a focus on personal and social liberation; Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* opposes modern “closed” forms with avant-garde postmodern “open” forms which release the reader from authoritarian tendencies in the author and transform the text from a “writerly” to a “readerly” experience; Mutlu Konuk Blasing in *Postmodern Poetry: the Rhetoric of its Forms* views modern poetry as formally authoritarian, burying its rhetoricity under false claims of scientific objectivity or organicism, while she sees postmodern poetry as politically radical in its self-acknowledgment of form as rhetorical stance rather than organic reality.
Some later analyses of postmodern aesthetic or cultural practice have modified or challenged the assumptions of these narratives. Lynn Keller in *Re-Making it New* and James Longenbach in *Modern Poetry After Modernism* make the case for a complicated 20th century poetic inheritance of push and pull which involves acceptance as well as opposition, emphasizing poets’ continuation and modification of their forbears’ work instead of outright rejection of it. Longenbach also complicates the crude political binary of “conservative” modern poetry and “radical” postmodern poetry, showing how such a narrative proves reductive of the politics of both modern and postmodern poetry. And theoretical readings such as Jean Baudrillard’s “The Orders of Simulacra” and Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capital*, have articulated a critique of postmodern aesthetic production as being of a piece with the exploitative economic, social, or political tyrannies that such production would appear to oppose. For these two critics the avant-garde emphasis on novelty mirrors the endless capitalist craving for ever-new products, rendering embrace of an avant-garde stance, with its often attendant interest in dismantling social, political, linguistic, and subjective systems, a futile political gesture if not a furthering of the alienation produced by those tyrannies or even an endorsement of nihilism. And yet, despite these modifications and complications, many of the parameters used to describe differences between modern and postmodern poetry can still prove useful, if utilized loosely. If taken as suggesting that certain poems or groups of poems show significant tendencies to enact the terms of a particular critical category, the older narratives can be illuminating of past and present poetic practices. For this reason I will utilize a blend of the terms of the narratives of

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4 Hans Bertens in *The Idea of the Postmodern* and Matei Calinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity* both usefully narrate this later critique of postmodern thought or practice.
modern and postmodern poetry, as well as the terms “modern” and “postmodern.” In this usage I follow James Longenbach’s practice as he describes it in *Modern Poetry After Modernism*. In a footnote justifying his own terminology, the critic claims to use “postmodern to describe any poetry which sees itself as coming after modernism – not to refer to any particular style, ideology, or group of writers that is commonly thought of as postmodern.” (*Modern Poetry After Modernism*, 177) This sense among writers of having come after something is prevalent among both modern and postmodern writers, and seems a useful, if somewhat arbitrary, designation for the sake of crafting my own narrative.

In any case the works of the third way poets I examine here echo some of the sentiments of the critical modifications of the narratives of modern and postmodern poetry listed above. First, their works don’t so much reject as modify the practices of their immediate and less immediate poetic forbears. (Frank Bidart’s description, in a 1983 interview with Mark Halliday, of his poems “Herbert White” and “California Plush” as autobiographical is a case in point. Both poems, he claims, draw from his experiences growing up in a world where wild eclecticism and cultural ignorance produced in him a sense of alienation. In that way, Bidart claims, both poems are personal, even though they are dramatic monologues spoken by fictional characters. In the Afterword to the *Collected Poems of Robert Lowell*, Bidart clams that he adapted this trait of fictionalizing the personal from Lowell himself who, of course, famously or infamously fictionalized within his autobiographical works. Bidart modifies the mode of his predecessor and mentor in making the fictional a dominant trait in his autobiographical works, yet he retains Lowell’s own poetic emphasis on crafting from
personal experience.) Second, the dismantling of philosophical, linguistic, or subjective systems generally results not in liberation in the poems of these writers, but in alienation.

The poems from Graham’s volume *The Errancy* (1997) are a case in point. In a 2003 interview with Thomas Gardner the poet claims that these are her most postmodern poems, in that they employ a plurality of voices and registers, which employment emulates the verbal deconstruction of John Ashbery’s works. Graham’s poems, however, and this is the point of the argument, do so as a means of critiquing such deconstruction as a source of alienation rather than embracing it. “The Scanning,” for instance, uses static as a prominent metaphor and depicts the speaker stuck in traffic trying to find information by scanning through the different channels of the car radio. She comes away with a sense of numbed stasis produced by the overwhelming plurality of vocalizations and noise which provide no useful standpoint from which to organize a response to the situation at hand. Finally, the poems of the third way poets of this project do not regard attempts at stabilizing the self to be acts of politically conservative containment. Though they have inherited their forbears’ powerful critiques of ontological/epistemological, subjective or linguistic closure, as well as an opposition to authoritarian politics, these poets produce poems which find some version of personal stabilization as a necessary or useful way to oppose the personal or social alienation resultant upon or in tandem with epistemological/ontological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty. Phillips’ poem “Fray” expresses this desire by declaring that the poem responds to “a human need,/ to give to shapelessness/ a form.” (*The Rest of Love*, 64)

At the same time, however, none of these poets’ works express a desire to return to some (imaginary) edenic past in which the subject and the world were wholly
integrated, reading such a return as a false teleology; nor do they make utopian claims that poetry is able to achieve a transcendent state of subjective or cultural reintegration through the aesthetic act (as many modernists claimed or seemed to claim). Rather, these works modify T.S. Eliot’s description of the aesthetic use of the “mythical method” in his essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth.” Eliot claims that the technique of “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” serves as a “way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” (Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, 177) If the terms “controlling,” “contemporary” and “futility” are removed, Eliot’s description can serve as a reasonable enough depiction of the works of the third way poets of this project. The poems of Graham, Bidart, Phillips, and Cole each exhibit traits of efforts to order and give a shape and significance to the immense panorama of anarchy which is history, but they do so without a sense that such ordering is “controlling” (permanent or containing), that history is futile, or that history has ever been anything but anarchic. Rather, the aesthetic act can be a method among others for contingently stabilizing the self and resisting the alienation produced by or parallel to the sense of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty, a sense inherited from both modern and postmodern poets.

In navigating their ways through the poetry of their postmodern and modern predecessors, the third-way poets considered here have displayed in their works four particular traits, in addition to the three mentioned above, which signify a modification of, or negotiation between, stances taken by their immediate and less immediate forbears.

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5 Eliot in particular made these sorts of claims in his later essays. Molesworth and Longenbach both describe the ways these cultural claims got incorporated into New Criticism and became an integral part of the assumptions of 20th century narrations of poetic inheritance.
First, the acceptance or embrace of historical flux and lack of coherent cultural stabilizers appears in their work as a superfluous or no longer necessary gesture. The works of both modern and postmodern poets express discovery of historical discontinuity or rupture and an attendant or parallel ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty, an expression the critical narratives of modern and postmodern poetry often take for granted. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for instance, uses its formal features to make an argument for a specifically contemporary sense of historical discontinuity, alienation, and fragmentation newly emergent in the culture. Ashbery’s “Soonest Mended,” though positing a different outlook and attempt at resolution, makes a very similar case as it entails a discovery of a moment of historical rupture, then attempts to embrace that rupture, or as the poem says “accept the charity of the hard moments,” as a mechanism for navigating it. (*Ashbery Collected Poems 1956-1987*, 186)

For the third way poets rupture from the past is not so much a discovery, but an already accepted occurrence, one reflected in the verse of these writers. In the poems of Bidart, Graham, Phillips, and Cole a coherent or wholly unalienated historical past never existed. Historical discontinuity is not just an aspect of the current cultural moment it is a perpetual part of aesthetic engagement and inheritance. This trait appears clearly in Frank Bidart’s poem “Little O” which claims that the problem with aesthetic production in regards to history is that each new generation produces a new “dilemma” of representation based on the present’s relationship to the past, recent or otherwise. The poem declares that “We are not belated: we stand in an original/ relation to the problems of making// art, just as each artist before us did.” (*Watching the Spring Festival*, 42) The poem counters here a frequent or implicit modern and postmodern assumption that there
ever existed in time a moment in which representation presented no problems for the artist because of the availability of a seamless cultural inheritance that could provide adequate formal parameters. In Bidart’s poem discontinuity or rupture is an inevitable part of historical transmission. Paradoxically, this form of discontinuity is what makes up continuity. According to the poem, since rupture is an inevitable part of the continuation of historical aesthetic transmission, the model for transmission is not one of revolutionary rupture in opposition to peaceful transmission, but rather a chaotic evolutionary process which can incorporate many varieties of transmission between the binaries of continuity and discontinuity.

A second trait evident in the works of third way poets which signals a modification of the works of their forbears involves the interrelated issues of ontological, epistemological, and subjective indeterminacy and the use of language (and poetry) in the resolution of these dilemmas. Blasing finds modern poets attempting to contain these indeterminacies by producing works which claim to be scientifically objective and presentational rather than representational. The critic’s exemplar of this tendency is Pound whose imagist phase works expressed a claim for “organic” objective form which resists the individual will or specific subjective stance of the author. In Blasing’s reading, Pound’s works react to ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective indeterminacy by using the poem to repress those uncertainties and replace them with a transcendent truth. For her, “In a Station of the Metro” is the clearest case in point of the direct presentation of an object which becomes a contained objective truth. A postmodern poem like A.R. Ammons’ “Corsons Inlet” depicts the breakdown of these scientifically objective structures of knowing and being as “liberating.” The speaker is
“released from forms,/ from the perpendiculars,/ straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/ of thought/ into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends/ of sight…” (Collected Poems 1951-1971, 148) Within Ammons’ poem, knowing and being are found in impermanent “eddies of meaning” which allow the self to fluctuate free of the constraints of a dominant discourse and the ontological/epistemological closures they represent. The poem formally echoes its assertions, as the lines don’t follow a regular meter or rhythm but accumulate and disperse across the page, mimicking the content of the poem and making a case that fluid linguistic structures can present this moment of liberation.

As mentioned above, a third way writer like Graham, while evincing skepticism about claims of modern versions of ontological/epistemological, subjective, or linguistic truth or closure, finds the complete dismantling of these structures for the sake of finding liberation unconvincing. In the previously mentioned 2003 Paris Review interview with Thomas Gardner, the poet makes this point, citing T.S. Eliot’s dissociation of sensibility as an ongoing phenomenon, one exacerbated by information technologies which split the self from the world and from itself through a massive, overwhelming glut of linguistic information flowing without end. The poet makes the point that lack of structure has itself become a coercive structure which no longer has the power to undo the dominant power structures through undoing the dominant discourse. Graham’s poems frequently illustrate this outlook. “The Scanning,” mentioned above, critiques the embrace of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty through its depiction of such uncertainty as ending in numbing paralysis. Graham’s later poems continue this critique, often by working through the dilemmas produced by deconstruction’s own claims for liberation through the dismantling of linguistic structures. For instance, the
speaker in “The Taken-Down God” finds the prospect of deconstructive absence alienating and nihilistically threatening and attempts to find a stabilizing parameter for herself in anticipating her engagement, through the poem and its metapoetic gestures, with the other of the reader. This stabilizing parameter or loose structure is both open enough to anticipate the participation of the reader/other in making up the act of readership and structured enough not to suppress or repress the self of the writer. These loose parameters, so the poem suggests, can provide a stabilizing starting point to resist the alienation attendant upon epistemological/ontological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainties.

To explain the point a little, the self created through the reading experience in a poem like “The Taken-Down God” is not an isolated objective subjectivity able to craft a timeless scientific truth, nor is it an absolutely fluid self unbound by structure and completely open to “eddies of meaning.” Rather, it’s a self created through an established parameter, that of the intimate bond between reader and writer which occurs through the action of reading and writing the poem. This bond neither essentializes the self and its contingent subjective truths, nor fails to honor the otherness of the other with its own contingent subjective truths but seeks instead to bring both parties into contact and enable thoughtful interaction between them. Metapoetic gesture, such as direct apostrophe to the reader, is one method often used by third way poets for establishing this intimate connection. Graham’s poems (such as “From the New World,” “Underneath 13,” “Woods,” and “Dawn Day One”) consistently utilize such techniques. Phillips’ poems often accomplish connection with the reader by casting the relationship between self/writer and other/reader as a romantic relationship in which the self has harmed the
other and seeks forgiveness and reconnection. “Revision” is a case in point, as it reads epistemological/ontological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty in terms of a romantic relationship between the speaker and the other/reader which is at a crux between splintering and re-establishment. At stake in the poem is the narrator’s verbal accounting for his time not spent in the company of the other, an accounting which will make his activity and his self known to himself and to the other party. The poem creates this self, but posits it as a self in relation to the self of the reader through the gesture of communication. The reader must complete the action of the poem through his or her own engagement of reading and thereby (according to the poem) make the complementary gesture of connection. Bidart’s “Second Hour of the Night” does something similar as it anticipates readerly interaction and enfolds that interaction within the poem by creating parallels between the acts of reading within the poem and the actual act of reading the poem. The result is to make recognizable patterns for activity which can allow the readerly and writerly selves to be experienced by both reader and writer.

Language for third way poets serves as the bridge between self and other and between internal and external realms, a bridge the poems of these poets acknowledge as fragile or flawed. Many of Phillips’ poems, such as “Youth with Satyr Resting,” find frustration in the fact that language can’t adequately represent experience or express the emotional state of the speaker. Neither language, nor the self, can be absolutely contained and controlled. Cole’s “Apollo” sequence ends with the assertion that the internal self will never be fully reconciled to the external self seen in the mirror, no matter how much patterned linguistic material the self produces. Furthermore, language can’t be relied upon to produce complete knowledge of the world. Graham’s “Woods” argues that
chronological change is so rapid that knowledge is only available in contingent, momentary pieces. But self-conscious working of language can produce patterns which allow the parameters of a self to become readable (though not absolutely knowable) over time for both poet and reader and to produce a joint discovery of a shared moment of comprehension. The works of all of these poets argue this point consistently.

This contingent readability of the self and the world draws from both modern and postmodern poetic practice and addresses the dilemma of a public versus a private poetry in ways that indicate a third trait characteristic of Graham, Bidart, Phillips, and Cole. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot famously declared a poetics of impersonality. Longenbach and Molesworth, in describing the ways the imperative towards impersonality became a major trait of New Critical endorsement of modern poetry, and Blasing, in her reading of the modern stance of “objectivity,” suggest a relationship created by this poetic mode between the writer and the public. In effect, impersonality becomes a mode of writing which represses or suppresses the self of the writer for the sake of public engagement and the production of a distanced, timeless, universal truth. Longenbach’s reading (in The Plain Sense of Things) of Stevens’ Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction claims the poem to be this kind of public document. For the critic, the abstraction within, and endorsed by, the poem allows the poem to serve as a public document able to be encountered by as many readers as possible. Longenbach compares Stevens’ use of abstraction with later modernist (and Aristotelian) claims contemporary to the poem that abstraction is not elitist, but rather allows all perceivers to engage the piece without the demands of specificity. And yet, as Blasing has argued in her case against Pound, when Stevens’ renders the specificities of his own subjective, rhetorical
stance invisible, he creates a poem which makes a claim for an objective, timeless truth. Even if the truth produced is that there is no objective, timeless truth (as the poem often claims), such a truth becomes objective or universal through the suppression of the subjective/rhetorical position of the writer.

The postmodern poetic turn to personality, as noted by Molesworth, or subjective rhetorical transparency, as described by Blasing, inverts this relationship. In a work like Lowell’s “Waking in the Blue” the personal events of the poet’s life, in particular his experiences with mental illness and institutionalization, are made public, freeing the repressed personality of the poet (for Molesworth) and making known the specificities of the subjective stance which contributed to the crafting of the poem (for Blasing). The poem, in this reading, becomes liberatory for both reader and writer as it works against the repression seen in impersonality and the coercion of the reader into the acceptance of a timeless objective truth supposedly made in bad faith. Keller, however, points to a danger in the excess of personal, subjectively transparent writing in her critique of the works of Robert Creeley. For her, Creeley’s poetry becomes solipsistic in its excessive use of personal material which fails to allow the reader access to the situation of the poem. The audience can’t be coerced into any meaning because the poem becomes meaningless. An excess of personal transparency, in too much resisting authorial repression and audience coercion too much, severs the connection of the writing self to the world.

My point in surveying such views is that the third way poets treated here address the issues of personal/impersonal and private/public writing by producing poems which act as publicly available interfaces for intimate exchange between poet and reader. The
interface model of the poem creates a balanced relationship between reader and writer in which the self of the poet is not repressed and the reader is not coerced into accepting a bad faith timeless truth. Such poems work as devices for producing a shared experience between two selves, and though that mechanism is publicly available the action self-consciously takes place within a place of privacy. Graham’s work often exemplifies this trait; “Underneath 13” is a case in point. The poem repeatedly points to itself as a material object produced by an absent self, and calls upon the reader to “touch me// here.” The here in the poem is the here of the poem, drawing the reader’s attention to the mental and physical acts of reading and the way that the poem, as interface, allows a connection between two distanced selves. The sense of intimacy the work creates between these two selves, highlighted by the poem’s troping of discourse as sexual intercourse, requires the privacy of the act of reading. Bidart’s and Phillips’ works often echo Graham’s in this regard, while Cole’s poetry presents a different if related approach to the dilemma. Cole’s poems often wrestle with the dual demands of public and private interaction by depicting the painful extremes of acculturation and solitude. Overdetermined social structures either painfully suppress the self or ostracize it, and yet, attempts to recompose the solitary self result in solipsism which threatens to rupture the self from a sense of reality. The wrestling within the content of the poems becomes a wrestling in the poem’s engagement with the reader as Cole’s work shuttles back and forth between generally recognizable events and the personal sensations of the self produced in the individual by the accidents of history. This constant wrestling is what places Cole’s poetry within the scope of this project.
Finally, a fourth trait noticeable in the work of third way poets is in the claims those works make for aesthetic production. First, the poems of these poets suggest that continuous production is the most appropriate resolution to the ultimately unresolvable ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemmas which they engage. Bidart’s “Third Hour of the Night” especially makes this case as, borrowing from Whitman, it casts the poet as a wound-dresser attempting to prevent further damage from the existential wound of being. If existential crisis and alienation are ongoing, then aesthetic production, so the poems of these writers claim, must also be ongoing as it makes those crises manageable through the creation of parameters in which to clarify the self. This clarification occurs within the individual poems and through the accumulation of a mass of work the poet can use to connect him- or herself to a material past. The re-use or reconsideration of material from the poet’s past becomes a version of discontinuous or chaotically evolutionary continuity. Another Bidart poem, “The Collector,” illustrates this trait as it shows the speaker/poet thinking back over his past poems of mourning for a deceased lover and painfully realizing that the moment of mourning is over as he no longer feels the loss. The past pain creates a link to the present pain; the situation of the past is reconsidered and encountered from another perspective, but this perspectivization is still tethered inescapably to the past selves created through past works.

This trait is not new to the third way poets of this project, of course, and is not really a radical modification of the works of their predecessors. Robert Lowell’s whole career arc, for example, is a case of a poet consistently reconsidering his previous works and making self-conscious shifts in his style or mode of writing. The move from the
New Critically inflected impersonal formal poetry of his first two books to the personal, often free verse poems of *Life Studies* is an often cited version of what Longenbach considers the “break narrative” which characterized not just Lowell’s career, but the careers of other poets who felt themselves to have come after an already completed modernism. This break narrative entails just this sort of breakthrough, a rupture from past works and a reversal of their modes or motifs. The critic severely critiques this version of poetic transformation by pointing to the ways that, however much such a narrative proved helpful to Lowell at a particular point in his career, it was neither completely accurate nor entirely justified by the whole of his career, as the poet’s work could often vary between formal and free verse works and personal and impersonal subjects. Another paradox to consider in examining this narrative is that even though a break resembles rupture in one sense, it becomes a form of continuity in another; the poet creates a connection with the past through consideration and disavowal of that past. As in the above examples of the third way poets of this project, even rupture becomes a tether to the material past of the poet’s work. What makes third way poets different, if only slightly so, in this regard, is in their prominent self-conscious consideration of past work as a reworkable yet stabilizing structure to connect the present self to the past. What Graham refers to in “Underneath 13” as “my love my archive” becomes a way to maintain connection to a material history of poetic crafting which becomes another stabilizing parameter allowing the self to become readable and to oppose the alienation of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty. (*Swarm*, 103)

A second feature concerning aesthetic production found in the works of the poets of this project is the claim that aesthetic pleasure, or self-conscious engagement with
“beauty” as Phillips calls it in his essay “The Case for Beauty,” can serve as another stabilizing parameter for the self. This claim represents a negotiation between the claims found in modern and postmodern poetry for the status of aesthetic production. While many modern artists, such as Eliot or Pound, upheld high art production as able to enact some version of social or cultural salvation through containment of the alienating forces around them, postmodern artists tended to react by collapsing the supposedly distinct categories of high and low art as well as by undertaking an intense critique of the claims for aesthetic pleasure or beauty. Aesthetic structures, like philosophical and linguistic structures, come to resemble another version of coercion which mid-century poets resist in an attempt to find radical liberation, often by using the aesthetic against itself. Keller’s reading of Ashbery’s poetry as modifying that of Stevens’ makes this case. For the critic, the postmodern poet’s works extend the modern poet’s by emphasizing the aesthetic pleasure of the ordinary or everyday, hence the variety of registers, discourses, and tones in a poem like “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” Within that poem the discourse of art criticism proves no more or less a source of aesthetic pleasure than the actual artwork criticized; furthermore, other discourses come and go, similarly providing aesthetic pleasure which is no greater or less than the pleasure of high art contemplation. The concept of beauty collapses as it becomes an all and nothing category; if beauty can be found anywhere and everywhere, then its privileged status is undone. Likewise, if aesthetic experience can be found anywhere, the aesthetic has no meaning.

The works of third way poets show an inherited skepticism for the automatically socially privileged category of hegemonic beauty or high art endeavor. Modern claims for large scale cultural and social salvation are not just confining in the poems of these
writers, but absolutely untenable. Jorie Graham’s early poems, such as “Two Paintings of Gustav Klimt,” sternly critique the concept of beauty as a confining codification, and her recent poem “The Violinist at the Window” forcefully interrogates the claim that aesthetic craftsmanship can provide any version of cultural cohesion in the face of overwhelming social or biological circumstances. The poem, taking its subject from a painting by Matisse, implicitly compares an artist attempting to perform for himself in the wake of the destruction of the First World War with a poet attempting to craft while aware of oncoming ecological crisis. Aesthetic crafting won’t contain destruction; and yet Graham’s poem argues, through its very existence, that aesthetic crafting can do something to stabilize the self, if only momentarily, when nothing else can be done. As in Bidart’s “Third Hour of the Night,” self-conscious crafting and aesthetic pleasure provide a balm for an unresolvable existential crisis.

As all of this says the works of third way poets are skeptical of modern poetic privileging of a high art aesthetic, but they also show skepticism for the complete dismantling of that aesthetic and the pleasures it can provide. Phillips’ previously mentioned essay, “The Case for Beauty,” is exemplary in this regard. There, the poet argues that acknowledging aesthetic pleasure creates a sense of authority for the self. Pleasure (or beauty) becomes a method by which the self can be held accountable, thereby giving aesthetic enjoyment an ethical valence. The previously mentioned poem “Revision,” which entails making an accounting of lost hours of pleasure to the other of a romantic partner, presents an example of this motif in action in Phillips’ poems. Pleasure becomes a way in which the self can be experienced. Cole’s poems also make a claim for aesthetic pleasure as a mode of giving shape to the self. In this case, aesthetic
craftsmanship and experience work against the repression of the subjective, sensory experience of the self. “At the Grave of Elizabeth Bishop” exhibits this trait as it describes a moment in which the speaker stops at the titular site to “see what I felt.” (Middle Earth, 43) The work of the poem and in the poem reconnects the sensory self to the intellectual self which has become alienated. Cole has claimed in an interview with Christopher Hennessy that this particular poem is a sort of ars poetica, and the poem argues for the ability of aesthetic pleasure to reconnect the self to itself. This case is made explicitly for the writer in the act of writing, but also implicitly for the reader in the act of reading.

The works of Graham, Bidart, Phillips, and Cole show a belief that the consciously crafted work, and aesthetic or sensorial pleasure, can provide an opportunity for ethical engagement through the taking of authority for that pleasure, however contingent or subject to change such authority may be, as well as through the reconnection of an alienated sensorial and mental self. In this way, their works seek to rehabilitate the claims for the aesthetic function of verse, as they express a hope that it can reintegrate the self of the writer and of the reader, thereby affecting some small degree of cultural or social change. This hope represents a chastening of the larger claims made by modern poets such as Eliot or Pound as well as a negotiation with the dismantling of the privileged status of the aesthetic in a poet like Ashbery.

Though my narrative is admittedly only a beginning, it is hopefully a useful starting place start in accounting for how poets emerging from the dual poetic strands of 20th century poetry see themselves responding both to the past and to the demands of the contemporary moment. The poetic embrace of ontological/epistemological, linguistic,
and subjective uncertainty has given way to a poetry which attempts to craft contingently stabilizing structures in which to read or produce a semi-coherent sense of self. This self exists separately from others, but in conjunction with them, and through this relationship the self and the other it can hopefully begin to resist the alienation produced by an ongoing sense of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty.
Chapter 1: Jorie Graham

Jorie Graham is commonly critically identified with postmodern poetry or philosophy, often in ways that use the word “postmodern” pejoratively. For example, in his polemical screed “Phillip Levine and Other Mediocrities…” Anis Shivani vitriolically judges Graham “a third rate student of Wittgenstein and Derrida… hung up on the idea that it’s difficult to make language communicate.” (“Phillip Levine and Other Mediocrities,” par. 14) Aligning her writing with two prominent thinkers whose address the dilemmas of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty, Shivani claims that Graham’s work is both reductive and illegible, so dependent on poststructural philosophical precepts (precepts Shivani dismisses) that the reader who lacks familiarity with those precepts can’t read the poem and the reader who has such familiarity needn’t bother reading them, since they merely “repeat” the philosophy. Adam Kirsch’s much more level-headed review of Graham’s Material, collected in The Modern Element, makes a similar charge. The critic aligns the poet’s work with Heidegger’s, who serves for him as a type of poststructural grandfather to whose theories of presence the poems are absolutely beholden, and concludes that without knowledge of Heidegger’s philosophy Graham’s verse is unreadable.

Graham’s involvement with Continental philosophy is undeniable, yet critics in claiming her as an arch-poststructuralist whose works are overly dependent on the reader’s familiarity with poststructural thinking Shivani and Kirsch both miss the specificities of Graham’s constant negotiation of the dilemmas created by such involvement. In effect, their dubious elision of philosophy and poetry aside, both critics
misread engagement with postmodern or poststructural thought as an embrace of it. On the contrary, Jorie Graham’s poetry consistently shows ambivalence towards the legacy of poststructuralism as well as the varieties of postmodern poetry it engendered or resonates with, the linguistically and subjectively unstable poetry of John Ashbery or the LANGUAGE poets for instance. Instead, Graham’s work offers complicated negotiations with the tenets of poststructuralism and the embrace of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty of postmodern poetry, negotiations sparked by the poet’s sense that the linguistic and subjective dismantling poststructuralism and postmodern poetry endorse have negatively severed the self from itself. Her sense of the self-alienation resulting from ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty often causes Graham to eschew the postmodern poetic embrace of such uncertainty and aligns her more often with the modern poetic sense that such uncertainty needs resisting. And yet, Graham can’t simply make a teleological return to modern poetry’s real or supposed promise ironically to enclose such uncertainty with the projections of the poet’s mind, as she must acknowledged that many poststructural theoretical precepts (particularly deconstruction with its concerns for absence and presence and their resolution in uncertainty) are at least a partially accurate description of the function of language and subjectivity. At stake for Graham then is the rehabilitation of poetic engagement and the subjectivity historically read as residing in or produced by such engagement. Her aesthetic task is to find some new way to compose the subject through aesthetic activity after having inherited the powerful mid-century critiques of subjectivity and aesthetics. Her poetry evinces a faith that doing so can bring

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6 I draw here from Charles Altieri’s description of modern and postmodern poetic practice in *Enlarging the Temple*. 
about a tenuous re-alignment of the fragmented subjectivities of reader and writer and produce moments of genuine presence, however chastened and conditional, through attuning the reader to the shared linguistic and sensorial experience of the poem. Given this, in Graham’s poetics the role of the reader is crucial for the very existence of the poetic moment. Linguistic transmission is key to Graham’s project and produces a kind of equation that finds balance in the mutual activity of textual engagement. If the reader does not exist, the poem can’t be read, and if the poem can’t be read it can’t do the work Graham thinks possible. In effect, the poet uses the poem not as a site that contains the essentialized subjectivity of the author, but as a site for the sort of intimate, direct, communicative exchange which can produce moments of subjectivity in the reader.  

This “interface model” signals Graham’s dual inheritance of modern and postmodern poetic practice. On the one hand, her poetry shows sympathy with Marjorie Perloff’s “open” poetics, described in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. Graham’s poems need readerly involvement for their very being, and they openly invite the reader to make individualized, personal meaning out of the aesthetic experience. On the other hand, the poet’s works do not entirely sever referents to leave the reader in a bewildered state of liberatory understanding, as referent is needed to build the bridging interface, and such bewilderment would replicate the alienation Graham’s poems want to resist.

Furthermore, the poet’s works show an attunement to Charles Altieri’s description in *Enlarging the Temple* of the postmodern poetic interest in attaining a state of the

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7 This reading is indebted to Cynthia Hogue’s examination of Graham’s attunement to others and otherness in her essay “The Speaking Subject/ In Me: Gender and Ethical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Jorie Graham.”

8 Thomas J. Otten explores this aspect of Graham’s writing in his essay “Jorie Graham’s _____’s.” For Otten, the blanks in Graham’s works not only draw the reader in, but attune the reader to the absence of the poet by highlighting an overwhelming 20th century virtual materiality which proves ultimately illusory. This reading points to another moment where Graham’s poems engage poststructural or postmodern thinking without endorsing it.
numinous through the aesthetic act. Graham’s works openly attempt to create a mutual sense of presence between reader and writer, one that echoes Altieri’s category of the numinous. However, Graham’s poems also exhibit traits of projected structures of which they remain suspicious, but which appear necessary for contingent or momentary comprehension of the external world. Finally, the poet’s works tend to announce openly the specific subjective position from which they emerge, rendering transparent the rhetorical stance inherent in the poem, as Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues postmodern poetry does in her work *Postmodern Poetry: the Rhetoric of its Forms*. And yet, Graham’s poems also show a desire, as Calvin Bedient has argued in “Postlyrically Yours,” for a self beneath the surface of rhetoric or a “created essence” which can resist the constant subjective shifts of rhetorical repositioning that alienates the self from itself. (*Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, 41) This third way negotiation accounts for the ways critics have argued for Graham as both a modern and postmodern poet. Bonnie Costello in “Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion” sees the poet first as modern and then as postmodern in the way her works “move[d] from a spatial, modernist to a temporal postmodern aesthetic, one that subscribes less to art as artifact than to art as process.” (*Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, 32) For Costello, the poems of *Erosion* are modern, while those in the volumes after are postmodern. Anne Shifrer, on the other hand, finds the seeds of Graham’s presumed postmodern turn within the earlier work. In my view, both critics are both right and wrong. Graham inhabits neither one pole nor the other, but navigates between them, using her poetry to work through the dilemma or crisis created by an inherited sense of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty.
Graham’s discomfort with postmodern thought and poetic practice can be seen in the ways she finds both of them corresponding to the alienating aspects of the culture. In effect, the dismantling of language and the subject her poems once considered liberatory gestures have come by the mid to late 90s to seem instead (or also) nihilistically alienating and therefore threatening the sense of self and its social, cultural, and political activities. Though she does not address poststructuralism directly, the poet’s interviews and critical writings strongly suggest that Graham views the mid-twentieth century theoretical and poetic embrace of subjective and linguistic uncertainty as having intensified the negative effects of social alienation rather than alleviated them. In a 1996 interview with Mark Wunderlich Graham elaborates on this dissociation when offering her views of contemporary verse.

I think the issues regarding the problem of subjectivity – the still operative inheritance of the desire for Romantic fulfillment, or presence, as it comes into conflict with the distrust of such a desire (the distrust not only of the validity of personal experience but of the very notion of an essential self who might claim to have such an experience) – are at the core of what we see happening today. Somewhere between the “I” that takes its authority from an apparent act of confessional “sincerity,” and the “I” that takes its authority from seeing through to its own socially constructed nature, there is still the “I” that falls in love, falls out of love, gives birth, loses loved ones, inhales when passing by a fragrant rosebush – the “I” that has no choice but mortality… If I have a wish, it is that the body’s (the heart’s) knowledge be trusted again, that the fear of the body – certainly understandable in the age of AIDS and the plague-like virulence of our instant information technologies – decrease, and that the senses be used again in our poetry, that real images be felt, written, and most importantly, understood for the knowledge they contain.

“The Glorious Thing: Jorie Graham and Mark Wunderlich in Conversation,” par. 6

Evident in this interview is the way Graham inherits skepticism of Romantic subjectivity; also evident is her strenuous desire to use poetry to realign subjectivities that are suffering a sense of self-alienation, having been split from their sensorial experiences by the overwhelming events of the external world. This contemporary sense of self-alienation is exacerbated by the fact that language itself is most in need of attention
because of the ways it has been divested of meaning by institutions that have abused it.

Graham makes this sense clear in “Friendly Fire,” a 1991 lecture given at the University of Iowa in which she attempts to speak against the first war against Iraq but has trouble doing so amidst the double-speak involved with rationalizing the military action.

I had wanted to compose words to speak of this war, but it is unspeakable. One of its most frightening aspects, it seems to me, is the degree to which language is being asked to collaborate and make it possible. We have been witnessing the erosion of language in our culture for some time now – language having become primarily a means for sales – of desires, emotions, ideas, identities…After a while our language becomes languages – each to one mind. The subjectivity becomes absolute. After a while there is no apprehensible text, there, underneath the interpretation. We are alone, each. Or, worse yet, it doesn’t really exist because I can’t really know it… [We are in a terrifying dark] in which our chief instrument for belief, for self-creation, is silently being taken from us. One in which the lifeline which connects us to our world – to the earth itself – feeling – is being severed. No censorship imposed by the state is as forceful as this ugly silence [made from use of euphemism], this gag made of what sounds like words slowly being accepted by the human spirit.

“Friendly Fire,” par. 8

In Graham’s formulation alienation from the word is representative of an alienation from the world, which in its turn becomes a solipsistic withdrawal divorcing mental from sensory activity. For Graham, poststructural linguistic theory and the poetic practices it endorses or generates, which claim that all language is rhetoric, that all is surface lacking depth, and that all writing represents absence, has the effect of naturalizing this alienation. It’s this mode of thinking and poetic practice Graham finds herself resisting.

More recently the poet has aligned herself with T.S. Eliot’s diagnosis of a social and personal dissociation of sensibility operating at the present moment. The poet describes her own project, and a high art poetic in general, as able to combat this fragmentation through deliberate, thoughtful language use. In a 2003 Paris Review interview with Thomas Gardner she sums up her position.

[W]hen you have a split TV screen giving you main news (images), secondary news in text (often war facts), weather, stock reports, and even an “update” in the corner, on sports, how is a person –
let alone one in a democracy and therefore responsible for clear-headed choice – supposed to feel any of the information she’s gathering? One is reduced to simply scanning the information for factual content. The emotive content, unless reported to one or rhetorically painted onto it, is gone from the experience. It seems almost in the way. And yet it’s in the overtones of the facts, in the emotive overtones, that much of the real information lies. None of this can be separated out from contemporary poetics. The “multitasking” asked of us by the CNN screen is precisely geared to dissociating our sensibilities. It forces us to “not feel” in the very act of “collecting information.” But what value does information unsustained by emotive content have, except a fundamental genius for manipulating dissociated human soul? Why, you can frighten them to the point of inhumanity. You can get them to close their eyes and let you commit murder in their name… If you were to ask me now what poems need to be doing in our era, I would be right back there with Eliot insisting that fighting the dissociation of feeling from thinking is still our priority as working artists.”

“The Art of Poetry No. 85,” 95-96

For Graham, the situation described by Eliot in the essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” that of losing some kind of centralized subjectivity and being controlled by the flux of information streaming without end, isn’t much changed in the early 21st century. But while mid-century poets attempted to utilize this flux as an occasion to revel in the liberatory fluidities of the self, Graham sees the situation of dissociation in a more sinister light. And yet, her response is not to make a teleological return to some version of modernist or romantic subjectivity. Rather, she rethinks the position of poetry and the position of the poet to develop a new relationship between reader and writer, one which transforms the poem into a site of intimate exchange in which both reader and writer might find similar, though different, forms of subjective reassociation in the paired sensorial and intellectual activity of aesthetic engagement, an engagement which negotiates between the practices of modern and postmodern poetry.

This chapter will begin by briefly addressing Graham’s ambivalent history of responses to poststructural or postmodern thought and poetic practice, focusing particularly on how that ambivalence influenced her thinking about the purpose and place of the aesthetic, thinking which reaches an impasse with the poems in *The Errancy*
(1997), a volume she has described in the Paris Review interview with Gardner as her most postmodern. It will then explore the mid-career volume Swarm (2000) as a watershed in Graham’s thinking both about the dismantling of language and subjectivity and the function of the lyric. Next it will focus intensely on the way the volumes after Swarm have continued to present the poem as a site of exchange, and conclude with a brief examination of Graham’s most recent work (work that suggests the beginning of a rethinking of the poem in the face of impending ecological collapse in which the reader has vanished).

The poems in Graham’s earlier volumes tend to re-enact many of the now standard poststructural critiques of language, subjectivity, and the aesthetic. “Kimono” from Erosion (1983) offers a sort of strip-tease of presence and absence by re-enacting a voyeuristic performance enacted unconsciously (or perhaps semi-consciously) by a speaker in a kimono for a boy who watches in the woods. The body in this case is rendered known and desirable by serving as a covering covered itself by an aestheticized rendering of the natural world. Presence and absence, body and mind, natural and artificial, watcher and watched become indistinguishable as the veiling layers of aestheticized language peel away, leaving nothing but more veiling layers of aestheticized language. “Two Paintings of Gustav Klimt” from the same volume enacts a very similar deconstructive tearing away and re-covering, describing a landscape of Klimt’s and an unfinished painting of a nude, “open at its point of entry/ rendered in graphic/ pornographic/ detail – something like/ a scream/ between her legs.” (Erosion, 62-63) The aesthetic impulse is critiqued here as engaged in the kinds of containment,
control, and closure which ultimately find expression in the Nazi atrocities in the years after Klimt.

Graham’s early poetic engagement with deconstruction allows her to critique the ways categories of the aesthetic, in her terms “beauty,” can become destructive, controlling entities. Many of the poems in The End of Beauty (1987) and Region of Unlikeness (1991) continue to call into question the ways we use the category of beauty or aesthetic activity to build the illusion of a “finished” reality. The End of Beauty works against this finish in several ways. First, the poems often follow high modernism in incorporating mythological subjects, but they do so not for the sake of presenting them as static containers of absolute transcendent truth. Rather, the subjects are re-interpreted or even revised to make the fluidities and pluralities of myth more apparent, suggesting a historical model without transcendent truth. The supposed stability of myth is transformed into contingent moments of temporary understanding. Second, several poems meditate on moments of fragmented, unfinished, unpolished not-quite coming together. A case in point is “Pollack and Canvas” which uses Jackson Pollack’s drip techniques, and the moment between the touching of paint and canvas as exemplary of the fluidities the poet finds in existence and the ideal of an artwork that is not closed or enclosed.

Regions of Unlikeness extends much of this critique, looking at the lack of closure in the poem as indicative of a lack of closure in the self, and generally positing that as an existential solution to the false consciousness of ontological or epistemological absolutes. And yet, several poems express some kind of desire for a substance or presence beneath the absence of the word. In “Who Watches From the Dark Porch,” for instance, the poet
tries to coalesce into a moment of authentic presence for the speaker within the poem who attempts desperately to understand the chaotic world around her. At the end, the speaker appears to seek safety and solace in a privileged moment of self-awareness and sensorial/mental presence, but couched as the poem is in the middle of heavily waged critiques of moments like this, the ending in which the self announces triumph in the act of sitting still becomes a rhetorical announcement divorced from the activity. The triumph rings hollow, particularly as the poem is followed, perhaps dialectically, by the legitimately harrowing “The Phase After History” which associates the desire for substance under surface with the suicidal desire of a mentally unbalanced man who tries to peel his face off searching for a real self underneath, the desire is still heavily present.

*Materialism* (1995) continues much of Graham’s recognizable poststructuralist critique of language and of supposedly stable ontological or epistemological categories, particularly in the poem “Concerning the Right to Life,” which interrogates the discourses surrounding abortion, and in “Dream of the Unified Field,” which uses Columbus’ journals to critique the ways language has been used to master or colonize the bodies of others, or “the other.” The poems in *The Errancy* (1997), though, constitute something of a shift away from this position. In the 2003 *Paris Review* interview with Gardner noted above Graham regards this work as her most postmodern, and when pressed she claims that for her the term signifies the dizzying simultaneous plurality of speakers and discourses which make up the poems. This mode of postmodernity is not endorsed, though, but rather used as a critique as Graham employs its precepts to explore the disorientation of living with language in this way. The poems in *The Errancy* work by exemplifying the state of both reader and writer being verbally overwhelmed; the poet
uses run-on sentences that create a linguistic bulk whose end effect is to leave the reader scattered and without a clear feeling of the sensory. Language in this volume seems incapable of describing a material world, and words spool out as if trying desperately to attach to a material reality. Description seems mostly inoperable. The title poem is a case in point. We begin with a description of the sound of cicadas “again like kindling that won’t take.” (The Errancy, 4) The next few lines elaborate on this situation, though, in a manner that suggests the mental activity of language is overriding the sensory data. This poem, and many more in the volume, circle back and away, again and again, from a concrete sensory detail to a figurative description far removed from the sensory and then back to a new detail which quickly develops into a new ungraspable, overwhelming verbal construct.

The poems in this volume use the deconstructive splitting of language and the linguistic self to critique the deconstructive mode of thought, though they do so while recognizing that they operate from within the very material they would critique and not at some kind of privileged linguistic remove. The tone of the poems is generally frantic, and static (as “noise”) becomes a recurring motif, both in terms of a sense of stasis within physical and verbal overwhelm and in the sense of meaningless white noise. The two senses go together in “The Scanning” which describes the situation of being stuck in a traffic jam, standing still, and trying to find a meaning for the gridlock by scanning through the radio. Instead of usable information or meaning, the poet finds an overwhelming plurality of voices from afar that merge distant information and the present situation into a moment of apparent panic. Far from embracing the meaninglessness of
language, “The Scanning” tries desperately to find meaning in language, but comes back only with a disorienting and dissociating fragmentary speech which prophesies war.

The penultimate poem in the volume, “Recovered from the Storm,” tries to navigate a way between the mind’s desire to verbalize the chaos of the material world, and the body’s necessity for interaction with it. The poem begins with a description of going outside to survey the damage done by a heavy storm. The scene is a waste land in miniature, and the poem itself draws from Eliot’s own questions concerning the responsibilities one has in a world out of joint (or for a world out of joint) as well as Elizabeth Bishop’s sense, in “A Complete Concordance with over 2000 Illustrations” of a scene only “connected by ‘and’ and ‘and.’” (Elizabeth Bishop: the Complete Poems, 58) The situation is one in which there are perhaps some things one could do to begin the process of repairing the damage (repair the trellis, remove the branches and debris from the yard), but others are obviously beyond immediate human abilities (putting the bushes back together, replacing the heads of the flowers). In the midst of this chaos the speaker feels a demand for some necessary action, but what action? What can she do? The poem moves from overwhelmed contemplation of right action to specific detail that seems unconnected or unconnectable. The description of a puddle containing “ditties of fate” suggests that this chaos is unavoidable. (The Errancy, 107) Even if the scene could be cleaned, Graham knows there will be others. The world is not permanently fixable, something Graham’s project always recognizes, and attempts at fixing (in the sense of repairing and of permanently setting into place) are things she resists strenuously. And yet, the poem, with its emphasis on finding a method for negotiating this mess, realizes that we can’t live in chaos. The description of the garden suggests that it served a larger
organizing function as an idea of order, to borrow from Stevens. But where Stevens would begin to build anew with a sense of ironic distance, the situation for Graham, suggested by the tone of the poem, seems both overwhelming and tragic. If Stevens, or even Eliot, tend toward detachment, Graham’s chaos, “this iridescent brokenness, this wet stunted nothingness,” happens in a state of immersion which doesn’t allow for the kind of ironic view high modernism took. (*The Errancy*, 107) The way out of the poem, and a possible mitigation of the chaos, happens when the poet stops trying to describe or define the scene, or even trying to plan a course of action; rather, it happens extraordinarily simply, as Longenbach has shown in his essay “Jorie Graham’s Big Hunger,” when the speaker stops thinking and picks up the first branch: “I pick up and drag one large limb from the path.” (*The Errancy*, 108) If the poem had previously thought through an Eliotic shoring of fragments against the ruins of a waste land, the final line points in another, though perhaps related, direction, that of the simple action of cleaning expressed simply where the body and mind move into the external world and take responsibility for the part of the world that they can.

“Recovered from the Storm” tries to find a way for the individual to act in a larger world in which the individual’s ability to effect the world has been diminished. The poet wants to reiterate that we aren’t absolutely powerless but do have an ability, a right, and a responsibility to contribute to the managing and maintenance of the natural world on the level of interaction with other people, nations, and cultures, and even on the level of interaction with other species. The poem attempts to illustrate the reality beyond an overwhelming and sometimes meaningless language, but description isn’t enough to break through the complications of signifiers operating at a remove from referents. The
poem, as much as it may want to resist, remains a static symbolic construct because of its enclosed distanced first-person stance. The poems in the volume reach a stalemate with their own deconstructive critique because they still operate within the confines of the lyric, producing a lyric “I” which still takes its own subjectivity as a given. The volumes after *The Errancy* bring this debate between rhetorical subject and presence to a crisis and begin to negotiate more fully between the twin demands of the deconstructive past and the subjective sensation the poet feels and wants to transmit.

In this sense, *Swarm* (2000) signals not a break, but a watershed for Graham. In her previous work, though it was often concerned with finding moments of the numinous, tended to fall back into the necessarily symbolically contained, illustrating an impasse in the poets negotiation of modern and postmodern poetic practice. “Recovered from the Storm” is a case in point; the action announced can only be announced and must remain rhetorical, however much Graham may want the actuality of the action. In *Swarm* the poet shifts the focus more specifically to the very language of the poems in order to create a state where language can be present as a material substance, but one which carries a referential valence which looks both backwards to the poet and forwards to the reader. Graham does not posit meaning as something absolutely determined by the reader, as in Perloff’s “open” poetics, but creates moments of address which anticipate and enfold the reader into the action of the poem through reading and empathetic imagination.

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9 In “Jorie Graham’s Big Hunger” James Longenbach makes a case that Graham’s work never breaks away completely from the modes or concerns of her previous works, but cycles back and forth between them. This reading of Graham’s career appears appropriate in my view, as even though *The Errancy* ends in an impasse in terms of its methods to connect reader and writer, Graham never stops thinking through this dilemma, but uses her past works to modify the ways she approaches ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty in later works.
On the whole, the poems in *Swarm* employ ruptures of grammar and visual space on the page, turning against the sensorial glut of the previous volume with a stripping away of textual material. In breaking with the conventions of grammar and syntax, Graham produces texts which purposefully strain at legibility, drawing attention to the effort we as readers must make not to fill in the gaps of language, but to fill in the gaps of meaning without language. Mentally providing a missing word (a frequent strategy Graham had used in her early work) often won’t do; rather, we must infer meaning from the fragmentary by remaining attuned to the surrounding grammatical context within the poem and the grammatical context of the other poems in the book.\(^{10}\) Language here becomes figurative of an insect swarm in that it is recognizable and meaningful as an entity only within the context of other entities. The swarm, though whole, needs plurality to survive, just as language, though composed of singular words, needs more language in order to be recognizable as language. The textual ruptures bring our attention to this feature of language. The individual words, taken as a plurality, make legible both the system and the users of the system. And yet, while this attention to legibility is a major feature of the work, it occurs in a space where legibility is threatened by the very means which attune us to the function of legibility; in other words, though Graham may want to keep our readerly focus on the function of words, the ruptures she employs to do so threaten to make the words incapable of providing meaning.

The opening epigram and several of the notes of *Swarm* serve as signposts for the reader and suggest methods to engage a purposefully broken text, one which may border

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\(^{10}\) Thomas J. Otten, in “Jorie Graham’s ____’s,” argues that the missing words in Graham’s earlier work highlight the absent place of the author and replicate the inevitable transformation of late 20th century material into non-existent immaterial through time. Though Otten’s point is cogent, the poems of *Swarm*, while concerned with deconstructive absence, employ a different technique for different ends.
on illegibility. Citing St. Augustine the book proper begins with the epigram “To say I love you is to say I want you to be” [sic]. Despite its simplicity, this epigram carries in it many of the ambiguities of language and meaning that Graham exploits throughout the text. As the poet places it here, this quotation appears as an unpunctuated fragment making available one reading in which we approach the line as a broken statement, cut off before it tells us what it or the speaker wants us to be. But we can take the open-endedness of the line to suggest not a particularity of being, but being in general, emphasizing that the act of loving, or love, is an act of open-ended creation of the other which honors the very strangeness of the other by not attempting to define what or who it is. Graham uses Augustine to create a direct address to the reader, the ultimate other or “you” encountering a text. This epigram sets the stage for a book that wants to use words to create blendings and mergings, metaphorical acts of love, between the reader and the writer through the physical substance of text and the imaginative anthropomorphic engagement such substance requires. Graham tropes reading as a sexual act throughout the book, sometimes in quite disturbing ways, and she suggests such troping here, but now the trope itself becomes a method for commenting on reading and writing and the crucial reasons to engage in those acts. At stake is the creation of being, in the writer through the crafting and in the reader through the reading. This textual/sexual engagement brings forth selves.

The notes provide another clue about how to engage the language of Swarm. The final note gives a definition for the word “swarm” from the Oxford English Dictionary, first as “‘a body of bees which at a particular season leave the hive or main stock, gather in a compact mass or cluster, and fly off together in search of a new dwelling-place,
under the guidance of a queen,’ as well as ‘persons who leave the original body and go forth to found a new colony or community.’” (Swarm, 114) These two definitions are both highly suggestive, particularly as they’re placed together in this way. The term “body” in the second definition has a particular resonance; though it’s obvious that this definition wants “body” to be read as meaning a mass or generic substance, as it’s used in the previous definition, there’s an impressionistic suggestion that Graham is addressing some sort of metempsychosis occurring, the soul’s leaving one body and taking up existence in another, here plural, existence. This becomes a metaphor for the functioning of the text, the imaginative part of the writer leaving the writer to find habitation in the collective other of the reader. Furthermore, this isn’t a finite procedure, but a cyclical one which recurs regularly, though with variation and permutation, each new place indebted to and different from the last, each new seeking out of a home or community both structured and chaotic. In the definition of the swarm we get a hint of the apocalypticism which occurs throughout the book, but continual reforming after the destruction suggests that apocalypse isn’t a final destruction or unveiling, rather a cycle of destruction and rebirth, revealings and concealings, both necessary for being. And like the open-endedness of being in the Augustine quote, the new formation of the swarm/self is not dictated by the text, but directed or guided through engagement with it.

Another piece of self-commentary which provides suggestions for legibility is the note for “For One Must Want/ To Shut the Other’s Gaze,” an “intentional slight misquotation from Dickinson’s 640 [Johnson edition], a poem which animates the book throughout.” (Swarm, 113) This poem of Dickinson’s, opening with the lines “I cannot live with You –/ That would be Life – / And Life is over there,” signals another moment
where Graham is guiding the reader into understanding how to encounter this text.

Dickinson’s poem is a direct address to an other unidentified “you” which emphasizes the distance between the self and the other concurrent with the desire to bridge that distance. As an animating feature of Swarm this poem expresses the skepticism Graham has about her own project. The turning of text into sensorial aesthetic substance in order to create a shared sense of self between reader and writer is an ideal, but a fragile one, dependent on the ability, and desire, of the other to engage and encounter the text. Graham’s project requires a power balance. She will trope her actions in such a way as to suggest that the writer, or the words, will submit to forms of destruction from the reader in the hope that such destruction can be creative. All through the book the poet expresses a desire to use language to bring reader and writer into conjunction for the creation of other selves, but concurrent with this desire is a fear that the desire is ultimately unobtainable, and potentially illegible for the reader.  

Another way in which Graham makes the text legible for the reader is through repetition. Several themes, motifs, tropes, images, and phrases recur throughout the volume. As noted, the whole work suggests a continuous cycle of destruction and reconstruction over time. And yet, though the cycle may remain the same, the features are perpetually changing. One way in which this occurs is through the representation of mythic and literary material. The poet works a host of identifiable mythic or literary characters (Calypso, Eurydice, Lear, Agamemnon) into the text. In doing so, though, she

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11 This reading borrows in part from Stephen Yenser’s review of Swarm, “Breaking and Making.” For Yenser, the linguistic breaking, particularly the rupture of punctuation, attempts to move the poem beyond time in order to engage a metaphysical silence that has an analog in Dickinson’s work. Though my own interest is not so much in Graham’s explorations of a potential Divine (or Divine Nothingness), I’m indebted to Yenser’s thinking about the volume for my own reading of Graham’s attempts to anticipate the reader.
modifies the narratives suggesting that the mythic has continual relevance not as a static conveyor of timeless truth. Rather, new formations must use the myths and narratives of the past and transform them, possibly rearrange them to a point of derangement, in order for them to mean beyond their cultural moment. In other words, the identifiable figures within the poems may draw upon certain historical meanings, but in doing so they will provide other meanings through new historical placement or replacement. Likewise with the repeated tropes and figures; in one poem they may signal one thing, in another poem that meaning may have shifted. Trope and figure veer between the recognizable and the illegible without becoming purely one or the other.

“from The Reformation Journal,” which opens the book, suggests that the tearing down of language is an attempt to get language to act as much like silence as possible with attendant images of the textual self-immolated or broken. Significantly, “[l]ocations are omitted,” a feature which James Longenbach reads in his essay “The Place of Jorie Graham,” as allowing the poet to emphasize the fact that reading is an engagement with a new specific place, the literal place of the text. (Swarm, 3) This place is one in which the reader encounters the other of the textual “I,” but this textual “I,” while suggestive of an author who worked the text also points back to the absent place of the physical writer who crafted the words, creating a situation where the author appears to be just as other to the text as reader is. The textual “I” “surrender[s itself]… like the sinking ship,/ a burning wreck from which the depths will get theirs when the heights/ have gotten theirs./ My throat is an open grave. I hide my face.” (Swarm, 3) The “I” here is a battered thing, submitting to being battered for the sake of a kind of truth. When the poem advertises that “I am not lying. There is no lying in me,” it suggests that the
method of fragmentation/rupture/self-immolation can be a revelation. (Swarm, 3) This becomes a moment in which the text comes close to burying its rhetoricity under the false consciousness of an absolute truth, a tenet of modern poetry Blasing critiques, as mentioned previously. Graham prevents the text from doing so both here and throughout the book, though, by creating a situation in which the text asks for explanations for terms, explanations which must be provided from some entity outside of the text. That entity could be the reader, put in the position of providing her own reading; it could also be the author, put in the position of having created a text which seeks understanding of itself as a sort of artificial intelligence. The asking is both a request and a self-interrogation, leading the text back to its source in the author. The more the text proclaims its otherness from the author, the more it points back to the author as its originating source.

The breaking or burning for the sake of truth occurs throughout the volume, but the breaking is not done in a way that suggests an ironic distance or blithe disregard for the pain involved in rupture. In many cases, the pain can be read as expressing anxiety over legibility. “2/18/97” raises this issue with the invocations of its last stanza with the biblical language of creation, “let there be…,” transformed into “let it be…” (Swarm, 14) Here, though, “it” is the creation of destruction, or creation through an act of withholding. The “loved glance” opens, spills out, but is taken back and then disavowed, linguistically disowned, disinherited, negated. (Swarm, 14) At the same time, the poem also expresses a desire for some unsayable, silent part of the self that can’t be negated. What word could we have for this state, and how are we able to read it? The state of the author resists legibility as she seeks to transmit silence into readable form. But how can we read silence? Silence is necessary for Graham, particularly in this book, as the antithesis of
verbal overwhelmingness, and her interviews and other writings heavily suggest that
attention to silence can allow us to create spaces that resist systemic technocratic
numbing. But can silence be legible and if so, how? The poem wants to settle the issue
by conjuring the state of silence, ending with the exhortation “Leave me the thing that
will not burn./ Leave me the thing that cannot be thought – I will not think it” (Swarm,
15). The ending, then, is an attempt at non-thought, signaling that perhaps ending is the
only way such a non-thinking can occur, in the leap into silence beyond the poem. The
ends of the poem, then, are the ending of the poem.

Attempts to get at an illegible, silent, unsayable state occur throughout the
volume, and are related to the apocalypticism of many of the poems. But the
apocalypticism Graham evinces is often not a destructive revelation or unraveling of a
false reality, rather it’s a piling on of the illusory. This illusory build up is so self-
conscious, though, that it begins to show the outlines of a potential underneath, an actual
depth under a translucent surface which runs in opposition to the postmodern
proclamation that all is surface. Rooted in the etymology of apocalypse is the concept of
unveiling, as in the traditional Romantic reading of revelation as the removal of a veil of
perception. Also etymologically linked is the Homeric figure of Calypso whose name
literally means “hidden.” Graham fuses both in “Underneath (Calypso)” which rips at
one veil, the veil of trope or language, only to replace the veil with more troping
language. And yet, in doing so, the poet also lets the veil slip to reveal the very
artificiality of the process of aesthetic crafting. The note at the end of the volume
announces that the poem is spoken by Calypso and addressed both to Ulysses, whom she
has in thrall, and to the reader. The speaker is a self-conscious construction, made from
the historical materials of an ancient handed-down text, a textual creature among a web of language, but one which appears to desire to break down language, to rupture the very stuff of which it is made. The poet keeps these tensions between veiling and unveiling, creation and rupture, in play.

The poem begins with the exhortation to sing, an exhortation, if we follow the note, both to Ulysses and to us, signaling that Graham figures our role as not just passive readers, but active producers of the textual moment. We are also called upon by the speaker in the poem, and by extension by the poem itself, to sing the poem, to engage and create it as an aesthetic moment and to take part in the adventures of Ulysses by imaginatively claiming them as our own. This sense of doubleness in audience is what allows Calypso both to reveal and conceal, acting out a set of symbolic actions within the symbolic boundaries of the poem, but also calling attention to the necessary interpretive action needed to make the symbolic structure have meaning. The end of the first section furthers this reading as Calypso apologizes for the veil while admitting that veiling is what allows us to recognize the depth below the surface. In a similar fashion, language is the veil which can allow us to recognize the crafting self of writer and of reader underneath the aesthetic material. This presence is both there and not there; on the one hand, the system of language that constitutes the poem is obviously lacking the physical presence of a speaker, hence the figurative construction. On the other hand, that figurative construction can’t exist without the writer having first materially crafted it. Similarly, the character of the speaker is conjured into speaking by the empathetic acts of the reader. Without the reader, the textual speaker doesn’t exist. And yet, this is a textual speaker who announces as much, rupturing the illusion of direct access to a
speaking text while creating it. The very subject the speaker wants spoken is the event of “being driven off course/ to face another audience,” signaling the dual performance of the poem taking place both in and out of the poem. (Swarm, 41)

The poem constantly concerns itself with the establishment of covering and illusion, hinting at the presence of an underneath through the self-conscious apologies for the veiling, presumably the veiling due to language. The desire for a material reality occurs throughout for this speaker, particularly in the poem’s third part which speaks to the world through a self-enfolding anthropomorphic command: “Strike me says each thing./ Resurrect me in my flesh./ Do not pass through me.” (Swarm, 42-43) The desire of the speaker here seems to be for tangibility, for a knowable state underneath the veil of language, a material authorial state underneath the absence produced by textual composition. And yet, the ending presents an odd conflagration which turns back on itself yet again. Graham creates a new ending to the story of Ulysses and Calypso by uniting the two in marriage, thereby changing the homecoming of the original epic. The coming together at the end is also a coming apart as both parties approach the end of the ritual as broken beings in flames, “[i]n anguish here under the veil.” (Swarm, 43)

The ceremony of ripping away, of burning down barriers to re-establish new ones, is itself another veiling as suggested by the ambiguity of the phrase in the last stanza. The poem keeps unlayering, then relayering, ultimately unraveling through the raveling gesture of persona (the speaker as Calypso), which then breaks down again in the persona’s self-admitted speaking in the poem and through the poem.

The marriage at the end of the poem is also reflective of the tentative union between the selves of reader and writer again mediated by the textual speaker. The
repeatability of the text is the method for “[f]rothing time back in its corner;” time can be pushed out of the way because the mediating text has been committed to the page and the marriage can occur again and again, as long as the material text exists and as long as readers exist to read. (*Swarm*, 43) And yet, Graham pulls back from the suggestion of an eternal aesthetic, noting the anguish and brokenness underneath the textual space; the recognition of suffering signals a recognition of the mutable selves on either side of the text, fragile selves that are always in flux because timed, and always approaching the material, however immutable the material is, from a fluctuating and immaterial viewpoint. The writer will potentially disappear, and new readers will emerge, each reading from a particular subject position. The text may be somewhat static, but the readerly viewpoint is not.

“Underneath (13),” the penultimate poem in the volume, directly figures the textual engagement as a sexual one, returning to the suggestiveness of the Augustinian epigram; the poem also reflects again on the brokenness of the language of the volume and the uses of that brokenness. The poem describes the crafting of poetry as a kind of failure, claiming that “the tools that paved the way broke” and that “our surfaces were covered/our surfaces were all covered.” (*Swarm*, 102) Language, as figured earlier, is a type of veil or covering. In this instance it’s not that the language itself has broken; in fact, the language seems too unbroken, having covered everything. The tools for manipulating language, for paving and covering with deliberateness, have been broken, and previous uses and crafting of the aesthetic now appear hollow, an “addict[ion] to results.” (*Swarm*, 102) The assertions of the poem suggest that the stance Graham takes here is one of an eternal alienation from the world due to the world’s resistance to
knowability. In other words, the deconstructive elements seem to win the day early in the poem as the poem asserts that “the human being and the world cannot be equated.”

(Swarm, 103) Following the deconstructive line, the poem asserts that we are forever ruptured from knowing the world through the mediating function of language. And yet, that assertion is made conditional in the following line by the contingent phrase “aside from the question of whether or not we are alone.” (Swarm, 103) This question is the issue the poem wants to resolve, at least for the moment of the poem, and it does so by turning to a focus on the physical body and the literal body of text.

The poem meditates on destruction and then turns to another reiteration of the sensorial glut of linguistic use: “so many messages transmitted they will never acquire meaning.” (Swarm, 103) This moment looks two ways, first at the external world where we are all transmitting messages throughout the day, utilizing language in private which will never be known or understood, and using language in public where it will be misinterpreted or ignored. It also looks at the work of the poem itself, and Graham’s own past writings which occur within the cultural and temporal space of the sensorial glut, private and public things which may never be heard or may never be attended to. This sense of reflecting on past poems occurs in the next line which asks “do you remember my love my archive.” (Swarm, 103) Past poetry, the archive of works and words, becomes equated with the emotion or act of love, and the poem begins its seduction of the reader with the command of the next line: “touch me (here).” (Swarm, 103) In the midst of omitted locations, the physical location of the text becomes present and here it becomes a literal, physical place. The command draws the reader back into his or her
bodily experience of text, the holding of the book, a touching that is necessary for the linguistic exchange of thoughts which can “give birth to a single idea.” (Swarm, 103)

The poem exposes the physical place of the text, but it does so for the sake of the impossible figuration of textual activity as sexual activity, impossible because openly acknowledged in the text as metaphor, yet another trope. And yet, the declarations, the piling on of trope, strain after something beneath trope that the poem suggests can be achieved. A blending between selves can, and does, occur through the textual encounter. The poem commands the reader to “be a phenomenon/ at the bottom below the word,” a demand that the reader attune himself or herself to a holistic physical and mental experience of the world or presence in the world. (Swarm, 104) Suggested here is that underneath the piling up of language is a living self, a living self of the reader and a living self of the writer. This moment counters the deconstructive annihilation of presence by creating attunement to bodily presence out of social, linguistic engagement. Internality is below the word, and yet caused by the use of words.

The end of the poem elaborates on the book’s project of creation through textual engagement by bringing the presence of the writer back to the foreground through the metatextual meditation on the self’s own engagement with textual creation proclaiming that “there is in my mouth a ladder/ climb down/ presence of world/ impassable gap/ pass/ I am beside myself/ you are inside me as history/ We exist Meet me [.]” (Swarm,105) The voice here becomes the bridge between selves and announces Graham’s faith that the voice can be heard, at least imaginatively, across the barriers of time and space. The particularities of the sound created by one entity make it possible for the “impassable gap” between one self and another to be bridged. This moment reiterates
the importance of the body in terms of aesthetic engagement. Textual sound, though mute on the page, can be made to sound through readerly involvement. The writer is also a reader here, as the poem proclaims “I am beside myself,” a proclamation which signals a literal ecstasy. The self doubles, creating a new textual self which is the engaging bridge, while leaving the writerly self to observe that bridge. The next line declares “you are inside me as history,” a claim that can be imaginatively iterated in several ways. For example, the “you” can refer to the writerly self inside the textual self as the historical creator underneath the physical language, but it could also refer to the textual self as it becomes, for the writer, a monument to the particularities of a historical moment which has now passed. Or it could function as another instance of direct address to the audience, reusing the metaphor of sexual connection to reiterate the imaginative engagement necessary for reading and for the creation of selves. The text now includes us as a part of itself, and the engagement between selves has now taken place, ending with the reminding assertion that “[w]e exist.”

This moment is significant both for the poem and for Graham’s work as a whole. In a sense, the project of *Swarm* is to test the theory of whether or not language and poetry can have meaning, and of whether in this poem, dependent on readerly and writerly activity, selves can be made through the very assertion of such a moment. The moment is fragile, made as it is of metaphor and trope, but the activity gives substance to the trope. The declaration here is a performative recovery of the self through the merging of creating self and creative self, authorial self and textual self, all of which includes the necessary activity of the reader which is also a creating and created self, creating in the act of imaginative reading, created by the effects reading has on the reader.
This moment is a watershed for Graham. The books after *Swarm* treat such extremes of textual merging with considerable if never complete skepticism and work to find other ways or other metaphors to convey and/or create the coming together of reader and writer. One strategy the poet employs is to turn from the brokenness and open-endedness of the previous volume to the construction of specific situations espoused by a specific lyric “I.” A major feature of the volumes immediately following *Swarm*, is their reinclusion of places. Many of the poems in these works telegraph the fact that they are written from a specific place at a specific time, describing the particularities of the speaking subject who experiences a place while that place is rapidly changing. This method of self-description during the act of experience gives Graham some stability to be able to move back from the trope of textual engagement as physical sexual engagement and into a more substantial rhetorical space, but a rhetorical space that posits a place of emanation as well as the awareness that such a place is lost for the reader. In other words, the absence of the author is already read into the speaking subject who acknowledges an encroaching erasure of the self as the self moves through time. This situation enhances the poetic dilemma of whether the self can be linguistically coordinated and transmitted. The difference here is that Graham takes as a given the work that was done in the previous volume to cast the relationship between reader and writer as one of mutual creation, and instead of working for the most part towards direct address, she more often experiments with crafting from the stance of a self-overhearing lyric “I.” An exploration of the poems of the volumes following *Swarm* will show how Graham reconfigures this relationship and continues to find ways to bridge the gap.
between absent writer and present reader through the shared sensorial experience of the poem.

The turn towards a more recognizable lyric stance means that Graham has to reconfigure the relationship between reader and writer. In asserting the self that was, the self that crafted the poem, she now must assert the difference and distance between selves engaged in the action of the poem. The poems of *Never* (2002) begin this process.

“Woods” presents and explores this issue by introducing the reader into the poem, making us aware of the new relationship that must be formed. The poem begins with an act of self-questioning which interrogates the very crafting of the poem, wondering aloud whether the writer will write another poem, and thereby set herself, or different selves split by time, “loping through the poem.” This action leads to the acknowledgment of the act of the readers quietly “do[ing] their job/ over this page.” (*Never*, 10) The poem uses direct address, but rather than inviting the reader to participate in the making of the poem as she did in poems before *Swarm*, the relationship here seems severed, perhaps even adversarial, as the speaker questions not only the action of the reader, but her own attempts to embody herself within the poem. Graham ironizes here her attempts to locate the speaker in a perceivable space, signaling a suspicion of such a maneuver with the word “swagger,” suggesting that the rhetorical stance may be rhetorical stance and nothing more. She also ironizes the act of the reader, perhaps a reader misunderstanding her previous attempts to draw readership into a relationship of creative intimacy. The “finish” she ironically offers suggests a readership that wants the closed experience of an aesthetic object, not the space for interpersonal engagement she seems to require. And
yet, Graham also asserts that the text is a place where one cannot “dwell,” showing a re-emergent skepticism about the ability of the text to house the experience of the self.

This moment in the poem sets the stage for a deflation of Graham’s poetic project. And yet, the rest of the poem works to reassert that project. From the self-conscious taking away of the beneficial action of the poem, she begins to reinhabit the poem through the act of observation. The poem shifts from a syntax of short fragments to that of the run-on at the point when the speaker moves from the disembodied meditation on the meaning of the creative act to an engaged act of looking. In other words, the shift comes when place reasserts itself: “One can say ‘finished’/ and look into the woods, as I do now, here,/ but also casting my eye out/ to see (although that was yesterday)(in through the alleyways/ of trees) the slantings of the morninglight…” (Never, 10)

The poem here recognizes that it must necessarily retain a self-consciousness about its rhetorical stance, it must make the reader aware that part of what it’s doing can only be accomplished through rhetoricity. For that reason, the parenthetical asides are a necessity. They work here to puncture the presumed reality of the rhetorical stance, but tonally they don’t function only as a deflation or ironic undercutting. Instead, the counterfactual asides buttress the stance of the poem, showing a self-awareness and a focus on the action that went into the construction of the work. The experience is not the experience of the moment, though the poem nearly adopts the position of positing it as such. The activity which makes up the content of the poem is a memory, something that happened the day before, but one which can be re-experienced as a present through the act of writing and reading the poem. Graham doesn’t want to stop time, but rather to experience it in the full flush of its motion and to have the reader become attuned to its
passing in the present during the very act of reading. At the end, in the rush of the run-on, the poem exhorts against projecting thought into the future, with the speaker instructing both herself and the reader not to “probe/ with the ghost of your mind this future as it lays itself out/ here, right over the day, straight from the front…” (*Never*, 11) This exhortation suggests two readings. On the one hand, it appears to assert that the establishment of presence requires that we concentrate on the physical moment as it is passing. On the other hand, considering the self-consciousness about the timing of the events in the poem, the self-acknowledgment that this moment of the poem is not the actual moment, but a reflection on an actual moment, the statement can have a metapoetic meaning in that it suggests to the reader that an accurate reading of the poem itself (a poem which is constructed from a moment beyond the poem’s speaking, making it a future projection back into the past), is to surrender to the moment of the poem. The times and places fuse through this metapoetic gesture, creating one space of rushing run-on which is a shared present of experience. Though the poem operates from a self-conscious rhetorical remove, in contrast to the moments of intimacy in *Swarm*, it still finds a space to bring the experience of reader and writer together into a shared empathetic moment.

This emphasis on difference, separation between reader and writer with potential solutions for bringing the two together, occurs throughout *Never*. “The Taken-Down God” which opens the last section of the volume, addresses this situation, dwelling on the absence created by language use. The poem attempts to replicate the moment of crafting by means of the published work, but it does so in a way which complicates the seemingly impromptu nature of the content of the poem. In the poem, the speaker describes writing
the poem, or at least writing the experiences reported in the poem, while sitting in a church where writing is forbidden during the service. The poem attempts to bring reader and writer together by bringing together the moment of inscription and the moment of reading as another shared moment of experience. And yet, the poet has become suspicious about the ability of language to produce this shared experience. Graham realizes in the poem that this connection may only be yet one more rhetorical trope, as much as she or the poem desires otherwise, and she negotiates her way through the demands of rhetoric and the desire for substance by meditating on the absence underneath the presence of the word by way of contemplating the absent statue of Christ in the church, the taken-down god of the title. The textual exchange here, as throughout *Never*, is once again tenuous, reflecting the distance Graham sees between reader and writer. But it does have moments that make space for a leap of faith which begin to allow for the possibilities of engagement and mutual legibility that can bridge the gap between presence and absence without either wholly replacing or displacing the other.

The poem begins with another evocation of a specific place as well as another metapoetic gesture which brings the presence of the reader into the space of the poem: “You are not supposed to write in the presence so I can’t really do/ this task [for us] in there…” (*Never*, 93) These lines declare that the task of writing the poem is an activity done not just for the sake of the poet, but for the sake of the reader, “us,” as well, and it’s one prohibited by the fact that the “there” in question, the inside of the church, is a place which prohibits writing. Ostensibly, writing in the church breaks decorum, but the word “presence” opens the way for the poem’s navigation of deconstructive concerns. The phrasing suggests a basic deconstructive dictum, that writing can’t be done in the
“presence” because within writing there is no presence, merely absence and continued deferral, a dictum echoed by the poem’s activity. The speaker describes her imagined scene of others encountering the statue of Christ she believes to be there, only to find, and dictate to us, that it isn’t there: “Look up, the cross is empty.” (Never, 93) The presence here has become an absence, reflecting the way that the presence of the self becomes an absence after the act of writing, undercutting the faith in the substance of writing Graham had evinced in the previous volume.

In the presence of this absence, the speaker brings her notebook inside and begins to write, drawing attention to the place of the writing by asking why “these words” are “an insult to/ the god,” pointing the reader’s attention to the text and the act of reading, but also bringing to the fore the kind of self-consciousness that goes into reading and writing. (Never, 94) As noted above, Graham is generally in favor of using the aesthetic moment to engage such moments of self-consciousness, but here that self-consciousness is problematic. The speaker sees others in the church lost to themselves in the act of ritual and wishes to be lost as well, but recognizes a difference, the difference of linguistic self-consciousness. Language here is associated with some kind of inner presence, the “speaking subject in/ me,” and it’s this inner presence which seems connected to the self-consciousness, self-awareness, and self-doubt which block attempts to be lost in the ritual and completely focused on the present moment. (Never, 94) This inner “me” desires to use language to “rip the veil,” echoing the apocalyptic themes of Swarm, but the ripping is complicated here if we consider how in Graham’s previous work language itself was associated with veiling. The linguistic inner me apparently wants to rip at language, or those things which veil experience, by using language,
“material” which the poet continually presents as the veil between our minds and our experiences. This internal me, so the poem implies, can only be known by the covering of language, and yet it wants to rip at that covering to get at an underneath or depth that the poem fears may not be there.

The act of writing here is an act of creating a self in the moment or creating a moment which can be filled with a self, a “somewhere,” a text, in which the self can “live.” And yet, Graham’s phrasing heavily complicates this desire, casting the act of writing as a form of “tak[ing] down/ what will continue in all events to rise.” (Never, 94) One immediate meaning of this phrase depends on the idiomatic use of “take down” to mean writing, resulting in the idea that writing is a process in which we try to capture or frame the events of the world as they are moving and changing, rushing forward in time. But the action of taking down recalls the removal of the statue of Christ and the replacement of presence with absence. The act of writing, then, is an act of the moment, one that captures the absence of the self as the self is disappearing into text. When the poem asserts “We wish to picture the erasure,” it describes the very action of the text as capturing the self in time which, at the moment of capturing, slips away. (Never, 94) The moment of describing the process of writing, the moment of self-consciousness, becomes an equivocal moment on the one hand proclaiming the noblest intention of writing to bring the reader and writer into conjunction, to capture the moment as it is passing, on the other making the reader aware of just how distant, how absent, the writer has now become.

This tension continues in the poem, but begins to find a kind of resolution in the fifth and sixth sections. The fifth section ends with a catalog of noises the speaker hears
while writing in the church, culminating in the judgment that they are “all laying-low
their nets of sound/ to catch the absence.” (Never, 96) Absence here can be made
palpable by the veil of sound, an attempt that is actually accomplished, although
equivocally. Across the fifth and sixth sections we encounter the enjambed line “It [the
absence]// is caught,” a simple statement of which we may be suspicious. (Never, 96) Is
this not yet one more rhetorical moment proclaiming a truth that is beyond the ability of
language to grasp? The poet shows a self-awareness here as she declares that what she
has crafted is an insistence, a promise that her “pen is/ a bypath” between the outer world
and the inner world of the church, suggesting that it also serves as the bypath between an
external world and an actual internal world of the substantial self. (Never, 96) This
declaration is not without doubt: “Weren’t we here? Wasn’t I/ in here? And you here
too? We have “written” – can’t you feel it in your hands…” (Never, 96) The rhetorical
questions give way to descriptions of sensation, and it’s in these descriptions that Graham
appears to re-establish faith in the communicability of verse, of the legibility of the
experiences of one self for another. This involves another rhetorical question in the
seventh section followed by another assertion made tentative by its forcefulness: “There:
a picture: the ruin of the mind: did you not make it?: because you/can, you/really can: you
only have to want to…” (Never, 97) The assertion here begins to echo the ways Swarm
found a kind of intercourse in discourse, signaling that the desire to engage the poem will
bring the readerly self into a tenuous conjunction with the writer, allowing connection by
way of the imaginative act of attempting to experience as another has experienced it. The
poem finishes by reconfiguring the readerly “you” as the person who replaces the statue
of Christ, the presence, repeating both the word “now” and the word “this” throughout,
emphasizing the shared mental and temporal space of the reading of the poem. This fusion of time and space bridges the gap between absence and presence and allows the reader and the writer to re-establish the subjective experience, if only for a moment, and a self-conscious moment at that, one which is lost after the time of the writing and reading.

“High Tide,” the poem that follows, replicates the doubt of the “The Taken-Down God,” describing an attempt at communication that is thwarted when the speaker discovers that what she took for a homeless girl is really a stuffed dummy. The speaker touches the girl “fill[ed]/ with the sensation of having/ goodness,” or what is later described as “love,” only to find “it’s not hair, it’s wool and phloxed-up/ random yarns, old woolen caps stuffed in a stocking/ face, with gum laid on…” (Never, 103) The intimacy, the kindness, the act of love which the speaker had made comes undone as the recipient of that act is not really there: “it is a puppet: it is a place// holding a place: it is an eclipse of: of holding/ on: of on: or in: or what a here can be/ if what one is// is finally reduced to here: it is not “now”: that’s what’s been taken elsewhere now.” (Never, 104) As in the previous poem, a mistaken presence becomes an absence, a person is transformed into absence by the presence of a substance left behind. This projected presence promises interaction, but whatever connection can exist is a solipsistic false one, leaving the speaker bewildered. This state of being bewildered again undercuts the idealistic side of Graham’s verse, the side that wants to see interconnection through the aesthetic act. Here the dummy mocks that interconnection both by thwarting the interaction of the speaker in the poem and by serving as a model for the poetic process, thus undercutting the model of intimacy Graham had espoused in Swarm. When the poet writes, she must believe that the words can reach an outside audience, can become legible
to someone outside of the self. In this poem, a dark truth is revealed as “someone has pushed the rock aside,” an echo of the revelation that Christ’s body is not within the tomb illustrating that the mistaken presence is an absence and bringing home the point that the desperate attempt to connect can, sometimes does, end in failure. (Never, 105) And yet, this echo also brings to mind the importance of absence in the very meaning of Christ; the lack of bodily presence signifies the divinity in Christ with absence becoming a moment of transcendence. The anxious tone of the poem which echoes the anxiety of the speaker within the poem concerning the availability of communication and legibility speaks to a feeling of disorientation while the language in the poem points, however contingently, to the potential for legibility outside of the contingencies of time and place (or of the fearfully solipsistic self) due to the potential for non-being of the hearer. The fact of the absence of the reader, perhaps, allows for the privileged form of communication that is the poem.

“Relay Station” which concludes the volume, mitigates some of the misery of the conundrums Graham presents by offering a “yes and no” through pointing out that though contingencies can occlude the attempts at communicating one self to another self (or to itself), such communication, however fragile, is still within the realm of possibility. The poem begins by proclaiming, through a bracketed aside, a permanent truth concerning the fact of a “highest tide” that occurs in the year; this tide is then implicitly compared to “words that come and go,” suggesting that, like the tide, communication can ebb and flow. (Never, 106) And yet, the poem privileges this highest tide that appears to possess the ability to linger, to serve as one of the “things that are kept.” (Never, 106) The
poem works to admit that that the work it can do as a poem is heavily conditional, but
that some of its power can be permanent.

In truth, there is, in grammar,
something where one is truly *one* – link by link,
crystalline –

into which [through which] the voice can empty and refract
what has been seen, or thought, or thought to have been seen,
or to have been. Someone’s hopes are “realized.”
Sometimes, just before the highest tide’s one, single, highest wave
retreats,
a thing and its description can be one: can be the time it takes to say the
thing.

*Never*, 106

On the one hand, this moment in the poem comes as a bald statement of the power of
language to, despite its fluidities, organize, coordinate, and then represent the experiences
of a self. But this statement is heavily conditional, self-consciously modified to point to
the ways that though this may be an ideal situation, it is not one which always or often
occurs. Furthermore, the self that is created through the activity of writing is an
ambiguous one. The idea that “grammar” provides a place where one is “truly *one*” can
look like a liberatory moment where the self realizes that it is truly itself, free from
coercive power structures. (*Never*, 106) But it can also look like the declaration of
solipsism, a production of a space in which the self, through the liberatory action of
writing, cuts itself off from others through the crafting in a solely personal language. As
in other poems, Graham places an emphasis on the voice, the sensory physical expulsion
of breath and sound which converts the mind into an embodied self and which can find in
words the means to relate that self. The relation, though, is a form of “empty[ing] and
refract[ing],” signifying that once the voice has been committed to the written word, it
divests itself of the experience while also shattering or fragmenting that experience through the fluidities of the written word. (*Never*, 106) And the bald declaration that aesthetic use can make a reality is heavily ironized as Graham relates that hopes are not realized, but “realized.” The word for the embodiment of our mental desires is undercut through the use of quotation marks.

Still, the poem holds out hope that a shared moment of aesthetic engagement can bring selves into conjunction. The sensation of shared time is where the poet places an emphasis, looking to that moment as a place where mental phenomenon and physical world can be brought into coordination, both for the poet writing and the reader reading. The poem acknowledges that this situation is ideal and not easily achieved, but nonetheless insists that it can happen. This happening produces not a stable object to be experienced, but this experience itself, what the poem figures as an “arrival,” where the simultaneity of time can emerge and bring into conjunction the self and the world. The end of the poem places emphasis on this arrival and focuses on the motion of the waves forever pushing out, suggesting that the poem itself can keep pushing out beyond the time of its inception and into the future, pushing for others who can read and encounter this moment in time. As a “singleness” this arrival is “stressful,” but still hopeful in its view that it allows for readerly and writerly coordination. (*Never*, 107) The idea that the singleness is stressful points back to the ways that the singular self in the grammar of language may threaten to become a solipsistic self.

*Overlord* (2005) continues and complicates Graham’s relationship with the reader, committed on the one hand to a continued use of language as a means of coordinating the self, but coordinating with a greater self-awareness of the ways the
poetic crafting of one self may cut off the legibility of that self outside of the self. What Graham begins to undertake is the rebuilding of a more self-conscious rhetorical “I,” one that can be permeable, but is more static and noticeably rhetorical for the sake of direct engagement. It’s not that the reader is no longer present, but that the metatextual engagement that Graham has been utilizing becomes implicit in the text, turning the text into a pseudo-epistolary document. This technique becomes most apparent in Sea Change (2008) and Place (2012), but the seeds of it are in the turning away from Swarm which occurs in Never and Overlord, volumes which both build from Swarm’s concerns for textual engagement as intimate form of empathy and turn away from that by acknowledging the impossibility of such troping.

“Other,” which opens Overlord, uses memory as the basis for meditating on the separation of selves from other selves, with the speaker recounting her first sick day with the realization that life goes on without her. First she encounters the sounds of the house usually associated with other times and experiences; then, in an internalization of exterior events, she imagines the experience of her absence in class at school. The poem presents a moment when the speaker realizes that she is different from other people, a separate self, and though people interact with her, their existence is not necessarily dependent on her. Life goes on. But the everyday terms for announcing whether one is in attendance at school take on another significance when considered alongside the previous use in Never. The fact that the speaker is “absent” presents a self-conscious moment in the text where the speaker can announce that the author is not here. The solitary experience of the sole self can’t be completely transmitted through the text. What we experience is the loss of self as the presence of the author recedes. And yet, the end of the poem, while
viewing this as something of a catastrophe, signals that there may be something salvageable from such a situation.

The speaker recounts that upon realizing that she was both present, in her specific physical space, and absent from the public space of the classroom, she was so disturbed “they came running to see what was wrong.”

This is what is wrong: we, only we, the humans, can retreat from ourselves and not be altogether here
We can be part full, only part, and not die. We can be in and out of here, now, at once, and not die. The little song, the little river, has banks. We can pull up and sit on the banks. We can pull back from the being of our bodies, we can live in a portion of them, we can be absent, no one can tell.

*Overlord*, 2-3

What the speaker points to here is a splitting of the self between a physical experience of “here” and a “retreat” from that experience. The language becomes Whitmanian, but where Whitman had treated the ability to be “in and out” of the moment as the privileged act of awareness, Graham sees it as a crisis. The crisis appears to be involved with the splitting caused by internalization or self-consciousness, aspects which then become linked to the act of crafting poetry itself by way of the “little song” which, like a river, provides banks that allow the self to pull back from experience. Poetry abstracts and creates a private space in which “no one can tell” that we are no longer present. This lack of presence becomes yet another trope for the relationship between the reader and the writer; the reader is duped into thinking that the writer is present in the poem when the writer is actually gone. And yet, as negative as the poem takes this to be, the trope contains constructive, rather than only deconstructive, potential. The physical presence of the writer is missing, but the language produced by the writer is here, allowing at least
a part of the self to “not die.” Furthermore, the act of absenting the self becomes a version of privacy, a trait Graham often finds redeeming and sees as under threat from external social and political pressures. The difference here seems to stem from the pun at the end of the poem, where the inability to tell the experiences of the self becomes extreme to the point that the self is forever cut off from other selves, and from itself. Privacy threatens to become solipsism, but this is a solipsism from which the speaker retreats, after having retreated into the self. In a sense, the poem is about the poem Graham wishes not to write, the “song” in which the self has pulled up so thoroughly onto the banks that it becomes inarticulate, illegible, unknowable, and abstractly self-involved to the point that the outside world is permanently cut off.

The ending of the next poem in the volume offers a counter-measure to the too-abstracted self that threatens to undermine the project of poetic communication. “Dawn Day One” begins by describing personal sensations and abstract thoughts as the speaker’s self is coming awake at sunrise. The second stanza has a brief break where the speaker addresses the reader (questioning what the reader’s position in the world has been), but quickly resumes the description of personal sensation and thought. The poem works up to a crescendo of thinking, what it terms an awakening, until the very end where the use of the second person recurs. Graham initially uses the second person in the colloquial way of writing “you” to mean “I.” And yet by the end of the poem these two blurred strands have separated out until the speaker declares at the end that “I’m actually staring up at/ you, you know, right here, right from the pool of this page. Don’t worry where else I am, I am here. Don’t/ worry if I’m still alive, you are.” (Overlord, 7) The assumption here is not that the poet is being overheard, but that she is being heard. From
this standpoint, she can speak directly to the reader in what we may read as an attempt to empower the reader through the re-establishment of the reader’s “hereness,” the state of being still alive, still bodily and mentally active, which becomes the point of departure for further existential engagement. Graham stages here a blending and merging in which the reader does not become terminally entwined, as he or she threatened to be in *Swarm*, but rather in and out of the poem, engaged yet still a sole self whom the poem wants to honor and encourage.

Graham stages a similar moment in the three poems titled “Spoken From the Hedgerows,” poems that stand at the center of the book. The poems work in several ways to think through the engagement a reader has with the language of the past by exploring the engagement a writer has with that same material. Each poem, in a different way, offers a performance of the voices of the past, attempting to resuscitate the voices of the dead and merge them with the present voice of the poet which then becomes the absent voice through the distance of the word. Circling around and through these poems, though, is a void which both speaks and remains absent, a void ultimately filled by the imaginative leap of the poet. Graham attempts to speak for an unnamed, lost dead soldier and to honor his absence by making that absence known. In doing this, though, she again expresses massive doubts about her claims for verse; yet the expression of these doubts attempts to justify doing with poetry what she can.

The first of the “Spoken From the Hedgerows” poems operates by drawing pieces from historical accounts of D-Day survivors into connection as a collage where simple declarative sentences demarcate one voice from the next. Each textual voice of a soldier begins by announcing that soldier’s name, then detailing how he got from the US to the
south of Britain to await deployment on D-Day. In effect, the voices gather and accumulate to echo the plurality of voices and people who grouped together to launch the decisive attack during World War II. The second poem, however, creates a voice for a soldier who died during the glider raids on German positions and who therefore could not have produced a written document of his experiences. This speaker is an unknown soldier who remains unknown and unknowable except for the voice the poet gives him.

The beginning of the poem recounts (with a run-on sentence) the speaker’s witnessing the destruction of the bodies of fellow soldiers as German artillery shoots through the wood gliders. The catalog of wounds is eerily matter-of-fact, described as “sudden openings” in the bodies of others. (Overlord, 37) After the run-on, the poem continues with short, direct statements which then describe the damage done by enemy fire once the planes have delivered their payload. All through these depictions of violence the speaker attempts to maintain an observational distance; observation allows for the recounting of the harm done to others and keeps the speaker outside of the moment. This distance collapses, though, at the end of the first stanza as the poem switches to a first person plural description of being shot. The observer becomes part of the group being killed, and then, in the one sentence that concludes the stanza, becomes an individual: “I do not know who I am, but I am here, I tell you this.” (Overlord, 38)

The absent speaker of lyric poetry mixes here with the historically imagined speaker to produce a strange hybrid absence that still makes claims for some kind of historical veracity, due to the archeological materials the poet cites as having gone into the making of the voice. The poem suggests that lyric may be the way to honor the dead because the genre inherently shares the quality of absence with the dead. The poem here
becomes a trace which allows the dead to become legible to the present reader; furthermore, the trace is epistolary, speaking out in the second person, reiterating that the voice is a rhetorical fantasy used to cover the absence of its being. The projected fantasy cuts both ways, though. The poem shifts in its second section to a quotation of Roosevelt’s public prayer “Let Our Hearts Be Stout,” broadcast on D-Day. In general, prayer might be said to represent a leap of faith in the person praying, an attempt to speak to a recipient who may or may not hear or even exist. The presence of prayer in the poem creates an eerie echo of the relationship between the reader and the speaker as traditionally cast. The speaker, after the reading of the prayer, declares “Fields heard what they could. Day heard what it could. I do not know why I speak to you. I too/ heard what I could.” (Overlord, 39) In relating the speaking “I” to the fields and the day, the speaker is including himself among inanimate objects, suggesting he, dead now, is also an inanimate object, hearing “what I could.” This transformation through death causes the confusion concerning the reason for his speech. It should be impossible. The speaker is making a leap of faith that he can speak and that the speech will be heard, just as Roosevelt makes a leap of faith in supplicating God to “[e]mbrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy Kingdom.” (Overlord, 39) The recipient of the prayer in the poem is the dead man, hearing what he can. The relationships become a pair of analogues, with the relationship between the president and the speaker analogous to the relationship between the speaker and the reader. In this case, the poem appears to ask the reader to hear what she can; it presents a plea for attunement to the voice of the other made across time and space, beyond death, and for the honoring of the act of speaking, of giving voice to pain, even if response is impossible.
The second poem begs for empathy for the other; the third poem describes a slightly different attunement for the other, this one which seeks to honor the “ecstasy” of comradeship and the willing sacrifice of the self for the sake of another person. Graham returns to the collage of voices from the first poem, but mixes them with different demarcations and an overarching structure of a lyric I in which the voices can be placed, merging of the two techniques of the past two poems. This is part imaginative filling of historical gap (the “I” placing itself back in time to report, through the aesthetic, on the feel of facing death in war) and part documentary evidence reconstructed into crafted form. The opening of the poem announces that the poem itself is an attempt to reconstruct the past to make it understandable, presumably for the sake of the present. The poem makes a claim to be able to “bring back” the past through “feeling.” (Overlord, 40) As is often the case, Graham is interested in the dual use of that word, the physical and emotional “feel” of a moment, and poetry, however compromised by concerns for legibility, seems to her the right place to do this work because of its engagement with aesthetics which allows sensation to be known.

After the opening invocation, the speaker changes from the first person singular to the first person plural, triggering the effect of empathetic imagination that lets her enter into the lives of others, inhabiting the experiences of a soldier on Omaha Beach as he rushes forward into the battle. After the depiction of sensation the poet attempts to describe the emotional engagement with others that occurs in the face of death as an ecstasy unlike any other human experience. The lack of personal loss in self-sacrifice signals that the relationship the poet envisions here is one of empathetic engagement so intense that the self, indeed all selves involved, are lost in the personal care of and for
each other. This moment, which wants to honor the ability of soldiers to sacrifice, to take a leap into caring for an other which is so extreme that the self literally faces erasure, is the furthest possible case for attunement to the existence of an other. That involvement with, and attunement to, the other and the erasure of the self recalls the ideal in *Swarm* of mixing reader and writer together into another moment of ecstatic intimacy, and the poem seems to operate under the expectation that we, as readers, will find in the reading a similar ecstasy which becomes empathy with the existence of the other.

And yet, as often occurs in Graham’s work, the moment of ecstasy or “beauty” is a moment of which we should be suspicious. The poet does not want to glamorize warfare or encourage the conditions that produce this encounter with death. The emphasis on empathy and self-sacrifice rather than personal valor undoes much of the glamour itself, but the poet remains aware that this ecstasy can become another form of personal valor. To mitigate this tendency, the poem splits at this point into a plurality of voices, voices that want to keep in play the simultaneous singularity of the self and the ways the self is involved in a whole. The first voice reinforces the ecstasy of the previous lines, claiming that the “entity” formed by soldiers through the experience of war is a “mystical concoction.” (*Overlord*, 41) The second voice, though, contemplates the ecstasy of the merging into a group by framing it as the universal inevitability of death. “It can’t happen to me” transforms to “It can happen to me” and then to “It is/ going to happen to me.” (*Overlord*, 41) The self faces the inevitability of annihilation as the poem begins to express a drawing back from the ecstasy of one kind of unity to focus on a view of another, much more terrifying and literal, obliteration of the self. An element of pathos begins to appear in the poem as the third voice emerges, attempting to explain to
loved ones back home the casual regard for death which the soldiers have developed.

The letter attempts to express an experience for which the speaker feels there are no words. This experience echoes the reading of the poem, where words emerge from a place of absence trying to communicate a personal feeling, emotion, or state now lost and perhaps illegible. Empathetic communication breaks down in the face of this experience, and the poem shows that one kind of empathetic action comes to replace the communicative function and the original social bonds that had helped to create the self in the first place.

The poem ends with a declaration of a life lived in the moment, knowing that moment may be the last: “If death comes, friend, let it come quick./ And don’t play the hero, there is no past or future. Don’t play/ the hero. Ok. Let’s go. Move out. Say goodbye.” (Overlord, 42) The admonition not to play the hero serves as a reminder in and through the poem against valorizing personal endeavor; under the circumstances, with death understood as a casual event, heroism has no meaning. The only meaning appears to be the meaning of the moment of existence, free of past and future. The admonition also appears to be a command to abandon role-playing, or, following Stevens, to “let be, be finale of seem.” This reading underscores the emphasis the poem wants to place on the existential moment of being itself in the face of death. There is no role to play, only the raw state of existence to inhabit. By the end, there are no longer words, as the poem tells itself to say goodbye. The end of the poem is the end of thought, the end of language, the end of communicability, and the end of this voice speaking. The poet attempts here to bring the death of the voice and the end of the poem together as a moment and, perhaps, through empathetic reading to bring the reader into a similar
aestheticized state in which he or she can understand the final end of the state of existence.

The final poem in the volume reaches back to these moments of empathy and again approaches the idea that attuned reading, empathy, and the aesthetic can be intertwined. Though these attributes are intertwined, they don’t produce a categorical moral imperative which transcends time and space, though Graham does suggest at the end that we must acknowledge some overarching inevitability which the poem positions as death, both personal and planetary. Death is not transcendent, nor does it offer transcendence through encounters with it. Rather, it’s an event which will happen and which can’t be avoided. The poet sees a problem in considering the ways to transmit this message, particularly as an aesthetic event. The intimacy Graham has developed between reader and writer re-emerges here, as the speaker directly addresses the reader in the second person and in doing so reads the reader as a good person, one who would show empathy and concern to another human being. From here the poet develops another analogue for engagement with the work through the use of the speaker’s attempts to engage a homeless man. First she sets up the analogy by figuring the reader as someone who would “not walk by the man old enough to be your grandfather,/ somebody’s grandfather, on the street in this great cold.” (Overlord, 86) The reader is like the speaker who is eventually shown not walking by the aforementioned homeless man. The reader is read into the poem as an empathetic actor who attempts to communicate, for the sake of helping, with a person who appears noncommunicative. The speaker’s desperate attempts to get the man to eat signal the breakdown of communication between two
parties, a breakdown the poet seems to circumvent by figuring the reader as like the speaker.

The engagement with the homeless man is ambivalent. The speaker attempts to help him, but the poem resists turning this attempt into a triumphant, self-serving moment by illustrating the very real difficulty of helping. The man seems immovable, inevitable, representing a situation which absolutely resists attempts not only at human interaction, but at changing the situation itself, signaled by the speaker’s self-chastisement: “Of course I have to leave. As always am/ expected. As always have done nothing.”

(Overlord, 88) Nothing has been done because there appears to be nothing to do besides make the empathetic effort. Even that effort is undone, not only by the intractability of the homeless man, but by the speaker’s own frame for action which incorporates her own versions of inevitability replete with the language for that inevitability, “of course,” and “as always.” The confrontation is not just with a homeless man, or even with one’s failure to change the situation of another; it’s with the very resistance of the external world to such change. What the speaker encounters is a moment of resistance to linguistic fluidities because beyond language and possibly resembling death. This is the moment the poem figures first as “the thing itself” (recalling Kant), and then in a moment of retraction and rephrasing “the given thing… that you might have persuaded yourself is/invisible, unknowable, creature of context – it is there, it is there, it needs to be there.”

(Overlord, 88) The intractable, the poem seems to argue, is knowable through its intractability; the poem further argues that we need to be attuned to this through the empathy we can share in the aesthetic moment. In this light, the end of the poem is equally equivocal. The return to observation of the natural, physical world, the world
which is given and in many ways intractable, may be considered a moment of acceptance of the limited abilities of the human, particularly the ability to recognize systems while possessing limited ability to change them. On the other hand, it can seem a threatening observation when considering that the natural world, often figured by its flora in Graham’s work, is often a signifier for the ways we have already altered the ecological world to the point that there can be no recalling the damage we’ve done. Both readings are available in a poem that questions how it can transmit knowledge not only about the intractable as a category, but also about the ultimate intractable, death itself.

Furthermore, this isn’t just a human death, but global ecological death, a theme floating throughout the book.

This theme becomes the prevalent one in Sea Change, a book in which Graham transforms her querying of the legibility of the self and others into a querying of the ecological and social sustainability of the self as part of the species. As Helen Vendler points out in her review of the volume, “A Powerful Strong Torrent” published in the New York Review of Books, many of the poems in the book are written from the imaginative vantage point of one speaking to another in a far off time when the sensations and scenery of the speaker are no longer available to the reader. A heightened concern for the time of the writing permeates the book; the poems tend to focus on the tension between thoughts of a far-off, unforeseeable future, suggesting that there may not be a future for the species, and the moments of presence and self-alignment Graham has always privileged. The main issue the poet investigates is the ethical quandary of writing verse, an aesthetic act necessarily involved with beauty and the production of pleasure (however much Graham qualifies these things, she always takes as a given that they are
the main work of a poem), while the species appears on the verge of self-termination.

The poet had previously negotiated her concerns with war and poverty with the aesthetic work in which she engages through the creative engagement and aligning of selves through the reading and writing. Here, though, that negotiation collapses as Graham begins to contemplate what it might mean when her verse, and her self, become illegible not just because there are slippages in language or gaps between reader and writer or parts of the self which can’t be coordinated into words, but because no one will exist to read the work.

This dilemma is present in the first poem of the volume. “Sea Change” begins with a description of a natural scene which doesn’t seem right, a weather pattern too rough for the season and a feeling in the body that the ecological world has gone wrong, a feeling supported by pieces of the scientific discourse which make up the descriptions of environmental change. The poet tries to consider the ways we interact with the physical world, declaring that “the world is our law,” the physical parameter for our being, and as such the entity which sets the parameters for mental categories of being, though the interactions we have with the world may not even be legible to us: “this indrifting of us/ into us, a chorusing in us of elements, & how the/ intermingling of us lacks intelligence, makes/ reverberations, syllables untranscribable…” (Sea Change, 4) The fact that we can be surprised by the physical world around us is the source of beauty; the surprise of physical sensation is often what brings Graham’s poems into their moments of coordination. Here, though, wonder is a dubious category, as it’s a correlate to the intellectual activity which allows us the knowledge of the destruction of the world around us as well as our own potential destruction: “& how wonder is also what/ pours from us
when, in the/ coiling, at the very bottom of the food chain, sprung from undercurrents, warming by 1 degree, the in-/ dispensible plankton is forced north now…” (Sea Change, 4) The dislocation of the plankton sets off a destructive chain of the potential dying off of interdependent species, a chain which links back to the human. Aesthetic wonder allows us to contemplate ecological devastation as a source of pleasure, a tendency that darkens Graham’s own project. A further darkening takes place as the poet contemplates her own place in the interconnected ecological relationship which she can recognize: “so that I, speaking in this wind today, out loud in it, to no one, am suddenly/ aware of having written my poems, I feel it in my useless/ hands…” (Sea Change, 5) The poem itself, in the face of rapid ecological change (the too-rough wind), is a pointless exercise, doubly so, as the poem can neither change the wind, nor can it seem to speak outside of itself. Is the poet speaking to no one? This question has haunted Graham’s verse, but in the poem and in the volume it becomes more charged as a problem as the poet seriously contemplates what it would mean for a poem if the reader disappeared from the equation entirely.

In contemplating this situation, Graham employs several strategies that diverge from those of her previous works. First, the metapoetic aspects of her work are muted. When the second person emerges, it tends to do so as an apostrophe either for a specific person, or for a landscape or environment which can’t speak back. When the pronoun doesn’t operate as a direct apostrophe, it tends to work as the idiomatic version of the second person meant as the first, “you” being understood as “I.” In “Underworld,” for instance, the poet attempts to speak directly to the physical world around her which is “revealing yourself to me.” (Sea Change, 13) In “Futures” the poet’s mind speaks to the
poet in the second person, as does an anthropomorphized environment, and “Summer Solstice” describes a moment in time in which the poet looks up from a specific place to see a specific “you,” someone not the reader. A few poems, which I will address below, present notable exceptions, but they stand out as exceptions. In any case this apostrophization creates a short circuit in which the reader can’t engage in the poet’s work in the same way as he or she had previously been encouraged to do. Increasing the distance between reader and writer is Graham’s persistent use of the lyric “I.” It’s not as if her work previously contained no first-person poems, but that the first person was often positioned in a relationship with an audience. Here the use of the first person creates poems that Vendler in her review notices as more generically lyric. This lyricization creates works which are less permeable, and can appear enclosed, but that enclosure is part of the point of the work; the present moment of environmental interaction may be something that is closed off to future generations, inaccessible and illegible to those beyond the moment of the writing. The distance between reader and writer is heightened for the sake of recognizing a potential future distance in which the world has transformed to such a degree that the past self is incomprehensible beyond the deconstructive dilemmas the poet had faced before. In this sense, those deconstructive dilemmas merge with the threat of ecological disaster and put Graham in the position of having to try some new way to make the illegible legible. The new way is the old way of the self-enclosed lyric, but crafted with a sense of awareness that the lyric is self-enclosed.

Two poems in particular break through the lyric enclosure. The first of these is one of the early poems in the volume, “Guantánamo.” It attempts a blending of selves similar to Graham’s earlier attempts, made for the sake of understanding the other who
has been tortured in the name of our safety. The poem begins as a lyric, but a lyric that attempts to understand the personal position of one who is kept in the titular prison. The speaking self seems to give voice to the voiceless, a US prisoner who has no rights under the law. By the middle of the poem, the poet switches to the second person: “& acts being/ committed in your name, & your captives arriving/ at your detention center, there, in your eyes…” (Sea Change, 10) The shift to second person breaks the speaker from one kind of identification with the prisoner from earlier in the poem; instead of making a claim to speak for the voiceless, it recognizes the otherness of the other and attempts to speak to the voiceless. But here, unlike most of the poems in the volume, use of the second person seems capable of reaching beyond the poem. The boundaries between the person in the poem and the person reading it begin to blur because of the ambiguities of the possessive. The detention center seems to belong both to the reader, as a place under his or her possession, and to the prisoner, as the specific place of his imprisonment. This blurring doesn’t hold, though, and the speaker becomes more insistent on addressing the reader directly to hold him or her responsible for the situation of the prisoner. This separation is finally accomplished near the end of the poem when the speaker begins to employ the first person plural, transforming her observations from those of an “I” to those of a “we,” making everyone accountable for the situation. And yet, the ending backs away from the communal guilt of the moment to return the poem to its initial lyricism: “Moon, who will write/ the final poem? Your veil is flying, its uselessness makes us feel there is/ still time, it is about two now,/ you are asking me to lose myself./ In this overflowing of my eye,/ I do.” (Sea Change, 11) On the one hand, the poem presents the last moment as a triumph of empathy, a moment in which the speaker is so
overwhelmed by the pain of others that she feels that pain herself and weeps. On the other hand, this empathy takes place within the circumscribed place of the poem, and seems isolatingly private as it requires a move from the public to the narrowly personal “I.” If the emotion is something only one person can feel, then the empathy is perhaps illusory and maybe merely self-satisfying. The aestheticization of the poem turns the pain of others into a moment of beauty, and the poet seems to want us to be on guard for how we feel what we feel in a given moment. The poem remains ambivalent about the ethical enactment of empathy, and the re-enclosure signals a possible return to solipsism that severs precisely those relations it wants to preserve.

“The Violinist at the Window, 1918” takes up the idea of aesthetic engagement during a time of crisis yet again. Drawing from Matisse and the artist’s efforts to paint after World War I, Graham crafts a poem that attempts to find a justification for the creation of an aesthetic moment when such a creation seems at odds with the surrounding world. The poem begins with a mediation on the figure of the man at the window beginning to bow his violin yet again in the aftermath of the war, describing how he must “take up whatever it is/ the spirit/ must take up” while questioning the song which the times require him to play: “& what is that melody of/ that sustained one note of obligatory/ hope, taken in, like a virus,/ before the body grows accustomed to it and it/ becomes/ natural again…” (Sea Change, 32) According to the poem, the aesthetic engagement with the world around is obligatory for the artist; the need to create is something uncontrollable, either personally or culturally. This need appears to be a necessity, an obligation, but an obligation to whom or what? What the aesthetic seems to
produce is hope, but this hope is extraordinarily contingent and on the cusp of being curtailed as it becomes organicized, naturalized, and made invisible.

The poem describes the moment of playing as “the lull in the/ killing,” a moment like many moments in Graham’s work where selves come into coordination. (Sea Change, 32) In this moment, though, the self resists; the destruction has been too destructive and the creating self pulls back from the moment: “& how/ thin is this/ sensation of time, do you/ not feel it, the no in the heart – no, do not make me believe/ again, too much has died, do not make me open this/ all up again…” (Sea Change, 33) At this moment in the poem, Graham again resorts to the mode of direct address, pulling the reader back into the poem in a way she resists for much of the volume. The reader is again involved in the creation, but here that involvement appears to produce a discomfort so intense that the poet resists the coming together she generally triumphs in the ethical point of her work. The shared time here is not right, and instead of the poem producing permeability as a creative act, it introduces it as an anxiety producing rupture. Though the reader “can see/ the whole sky pass through this head of mine,” the poet wants to resist the transmission because the act has lost its meaning in the wake of worldly devastation. (Sea Change, 33) Pleasure seems obscene.

The poem concludes by exposing more and more of the back and forth between the human need for aesthetic consolation and the way in which that need may bury the true horror of the world. The aesthetic act at the moment is “what hope forced upon oneself by one’s self sounds/ like… it is a/ good sound, it is an/ ugly sound…” (Sea Change, 34) The poem alternates, describing how “clouds roil, & and they hide the slaughterhouse…” (Sea Change, 34) The aesthetic act becomes, then, not just a hopeful
act, but a desperate act, one which obscures the true activity, the true horror of what is happening around us. The poem concludes without offering much of a way out of this ethical dilemma. The only solution it can offer is to look again to the future, trusting that “this will be a time again in which to make – a time of use-/lessness – the imagined human/ paradise.” (Sea Change, 34) The poet must believe, or force herself to believe, that the time of performance, the time of creation, will come again and be again in the act of creating. The speaker must project into the future to justify the act, an act, as posited by the beginning of the poem, in response to the world around her. If the world produces the response, then perhaps it’s not entirely inappropriate, and yet that seems a slight rationale, in the face of devastation, for the act of creating an artwork, an act declared useless by the poem itself. The struggle for an ethical justification for an artwork seems at an impasse by the end of the poem. The only option the poem presents is just to keep moving, though the hope it describes is so heavily curtailed through self-consciousness it may not be hope at all.

The idea of a hopeless hope recurs in the volume’s final poem, “No Long Way Round,” which again takes up the idea of how and why to write a poem in a time of coming disaster. The difference here is that Graham returns fully to the metapoetic gestures and pseudo-epistolary mode she has championed throughout her work. In doing so, she returns to the redemptive idea of a shared poetic experience, though one altered by time. The coming together of presences (which she often sees as producing or as equivalent to the redemptive function of verse) serves here to sever rather than conjoin, however, and the connections that a poem can make between reader and writer seem more tenuous than before. As the poem announces at the outset, “I have time, my time,
as you also do, there, feel it.” (Sea Change, 54) The poem can work to inspire presence in the other, but doing so reiterates the difference between the lyric “I” and the other of the reader. The poem, despite its hope that it can reach a reader and can do the ethical work Graham thinks the aesthetic will do, is shot through with doubt as it keeps announcing the possibility that in creating the poem in a time of massive looming ecological and political change the poet has undertaken a futile activity. “One has to believe/ furthermore in the voyage of others,” the poem states as a rejoinder to the earlier dictation to the reader to come into a state of presence. (Sea Change, 54) This push and pull of belief in a reader and doubt about the reader, which is a doubt about the work of the aesthetic, occurs throughout until the final blank statement that “there are sounds the planet will always make, even/ if there is no one to hear them.” (Sea Change, 56) This moment naturalizes and organicizes the speaker, making a claim that the stance of the poem is not a rhetorical one, but rather a biological one. This move is controversial in all of the ways Blasing points out, as it suggests a totalizing, authoritative authorial view, but it fluctuates in a way different from Pound’s work or that of the LANGUAGE poets after him. Graham is attempting to think biologically, to move her considerations self-consciously into the realm of the literal posthuman to ask what part not just her work but all poetry will play in a world where there are no more readers, either because humans as a species are gone or because the species has changed so drastically that it can’t comprehend the change. The ending is organicizing, but in a mass ecological way that sees an identifiable system of species interconnectedness as encompassing the poem’s rhetorical viewpoint, rendering it one more viewpoint among many. The organization makes room for the rhetorical point of view, but then levels it, transforming it from one
viewpoint among many, to one sound among many. The very dark hope the poem finds itself capable of holding on to is the hope that there will still be existence in the future, even if that existence is not human. Transmission will still take place, though what kind of transmission may not even be comprehensible.

The poems in Sea Change are often desperate and dark, offering only the sparsest of hopes for the poetic project Graham has undertaken throughout her career. The poems reach an intellectual impasse; self-enfolding around a panicked lyric “I,” they cast massive doubt on the ability to connect one human to another. Shades of that darkness are present in Graham’s most recent volume, Place (2012), particularly in poems where cognition of the distanced suffering of others (either through war or the threat of ecological collapse) is brought into the thinking place of the speaker. Still, the poems, many of which function as mindful meditations, are much less panicked than those in the previous volume (or in the previous three volumes), and serve as moments where the poet again evinces a tenuous faith in the mutually crafted presence of a moment between reader and writer. Several poems in the volume incorporate, recycle, or modify the techniques and concerns of previous volumes. “The Bird on My Railing” offers a riff on Swarm’s emphasis on creation and being. Here, though, the poet lets go and recognizes that after the song “the breath-bird [is]/ free to/ rise away into the young day and/ not be - ” (Place, 19) In the earlier work caring was manifest in the poet’s desire to have the other be. Here, care is manifest in the poet’s letting go and allowing something not to be. “Treadmill” echoes the ways many of the poems in Never emphasized the particularities of time and space as part of the construction of the poem through a meta-poetic self-interruption in the middle describing the time and place of the writing of the poem and
the way that the poem, however much the poet wants to stay “outside,” always incorporates the being of the writer. And “Employment” echoes the empathetic attempts which composed the centerpiece of Overlord, only here the empathy is with those in the midst of economic crisis and under threat of losing their homes, not their physical lives. The volume takes in the previous volumes and offers permutations and variations on the thematic and technical aspects of past work, not quite refuting, but modifying what had previously worked to solve an instant’s intellectual or aesthetic dilemma.

Many of the metapoetic gestures return, emphasizing the shared physical space of reader and writer through the medium of the page. Furthermore, several of the poems take as their subject the intergenerational relationship of mothers and daughters, either with the poet meditating on her memories of her mother or with second person apostrophes to her daughter. The apostrophes in the previous volume often had the effect of closing the reader out of consideration, but here they seem more inclusive. The difference is the way Graham reworks, yet again, the existential implications of physical contact which reached a crescendo (or crisis) in Swarm. When Graham contemplates her daughter, she does so with a language that harks back to the loving terms of the earlier volume. This produces a muted engagement with the poet. Instead of troping the extreme (impossible) sexual connection between reader and writer, Graham uses her daughter as a mediator; the presence of the daughter provides a direct address which can speak to the reader and proclaim the kind of existential connections which “Underneath (13)” desired to proclaim, but it can do so only from the safety of metaphor. The poet takes a stance of nurturing both the daughter and the reader, reaching the other through the one.
“Mother and Child (the Road at the Edge of the Field)” narrates a situation in which the linguistic merging between selves which was prevalent in *Swarm* is examined in a new light, that of instructing another in the use of language. The poem consists almost entirely of one long run-on sentence that considers the ways our sensory experience of the world interacts with our mental, linguistic conjurations. In the immediate rush of the poem, language first appears as unable adequately to describe the experience of the world or being in the world. The world is considered “a whirling robe humming with firstness [which] greets you if you eye-up, confess it…” (*Place*, 10) The phrasing here is ambiguous; first, Graham is using the second person primarily to speak of the sole self’s experience. This mood shifts to the first person, though, several lines later, and the first and second person blur in the shifting. Second, the phrase “confess it” demands either the self or the reader to admit that the world is experienced in this way, but the demand is couched in language resonant either with state function or church function, both suggesting that such an admission of the sensory experience of the world is akin to a sin or crime. Something about the situation throws off language, and the poem wants to capture what it is not to be compelled to experience the world as language. The situation is one which undercuts our linguistic ability to describe it because it is such a passive experience, an experience of mere presence. The impulse to describe, the impulse to link words and thoughts and ideas into a chain propelled forward by time undoes the experience of being, or what Graham refers to as “the world of the world.” (*Place*, 11)

In opposition to this sense, is the speaker’s attempt to narrate the moment in the moment: “. . . I talk to myself, I make/ words that follow from other/ words, they push from
be-/ hind – into the hedge like the hedge/ but not of it.” (Place, 11) The poem here suggests that Graham is sympathetic to the Romantic idea that use of language is connected to the awareness of consciousness that takes us away from the natural world. The words for the hedge are like the hedge but do not come from the hedge, a fact that causes the speaker to feel herself disconnected from the “world of the world.” As the poem reiterates, the word is “slippery against it [the hedge] where it/ never knows they are pressing, delirious accents trying to reach in, fit/ in – phantoms…” (Place, 11) In concert with this moment is the shift to the first person and the admission of the speaker’s talking to herself, a moment when separation from the world has become solipsism.

The self-isolation of the linguistic realization renders the rest of the world “phantoms,” and yet that phantom information begins to bleed into the poem. Indeed, the poem becomes haunted by atrocities that are only half there because simultaneously inaudible, and yet known, at least known enough to be transmitted in the poem. Sensation appears to be the only trustworthy thing in this world, as it makes “the guard and the prisoner feel as one,” suggesting that the plain being of the selves can only be connected through shared sensation. (Place, 11) This brings the speaker back to attempts not just to speak, but to teach language to her daughter, now addressed in the second person. The daughter, however, resists, as she has resisted the learning of language and what the poem suggests would be the disconnection between self and world. The mother’s attempts to teach become covertly desperate as she is convinced that the daughter “now hears the/ cannibalizing scream in all/ my kindness.” (Place, 12) The poem then shifts to describe how both mother and daughter share a moment as the daughter lets go of a piece of the hedgerow to grab her mother’s hand. This moment
breaks the run-on momentum of the poem and presents a shared moment between selves. This moment transforms the situation of the poem, and the poem concludes by renaming this moment: “where I take your empty hand and/ we start home,/ emptied of attempt and emptied of/ survival skill, is love.” (*Place*, 12) What the mother eventually teaches the daughter is the shared presence that can exist between two people, a situation Graham’s poetry always seems to want to teach. The moment is symbolized in this poem as it had been earlier directly rendered, but the idea that a shared moment is an act of creation, and of love, of emotional connection, is resonant with Graham’s earlier work. Despite its distrust of language and awareness of the way language can separate, the poem argues through its existence that language can still bring selves together.

This tentative faith animates the last poem in the volume, “Message from Armagh Cathedral, 2011,” a poem which makes an argument for the miraculous communication with the incommunicable through the process of aesthetic imagination. The title of the poem announces that the poem serves as an annunciation, a message from a particular time and place written for an audience to be received and read. And yet, despite the intention of transmission, the ability to communicate still remains doubtful. The poem begins by asking, “[h]ow will it be/ told, this evidence, our life, all the clues missing?” (*Place*, 75) On the one hand, this question looks anxiously to the future, trying to anticipate how future generations will understand the existence of we who are now past. On the other, the question can be seen as self-directed, as the poet questioning herself in the ways that this poem, this piece of evidence, will be constructed. The poem concerns itself with the particularities of time and place, emphasizing the context of its
construction as much as possible, and from that context attempts to explain to a reader, presumably a future reader, who “we” were and what “we” experienced.

The play with the pronouns is significant in this poem because it signals a modified way of thinking through the audience. The beginning of the poem seems addressed to some future reader. However, at line 30 the speaker switches from describing the acts of the first person plural to addressing the second person. Initially this seems to be a direct address to the future reader, but quickly becomes an address to the inanimate objects of the past, specifically the statue of the Irish king Nuadh.

Much of the poem consists of a communion with this ancient art object. And, as reported in the poem, the communion is not merely one-sided either; rather, the statue of the king speaks back. Future reader and past object merge and are incorporated into the poem, acting as a commentary on the poem itself. The aesthetic object, though bound by its own experiences and its own time, begins to speak outside of time, offering continued communication; this communication is not absolutely transcendent, though, and Graham wants to point this out through the detail of the changed environment, the differences in the sky. This tiny detail points to the idea that the communication itself is also contingent on the one attempting to communicate. The one who engages with the aesthetic object or moment of the past is absolutely necessary for the communion to work. In this way, the poem exemplifies how Graham thinks we might be able to reach others through aesthetic transmission.

This transmission is necessarily involved with perceiving in the past the concerns of the present, as evidenced by the poem’s emphasis on the mutilation of the king. The statue shows the king holding the silver arm that was crafted to replace an arm severed in
battle. Recognition of this prosthesis produces a meditation on what it means to be whole. As the speaker touches the statue with an intimacy which recalls *Swarms*, she asks “How shall we be/whole. Who/ will make the missing part. The biggest obstacle is not knowing of what?” (*Place*, 78) The poem then moves to a contemporary reporting of the experiences of a soldier losing his arms from a hidden explosive. The fragmentation of the body is incorporated into the poem as a historical analog, reiterating the point that the past is only conceivable in the light of the present, but also as a metaphor for the poem itself. The poem is fragmented without a reader, and can only exist in the moment of being read. At the moment of being read, at the moment of aesthetic communion, the miraculous can occur, the past can speak back, the self of the writer and the self of the reader can be made whole through a kind of aesthetic/poetic prosthesis. Though the aesthetic moment can be reified into a monument, a static object that resists the chaotic motion of what it means to be, the fracture, the piece left out, provides a gap to be completed by those in the future. This lack of completion is painful, hence the anxiety in much of Graham’s work about whether or not the work will be legible. However, the lack of legibility calls for the engagement of the other, invites the other to take part in the readership, in the making or in the not making as the case may be. The other can perhaps find presence in the work of the poem, and thereby resist the negating effects of numbing language Graham has long identified in the culture.

As noted by James Longenbach in his essay “Jorie Graham’s Big Hunger,” Graham’s aesthetic engagement is not lacking in ambition. The constant in all her work is the desire, however contingent or chastened, to produce some moment between reader and writer in which the two can come together in a sense of mutual presence, however
limited or conditional. Graham’s project stretches for a form of redemption, yet the poet also always remains on the alert against the claims of any resolution she finds. Her work shuttles between modern poetry’s tendencies for cultural redemption through the closure of aesthetic products and postmodern poetry’s tendencies for personal engagement with the numinous through ongoing process in the end perpetually weaving a space between order and chaos in which the self can, hopefully, resist the alienation Graham sees in the current moment.
Chapter 2: Frank Bidart

Frank Bidart has been openly resistant to many of the precepts critics and poets associate with postmodern poetry. This resistance appears prominently in Bidart’s 2001 interview with Andrew Rathmann and Danielle Allen’s collected in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*. There, Bidart objects first to the theoretical idea that all language or thought is a matter of surfaces only: “I think there is a structure beneath things that one can fight, but the idea that it is not there is… illusory. I don’t believe we just sort of hop along on a shifting consciousness that has no patterns beneath it… I feel there are structures in my life that I don’t just choose, and that a great deal of living is negotiating with them… They’re there – you don’t triumph over them by pretending they’re not there.” (*On Frank Bidart*, 70) Second, the poet openly rejects the idea of an “open” or completely reader-determined poetic: “Now, you can have an aesthetic of chance,” but it’s “no longer news that there is chance in the world, that things are daffy and unpredictable. Those are old discoveries.” (*On Frank Bidart*, 71) Third, Bidart disagrees with the idea that contemporary assumptions about moral or ethical behavior have changed so radically that morality or ethics are non-operative; in rebuttal of that view, he points to the continuous, contemporary functioning of guilt: “When I began [The Sacrifice], the rational humanist liberal academic position seemed to be that, because guilt is the result of outmoded injunctions that we no longer believe… once the beliefs are given up guilt disappears. It’s not true… Our life is essentially a condition in which contradictory demands are placed upon us by not only others, but ourselves. There’s no way out of that.” (*On Frank Bidart*, 77)
Bidart’s comments critique standard versions of postmodern poetry and implicitly align that mode of writing, whether practiced or described, with poststructural theory and in an echo of Graham the poet’s remarks carry strong suggestions that Bidart reads versions of poststructuralism, which dismantle language and the subject, as well as versions of postmodern poetry which incorporate or anticipate poststructuralism, as modes of thought or composition likely to alienate the reader or writer from the self and from the unconscious structures which support the self and which (as we’ll see) the poet thinks can be made conscious and understood through poetic crafting. Bidart’s poetry, like Graham’s, reveals a continued inheritance of both modern and postmodern ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty or crisis, a condition his work won’t resolve in conventional postmodern ways, not, that is, in the supposed liberatory postmodern or poststructural “embrace” of a state of uncertainty. At the same time, in yet another echo of Graham, Bidart doesn’t simply dismiss poststructural critiques of language and subjectivity or postmodern poetic inheritance in favor of a teleological return to a mythic modernist past. Instead he attempts to wrestle with both modern and postmodern assumptions about responses to uncertainty, for he sees both as defining the contemporary historical dilemma which his art must confront. In so wrestling, Bidart, like the other poets of this project, negotiates between his mid-century

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12 One of the difficulties in considering Bidart’s navigation of modern and postmodern thought has to do with his own use of the term “postmodern” in interviews and other writings. The emphasis on structures in the above statement strongly suggests an implicit concern with poststructural dismantling (a postmodern critique of language and thought) though he does not identify it as such. The emphasis on structures (aesthetic, social, personal, etc.) and the alienation resultant from their lack has been an issue in Bidart’s work since he began publishing in the late 60s and early 70s. However, poststructuralist thought was not a prominent feature of academic or poetic discourse until the mid to late 70s. And yet, as Bertens and Calinescu recount, a discourse of postmodernism was available and anticipates poststructuralist critique as well as Marxist critiques of those critiques. In an odd way, Bidart appears to anticipate a critique of poststructuralism through his critique of postmodern poetic practice in his early writings, then develops a vocabulary later as theory, and counter-theory, develop their own vocabularies.
and his modern poetic predecessors in an attempt to find some contingently coherent
structure that at least momentarily stabilizes the self while it also recognizes that the high
modernist dream of permanent stability is just that, a dream or an illusion.

At stake in Bidart’s work, as in Graham’s, are the intertwined issues of language
and the self’s construction through the aesthetic use of it. Like Graham, Bidart navigates
between modernism’s proferred structures of containment and postmodernism’s embrace
of the numinous (as described by Charles Altieri in *Enlarging the Temple*). Where Bidart
differs from Graham in his emphasis on the destructive alienation from history which
poststructuralist critiques and postmodern poetic practices effect. Here Bidart echoes (or
perhaps anticipates) later Marxist critiques of modernity, particularly those of Jean
Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson who, in “The Order of the Simulacra” and
*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital* respectively, see in postmodern
eclecticism a radical divorce from material history, an irreparable rift between the
historical subject and the material conditions which created that subject. While Bidart
accepts this critique partially, he disagrees with the assumption that humanity is
necessarily forever ruptured from its own cultural history. Bidart’s works argue that such
a view is a falsified, nostalgic reading of cultural history and aesthetic production a view
that presumes that both the past and the present are static entities. For Bidart, history has
never been static, neither has it ever provided a completely coherent, cohesive, uniform
pathway from a past events or creations to present ones. Rather, the accumulation of
events and methods for negotiating aesthetic dilemmas or artistic needs provide models
which, to paraphrase Bidart’s own memorable formulation, we inherit, and in inheriting

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13 Langdon Hammer’s reading of “Herbert White” in his essay “Frank Bidart and the Tone of
Contemporary Poetry” sees in that poem an embodiment of this state of alienation from a historical past, an
embodiment the poet critiques through the poem.
change. Inheritance, Bidart thinks, is chaotic and it always has been. This means artists are never absolutely connected to a past, or absolutely severed from it; they are both severed and connected, drawing on and rejecting the past as present need dictates. This sense of historical inheritance leads Bidart to draw from both modern and postmodern poetic practices. He uses (or re-uses) past material to create connection to an aesthetic past, as modern poets such as Eliot and Pound often did, while he also recognizes that such connections are not transcendent, but rather contingent and based on the specificities of a particular historical moment, as postmodern writers often do. In this sense, the version of history Bidart espouses in his poems is neither contained (in a modernist manner), nor radically open (in a postmodernist one). Instead, Bidart’s poems typically shuttle back and forth between loose parameters that will inevitably be revised, torn down, modified, or reconstructed by himself or others over time.

Bidart’s poetic attempts to navigate between poststructural or postmodern critiques and Marxist counter-critiques, as well as his methods for doing so, depend on the connections which he thinks the present artist can create between himself or herself and the aesthetic past. Connections to the past create parameters for knowing or experiencing the crafted self. Thus the artist can begin to read the self in two ways. On the one hand, the self can be read in terms of conscious connections to historical methods or theories of crafting which create one set of parameters for defining the self. And once the artist has crafted enough material over time, the work itself can serve as another set of parameters for creating definition. Through continuous crafting the artist creates a sense of self that enters history as a version of the artist; this version can then give him or her a

14 Tom Sleigh remarks on this aspect of Bidart’s work in “Frank Bidart’s Voice” where he argues that poetry for Bidart is not a crypt but a vital tether to the past.
sense of personal coherence. And yet, because such connections to the past are never presumed to be static, the created parameters are ones within which the subject constantly shifts, fragments, or even reforms itself. In this sense Bidart modifies the postmodern sense of radical renewal into a personal, continual revision that itself occurs within the set limits or contingencies of the previous aesthetic creation. The poet turns away from this postmodern mode, though, as his revisions often incur some sort of erasure or destruction, rendering Bidart’s version of reformation one which is not perpetual, but rather one in which irrecoverable loss is unavoidable.

Connected to this sense of loss is Bidart’s focus in his work on the tragic mode. First, this mode depends on acts of transgression that expose both personal limitations and the historical structures which inevitably operate within and beneath human action. Once a structure or limitation has been transgressed, the ensuing destruction makes the limit or structure knowable. But in a world of radical flux transgression can’t occur because (supposedly) there are no limits to be transgressed. Bidart’s tragedies reassert limitation (and thereby the possibility of tragedy itself) through the use of transgression as aesthetic content. Second, the tragic mode makes the performative aspects of Bidart’s text more legible. A speaker whose speech is a self-acknowledged performance already announces that the “authentic I” of the poem is an illusion or mask. And yet, this insisted-upon authorial distance allows the poet to be autobiographical without writing autobiography as it also allows language imaginatively to refer to a situation or place without claiming to act as or be a transcendental signifier. Through a logical structure of

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15 Cal Bedient’s “Frank Bidart, Tragedian,” a review of the poet’s volume Desire, considers the tragic aspects of Bidart’s work, particularly as it addresses the twinned concerns of fate and guilt.
16 Critics have noted the performative aspect of Bidart’s verse since the beginning of his publishing career. In the introduction to Golden State Richard Howard addresses the declarative aspects of Bidart’s verse and describes the way the poems are like and unlike a scripts.
“neither/nor,” Bidart creates a situation in which both reader and writer are neither wholly identified with the text, nor wholly severed from it. Rather, the readerly and writerly selves are engaged in shuttling back and forth between textual identification and textual dislocation, acknowledging the fiction of the text as well as acknowledging the necessarily mirroring aspects of the created order.

In this way, Bidart’s poems serve as scripts that both a project the author’s voice (along with notations for the sound of the reading) and define a place where “final performance” rests with the reader. In effect, performativity allows Bidart to eschew what he views in “Ulanova...” as language signifying an “addiction to mimesis” in favor of the self-conscious referential multiplicity of the mentally performable script. The voice is “fastened to the page,” in the phrase from Frost Bidart uses in his 1983 interview with Mark Halliday, but it is also altered becoming less authorial voice than the script for the reader’s engagement and imaginative acting out or performance. (In the Western Night, 223) Several critics have noted the ways this performativity complicates the already complicated deconstructive splitting of a presumed essential “I” and the rhetorical action of the text. Langdon Hammer, for instance in his “Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry,” sets the poet’s verse in tonal opposition to a characteristically postmodern ironic “flatness of voice” that has coincided with a rise in theoretical precepts arguing that “the speaking voice [is] not only a rhetorical figure but a metaphysical illusion...” (On Frank Bidart, 9) In Hammer’s view, Bidart’s typographical efforts at producing (or perhaps reproducing) tone mark a shifting away from a sometimes glib or otherwise automatic irony as well as from poststructuralism’s emphasis on dismantling the subject. Lloyd Schwartz echoes this reading in the essay “Frank Bidart and
Punctuation” which analyzes the poet’s use of punctuation argue that his poems are scripts for mental performance, so that “the printed version is the ultimate authority.” (On Frank Bidart, 36) In other words, the punctuational specificity, while opening up performative possibilities for the reader reading aloud (or otherwise), ultimately grounds the text on the page in a concrete way.17 Such grounding resists Marjorie Perloff’s description (in The Poetics of Indeterminacy) of a postmodern “open text” as it gives a specific script for reading. And yet, the text nonetheless remains open for individual readers’ performances, thereby resisting modern closure as one more illusion of certainty in a necessarily mutable reading environment.

A new dilemma occurs for Bidart, though, as what had seemed a solution to fusing modern and postmodern responses and problems in the early books Golden State (1973), The Book of the Body (1977), and The Sacrifice (1980) becomes a problem itself. Over time, and with enough cumulative work, Bidart’s poetic subjectivity self-consciously enters the world of the poems, performing another version of the self within an already performative text. Such events begin occurring more noticeably in The First Hour of the Night (1990) and In the Western Night (1990), but become more pronounced in the poet’s later volumes, starting with Desire (1997). The emergent problem for Bidart has become one of confronting his own past performances, negotiating again through their positions and rhetorical statements as they relate to the archeological, historical Frank Bidart, the making self, whose consideration of the act of making and the made things of the past have changed. The poet, over time, has acknowledged that once

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17 Cal Bedient’s afore-mentioned review of Desire makes this case as well, though in much starker terms. For Bedient, Bidart’s work before Desire was marked by the adoption in some poems of a mask or persona, while other poems adopted a more “authentic” speaking subject. With Desire Bedient believes the poet fuses the two aspects.
the “I” enters the poem it becomes a rhetorical stance distanced from the writer, one that threatens to render the self as nothing more than an endless Borgesian hall of mirrors. The distance Bidart perceives between versions of selves hints at the poet’s acceptance of parts of the deconstructive distance between rhetoric and subjectivity, but where the extremes of deconstruction would absolutely sever the connection between constructing and constructed self, Bidart sees an unavoidable historical connection with the constructed poem. The poet accepts that our subjective states fluctuate, but he objects to the idea that this fluctuation is so extreme as to completely disconnect the artist from artistic crafting. Bidart’s method of navigating the deconstructive dilemma is willingly to enter the hall of mirrors and constantly to reintroduce the present subjective stance as the new viewpoint which hovers over the past aesthetic selves or past aesthetic performances which now, inevitably, make up the archeological self, and then to reconsider those past selves in their relationship to the present. This is not to argue that the elevated stance of the present “I” has absolute authority over or within the poem. This figure recognizes that it must be replaced by other figures over time and will become subordinate to new stances which the author will take, stances which may find an echo in older, previously discarded stances. And yet, the historically privileged place of the present “I” can grant it a power to do the kinds of negotiating with the past the poet needs it to do.

All of this implies Bidart’s recent works entail a metapoetic looking back at older works in an effort to navigate the states of past selves. These efforts may involve loss, as I will show in discussing the relationship between “The Yoke” and “Collector,” for instance, but the gain is to produce a situation in which the poet can assert a connection to a material history and to a past historical self. The creating self is tied to the past creating
self through the present crafting. The only way through this dilemma might be called perpetual crafting, the (so to speak) endless making and re-making of the self through reflective, aesthetic, performative pieces. For the poet (or at least this poet) continuous making provides a way through the poststructuralist dismantling of language, self, and history (as well as versions of postmodern poetry which parallel or embrace such precepts), a way of giving relative stability to a particular historical self without claiming transcendent or otherwise final stability. Such aesthetic making allows the writer to authorize a version of his own history, but this history is not static. So long as the author is alive, there exist possibilities for vision and revision. But the history of the self as made through acts of aesthetic fashioning is not absolutely open-ended either. Past performances become aesthetic events that stabilize the self as it moves forward into the future of additional, ever revisionary making.

In order to see the ways in which Bidart wrestles with the major strands and critiques of poststructuralism or postmodern thought, as well as with the assumptions and practices of his postmodern poetic predecessors, we need first to see how he diagnoses an aesthetic dilemma created from engagement with postmodern poetry, starting with his early works. A close reading of “Herbert White” and “California Plush,” both from the poet’s first volume *Golden State* (1973), will illustrate the ways in which Bidart anticipates and critiques emergent postmodern poetic or theoretical practices, seeing in them not liberation but nihilistic violence, historical loss, and personal alienation. Once his critique is established, I will provide readings of several poems from *Desire* (1997), *Stardust* (2005), and *Watching the Spring Festival* (2008) to provide illustrations of the
ways Bidart attempts to rehabilitate, in a chastened way, the lyric subject and a personal sense of historical connection through the act of aesthetic construction.

Taken together the poems “Herbert White” and “California Plush” show how the poet anticipates the postmodern or poststructuralist dismantling of the self as, because of the historical disconnection such dismantling entails, more alienating than liberating for the self. In the 1983 interview with Mark Halliday cited above Bidart claims that both of these poems offer parallel viewpoints of alienated subjectivities. One has no connection to a cultural past and can therefore only find connection through violence; the other strives diligently to form a connection with the cultural past for the sake of attaining what the poet describes as insight. “Herbert White” opens with an uncannily blank description of an act of violence and combines it with an equally nonchalant description of the self-alienation that follows from that act:

“When I hit her on the head, it was good,
and then I did it to her a couple of times, -
but it was funny, - afterwards,
it was as if somebody else did it…

Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line.

*In the Western Night*, 127

At the outset of the poem, an act of violence produces (or seems to) a moment of transcendence and self-coherence otherwise missing from the life of the speaker. This moment introduces the tragic concept of transcendent violence, that is, introduces tragedy’s generic demand for transgressive violence as the guarantor of its coherence and meaning. And yet, Bidart immediately undercuts this transcendence and self-coherence are undercut immediately through his presentation of the speaker’s diction; White as character or person may be seeking self-coherence and transcendence, but his only
terminology for expressing his judgment or comprehension of such matters is the contextually hollow locution “good.” That is, White seems capable of feeling and thinking only in the most simple and simplistic terms. The limits of his diction ultimately conveying the limited methods he has for working through his own nonetheless touchingly desperate sense of alienation. White is alienated from the language and concepts which could provide an anchor to his sense of self and his only recourse appears to be violence.

In a strange sense, the tragedy of “Herbert White” is the poem’s inability to maintain tragedy. This inability occurs immediately, as the coherence White had initially experienced through his act of violence evaporates and he begins to have the sense that the killing and rape had been perpetrated by someone else. The kinds of transcendence through violence traditionally offered by the tragic can’t occur because the violence can’t serve the function of transgressive act. White is in such a state of subjective flux, such a state of cognitive and historical dissonance that he is unable to attribute his transgression to himself, and his world returns to a state in which “everything [is] flat, without sharpness, richness or line,” an apt description of the postmodern plateau or the state of historical eclecticism Jameson and Baudrillard critique.

After the initial violence White offers a kind of description of what drives him to violence, and the description can be read as a critique of a condition critics emergent around the time of Bidart’s writing recognized as postmodern, here labeled as producing alienation rather than liberation. White claims that he always wanted to “feel things make sense:"

I remember
looking out the window of my room back home, -
and being almost suffocated by the asphalt;  
and grass; and trees; and glass;  
just there, just there, doing nothing!  
not saying anything! filling me up –  
but also being a wall; dead, and stopping me;  
-how I wanted to see beneath it, cut  
beneath it, and make it  
somehow, come alive…

In the Western Night, 128

Through White’s disturbing phrasing Bidart suggests that the postmodern claim that all reality and representation is depthless has become an alienating dead end rather than a solution to the tyranny of transcendence or other certitudes. That is, White has absorbed the cultural blankness around him; it has become him, filling him with an understandable, even admirable drive to cut beneath the surface and find something which he describes as “alive.” And yet, the phrase “cutting” links this very drive to the acts of violence he has perpetrated and keeps perpetrating as he tries to fill the void of himself, tries to find meaning in the meaninglessness he has absorbed through the killing of others. White, in his perversion, has transformed creation into destruction; aesthetic making, the crafting of things into moments of the “beautiful,” occurs as murder.

The poem’s conclusion features a moment when the dissociation begins to break down for White, as do the transcendent effects of his act of violence:

Nothing in the sky  
would blur like I wanted it to;  
and I couldn’t, couldn’t,  
get it to seem to me  
that somebody else did it…

In the Western Night, 131
White experiences a connection back to his actions, back to the horror he has committed, but part of this horror is the fact that the transcendent aspects of the killing won’t persist either. The lack of the “beautiful,” in White’s words, suggests that the world he inhabits is one where the transgression truly lacks meaning. The violence has been incorporated into the blank or void that is his understanding of the world, and even though hell comes when the character has a moment of self-revelation, that hell seems to be a never-ending sense of meaninglessness. Even violence can’t produce meaning, and the self is stuck either in perpetual alienation or the hell of self-revelation as the embodiment of the blank around it. For White there is no way out of the void once the void has become the internal state of the self. Herbert White is forever self-alienated, without a stable subjectivity even when confronting himself. As such, he embodies, while anticipating, the poststructural condition of the dismantled subject. In effect, Herbert White is postmodern man as monster.

“California Plush” offers a parallel instance, only here the self involved in attempting to create itself has the relative anchor of cultural history. Still, this anchor is only partially able to build the self-connection the speaker appears to want as he struggles with the historical blankness of his own upbringing, a sense of cultural void which parallels Herbert White’s own sense of personal void. At the beginning of the poem fluidity, movement, and flux can be thrilling and freeing:

The only thing I miss about Los Angeles
is the Hollywood Freeway at midnight, windows down
and radio blaring
bearing right into the center of the city, the Capitol Tower
on the right, and beyond it, Hollywood Boulevard
blazing
-pimps, surplus stores, footprints of the stars
descending through the city  
fast as the law would allow  
through the lights, then rising to the stack  
out of the city  
to the stack where lanes are stacked six deep  
and you on top; the air  
now clean; for a moment weightless  
without memories, or  
a need for a past.

*In the Western Night*, 135

This exhilaration can create the illusion of an experience without, or perhaps beyond, history, an upward flight into the freeing weightlessness of a fluid subjectivity, fluid because freed from the mooring of a specific personal past. We might also think of this moment as drawing to mind some of the analyses of Las Vegas as an exemplar of postmodernism in architecture, a place where all styles or events, high and low, can converge, as described in Robert Venturi and Scott Brown’s classic architectural text *Learning from Las Vegas*. And yet, the poem inevitably works against the view that such a situation, the sort Venturi and Brown see as utopian without much of the irony that term might seem to require, is tenable beyond the moment. The poem’s first line should recall to us the fact that its moment of “historylessness” is itself a part of history, itself a moment of recollection. Secondly, the poem asserts that after this flight into freedom comes an inevitable, necessary, crash: “The need for the past/ is so much at the center of my life/ I write this poem to record my discovery of it,/ my reconciliation.” (*In the Western Night*, 135) The past is necessary; but it’s there and not there. The “need for the past” is at the “center” of this subject’s life, which suggests some kind of stable center, but a stable center based on absence, calling to mind the Stevens of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” where the poet enacts a breaking of systems of order to create a need or
desire for new systems in order to begin to create those new systems. The act of writing the poem seems to be a gesture aimed at fixing things, toward creating some more stable center, but even this act is a bit slippery; to what does “it” refer? The need for the past, or the past? The ambiguity suggests that writing may be able to fix (affix?) some things, but can’t provide an absolute verbal or historical record. Yet, the record it provides may (again, to recall Stevens) be sufficient, sufficient for an act of discovery and reconciliation, or perhaps the mere attempt to do these things is “enough.” The rest of the poem describes the ways that the speaker attempts to reject aspects of his father (who views the past as mere debris) and the California of his birth, both composed of a stylistic or subjective hodgepodge, in favor of a more congruent style or sense of self, all things he is unable to do. The hodgepodge, the fluid willynillyness of the situation is, paradoxically, his foundation, and the poem ends, appropriately, with more questions than answers, or rather, the question becomes the answer, however unsatisfactorily: “I look at my father: as he drinks his way into garrulous, shaky defensiveness, the debris of the past is just debris--; whatever I reason, it is a desolation to watch… must I watch? He will not change; he does not want to change; every defeated gesture implies the past is useless, irretrievable… - I want to change: I want to stop fear’s subtle guidance of my life--; but, how can I do that if I am still afraid of its source?” (In the Western Night, 142-143) The poem ends in indeterminacy, a desire to change, to move away from perpetual change, but the tone is a fraught one which fears that the center will always be indeterminacy or, in the poem’s terms, incongruity, and that incongruity will not provide this subject with the gravity he feels he needs. And yet, as Bidart’s later works will suggest, having engaged in the creative act of writing from the material of the past may
be one way to steady the past, though such steadying is itself tentative and, inevitably, as
time moves on, the act of steadying becomes itself a past event.

Many of the poems of Bidart’s oeuvre wrestle with the ideas presented in these
early works. “The Arc,” (from *The Book of the Body*) in a manner similar to “Herbert
White,” explores other attempts to use violence to find structure in a seemingly
structureless world, although there the violence is done to, not by, the narrator. And “The
War of Vaslav Nijinsky” (from *The Sacrifice*) and “Ellen West” (from *The Book of the
Body*) are both tragic performances, carved out of pre-existing material, which feature
characters whose tragic limitations are their own mental illness, an unavoidable
underlying structure of structurlessness which echoes the chaos of the external world.

But it’s with 1997’s *Desire* that Bidart more fully brings the dilemmas of the historical
place of the crafting subjectivity to bear on the crafting of the work itself. Part of this can
be seen in the poet’s declaration in the notes to the volume that he has “treated sources as
instances of the ‘pre-existing forms’ mentioned in the first sentence of ‘Borges and I’;
and done this so freely that it needs acknowledgment.” (*Desire*, 61) The use of past
sources as raw material for the chiseling out of new poetic material suggests that the past
has priority as an unavoidable event, as material solid enough to serve for chiseling. And
yet, the very fact of the chiseling suggests that the past is not so solid as to resist
rethinking and reuse. In this way, history becomes not an ur-text but a type of base text
for re-translation as the contemporary historical dilemma requires. The reuse of historical
material doesn’t operate as an ironic counterpoint, as it often does in Pound for instance,
nor does it serve explicitly to illustrate the ways the past and present mirror each other in
confirmation or judgment, as, say, in Eliot. Instead, new making from past material
reframes and recontextualizes the material, and in doing so changes future consideration and future use. In recontextualizing past material so explicitly that it becomes a new poem “carved out,” in the poet’s term, of the old material, Bidart makes the past into the present.

This re-making implies a broad theory of poetic and historical transmission, but it also has repercussions for the self in the act of making, a dimension which Bidart also incorporates. Historical material from which the poet crafts also includes the material of the crafting subject’s own past. This consideration opens the path to further interpretation and re-interpretation of the self, ultimately re-opening the old wound of subjective instability. And yet, Bidart’s metaphor of “chiseling” from past material suggests a limit in the material, a finitude of raw resources from which only a finite amount of crafting can be done. The limitation of material gives parameters to history and parameters to the self as the self seeks stability in the crafting. New crafting can occur because the present moment slips away to become a new past which itself becomes the limited material for new consideration.

“Borges and I” offers a model for historical change which incorporates the self and the self’s abilities to craft, despite the fluidities of history, language, and subjectivity, a momentary form for a contingently coherent sense of self carved from the materials of the past. Taking its title from an already existing story by Jorge Luis Borges, the prose poem begins with the assertion that “We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.” (Desire, 9) This opening block of text blends cultural and personal history as it asserts a method for negotiating the vicissitudes of change both aesthetically and existentially. The text asserts that the methods one uses in crafting, the
“forms” which gives shape to the work crafted, are necessarily inherited, “pre-existing.” This assertion would seem to suggest a static version of historical transmission of transcendent aesthetic materials, but Bidart undermines this position by noting the change necessarily involved in the very act of inheritance. Forms are not static or transcendent but change when filled with new content; furthermore, this content itself is changed in filling the form, chiseled into a new state through the crafting. This primary assertion of aesthetic transmission becomes existential as the terms between crafting and being begin to blur; it’s not just that we change aesthetic form and then the form and content both change, but that “we change them and are changed.” Aesthetic crafting is here linked through verbal ambiguity to the very aestheticization in which the poet partakes, just as “form” can be another way of addressing social roles or expectations which have come down to us and which we inhabit, are changed by, and at the same time actually change through our own use of them. Crafting then becomes a constant making of the self where the self is made and remade through engagement with past materials which then develops within the self a perspectival attunement to the past which changes as the self uses it to change.

The model of history offered by the opening of the poem accounts both for historical change and historical stability, offering parameters for the making of history and the historical self through historical engagement or attunement. The second block of text disrupts the stability, though, by interjecting a deconstructive split into the midst of things, as Bidart interrogates the claims of the original Borgesian text that the textual “I” is eternal and authentic while the physical human who crafts the text is inauthentic, an exaggerator or liar. This assertion, which appears to create a deconstructive rift between
crafted, textual self and crafting self, is, according to the poet, “seductive and even oddly comforting, but, I think, false.” (Desire, 9) The poet’s problem with the Borgesian “I” is that it appears to operate in an extreme either/or fashion, one in which the binary rupture is so complete that the textual self has no connection to the physical reality of writing self. Because the writerly self is an exaggerator and falsifier, the text produced is itself a lie, meaning that both textual and writerly selves are connected through their mutual falsification. Bidart is as unconvinced by claims of extreme textual rupture as he is by extreme claims for textual representation.\textsuperscript{18}

The sixth block of text (which proclaims that “all assertions about the systems that hold sway beneath the moon” seem to the speaker “to be true, as true”) begins to suggest the ambiguities and illusions the poet addresses in the tenth, eleventh, and thirteen sections of the poem by opening the way for a “neither/nor” logic which wants to see the crafting self as neither wholly severed from nor wholly at one with the crafted self, but as some roiling, unstable fluctuation beneath the two. (Desire, 9) If all assertions are true, then the textual “I” of Borges’ story is accurate in his diagnosis of a textual/subjective split; but then, the counter-proposition of an authentic representation in the text of the author would be equally true. Bidart can’t accept this, as the “candor” which the Borgesian “I” offers is, to Bidart, nothing but a “[s]weet fiction, in which bravado and despair beckon from a cold panache…” (Desire, 10) The authenticity of the absolutes of rupture and alignment don’t accord for the speaker, who just then begins speaking in the second person, describing “Frank’s” illusions. The first illusion appears

\textsuperscript{18} This reading is indebted to Dan Chiasson’s analysis of “Borges and I,” among other poems, in his essay “Presence: Frank Bidart” which looks at the ways the poet attempts to fill form with the authorial self, noting the ways Bidart’s poems advertise their indebtedness to form in the self’s attempts to assemble itself.
to negate the opening assertion of self-change through making, suggesting that the
stabilizing “order” or the poetic craftsmanship is only a contingent or illusory order, that
the change of the self is not transcendently stabilizing, but rather a version of order for
the time being. The chaotic nature of the self’s experiences escape transcendent
containment. The second illusion is one in which “his poems also had cruelly replaced
his past, that finally they were all he knew of it though they were not…”; the third is that
“though the universe of one of his poems seemed so close to what seemed his own
universe at the second of writing that he wasn’t sure how they differed” with the result
that “after he had written it his universe was never exactly his universe.” (Desire, 10) The
second and third illusions complement each other as they analyze the operation of the self
as it enters aesthetic history through the act of crafting. The illusion of subjective/textual
merging is punctured by the assertion that the material from which crafting can occur, the
self’s memories, is not supplanted by the work, an assertion which makes a distinction
between the actual, chaotic, archeological past of the self and the ordered form of the
poem; furthermore, the moment of inscribing the self is not a moment in which self and
inscription merge into one “universe.” The universes remain unlike, rendered by the
image, borrowed from Wilde, of the universe of the artwork as a mirror “dirty and
cracked.”

And yet, the fact that this universe of aesthetic craftsmanship is not a perfect
mirror of the universe of the self is the problem that drives, even permits, further crafting.
As the fourteenth block of text proclaims: “Secretly he was glad it was dirty and cracked,
because after he had made a big order, a book, only when he had come to despise it a
little, only after he had at last given up the illusion that this was what was, only then
could he write more.” (Desire, 9-10) Only once the poet fully recognizes the distance
between the chaotic crafting self and the “big order,” the construction which he has made,
can he begin to desire to put the chaotic self into order, or form, through more crafting,
more attempts to find in the work the merging of text and authentic self. The attempt
may be intellectually impossible, but the alternative is “terror at the prospect of becoming
again the person who could find or see or make no mirror…” (Desire, 10) What animates
the poet is the greater frustration of being without the semi-stabilizing, contingent order
made in the work as an attempt to give definition to the self. So the process is one of
fluctuation, of being neither wholly connected to the textual self, as the self senses its
split after the act of creation, nor wholly disconnected, as the organizing structure gives
some semblance of order, if only a semblance.

Near its end the poem returns to its opening assertion, that we “fill pre-existing
forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.” (Desire, 10) But to
conclude at that point would signal an aesthetic model of circularity and return,
suggestive of the poststructuralist or postmodern plateau and more or less negate the
change which the assertion describes. The end of the poem, though, suggests otherwise,
proclaiming “Everything in art is a formal question, so he tried to do it in prose with
much blank white space.” (Desire, 10) That is, the last block of text subverts the
circularity, offering the change the opening and closing suggest by way of a metatextual
turn. The poem has been changed by its inheritance of its own materials, and the
response to the “formal question” of this inheritance is to try to capture the ways in which
the poem exists as a type of order, a type of method of organizing existential chaos, but
one which is itself somewhat chaotic, a form of formlessness with much left unwritten,
“much blank white space.” The ending suggests a sense of stability and a sense of change as the text and the self become modified rather than, as it were, completed. It likewise suggests the parameters for negotiating the poststructural splitting of subjectivity and language, using analysis and description of the aesthetic process to enact a self constantly flitting between the authenticity and inauthenticity of the textual self. The text can’t completely contain the self, but the action of crafting can momentarily suffice, until the self changes once more and has to create a new mirror from the inherited whole of the past attempts including this one. The brief poem “Homo Faber” which follows “Borges and I” reiterates this idea with the simple declaration that “Whatever lies uncarried from the abyss within me as I die dies with me”; aesthetic crafting is an attempt to sate the desire, the void, in the self which lies at the heart of the self, but to do so without modernist fictions of permanence or postmodern fictions of liberating impermanence. (Desire, 12)

The sort of “neither/nor” logic just described occurs again in “The Second Hour of the Night,” another of Bidart’s tragedies. This one retells Ovid’s mythic tale of Myrrha’s incestuous love for her father and continues to rework the aesthetic dilemma of the poststructural self in its attempt to discover historical connection through aesthetic crafting. The poem calls upon a set of performative devices in order to enact the work, such as the invocations which occur within the first section, or the call and response litany of the third section. These devices are obviously rhetorical, and yet weaving through them we find personal revelations that suggest a subjective self raveling and unraveling as it moves into and out of the text. After the three-fold descriptive invocation of the night, for instance, we find a speaker (whose biography appears to merge with
Bidart’s) declaring that his own biography merges with that of Hector Berlioz (he had read the composer’s biography while watching his mother die). The speaker’s memory intertwines with the memories of another as reader and text become interlaced, spun into a single moment, yet capable of being teased apart because innately existing as separate strands. Reading self and written text are neither fully connected nor disconnected, but waver solid and flowing somewhere between.

This motif of liminal engagement echoes the ways the poem positions its own history of crafting, offering a model for historical engagement which the poem describes and follows. For instance, the myth which gives content to the poem its narrative content is neither attributable nor unattributable: “Ovid tells the tale: -/ or, rather, Ovid tells us that// Orpheus sang it…” (Desire, 32) The telling and retelling implied by his reference to Ovid’s famously elaborate and almost endlessly recessive and recursive framing devices echoes the Bidart speaker’s earlier raveling into and out of Berlioz’s memoirs and suggests that this wavering between identification and displacement of textual material has been a feature of poetry since the beginning of textual composition. There is no real Ur-text, offering textual stability and transcendence of content; rather, there are variations and permutations or translations of the story from one age to the next, tellings and retellings throughout time that become modified through the textual engagement, as Ovid himself tries to modify and textualize the uncontainable, perhaps dangerous, Orphic song. Bidart’s art is similar to Ovid’s in that both seek to use writing to stabilize the chaotic void in the writing, but similar too in that both also realize that such stabilization requires a close affiliation with inherited history and an undermining or qualifying recognition of distance from that history, as the writer moves between past model and present need.
The tale is neither old, nor new, neither stable nor unstable, providing both parameters and a blank for the current writer to follow and fill, always with the knowledge that the future will treat this present attempt in a similarly continuous and discontinuous way.

Related types of wavering occur throughout the poem, most notably performed by Myrrha within the myth; her activity is described as something caught between fate and free will, apparently independent of the gods, and yet reflective of the acts of another on her own will. When the gods confront each other in horror seeking the one culpable for making incest a part of Myrrha’s fate, none of them takes responsibility. Turning to the Furies they find that those entities, though “justly again and/ again had been beseeched” by Myrrha’s nurse as part of her revenge on Cyniras, were not at fault, as “upon inspection// exertion by immortals was unneeded.” (Desire, 50) The human action appears to exist somewhere in the liminal space between fate and free will, an observation the poem makes pointedly as Myrrha prepares to commit her tragic transgression:

As Myrrha is drawn down the dark corridor toward her father
not free not to desire
what draws her forward is neither COMPULSION nor FREEWILL:-
or at least freedom, here choice, is not to be imagined as action upon

preference: no creature is free to choose what allows it its most powerful, and most secret, release…

Desire, 46

The poet’s use of the passive voice signals Myrrah’s lack of control, and yet she does have some active part to play, one that occurs within the parameters of activity and passivity. The drive underwriting this liminal space is desire; desire propels Myrrha to
activity as the void in “Borges and I” prompted that poem’s activities. In both cases, the empty part of the self which exists between parameters pushes the will into the place of acting to solidify those parameters and limit the liminal space between; in “Borges and I” this occurs through what I have called continual crafting, in Myrrha’s case it occurs through transgressive sexuality. The end of Myrrha’s story gives another example of the “neither/nor” logic of existential wavering Bidart employs throughout the poem, as the protagonist is transformed into a paradoxically finalized liminal state, a tree, a state which fulfills Myrrha’s pleading to the gods to “Make me nothing/human: not alive, not dead.” (Desire, 54)

The poem concludes by bringing forth yet another invocation of the night, this one calling upon the dead and developing an intertextual relationship with “The Yoke,” a previous poem in the volume. “The Yoke,” an elegy for Joe Brainerd, suggests a model of endless mourning centered on the poet’s attempts to conjure the dead while nonetheless being fully aware that language lacks the resurrective power all elegy dreams of and some elegy claims. “The Second Hour of the Night,” though, offers a negotiation with the impossibility of textual conjuration by way of the sort of neither/nor proposition mentioned earlier. Where the prior poem called on the dead and acknowledged that, though called, the dead can’t call back, the third section of “The Second Hour of the Night” features a moment where the dead do seem able to inhabit the body of the living. And yet, the moment, as it inevitably must be, is equivocal. On “such a night./ at such an hour;” grace appears as “the dream, half-/dream, half-/light, when you appear and do not answer the question// that I have asked you, but courteously/ ask (because you are dead) if you can briefly// borrow, inhabit my body.” (Desire, 58) The borrowing is rhetorically
affirmed, as the dead loved one enters the speaker’s body “like a shudder as if eager again to know/ what it is to move within arms and legs.” (Desire, 58) The reinhabitation of the dead serves as a metaphor for the textual engagement as a whole. Present self and absent self can merge through the aesthetic act of making metaphors; this merging speaks to the recall involved in conjuring the dead beloved to the conjuror, and it speaks to the recall in conjuring history as part of a necessary textual engagement.\textsuperscript{19} Again, this all occurs in a liminal state bound by a neither/nor situation, one not dream and not waking, one in which the self is neither wholly textual self, nor wholly severed from a textual self.

In effect, the ultimate liminal place is the place of the poem, which is neither wholly imagined act nor wholly archeological thing. And within this liminal space, so Bidart claims in this and the other poems in the volume, we can find parameters for stabilizing this space which we use and in using transform. Self and history waveringly merge and, as in Graham’s poetics, reader and writer hopefully emerge changed from that exchange.

The poems of Stardust (2005) continue Bidart’s exploration of the intertwining of subjectivity, history, language and the act of crafting, but they do so with a darker edge, one that signals a more fully fleshed examination of the negating void which produces the desire for creation, a void which is chaotic and destructive. In these poems, particularly “The Third Hour of the Night,” a destructive principle is coupled with a creative one to illustrate the ways creation necessarily comes out of destruction. The focus of these poems is again on the way aesthetic crafting can be a temporarily integrating crafting of the self (and of other selves by way of Bidart’s characteristically intertwined reading), but

\textsuperscript{19} Forest Gander’s “The Art of Inhabiting the Body” makes this argument, illustrating the ways that the poems throughout Desire, and through the early part of Bidart’s career, attempt to allow a plurality of voices to find vocalization through the act of writing.
shaded with the recognition that creative making can be accompanied by internal, critical unmaking.

“For the Twentieth Century,” which opens the volume, presents the current historical moment as one in which the entire history of aesthetic experience seems infinitely available: “I push the PLAY button -/ … Callas, Laurel & Hardy, Szigeti/ you are alive again.” (Stardust, 3) And yet, this capacity for simulation of eternal life is not static, nor is the place of the subjectivity experiencing the aesthetic moment stable. The speaker is “bound” by desire to experience the “boundless” ecstasy of the aesthetic experience, and though the method for producing that ecstasy, the technology itself, remains relatively stable, the end of the poem suggests that the experience of the aesthetic is open to constant reinterpretation as time moves on and new patterns and forms develop from the old, in a process the poet describes as “[t]he art of the performer.” (Stardust, 4)

Each new artist makes from the old art and forms a tapestry of the self in the simultaneous mutability and stability of the repeatable aesthetic experience. The tone of “For the Twentieth Century” is at least partially celebratory, but most of the poems in the volume accompany meditations on aesthetic making with darker shadings that reflect concerns with the alienation that occurs when attempts at making are frustrated. “Young Marx” chisels that thinker’s early analyses of the workings of labor into a poem arguing that “estranged from labor the laborer is/ self-estranged.” In this instance aesthetic crafting is one more version of labor in which the self can become self-alienated if estranged from the crafting. Through his framing of Marx’s argument, Bidart asserts the existential necessity of aesthetic making, of pulling from the void of the self a momentary order that can make the self recognizable. And yet, the poem’s close includes a reminder
that the stabilities or reintegration made through such labor can never be static; the speaker announces that the chiseled text is from “Marx in 1844, before the solutions that he proposed/ betrayed him by entering history…” (*Stardust*, 6) Marx too is a laborer, seeking reintegration through the labor of his thinking and writing. The problem Bidart sees with Marx’s formulation or “solutions” is that they assume a concrete end to history which Bidart can’t assume. Marx’s envisioned paradise of unalienated labor is also a paradise of permanent subjective unity, a unity which Bidart argues can’t be achieved simply because history “betrays” us. Change is inevitable, and the poet implies that whatever wholeness is achieved for the subject will eventually be undone by the necessary changes wrought on the self through time. Permanent attempts to “fix” the self, or other selves, will result in disaster as we drive forward in critical violence to undo the static stabilities of the self.

“Advice to the Players” expands on the ideas in “Young Marx” concerning the human desire to craft in an attempt to create coherence for the self, asserting at the beginning that “[w]e are creatures who need to make,” and echoing “Borges and I” that “[m]aking is the mirror in which we see ourselves.” (*Desire*, 10) Our constant need as humans is to keep making, and yet “without clarity about what we make, and the choices that underlie it, the need to make is a curse, a misfortune.” (*Desire*, 11) In this poem, Bidart acknowledges that destruction, or un-making, can be a kind of parallel making. As with “Herbert White,” when insight into the making is unavailable or the means for making are non-existent, destructive violence is the outcome as the drive to craft the mirror for the self seeks to find an outlet. A similar motif runs through “Curse,” which performs the action of cursing the hijackers who destroyed the Twin Towers. In Bidart’s
analysis, their act of destroying themselves was an act of creating themselves through
destruction: “Now, as you wished, you cannot for us/ not be.” (Stardust, 25) The mirror
they made was the void within themselves. Bidart turns this void which they unleashed
on the world into art through the act of linguistic framing, a literal curse attempting to use
language to effect the world. Here the curse works to erase the hijackers by making
understandable their own acts of erasure. The poem is written entirely in the second
person, transforming the people who perpetrated the acts into anonymous sources of
destruction, devoid of names or specific identities. Destruction, an act of frustrated
making, ultimately serves to destroy the self and others and perpetuates the alienation
from history which Bidart enacts through his own act of aesthetic erasure.

All through *Stardust* Bidart perceives danger in the art of making, or in the
making of art, finding the drive to craft accompanied by a nihilistic darker side which
also appears to stem from the desiring void the poet perceives at the core of the self.
Though he still perceives the attempt to craft as an attempt at self-making, Bidart
foregrounds the self’s tendencies to undo itself through the drive for further making even
more strenuously than in previous volumes. “The Third Hour of the Night” which
concludes the volume elaborates fully on the intertwined activities of creation and
destruction. As in his previous works, Bidart attempts to craft a mirror which creates a
simultaneous raveling and unraveling of the self through the tapestry of interrelated
strands, this time drawing on the archeological archive of his past, the “found” works of
Benvenuto Cellini’s autobiography, and the recorded experiences of a murderous
Australian sorcerer whose very graphic and eerily matter-of-fact recounting of the
mutilation, murder, and possible rape of a woman closes both the poem and the book.
Like the poems in *Desire*, “The Third Hour of the Night” creates a liminal textual space that wavers between identification and recognition of difference, drawing the experience of the historical Frank Bidart’s and of his reader’s into wavering alignment with those of the aforementioned destructive creators. Here, though, language too is implicated in destruction, and what had been a set of stabilizing parameters becomes a dangerous material from which to craft, dangerous to both reader and writer. If in “The Second Hour of the Night” language could serve as the liminal bridge allowing the writer and reader access to a state between life and death, in “The Third Hour…” language is implicated in the act of killing.

The first part of the poem, drawing from Walt Whitman, identifies the desire to make as a form of wound dressing, casting the artist as “the creature/ driven again and again to dress with fresh/ bandages and a pail of disinfectant/ suppurations that cannot heal/ for the wound that confers existence is mortal.” (*Stardust*, 38) Once again, aesthetic dilemmas and existential dilemmas merge, and the production of the aesthetic work is presented as the production of the self, only here that self is also under erasure. To exist is to die, and aesthetic crafting can’t reverse or “heal” that state; it can, however, act as a balm, making bearable the unbearable condition of mortality, mitigating the trauma of being without claiming the capacity to prevent or heal it. And yet, though crafting can dress the wound of existence, it can also wound in its turn or intensify the wound it seeks to ease. The void out of which the self creates that was identified earlier (as identified in the poems of *Desire*) proves chaotic, and the order created from it, like Marx’s order, can become a form of destruction. Bidart presents the creative principle in all its fury as a sort of beastly dark double to the self-knowing subject.

Understand that when the beast within you
succeeds again in paralyzing into unending
incompletion what you alone had the temerity to
try to make
its triumph is made sweeter by confirmation of its
rectitude. It knows that it alone
knows you. It alone remembers your mother’s
mother’s grasping immigrant bewildered
smoke-filled slide-to-the-grave
you wiped from your adolescent American feet.
Your hick purer-than-thou overreaching veiling
mediocrity. Understand that you can delude others but
not what you more and more
now call the beast within you.

_Stardust_, 39-40

Significantly in this passage, the poem switches to the second person in this passage with
the effect of splitting the self between speaking self and heard self. Bidart appears to
employ some version of the subjectively fragmented instability central to poststructural
thinking or versions of postmodern poetic practice. The self is severed in speaking to
itself as to a different person. And yet, the use of the second person also has the effect of
reaching across the page and implicating the reader in (or even into) the text, creating a
blurred moment where the reader can share the general principle of aesthetic destructive
creation as well as the speaker’s memories of personal loss. From one perspective the
poem presents language and the self as unraveling, fragmenting as the speaker separates
out from himself; yet from another perspective this unraveling is a form of weaving
together as the language used by the fragmenting speaker is the very language used to
draw the reader into conjunction with the poem.
The paradoxical place of reader and writer finds an echo in the paradoxical function of the inner beast which both creates and destroys, whose perpetual dissatisfaction is the painful source of the drive for further creation; the action of “paralyzing into unending completion” suggests that the work can be one of radical openness or one of radical closure, with the beast serving to undermine whichever conscious intention of the artist through unconscious undoing. Despite the attempts of the artist to master the self, the unknown, unconscious part of the self is “the only one that knows you,” and this chaotic, dangerous, negating principle holds sway in the poem as Bidart presents the artist desperately attempting to mitigate it. The beast, in this sense, operates by introducing paradoxical opposition into the crafted structures, echoing the deconstructive breakdown of oppositional binaries. This breakdown threatens the liminal space, separated by neither/nor binaries, which the poet had previously employed to create parameters for the wavering self. But it also serves to produce a new set of parameters, those between creation and destruction, within which the artist can waver, producing new work which is wounding and wound-dressing at once.

Throughout the poem language is portrayed as possessing the power of both creation and destruction. The second and main section begins with a brief meditation on the Greek myth of the introduction of language as the creation of language by the Fates.

Atropos Lachesis Clotho

Three, who gave us in recompense for death
the first alphabet, to engrave in stone what is most evanescent,
the mind. According to Hesiod, daughters of Night.

Stardust, 41
Language offers permanence here, but only as compensation for mortality, the very mark of impermanence. Furthermore, language here is associated with other forms of crafting, particularly sculpting, as the act of writing is a form of “engrav[ing] in stone,” setting the stage for the poem’s focus on Cellini and his life. The artist engraved himself figuratively through the crafting of his autobiography, and literally in crafting his sculptures. The lines adapted from Cellini’s autobiography suggest as much, asserting that “we are electric ghosts,” dead forms animated (or perhaps re-animated) with a sudden charge. Animation and reanimation take place throughout time as the artwork, the engraving of the self (or the self’s efforts) is experienced and re-experienced again and again by the viewer and reader. The self exists as neither living nor dead in the work which, through time, haunts newer and newer viewers or readers. This is the immortality that Cellini apparently seeks to attain in his crafting of the statue of Perseus. And yet, within this immortality is a self-destructive drive. The drive within Cellini to create an immortal work, to give himself more life, is also fueled by the homicidal drive to take the lives of others, first evidenced by his killing as an act of vengeance the man who murdered his brother, and later in his aborted attempt to kill his main rival. In asserting his own place and potential for immortality Cellini also seeks to eliminate that potential in others. Bidart’s use, then, of Cellini’s biography is illustrative of the way the drive to create can turn from a balm to an attempt to master the lives of others in order to clear space for the self’s creation, in two senses of that word.

The poem’s concluding section, which focuses on the Australian sorcerer, brings the aesthetic mastery of others into sharp relief. Much of the very disturbing power of
this section comes from the matter of fact way the sorcerer recounts acts that implicitly joins sex, torture, and murder. The sorcerer knocks out a woman, opens her abdomen, reaches inside and squeezes her heart, then to cover up his crime uses a stick to poke her intestines back inside, and then inserts some sort of healing mixture into her wound and covers her with healing ants which make the wounds appear to disappear. The sorcerer claims that he brings the woman back to life briefly, but informs her that she will die in three days, a mode of linguistic power (or curse) which the poem suggests is complicit in the action of killing. Part of the destructive ritual involves the command and the saying, and at the end of his section of the poem, the sorcerer’s power is connected directly to his ability to command and terrify beyond his own physical time and place through his capacity for linguistic use:

Everyone knows I have powers but not such power.
If they knew I would be so famous
they would kill me.
I tell you because your tongue is stone.
If the gods ever give you words, one night in sleep you will wake to find me above you.

_Stardust, 78_

As in the earlier section, the sorcerer’s speech can be taken as a metapoetic turn. It speaks both to an audience within the poem (the anthropologist to whom the statement is made) as well as outside the poem (to we the readers). The permanence provided by language, previously figured as a recompense for mortality, has become a method of killing and silencing, and the sorcerer, like Cellini, overpowers and attempts to master

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20 Bidart remarks on this in an interview with Adam Travis. The poet also notes the way the sorcerer’s activity is a curse where malefic use of language becomes the killing will of the speaker.
others, in this case the reader. While the speaker at the poem’s outset approached the crafting as a form of wound-dressing, the poem becomes a form of wounding, threatening nightmarish visitations and the silencing of the other of the reader.

The poem ends with a reiteration and modification of Bidart’s exploration of the process of historical aesthetic fashioning, this time through the lens of the unconscious, chaotic, beast-like principle. As the speaker confronts the mirror he finds “the familiar appeaseless/eater’s face” which cajoles him with a confrontation of his own destructive impulse, active, consciously or not, in every creative act: “All life exists at the expense of other life/ Because you have eaten and eat as eat you must/ Eater become food…”

(Stardust, 79) The negative reflection, the eater, is a type of void, “appeaseless” in terms of its intake of past aesthetic material; the recompense is to produce from the self the “food” for future generations of appeaseless, creative/destructive selves. As in previous poems, history doesn’t stop, nor is the inner eater appeased; in recompense, Bidart offers the constant of crafting over time, not as a method of crafting a whole order, transcending time and space, which will “fix” things for all time and bring an end to history, but rather as a method of constant negotiation and renegotiation of the demands of history which can generatively produce selves to stave off the hunger of the void if not appease it.

Bidart’s recent collection, 2008’s Watching the Spring Festival, continues his exploration of the intertwined issues of self, language, and history, this time focusing on the poet’s own experiences of the aesthetic as inescapable experiences in his own life. Three particular poems, “Ulanova at Forty Finally Dances Before the Camera Giselle,” “Little O,” and “Collector” exemplify the ways Bidart has reworked and refined his balancing of the fluctuating self between history, performance, and rhetoric.
“Ulanova…” begins with another reconsideration of the self as it moves through time, in this instance focusing on the art of the titular dancer in a video performance that is neither wholly replicative nor wholly original act. The dancer fluctuates between the two moments in time, her present moment of dancing and the present of the spectator. In a similar manner the speaker fluctuates in time, as his recounting of his own memories becomes a performance of the past within the stabilized parameters of the poem. Ulanova, as the speaker re-watches the performance, has become art personified, a “creature/ who remembers/ her every gesture and senses its relation to the time/ just a moment before when she did something/ close to it/ but then everything was different…”  
(Watching the Spring Festival, 26) The fluctuation between repetition and new movement becomes exemplary of the state of the self as it re-experiences the work and reconsiders the ways the self has changed over time:

This and every second is the echo of a second like it but different when you had illusions not only about others but about yourself. Each gesture cuts through these other earlier moments to exist as a new gesture but carries with it all the others, so what you dance is the circle or bubble you carry that is all this.

Watching the Spring Festival, 26-27

The artwork provides a place for identification both with the performer and with the past selves that make up the self. This is a function not just in the poem but of it, as suggested by the ambivalent use of the second person throughout it. Here, and elsewhere, the speaker appears to be speaking not only to himself, but also to Ulanova. Add to this the way Bidart has used the second person throughout his work to draw in the reader, and the
The poem maneuvers back and forth between depictions of the dance, descriptions of the speaker’s desire to write a poem about his experiences with the performance, and meditations on the nature of tragedy. The poem posits that the significance of Ulanova’s dancing of “Giselle” is in its relation to the tragic, first as the dancer herself renders through the particularities of her performance renders what would be a “nice story” into an actual tragedy, and second because Ulanova, older than the average ballet dancer, is herself performing under the limitations of age and her accumulated past, limitation being one of the main features of tragedy as posited in the poem. The relation between tragedy and historical limitation is explicitly explored in one of the prose sections as Bidart explains his resistance to the postmodern flattening.

You have spent your life writing tragedies for a world that does not believe in tragedy. What is tragedy? Everyone is born somewhere: into this body, this family, this place. Into the mystery of your own predilections that change as you become conscious of what governs choice, but change little. Into, in short, particularity inseparable from existence. Each particularity, inseparable from its history, offers and denies. There is a war between each offer you embrace and what each embrace precludes, what its acceptance denies you. Most of us blunt and mute this war in order to survive. In tragedy the war is lived out. The radical given cannot be evaded or erased. No act of intelligence or prowess or cunning or goodwill can reconcile the patrimony of the earth.

Watching the Spring Festival, 31-32
This passage echoes the complaints Bidart conveys in his interviews and notes. The tragic, dependent on limitation and transgression, is not functional in a world which views the subject as unmoored from historical limitation and constantly involved in radical, perpetual self-reinvention. Bidart shares the poststructuralist view that the self is not static, but he also insists that the self’s capacity for change is necessarily limited by that “particularity inseparable from existence” which both “offers and denies.” In the poet’s hands, then, the use of tragic material becomes, in the poet’s hands, a method for resisting the nihilistic absolutes of subjective and linguistic fluidity by reasserting connections to the specificities of personal history, though such use is also dependent on suffering and sacrifice.

Ulanova’s performance in the poem provides the prime example of the tragic. Giselle as she goes mad and dies is forced to confront an end to the future self she believed had been set for her and the moment of being severed from the future is her moment of knowledge of the limits that life has provided for her. Her dream of what could be could only ever be a dream, and in the frustration of that she experiences her madness and demise, an outcome Bidart sees as the point when the self attempts to fight back against its limits. As Giselle rises to dance for Albrecht, Ulanova’s dancing shows something other than a passion for another we might expect from romantic melodrama.

Act Two, because this *Giselle* has been abbreviated by L. Lavroosky, is a sketch of Act Two.

*Worse than being dead yourself*

*is to imagine him dead.*

Many ways to dance Giselle, but in the queer moonlit halflife of the forest at night, when Giselle in death dances with Albrecht to save him, Ulanova
executes the classic postures of ecstasy, of
yearning for
union, as if impersonally –
as if the event were not at last
again to touch him, but pre-ordained
beyond the will, fixed as the stars are fixed.

*Watching the Spring Festival, 32-33*

In death, Giselle becomes a somewhat mechanical representation of the very limit she attempted to exceed in life. Her death and her dancing seem “pre-ordained,” revealing the limitations of the situation, but also the limitations of the aesthetic. In a sense, Ulanova’s mechanical dancing is reflective of the dancer’s own situation within the ballet as well as within history, set within the strict limits of form, the strict limits of the body’s abilities, and the strict limits of Cold War politics.

The demands of form, the “severity and ferocity at the root of classical art, addicted to mimesis,” constrain the dancer, and the dancer’s character, into acting out the story of the ballet, despite what dancer and character may desire. And yet, within this helplessness in the face of fate comes another version of fate, counter to the demands placed on the self by death and art.

When Giselle dead defies her dead sisters

Death and the dramatist make visible
the pitiless logic within love’s must.

*Love must silence its victims, -
... or become their vessel.*

She has become his vessel.

*Watching the Spring Festival, 34*
This moment is a softened transformation of the moment at the end of “The Third Hour of the Night” where the consuming artist must become food. In the moment of suffering and sacrifice, Giselle becomes the vessel of love as Ulanova has become the vessel of Giselle. The artist carries the work to fruition in the work and through the work, acting in the “bubble” of the limitations placed on the artist through the historical form or the performative script. This activity mirrors the activity of the viewer’s or reader’s experience of the work as the viewer/reader finds himself or herself potentially merging in the liminal space of the experience with the artist in the particularities of the artist’s experience. The artist is both artist and audience, as the audience becomes both audience and artist.

In the end, the poem turns back to suggest that the art work itself can become a “radical given” or supportive limitation to the emerging artist as it provides an inescapable, though multifaceted, memory providing useful parameters to the emerging artist: “Ulanova came to Pomona California in// 1957 as light projected on a screen// to make me early in college see what art is.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 35 The artwork becomes part of the self as a memory, just as the self, through projection into the artwork, becomes a portion of the art. As in “Borges and I” the self enters another version of the hall of mirrors, but here the poem asserts that the self, though mirroring and potentially plural, is only plural in a limited form, bound by the given particularities of biology, history, and memory.

“Little O” brings the issue of the poststructural dismantling of language and the subject to bear on Bidart’s framing of the self as necessarily connected to the particularities of history. In the notes to the volume, the poet signals that the “argument
here is with Stevens’ “The Creations of Sound,” his argument with Eliot.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 61) Ultimately, Stevens’ argument with Eliot, signified as “X” in the poem, is by the end an argument about the use and structure of language. Speech, so Stevens declares is “not dirty silence/ Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier./ It is more than an imitation for the ear.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 43) Stevens objects here to what he sees as Eliot’s too-tight control (or attempt to control) language and to Eliot’s view of language as intellectual “clarification.” For Stevens, language is not clarity, but ambiguous suggestion, and in the fluidities of language, as in the fluidities of many other systems of thinking and being, Stevens finds his poetic strength. The last lines of Bidart’s poem go so far as to suggest that language is a system beyond us, working in us despite our attempts at intellectual control: “We say ourselves in syllables that rise/ From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 43) In essence, Stevens argues that Eliot’s view of the poem as an empirical intellectual construct fails to account for the sensory aspects of verse, as well as the ways that language is severed from us, working despite us. Bidart does not necessarily argue against Stevens’ emphasis on ambiguity and his argument for a view of language as more fluid than what he perceived Eliot to perceive. The later poet also does not necessarily disagree with Stevens’ emphasis on the sensory aspects of poetic production; one of Bidart’s fascinations from his first book has been with the ways that human bodies function and resist the kinds of controls placed on them, whether those are mental, linguistic, or social. What Bidart does argue against is the too great emphasis that Stevens places on linguistic fluidities, which become an evasion of history, and the too-
great tone of candor Stevens employs, as if the truth of Stevens’ resistance to absolute truth has become itself a form of absolute truth.

Bidart’s poem begins with a direct refutation of Stevens’ poem by way of paraphrase: “To see the topography of a dilemma// through the illusion of/ hearing, hearing the voices// of those who, like you, must live there.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 42) The problem with aesthetic production in regard to history, as Bidart sees it, is that each new generation produces a new “dilemma” of representation based on the present’s relationship to the past, recent or otherwise. The opening of the second section clarifies this: “We are not belated: we stand in an original/ relation to the problems of making// art, just as each artist before us did.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 42) Here the poet counters the assumption that there existed at time in which representation presented no problems for the representer, that the issues of accurately exemplifying the present moment are new problems. Bidart’s view of history as continual inevitable inheritance works against a view that wants to see the present postmodern moment as absolutely cut off from history. In his formulation, history, here aesthetic history, is a constant rethinking of the past, and of the present, as new attempts or solutions are found to best reflect a moment that seems incommensurate with the past. The past provides the material for making in the present, setting the stage for what he later in the poem refers to as refusals. What we refuse, how we break with the past becomes the source of continuity. This stance rejects not just Stevens, but a view of the condition of postmodernity that wants to see in the late twentieth century a wild eclecticism untethered from historical limitations. Bidart finds his own strength in considering the
limitations that he suggests work under our behaviors whether we acknowledge them or not.

And yet, Bidart’s stance is ultimately different from that of the traditional view of modernism, that considerations of past art can be ways to “contain history,” in Pound’s description of his activity in the *Cantos*. Containment is not an option for Bidart since he views history as uncontainable. History does not stop, and the present solution to an aesthetic dilemma will become a point of refusal for some artist at some future time. History is the limiting factor on our choices: “At the threshold/ you can see the threshold: - // it is a precipice.” (*Watching the Spring Festival*, 42) But it also gives possibilities for renewal. Bidart approaches this idea by attending to opposed attitudes toward mimesis.

Disgust with mimesis, -
disgust with the banality of naturalistic representation, words mere surface mirroring a surface, -
is as necessary as mimesis: as the conventions the world offers out of which to construct your mirror fail, to see your face you intricately, invisibly reinvent them.

*Watching the Spring Festival*, 42-43

Bidart utilizes a modification of a rather Stevensian term to make his argument. If Stevens emphasizes, in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” to name an example, the importance of invention to the artist, Bidart will place his focus on necessary reinvention of convention. Stevens often has in mind the use of invention not just as creation of the new, but as retaining its definition of discovery, suggesting that aesthetic artistry is not an
absolute of fabrication, but of fashioning from what’s there. Bidart pays homage by suggesting that artistry comes not just from discovering, but rediscovering the “conventions” necessary to construct an artistic mirroring of the present. In the later poet’s formulation, both an outmoded mode and disgust with the outmoded mode guide the rediscovery of a mode (temporarily) not outmoded. And the view of language attached to this method of representation, “words mere surface mirroring a surface,” suggests a discomfort with the way that “naturalistic” depiction makes claims for language as surface representation of other things which are in themselves merely more surface.

Bidart concedes some ground, but wants to temper the absolutes in the earlier poet.

But

imagining that words must make the visible

a little hard to see, -
or speech that imitates for the ear speech

now is used up, the ground sealed off from us, -

is a sentimentality. Stevens was wrong. Genius leading the disgusted over a cliff.

Everything made is made out of its

refusals: those who follow make it new by refusing its refusals.

Watching the Spring Festival, 43

Bidart’s complaint here becomes not just a complaint against Stevens but a complaint against a post-structural view of language that sees language as unable to represent and as serving a type of replacement function for the external world, another version of the surface underneath the surface. This view of language cuts us off from the historical past
by emphasizing too great a rupture with the material. Instead, Bidart rediscovers, or reinvents, the limits for aesthetic creation. Here, those limits are the refusals. If a past moment, either Stevens’ own, or the postmodernism sprung from Stevens’ views, crafted its refusal by refusing refusals, Bidart will craft his, in a verbal nod to Pound’s credo “make it new” (and so to modernism itself), by reasserting the refusals.

“The Collector,” which concludes the volume, offers another consideration of the desiring void out of which the self aesthetically forms itself. Here, Bidart looks at the work of the past through the lens of old age, offering another tempering of the nihilistic dark beast of the “The Second Hour of the Night” which still acknowledges the creative/destructive drive to clear room for the reinvention of the self while the parameters of aging quickly constrain the selves which can be invented. As with much of Bidart’s work, the poem utilizes the second person as an act of self-overhearing and a metapoetic reaching across the page to implicate the reader in the work of the text. It interweaves materials from the aesthetic past, both historical and personal, together with the poet’s own memories and the memories shaped from engagement with his own work to return again to a creative principle which both sustains the self and threatens the self in terms of all it demands of the artist to keep crafting. Throughout the poem, the speaker desires a final finish, an end to desire, acknowledging that such an end is comparable to mortality. Yet the poem ends by asserting once more the unending, unfinished, constantly crafting nature of the void at the heart of the self. However painful it may be constantly to need to reinvent the self through crafting, such need is a necessary part of life.
Throughout “The Collector” autobiographical flourishes are cast in terms of previously experienced artworks, again recalling Bidart’s insistence that the self becomes itself through the intertwining of individual experience with the experiences of the aesthetic past. This occurs first at the very beginning of the poem, as the speaker tells himself that “[y]our new poem must, you suspect, steal from// The Duchess of Malfi.

Tonight, alone, reread it.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 53) The newly crafted poem, which is another version of the self, must take from an older work that offers either stabilizing parameter or identification. This principle recurs in the second section where the poet describes a memory of a fight between his mother and stepfather in terms of tragic Greek myth: “In the back seat of// the car you were terrified as Medea/ invented new ways to tell// Jason what he had done to her.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 54) The classical myth give shape to the experience, just as the experience fails perfectly to conform to the myth; the invention, the rediscovery, in the present moment is a requirement of the reuse of the form of the tragic myth. Listening to a recording of the mid-twentieth century big band singer Lee Wiley singing triggers a recognition of the much more recent historical past, one which represents the parameters of the speaker’s youth, and delimits the periods of the self; meanwhile the aging self (in a reference adding yet another historical layer) is cast as “Lady/ Macbeth wiping away/ what your eyes alone can see.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 56)

The darker shadings of “The Third Hour” become present in the poem as Bidart continues to explore the self’s need to destroy in order to clear space for reinvention. First, the repetition of the reinvention of the self is cast as a ritual whose performance will one day give way to the cessation of the need for such a ritual: “The rituals/ you love
imply that, repeating them,// you store the seeds that promise/ the end of ritual. Not this.”

(Watching the Spring Festival, 54) The ritual of composition may claim that one more reinvention will eliminate the need for reinvention, but the negation that follows the claim acknowledges that the need is perpetual. No ritual will stop the painful need in the self, rather rituals salve but also perpetuate that need since what they stores are “seeds,” the new beginnings of new works when the old are found wanting. Second, the dissatisfaction with the already made, whether made by the self or by others, is given a destructive cast: “The curator, who thinks he made his soul/ choosing each object that he found he chose,// wants to burn down the museum.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 55) Negation, hatred of the self’s creations and the self which created them, inspires the destruction necessary for new creation.

The most self-damning aspect of this destructive urge occurs as Bidart thinks back over the works of mourning performed in Desire, poems that examined the way the dead beloved can return in dreams, or in the half-dream of artworks, and rehabit the self again. The poet turns against himself as he suggests that the completed act of mourning, earlier rendered as a never-completed process, is a form of betrayal not just of the dead but of the poet’s past self or selves as well.

He no longer arrives even in dreams.

You learned love is addiction

when he to whom you spoke on the phone every day

dying withdrew his voice – more than friends, but

less than lovers.

There, arranged in a pile, are his letters.
The voice of the loved one, already at a distance, becomes more distanced throughout the poem until it is reduced to letters. The process of dying occurs again as the departed becomes more and more absent until his only remaining presence is the word. Dying is a withdrawal of the voice, and letters, the written word, can only be remnants. On the one hand, Bidart is typically skeptical of deconstructionist claims that language is only ever absence; on the other hand, he fully bears the weight of that claim. Lurking behind the reduction of the withdrawn loved one into the realm of letters is an alphabetical pun, and the implication seems to be that Bidart, in crafting his own past poems, has also enacted a kind of reduction. The elegies for Brainerd were not enough to stop his voice from disappearing. Though literature may allow the voice to speak for a moment beyond time, the victory is heavily compromised by the inescapability of mortality and the inevitably withdrawing, and ultimately withdrawn, voice. Immortality, it seems is itself “mortal.”

In the penultimate section of the poem the poet proclaims his ultimate distrust of the poetic past he has constructed for the self. “The law is,” he declares, “that you must live in the house that you built.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 57-58) The poet must live with the things that he or she has written, regardless of changes in thought, temperament, or life, making any one attempt at mitigating the black hole either ineffective or painful. The overwhelming pressure of the past seems to be Bidart’s focus here as he argues in the second person that “[y]ou are uncertain what crime// is, though each life writhing to/ elude what it has made// feels like punishment.” (Watching the Spring Festival, 58) Here again the long history of the canonical poetic past and the relatively short history of the personal poetic past collapse as the speaker also might,
speaking of himself, his future or past self, or other past selves. Who are the lives
writhing to elude what they make? They could be both the poet speaking of himself and
every other writer who came before, working to make more work which necessarily both
builds on and revises his or her own past as well as the whole of the aesthetic past, or
whatever part of the aesthetic past that writer has drawn upon. The pain of constantly
overturning, or at least attempting to overturn, the self’s own productions, as well as the
productions of others, “feels like punishment,” the suffering that the artist must endure
for the sake of creating and for the sake of having created.

This meditation on the pains of creation and the pains of the past brings the poet
back to his earlier assessment of historical-aesthetic engagement. In this instance, the
poem turns back in on itself, drawing the circuit of referentiality even tighter, implicating
the present poem as one more example of a soon to be failed attempt at mitigating the
existential and poetic crises that Bidart has already enumerated.

Tell yourself, again. The rituals
you love imply that, repeating them,

you store the seeds that promise

the end of ritual. You store
the seeds. Tell yourself, again.

what you store are seeds.

Watching the Spring Festival, 58

Once more, the poet addresses the desire for an end to desire, for a production so perfecit
it will make desire cease. And again the poem seems to admit failure in its rhetoricity.
But it’s an odd sort of failure. For Stevens, the inevitable failure of systems to hold
meaning was, though not without its frustrations, a kind of triumph, really the most of
triumph one could know. Desire and rejuvenation went hand in hand, and though the breakings which necessitate rejuvenation can be traumatic, the desiring creative self ultimately enjoys the fashioning, and self-fashioning, in a world of arbitrary limits. For Bidart, the very desire to keep creating is a kind of failure, but in the contemporary poet’s limiting and limited world (despite the illusions it wants to create for itself), in his ultimately tragic universe, the moving on of poetic creation in the face of past poetics, even those of one’s own making, is a kind of corrective virtue that will always hold out hope for an end. One end inevitably will come. Perfection will not be reached; the self will die (and even if eternity were an option Bidart strongly hints that it would only offer new opportunities for anxiety about the past and new desires for new works that would attempt to put the past to rights). And yet, the desire to get it right, though fraught with anxiety, at least makes this poet hopeful that the efforts to negotiate past mistakes will offer some sorts of corrections. The past is never quite dead, though it’s never really alive anymore either, even in memory. Still constant crafting from it can nourish and offer, if not healing, survival.
Chapter 3: Carl Phillips


Beauty, at least when it is referred to by that name – suffers the same treatment by too many contemporary poets (and students of poetry) as does authority in poetry. It gets dismissed as naïve, or irrelevant, or somehow on the wrong side of the field on whose other side we are all assumed to have happily set up camp together. But to hold that assumption is to exercise the very sort of authority that the mysterious “they” hold suspect. It also suggests that beauty is monolithic, one-dimensional, and finally inorganic – without the capacity for evolution, without susceptibility to time.

*Coin of the Realm*, 3

The poet continues:

Equally on the rise: an unwillingness to be held accountable – to take responsibility, which is what authority requires; it forces the artist to take a stand and to reckon with such issues as intention, meaning, self, and their relationship to what Marianne Moore calls “the genuine.” And since abstraction is generally conflated with authority – as, erroneously, the concrete is not – what hope for beauty?

*Coin of the Realm*, 3

These statements, while expressing a resistance to certain postmodern precepts concerning the radical, supposedly liberating dismantling of aesthetic categories, also resist the opposite extreme: total rejection of postmodern free play. Phillips recognizes that the deep suspicion towards beauty, authority, and accountability among many critics, readers, and writers, a suspicion that claims to undo the tyranny of constrictive aesthetic (and sometimes also political) authority, has sometimes become an authoritative tyranny itself, codifying and simplifying the multi-faceted, constantly changing experience of the aesthetic. But he also recognizes that some version of the radical uncertainty espoused by postmodern poetics and theory is an appropriate description of the way categories of thought operate, a recognition visible in his careful defining of the category of the
organic as matter not of static, “natural” stability but rather as involved in and susceptible to change over time. Phillips does not argue for a stability which replaces the instability of radical poststructural critiques; rather, he argues, that categorical stability and radical instability both fail to account for the experience of the aesthetic, an experience Phillips sees as neither constant nor inconstant, but rather as incorporating and resisting both resisting the extremes of either. In this way, Phillips’ thinking resembles Bidart’s, which tends to operate on the basis of a neither/nor logic. Here and throughout his work Phillips views aesthetic experience as neither wholly static nor wholly open-ended. And his emphasis on the changing nature of the aesthetically pleasing, or what he terms beauty, echoes Bidart’s view of history as always constantly in flux. Rather than a nostalgic view of a glorified past in which artists supposedly had an absolutely stable relationship with an aesthetic tradition, both poets think that the relationship with tradition is never stable because the past is always, and has always been, in need of reinterpretation by the present artist. Though not as assertive as some of Bidart’s pronouncements, Phillips’ suggestion that beauty has “the capacity for evolution” and has a “susceptibility to time” shows a deep affinity with the views of the other poets treated here. Phillips, like the others, navigates between modern and postmodern poetic responses to the dilemmas of historical disconnection and alienation.

Phillips’ opening remarks in the essay just quoted particularly resemble Graham’s stance in regard to the potential effects of aesthetic engagement. Both poets are skeptical of past claims for transcendent categories of aesthetic beauty, Graham perhaps more

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21 This modification of the category of the organic in particular signals Phillips’ navigation between modern and postmodern poetic practice. Phillips’ version of organicism is not the modern version Mutlut Konuk Blasing considers to be authoritarian and repressive; rather, it involves a version of external, observational truth, but one which recognizes itself as a version and which recognizes externally verified observation as mutable.
obviously, as her early work tends to deconstruct the very concept of beauty in order to show that the authority granted it by past thinkers is false. In any case, Phillips first signals his skepticism through his rehearsal of the arguments against beauty, a rehearsal which signals a prior wrestling with the very arguments he rebuts; second, his depiction of a mutable, contingent, or evolutionary beauty directly counters the idea of a timeless aesthetic experience. More importantly, though, both poets, like Bidart, sense that aesthetic activity, specifically the self-conscious crafting of verbal art, can bring about some type of coherence for the self. Where Graham envisions moments of contingent presence arising from readerly and writerly engagement with the poem and Bidart sees the poem as re-establishing semi-stabilizing historical structures for reader and writer, Phillips imagines that the poem serves as a place for the contemplation and working through of the self’s responsibility to and for language, responsibility related to the self’s duty to act ethically in the world and in relation to others.

Phillips is also suspicious, as Bidart and Graham are, that the temporary resolutions he devises are illusory attempts to connect the self to the world, to other selves, or even to itself, attempts doomed to failure because the self is innately and unalterably fragmented and because its principle too, language, is epistemologically and otherwise unreliable. Yet, like the other two poets, he is unwilling to give up the game,
instead treating the fated failure as a failure rather than accepting and immersing himself in fragmentation as his postmodern poetic predecessors would. Much of Phillips’ work involves immersion into the flux of the material world because the language used to know that world has proven insufficient to the task of knowing. However, this immersion is not a solution for Phillips; rather, it’s the source of his dilemma or, to put it differently, the original state the self in his poems inhabits. The poet’s work does not labor to discover and then accept the epistemological or linguistic fragmenting of the self, rather it starts from that fragmenting and attempts to use language to stabilize or orient the self within its given situation. In many cases, a Phillips poem ends by admitting that the self is not entirely coherent, that language is an insufficient ontological/epistemological tool, and that the world is not entirely knowable. Again, these realizations resemble postmodern responses to poetry’s dilemma but differ crucially from them in that Phillips evaluates them less as liberating than as painful and defeating. The poet renders the postmodern poetic or theoretical reading of language and the self as tragic rather than freeing. And yet, Phillips keeps returning to the task of composition, because for him, a constant reengagement with the linguistic aesthetic, even if it’s an attempt doomed to failure, provides a contingent stabilization of the self which is necessary for the self’s ethical engagement with the external world.

Much of Phillips’ stance stems from his interpretation of modern and postmodern ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty as a more than merely epistemological dilemma. For him the dilemma is also always ethical, involving the self’s treatment of others. Phillips’s work typically revolves around personal transgressions in which someone is treated in ways that do harm. That someone is often depicted as a
romantic partner the speaker has hurt somehow. Transgression is the trigger for the fragmentation of the self and the self’s fragmentation from a world previously assumed to be knowable but transformed through the rupture either of self from other or from its own self-conception. Phillips’ poems often try to bridge the gap transgression opens by creating from it a knowable situation and by taking responsibility both for the self and the self’s part in the rupture and for the language that represents and seeks to repair it. The act of writing the poem, then, is an attempt to heal what Phillips presents as a broken bond, but part of the poet’s inheritance from the poetic dilemmas of mid-century, particularly the distrust of epistemological solutions and critiques of the stable subject, is an acknowledgment that as much responsibility for the transgression as the speaker may want to take, the end result of healing a ruptured bond is not in the hands of the poet, rather, it rests in the hands of the other who has been hurt or who has engaged in the aesthetic act of reading. To take responsibility for rupture and ask for forgiveness is only part of the equation, and the other party must complete the action (or not, as the case may be). In this, Phillips’ work echoes Graham’s, as both writers attempt to rethink the lyric, shifting it from a contained paradoxical private/public utterance to one incorporating the reader into the necessary action of the poem. In Graham’s work this move is more overt; she typically and explicitly insists on the reader as necessary for the act of communication. For Phillips the readerly requirement is less a matter of explicit statement but it is nonetheless implicit in the action of the poem. The asking of forgiveness and attempt to heal a rupture requires action on the part of the other, action implicitly in the hands of the other person within the poem, but also in the hands of the reader as the other reading the poem. The poem is the bridge to re-connect a broken bond
between selves; in this way Phillips’ utterances are less private thoughts overheard and more like direct public address, seeking to establish a relationship between self and reader. This relationship is not as defined as the one Graham seeks to establish, nor is it as hopeful of producing the healing presence each poet desires. For Phillips the task is to establish an empathetic bond between self and other through carefully crafted language and then to leave the relationship between speaker and lover open-ended in order to avoid coercion. To return to the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemma all these poets respond to, the failure in Phillips’ poems is his way of insisting that any final solution to the dilemma is necessarily a false solution. But, and crucially for my argument, so too is acceptance of and immersion in the new chaos created by transgression. Phillips finds a structure in the relationship between reader and writer which is both open-ended (accepting of the fact that change, evolution, even transgression are inevitable parts of any relationship), and yet structured enough that both parties keep returning to attempt to re-establish the figurative bond between them. This structure incorporates aspects of modern and postmodern poetic practice, as described by Charles Altieri in Enlarging the Temple, that is, it requires symbolic, projected enclosures (recognizable and repeatable patterns) in order to make readable the experiences of the self; and yet keeps those patterns open and mutable, able to embrace the numinous through the accidents which make up reader and writer.

Phillips’ stance towards the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemmas inherited from modern and postmodern poetic practice has not altered radically

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24 Phillips uses this metaphor of writing as a bridge in the previously cited essay “The Book as a Bridge?” Throughout the essay Phillips highlights the ways in which both writing the poem and reading the poem require work on the part of both reader and writer. The emphasis on mutual activity shows Phillips’ familiarity with Perloff’s version of “open poetics” which requires readerly participation. It resists, however, a full embrace of such, as doing so abdicates the poet’s responsibility for the text.
over time; rather, it has unfolded and been varied or modified as his work has accumulated and he has begun to address the inevitable patterns which emerge from that work. Pattern reveals a stabilizing consistency for the poet at the same time as it addresses the self’s susceptibility to change, altering or even deviating from it, all of those serving to make the pattern more noticeable. Two significant shifts in Phillips’ work have occurred, though, one representing a reworking of the poet’s relationship to linguistic flux, the other signifying a subtle, but real, aligning of his intellectual concerns with an emergent set of metaphysical or spiritual ones. In his first book Phillips utilizes the fluid ambiguities of language to form a zone of comfort in the face of often oppressive external forces. Not saying becomes a way out of being forced to say and an exploration of the ways language and mental categories won’t conform to experience is often quietly freeing, as it can be in the works of a poet like John Ashbery.\(^{25}\) In his second book, though, Phillips feels a greater compulsion to use words to record situations for which no words or conceptual categories are available, situations which entail confrontations with mortality. Facing the death of a loved one becomes a challenge to the liberating or sheltering claims of postmodern poetics the poet had earlier enacted as those claims are found wanting when confronting an immersion into radical change after which there is no comprehensible renewal. The split between the self and a knowable world becomes an adequate description of the self’s experience of transition in the midst of painful loss; however, Phillips finds immersion and acceptance of this state, at least

\(^{25}\) This is not to say that Phillips completely eschews linguistic deferral in his later works. David Baker, in his review in the *Kenyon Review* of Phillips’ 2000 volume *Pastoral*, notes the way that though the poet “defers the gay narrative throughout… or suits it in densely figurative material, he doesn’t finally withhold it.” (‘Story’s Stories,” 161) And yet, deferral can cause confusion if context is unknown, such as that evinced in David Garrett’s review of the same volume in *World Literature Today* where the critic misreads the narrative for a heterosexual one and faults the poet’s eroticism as too abstract in its failure to mention the female beloved of the poems’ narrator.
without the healing work of the poem, to be an unconvincing solution to the dilemma, as it becomes instead a nihilistic abdication of the self’s authority and responsibility to survive through the making of meaning out of a newfound sense of rupture or meaninglessness. Language may be radically unstable and the world (and the self) may be ultimately incomprehensible to human modes of understanding, but relinquishing the attempt to know or understand is for Phillips a nihilistic acceptance of a state which still provides parameters, however diminished, chastened, or contingent, for some version of self-construction through the authority of language. Self-construction through conscious aesthetic engagement becomes for him, as it does for Bidart, a means of survival in the midst of an immersion into a chaotic ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis. And as with Graham, self-conscious construction entails the incorporation of the other of the reader, first in tenuous or ambiguous steps, then in more noticeable ways which respect the “otherness” of the other while working to establish the act of reading as an intellectual and emotional bond.

The second shift in Phillips’ thinking through of this aesthetic dilemma comes later in his writing, specifically in the 2009 volume *Speak Low*. There, the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis of earlier work attains a subtle, metaphysical dimension as the crisis itself becomes more indicative of a spiritually fallen state which is ultimately unchangeable through the self’s activities alone, although those activities may lead to an acceptance of that fallen state through a recognition both of humanity’s inability to comprehend the world while not abdicating a faith in which the world may be comprehensible or ultimately meaningful for an entity
outside of the world or for the self under certain conditions. In other words, Phillips’ shift in stance suggests that an unknown and unknowable other who encounters the work resembles a divinity beyond the scope of human understanding, but one who validates faith in the human desire (and attendant attempts to satisfy this desire) to return to an unfallen ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective state, however unlikely such may be through human activity alone. At this stage of Phillips’ career, the poem becomes not just a working through of an existential crisis, but a working through of a spiritual one as well as Phillips increasingly attempts to make comprehensible the self’s transgressions in order to atone for them while also casting the epistemological attempts to know the world as attempts to know what lies beyond empirical evidence. These spiritual aspects of Phillips’ verse have been present in his work before, but in *Speak Low* they become more noticeable, and in his most recent volume *Double Shadow* (2011) even more pronounced. This merging of the earlier dilemma with a spiritual one is significant to my consideration of Phillips’ complicated stance in relation to postmodern and modern poetics or thought. It incorporates acceptance of a version of radical ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty (the assumption that however much one maintains faith, there may not actually be an other to reciprocate the attempt to build the bond the poet desires), but Phillips’ repeated return to the attempt, the continuous writing of more verse, evinces a faith that the certainties disallowed by postmodern thinking could potentially exist, however beyond the scope of human

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26 Phillips’ writings have been rather oblique about the nature of his spiritual engagement. In the essay “As For a Poetry of Devotion,” published in *Religion and Literature*, Phillips claims that he is “hardly a religious person, let alone a religious poet.” (“As for a Poetry of Devotion,” 140). And yet, the essay remains attuned to what Phillips calls the human desire to believe which doesn’t have to “be confused with being religious.” (“As For a Poetry of Devotion, 140-141). “Poetry, Consciousness, Gift,” Phillips’ essay on T.S. Eliot’s work, shows a similar attunement to spirituality and belief. In that essay the poet remarks that religion is not a drug, but something that can “make the world all the more visible for its being thrown into the light of what may or may not exist beyond it.” (*Coin of the Realm*, 90)
knowledge they might be. This faith is the strongest indication in Phillips’ work of the negotiation between modern and postmodern practice he shares with the other poets treated in this study.

In this chapter I’ll begin by examining several poems from the poet’s first volume *In the Blood* (1992) in order to establish his initial utilization of the postmodern poetic understanding of the linguistic and mental unknowability of the world as a method for decreasing the unbearable external pressures placed on the self to meet repressive, pre-established social expectations. After doing this, I will examine two significant poems from Phillips’ second volume, poems which call into question the aesthetic solutions of the previous poems. Following this, I will present chronological readings of several poems from throughout the poet’s career in order to illuminate the ways Phillips has wrestled consistently with the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemmas which he has inherited, developing works which resist the extremes of postmodern assumptions about the indeterminacy of knowledge, language and subject while conceding that such indeterminacies are unavoidable. In particular, these works will focus on the ways the poet has attempted to incorporate the other of the reader as a means of thinking through the ramifications of that relationship. Finally, I will end with an examination of the poet’s two most recent volumes, *Speak Low* (2009) and *Double Shadow* (2011). They signal a modification of the postmodern poetic acceptance of radical flux as a version of faith which admits the impossibility of knowledge for the self while hinting at the possibility of knowledge for an other outside of personal experience.

The poems from *In the Blood*, Phillips’ 1992 first volume, express a deep ambivalence towards the meanings which accrue to the self due to the self’s actions, and
generally end by finding comfort or shelter in the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective fluidities embraced by postmodern poets. On the one hand, the poet generally uses language and lyric form to attempt to make the self and its activities knowable to itself. On the other, intense pressures (internal, external, or internalized) push against such self-knowledge, threatening judgment, punishment, or constraint. The result of such pressure is a tendency for Phillips to take shelter in the stance of accepting his inability to know the external world, or the self, through language. The poet adopts the postmodern idea that if language is a faulty container for socially constructed epistemological categories, then those categories can be undone through exploitation of linguistic breakdown. And yet, the ambivalence of the poems also signals a growing sense that such a stance is not sufficient for the work the poet wants to do.

The tension in most of these early poems comes from Phillips’ attempts to use language and lyric form to make the self coherent, followed by a discovery or assertion that the self can’t be made coherent. This assertion develops first into a kind of relief, but then becomes a new source of frustration. The opening poem of *In the Blood*, “X,” is a case in point. The poem utilizes the letter “x” as an open signifier which both offers and resists interpretation through the plurality of meanings it can hold. At the beginning, x is the image of crossed silverware on a plate, which is transformed into the “stitch of beginners” (cross-stitch that marks the preliminary attempts at sewing, bringing material together into recognizable pattern). X then becomes the criss-cross merging of newlyweds, the unknown quantity (as in a mathematical formula), an unknown quantity in terms of any other body open for erotic exchange, and ultimately a particular body, this as the poem shifts into second person. The poem cycles through different x’s and crosses
or crossings to end with the speaker describing the laying of his head on another person
“where/ your ass begins its half-shy, half-weary dividing, where I// sometimes lay my
head/ like a flower, and// think I mean something/ by it.” (In the Blood, 3-4) At this point
in the poem, at the moment of the most intimate physical contact, the greatest gap in
meaning opens up as the speaker evinces his greatest ambivalence either about his actions
or about the person he’s with. The end of the poem, which employs a purposeful line
break, gives one more example of what x may be: “X is all I keep// meaning to cross
out.” (In the Blood, 4) On the one hand, the lines signify ambivalence about the desire to
hang on to the things that x can, or does, signify. In this way, x retains its ambiguity as a
purposefully forever-fluctuating signifier, simultaneously signaling everything and
nothing, figure and blank. On the other, it signals the way that even a blank signifier can
be something, both what needs to be crossed out and what can’t be, the sign of erasure
and the unerasable sign. The unstated or unadmitted (because hidden behind the
purposeful nothingness of the signifier) persists beyond attempts at erasure, apparently to
the pleasure and pain of the speaker, all of which brings to mind a final unstated figure
for which x can stand, a scar. X as scar signals that something was there, that experience
did happen, though the meaning of that experience may be beyond telling, may change
with the telling, or may be best untold. In this poem, the fluctuations of language are
something of a blessing because they allow for the speaker both to say and not say what
he feels the need to confess and what he feels he can’t. In this sense, language, though
fluid, is definitive, inescapable; it puts pressure on the speaker to make a definitive,
knowable meaning out of experience, and his resistance to doing so gives the poem its
drama.
This resistance resurfaces in “Passing,” which recounts its speaker’s ambivalence when encountering a “Famous Black Poet.” Inevitably, race will be read categorically, a situation which the speaker recounts and replicates, particularly as he names, and doesn’t name, the poet he encounters, a poet signified mainly by his race and fame, another version of the x which both proved sufficient and discomforting to the speaker of the previous poem.27 In opposition to the Famous Black Poet’s state of recognizable race, the speaker describes his own “passing” which signals an unrecognizably, unknowable situation in the poem, a circumstance where one is both self and other. The speaker resists the inevitability of racialized categories, declaring that the racialized subject matter of the poet’s poems “is something I cannot use/ in my business.” (In the Blood, 5) And yet, the resistance signals the way racialized thought has invaded the speaker’s categories, has divided him between one way of seeing himself and another. The speaker finds himself in the quandary of ambivalence towards his own position. By the end, he has a revelation of “the lung of the Famous Black Poet/ saying nothing I want to understand.” (In the Blood, 6) But the desire not to understand is not the same as not understanding; in fact, the desire signals that the speaker does indeed understand the things said by the Famous Black Poet, and that he can’t escape the racial categories, or even the cultural upbringing, with which he’s been involved. The poem enacts this doubleness, first declaring that the subject matter of African-American cultural experience is not something the speaker wants in his poems, and then using that material

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27 Phillips often comments in essays and interviews on the ways he thinks race is inevitably a part of the self’s experience, and as such poetry reflects that experience. However, he is resistant to limitations imposed on poems by readings of poems which reduce them to racial context alone. “Boon and Burden: Identity in Contemporary American Poetry” is a case in point, as it considers the ways readings of group identity can curtail the meaning of a poem and limit the audience for it. In the same essay Phillips also shows analogous thinking to the ways gender and sexuality are inevitably aspects of the self which inform the poem, but which don’t ultimately reduce the poem to a specific reading.
to talk about the very rejection of it. The rejection isn’t a total rejection; the poem belongs to a tradition of African-American writing, even though it recognizes its difference from that tradition. The being and not being racialized in this case is similar to the ways that a pressure to name a situation, to enter experience into a state of discourse for the sake of knowability, is resisted in “X.”

“Leda, After the Swan” stages a similar play with the parameters of the given and the experiences within that given which resist categorization. Presumably spoken from the viewpoint of Leda, the poem describes the rape by swan as both familiar and defamiliarized, admitting that “[p]erhaps…” she “recognized/ something more/ than swan” in the actions of the disguised Zeus which seem both swanlike and exaggerated. (In the Blood, 27) The “perhaps” signals how the experience, though set within mythic parameters, remains fuzzy, as does the lack of definition of Zeus as he is transformed into “this barely defined/ shoulder, whose feathers/ came away in my hands…” (In the Blood, 27) The details of the scene blur, as the crows around become “neither/ black nor blue.” (In the Blood, 27) The final summation renders the whole event and the whole of experience into the nondescript catchall “everything,” as afterwards “everything, I/ remember, began/ happening more quickly.” (In the Blood, 27) And then the poem, somewhat abruptly, stops. As a retelling of myth, this poem takes the parameters of myth and then defies much of mythic experience. The oft-told story of Zeus’ rape of Leda becomes, in the poetic re-telling, a blurry and indistinct experience, lacking in physical detail, poised only in the “perhaps” of uncertainty. And yet, that “perhaps” seems

28 In a 1998 interview with Charles H. Rowell in Callaloo Phillips comments on this poem noting that the “Famous Black Poet in [“Passing”] is outlining a black experience that is his, but which he believes the rest of us should also acknowledge as ours.” (“An Interview with Carl Phillips,” 204) Phillips highlights his resistance to this kind of reduction, noting that these experiences are not his and aesthetic expectations that they should be make the poem exclusive to a particular audience.
Phillips’ way of introducing new material into the staid myth, of making the mythic current by focusing on a late 20\textsuperscript{th}/early 21\textsuperscript{st} century feeling of experiential blur in the face of trauma, rather than the definitive narrative usually offered in contemplation of the mythic as poetic material. And where Yeats, for instance, had worked the mythic material to speak broadly, and in the third person, of the large-scale revolutionary cultural events of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Ireland, utilizing the myth and its outcomes to contain those events, Phillips writes in the first person of the personal disorientation of traumatic event. As with Graham’s and Bidart’s reworking of mythic material, Phillips’ mythic matter doesn’t contain, rather it serves as a failed container for unknowable experience which the poet wants to use to resist knowing.\textsuperscript{29} And yet, Phillips differs from the others in that for him the mythic doesn’t create parameters, but expresses a sense that parameters can’t exist; the sensation, for Phillips, is beyond absolute expression or knowability.

In these earlier poems, crisis comes from a sense of social or cultural overdetermination, an external pressure to come up with the language to describe and codify an experience or a self. The twists of language and categories leave these descriptions incomplete, and point back to the very pressures for making meaning that a situation can place on a racialized, sexualized, gendered self. The poet both says and doesn’t say what the meaning of a situation is, letting ambiguity serve as a temporary solution for the poetic pressure to say when the self is reticent to utter. Immediately afterward, though, this solution becomes problematic. The poems of \textit{Cortege} (1995), Phillips’ second volume, move from ambivalence to the expression of a more extreme frustration with ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty. In

\textsuperscript{29} Phillips has signaled this attunement to the mutability of myth in his essay “Myth and Fable: Their Place in Poetry” where he acknowledges the temporarily stabilizing parameters of myth which can mutate over time through their reuse through poetic re-creation.
particular, the title poem addresses the ways acceptance of, or immersion within, radical epistemological, subjective, or linguistic uncertainty reaches a limit when considering such “extreme” subjects of death and mourning.

“Cortege” attempts to find meaning within the ritual of tragedy. The poem uses the tragic method of chorus and response to respond to the radical change in meaning resulting from the loss of a loved one. Death itself is ultimately voiceless, an unknown and unknowable situation for which words can’t be accurately conjured, a literal and extreme example of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty. Our ability to know is frustrated by final ends, and the loss, sudden or otherwise, of a loved one puts the self into the position of having to move from one state into another. Language falters in the face of death, lacking the ability to describe with any complete accuracy the state of the self after death, and yet is put into the position of having to redefine the new life of the living, the life of loss. In this position language can find another dead end; what can a person really say when loss is so profound that words don’t feel fit to encompass the experience of grief? Classical tragedy, involved with transition and its often awful consequences, offers the poet a space for ruminating on the loss engendered by death, giving pre-established form to language and to mourning, graciously providing a frame for the words which can seem as if they can’t do the work of expressing the grief a person may feel. Tragedy functions in the poem as a rite which helps mold raw emotion into a steady form and which allows for the articulation of the

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30 Phillips’ note to his translation of Sophocles’ Philoctetes comments on the inexpressibility of pain within tragedy. Noting that regularized exclamations of pain sound reductive when performed, the poet doesn’t translate those exclamations directly but gives stage directions for the actors to use their discretion in the expression. Such a choice shows attunement to the limitations of language adequately to express within the tragic moment. It’s such inadequacy that the form of “Cortege” hopes to mitigate, in the inverse of the decision not to translate Philoctetes’ ejaculations of suffering.
actually or seemingly inarticulable. Here Phillips is not fleeing the parameters of an overdetermining situation, in this instance the overdetermination of historical literary form, but using those parameters to shape the shapelessness of emotional pain.

The prologue to “Cortege” opens the sequence with a rumination on the possible dream of the sea, establishing a loose binary between the ever-fluctuating, liquid material of the ocean and a specific version of it in which the ocean, according to the poem, dreams, the “usual” dream “Of the Flesh.” (Cortege, 21) This metaphorization suggests the dream of an inanimate, though animated, object for a stable physical self, a self that is ultimately impossible. On the heels of this desire for a physical, sensory, perhaps sensual, self, Phillips shifts to consider “[t]he letter written in the dream,” an instance of language used to communicate from one party to another, but carrying with it the suggestion, with another sense of letter, that language itself is also at issue. (Cortege, 21) Immediately we’re introduced to a sense of loss; the prologue takes place in the conditional, carrying with it the connotation that something is not possible. And yet, the conditional is also a tense that encapsulates the terms of possibility, opening up imaginative space for thinking of situations other than the one the self experiences at the moment. It’s a tense that exists between two worlds, that of what is, with its attendant
text

loss, and that of what isn’t, which gives space for dreaming.31 Language within this space is left unstable: “The letter written in the dream would go/ something like: Forgive me – love, Blue.” (Cortege, 21) Language falters here and can’t conjure the exact words that would be spoken in dreams. And yet, the parameters can give an approximation, in

31 James Longenbach sees something similar in Phillips’ work in his essay “Consequences of Conjunction.” The critic notes the poet’s use of the conjunction “or” in the poem “Stagger” as an instance in which space is opened between what is and the variety of possibilities for what could be.
this case an approximation of the desire, the loss, the guilt, and the regret experienced by
the speaker.

This tendency to approximate recurs throughout the poems at different points as
Phillips conjures images of an afterlife where the dead loved one now resides. And yet
the conjuring retains a self-consciousness that signals doubt on the part of the poet about
his ability to perform the task of imagining life after death. Realistically, he can’t do this,
but the urge persists to try to do so because he is more animated than numbed by grief, an
urge underscored by the persistent way the chorus compels the speaker to speak, or tell:
“Say the sound of his body./ His body was quiet./ Say again – quiet?/ He was sleeping./
You are sure of this? Sleeping?/ Inside it, yes. Inside it.” (Cortege, 22) The speaker,
under compulsion, wants to proclaim knowledge of a state he can’t know, of an “inside”
of the body in which the other person was sleeping, but the knowledge of such a state is
available only through the language of the other party, which is unavailable if the other
party can’t communicate. The chorus, by its insistence on accuracy, expresses doubt
about the certainty of the primary speaker’s statements, and by the poem’s end the
speaker’s insistence seems an attempt to elude the truth of our limited abilities to know
others through the mediating function of words. This inability, however, eventually takes
on another valence; as we know from the title of the poem that this is a work of
mourning, and the suggestion weighs heavy that the “sleeper” is not a person sleeping,
but the body of a dead loved one. What the speaker can know of the dead, then, is
extraordinarily limited. Death presents the limit of language and the imagination because
our empirical experience of the thing, necessarily, is nonexistent. Added to this is the
skepticism that language, particularly aesthetic language, can accurately honor the
experience of grief. The rest of the poem is a working through of this situation, an attempt to tell what can’t be told, either because the telling is inaccurate, unreliable, or because the admission will bring the speaker to the reality of loss.

The poem fluctuates between choral utterance, with its attempts to glean information and put the speaker in the place of saying (perhaps confessing) his experience, and imaginative renderings of the state of the dead loved one. In “Pavilion” the loved one is not named, but is spoken of as “One,” universalizing the particular as if attempting to universalize the experience of death. This experience is rendered as a form of aestheticized speech:

One is for now certain he is one of those poems that stop only; they do not end.

One says without actually saying it
*I am sometimes a book of such poems,*
*I am in other times a flower and lovely*

*pressed like so among them, but always they forget me.*
*I miss my name.*

*Cortege,* 23

The dead self is rendered metaphorically, becoming a poem, but one whose action is curtailed; furthermore, this is a place in which speech is not entirely operative, as the words of the dead are said and not said. The dead can’t communicate, neither can they be differentiated, as the one word which would signify the particular dead isn’t used, and apparently is lost. The form of communication this section looks for by the end is that of a messenger who will come, but his “message is a flower,” a means of expression by way of carrying a physical object. (*Cortege,* 23) What is the meaning of a flower? This moment is equivocal, as the flower inevitably carries meaning with it, yet the meaning of
that meaning is undeterminable as the flower goes unnamed. At least, we don’t have
even information as readers to determine it. Is the flower a better or worse form of
expression than language? Again, we can’t interpret what seems to demand to be
interpreted. “Interior” returns to the impossibilities of expressing something
inexpressible. The dead loved one is now rendered, in an echo of Hamlet, as “somebody
[who] knocks/ and knocks at a new/ country, of which// nothing is understood…”

(Cortege, 25) As he bends to pick a flower by the side of the road, a flower now rendered
as possibly dangerous, “it is as if/ he knows something to tell it.” (Cortege, 26) Speech
again is rendered inoperable, as speaking to a flower, speaking to an inanimate object, is
a moment of attempted literal communication with nature where the natural world can’t
communicate back. And yet, the gesture remains gesture, as all of this is rendered as
simile, “as if” the knowledge exists in this unspeaking, unspeakable land. The poem
concludes by imagining a funeral envoi of the many dead, but again, this final action is
equivocal. The beginning of the poem describes each boat as bearing “each/ a name I
didn’t know and then, recalling, did.” (Cortege, 28) Naming occurs as memory makes
available the words for the lost ones. And yet, despite the assignment of proper names to
two of the boats, the second person to whom the speaker speaks remains nameless. The
name is either withheld because the grief is too strong, or the speaker is attempting to
communicate with the dead, an action parallel to the communication with the flower.
The only communication that can take place is imaginative or imaginary, and yet the
poem seems capable of making this leap because it is a poem. The imaginative activity
of the creation of verse, particularly in the advertised formal way of utilizing tragic
funeral rites, allows this kind of expression of grief because the work is admittedly a
work of art. We can imagine all we want within the frame of a poem. But another turn exists: if the poem is content to rest in imaginative communication as far as speaking to or beyond the grave goes, then it must admit that its own function of speaking beyond the moment of the artist is also equivocal. The funeral rite is internalized, so the speaker/poet is questioning himself. Even the imagination of the dead is a projection from the mind of the poet, and if the poem must maintain its faith in its ability to communicate beyond the realm of the living, then it similarly has to maintain some kind of faith in its ability to speak outside of the head of the poet and to an outside audience. For this reason the very casting of the poem as a series of tragic funeral rites is in itself equivocal; it makes a gesture towards socialization, but a gesture that relies on readers for its completion. For all this, “Envoi”’s attempt to speak to the dead speaks also to the persistent doubt and hope within the poem for the patterning power of aesthetic language. The presence of the poem ultimately validates faith in the work itself in its attempt, however contingent or impossible, to bridge the gap between knowable state and unknowable state as well as that between private grief and the healing act of public mourning.

Other poems in Cortege evidence a similar burgeoning faith in the act of the poem or aesthetic moment to serve as an attempt at bridging the gap between alienated selves and the external world through an engagement with language. “Youth With Satyr, Both Resting” is an exemplary case. The poem continues Phillips’ fascination with trying to square language and experience by exploring the ways that language and experience don’t quite match up. The poem begins with the observation that “[t]here are certain words – ecstasy, abandon, surrender – we can wait all our lives,/ sometimes/ not so
much to use/ as to use correctly…” (Cortege, 31) Language waits for the opportunity to find a fit to experience, to find a moment where the expectation for moments of sensory pleasure can accurately be described and known by the language expected to be able to express such a thing. This is the situation that Phillips explored in his earlier poetry, finding relief in the ways that language fails to fit and knowing gets thrown off. Here, though, stimulated by pleasure instead of guilt or anxiety, the failure of words to match experience results in frustration, and then becomes transformed into guilt or anxiety.

Then the moment at last comes,
the right scene but more impossibly different than any we’d earlier imagined,
and we stumble, catching

instead at nouns like desire, that
could as easily be verbs,
unstable adjectives like rapt or unseemly.

Cortege, 31

Experience leaves the speaker grasping for language, and the end result is to see the moment not only as “ecstasy,” but as simultaneously “unseemly,” the latter word signaling knowledge of the ways social acculturation influences sensory knowledge through judgment. The speaker wants to turn to indications of the external world as a method for maneuvering out of this linguistic conundrum, a conundrum described by the difficulties of coordinating mind and body, language and knowability, internal world and external: “We find that for once nothing at hand/ serves quite as well as the finger doing/ what it does, pointing…” (Cortege, 31) Gesture would appear to substitute for language, but the mind still seeks to interpret the meaning of gesture and the meaning of the objects at which the finger points, hence the projection of longing onto the nearly empty wine glasses that appear to be the object of the pointing finger.
The poem here turns to sensual physicality in an effort to understand the moment more clearly, and it briefly comes to some sort of alignment between word and scene.

[O]r the boy’s hand, fallen in such a way as to just miss touching the predictably stiff phallus – no other word here will do – of the satyr…

_Cortège_, 31

Some word is absolutely appropriate, as “no/ other word here will do,” but the poem remains ambiguous, since the exact word that makes the exact fit is not explicitly indicated, despite the poem’s insistence on explicit accuracy. We might presume that “phallus” is the word, due to its proximity to the self-interruption and, while there are plenty of other terms for that appendage, this particular term seems to fit best for the speaker in this instance among the variety of options. And yet, both “predictably” and “stiff,” as descriptive terms, could serve equally wee as the word the speaker sees as inevitable.

The poem moves from this linguistic confusion to another attempt at signification. The boy’s mouth is an “O” which “the satyr’s beard… seems most like wanting to curl into,” a figure repeated in the twisting vines above the two. (Cortège, 31-32) The physical figure of the alphabet would seem to give coherence to the separation between the human and natural world, but that situation is compromised by two factors within the poem. The first is the title’s signal that the poem describes an artwork. The poem is aware of itself as a poem, something constructed and unavailable in a “natural” space outside of the poem, a suggestion reiterated in the observation that the twisting of the grapes is “too artificial[1], perhaps.” (Cortège, 32) Furthermore, even in this space of idealized construction ambiguity reigns. The final lines, rather than offering a solution to
the dilemma figured at the beginning of the poem, claim that the hanging grapes which
had offered some more than linguistic connection between selves and the external world,
are “strung above and,/ to either side of the two sleepers,/ in the manner of any number of
unresolvable// themes, let dangle.” (Cortege, 32)

The poem resolves in a non-resolution affirming that, though we may grasp after
words to fit a situation, especially in a situation of intenest experience, language is not
up to the task of accurately reporting the sensation. And yet, language is involved in the
experience as the repeated patterning of the “O” gives shape to the experience within the
poem, making the experience recognizable, though not knowable categorically.
Language and its aesthetic use are inevitably intertwined here with sensory (and sensual)
experience. While the poem recognizes that language can’t resolve in an absolute way
the split between the self and an unknowable world, it also recognizes that language is
not a category outside of the world, but already interwoven into our experience of the
world. Language is fallible, but not absolutely disconnected from experience; in a similar
way our knowledge is fallible, though not absolutely severed from the world. Rather, the
poem posits all of these things as intertwined categories which, while unresolvable in an
absolute way, can provide pattern through the sensual/aesthetic experience, which
experience makes selves and the external world recognizable and manageable.

The poems from Cortege I’ve discussed represent the beginning of an unfolding
which takes place across Phillips’ career. From his second volume on the poet’s works
express a very similar stance in regards to the issue of the separation of the self from the
world and others. Again and again Phillips demonstrates a faith in the potential of the
aesthetic act to create an empathetic bond between self and other or develop patterns for
recognizing the external world while also recognizing that such faith requires a leap. In many instances the genre of the lyric ultimately frustrates attempts to speak beyond the self, and yet the poet still attempts to develop a relationship between self and other which becomes structured and fluid enough to do the ethical work the poet thinks the poem can do. What follows will be a series of readings of poems from across Phillips’ career to establish his stance towards an inherited ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis. These readings will culminate in an examination of his most recent two volumes and the ways they suggest the development of this dilemma into a spiritual crisis which corresponds with the existential crisis and of a response to both.

Several poems from Phillips’ 1998 volume *From the Devotions* address the distance between self and other, writer and reader, through attempts to apostrophize the other within the poem. In most cases, the end result is equivocal as the person addressed appears to be a very specific “you” involved in a specific memory or activity. The specificity reinforces a sense of lyric enclosure, as it does in the poems of Graham’s *Sea Change*, and the attempt to incorporate the other into the poem is ultimately frustrated. However, such attempts begin to suggest the ways that Phillips, more and more throughout his career, will read the relationship between reader and writer as one that shares similar parameters with those of a romantic partner. “No Kingdom,” a major case in point, is spoken by one romantic partner to another as the speaker walks outside alone to be naked in the rain and notices a glass his partner has left on the porch. The speaker creates a set of comparisons to the glass’s filling up with water.

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[T]he way disease does
the body, the way desire
can, or how God
is said to,
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slowly the rain fills the glass.

*From the Devotions, 18-19*

The triple comparison creates an ambiguity about how to read the scene, as the filling can be either life threatening, pleasurable, spiritual, or even some combination thereof. This ambiguity extends to the final action of the poem, as the speaker empties the glass.

Never mind
that no kingdom was ever won

by small gestures:
I’m tipping the rainwater out.
The glass I’ll put

here, where you’ll find it.

*From the Devotions, 19*

Is the final gesture one of kindness, preserving the glass so it doesn’t get broken and allowing the other party to find it again? Is it one of recrimination, moving the glass and showing that the glass was moved as a chastising gesture? Is the glass placed back in the same place, eliminating the evidence of the speaker’s having moved it? Or is the glass placed elsewhere, showing the hand of the speaker in the movement? The final gesture also calls attention to the poetic act itself, as the “here” in the poem is also the “here” of the poem; the gesture of placing the glass “here” is the gesture of writing the poem, attempting to move beyond the self-containment of the lyric form and out to engage the other. And yet, two things frustrate the completion of this gesture. The first is the ambiguity of the gesture itself. The second is the specificity of the other. Descriptions of the particular actions of the other have the effect of enclosing the other within the poem, controlling it rather than accepting its fluidities. The genre reasserts itself and though the ambiguity of the gesture provokes interpretation on the part of the other, such
interpretation is bounded by the specific realm of experience ascribed to the specific other in the poem.

“The Kill” from Pastoral (2000) effects something very similar, describing an act of sexual intercourse between the speaker and a partner and the ways the speaker thinks through the meaning of the act. Throughout, sex is an act of submission on the part of the speaker, as the poem itself is a memory of “[t]he last time I gave my body up,/ to you…,” and the physical act is quickly complicated by the mind’s action of interpretation and contemplation of what both bodies are made of and how fragile such stuff ultimately is. (Pastoral, 73) The poem spools out as the speaker meditates on the meaning of loss, seemingly to the point that thought overtakes physical sensation, as the conclusion of the meditation states “By then, you/ were upon me, and then/ in me….,” (Pastoral, 73) This thinking away occurs again, nearly immediately, as the poem turns to a flurry of images and thoughts which are suggestive of the physical acts taking place, but metaphorized to the point that they suggest the mind grasping to understand the meaning of intimacy between self and other, the sole mental activity disconnecting the speaker from the other and his own physical presence.

The poem ends ambiguously, suggesting both disconnection and reconnection between the self and other and between the self and itself. Turning to look back at the other person the speaker “instead of you, saw/ the soul-at-labor-to-break-its-bonds/ that you’d become.” (Pastoral, 74) The other party seems equally involved in a solipsistic moment, and the final figuration of the poem recasts the relationship as a form of hunting:

I tensed
my bow:
one animal at attack,
the other – the other one
suffering, and love would
out all suffering –

Pastoral, 74

The ambiguity of the ending comes from the lack of clarity about how to read the metaphor. Is the speaker on the attack with the other suffering, or is the other on the attack with the speaker suffering? Both readings appear accurate, as the speaker is suffering (in a way) in the act of physical submission while the other appears to suffer in the act of spiritual crisis. The power relationship is complicated by the end of the poem as the submissive party is also powerful in producing the spiritual crisis on the part of the other. Furthermore, this complicated relationship suggests more than physical intimacy. As with Graham’s work in Swarm Phillips presents sexual activity as a metaphor for aesthetic activity, with the second person serving to invite the reader’s participation in the poem. The other in the poem becomes the other of the reader who enters into the work to complete the action of the poem through reading, and in reading engages in the power relationship enacted in the poem. The poet submits to readership, to the actions of the other in the finding of meaning in linguistic/aesthetic activity, while the reader submits to the specificities of the moment dictated by the poet. Phillips reads this action as a paradoxical act of love which makes suffering known, that is, it makes the self available to itself, however painfully, through the aesthetic work. And yet, the poem itself is ultimately curtailed by the enclosures of the lyric genre. As with the previous poem, the tentative attempt to reach beyond the lyric self through incorporation of the other reaches a limit in the specificity of action and memory the poet describes, producing a boundary which may prove insurmountable to the other’s reading of the work.
“Revision” from *The Tether* (2001) revisits this dilemma, this time casting it directly in terms of the self’s attempts to know itself through the act of linguistic construction. Here, though, the reader/other is now a more integral component in the self-construction. The poem reads the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemma as a romantic relationship apparently at a crux between splintering and re-establishment, beginning with the speaker expressing a romantic and existential dilemma which carries an epistemological and linguistic valence:

Which is worse – not being myself, for long hours, able to account for my own absence; or not having been, by anyone, asked to – I can’t say.

*The Tether, 79*

The dilemma is both romantic and existential, as not being able to account for absence signals infidelity as well as a state of non-being, drawing from the deconstructive use of the term “absence” to signal the lost presence behind the text. Furthermore, linguistic uncertainty accompanies the existential uncertainty; the speaker must account for absence, linguistically describe the events which caused such a thing, and can’t say whether having to do so is worse than not having to. This situation is compared to the attempts of the mind to read the mind’s state into the natural world, attempts which ultimately end in failure. The mind, whose

instinct is to resist any namelessness, calls all of it – leaves, leaves, and the wind’s force – *trust*, at first, then *disregard*
until, suspecting the truer name is
neither of these, it
must stop naming.

_The Tether, 79_

The uncertainties end in an impasse; naming can’t make the world coherent at this point,
and the self shuttles back to its own solipsism, a solipsism which hints at an irreversible
rupture between two parties.

The poem then turns to compare its situation to the fate of the gods of antiquity
who fade from memory and recognition as time moves on and beliefs change, admitting
that the ways we see the world, the ways we answer to the demands of the other in a
relationship, even the role we may possess in a relationship, changes over time. The
poem gets to the brink of separation, but makes an attempt at constructing another
version of the possible outcome of the relationship.

If mistake, possibly,

yet mistake this
afternoon seems less

a river than a barely contained in
spite of everything

belief: there’s another ending.
In this one, I recognize you –

and the recognizing has the effect of
slowing down that

part of me that would
walk past, or as if away toward

another ending – You

speak first. And I’ll answer.

_The Tether, 80-81_
The speaker makes a leap of faith into the potential of mutual recognition and communication, all of which is cast in self-conscious aesthetic terms as the poem announces its own end. The self-conscious crafting of the aesthetic and linguistic moment, based on faith in the response and recognition of the other, crafts a bridge where both can begin to communicate. Furthermore, this communication is much more open-ended than the versions of incorporating the other in earlier poems were, putting the second person into the role of linguistic initiation. Though obviously the artwork was first crafted by the poet, the poem recognizes the activity of the other in balancing the relationship. This poem marks a moment in Phillips’ work where the poet begins more and more to accept the otherness of the other and works more intently to recognize how intractable that otherness can be. And yet, the poet still evinces a consistent, though contingent, faith in the artwork’s ability to bridge the distance between internal self and outside world.

“As a Blow, From the West” from *Rock Harbor* (2002) echoes “Revision’s” stance, reiterating its themes of linguistic, personal, and relational instability, this time casting the situation within the knowing yet unknowing state of aestheticized dream. The poem begins with a series of evocative names for the moon, moving from the more or less actual (“blue,” “harvest”) to the fabricated (“don’t touch me,” “do”) then shifts to a description of the events in a dream, events that occupy most of the poem. Agency appears in the resistance to agency; the speaker loses identity and becomes “one among many of no distinction,” who themselves appear to share similarities with a flock of migratory birds who refuse migration. (*Rock Harbor*, 15) The comparison breaks down, though, as the speaker thinks and rethinks the actions of birds, recognizing that birds,
acting on instinct, can’t make the choice of refusal. The natural world resists figuration here, as the differences between human and animal experience present an unbridgeable gap; the speaker exposes this gap again when describing the flowers that grow on the side of the volcano that have proliferated to the point that they resist nomenclature.

Following the frustrated naming, the speaker shifts to apostrophe, addressing an unknown “you” who also appeared in the dream, and who, in a circumstance unstated in the poem but inferrable from it, poses a threat in the dream; the dream place seems “safe, which is not to say/ you weren’t in it.” (Rock Harbor, 16) The second person addressed is a troubling personage, disrupting the linguistic event. Where the poem is composed of language, the “you” is “not so much/ a man of few words” as “one who… chooses instead/ of words his body/ as the canvas across which to/ wordlessly broadcast his coming…” (Rock Harbor, 16-17) The opposition here between an external, intruding, physical presence and a self-contained, lyrical, linguistic one begins to suggest a use of the second person in concert with its employment by Graham and Bidart. The intruding other is both the friend (or partner) in the poem and the reader, the physical, material other outside of the lyrical space encountering and now read into that space.

The poem suggests, though it never explicitly states, the presence of a broken bond between the “I” and the “you,” noting that “the body” of the second person is “a wordless and stalled/ avalanche that, since forgivable…./ I would forgive…” (Rock Harbor, 18) Within the dream, and its shifting images and situations, repair of the broken bond between self and other becomes possible, suggesting that the poem itself acts as the bridge between the severed selves of the poet and the reader through the actions of the lyric “I.” The ending of the poem reiterates this claim. The poem turns to italics,
breaking the dream description and declaring that “to leave, or/ try to – and have
drowned// trying - becomes refrain,/ the one answer each time/ to whatever question...”

(Rock Harbor, 19) The poem concludes with a series of questions, with the final one readdressing the intrusive second person.

> [H]ow is it possible that it cannot be enough to have given/
up to you now the dream as – for a time, remember – I did give
my truest self? why won’t you take it – if a gift, if yours?

_Rock Harbor, 19_

The question reiterates the gap between self and other by calling attention to the lyric’s historic rhetorical claim for itself as the container for the subjectivity of the poet, the “truest self” of the poem (equated with the aestheticized dream), and then complicating that claim by attempting to speak outside of the first person. The poem doesn’t come to conclusion, rather it opens a space for completion by the reader. This form of completion through incompletion echoes the poem’s earlier attempt at forgiveness, only here the power structure is reversed. Where earlier the speaker was the more powerful party, forgiving rather than asking forgiveness, here he is submissive to the action of the other, offering the self, the dream, the aesthetic moment, and the poem as a gift to be accepted, or not, by the other. The poem recognizes the limits of poetic activity; the self attempts to use language to coordinate itself and its dealing with the world, but such attempts reach a limit when they encounter the other who hears or reads. The poem solves the aesthetic dilemma by turning to the reader to complete the establishment of the emotional bond by accepting the poem and the aesthetic experience it offers. The poem does not produce the moment of mutually engaged presence that Graham, at her most idealistic, suggests can occur. Nor does it establish the historical parameters for the self which
Bidart sees as his own aesthetic task. Phillips’ poem does incorporate aspects of both
techniques, though, as it establishes a sense of the self in relation to another self,
coordinating both through the use of the poem as a stabilizing parameter for engagement.
The poem establishes a relationship between poet and reader/other that incorporates the
other and invites the other into the experience without attempting to control or dominate
him. The engagement between self and other occurs within the parameters of the
reader/writer relationship which is fluid, and yet still contains parameters, neither
altogether closed nor altogether opened.

“Late Apollo,” from *The Rest of Love* (2004), stages a similar attempt to work
through the linguistic and existential issues of the previous poem. It begins by describing
“two boys, throwing a ball between them” under a streetlamp. (*The Rest of Love*, 16) This
scene, observed by the speaker, triggers a set of memories which themselves trigger a
crisis in knowledge and in the use of language as a way of addressing that crisis. From
the beginning, silence is a component of the dilemma:

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At last the snow lies
unoracular,
unstepped across.
If I could speak, I’d speak
to no one, now.
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*The Rest of Love*, 16

The speaker (or non-speaker) shares with the snow the state of being without
verbalization, a state which can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the unblemished
nature of the snow can suggest that the speaker finds in himself a similar sense of calm or
purity, untouched or untroubled by events which require speech; this reading looks back
to the etymological roots of the word “infancy” (without language), suggesting that,
lacking language, one has innocence instead. On the other hand, the state of being
without speech is also comparable to a looking forward to death, an absolute state of speechlessness. The speaker appears poised on the cusp of both a mental birth and a mental death, and yet the phrasing, specifically concerning speech, suggests that the speaker is not absolutely without language, but rather without the ability directly to engage the other in language, as the presence of the poem refutes the idea that language is absolutely lost to the speaker.

This point in the poem makes a metapoetic turn, drawing the reader’s attention to the strange space of the poem, a space both speech and not speech, linguistic but without the direct vocal contact speech requires. It also marks the space where the reader begins to be drawn into the experience of the poet. After describing a desire to “remember the way everyone/ else does…” the speaker launches into his own memory; here, though, the recording of the memory begins in specificity, then, through the power of the literary technique of simile, quickly becomes less memory than fantasy. (*The Rest of Love*, 16)

Furthermore, the recording is rendered in the second person, drawing the reader into the experience:

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You’re in a garden,
you’ve trellised the dwarf cherry, trained it so as,
branching, to become – and cast shadow against the wall –
this fan, opening, held open, the way a map is held
in wind –

The map makes getting there
at first look easy: a prairie, then the mountains, then the sea.

*The Rest of Love*, 16
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Where earlier poems, such as “No Kingdom” had curtailed the reader’s/second person’s mutual experience of the literary moment through the specificity of the scene, here, self-conscious literary technique, which moves memory into the space of poetic fantasy,
allows the second person to engage the poem more fully through the enunciated aestheticization.

The second section of the poem continues the aestheticized fantasy, and presents a scene in which the self has merged with the other, the world, and language, producing an idealized state of completion. The poem shifts to the second person plural, declaring that “now it is as we wanted it,” merging the desires of self and other into one completed moment. (*The Rest of Love*, 17) The landscape becomes edenic, needing no tending in order to flourish, further signaling the merging of self and world, as if the speaker and reader have returned to a state in which humanity and the natural world have not suffered a rupture. The place becomes a “[c]ountry to which, increasingly, I’ve felt native…” and the state becomes comparable to waking from a dream, which then becomes comparable to a state of linguistic veracity: “a language that, all this time, we knew.// Here comes the word for mystery./ Here comes the word for true.” (*The Rest of Love*, 17) The third section continues the memory/fantasy of merging into the stillness of a perfect place, and yet the fantasy is undercut by the use of the conditional which opens and closes the section. Beginning with the observation that the scene is “[a]s if everything were in the effect, finally,” the section moves on to describe a scene which becomes more and more self-consciously aestheticized through the use of literary devices. (*The Rest of Love*, 18) The trees at shoreline are compared to the resistance of the saint to temptation, which then triggers a comparison of the scene itself to the paintings of saints which stand isolated in the crowd around them, an external reality which, in the space of the painting, “equals/ what’s forgettable.” (*The Rest of Love*, 18)
The poem moves back to the curtailed lyric space, returning to the first person; and yet, within this space the poet makes room for readerly experience through the generalization of the specificities of memory and a further aestheticization of memory itself.

The light, for as far as I can see, is that of any number of late afternoons I remember still: how the light seemed a bell; how it seemed I’d been living inside it, waiting – I’d heard all about the one clear note it gives.

The Rest of Love, 18

The afternoon could be any afternoon, allowing the reader to project into the scene the vision of any afternoon. The comparison of the light to a bell, though intellectually difficult to tease apart due to the synaesthesia involved, makes the particularities of insular memory palpable beyond the solipsistic urge. The final image of the bell serves as a final commentary on the act of the poem itself. The bell is a sound without speech, as the sound of the poem is itself a version of sound without speech, capable of engagement in the imaginative realm of aestheticization. The internal memory, which threatens to be solipsistic, can become transformed through the work of the artwork into a moment of mutual aesthetic experience. As with the opening of the section, the moment of clarity and fullness of being is conditional, presented by the poet as something which “seemed” real but which was not. And yet, the seeming appears to be sufficient, as it acknowledges the unattainable reality of merging self and other, while still validating the desire for such. The poem becomes the contingent, fantastic space where selves can merge under the aegis of the conditional aesthetic use of language.
“The Messenger” from *Riding Westward* (2006) echoes the sense that the neither/nor space of the poem, which provides language which is neither speech nor not speech, can be a place to reconfigure the self, and its relation to other selves, in the midst of rupture. It also utilizes a silent or missing bell as a metaphor for poetic activity which occurs in a linguistic space that is not spoken, and yet not quite unexpressed. Again, the poem employs the second person, including the reader in the open-ended poetic space; and, like “Late Apollo,” centers on the linguistic no man’s land of transgression that resists attempts at figuration. The poem begins in linguistic confusion, with the speaker asking “[w]hat is it you had meant to say? What had/ I said?” (*Riding Westward*, 35) Self and other are both disconnected from language as the external world first offers, then rescinds, the image of epistemological certainty; watching the snow fall, the speaker notes that it “fell to the same as usual/ transfigurational effect” which made the world seem different, an effect which is only brief as the world is transformed back to “what it/ always is again: just the world – changed,/ changeable.” (*Riding Westward*, 35) The ontological/epistemological mutability and uncertainty echoes the sense of rupture in the relationship between the two parties of the poem, figured either as a speaker/partner, or writer/reader, relationship, as the speaker attempts to characterize the nature of betrayal.

What happens, I think, is we betray ourselves first – our better selves, I’d have said once – and the others after, as if that made knowing what to call it somehow easier, meaning less unkind.

*Riding Westward*, 35

Betrayal in this figuration is not just a splitting off of self from other, but a splitting within the self. Furthermore, the split spills over into the way the self uses language to account for the world, as the specificities of the betrayal register only as “it.” The cause
of the rupture resists naming, and, in the terms of the poem, is neither easier to know nor less unkind for the other party to experience, making the experience an unassimilable source of pain for both speaker and other.

At the mid point of the poem the speaker turns to a self-reflective questioning of his motives: “Why give it a name? What makes me/ want to?” (Riding Westward, 35) The romantic rupture takes on the character of a larger epistemological rupture, as the speaker questions not only the rationale of naming, but asks what it is inside him that makes him desire to name and know. The fragmentation of the self becomes more pronounced, as the speaker’s own desires seem alien, making the self unassimilable or unknowable even to the self. The act of questioning points to a desire on the part of the speaker simply to accept the rupture as unsayable, and therefore unassimilable, a move which would align Phillips with a postmodern precursor like Ashbery. And yet, the poet isn’t satisfied by resting in this rupture; he turns instead to the image of a “bell tower near here/ I’d meant to show you.” (Riding Westward, 35) As in the previous poem, the bell functions metaphorically to represent the said/unsaid aesthetic work of the poem which can be an imaginative, yet sensorial, bridge between the self and the world as well as other selves. As the speaker asserts:

[T]here’s still a music hearable, despite the bell itself missing – lost, or stolen, though it is difficult to steal a bell so large, presumably, and a shame to lose one.

Riding Westward, 35

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32 Dan Chiasson notes this similarity between Ashbery’s and Phillips’ works in his review “End of the Line.”
The bell resembles the activity of the poem in that both produce a “music/hearable” despite the absence of the party making the music. *(Riding Westward, 35)* The aesthetic function of the poem and the bell still manage to resonate, even though generating presence has been lost. Meanwhile the gesture of showing the tower signals a faith in the ability of the shared experience to bring self and other into alignment, if not perfect harmony. The suggestion that the bell has been stolen resonates with the earlier suggestion of infidelity or betrayal, signaling that the absence behind the sound is also a figure for the rupture between the two parties. In this way, Phillips associates lack of authorial presence (in a nod to deconstruction) with a tragic self-splitting which is also a solipsistic severing of the self from the external world. The ghostly bell, then, is a tentative bridge between all of these things, emphasizing not the literal meaning of the artwork or the word, but the palpable sense of its capacity to be experienced by more than one party. The end of the poem is ultimately ambiguous, as it seems to signal an acceptance of a state of absence and rupture as well as an ironization of that acceptance. The speaker closes with a pseudo-confession.

*Wind enters and leaves*

*the tower like a thing that lives there – but nobody lives there, no one, I keep meaning to say.*

*Riding Westward, 35*

The assertion of the emptiness of the tower suggests an admission that absence and rupture are inevitable and incurable. And yet, the assertion (emphasized by italics) that these words are something the speaker keeps “meaning to say,” rather than something said, suggests that the assertion may not be accurate after all. The unrealized intention signals both dismay at the unredeemable state of rupture and hope that such a state is not
absolute, and that healing and redemption can be found. Doubt is indeed present, but so too is a faith in another condition, however tenuous; this keeps the speaker from an absolute assertion that there is nothing behind, or beyond, the poem but a solipsistic, nihilistic void.

Throughout these poems Phillips makes attempts to move beyond the enclosure of the poetic space to create a self knowable through its relationship to other selves. The self isn’t static, nor is it absolutely fluid. Rather, it moves within the parameters of relationships with others and with the world. When language is unable to make meaning through definition alone, the aesthetic use of language can begin to build a bridge between self and world or self and other. Phillips will acknowledge doubt about his position, as he does in the above poem, but the doubt is never permanent. Instead it is balanced by an ambiguity that suggests not acceptance of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective fragmentation, but a hope that coherence could or can exist in some capacity. Recently the poet’s work has been more suggestive that the concerns addressed above have taken on a spiritual dimension.

Several poems from *Speak Low* (2008) and *Double Shadow* (2011), particularly the poems of the last section of the latter volume, exhibit a concern that both doubt about and tentative faith in the linguistic engagement with the self and the world intertwines with doubt about and faith in the presence of a divine other outside the scope of the poem or even the human capacity to comprehend it. Phillips’ figuration resembles Graham’s mid-career attempts to read the reader as a “bored God.”33 Here, though, the God isn’t bored, rather God is potentially unreachable or unwilling to make the redemptive move

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the poet hopes for. Divinity becomes a larger other towards whom the poet must make a
leap of faith, adding the dimension of spiritual belief to the attempts to heal a rupture
between self and other he had earlier explored. And as earlier, the poet leaves the
relationship open between parameters, remaining uncoercive yet nonetheless hopeful of
connection, seeking validation from the other, however low may be his expectation of
empirical reciprocation.

_Speak Low_ opens with the title poem, a poem which returns to Phillips’ concern
with aesthetic attempts to connect self with world through language and recognition of
pattern, as well as to his doubts about that project. Here, though, the epistemological
dilemma concerns not just knowledge of the world, but knowledge of an experience
outside of the empirical which the poem wants to validate, and yet has no language for
confirming. The poem begins by noting that the “wind stirred,” and that “the water
beneath it stirred accordingly…” (_Speak Low_, 3) Invisible force is made visible, and
comprehensible, through its patterned effects on the water. That movement, however, is
registered as verbal ambiguity: “The wind’s pattern was its own, and the water’s also.”
(_Speak Low_, 3) The line says both that the wind’s pattern was its own pattern as well as
the water’s, and that the wind’s pattern was its own pattern as the water’s pattern was its
own pattern. Motion, in this way, is knowable and unknowable; the verbal figuration
clarifies and obfuscates. Phillips complicates this already complicated imagining by
adding the light to the figuration, noting the way that it too is interwoven through
perception into the wind and the water. Each layer of figuration interacts with the others,
blurring the qualities that separate them into their own entities; yet, each is its own entity,
existing separately, though at the same time only comprehensible to the senses through
the action of the others. The wind moves the water, the water moves the light, all things connect, yet each remains separate and has its own recognizable pattern, yet one nonetheless recognizable only in relation to others.

Then, this triple figuration begins to separate out, suggesting a fragmenting or fracture as the strands are differentiated. The poem describes the way the “water assumed also the shape/ of what contained it, while the light did not,” signaling the way that light is perceivable by sight, but not by touch, a situation which allows for projection on the part of the speaker as he proclaims that it “seemed/fugitive, a restiveness, the less-than-clear distance between/ everything we know we should do, and all the rest – all/ the rest that we do.” (Speak Low, 3) The light becomes a point of comparison for ethical activity; the water, in a similar fashion, becomes a point of comparison for the desire to know an existence beyond material existence.

Stirring, as the wind stirred it, the water
was water - was a form of clarity itself, a window we’ve
no sooner looked through than we’ve abandoned it for what
lies past that: a view, and then what comes

into view, or might,
if we watch patiently enough, steadily – so we believe, wishing
for what, by now, even we can’t put a name to, but feel certain
we’ll recognize, having done so before. It looked, didn’t it,
just like harmlessness. A small wind. Some light on water.

*Speak Low, 3*

The poem at once professes faith in and skepticism about the existence of a state of knowing surpassing “regular” states of knowing. On the one hand, this state can’t be verbalized; it resists naming and full comprehension. On the other, the speaker has experienced this state previously, and has a faith (or wish) that he can experience such a thing again. The experience of this intractable, ineffable state comes through patience, observation, and recognition; it’s also comparable to the poetic act itself, as the
aestheticization of experience involves transforming what “looked… just like harmlessness” into an experiential moment between writer and reader which involves the ability to feel an experience which exists only through linguistic transmission. (*Speak Low*, 3) The poem becomes another form of patterning, comparable to the triple figuration within the poem. Self, other, and world can’t be known individually, but only in relation to each other; furthermore, this relation can begin to present, so the poem suggests, a feeling beyond sensation, description, or knowledge. The poem never fully makes a claim for embracing the spiritually transcendent; indeed, doubt is very much a part of the experience, as the speaker self-consciously presents transcendence as conditional, as something “we believe,” an admission that the experience requires a leap of faith. And yet, the poem undoubtedly sees that experience and strongly suggests that the aesthetic act itself may be able to provide what we know of a state beyond the rational.

Several other poems in the volume also suggest a potent longing for similar states beyond knowing or beyond an absolute truth that provides stability to the self and the self’s actions. These poems utilize sexual activity as a springboard for meditation on the ways physical desire echoes the desire for a state or truth beyond empirical reality, focusing on the act of submitting to the moment or to a greater force which the self appears to experience as something beyond itself. “The River in Motion and in Stillness” is a case in point. The poem opens by describing a scene in which ugliness is transformed from ugliness to beauty. Two people lay on their sides and one lifts his “ruined” face “[a]s with the satisfaction of a near-impossible task/ brought finally… to absolute/ accomplishment…” (*Speak Low*, 20) Both parties’ faces are ruined, yet in the
particularities of the light “what ordinarily gets taken for flaw/ very briefly [is made]
what it also is: a loveliness, and something// strange, original…” (*Speak Low*, 20) In the
contingent space of the right light at the right angle, mistake is revealed as beauty as well;
the time and place uncover an otherness of the other, which is found singular, yet lovely.
The poem declares that this specific time is

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when the particular blunder of
misjudgment, winging its way more forcibly toward us,
can become almost a kind of truth that, though no longer
believed in, still seems worth longing for.
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*Speak Low*, 20

The contingent time of the poem opens the door for truth, and this truth, though highly
conditional and empirically unavailable, remains enticing. Furthermore, the truth
becomes known through mistake or transgression, a fact that overwhelms the speaker.
This knowing, or knowledge, is openly denied as true, yet it still provides a sense of
validity to the speaker, however much that validity isn’t rationally endorsed. The poem
closes by seeming to offer two options in relation to the acceptance of this contingent
validity: “Some of us/ surrender the self. Some withhold it.” (*Speak Low*, 20) And yet,
this figuration is so general that the direct object of surrender is unclear. Is this a
surrender to the truth, the blunder, the time, the other person, external reality, a state
beyond empirical observation, or a combination of all of these? The poem provides no
clear answer, turning instead to an observation of the river; this suggests a completing
leap of interpretation on the reader’s part: “You can see how/ the river, ever so slightly,
turns here, just before descending.” (*Speak Low*, 20) The poem turns to the second
person, drawing the reader into the aestheticized moment and suggesting that the reader
must determine what we surrender to or withhold ourselves from, just as we must
determine which turn, left or right, the river makes as it descends. The very descent of the river suggests transgression; its downward course resembles a fall, and the poem puts the reader into the position of determining which turn to take, the turn to descent or some other way. Belief or disbelief in the truth of the poem, submission or withholding of the self, descent or ascent all appear left up to the reader’s choices, and yet the poem is not absolutely indeterminate or “open.” The choice of reading, which becomes an ethical exercise in determining right action, takes place within the parameters of the poem, and if the reader chooses to believe in absolute truth, or faith in judgments beyond empirical reality, then that choice is left open.

“Night Song” revisits the concept of submission, desire, transgression, and the use of patience in attending to a moment which suggests spiritual transcendence. The poem opens with general descriptions of the desires of the “more prismatic of the Roman/ emperors,” casting them in as conquerors over the others, both literally and sexually. (Speak Low, 27) In opposition to this the poem meditates on “those emperors of the almost-/ finished second century, who by their own example make/ a case for submission to what resists control…” (Speak Low, 27) The second set of emperors appears to serve as an example, as the poem concludes by accepting a stoic embrace of pain for the sake of another state.

Conquest and servitude; suffering, and suffering’s famous ability to bring about a patience that pleasure ultimately has little time for. I close my eyes. I remain persuadable. I give up what I can. Who’s to say what will not be useful?

Speak Low, 27
The poem draws upon both theories of tragedy and Christian theology as each stream of thought finds transcendence through suffering. Stoicism tempers the transcendence, as the outcome of suffering is patience. And yet, taken in relation with the way “Speak Low” posits patience as providing access to a state beyond the rational, the patience strongly suggests some kind of non-empirical transcendence, particularly as it is accompanied by the closing of the speaker’s eyes, the shutting off of the external world in order to achieve submission to a state beyond that world. The poem does not end in absolute faith in this state, nor in the absolute faith of transcendence, but it does have some hope as the speaker remains “persuadable.”

The final poem in the volume, “Until There’s Nothing, Just the Sea, a Sea of Leaves” echoes the stance of spiritual ambiguity taken in the previous poems, here drawing from the Romantic tradition, as well as more modern and postmodern interpretations of that tradition, using an elevated viewpoint to meditate on the relationship between the self and the external or natural world. Wordsworth and Shelley in “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” and “Mont Blanc” respectively use their place of ascension to meditate on the transcendental possibilities to be found beyond the empirical reality of the world. Stevens in “The Man at the Dump” heavily ironizes this stance, transforming the privileged perspective place of elevation to a pile of refuse, yet still finding potential for transcendence in the everyday and exotic discards that make up the hill on which the titular man stands. Lowell in “Skunk Hour,” extending Stevens’ ironizing tendency to a much darker degree, casts his vantage point as a hill overlooking a lovers’ lane.  

I draw here for the reading of “Skunk Hour” and its relationship to Stevens’ “The Man at the Dump,” as well as both poems’ relationship to the romantic tradition, from Paul Mariani’s biography of Robert Lowell.
the speaker ultimately can’t find the kind of transcendental knowledge typically offered by the tradition from which he draws; his “mind isn’t right,” and what he ultimately finds in the world around him are the brute facts of animal survival.

Phillips draws upon this history of seeking transcendence and skeptically critiquing that search, but modifies it again, ultimately allowing for a tentative faith in the connection of self with other (both human, and perhaps, divine). The poem opens by describing an ascent by the speaker and another party from a meadow to a higher elevation from which the speaker turns to “look down on the world that we’d left behind us.” (*Speak Low*, 60) The world seems simultaneously “unimportant” and “very detailed,” allowing for the speaker to observe and meditate on the scene below, noting the “blighted orchard/ whose tress could, in almost any light, make salvation look/ like nothing so much as a script that, in the end, though/ perhaps reluctantly, they’d been written out of…” (*Speak Low*, 60) The speaker appears to cast this moment in a negative light, compressing his meditation into a sarcastic final judgment: “So much/ for the world…” (*Speak Low*, 60) The depiction of salvation as a script represents a rupture in two different ways. First, the script suggests a rote catalogue of actions or rituals through which to run, a performance that ultimately ends as a mere performance unable to offer transcendence. Second, the term script suggests not just rote action, but linguistic usage, one tool the poet has to connect with an external world beyond the self, and a tool which is unavailable in the natural world beyond the human. Language, and the consciousness or self-consciousness it connotes, severs the self from the world here, and the sarcastic

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*The Last Puritan*. I draw here for the reading of “Skunk Hour” and its relationship to Stevens’ “The Man at the Dump,” as well as both poems’ relationship to the romantic tradition, from Paul Mariani’s biography of Robert Lowell *The Last Puritan*. 

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summation points darkly to the potential acceptance of solipsism as the fated state of the speaker.

The poem doesn’t rest in this observation, though; rather, it self-consciously pivots to return the speaker to the relationship between self and other which is neither completely open nor completely closed. The pivot rests in a gesture which grasps towards a transcendental feeling of wholeness created through artistic operations.

It was then he turned to me as if turning were an art, one he’d lost the mastery of, or as if some part of him, the part more wounded, were caught inextricably in the kind of dream in which one has been asked to say the difference between mercy, compassion, and pity; and, to one’s surprise, one does know the difference…

_Speak Low, 60-61_

The poem presents the gesture of turning to face another as a somewhat clumsy aesthetic attempt, and yet that attempt points, however contingently, towards reconciliation between the self and other. The solipsistic fears expressed by the speaker at the vantage point involved the separation of self from external world due to language and consciousness; here, though, language appears redeemed through gesture and dream.

Language is by no means absolutely redeemed, and useful for self-redemption, but the speaker maintains the possibility under some circumstances it may be. The very end of the poem reiterates this; the speaker claims that the coherence of language in the dream “comes as a star – clear,/ attainable…” (Speak Low, 61) The final act in the poem is the act of reaching for this attainable thing or state: “blindly, a bit unsteadily – stutter of gratitude,/ sway of despair – the hand rises, as if at last the reach for it.” (Speak Low, 61) The insistent conditionals signal skepticism about the completion or wholeness on offer; and yet, the speaker expresses faith, not faith in achieving the wholeness, but faith in
making a gesture towards it. The gesture is what matters here, and in making the gesture matter Phillips transforms the romantic quest for transcendence through natural communion into a quest for transcendence through engagement with others. Natural communion in the poem leads to solipsism and dismissal of a state of otherness; that state is potentially available in communion with others, a communion which uses art as the bridge. By the end of the poem Phillips has transformed his earlier ethical concerns for the relations of the self to others into metaphysical ones which point towards salvation without promising completion.

*Double Shadow* continues the tentative search for a state of transcendence notable in *Speak Low*, often utilizing a similar terminology of submission, suffering, and patience. The volume’s last three poems in particular address a re-engagement with the self’s relationship to the external world that suggests acceptance of the world’s intractability, yet looks beyond that intractability with a contingent faith in a state beyond empirical observation or rational thought yet somehow palpable, as suggested in the previous poem “Speak Low.” “The Life You Save” illustrates the mind’s desire to achieve this state, honoring that desire, yet remaining skeptical that it can be wholly satisfied. The poem opens with a description of sequential scenery, a sort of miniature romantic encounter with the natural that has echoes of “Until There’s Nothing, Just the Sea, a Sea of Leaves”: “After the pinefields, there’s the marsh – you can see it// from here. And after that?” (*Double Shadow*, 49) Propelling the poem is the repetition of that last question, the nagging progress of the mind in its desire to push beyond direct experience of the external world into an assured knowledge of experience beyond what can be sensibly observed. The poem’s reply to itself is to point toward the end of history
and the beginning of myth, suggesting the way that the propulsive mind will create from the desire or need for meaning an imaginative order which makes claims for a timeless truth. And yet, the poem maintains that this truth isn’t sufficient, as the italicized thought pushes further, looking beyond that construction.

The second section of the poem responds to this demand by affirming repetition, a return to the pinefield and marsh of the beginning which threatens exhaustion: “After that, the turning back again. Nothing you/ won’t know already…” (Double Shadow, 49) Phillips presents the experience of the world as exhaustingly cyclical, turning the perceiver back again and again to what has already been perceived. And yet, despite this return, with its connected deflation, the italicized countervoice, the propulsive mind which seeks something beyond the experience of the present moment, beyond the meaning given then made, beyond the exhaustion of re-experienced scenery, notices something not necessarily unnoticed before, but certainly un-noted: “And the reeds, too? The reeds that grow there?” (Double Shadow, 49) This turn towards the tiny, intimate detail spins the poem away from a meditation of the deadening effects of repetition of experience and towards something else, delivered in a tone of hushed admiration, followed by the assertion that “[s]oon it will be as if nothing had ever happened.” (Double Shadow, 49)

This final line of the poem is somewhat equivocal, pointing as it does to destruction, the suggestion that within this back and forth of personal experience, the coming and going of the self in the landscape, meaning and the self will end. And yet, the tone of the ending is not mournful, and the prospect of destruction is undercut by the actual phrasing, which presents an ambiguous reading of what happens during the
contemplation of the reeds. The declaration that it “will be” gives the sense that this experience is inevitable, unavoidable, but the “as if” signals that this unavoidable state is only the perception, in the mind of an unknown experiencer, of a state of being. “As if nothing had ever happened” is the experience despite something having actually happened suggesting that the self and the self’s meaning hasn’t been erased completely, but perhaps just to the point that experience is not exhausted and one can return to the same landscape revived or refreshed or primed to see in it a small part one hadn’t seen before. The refreshment or renewal of experience is cast as an aesthetic solution, though it carries a subtle spiritual valence with it. The poem, concerned with endings, implies a profound concern with mortality, the final ending of the self and the self’s history. The mythmaking, the development of an assertive faith in a definitive state after death, is insufficient, as the mind refuses to rest in that construction. The mind pushes forward, dismantling the myth, giving the self no absolute consolation in a state beyond the observable, that is, a state after death. And yet, the ending, whose conditional “as if” keeps it open-ended with the conditionalizing “as if,” suggests that something has happened, that something can exist beyond the present experience.

The following poem, “Heaven and Earth,” echoes the previous volume in finding salvation through a gesture that remains equivocal but nonetheless signals a contingent faith. The poem presents its speaker at a moment of crisis, cast as “vertigo,” in which “suffering and a gift for it for a moment meet,/ then go their separate ways.” (Double Shadow, 50) The state of crisis suggests that the goal of transcendence through suffering, at play in a poem like “Night Song” is unachievable, and has left the speaker in greater pain because of his very lack of faith in the ability to achieve the state he (perhaps)
desires beyond the present moment. In the midst of vertigo, the speaker experiences fear which “becomes cowardice: fear given/ consciousness of finite existence in the realm/ of time – what exists,// and doesn’t.” (*Double Shadow*, 50) The ontological/epistemological dilemma has become an issue of mortality, and triggers thoughts of fragmentation, as the speaker thinks back to the night before and his experience of hearing “the occasional handful of notes: someone/ else out there, singing? or myself singing,/ and the echoing after? I didn’t know,// or want to.” (*Double Shadow*, 50) Where previously Phillips had presented the aesthetic moment as healing, here he presents it as anxious, as panic overwhelms and reifies rupture. The poem ends ambivalently, as the speaker looks into the sky.

The stars did
what they do, mostly: looked unbudging, transfixed,
like cattle asleep in a black pasture, all the restlessness
torn out of them, away, done with. I turn beneath them

*Double Shadow*, 51

The stars hint at celestial stability, but the speaker remains self-conscious (as the undercutting term “mostly” says) and recognizes that perception and reality may, in fact, not meet. The poem’s final clause “I turn beneath them,” indicates that the perception of stability has not stabilized the speaker in the midst of his crisis; he remains in frantic motion however fixed the world above him seems. And yet, the turning offers a kind of hope, especially when considered alongside Phillips’ previous use of gesture as unfinished action, a hope that can point towards salvation, as turn’s pun on conversion implies.

The final poem of *Double Shadow*, “Cathedral,” signals tentative resolution to the spiritual and epistemological dilemmas the other two poems pose, though this resolution
is not conclusive, but rather open-ended within certain parameters. The poem opens by suggesting the conclusion of a thought: “And suddenly – strangely – there was also no fear, either.” (Double Shadow, 52) The line sounds like conclusion, but the framing leaves itself open to material the lines conclude, as well as to the property that stands in opposition to fear. The second line suggests submission, as if the self in the face of the former crisis is comparable to “a horse in harness to what, inevitably, must break it.” (Double Shadow, 52) The speaker’s state is without light, but also without “hiddenness” or “hiding,” suggesting that empirical perception is not available, and yet comprehension is taking place, as neither the self nor the world outside of the self is wholly unavailable. The final line, which describes how “[l]eaves flew through where the wind sent them flying,” suggests submission to the inevitability of a powerful external force, a force which can’t be directly perceived, but which can be felt, a suggestion which resonates with Phillips’ earlier use of the wind in “Speak Low” to hint at the recognition of an other state beyond empirical reality which may be accessible as intuited feeling. (Double Shadow, 52) As always, the lines are ambiguous, suggestive of both epistemological conclusion, as the self becomes sensory and finds connection to the world through the feeling of the wind, and spiritual conclusion, as the self’s submission to the external force can represent submission to a will beyond human understanding. The two come together in the moment, though the possibility for reading them separately remains, resting in the reader’s attunement to either or both crises.

Throughout his career to date, Phillips never expresses a conclusive solution to the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective dilemma he has inherited from his modern and postmodern forbears. Immersion into chaos and flux is inevitable, as is
the self’s separation from external reality; language remains an inefficient tool in bridging the gap between self and other, self and self, and self and world. And yet, the poet turns from postmodern acceptance of this state of uncertainty to a faith in the gesture towards the other. Certitude is unavailable, however Phillips validates the continued attempt through the bridge of the aesthetic act of the poem with a faith in the act itself, regardless of outcome. As with the poems of Bidart and Graham, Phillips’ work attempts to bridge the gap between alienated selves with the hope of mitigating that alienation and allowing the self of reader and writer to engage in mutual aesthetic experience. And as with Bidart and Graham, continuous aesthetic crafting creates contingent parameters for the self to experience itself.
Chapter 4: Henri Cole

Henri Cole’s poetry is often noticeably different from Graham’s, Bidart’s, and Phillips’. First, the metapoetic tendencies in his work are often muted. Where Graham and Phillips announce in their works a direct engagement with the reader and Bidart’s poems anticipate and enfold the reader into the poem, Cole’s poetry tends to stand at a remove. A few poems, such as “Solitude: the Tower,” use direct readerly address, however, when Cole’s work switches to the second person, it generally does so in a way which signals a specific second person within the content or action of the poem, as Graham’s poems in Sea Change tend to do. The result is to leave the reader outside of the work rather than to place him or her inside as the other poets of this project often do. Second, Cole’s poetry tends not to engage directly with the theoretical aspects of postmodern practice and critique. Where the other three poets’ works address postmodern cultural practice informed by critical theory, Cole’s poetry tends to focus on the localized and specific aspects of sensorial engagement or intimate event; when the poet’s work does engage critical theory the engagement is generally implicit in the poem (the “Apollo” sequence is notable exception). These two differences may make Cole’s poems appear smaller in scale, but throughout his work and the arc of his career, Cole has shown a consistent engagement both with the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, subjective, and historical dilemmas of the other poets of this project as well as with their attempts to negotiate between the tenets of modern and postmodern poetic practice.

Like the other poets in this project, in his early works Cole replicates some of the practices of his immediate postmodern forbears, then by mid-career he turns away as
those practices become less convincing to him. In Cole’s case this entails the adoption of the radical perspectivism of James Merrill’s work, which uses the aesthetic act to find freedom, however contingent, from overbearing personal or historical constraints. “Chimes for Ya-ya” would be a case in point, as Merrill uses the space of the poem to reframe and rethink a moment of heartbreak and suicidal despair into a narrative of mock-rebirth which may point towards an actual, though conditional, sense of rebirth in the present speaker. The poem, at least for its own moment, undoes the pain of the past by recasting it as a new perspective that diminishes that pain. Cole’s early poems often similarly employ the aesthetic act to recast past pain and find aesthetic redemption for trauma. The poems of *The Marble Queen* (1986) and *Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* (1989) are examples of this strategy. However, by the poems of his third book, *The Look of Things* (1995), such attempts at healing through aesthetic perspectivizing become severely chastened, and by his fourth book, *The Visible Man* (1998), the art made from past pain makes less and less claim to be redemptive or painless (though the pain, darkly, can become a source of pleasure). Instead, in this and later volumes Cole begins to utilize a model of historical consideration that echoes Bidart’s consideration of the past as a chaotic, yet continuous, evolutionary process where the self changes, but does so within the limiting parameters of past event. Where Bidart utilizes this model to read the self in relationship to the whole of the aesthetic past, Cole focuses more intently on the individual past of the self, using inscription to stabilize a moment in which the self can be understood in conjunction with present sensation and past memory.

On the surface the narrative of Cole’s career can look like an example of what Longenbach refers to as the “break narrative” often used to describe the careers of mid-
century poets who turned away from strict formal and impersonal verse and began to utilize personal free verse as a liberatory gesture. Cole’s early work is often formal and ironically distanced while his later work, especially after *Middle Earth* (2003), appears to be immersed in the personal while its metrical features are softened.³⁵ William Logan’s review of that book places it in the tradition of confessional poetry, the verse most associated with the break narrative, calling it “the most intimate book in American poetry since Plath’s *Ariel.*” (*Undiscovered Country*, 327) And yet, neither the terms of this narrative, nor the comparison to the confessionals, account for Cole’s modifications of his own works or those of his predecessors. The complementary moves to more intimate subject matter, less ironic distance, and softened features of rhythm and rhyme were not a sudden and dramatic break from the poet’s earlier work. Rather, the seeds for Cole’s modifications, as well as those for the modification of radical perspectivizing and the adoption of a historical model of the self resonant with Bidart’s, were present fairly early, making the narrative arc of Cole’s work less of a rupture and more of an unfolding. The poet himself, in an interview with Christopher Hennessy, has referred to the turn in *Middle Earth* as the result of a gradual merging of two opposing tendencies.

In my twenties and thirties, Allen Ginsberg and James Merrill were gay models of the Dionysian and Apollonian. They were like opposing magnets, and it seemed to me there was nothing in between. Though as a young poet I drank happily from the cup of the Apollonians, as I’ve matured, I’ve sought a hybrid of the two. How to be Apollonian in body and Dionysian in spirit – that is my quest.

*Outside the Lines*, 122

Cole does not dismiss either term, but sees both as necessary for poetic crafting.

Furthermore, the intimacy Logan cites does not operate in the same manner as that in

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³⁵ Though the metrical features become softened in his later work, Cole has remained attuned to various other formal features of verse. His 2010 essay “My Sonnet” in *Literary Imagination* which focuses on the concept and implementation of the volta in the sonnet attests to Cole’s formalism within free verse.
Plath, or any of the other mid-century poets who made an abrupt turn from the impersonal to the personal. Where the poems of break narrative poets often worked to free the repressed personality of the author and make known the subjective stance which contributed to the crafting of the poem, in effect using the poem as a liberatory gesture for both reader and writer, Cole’s poems generally use the aesthetic act to stabilize and make comprehensible (or as comprehensible as possible) a past moment of emotional torment. The very term “confessional,” used to describe Plath and other poets immersed in personal material, makes a claim for exorcising the trauma of the past in order to free the poet from repetitive obsession with that trauma. In Cole’s poems trauma or crisis is not liberatory; on the contrary, suffering becomes a means of connecting the self back to itself. The aesthetic act becomes a tether to a moment which links the present self to the past self, stabilizing a subjectivity the poems often assume as fragmented. This tethering aspect of painful memory is important in Cole’s work, as it represents the modification of the Merillian postmodern perspectival shift which argues for a version of subjective instability which Cole’s work finds alienating. This same feature also indicates that Cole is not using his poems to liberate the past from traumatic memory, as Logan’s characterization implies. Instead, Cole’s poems use mental and bodily memory in conjunction with inscription to create a self shuttling between the parameters of the past and the present.

Because Cole’s poems draw from the specific accidents of the past which comprise memory, he often faces the challenge of making that memory accessible or meaningful to an audience outside of the self, anticipating that privacy may threaten their function. In this way Cole’s poems wrestle with the dual demands of public and private
engagement. Scott Bradfield, for instance in “Mirror, Mirror,” his review of *Middle Earth*, cites “Self-Portrait in Golden Kimono” and several other poems from *Middle Earth* as incomprehensible in that they exclude empathy with their extreme use of private material. Other poems, such as “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge,” the sixth sonnet in the “Apollo” sequence, and “Eating the Peach” connect a drive to relinquish language with a desire to relinquish the subjectivity created through language. This attempt becomes not just solipsistic, cutting the self off from the external socialized world of language, but suicidal, as the poems express a strong desire to return to a state of non-existence. And yet, Cole’s poems consistently pull back, exhibiting contingent faith or hope that the language of the bodily self can connect to a distanced other. The recent poem “Solitude: the Tower” from 2011 is a case in point, as it describes itself as an attempt to address the other of the reader, ending in the declaration that in doing so “I feel happiness, I feel I am not alone.” (*Touch*, 5) Feeling unalone is not the same as being unalone, and in this phrasing the poem cycles back to the dilemma of whether or not language can ever really connect the internal self to the external world as it attempts more fully to connect the self to itself. And yet feeling is what Cole’s poems often express as a supplement or survival mechanism when sheer intellectual activity appears to end in nihilism or self-annihilation.

Like the works of Graham, Bidart, and Phillips, Cole’s poetry suggests that there is no escape from, or solution to, epistemological/ontological, linguistic, or subjective dilemmas which create a sense of alienation in the poet. However, constant crafting, in this case complemented by inevitable ongoing experience, can be a provisional form of resolution which stabilizes the self as it attempts to navigate those dilemmas. In describing the arc of Cole’s career I will begin by showing his early attempts to use the
poem as a moment of perspectival or constructed rapture, a gesture to liberate or redeem the self of the writer. After this, I will use the poems of Cole’s third and fourth books to illustrate the way his work became increasingly skeptical of such Merrillian perspectivizing, until, in the “Apollo” sequence, the poet becomes frustrated by the inability of the various perspectives of the self to cohere, yet sees in continuous inscription a way of negotiating the split between internal and external self. Finally, I will use the work from Cole’s three most recent books, *Middle Earth* (2003), *Blackbird and Wolf* (2007), and *Touch* (2011) to show how the poet’s works consistently use inscription in ways which parallel Graham’s and Bidart’s to stabilize parameters within which the self can come into momentary being. Through such examination I will make the case that Cole negotiates, in a manner similar to the other poets of this project, between modern and postmodern poetic practice and thought, ultimately crafting a third way through modification and combination of both modes of thought or aesthetic production.

Many of the poems in Cole’s first two volumes, *The Marble Queen* and *Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*, treat the poem as a place in which the self can experience freedom from constrictive or coercive external demands. “Canard,” which describes the rapture of a long drive, is a case in point. The poem echoes the opening of Bidart’s “California Plush,” which finds a similar ecstasy in fast freeway driving, but it neglects to account for the inevitable crashing decline from such elation of which Bidart’s work remains aware. Instead, “Canard” views the rushing journey, and the aesthetic work which mirrors that journey, as a method of transforming the limitations of a painful past into a moment of exuberance which appears to redeem the pain of the material which went into it. The
the poem opens by declaring that “No rapture exceeds driving south in August/ the roof down, someone you love or could love/ asleep beside you…” (The Marble Queen, 22)

The tone of the poem echoes this declaration, describing the various sights which greet the speaker as he speeds south. In the middle of the poem, the speaker encounters an “affable farmhouse frozen/ as if in a crystal globe, a tiny morality/ tale sleepy beneath the cloak of winter’s inactivity…” The depiction of the house as a morality tale suggests an encroaching ethical restraint on the ecstasy depicted in the car ride; and yet, through the speaker’s imaginative activity, ethical dismay at the boundless rapture is overcome.

I can hear a couple whispering to one another
as one nuzzles like a pony against the other.
Sunday morning, the coverlet thrown back,
they sleep lightly, waking and dreaming in succession,
their slippers tucked beneath their featherbed,
a fifth of spirits drained in the kitchen.
Their household snug as a hatbox.
They seem poised in mid-air, their lives yet unlived.
What they are and what they are not are faultless
as little clouds of breath expel from their chests.

The Marble Queen, 22

The imagined couple in the farmhouse come to resemble the couple in the car in that both couples occupy a liminal space between the past and future, the farmhouse couple “poised in mid-air,” the driving couple endlessly on the road. In this moment of present-focused aestheticized rapture, morality disappears, as the existence of the farmhouse couple becomes “faultless,” signaling that aesthetic activity and the joyful ecstasy of the moment have redeemed dubious past behavior, as suggested by the empty bottle in the kitchen.

This redemptive capacity which the poem claims exists within aesthetic activity becomes the major focus of the rest of the poem, as the strategy for encountering the pain
of guilt or the anxiety of meeting external expectations becomes one of accepting the transformative power of imaginative rapture.

Accept! Accept! When the rest of the world is at Z and you only at C (a central conundrum of your unhappiness), and you wish to be small as in every child’s fantasy of Swift’s island, small enough to lie in a soup spoon, just a speck in an ignorant world, the sweetest revenge is acceptance.

_Aesthetic activity transforms the limitations placed on the self by external pressure into a moment of liberation, and those pressures, in providing the substance for aestheticization, become redeemed. “Rough stories,” so the poem claims, become “an accordion of dolorous days/ squeezed into a sweet rhapsody.” (The Marble Queen, 23) By the end of the poem, this rhapsody crescendos into a literal moment of ecstasy as the speaker appears to move outside of himself in the joy of a moment that extends indefinitely. Looking again at the ducks in the sky, the speaker describes himself and his partner on the drive from without, claiming that “in our convertible two shining bodies/ glance back at a flock of canards and are carried/ south in August toward the strange sea.” (The Marble Queen, 23) In this instance the speaker has become split from himself, so overwhelmed that he appears to have a transcendent moment outside of himself. The poem ends with the triumphant declaration “Let the rapture have them,” signaling that in the space of the poem all space and time, as well as boundaries for the self, become delightfully, and deliriously, diminished. (The Marble Queen, 23) The poem leaves its occupants forever on the road, a move which signals rapturous liberation here, but one which Cole might later interpret as unmooring ecstasy._

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“Midnight Sailing on the Chesapeake,” also from *The Marble Queen*, shares the sense that the work of the aesthetic imagination can offer contingent redemption of the existential difficulties which assail the self in the midst of intellectual uncertainty or crisis, in this case tensions between a father and son. The poem describes this relationship in terms of the parable of the prodigal son. The speaker is cast as the prodigal and the shared activity of sailing at night is presented as an attempt to heal a rift between father and son. Within the space of the poem, this rift appears to be healing, and as in “Canard,” “Midnight Sailing…” suggests that the open or liminal space of motion (here, sailing is what driving was in the earlier poem) is analogous to the open space of aesthetic play, and that, within such space, time can stop and the past can be redeemed. Sailing, as a space for free play, usefully blurs identity.

I have returned to visit him,
aill-stricken but convalescing, amused
by his heart, a bypassed facsimile
of my own, his panacea,
an earthless season on the Chesapeake,
a diet of blue points and brine,
and he’ll slip into septuagenaria.

This is how it the prodigal began – or ended? –
Guiltless and favored until his heart
burned and filled with malefaction.

*The Marble Queen*, 51-52

The son’s heart should be a facsimile of the father’s, not the other way around. The poem inverts the order of the relationship, and in doing so blurs the lines between progenitor and offspring. This confusion alters the story of the prodigal which suggests that, though the son has returned, the father, who is currently recovering from a heart “burned and filled with malefaction,” also resembles the prodigal. If both parties enact the part of the prodigal, thanks to the free play of the aesthetic act, then both parties can
hold blame and can forgive the other. The difficulties of determining the wronged and the offender aren’t eliminated but equalized in a sense, allowing both parties to forgive and be forgiven within the space of the “earthless season” of sailing.

The poem continues to use the aesthetic moment as one of redemption. The speaker figures his father in the moonlight as an Incan god and the black ocean as another form of heartbeat: “he watches the black-hearted Chesapeake/ sweep away behind us, the eastern sea/ swelling and throbbing like the heart of a child.” (The Marble Queen, 52)

Within the space of the poem, the natural world becomes emblematic of the emotional engagement between father and son, and though the sea can be troubling, the ability to move on it together suggests that both parties can navigate the rift in the relationship. Near the end of the poem, the speaker begins to forecast the weather for the next day, switching to the future tense and describing a perfect day which represents the future time of absolute healing between father and son.

Tomorrow it will be a perfect day.
Indian princesses who once bathed
on the distant opalescent rocks
will seem nearer than their centuries away.

The air will be clear of everything,
I will oar “Raindrop” [the dinghy] across the cove,
beyond the sea urchins’ sting,
to the sacred bathing spot and dive

into the many-shouldered fragrant day,
my skin brown as an Indian’s
against the azure day.

The Marble Queen, 55-56

In this projected future, another imaginative aestheticized space, time comes close to redemption, as the past “seems nearer” to the present, and the troubling rifts between the father and son appear healed as the “air [is] clear of everything.” The speaker conjures
an image of a perfect time which suggests that this future will be one which not only heals the broken relationship he has described so far, but also one in which the self will no longer be disconnected from the external world.

The passage is reminiscent of the section of Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” which projects a future time when unself-conscious merging between self and other and self in world occurs in its image of unified men chanting. As in Stevens’ poem, the separation between self and external world, particularly the natural world which previously had been threatening but is now inviting and refreshing, is diminished through imaginative construction of a future time depicting what will be. Unlike Stevens’ work, though, Cole’s poem attempts to extend that time. The poem doesn’t retain its use of the future tense but shifts back to the present as if the future has already arrived. Within the imaginative projection the speaker declares that “[a]fter swimming for hours” he “lift[s himself] onto the great gray rocks, and there/ in the miraculous sun a teaspoon// of light shines up from the water/ like a crystal whirling with color from the sky.” (The Marble Queen, 56) The future tense within the projected future becomes the present, a sleight of tense which diminishes the barriers between time periods and creates the eternal ecstatic moment “Canard” attempts to capture. Past and present fuse, as sky and sea seem to fuse. Alienation diminishes as the boundaries between objects in the natural world, and between even people, diminish. By the end of the poem, through the imaginative act of poetry, the visionary moment of the “teaspoon of light,” the father’s heart and his relationship with his son become healed. The imagined Indian princesses seem “contented and ageless” just like “father drowsing beneath his canopy,/ his pinched heart
released like a buoy into the bay.” (The Marble Queen, 57) At the very end of the poem, father and son merge.

Everyone is gone except for me.  
In the teaspoon of light [father] is just a boy,  

like his son with the surf in his heart.  
He dips his tennis shoes into the sea,  
splashing his calves and knees.  
We cannot tell ourselves apart.  

The Marble Queen, 57

Like “Canard” the poem is confident in its own abilities to enact a moment of visionary, ecstatic healing. Both poems proclaim moments where the demarcations between self and other diminish and where the past becomes redeemed through the very act of aestheticization which produces the ecstatic moment. Both poems appear to offer an eternal rapture, but such offering ultimately fails, as it has to, because the visionary moment can’t last indefinitely, a truth neither of the poems openly acknowledge, though the tension in “Midnight Sailing on the Chesapeake” between the push of merging and the pull of “seems” or “like” which produces separation signals some awareness on the part of the poet of the impossibility of the task. This sense of impossibility slowly becomes more overt throughout Cole’s work until he mutes the claims for ecstatic redemption and focuses on the pain of memory, a modification which produces its own aesthetic problems, problems I will discuss later.

Encounters with the limitations of visionary redemption begin occurring in The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge. Many of its poems still work to find recompense for pain in the aesthetic moment, but such recompense becomes more difficult to sustain as the poems begin to wrestle with the issue of mortality. Death begins to limit the claims of Cole’s works, as it did in Phillips’ poetry after In the Blood. The volume’s opening
poem, “Half-Life,” presents a specific example of the way the poet still attempts to find redemption in aestheticization with decreasing results while the final poem, “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge,” finds resolution in spiritual salvation which appears to come at the cost of self-obliteration. Both poems resolve the ontological/epistemological dilemma of the separation of the self from the external world in a redemption promised by self-annihilation, yet both poems appear eerily blithe about such an event. The unnerving calm in the poems undermines them in a sense. Cole’s more direct engagement with the more disturbing aspect of this strategy in his later work suggests that the poems here present a moment where the poet himself begins to distrust the poetic strategies he has previously developed to find resolution to the ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crises he addresses in his works.

“Half-Life” opens by setting up the idea that imaginative projection can make of a dark environment a pleasurable experience, describing a landscape which appears bleak, sunless, though “the world seems faultless in spite of it.” (The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 7) The body of water in the poem appears ghostly, a “continuous/ ectoplasm of gray,” and yet out of the darkness the speaker announces an elevating transformation: “The day ends like any day,/ with its hour of change/ lifting even the choleric heart.” (The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 7) The poem depends on this transformation as it turns to describing the speaker’s dying friend as “resting on the daybed,/ fill[ing] his heart with memory,/ as July’s faithful swallows/ weave figure-eights above him…” (The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 7) The friend tosses cherries to the birds, which gesture becomes a method of merging the self into the external world.

To my mind, the cherries form an endless necklacelike cortex rising out of my friend’s brain, the swallows
unraveling the cerebellum’s pink cord.

_The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 7_

Thought becomes action and interaction with the external world, which diminishes the gaps between self and other. This appears to resolve the dilemma of self-alienation by fusing internal self and external other. And yet, given the information that the friend is “[i]n remission six months,/ his body novacained and fallow,” the poem is also aware that a complete diminishment of the boundaries between internal self and external world involves the elimination of consciousness (death), an awareness that becomes increasingly overt as Cole’s work develops. (*The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 7*)

Furthermore, the connection takes place within the imaginative space of the speaker’s mind, signaling that such ecstatic merging is a product of one person’s projection of meaning onto the moment.

Meanwhile, the poem appears poised to present a verifiable visionary moment which can offer the redemption of extended life, but such a moment fails: “In a wisp Gabriel might appear to us,/ as to Mary, announcing a sweet/ miracle. But there is none.” (*The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 8*) Instead, the speaker attempts to find recompense in memory and the sensations of the world, seeking sensorial and intellectual heightening in the act of dying.

A half-life can be deepened by the whole sending out signals of a sixth sense, as if the unabashed, youthful eye sees clearest to the other side. A lemon slice spirals in the icy tea, a final crystal pulse of sun reappears, and a newer infinite sight takes hold of us like the jet of color at the end of winter. Has it begun:

the strange electric vision of the dying?
Another diminishing of demarcations between self and other occurs in this shift to the first person plural. This suggests that the speaker and the friend experience the same heightened visionary sensations brought about through impending mortality. The experience of multiple parties blends as a paradoxical “newer infinite sight” occurs, a term suggesting the rejuvenation of visionary potential brought about through the dying moment. The poem ends with an exhortation to use this newfound “electrical sight” to see rebirth in the world, describing the sparrows’ return as bringing “a world of joy trancing/ even the gulls above the silver ferry.” (The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 8) The poem announces redemption, and yet such redemption seems dubious as the speaker, who, despite his assurance, lacks the authority to make such a proclamation. Mortality presents an intellectual limit to what the speaker can represent, despite the poem’s attempts to move beyond that limit. The ecstasy of the visionary moment of dying comes across as hollow, and the rebirth the poem advertises in the joy of the sparrows becomes equivocal.

The title poem of the volume, “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge,” revisits the idea that the resolution to the self’s alienation from the external world occurs in the relinquishing of consciousness. Such relinquishing occurs within the midst of a moment of an aestheticizing in the poem (the taking of a photograph of a family at the zoo), returning to the use of aesthetic activity as redemptive activity. And yet, the poem echoes “Half-Life” in equating the abolition of consciousness with death, ignoring the darker shadings of such an equation, and reaching instead for the supposed certainty of an afterlife. The poem begins by depicting the narrator and his family getting ready for a
trip to the zoo. Once they’ve arrived, the speaker describes the polar bears and recounts the exploits of “a neighbor’s sons” who “one night, scaled the wall/ to dive and kick among them.” (The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 63) The boys, in crossing the barrier of the bars, cross the barrier of human and non-human and do so at their peril. The poem does not declare so, but heavily suggests that the boys died, a suggestion which occurs in the depiction of photographs taken of the animals and the families by the children at the zoo.

Each child freezes [the animals] in Kodak – … – and therefore ourselves

in rendezvous this first light of evening,
as at a pageant or crazy fantasia
of the unconscious where we all collect
eventually, even Star [the narrator’s dog] and the souls

of the boys found in the polar tank.
All of us writing in a kind of heroic
remembering of what our natures are –
the unspeakable resemblance, the distant

mother-tongue – though the cage-bars
frame us apart.

The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, 64

The photograph presents a merging of human and animal and suggests the separation of the boys’ souls from their bodies. In this moment of merging, the resemblance becomes “unspeakable.” Words, the vehicle humans have to make consciousness known, fail, and everyone in the scene becomes part of a “fantasia/ of the unconscious” where a real nature becomes remembered. The aestheticization here presents a frozen and fatal moment, the inverse of the moment of ecstasy in “Canard” and “Midnight Sailing on the Chesapeake,” and though it involves a similar scene of redemption, of merging the internal self and the external other of the world into one entity, it does so through a cessation of motion and “consciousness.” The poem concludes in a prayer to God for
humanity to become more like the animal, less conscious and more open to instinct, but such instinct, at least as suggested in the middle passage of the poem, comes through the relinquishing of specifically human life.  

Like “Half-Life” the poem blithely ignores the darker shadings which work against the tone of triumphant resolution.

In Cole’s next two books, *The Look of Things* and *Visible Man*, his poems become far less certain about the kind of redemption offered by the aesthetic act. A few poems attempt a type of Merrillian perspectivization, such as “Plastilina” from *The Look of Things*, which involves a game of truth or dare among a group in a hot tub and ends, after blithe revelations of sins committed against others and of past traumas, with a declaration of the self’s ability to transform such material.

> Unlike earth, which hardens, crusts, deteriorates,  
> the mind (or is it the heart, really?), once smothered,  
> recasts itself like the sculptor’s dove-gray matter,  
> by degrees relief, medallion, small figurine:  
> whatever sad thing it was, mere fodder,  
> for what, years hence, it might blissfully be.

*The Look of Things*, 22

More often, though the poems declare a more threatening sense of alienation than previous ones, and resolution to that threat is found not in proclamations of aesthetic redemption but rather in a refocus on immediate physical sensation. Throughout both of these volumes the darker shadings which the poet had seemed to overcome or suppress become more present, and the poems wrestle more openly with the unassimilable pain or trauma of the past; when they come resolutions to the dilemmas of self-alienation are

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36 Cole’s Catholic upbringing has been a constant theme in his works. However, the religious language which seeps into his work seems more generally metaphorical than specifically doctrinal. In the interview with Christopher Hennessey cited previously, Cole makes some acknowledgment of the influence of his upbringing on his works but stays away from declaring a religious affiliation, preferring to address matters metaphorically.
more doubtful or chastened. That is, the poems still insist that pain can be transformed into art, but they find such transformation less redemptive and more like the balm Bidart suggests in the Whitmanian image of the wound-dresser which occurs in the beginning of “The Third Hour of the Night.” This shift within his works illustrates Cole’s continual navigation between modern and postmodern poetic practice, as the works recognize that postmodern aesthetic free play has become alienating rather than liberatory.

“40 Days and 40 Nights” from *The Look of Things* can make the case. It presents a moment of self-alienation which looks towards a focus on physical sensation as a way to resolve the dilemma of a subjective split within the self. The immediate matter of the poem concerns the speaker’s being tested for HIV; through this event, the poem explores the very crucial ways that language can falter in the face of mortality while still possessing a mitigated use in giving form or shape to physical experience through the act of aesthetic crafting. The poem begins with a slant rhyme couplet that opens up a space between the body and the word: “Opening a vein he called my radial,/ the phlebotomist introduced himself as Angel.” (*The Look of Things*, 7) The naming of the vein presents an equivocal moment. On the one hand, the part of the body becomes comprehensible to the phlebotomist by through medical discourse. On the other, such discourse appears alienating to the speaker as it makes him seem uncertain of the knowledge he previously had of his body. This sense of bodily self-alienation recurs in the poem, as the speaker attempts to make bodily sensation, intellectual knowledge, and verbal expression cohere. The ontological/epistemological, subjective, and linguistic uncertainty in this poem is literally existential as the verbalized outcome of the test will determine life or death for the speaker. Truth, in the beginning of the poem, becomes physicalized, as Angel, whose
name itself suggests divine proclamation, makes his annunciation in the third stanza:

“‘Now, darling, the body doesn’t lie,’ Angel said./ DNA and enzymes and antigens in his head/ true as lines in the face in the mirror/ on his desk.” (The Look of Things, 7)

The recognition of this unavoidability, this inability to lie that lurks within the body, causes the speaker to seek auguries in the events of the everyday, and doing so reveals a tiny ars poetica tucked in the midst of the poem proper.

In the way that some become aware of God when they cease becoming overawed with themselves, no less than the artist concealed behind the surface of whatever object or felt words he builds, so I in my first week of waiting let the self be displaced by each day’s simplest events, letting them speak with emblematic voices that might teach me.

The Look of Things, 7

The phrase “felt words” would seem to collapse the distance between the verbal and the physical; it carries the sense of “felt” as an emotional sensation, but lurking behind it, in a poem concerned with the ways words and bodies can depend on each other is the sense that words themselves are felt, palpable. The artist builds a surface from the thing that is felt, the thing that is physically and emotionally knowable and true. And yet, such a building is a surface that conceals, bringing back to mind Angel’s declaration that the body doesn’t lie as opposed, presumably, to the mind with its emphasis on words that put into communicable form the content that we can know of the body. The crisis of the knowability of the body brings about an external search for meaning, an attempt to read in the world outside of the body “emblematic voices,” auguries that signal what can’t be known in, or of, the body. The process seems to work at first: “And they did… until I happened on the card/from the clinic, black-framed as a graveyard.” (The Look of Things,
7-8) The card contains the random number the speaker was assigned in order to receive the results of his test, but the speaker wants, or wants to see, more. The number can potentially be a date which the speaker, in his agitated state, reads as a final judgment. He accepts and denies this reading several times until he’s finally called back in by the clinic to learn whether or not he is dying.

    Part of the drama of the poem lies in the fact that it curtails expected annunciation. The vital life-giving or life-taking knowledge remains unacknowledged, and therefore unknown, at least within the scope of the poem. Instead, we have a concluding stanza that focuses on the sensory: “someone’s cheap cologne,/ Sunday lamb yet on the tongue…” (The Look of Things, 8) When the mental is brought to bear, it is done so by way of a simile that again suggests our way of knowing through physical touch: “[t]he mind cool as a pitcher/ of milk…” (The Look of Things, 8) Even Angel’s role, holding the speaker’s hand for the sake of emotional support, is tactile and sensory; he may serve a spiritual function, but he does so through his physical function. In the final couplet, when the word comes, it doesn’t come: “I watched the verdict-lips move,/ rubbed my arm, which, once pricked, had tingled, then bruised.” (The Look of Things, 8) The verbal moment is displaced by the physical moment and we’re left only with the knowledge that the senses can know. Such knowledge does not resolve the crisis of mortality, but the poem suggests that the focus on the body may be a method for reintegrating the self when intellectual certainty remains elusive.

    The emphasis in “40 Days and 40 Nights” on the aesthetic ability of “felt words” and the focus on the mortal body signals a shift in Cole’s poems away from the aestheticized moments in the earlier books. The poem does not see in the aesthetic act
the ability to transform the moment of mortal knowledge into a moment of redemptive rapture. Instead, the aesthetic act functions like Angel at the end of the poem, Angel whose name suggests annunciation, verbalization, and the spiritual, and whose actions provide emotional support through physical support. Aestheticization, “felt words,” gives the limited support or structure it can to the self when faced with alienation and mortality. Such an emphasis on personal physical sensation carries with it another set of problems, though, particularly problems involving the ability to make those sensations available, comprehensible, meaningful, or acceptable to others. “Paper Dolls” wrestles with an attempt to honor the specificities of personal sensation while acknowledging that such specificities can be socially disturbing. In the poem a group watches a close friend take his dying breath, taking part in a communal ritual of leave-taking which gets disrupted through the involuntary physical reactions of the dying man: “we kissed/ what remained/ good-bye/ in a scene/ at first holy,/ then lurid/ as something stirred/ beneath the sheet.” (The Look of Things, 13) The moment of death appears in the poem as one of solitary erotic engagement for the dying man, a moment which signals a modification of the ending of “Half-Life.” Where the previous poem argued for sensorial redemption as the senses fade, “Paper Dolls” problematizes such a stance by emphasizing solitary sensation’s way of breaking decorum and disrupting the communal moment. Death becomes a paradoxical moment of absolute reconnection of the self to itself through the intensest possible focus on physical sensation (as that sensation leaves the body) and the moment of most alienation as the self experiences itself so individually that it becomes severed from the community of friends and family engaging in the final communal act.
The tension between the push towards the balm of pure sensation, which resolves the issues of self-alienation at the expense of social engagement, and the pull of communal activity, which promises to reunite the self to others at the expense of an authentic sense of self provided by acceptance of sensorial activity, is present in many of the poems in the volume. “You Come When I Call You” details the humiliating and painful hazing the speaker goes through to be accepted into a fraternity, only to find “in that lamentable/ fraternal Gamma code… not one/ natural Brother only niggling dues to be paid,/ committees, like dogs paraded/ on leashes, straining towards women,/ immolation of spirit, a berated/ God, nobility worn like a harness,/ [and] a sour apple in the heart…” (The Look of Things, 25) “The Houseguest Looks at Love and Life” details the ordeal of suppression of the self a visitor goes through to make his hosts comfortable, an ordeal which ends in self-fragmentation. By the end of the poem the speaker reveals that “[a]ll [the houseguest] ever wanted, you see, was not/ so much a place but himself whole again,/ before his conscience, like a glowworm caught/ in a jar, shone its gaudy light through him.” (The Look of Things, 63)

“Buddha and the Seven Tiger Cubs” attempts to reintegrate the self through acknowledging and honoring the aspects of the self that social acculturation tends to admonish, but the resolution ultimately finds another version of fragmentation and loss in the attempt. The poem describes the speaker thinking about “what love means,/ unashamed to have known it as something/ tawdry and elusive from watching lean erotic dancers in one of the dives/ on Stark Street, where I go some lovesick nights.” (The Look of Things, 64) The diminishing of shame in the speaker signals an attempt by the self to acknowledge the desires and behaviors usually denigrated or projected away from the self.
as something shameful. The rest of the poem aestheticizes the activity of erotic and monetary exchange, describing it as an act of love, but one inevitably involved in loss. In this case, the speaker reverses the roles of exploitation, describing himself as having been nurtured and rejected after having given money to a dancer.

My heart is not alert; I am transfixed,
loving him as tiger cubs love their
mother who abandons them forever.

The Look of Things, 64

The acceptance of this moment of tawdry love is also an acceptance of the pain of loss. The integration attempted through acceptance is an integration which acknowledges exploitation, pain, and loss as parts of the self. Even in the move towards a personalized aesthetic moment, which promises release from fragmentation, the self finds pain.

Moments such as these continue through Visible Man where the poems more overtly address the issues of self-splitting and acculturated shame. The poems often find resolution in the acknowledgment of pain as significant in the creation of stabilizing memory. The poems in this volume also expand on the recognition of solipsism as a result of too intense a focus on the sensations of the self, as well as revisit the desire for a state of non-consciousness present in earlier works. Here, though, that desire is more overt and more openly associated with a suicidal drive. The opening poem, “Arte Povera,” describes a polluted seemingly desolate landscape as an opportunity for crafting a truer aesthetic moment as well as a truer aesthetic self. The speaker declares that he was “pleased” and “defiant” in seeing such a scene as “a dry basin meant the end of description & rhyme,/ which had nursed and embalmed me.” (The Visible Man, 3)

Technical proficiency and eloquence had provided a form of aesthetic sustenance but it had also prevented another form of aesthetic engagement. The poverty of the
surrounding scene offers another form of sustenance, as does the speaker’s pushing back against formalized language. And yet, the final declaration of the poem, “My soul-animal prefers the choke-chain,” signals that this ars poetica is not a declaration of freedom, but rather a paradoxical acknowledgment of the speaker’s desire to work against unbreakable restraints. (*The Visible Man*, 3)

Throughout the book resolution and self-integration are found in struggle, not in the freedom from struggle. “Black Jacket” details a group dinner at an exclusive club that ends in humiliation for a member who must wear a jacket loaned by the establishment as his “Sunday best” proves inappropriate to the place. The speaker empathizes with the embarrassed member, and notes the grudging social acceptance of the group into the club which comes with an attendant sense of ostracism. In the middle of the social confinement, the speaker notes that “Something pricked us like a saw:/ captivity was breeding consciousness.” (*The Visible Man*, 11) Confinement becomes a way of knowing the self, of creating a sense of sole identity outside of the limitations of ostracism. And yet, the self created, the ostracized self, is anti-social due to its creation through ostracism. Out of pain comes the solitary self; and yet, in Cole, that self is made not just through pain, but of pain, as it becomes a self which resists enclosure, but needs enclosure to know itself. On the one hand, the self is fragmented, shamed, and ostracized through engagement with communal activity. On the other, when it is completely its own, it is also completely alone, unassimilable to the larger group and subject to an extreme form of subjective splitting or self-alienation.

The culmination of this aspect of Cole’s examination of self-creation through self-isolation comes in the sonnet sequence “Apollo” which ends the book. Cole has stated in
interviews that the poem explores the various discourses which make up different versions of masculinity, but the issues of gender begin to recede as the poem begins more and more to address the existential quandaries of an interrelated ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis. “Apollo” comes the closest in Cole’s writing to a direct encounter with the types of poststructural linguistic theories Graham addresses in her work, and like Graham, Cole finds those theories alienating, representing a modification in his own works of the postmodern poetic practices he has inherited. The sequence shares with a poem like “The Taken-Down God” a concern for the ways inscription can be used to create an interactive self. In Cole’s poem, though, the crisis comes through an alienation so profound that the speaker begins to express a desire to relinquish words and consciousness. Such a desire is not new to Cole, as it has been a darker, unacknowledged shading in early works like “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge.” In “Apollo,” though, the shading is acknowledged and the poem courts both solipsism and a non-linguistic, non-consciousness which looks like an attempt to find both a moment of coherent presence and a shutting down of the self into death. The sonnets in the sequence set up a double bind, where acculturation and social interaction suppress the self, but where attempts to find freedom in explorations of the singularity of the self end in internalization so profound that it threatens the speaker’s sense of reality. Unlike the other poems in Cole’s work, here bodily sensation does not serve as a method of stabilization as external activity becomes associated with communal activity which contributes to the sense of self-alienation. The poem ultimately finds resolution not in reintegration, but in continual war, an “insurrection against the self”

37 This occurs in the previously noted interview with Christopher Hennessey
between an internalized, solitary subjectivity and an externalized social and physical one.

*(The Visible Man, 67)*

The first poem in the sequence initiates the split between the self and the external world. It opens with a description of an apparent clandestine orgy taking place under a dock, an orgy that has been interrupted by the sound of seagulls. After a hiatus, the members resume their activity and the speaker begins to recognize himself in the other selves around him: “‘You’re just like us,’ some bastard said; ‘and it was true…” *(The Visible Man, 54)* The discomfort signaled by referring to one sexual partner as a bastard is continued throughout the poem as the speaker displaces his desires onto the group: “Little by little/ they had made me like them, raptly feeding/ in silhouette…” *(The Visible Man, 54)* In effect, the speaker seeks to distance himself from his body and its pleasures by making claims that these pleasures did not come from him and are instead instilled through the activity that others have forced upon him, however gradually. A split takes place; the self is not the body and is not connected to what the body wants, but rather controlled through the activity of the social group. For a brief moment something transcendent, drawing directly from Emerson’s language of the “transparent eyeball,” and apparently coinciding with orgasm, appears to happen:

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For a moment,
I was the eye through which the universe
beheld itself, like God. And then I gagged,
stumbling through brute shadows to take a piss,
a fly investigating my wet face.
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*The Visible Man, 54*

The poem sees great potential in this particular fusion of body and mind especially as it seems to signal a threshold to a spiritual state. The feeling of orgasm described here is
the feeling of divinity itself, or perhaps as close to divinity as humankind can get.

Attendant to that feeling, however, are the basic mechanics of human sexuality which the poem treats negatively. Presumably the speaker gags because as he has achieved his own orgasm he is facilitating someone else’s, but folded into the gagging is the suggestion of disgust, just as the wetness on the speaker’s face could either be read as semen, given the suggestions of the speaker’s prior actions, or tears, given his emotional state of confusion. The body reasserts itself here as a system of secretory processes from which the mind of the speaker seems to revolt as he turns away from the “brute shadows” and separates himself from the group that has claimed him. Bodily identity then becomes group identity and the self becomes lost. And yet, the rhetorical lure of the orgasmic language is still potent in the poem. Turning away from the group becomes a turning away from the self’s body; it inaugurates the split which animates the whole sequence.

Throughout the poems of the sequence the speaker explores different ways of thinking about the self, first looking at external methods for stabilizing the self, then moving further inward to the crisis of solipsism and alienating disconnection from the external world. The second sonnet, for instance, turns to the discourse of religion to establish a set of rules by means of which the self can find external stabilization which can in turn lead to internal salvation. The repetition of the rules in a type of baby-talk ironizes conformity to those rules as well as the rules themselves, though, by casting them as a childish understanding of the self only in relation to externalized codes of strict conduct. The fourth sonnet begins the crisis of internalization as it announces that the “human self is undeconstructable/ montage,” ultimately declaring that the self is “a body contained by something bodiless.” (The Visible Man, 57) In this reading of existence, the
internalized undeconstructable montage has control over the physical material of the self, rendering all material an internalization. The fifth sonnet furthers this thought and announces a form of solipsism attendant to a sense that the self is only language: “Inside my chest/ there is loose straw. Inside my brain there are/ syllables and sound. Living inwardly, how can I tell what is real and what is not?” (The Visible Man, 58) This intense internalization, which alienates the self both from the self’s senses and from an external social life, culminates in the sense that the speaker is “like a man whose being has miscarried.” (The Visible Man, 58) The sixth sonnet echoes this sense by contrasting the instinctual, unconscious movement of a seal with an act of writing, an act the sequence equates with the articulation of self-consciousness this poem reads as in excess of the natural world where “[b]ody and self were one.” (The Visible Man, 59) The poem expresses a desire to have the unselfconscious sense of physical presence of an animal, and yet as in “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge” this moment courts self-annihilation. An ultimate renunciation of consciousness and reunification with the material world occurs at death, and the desire here to give up language in order to give up consciousness suggests a suicidal drive, a drive Cole explores in more detail in the poems of Blackbird and Wolf.

This crisis of a felt split between bodily experience and mental or verbal activity recurs in the poem until the ninth sonnet begins a turn toward a version of reintegration explored further in the tenth poem. The ninth poem opens with the declaration that the speaker can’t love because he was never loved, and the confession of a feeling that he is “not alive/ but frozen like debris in molten glass.” (The Visible Man, 62) Like the fifth sonnet, this poem presents an image of stasis, the self miscarried, frozen in time and
beyond salvation: “A little blood or forgiveness does not/ improve things.” *(The Visible Man, 62)* At this moment in the sequence the speaker makes a prayer to Apollo for redemption.

> You, with your unfalse nature
> and silver arrows, won’t you take my wrist.
> Speak to me. My words are sounds
> and sounds are not what I feel. Make me a man.

*(The Visible Man, 62)*

Feeling here is something beyond words, and words are nothing but sound. The poet calls on the discourse of masculinity in the final sentence, which obviously carries the sense of a desire to be some kind of “true” version of masculinity instead of what he is, presumably something either childlike, hence the stasis suggestive of arrested development, or feminine. But the desire to be a man also signals a desire to be human, more than an animal, less than a god, and the poem suggests a potential for reintegration through linguistic use. Though the speaker’s use of words and sounds is alienating, the poem holds out hope that accurate language use can be achieved. The speech of Apollo is apparently to be truthful, and the end of the poem expresses a desire to become human through a more accurate alignment of sensation, internal self, and language.

The tenth sonnet furthers this thought as it attempts to reintegrate writing into the act of self-production.

> To write what is human, not escapist:
> that is the problem of the hand moving
> apart from my body.
>
> Yet, subject is
> only pretext for assembling the words
> whose real story is process is flow.

*(The Visible Man, 63)*
This moment in the sequence signals the poet’s most direct treatment of the problems of poststructuralist language use, particularly deconstruction with its casting of the self as a group of multiple fictions without a metaphysical essence (which it reads as false). Initially the desire is for control of the system of language in order to “write what is human, not escapist,” a form of control which expresses a desire for a coherent, persistent, actual self. Yet Cole also acknowledges here that the “real story” of words “is process is flow.” In this sense, words are an abstract system beyond the ability of human use to master them. The term “subject” carries within it the sense of a topic for a poem, but also suggests subjectivity, or the self itself. The self, then, is here shown as nothing but a scene of linguistic assemblage, “[s]o the hand lurches forward, gliding back serenely…” (The Visible Man, 63) The hand detached from the body appears to signal the system of language writing itself, unmoored from both body and mind. This would seem to be a capitulation to a deconstructive poetics, but the poet shifts yet again by the end of the sonnet. First the speaker proclaims “Today, I am one.” This statement signals that the unification between body and mind has apparently occurred at the moment of inscription, as it does for Graham in “The Taken-Down God.” Second, being one allows for the moment of inscription.

The hand jauntily
At home with evil, with unexamined feelings,
with just the facts.
    Mind and body, like spikes,
like love and hate, recede pleasantly.
Do not be anxious. The hand remembers them.

The Visible Man, 63
Though the poem acknowledges language to be involuntary process sculpted into aesthetic form, it turns back to insist that the unconscious hand “remembers” body and mind. Selves are created by language, yet also have the ability, through personal memory (which the poem treats as mental and physical), to create in their turn. Memory, coming from both body and mind, is the form of resistance against the absolute fluidity of deconstructive linguistics and gives a sense of presence that works against the suicidal desire for a complete state of nonconsciousness. In this instance, the body becomes a part of consciousness by taking part in the act of inscription.

And yet, the sequence ultimately acknowledges that this state of presence is not permanent, but must be continuously reasserted as new crises inevitably arrive. The final poem in the sequence opens by declaring as much:

This is not a poem of resurrection.
The body secretes its juices and then is gone.
This is a poem of insurrection
against the self.

_The Visible Man, 67_

The first lines decry the idea that alienation of the self, and an attendant sense that the body and the external world are alien to the self, is a crisis which will only find resolution in death. In opposition to “resurrection,” we have “insurrection,” with the self at war with itself in a way that seems never to end. Memory, tied to psychoanalytic language in the poem (“In the beginning was the child,/ fixating on the mother, taking himself as the sexual object…”), tells one story of the self’s emergent desires, but that story trails off in an ellipsis as if exhausted by the repetition and reduction of desire to a simplistic Freudian pathologized reading. (_The Visible Man, 67_) Instead, the speaker turns to the mirror to see himself, and instead of ending with a merging of self and body, or the moment of presence which had occurred in the tenth sonnet with its act of inscription, the
poem reiterates a sense of further self-alienation. Instead of seeing the self in the mirror
the speaker sees “a man with a firm/ masculine body.”

Mouth open like a fish,
I look at him, one of the lucky ones
above the surface where the real me
is bronzed in the Apollonian sun.

_The Visible Man, 67_

The “real me” exists above the surface with the body while some other self, the speaking
“I,” resides below. The sonnet ends with the declaration that this subterranean self
“stay[s] a while, mesmerized by the glass/ whose four corners frame the eyes of a man/ I
might have been, not liquid, not pent in.” ( _The Visible Man, 67_) This self is fluid,
changing, mutable, and of necessity, apparently, “pent in.”

The end of “Apollo” re-addresses the way previous poems in the volume had
presented confinement as an opportunity for self-knowledge through an understanding of
the self’s parameters. In this case, the external, physical, social self confines the “real
me” of the speaker, and will continue to do so until the moments when inscription occurs
and physical and mental memory merge into language. Such moments are privileged as
rare ones which can create a sense of presence, and in the mean time the self appears to
be in continual subjective crisis as it fights with itself over its internal and external drives.
The resolution of ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty
which occurs in the poem is that of non-resolution, a realistic response to the recognition
that privileged moments of presence or comprehension are fleeting. And yet, the poem
also contains within it the seed of a modification which occurs in _Middle Earth_, the
volume after _The Visible Man_, and which the poet extends into his most recent work. As
noted before, the poems of _Middle Earth_ and after tend to de-emphasize strict meter and
rhyme and focus more on moments of greater intimacy. Both of those tendencies are
present in *The Visible Man* which opens by declaring aesthetic renewal through a self-limiting of formal structures and closes with a brief glimpse of mental and physical presence brought through aesthetic linguistic engagement with memory. The poems of *Middle Earth* and after use these aspects as strengths, as they focus on intimate memory and less elaborate formal structures to create from that source and those forms the moments of presence which “Apollo” promises as possible. And yet, the challenges of reconciling the internal self with the external physical self, as well as reconciling the sole self to the social or acculturated one, still remain, though in altered form. In this examination of Cole’s later work I’ll start by showing how a few poems from *Middle Earth* attempt to find reunification through the aesthetic act crafted from a joint effort of mental and physical memory. Then I will show through a reading of the later poems of *Blackbird and Wolf* how Cole reworks the issues of a suicidal drive toward non-linguistic non-consciousness as well as the threat of solipsism. Finally, I will turn to the poems of *Touch* which continue to fashion painful memory into an aesthetic moment of presence, but which ends looking towards a moment of fashioning the self which contains a hope for self-unification through constant attempts to capture that moment, or others like it, through constant aesthetic crafting. This emphasis on constant aesthetic crafting links Cole’s poetic endeavors to those of Graham, Bidart, and Phillips, as the other writers also find in such constant crafting a tentatively stable sense of self which can resist ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis and continually navigate between the inherited poles of modern and postmodern poetic practice.

“Self-Portrait in a Gold Kimono,” which opens the volume, is a poem created from the combination of physical and mental memory brings a sense of coherence to a
chaotic sense of self. In the poem the speaker, beginning with birth and progressing through to the present, details the myriad uncontrollable events which went into making himself. The poem acknowledges that this self is not an absolutely stable entity, and yet argues that parameters for the creation of the self, first through accident and then through manipulation of those accidents, can be developed by the self through self-crafting. The poem declares that “[t]he essence of self emerges/ shuttling between parents,” signaling a sense of self made from oscillation between two given entities, either behaviorally or biologically. (*Middle Earth*, 3) The speaker then offers more immediate recollected images details images, culminating in a moment of self-description.

Noel, the wet nimbus of Noel’s tongue
I drop acid with Rita.
Chez Woo eros is released.
I eat sugar like a canary from a grown man’s tongue.
The draft-card torn up;
the war lost.
I cling like a cicada to the latticework of memory.

*Middle Earth*, 4

The description of memory as latticework suggests that memory itself is not an absolutely solid structure, but a structure made from a varied criss-cross of material which exists by hanging together. Furthermore, the speaker suggests that memory is both stabilizing and confining. The self figured as a cicada clinging signals a self in transition, as the cicada hangs tightly to a tree in order to shed its skin. In this case the poem presents memory as the place on which the self can momentarily rest while developing into a new self while still in touch with the confining dead shell which has been outgrown. The moment suggests the paradoxical freedom found within confinement which was a major motif in the previous book, but here the image promises continual growth out of a past which is confining, yet which also stabilizes.
The end of the poem introduces the element of linguistic self-fashioning by bringing together the sensory moment, memory, and inscription. Such self-fashioning is not absolute, though, as the speaker returns to consider the unavoidable source of the self: “feeling the subterranean magma flows,/ the sultry air, the hand holding a pen,/ bending to write,/ Thank you Mother and Father, for creating me.” (Middle Earth, 4) The memories lead to the present which involves a current act of inscription in praise of the original creation of the self which took place out of the self’s control. This self-portrait works to capture not just a set moment of time, or the set past of who the speaker has been, but rather a self in continual growth. The accumulation of memory doesn’t stop, and the present moment is one more moment of memory accumulation, though such accumulation inevitably forms the latticework and shell described above. In this way the poem echoes Bidart’s “Borges and I” and “The Collector,” poems that offer a model of perpetual self re-making through the parameters of ever-accumulating memory. This self in motion contrasts with the earlier image of a self frozen in the aesthetic act, as in “The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge,” as well as the self lost in unmoored ecstatic free fall, as in “Canard.” Cole’s poem suggests that the self shuttles not only between mother and father, but also between past self and present, with the shuttling suggestive of movement within set parameters. Inscription becomes one way of stabilizing those parameters which become a new form a self-shuttling.

“Kayaks” further explores the pragmatic compromises that Cole makes between the body, the mind, and the use of verbalization as a tool of expression, a marker of his interest in both modern and postmodern poetic strategies. Language here is not a reliable instrument, and yet, the speaker holds out a hope that it can be used for some kind of
communicative purpose. The bet on that hope is extraordinarily hedged, though, and the poem leaves open the possibility that the only reliable communicant one may have may be oneself. Still, self-communication, however short circuited, can lead, as the poem also acknowledges, to forms of self-knowledge that transforms perceptions of the self. The poem opens with a description of an external landscape which shifts, at the announcement that “[d]ay is stopping,” to a description of an internal state, that of the speaker feeling “distant or blank.” (Middle Earth, 9) The speaker’s distance from himself is then compared to the ways thought and action are distant, and then to the ways that language becomes distant “from all things desirable/ in the world, when it does not deliver/ what it promises and pathos comes instead…” (Middle Earth, 9) There is potential in language to “deliver/what it promises;” in other words, language has the potential not to be estranged representation and can deliver, perhaps through empathetic reading, the self that is not present. This potential is compromised, though, especially when the speaker’s state of self-distance, in a short circuit of comparison, is made comparable to the state that the speaker feels. His “pathos,” that of being self-estranged, is connected to the estrangement of language which is connected erotically back to the body, as the speaker sees it as particular to the moment “within or without valid structures of love.” He sees that “he has been deceived,” that the beloved is other “than he seemed.” (Middle Earth, 9) Despite this, the speaker announces that the fault comes from himself when he is “tired, hurt or bitter.” (Middle Earth, 9) The fault is not in the other, but in the self under certain conditions or constraints, and, though the representational abilities of language are suspect, they can reveal the self to the self. The trigger of self-revelation is made when the speaker “tells himself,” falsely as he declares
at the end, that others have been false. The falsifying effects of language, in this way, can be used to arrive at a truth, though the inward-folding or short circuiting that occurs throughout the poem heavily ironizes this kind of truth and suggests that self-knowledge may only be solipsistic, further alienating the self from the external world. And yet, the poem suggests, in the very act of writing, that inscription can be one way of leaving a written record to stand for the self even in the self’s confusion, an authority of the self similar to Phillips’ conception of language as a foundation for selfhood.

The idea that inscription offers stability recurs in “Middle Earth,” the title poem of the volume. It describes the mental difficulties of the speaker’s mother which are related directly to memory loss. Memory, the mind, the body, the self, and language all intertwine throughout the poem. The poem begins with a hodgepodge of details, the first relating the case of the gas man, who comes to the door looking for payment for a bill and is interrupted by the speaker’s mother asking for her pills. Immediately following are a series of somewhat fragmented personal observations; those reveal the narrator’s escape from memory through drinking and his mixing up of “desire and disgust.” (Middle Earth, 13) The fragmentary nature of these observations comes into relief later in the poem as the speaker describes the way he begins to deal with the erasure of memory.

I repeat things in order to feel them,

    craving what is no longer there.

The past dims like a great, tiered chandelier.

    The present grows fragmentary

    and rough…

Middle Earth, 14
Repetition is a method of feeling again what has been lost. Verbalizing, repeatedly, brings back the ghost of the past which threatens to be nothing but a series of events under erasure. The representing (in the present tense) of the present as a fragmentary set of circumstances captures sensations before they become dimmed and lost, a threat not only signaled by the idea that the past is like an old chandelier, failing, but also in the way that the speaker’s mother is slowly losing her past. One way of salvaging the past is through the repetitions and verbalizations that the speaker engages; another way is through the writing of the poem.

At the end, the poem offers a binary reading of versions of the fragmentary present, one which offers no meaning (“some days the visual field is abstract or empty”), and one in which too much meaning becomes chaotic (“it’s eerily concrete –/ expressive figures move around/ with an endless capacity for tumult/ and uncertainty,/ taking us further from ourselves,/ into the aura/ at the deepest point of the river…”). (Middle Earth, 14) The implication of the end of the poem, which reads the speaker holding his mother’s hands “like love and hate,” is that the mind’s insistence on meaning becomes a way of undoing meaning, that the physical action is controlled by a mind itself out of control. The body’s sensations, and whatever truth they may be able to tell, are rendered “numb” by the action of the disintegrating mind, and without memory the self becomes undone. The conclusion of the poem is ultimately equivocal and suggestive, turning from the action of the speaker’s holding of his mother’s hands to a description of the mist on the water. The action of the mist signals evaporation, one more transformation perhaps parallel to the uncertainty and instability of the expressive shapes as well as the dimming chandelier of the past. And yet, despite the human capacity, or perhaps desire, to find
parallels and meaning in the turn to the natural world, there may not be meaning in the final image of the mist, but rather a shift of perspective to alert the reader to an event or a detail. In “My Sonnet,” an essay in Literary Imagination, Cole describes his fascination for Japanese poetry and mentions the turn to description of the natural world and the transmission of physical sensation typical of eastern poetics. The poet accomplishes something like this at the end of this poem which doesn’t necessarily read the natural world as a type of symbolism, but rather a suggestive detail that doesn’t enforce a direct parallel. In this way, the poem itself undoes, very simply, the attempts at forcing of meaning that the minds in the poem enact. This self-dismantling critiques the modern use of the poem as a projected, containing symbolic system, and yet it doesn’t completely endorse a postmodern embrace of numinous experience as it sees both projected memory and external sensation as necessary for poetic construction.

Poems throughout the volume implicitly or explicitly use inscription to bring the self into temporary coherence by presenting parameters for encountering the self. And yet, there still remain moments within poems which suggest a desire for a state of non-consciousness in which the self relinquishes language and thought to connect to an external world. “At the Grave of Elizabeth Bishop,” which the poet has referred to in an interview with Christopher Hennessey as an ars poetica, is a case in point as it presents a speaker “detaching [himself] from the human I” and “[stretching] out like a sinewy cat in the brown grass/ to see what I felt…” (Middle Earth, 43) The poem describes the sensation of the speaker attempting, while “a little drunk on the ultraviolet rays,/ and on myself, I confess…,” to bring himself into coordination not only with the external world.
but with himself as well. *(Middle Earth, 45)* The poem concludes in a quietly ecstatic merging of self and world.

I felt a deep throbbing, as from a distant factory,

binding me to others, a faint battering of wings on glass

that was the heart in the lovely dark behind my breast,

as I was crouching to tie my shoelaces,

feeling strange in the meaty halves of my buttocks,

until I sprinkled a little earth on my head,

like Hadrian reunited with the place he loved.

*Middle Earth, 45*

This moment echoes earlier moments in Cole’s works when he attempted to unite the self with the external world by entering a state of non-consciousness, and yet, as a linguistic act, the poem serves to diminish the suicidal aspect of such a state by advertising it as a temporary moment of unification which language use can then frame into something which can be revisited. Linguistic use shows the consciousness at work in the construction of a moment of non-consciousness, allowing the poem to eschew the suicidal drive attendant to the relinquishing of language and self. This drive is not completely gone from Cole’s works, though, as it reasserts itself in the poems of *Blackbird and Wolf*, particularly in the book’s third section and in its culminating poem “Dune.”

The two poems which open the third section of *Blackbird and Wolf* serve as complementary examinations of a split between the self and the world which focus on guilt and transgression. The first poem, “Beach Walk,” begins by describing the speaker finding a dead baby shark and engaging in an encounter with a boy on the beach: “Later,
I saw a boy,/ aroused and elated, beckoning from a dune./ Like me he was alone.

Something tumbled between us –/ not quite emotion.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 41) The action may be ambiguous, suggestive of sexual activity, but the tone of the poem is not. Throughout, a darkening has taken place, as the speaker admits at the poem’s end, when he casts the whole encounter in tones of despair with a touched with sin. The end of the poem invokes the fall in the garden followed by an anti-redemptive pronouncement that suggests that life itself is nothing but the hurt of others and hurting others: “We fall, we fell, we are falling. Nothing mitigates it./ The dark embryo bares its teeth and we move on.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 41)

"Eating the Peach," the second poem in the section, describes the necessary action of eating, along with its attendant pleasures, as an act of inhumanity; the very first line declares that while taking a bite the speaker feels “like a murderer.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 42) The pit resembles “a small mammal’s skull,” and sucking on it brings about some sense of aesthetic pleasure that, in the poet’s words, “erases all memory of trouble and strife…” (Blackbird and Wolf, 42) This moment is something like a bath in Lethe that quickly becomes de-evolutionary as the speaker seeks a backwards way beyond the human to some kind of sole sensory self.

Eating the peach, I feel the long wandering, my human hand – once fin and paw – reaching through and across the allegory of Eden, mud, boredom, and disease, to bees, solitude, and a thousand hairs of grass blowing by chill waters.

Blackbird and Wolf, 42
The sense of taste has been replaced by a desire for distanced observation and solitude. The image is of a pre-Edenic state and displays a yearning for a time before the fall, when guilt, such as the guilt of taking pleasure in bodily sensation, was non-existent. As with earlier poems, this one expresses a desire to relinquish language and consciousness, as well as to separate the self entirely from the external world and devolve into complete solipsism. In this sense, the poem works against “At the Grave of Elizabeth Bishop” by posing its own creation as an aesthetic object as a failure to achieve the state the previous poem had celebrated. Where the earlier poem used inscription as the mechanism for capturing a privileged moment of connection, this poem sees inscription as a failure which prevents the achievement of that moment.

In “To the Forty-Third President” Cole continues his exploration of linguistic and subjective splitting by describing the actions of the president in opposition to his language. The poem opens with a description of George W. Bush walking through the rubble of the Twin Towers “that border state where the mind narrows/ and will not be broadened by hope.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 44) Despite the dismal nature of the scene, the president speaks in a “strong victorious voice” which causes the speaker almost to “believe love of country/ will be enough to right old wrongs,/ pity the poor, and avert war...” (Blackbird and Wolf, 44) The sensation does not last long, though, as the poet observes how the “soft-pedaling language resumes,” causing a headache in the speaker. (Blackbird and Wolf, 44) Essentially, the words of this elected representative are “rhetoric divorced from practice.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 44) This dissociation sets off a series of questions for the speaker concerning the kinds of inwardness the previous actions of the president would seem to require. The questions circle around a central
concern for whether actions can also be divorced from practice and the ways that the
posturing of good faith can serve as a cover for bad. But the questions themselves are
rhetorical questions, one more instance of rhetoric in a poem concerned with the ways
that rhetoric can be divorced from reality. The two rhetorical questions that end the
second sonnet-stanza deserve attention.

Can a few like you lead us all?
Waving from your droning black helicopter
at the cheering hordes, fixing your gaze
on some mythical past, can you see
time battering the surface of the Earth?

*Blackbird and Wolf*, 44

The speaker signals the underlying animus in the poem. A gaze fixed on a mythical past,
one that ignores present destruction for the sake of an undying, transcendent vision of a
timeless state, is a false teleology that can't account for historical change (or historicity,
for that matter). Furthermore, it can’t account for those who don’t share such a view and
stand in opposition to the elected official who is supposed to represent the whole
population.

And yet, the poem pivots from crude political opposition to a position of reluctant
identification either with the elected official or with others who share his views.

Part of me, the real red-bloodedness,
open, drinking in the night, hates something vaguely, too,
and is frightened, staring out at the night grass
where, when the moon breaks out for a minute,
steam rises from ropes of excrement
extruded by some unbroken animal
circling in the dark wood.

Blackbird and Wolf, 46

The ending addresses a politics of fear and resentment, a politics that is threatening, but that, in a complicated move, turns fear and resentment back towards the self. The speaker acknowledges hatred not just in himself, but in others as well. An ambiguity sets in with his fear; is the speaker frightened because he knows that he has a similar hatred to the other that hates him, or is he frightened of something else in the night? The poem supports both readings, as it does with an ambiguity concerning the “unbroken animal/ circling in the dark wood.” Is the animal a threat or prey, unbroken because unbreakable, or because merely waiting to be broken by an aggressive force? The lines blur in uncomfortable ways between threat and threatened, reflecting that the poem itself operates within the same political scene of resentment it would seem to want to critique.

“Dune,” which concludes the section, attempts to find resolution by returning to the use of ongoing aesthetic craftsmanship to transform existential crisis into a stabilizing parameter. It opens with the speaker declaring a sense of powerlessness as he declares “I think I’m at the lowest level of actual control…” (Blackbird and Wolf, 54) This feeling contrasts with a desire to “write something highly controlled,” signaling that the speaker is dissociated from his ability to use language as well as from an attendant ability to make himself coherent to himself. (Blackbird and Wolf, 54) And yet, the tone of the poem does not sound threatening; rather, the feeling of loss of control becomes freeing, as the speaker shifts to a description of the sensation of swimming and the statement that he “feel[s] protection/ under the law if the law is light.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 55) The
second stanza brings the moment of inscription into the poem in a way resonant with Graham’s metapoetic activity in “The Taken-Down God,” as the speaker describes the act of writing the poem within the poem, collapsing the sense of time. And yet, Cole’s poem differs in reading such a moment less as one of presence than as one in which the self is overwhelmed with sensorial detail. The speaker describes a series of things he experiences while writing, then declares that “Sometimes I feel like a large, open eye,// in which there is a sifting of too many things.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 56) This line recalls Emerson’s idea of the “transparent eyeball,” as the first “Apollo” poem did; however, the self in this case does not experience ecstasy in encountering the plurality of experiences in the world, but rather a sense of being exhausted by that plurality.

This crisis appears resolved in the act of accepting non-resolution, as the speaker describes another plurality of sensory details while his “lips nibble out of control,/ like creatures differentiating themselves,/ trying to give inwardness voice.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 57) As at the beginning of the poem, the inability to bring internal self and external self into conjunction through language presents a moment suggestive of crisis, yet the poem brushes this away, declaring that “the earth forms, stems flourish,/ and the time of my life goes on.” (Blackbird and Wolf, 57) The resolution of the poetic and existential crisis appears to occur within this acceptance of biological necessity, but the next stanza introduces a moment of mortality, as it describes, in a scene reminiscent of the titanic swimmer in Whitman’s “Sleepers,” a storm on the water that apparently nearly kills the speaker.

Yesterday, a storm tore the bay apart.
I was swimming and became disoriented.
Violent scrolls of foam and green water
Rolled across the silky, pellucid surface
and lightning stained everything red
as I stroked through showers of arrows.
The little tree of knowledge with my name on it
wasn’t anywhere for me to climb onto.

*Blackbird and Wolf, 58*

The swimmer makes it back to shore, unlike Whitman’s titan, but the speaker is shaken, “trembling,” from the “vibrant mutability” and “foaming energy” of the sea in a storm. The near-death experience brings a kind of clarity as the speaker’s vision becomes focused on specific things around him, and the details seem less shifting than they do controlled. As with “Half-Life,” a brush with mortality heightens the senses. Here, though, such heightening is not blithely embraced, but acknowledged as threatening, and the clarity is the result of surviving the event, not through embracing death.

After swimming back to shore and surviving the storm, the speaker again turns to describe another set of sensorial details, this time a bird catching an insect in its mouth which in turn makes the speaker think of other natural details, connecting memory to present observation through the sensorial act. The moment culminates in a comparison of bees to aesthetic activity, as the put “their whole lives into the small sting/ that hurts us, but not before changing gum/ into gold, like poetry, which is stronger/ than I am and makes me do what it wants.” (*Blackbird and Wolf, 58*) These lines show a modification of Cole’s earlier use of the aesthetic as redemption. The bees operate like the painful memory acknowledged in earlier poems like “Canard,” in that they connect remembered pain with future pleasure. Here, though, the connection is not rendered as a matter of cause and effect, but rather as an attendant activity, diminishing the claim that the
aesthetic act is redemptive of past pain, merely associated with it. Furthermore, the idea that poetry is stronger than the speaker, or internalized self, suggests that the act of inscription has become involved with involuntary physical memory, as the muscle memory of the hand, as in the tenth poem of the “Apollo” sequence, works to combine the accidents of external reality and the deeply internalized self into one transmittable moment.

The poem ends with a rhetorical question which suggests that this continued activity of inscription, involved in memory, activity, and language, can continue to bring the self into temporary coherence.

Is there something in earth that makes us resemble [the bees] – rising at dawn, the sun flashing scarlet, rubbing together for warmth, going forward – even when the world seems just a heap of broken things?

*Blackbird and Wolf,* 59

The bees, associated with aesthetic activity, serve as the model for continued activity and existence even as the self faces a seemingly insurmountable ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective crisis which also appears ongoing. The poem draws from the language of Eliot’s *Waste Land,* with its heap of broken images, to suggest a world perpetually in need of re-engagement due to a crisis of subjective splitting. Though the rhetorical question at the end is ambivalent, the association of the bees with poetry suggests that humans can resemble this continuous return to activity which provides contingent meaning to the moment and reconnects, however tenuously, the self with the external world. This view serves as a softening of “Apollo,” refiguring the event not as a
war with the self, but a perpetual survival mechanism resonant with Bidart’s views in “The Third Hour of the Night” that ongoing craftsmanship is necessary for continued self-coherence.

The poems in Cole’s most recent volume, *Touch*, continue to explore the ways inscription can bring a moment of coherence to the self while also remaining aware of the problems of solipsism and a desire for non-consciousness. The afore-mentioned “Solitude: the Tower” utilizes metapoetic techniques reminiscent of Graham and Phillips, calling directly upon the reader as a participant in the connection between reader and writer. The title poem takes the suicidal drive to non-consciousness to an extreme as the speaker is a corpse remembering past sensations and declaring that after being lowered into the grave he is now next to a lost loved one, and reconnected to the non-conscious natural world of “dissolving loneliness.” (*Touch*, 23) “Resistance” illustrates a moment in which the speaker attempts to use the aesthetic act to transform a painful moment or memory, finding that the act won’t transform the pain, but must incorporate it.

Quarreling with a drug-addicted lover, the speaker “intended to make/ a poem about the superiority of language over brute force,” but instead he faces the language, rendered as crude cell phone text speech, of the uncaring lover: “Sleep sleep sleep,/ no more wasting my ass with ur sleep.” (*Touch*, 55) And yet, such a moment can still be used as a privileged aesthetic moment. The poem concludes this way: “Still, entering/ the room, I felt liquid, my eyes cleared.” (*Touch*, 55) Several other poems detail the same situation of the speaker dealing with the unloving lover, and offer the same complications of conflicting language use to make sense of the moment through aesthetic construction. The majority of these poems are harrowing and painful, showing the pains of memory
resistant to transformation through the aesthetic act, though they do prove to be assimilable to it.

And yet, the volume ends with another poem typical of Cole’s previous work, yet providing a modification of it. “Swimming Hole, Buck Creek, Springfield, Ohio” offers a moment in which poetic transcription, implicit in the crafting of the poem, brings memory, the body, and language together again for one small moment of personal coherence. The poem announces that the memory described comes back “[l]ike an echo,” which is “tangible again.” (Touch, 62) The memory is one of swimming naked with others and finding in the moment not the isolation that separates the self from itself and others detailed in the poems of The Visible Man. Rather the moment is communal and individual at the same time.

“We were all] boys still,
like blossoming buds,
bending under
the paw of some
hormonal energy
that lingers now
in memory’s tunnel
like an air prowling
around us, vaguely
ornery, urging:
“Begin what you are…”

Touch, 63

The language of biological urging speaks to each of the boys, communicating to them individually, yet also as a group, exhorting them to begin the process of becoming a self. The poem ends with the speaker returning to his conception of this voice, which doesn’t “belittle [him] for [his]/ unmasculine traits” but uplifts him into his own process of self-growth. (Touch, 63-64) The end of the poem re-reads the voice of nature as urging “‘Be
kind to him./ stranger that he is[.]” apparently separating the speaker back out from the
group again. (Touch, 64) And yet, within the scope of the poem, the same voice has
apparently spoken to all parties involved, signaling that the sense of being a stranger in
the speaker is shared by each of the boys. The poem ends with a suggestion that there is
no transcendental connection an internal self can have to other selves or the external
world, and yet this issue becomes universalized through the plea for kindness and
acceptance of the otherness of all others, not just a particular other. The isolating
loneliness of previous poems of Cole’s is transformed from a solitary
ontological/epistemological, linguistic, and subjective uncertainty, to a universal one
which remains without solution. And yet, the call to action at the end of the poem is a
call for acceptance and further interaction despite uncertainty. In this sense, the poem
recognizes that absolute resolution can’t be found, and yet advertises, through its very
presence, Cole’s continued sense that further linguistic crafting from memory and bodily
experience can give coherence to the self. It also conveys an emergent hope that such
crafting can be the act of kindness which recognizes the familiarity of the stranger.
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