‘The Incarnate Now’:
D.H. Lawrence, the New York School, and the Poetry of the Present

and

Things to Come

by

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a critical study, '"The Incarnate Now': D. H. Lawrence, the New York School, and the Poetry of the Present', followed by a collection of poetry, *Things to Come*. The critical study explores the legacy of D. H. Lawrence's thinking about American poetry and the poetics of the present moment on the writing of the postwar period. Chapter I places Lawrence's interest in America in context, introducing connections between his writing and the work of Walter Pater, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson; the chapter examines Lawrence's own poetry in detail, drawing particularly on an important essay, 'The Poetry of the Present'. Chapter II explores the significance of spontaneity and the present moment in postwar American poetry, outlining the emergence of a new set of cultural and aesthetic priorities and offering detailed readings (chiefly) of the poetry of Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler. Chapter III turns to the writing of John Ashbery, presenting a detailed examination of his poetry and its fulfillment of the ideas outlined in the previous chapters, focusing in particular on the poet's temporal experiments and their impacts on the poem/reader. Overall, this study aims to emphasise the value of D. H. Lawrence to the poets of the New York School, offering his thinking as a new way to appreciate their various accomplishments.

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‘The Incarnate Now’:
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I

Making Contact

Writing to his friend the novelist and historian Waldo Frank in 1926, Hart Crane bemoaned the cultural and political stagnation of the United States: 'If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say.'[1] Crane's frustration reveals a typical anxiety dogging the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century, concerning the foundation of a genuinely American form of artistic expression free from association to a European tradition from which – in more ways than one – America believed itself to be distinct.

The question of America's European DNA was a familiar one to Frank, underpinning much of his 1919 book, *Our America*, in which he surveys the country's historical trajectory, examining its implications for the generation flowering into Modernism. For Frank, the overriding impulse of America's foundation was an economic one, 'And from that day to this,' he argues, 'America has had no tradition, no articulation outside of the industrial revolution which threw it into being.'[2] Frank offers up the fundamental capitalist project of the United States as an explanation for both the pioneering and Puritanical modes of the early American settlers. Each mentality derives, he argues, from 'the one Philosophy that America can justly claim to be her own,' a systematic pragmatism through which, according to Frank, 'The values of life lose their inherency, [and] become subordinate to the abstract conception of [geographical, material, and spiritual] Progress.'[3] For Frank, this impulse stifled creative expression in favour of an increasingly mechanical and homogenized national identity, encapsulated by towering cityscapes and the symbolic completion of the Pacific

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[1] Quoted in Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Marc Simon (New York: Liveright, 2000), xxxi

[2] Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liverlight, 1919), 14

[3] Ibid., 26-27

Railroad on the one hand and by widespread intellectual and religious conservatism on the other.

Concern over the gradual mechanization of the United States was voiced at several points during the nineteenth century. For many, the nation's rapid industrial development was at odds with its status as a newly discovered natural paradise, untainted by the marring effects of European civilization. In Thomas Cole's 1828 painting, *The Garden of Eden* **[Fig. 1]**, this vision of the American mythos is made explicit, relocating paradise to a landscape closely resembling the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Edenic quality of Cole's other pictures is hard to deny. There is a quiet stillness to paintings like *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains* (1827) **[Fig. 2]**, for example, in which the landscape seems both fresh and undisturbed, as if newly created.

Cole's influence over American landscape painting is commonly measured by the development of the Hudson River School, a cluster of New York-based artists including John Kensett, Albert Bierstadt, and Cole's own student, Frederic Edwin Church, whose work continued to champion the beauty and grandeur of the American wilderness. Before his death in 1848, Cole outlined his anxieties about the loss of America's newfound promised land in his 'Essay on American Scenery' (1836), in which he warned against the hidden costs of national expansion: 'I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away [...] and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement.'[4] Cole's anxieties are most famously represented in his suite of five

[4] Thomas Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery', *American Monthly Magazine*, Vol. I (January 1836), 12

pictures, *The Course of Empire* (1834-36)[5], but their tension is also present in *The Oxbow* (1836) **[Fig. 3]**, showing a panoramic view of the Connecticut River after a thunderstorm. The painting is divided along a diagonal plain, as if presenting two separate views of the same scene stitched together: to the left, lush, vegetative landscape, imbued with natural destructive force; to the right, cultivated agricultural fields and the gently rising smoke of settlement. Hidden in the middle of the painting is a miniature self-portrait, Cole caught between these two extremes. 'In this age,' he writes in the 'Essay', '[when] what is sometimes called improvement [...] makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination shall all be crushed beneath its iron tramp, it would be well to cultivate the oasis that yet remains to us, and thus preserve the germs of a future and purer system.'[6]

For many, 'improvement' came at the expense of America's artistic cultivation. By 1900, according to Waldo Frank, 'Cultural America [...] was an untracked wilderness but dimly blazed by the heroic ax [*sic*] of Whitman,' still waiting for its inaugural expression, an American art for American people. Frank casts the younger generation as a bold new wave of cultural pioneers, drawing dually on the language of biblical creation and the spirit of the American frontier: 'In this infancy of our adventure,

[5] The large, cinematic sweep of these paintings, at times Shakespearean in their theatricality – there are certainly echoes of *Julius Caesar* (c.1599) in the central panel's veiled criticism of the Andrew Jackson presidency – chart the rise and fall of a fictional civilization, each panel depicting a different phase of Cole's narrative. The sequence bears the influence of J.M.W. Turner's diptych of the Carthaginian Empire (1815-17), as well as the destructive imagery Cole borrowed from John Martin's visions of the Old Testament, as in *Belshazzar's Feast* (c.1821). By the series' final panel, however, Cole implies the ultimate prevailing of nature over civilization, depicting a calm, moonlit scene in which the broken columns of a once-sprawling metropolis are now consumed by vegetation.

[6] Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery', 3

America is a mystic Word. We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her.'[7]

For a certain group of writers and artists at the turn of the century, this search involved a conscious, even necessary abandonment of familiar European ties. In the central chapter of *Our America*, Frank turns his attention to the vanishing Native American and Mexican heritage of the United States, 'the buried [...] remains of a human world' from which so much might have been drawn. 'The American did not absorb or learn,' he laments: 'In his hands, the integral expressions of Mexican life – their remarkable harmony with the native American world – become toys of the picturesque, motives for cheap commercial imitation.' Although he doesn't state explicitly how America might benefit from this better-late-than-never appreciation of indigenous culture, Frank lingers on the image of a close-knit, harmonious relationship with the natural world 'and its Great Spirit,' advocating a return to a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist mode of human existence. Indeed, the chapter of *Our America* in question, 'The Land of Buried Cultures', begins with a symbolic exodus from the industrialized landscape of the United States. Boarding a bus at Pueblo, Colorado, Frank 'swings out from the dirty industrial town' where, 'Beyond [...] the vast chimneys of the steel-mills,' an indigenous settlement of simple, earthy structures – 'the homes of Mexicans to whom once this land belonged' – lies in the shadow of the belching factories. Frank notes how the huts are 'stained with soot,' located in a 'scoop of desolation,' as if to present an image of the dwellings being slowly buried under decades of industrial deposits.[8]

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[7] Frank, *Our America*, 9-10

[8] Ibid., 93-96, 107-113

As part of his review of William Carlos Williams's historical survey *In the American Grain* (1925), the English writer D. H. Lawrence praises Williams's history as 'a sensuous record of the Americanization of the white men in America, as contrasted with ordinary history, which is a complacent record of the civilization and Europizing (if you can allow the word) of the American continent.'[9] By 'Americanization,' Lawrence appears to mean the process by which the figures Williams discusses – from Eric the Red to Abraham Lincoln – come to reckon with the country's existing indigenous cultures, complicating the standard mythology of America's discovery as a pristine, untouched wilderness. Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that the term *American* – what it meant and to whom it should be applied – was precisely under cultural review during the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, this question arguably gave impetus to Williams's book, in which he challenges the received notion that America should be synonymous with a recurring motif of discovery and inauguration.

In addition to *Our America*, it is possible that *In the American Grain* was shaped in response to an influential essay by the critic Van Wyck Brooks. Published in the popular literary periodical *The Dial* in 1918, 'On Creating a Usable Past' lays out the dilemma of American cultural expression. In an argument running parallel to Frank's – with whom he co-founded *The Seven Arts*, another literary magazine – Brooks identifies America's lack of a true 'cultural economy,' asserting that the predominant narrative of the nation's historical and cultural past remains persistently entangled with a European model. 'The present is a void,' he writes, 'and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives [...] is a past without living value'. 'But is this the only

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[9] D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1961), 334

possible past?' Brooks asks: 'If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?'[10]

Lawrence's praise of *In the American Grain* is directed, in a sense, at Williams's attempt to establish the 'usable past' of Brooks's article. Lawrence, too, was suspicious of the European tendency of the United States, as expressed in his 1922 poem 'The Evening Land', in which America figures as 'the grave of our day,' 'the open tomb' of Western civilization. For Lawrence, the democratic project of the United States inherently compromised the essence and vitality of the individual self; constructed on the skeletal foundations of a 'more-than-European idealism', Lawrence imagines America in his poem as a society of automaton-like figures held captive by the narrow doctrinal creeds of its founding fathers.[11] At the time of writing this poem, however, later published in his 1923 collection, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, Lawrence had yet to visit the United States; in November 1921, he received a letter from Mabel Dodge Luhan (née Sterne), a New York writer and self-styled patron of the avant-garde, inviting him and his wife Frieda to visit her in Taos, New Mexico.

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While the United States had acquired most of its territory in the wake of the Mexican-American War (1846-48), New Mexico would only join the Union in January of 1912, just ten years prior to Lawrence's arrival. In 1890, the Census Bureau announced the formal 'closure' of the American frontier, suggesting there were no longer any empty regions of the country left to occupy. Even so, by the turn of the century, New Mexico had

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[10] Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial* (11 April 1918), 339

[11] D. H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1993), 289-290

already gained a reputation for its 'frontier'-style deserts and plains, not to mention the presence of a number of Native American pueblos, drawing increasing levels of tourism to the American Southwest (made possible by the recent expansion of the railroads into Santa Fe). In the decades preceding commercial photography, American rail companies frequently employed the services of landscape painters as a way of enticing potential visitors to the region. The painters became something of an attraction themselves, as tourists would flock to see them working on colourful depictions of Native American culture and the surrounding landscapes. In the words of Judith Ruderman, 'The fact that tourists watched the watchers, who were themselves seeking to transmogrify reality into salable commodities, suggests the extent to which Indian culture was becoming a *spectacle*.'[12] At the same time, the threat to the Native American population – which many believed was being systematically absorbed, diminished, and 'Americanized' – led to increased anthropological and archaeological interest in the area, including the foundation of the School of American Archaeology by Edgar Lee Hewett, an influential spokesperson for the protection and stimulation of Native American life. It was this impulse, in part, that encouraged Mabel Dodge Sterne to trade in New York for New Mexico, where she hoped to establish an alternative literary and artistic circle that might, in its way, contribute to the promotion and protection of the landscape and its people. It was in this spirit, on the strength of an extract of his forthcoming travel book, *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), that she wrote to Lawrence urging him to come and see New Mexico himself.

Critical of Europe's direction following the First World War, America had been on Lawrence's mind for several years. As early as November 1915, shortly before

[12] Judith Ruderman, 'Lawrence as Ethnographer and Artist: Apprehending "Culture" in the American Southwest', in Virginia Crosswhite and Eari G. Ingersoll, eds., *"Terra Incognita": D. H. Lawrence at the Frontiers* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 38

moving to Cornwall in the south of England, he wrote to several friends (including the novelist Katherine Mansfield) expressing a desire to relocate to Florida to begin an artistic community of his own; to 'create a new world,' 'a new life, a new beginning' in a place 'where there are only birds and beasts and no humanity'.[13] Alongside 'The Evening Land', Lawrence also produced a number of important prose pieces on American subjects in the years before he travelled there. In 'America, Listen to Your Own', printed in the *New Republic* in December 1920, he argues – like Frank and Van Wyck Brooks before him – for a renewed engagement with indigenous culture and spirituality. 'Europe invariably arrives at this self-congratulatory conclusion,' he begins, '[that] "America has no *tradition.* She has no culture-history."' But 'The future is not a finished product, like the past,' he states, presenting Europe as a canvas of crumbling monuments, 'just one big arrangement of things to be admired.' Instead, he writes, the future is 'a strange, urgent, poignant, responsibility, something which urges inside a young race like sap, or like pregnancy, urging towards fulfillment,' offering an image both of phoenix-like rebirth and organic sustenance, a hidden substance waiting to be tapped. 'Abide by that which is coming,' he writes, 'not by that which has come.' For Lawrence, the shape of America's future had been hidden in plain sight, in 'that very America which had been rejected and almost annihilated.' 'America must turn again to catch the spirit of her own, dark aboriginal continent,' he concludes: 'Americans must take up life where the Red Indian, the Aztec, the Maya, [and] the Incas left it off.'[14]

Lawrence's period of residence in New Mexico stretches over several years, beginning on 11th September 1922, his thirty-seventh birthday. It is the only place that he and Frieda ever owned a home, the Kiowa Ranch, a modest mountain property near

[13] George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton, eds., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 482

[14] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 87-91

Toas, a gift from Mabel Luhan in 1924. Towards the end of his life, he often wrote about his wish to make it back to New Mexico again, in part due to the benefits the climate might have on his health; Lawrence was officially diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1925, a chronic respiratory condition to which he would eventually succumb in March of 1930. 'I am lying in bed, quite ill, cut off from work and everything, trying to get my bronchitis healed a bit,' he wrote to Dorothy Brett, five weeks before he died: 'I want so much to get well enough to be able to start for New Mexico. I feel I'd get better there'.[15]

While he wrote a great deal about the region while he was residing there – including much of his short novel *St Mawr* (1925), in which protagonist Lou Witt exchanges her sterile life in post-war England for the mountains outside Taos – some of Lawrence's most important writing about New Mexico didn't appear until the years after he left. What's more, as the poet Henry Shukman observes, it is curious to note that, unlike his previous trips to Italy and Australia, Lawrence never ended up producing a 'great novel of New Mexico, let alone of America, or any novel here at all. Instead he wrote *The Plumed Serpent*, a novel of Mexico, [and] a series of wonderful essays about Native American dances [...] mostly set in Arizona.'[16] Neil Roberts goes so far as to insist that Lawrence's accounts of New Mexico, especially those written after his departure, are 'extremely misleading,' and that his first impressions actually reveal his characteristic scepticism towards the place he encountered, especially the 'colony of rather dreadful sub-arty people' he had worried he would find there.[17] 'It is all an experience. But one's heart is never touched at all,' he wrote to Mary Cannan, 'neither

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[15] Aldous Huxley, ed., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1932), 849

[16] Henry Shukman, 'Looking for Lawrence', *New Mexico Magazine* (1 November 2012), https://www.newmexicomagazine.org/blog/post/lawrencenewmexico-78512/ (accessed 19 May 2020)

[17] Neil Roberts, *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 75

by landscape, Indians, or Americans.'[18] Indeed, he seems surprised – even disappointed – to discover the extent to which the Native American population had already been 'Americanized'. In the words of Julianne Newmark, Lawrence's first months in New Mexico were 'marked by his struggle to assimilate his preconceptions about "aboriginal" America […] with the realities of interracial relationships' and 'Native people participating in the "modern" era of the industrial machine (as exemplified by Tony Luhan [Mabel's husband] driving a motorcar)'.[19]

Despite his initial uncertainty, however, by the time of his 'New Mexico' essay of 1928, Lawrence's feelings about the place have clarified. One the one hand, he acknowledges the received and packaged version of New Mexico perpetuating its reputation as the country's foremost experience of the western frontier, 'the picturesque reservation and playground of the eastern states, […] desert mesas, pueblos, cowboys, penitents, all that film-stuff' (the same 'toys of the picturesque' that Waldo Frank describes in *Our America*). At the same time, beneath the surface of this plasticity – Lawrence refers frequently in the 'New Mexico' essay to an image of 'mucous-paper,' a transparent wrapper preventing insect-like tourists from accessing the actuality of their environment – lies 'the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had,' he writes, a mode of existence 'liberated […] from the present era of civilization.'[20]

The essence of Lawrence's feeling about New Mexico and the cultural and spiritual value of America's indigenous cultures arises, again and again, like a whale

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[18] Huxley, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 719

[19] Julianne Newmark, 'Sensing Re-Placement in New Mexico: Lawrence, John Collier, and (Post)Colonial Textual Geographies', in Crosswhite and Ingersoll, *"Terra Incognita": D. H. Lawrence at the Frontiers*, 158

[20] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 141

surfacing to breathe, over much of his occasional and autobiographical prose. As a recurring subject, his sense of what is valuable about the place remains intact. While his frequent rearticulations of the same idea could be interpreted as evidence of Lawrence's enthusiasm for 'the genuine America' he felt he had discovered, the cumulative effect of these essays is a sense that what Lawrence truly wants to say about New Mexico is constantly eluding him, slipping out of reach, as if he feels compelled to try and write it out again from scratch. As Aldous Huxley notes in his introduction to Lawrence's *Selected Letters*, 'It was characteristic of him that he hardly ever corrected or patched what he had written. I have often heard him say, indeed, that he was incapable of correcting. If he was dissatisfied with what he had written, he did not [...] file, clip, insert, transpose; he re-wrote.'[21] Alongside the eponymous 'New Mexico' essay are several other pieces expressing something of the same idea, all dating from the early-1920s, including 'America, Listen to Your Own', 'Indians and an Englishman', 'Pan in America', 'Taos', and 'Au Revoir, U.S.A.'. What's more, the central notion that these waning cultures might somehow exist as a more authentic alternative to American artistic expression informs nearly all of Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, his idiosyncratic survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American prose.

There are several sides to Lawrence's deep impression of Native American culture. On the one hand, like Waldo Frank – with whom he exchanged occasional correspondence – Lawrence seems to value the profound connection between the human and the natural worlds. As he understood it, this amounted to a 'direct contact with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life,' and so on. 'To come into immediate *felt* contact' with the world,

[21] D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, ed. Aldous Huxley (London: Penguin, 1950), 13

Lawrence supposed, was to 'derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy.'[22] At the same time, Lawrence's New Mexican discovery greatly informed his sense of spirituality. Overall, his writing reveals a deep-rooted suspicion of religion, too authoritative and absolute for his iridescent sense of self. 'Men are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes,' he argues in 'The Spirit of Place', an essay of 1917 that would go on to become the opening chapter of *Studies*.[23] For Lawrence, the 'deepest self' is Protean, liable to swift and sudden changes of shape and temperament, 'merely the breath of the moment, and one eternal moment easily contradicting the next eternal moment,' as he writes of the poems in *Pansies* (1929).[24]

As with the several complementary essays on New Mexico, Lawrence produced a cluster of important essays – composed in 1925, though variously published – on the relationship between morality and fiction. He consistently praises the novel as 'the one bright book of life,' drawn to its capacity to reflect the full, unwieldy spectrum of human experience: the good, the bad, the ugly.[25] 'Each thing, living or unliving, streams in its own odd, intertwining flux,' he states in 'Art and Morality'; 'There is no absolute good, there is nothing absolutely right,' reads 'Why the Novel Matters': 'All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute. The whole [of experience, of creation] is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another.' These quotations are typical of many passages throughout the essays. For Lawrence, fiction exists (at its very best) as the one aesthetic form that can accurately represent the fluidity and flux of human feelings and experience: 'The novel is the perfect medium for

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[22] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 146

[23] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1977), 13

[24] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 424

[25] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 535

revealing to us the changing rainbow of our living relationships,' he writes, gesturing slyly in the direction of his own novel, *The Rainbow* (1915).[26] For Lawrence, mankind was losing his ability to appreciate this 'changing rainbow'; where indigenous cultures seemed in touch with a truer, purer form of human experience, the refinements and 'improvements' of so-called civilization had, for Lawrence, brought about its loss. 'It makes me sad beyond words,' he wrote in a letter of 1915, reflecting on the working-class communities of his native Nottinghamshire, 'These men, whom I love so much [...] – only industrialism, only wages and money and machinery. They can't *think* anything else.'[27]

There is a curious parallel to be drawn, at this moment, between Lawrence's sense of distance from some previous or originary primal state and Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing on the relationship between language and the natural world. 'Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact,' writes Emerson in *Nature* (1836), 'if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.' 'As we go back in history,' he continues, 'language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols': '*Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*,' and so on.[28] 'How marvelous is the living relationship between man and his object,' reads, by comparison, a passage from Lawrence's *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* (1925), 'be it man or woman, bird, beast, flower or rock or rain, the exquisite frail moment of pure conjunction, which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless.' A few paragraphs later, as if recalling Emerson's 'picturesque' language directly, Lawrence references the pictorial language of

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[26] Ibid., 525, 536, 532

[27] Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, 93

[28] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Joel Port and Saundra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 35-36

petroglyphic rock art: 'The pictures in the cave represent moments of purity which are the quick of civilization. The pure relation between the cave-man and the deer: fifty per cent man, fifty per cent bison, or mammoth, or deer.'[29] For Lawrence, the cave paintings exist as a 'moment of pure conjunction' – a consummation or communion – between the artist and the object represented. They stand as a record of that moment, an experience of 'immediate *felt* contact' between man and his environment.[30]

It doesn't seem insignificant, given Lawrence's frequent insistence on spontaneity and the present moment, that the cave paintings share an important conceptual and aesthetic impulse with photography, the fact of freezing or preserving time. As we have already seen, Lawrence makes frequent use of the word 'contact' when describing the relationship between the individual and the natural world. It is a word which implies both intimacy and a kind of felt physicality – 'actually *touch* the country, and you will never be the same again,' he urges in 'New Mexico' – but it is a word that Lawrence also borrows from the language of photography, referring to a method of darkroom development in which a negative is placed directly onto photographic paper (known as a *contact sheet*). Lawrence uses the word several times

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[29] D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished, and Other Prose Works by D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 434

[30] Though he doesn't appear in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, it's possible that Lawrence has in mind a scene from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's narrative poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) here. In Book XIV, Hiawatha – Longfellow's protagonist, a fictional Ojibwe warrior – delivers a speech on mutability, lamenting the loss of great men and their wisdom. Following his monologue, he uses a set of coloured paints to invent a form of 'Picture-Writing', which he later teaches to his people as a means of preserving their history:

> From his pouch he took his colors,
> Too his paints of different colors,
> On the smooth bark of a birch-tree
> Painted many shapes and figures,
> Wonderful and mystic figures,
> And each figure had a meaning,
> Each some word or thought suggested.

in a revealing passage about Edgar Allen Poe, suggesting that 'all organic life [...] only lives through contact with other matter'. As such, 'Each individual organism is vivified by intimate contact with fellow organisms,' including man, who 'takes into him the life of his fellow men, with whom he comes into contact, and gives back life to them.'[31] It is likely that Lawrence's philosophy of interconnectedness owes something to his knowledge of Buddhism, which he would have encountered reading Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and William James (who makes a notable connection between Buddhist teaching and Emerson's Transcendentalism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)), not to mention his brief trip to Sri Lanka in the Spring of 1922, en route to the United States. Indeed, (though his complicated relationship with Buddhism has been well documented) Lawrence's theory of 'immediate *felt* contact' seems to embrace a kind of spiritualism: 'This effort into sheer naked contact, *without an intermediary or mediator*, is the root meaning of religion'.[32] Lawrence echoes this language in 'Terra Incognita', a posthumously published poem distilling the essence of his thinking about 'contact':

> There are vast realms of consciousness still undreamed of
> vast ranges of experience, like the humming of unseen harps,
> we know nothing of, within us.
> Oh when man has escaped from the barbed-wire entanglement
> of his own ideas and his own mechanical devices
> there is a marvellous rich world of contact and sheer fluid beauty
> and fearless face-to-face awareness of now-naked life.

[31] Lawrence, *Studies*, 71; Alongside photography, Lawrence's interest in the word 'contact' may also channel a passage from Henry David Thoreau, who, descending Maine's Mount Katahdin, finds himself in a truly wild, untamed environment, triggering a moment of ecstasy: 'Talk of mysteries! – Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?' (*The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: The Maine* Woods (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 95).

[32] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 142, 146

Again, Lawrence rails against the 'mechanical devices' of the European world, emphasised by his image of 'barbed-wire entanglement,' suggestive of the bloody, chewed-up battlefields of the First World War. By way of an alternative, the poem offers up 'vast ranges of experience' – evocative of the wide, open topography of the New Mexican landscape – 'a marvellous rich world of contact and sheer fluid beauty / and fearless face-to-face awareness of now-naked life'. The word 'contact' appears again, as do 'sheer' and 'naked', as Lawrence appears to draw – explicitly or not – on the language of photographic printing.[33] As biographer Keith Sagar would later suggest, 'Getting into relationship with the universe is perhaps as good a definition as any of religion as Lawrence understood it.'[34]

It should not be understated that Lawrence's relationship to Mexican and Native American culture is a complex one. At the very least, it could be – and has been – argued that Lawrence gets entangled in a fairly unambiguous fetishization of the Other, aligning his thinking with several other Modernist figures commonly huddled under the umbrella of Primitivism. As Marianna Torgovnick has pointed out, a great many writers at the turn of the century constructed their understanding of so-called 'savage' and 'primitive' cultures in response to their mounting feelings 'of disgust or frustration with Western values'. As such, Torgovnick suggests, 'The primitive becomes a convenient locale for the exploration of Western dullness or degeneracy, and of ways to transcend it'.[35] Gazing back across his writing with a century of hindsight, Lawrence's most jarring work for the contemporary reader is that which skates close to – even beyond – the boundaries of racism, authoritarianism, and homophobia. What's more, although his

[33] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 666-67

[34] Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: Poet* (Penrith: Troubador, 2008), 8

[35] Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 154

writing occasionally appears to condemn or recoil from it – as in *The Plumed Serpent*'s apparent moral rejection of its opening bullfight – Lawrence was clearly fascinated with the sometimes bloody nature of these cultures' religious practices. Georges Bataille recorded this 'bloody eccentricity' in his 1928 article, 'Extinct America', making particular (and occasionally graphic) reference to the sacrificial practice as a 'Continuous crime committed in broad daylight for the mere satisfaction of deified nightmares, terrifying phantasms, priests' cannibalistic meals, [and] ceremonial corpses,' evocative of 'the blinding debauches described by the illustrious Marquis de Sade.'[36] Unlike Bataille, Lawrence seems almost perversely attracted to this ceremonial violence, famously incorporating a bloody and apparently self-willed human sacrifice into his story 'The Woman Who Rode Away' (1924-25), whose explicit and sexually euphemistic final pages have come under frequent critical scrutiny.

For many, Lawrence's exploration of these cultures has been regarded – in the words of Peter Balbert – as a 'retrograde effort to establish totemic myths and symbols as the primary tools in interpreting American literature.'[37] Others have been more sympathetic, including critic Lee M. Jenkins, who reads Lawrence's *Studies* as 'a remarkable and often disturbing record of [his] attempt to come to terms with ethnic difference and otherness in America,' warts and all.[38] To be generous, one might argue that this 'disturbing record' stands as evidence of Lawrence's 'strange assembly of [...] incongruous parts,' as he writes in 'Why the Novel Matters', in a certain sense enacting his own doctrine of openness to the 'flow and change' of selfhood. Nevertheless, Wayne Templeton argues that while Lawrence may have tried to 'move beyond rather than

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[36] Georges Bataille, 'Extinct America', *October* 36 (Spring 1986), 3

[37] Peter Balbert, 'Lee M. Jenkins, *The American Lawrence*', *English Literature in Translation* 59.2 (2016), 272

[38] Lee M. Jenkins, *The American Lawrence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 14

simply conform to colonialist European convictions concerning Native Americans,' he could never hope to break fully away from 'the popular colonialist image' of the cultures he explored.[39] Conversely, Julianne Newmark suggests that Lawrence's New Mexican writing demonstrates 'an adjustment of perspective and articulation,' ultimately distancing his efforts from the colonial rhetoric of the 1920s, a perspective shared by Mark Kinkead-Weekes, who argues that it is precisely due to Lawrence's encounters with Native American culture that his writing of this period reveals insights into colonial discourse 'many years ahead of their time'.[40] W. H. Auden attempts a measured defence of Lawrence's shortcomings in *The Dyer's Hand* (1962). 'A sufficient number of years have passed,' he writes, 'for us to have gotten over both the first overwhelming impact of Lawrence's genius and the subsequent violent reaction when we realized that there were silly and nasty sides to his nature'. 'We can be grateful to him for what he can do for us,' Auden concludes, 'without claiming that he can do everything or condemning him because he cannot.'[41] Whether this gets Lawrence off the hook or not, if it is even as simple as that, it is clear that an examination of Lawrence's attempts to 'apprehend' (to borrow a useful term from Judith Ruderman) the marginalized cultures he encountered in the American Southwest is crucial to gaining any insight into his philosophy and writing.

What comes to the surface, time and again, is Lawrence's insistence on spontaneity, on the 'immediate *felt* contact' between the self and its environment. 'The business of art is to reveal the relationship between man and his circumambient

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[39] Wayne Templeton, ''Indians and an Englishman': Lawrence in the American Southwest', *D. H. Lawrence Review* 25.1 (1993-94), 15

[40] Newmark, 'Sensing Re-Placement', 175; Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 'Decolonising Imagination: Lawrence in the 1920s', in Anne Fernihough, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67

[41] W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand & Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 288

universe, at the living moment,' begins 'Morality and the Novel'.[42] And yet, despite his championing of fiction, it is in Lawrence's poetry that his own expressions of 'immediate *felt* contact' are best realised.

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'Lawrence's special and characteristic gift,' writes Aldous Huxley, 'was an extraordinary sensitiveness to what Wordsworth called 'unknown modes of being''.[43] Later discussing Lawrence's rejection of traditional forms of religious thought, Huxley sees to the heart of what he refers to as Lawrence's distinctive 'polytheism,' the basis, he argues, of 'his aesthetic principle, that art must be wholly spontaneous, and, like the artist, imperfect,

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[42] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 527

[43] Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, 7; Huxley lifts this from the boat-stealing episode of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805). Following his vision of the cliffs – 'the huge Cliff / Rose up between me and the stars, and still, / With measured motion, like a living thing, / Strode after me' – the young Wordsworth heads home 'with grave / And serious thoughts':

> and after I had seen
> That spectacle, for many days, my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
> There was a darkness, call it solitude,
> Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes
> Of hourly objects, images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty Forms that do not live
> Like living men moved slowly through my mind
> By day and were the trouble of my dreams.

Like Lawrence, it is interesting to note that Wordsworth accesses 'a darkness,' distinct from – and perhaps beyond – the 'familiar shapes / Of hourly objects.' There is a spiritual dimension to the 'huge and mighty Forms' of Wordsworth's thought, at once resembling the terrific Sublime of Edmund Burke's *Enquiry* (1757) and the non-material Forms of Plato's metaphysical philosophy. Moreover, whatever Wordsworth has in mind here is distinctly plural – 'Like living men' – a many-headed, polytheistic otherness that obliquely resembles Lawrence's sense of accessing a primal aspect of the human soul. '[*M*]*y soul is a dark forest*,' he writes in *Studies*: '*gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back*'; '*I must have the courage to let them come and go*.' (Lawrence, *Studies*, 23)

limited and transient.'[44] Although, to an extent, this is an interpretation Huxley draws from the shifting character of Lawrence's letters, it echoes the language of a short prose essay of 1919, intended by Lawrence to be the preface of an American edition of *New Poems* (1920).

'The Poetry of the Present' is the closest thing to a poetic manifesto Lawrence ever came to writing, in which he advocates for a new species of contemporary poetics. He begins by distinguishing between two presiding movements, one a poetry of the past, the other of the future, both striving for 'perfected moments' of thought and experience, encapsulated, he suggests, by 'the treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats'. 'But there is another kind of poetry,' he continues, 'the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present.'

Unsurprisingly, Lawrence is drawn to the 'seething poetry of the incarnate Now' due to what it shares with his ideas about the spontaneity of selfhood and experience. In the immediate present nothing is fixed:

> there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are flying, quivering, intermingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon. There is no round, consummate moon on the face of running water, nor on the face of the unfinished tide. There are no gems of the living plasm. The living plasm vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither. There is no plasmic finality, nothing crystal, permanent.

Lawrence offers up an 'intermingling [...] web' of natural images, from the turbulent running waters, distorting their surface-image of the moon, to the gentle inhaling and

[44] Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, 12

exhaling of time and the mysterious image of the 'living plasm,' which appears at several points throughout the essay. The repetitious nature of Lawrence's writing gives an impression of him scribbling down his thoughts as they occur to him, as if trying to capture them before they disappear, building on images and ideas as he goes, sentence by sentence, maintaining a relentless forward momentum which enacts the very lack of fixity he's eager to describe, the essay rushing by in glimpses, a river of present tense participles: 'flying,' 'quivering,' 'shaking,' 'living'.[45]

Rather than create the 'everlasting gems' of past or future experience, Lawrence's aesthetic proposal is to somehow apprehend the energy and spontaneity of the immediate present before it crystallizes into something else. Because both life and our experience of it exist in an 'ever-present' present tense, he argues, poetry should work to try and emulate 'the quality of life itself.' Not only might this enable the poem to partake in 'the very white quick of nascent creation,' but, crucially, the attempt offers the poet themselves an opportunity to participate in 'the very substance of creative change.' It is in this moment of creative mutation – the continuous coming-into-being of the present moment – that the potential for 'immediate *felt* contact' between the poet and the world is most acutely possible.

It seems likely that Lawrence's language here – especially his 'gem-like lyrics' – calls out to Walter Pater's collection of art-historical essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, first published in the 1870s. In his famous 'Conclusion', Pater articulates a model of experience that rings very true to Lawrence. 'Our physical life is a perpetual motion,' he writes, 'driven in many currents; and birth and gesture and death and the

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[45] This quality of Lawrence's writing is acknowledged by Geoff Dyer in his 1997 study, *Out of Sheer Rage*. '[E]verything is written – rather than noted and then written – as experienced,' he notes, identifying an 'immediacy [...] inscribed in the writing,' in which 'The transformation from 'notes' to 'prose' often takes place within the course of a sentence.' (Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Penguin, 1997), 120)

springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations,' a 'flame-like [...] concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, [composed] of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.' In an elusive and often reached-for passage, Pater prescribes to the reader something like a wholehearted embrace of this 'concurrence':

> To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits [...] While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the sense, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.

Pater champions what we might call a new mode of attentiveness, though an attentiveness to what is hard to pin down. Like Lawrence and his 'immediate *felt* contact,' Pater is drawn to experiences of 'exquisite passion' that 'set the spirit free for a moment.' Though he gestures only vaguely to the kinds of experience that might generate this passion – strange dyes, strange colours, the work of the artist's hands, the face of one's friends – there is an obvious blurring of the aesthetic and the actual here. The 'dyes,' 'colours,' and 'odours' of Pater's phrase are characteristics of the art object, 'the work of the artist's hands,' and Pater rounds off the 'Conclusion' with an emphatic defense of 'the love of art for its own sake'. It is art, above all, he argues, that most consistently and forcefully sets the spirit free, 'For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.'[46] In the 'face of one's friend,' however, Pater imagines not an art object but a real-world experience, imbued with newfound aesthetic significance. With

[46] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 150-153

renewed attentiveness, he seems to say, the familiar face suddenly appears to us as an object of aesthetic vitality, somehow equal to the work of art. Under Pater's instruction, the world of experience becomes a site of great aesthetic potential, offering access to an endless stream of exquisite passions, if we could only train ourselves to witness them. It is as if Pater's call to attentiveness is a call for us to pay attention not only to experience – to life's 'strange dyes', perhaps – but to the aesthetic potential of our lives to exist as works of art in their own right.

Pater's book was met with the challenge that it amounted to a provocative advocation of hedonism, an ethical doctrine emphasising the satisfaction of personal (typically sensory) desires. This view of Pater's work was compounded by the influence of his writing over a certain strain of *fin de siècle* artists and commentators, particularly those associated with the Aesthetic Movement of the late-nineteenth century. But this reading of Pater's work is a narrow one. At the very least, to focus on the aggressive pursuit of 'art for art's sake' – an imperative commonly drawn from *The Renaissance*'s 'Conclusion' – risks overlooking the complicated and anachronistically Modern sense of selfhood that emerges in its final pages. Like Lawrence, Pater's appreciation of the self is marked by its existence within an endless succession of impressions, 'unstable, flickering, inconsistent.' The self, like experience, is infinitely changeable, responding to impressions in real time with chameleonic fluidity. In the words of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, Pater was 'preoccupied with how one could commit oneself to the absolute uncertainty of continuous change,' and, by extension, his 'apparently

hedonistic proposals concealed a terrible skepticism, a paralysing self-doubt about the 'elusive inscrutable mistakable self.''[47]

Lawrence goes on to give a full, at times over-brimming account of how the poetry of the immediate present should look:

> There must be mutation, swifter than iridescence, haste, not rest, come-and-go, not fixity, inconclusiveness, immediacy, the quality of life itself, without denouement or close. There must be the rapid momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the for ever incalculable journey of creation: everything left in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things.[48]

As in the earlier passage, this sequence is marked by an abundance of related imagery, a 'rapid momentaneous association of things,' each urgently insisting on the value of spontaneity and creative flux. Like his philosophy of selfhood, Lawrence's prose is

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[47] Quoted in Pater, *Studies*, xiii; The phrase 'elusive inscrutable mistakable self' comes from Pater's lecture, 'The History of Philosophy':

> And if we know so little it might be urged of the supposed substance of one's own mind how much less can we really penetrate into the minds of others of whose whole inward existence in a logical estimate of facts nothing really comes to us but a stream of material phenomena as of ourselves to ourselves but the stream of the phenomena of our own elusive inscrutable mistakable self.

Kate Hext highlights the same passage in *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 2013), describing it in terms that would apply neatly to the Lawrence of 'The Poetry of the Present':

> This unpunctuated passage from 'The History of Philosophy' (c.1880) flows out in a stream of consciousness, with Pater's writing barely keeping up with his thoughts as he attempts to come to terms with the isolation of the individual and 'the elusive inscrutable mistakable' nature of other people and of ourselves. [...] He is captivated by the situation of the modern individual: in a world where all we can be certain of is the truth of our impressions, we are left unable to understand the nature of the *self* who is having these impressions and – worse still – life is left vacuous by the empirical-scientific dissolution of metaphysics. (2)

[48] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 183

Protean and metamorphic, slipping from clause to clause before the reader has a chance to fix it down. It is as if we were reading the record of Lawrence's subject as he writes it into existence, or perhaps even his first attempt to put the new mode of poetic writing he's describing into practice. Having said this, Lawrence acknowledges in the essay that he is not without an antecedent. Like Waldo Frank (who offers an image of the poet chopping his solitary way through the cultural wilderness of nineteenth-century America, cited above), Lawrence takes this opportunity to single out a pioneer.

Lawrence first encountered the poetry of Walt Whitman towards the beginning of 1914. Writing to a friend – journalist and editor, Henry Savage – Lawrence suggests that he and Frieda 'have been going for Whitman,' his phrase implying deep immersion in the poet's work.[49] He would go on to write a frantic and controversial chapter about Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, railing against the poet's politics of democratic idealism, casting a suspicious and disparaging eye over his sexuality while simultaneously praising him as 'the one man breaking a way ahead' in American poetry, referring to him, in a moment of brief and touching sincerity, as 'the great poet, who has meant so much to me.'[50]

The essays that appear in *Studies* were mostly published as stand-alone articles in the *English Review* between November 1918 and June of the following year. Each of the essays went through several revisions, including five known versions of the Whitman piece. The earliest, which proved too controversial to publish due to Lawrence's focus on the poet's homosexuality, was composed in 1919, the same year Lawrence was writing 'The Poetry of the Present'. True to form, the revised versions of

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[49] Zytaruk and Boulton, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. II, 137

[50] Lawrence, *Studies*, 179

the Whitman essay range from being wildly critical, enthusiastically praiseworthy, and frequently crass; Lawrence gives Whitman 'the roughest ride ever accorded him,' in the words of poet Robert Creeley.[51]

Lawrence's criticism of Whitman is largely directed at the poet's philosophy of self-identification. The sprawling, egalitarian project of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) sees the poet broadly cataloguing the United States, encompassing its many faces, lives, and geographies. The disparate elements of Whitman's catalogue discover unity within the poems; they generate and shape the work, which comes to stand (both metaphorically and metonymically) for the nation itself. What's more, they are also drawn into the figure of the poet, who offers himself up as a limitless vessel into which the country might be poured; each item of the catalogue is known and loved by Whitman unconditionally, but they also become part of him, a bodily incarnation of America herself. Whitman engages in acts of self-identification that somehow give him life within the pages of his work. Where Lawrence takes issue with this project, however, is in the fundamental status of the poet as a representative of the whole, an omnibenevolent embodiment of an entire, sprawling, disparate nation.

Whitman's instinctive embrace of the country and its constituent parts amounts – in Lawrence's view – to a mechanical way of being. 'Walt was really too superhuman,' writes Lawrence, and 'The danger of the superhuman is that he is mechanical.'[52] For Lawrence, to become mechanical is to surrender life; we might recall his impassioned statement in 'Why the Novel Matters': 'In the novel, the characters can do nothing but *live*. If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern,

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[51] Robert Creeley, *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 198

[52] Lawrence, *Studies*, 172

or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead.'[53] In line with this philosophy, Whitman's 'mechanical' pattern of self-identification is far more deadening than enlivening. Moreover, Lawrence takes issue with Whitman's apparently limitless capacity for 'amorous love,' arguing that it undermines the fundamental essence of his individuality, an argument he crows with characteristic cynicism:

> "I embrace ALL,' says Whitman. 'I weave all things into myself.'
>
> Do you really! There can't be very much left of *you* when you've done. When you've cooked the awful pudding of One Identity.[54]

Towards the end of *Studies*, Lawrence concludes that the overriding tendency of the United States has been towards a Judeo-Christian sense of moral perfectibility, a spiritual preoccupation that ultimately values some conception of the soul over the body, the afterlife over the here-and-now.[55] For Lawrence, 'Whitman was the first to break [this] mental allegiance,' realising the true value of the body, understanding that it might reveal its own system of worth. This worth, as Lawrence saw it, was the value of encounter, of attending to the present moment of experience as fully as possible, what he refers to as Whitman's great philosophy of 'The Open Road'. Lawrence praises the poet's receptiveness (even vulnerability) to the world on its own terms, 'Exposed to full contact. On two slow feet. Meeting whatever comes.' For Lawrence, Whitman's

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[53] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 537

[54] Lawrence, *Studies*, 174

[55] This is nowhere more apparent than Lawrence's essay on Benjamin Franklin, in which he argues passionately against Franklin's – Lawrence insists on referring to him, sardonically, as 'Benjamin' – Aristotelian doctrine of moral and spiritual perfectibility: 'Man is a moral animal. All right. I am a moral animal. And I'm going to remain such. I'm not going to be turned into a virtuous little automaton as Benjamin would have me. [...] / I am a moral animal. But I am not a moral machine. I don't work with a little set of handles or levers.' (Ibid., 22)

poetry ultimately champions a new 'doctrine of life,' 'A morality of actual living, not of salvation.' Given the similarity between what Lawrence argues about Whitman and what he elsewhere claims to value in indigenous American and Mexican cultures, it comes as no surprise to find that he champions Whitman, in the following paragraph, as 'the first white aboriginal.'[56]

Lawrence rehearses his thoughts about 'The Open Road' in 'The Poetry of the Present'. In fact, an image of the Open Road appears before Whitman's appearance in the essay, as when Lawrence describes 'the rapid momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the for ever incalculable journey of creation'. When Whitman's cue eventually arrives, however, Lawrence is efficaciously direct:

> Whitman's is the best poetry of this kind. Without beginning and without end, without any base and pediment, it sweeps past for ever, like a wind that is for ever in passage, and unchainable. [...] The clue to all his utterance lies in the sheer appreciation of the instant moment, life surging itself into utterance at its very well-head.

While he doesn't supply the reader with any specific textual references – no passages of Whitman's poetry that illustrate these qualities – the complex collision of figurative imagery is clear. Whitman's poetry is marked by a fittingly American sense of liberty: it is consistently 'unchainable,' imbued with the endless, self-replenishing recurrence of the natural world; a wind that 'sweeps past for ever,' a mountain spring continuously brimming with energy. More than this, the poetry is also self-determining: it is 'Without beginning and without end,' without the need of a designer; it has no 'base [or] pediment,' requiring no construction; it is its own creator and architect, 'surging itself

[56] Ibid., 181-82

into utterance,' refreshed, again and again, by 'the sheer appreciation of the instant moment.'

In the following paragraphs, Lawrence goes on to give an enthusiastic defense of free verse, the poetic form that best enables the poet to participate in their own writing, capturing themselves within the work, which, Lawrence insists, 'should be [a] direct utterance from the instant, whole man'. While Lawrence admits that free verse produces poetry more discordant and less aesthetically polished than the poetry of 'fancy laws', this very 'confusion and [...] discord', he argues, belong to reality, 'as noise belongs to the plunge of water.' For Lawrence, poetry of the present is bound to be messy, irregular, and prone to sudden, unexpected change, precisely because it tries to capture 'life itself'. With free verse, he continues – drawing again from Pater – 'We can be in ourselves spontaneous and flexible as flame,' giving rise to a poetry of 'supreme mutability'. 'Poetry gave us the clue,' he writes, and the clue is 'free verse: Whitman.'[57]

The importance of free verse, for Lawrence, has to do with time. Handled faithfully, free verse enables the poet to apprehend the present moment of experience, the pure, 'pulsating' energy – 'the creative quick' – of the world becoming itself. The poem becomes a record of this encounter and, as such, somehow preserves it, like a painting or a photograph. A successful free verse poem, Lawrence implies, would be one that manages to resurrect some of this energy during the process of its being read, allowing both the poet and the reader to experience it again, like thunder following a lightning strike. The inherent problem of Lawrence's theory, however, lies in the creative process itself, whereby the poet's act of writing (literally) fixes their experience

[57] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 183-85

in words. Making contact with the present moment may be one thing, getting it down on paper is another thing entirely.

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Criticism of Lawrence's own poetry isn't hard to find. In 1935, the American critic R. P. Blackmur advanced an attack on his verse, citing its apparent lack of technical ability as an extreme version of 'the plague of expressive form.'[58] A decade later, lecturing on Whitman to the Churchill Club, T. S. Eliot suggests that Lawrence's poems 'are more notes for poems than poems themselves,' while Keith Sagar describes the work in Lawrence's collection *Pansies* (1929), as 'not more than notebook jottings,' concluding that the worst 'do not even have the virtues of good prose.'[59]

It is easy enough to find examples of Lawrence's poetry that confirm the worst of these early criticisms. A great many of the brief, almost epigrammatical stanzas collected in *More Pansies*, published posthumously in 1932, have a rapid-fire, notational quality, often ringing out in Lawrence's most cantankerous, high-tempered bark. As Blackmur implies, the cumulative effect is to suspect that Lawrence saw writing poetry, at least in part, as an opportunity to exercise his moral, political and personal grievances. 'He said to me: Your life will be so much the poorer / since you refuse my friendship,' begins the anecdotal 'Refused Friendship': 'But I, honestly, don't know what he means. / I can't see that I refuse anything. / I like him. What else is there?'[60] Like so

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[58] R. P. Blackmur, *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), 255

[59] T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 362; Keith Sagar, *The Art of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 233

[60] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 611

many poems in the collection, this reads like a scribbled, dashed-off diary entry, recording the poet's immediate thoughts hot off the press.

Lawrence makes no attempt to disguise the influence of Whitman on his writing. The final poem in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 'The American Eagle', interrupts its meditation with a series of onomatopoeic interjections, mimicking the eagle's cry, complete with a loud, capitalised 'YAWP!!!' plucked straight from the pages of 'Song of Myself'.[61] Equally, as early as his collection *Look! We Have Come Through* (1917), Lawrence's poems vibrate clearly with the cosmic language, stretching lines, and panoramic vistas of Whitman's writing, nowhere more overtly than in 'New Heaven and Earth', 'in some respects the most profoundly Whitmanian poem not written by Walt,' according to Harold Bloom.[62] Lawrence borrows a host of Whitmanian devices here, from Whitman's balance of metaphysical and bodily imagery, the Edenic (hyper-American) conceit of discovering an untouched wilderness, and a prosaic catalogue of worldly phenomena – 'skies, trees, flowers, birds, water, / people, houses, streets, vehicles, machines' – right down to the numbered sections characteristic of Whitman's longer poems. While Bloom is right to applaud Lawrence's impersonation, there is a sense that 'New Heaven and Earth' skates so close to Whitman as to highlight its own artificiality, over-emphasising the extent to which the poem mimics something else, revealing it to be a fake.[63]

Nevertheless, a common defence of Lawrence's writing praises his engagements with the natural world. Lawrence's 'great gift,' writes Marjorie Perloff,

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[61] Ibid., 413

[62] Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 262

[63] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 256-61

was his 'Wordsworthian ability to 'see into the life of things," lifting a phrase from 'Tintern Abbey'.[64] 'He seemed able to enter into other lives, and not only human lives,' recalled Jessie Chambers, with whom Lawrence had his first significant relationship:

> With wild things, flowers and birds, a rabbit in a snare, the speckled eggs in a hole in the ground he was in primal sympathy – a living vibration passed between him and them, so that I always saw him, in the strictest sense of the word, immortal.[65]

In her memoir *Not I, but the Wind* (1935), Frieda Weekley – Lawrence's wife, widow, and sparring partner – paints a similar portrait of her husband the naturalist. 'When Lawrence first found a gentian,' she notes, recounting an episode from their alpine honeymoon in 1912, 'I remember feeling as if he had a strange communion with it, as if the gentian yielded up its blueness, its very essence, to him.'[66]

Even before *Birds, Beats and Flowers*, Lawrence's poetry is frequently grounded in enigmatic run-ins with the natural world. 'A Doe at Evening', from *Look! We Have Come Through*, dramatizes an encounter with a single, silhouetted deer, 'a fine black blotch / on the sky'. The poem speaks directly to Lawrence's 'great gift' for seeing beyond the veneer of outward appearances:

> I looked at her
> and felt her watching;
> I became a strange being.
> Still, I had my right to be there with her.

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[64] Marjorie Perloff, 'D. H. Lawrence', in Claude Rawson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 488

[65] Quoted in Amit Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 167

[66] Frieda Lawrence, *Not I, but the Wind* (London: Heinemann, 1935), 33

Her nimble shadow trotting
along the sky-line, she
put back her fine, level-balanced head.
And I knew her.

Lawrence finds himself under an equal scrutiny, gazed at – even *into* – by the deer, a disarming experience that transforms him into 'a strange being,' somehow exposed, unbalanced like the uneven metrical arrangements of each quatrain, whose lines can't seem to make their minds up about which pattern of feet to take. But the experience also permits Lawrence to claim new knowledge of the deer, albeit with the acceptance, in the poem's final stanza, of his own animal nature:

Ah yes, being male, is not my head hard-balanced, antlered?
Are not my haunches light?
Has she not fled on the same wind as me?
Does not my fear cover her fear?

The questions here are doubtful, unsure of themselves, but they suggest – 'Ah yes' – both revelation and discovery. More importantly, they speak to an equalization of some kind, the poet and the deer sharing not only the same evening but 'the same wind' and even something of the same anatomy, 'level-balanced' against each other. 'A Doe at Evening' interrogates the natural world, staring long and hard at it, meeting its gaze. But it also seems to hinge upon the difference between looking and knowing, observing and understanding, or – to use the language of the poem's second stanza – between 'watching' and 'being'.[67] It even recalls his earlier comments about petroglyphic rock art: 'The pure relation between the cave-man and the deer: fifty per cent man, fifty per cent bison, or mammoth, or deer.'

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[67] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 222

Rather than entering into another life, however, as Jessie Chambers has it, the poem seems to finish on a note of flat uncertainty, as if the revelation that was promised had suddenly 'fled': a case of *Almost, but not quite.* Many readers have found the natural world to be somehow deciphered in Lawrence's poems, its 'very essence' laid bare, to echo Frieda Weekley. Time and again, however, we encounter a blockage, a failure to discover any kinship with this world at all. As he suggests of a group of autumn cyclamens, recalling a trip to Lake Garda in 1913, Lawrence's writing is filled with 'little living myths that [he] cannot understand.'[68] Far from seeing into the life of things, more often than not we find their essences eluding him.

The poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* are frequently considered to be the peak of Lawrence's poetic achievement. Written between 1920 and 1923, they span one of the poet's most restless periods of international travel, as evidenced by the 'luggage labels' (in Lee M. Jenkins's phrase) tied to the bottom of each piece: 'Baden-Baden,' 'Fiesole,' 'Lobo,' 'Taos'. Beginning in San Gervasio, outside Florence, the poems head south to Sicily before migrating back to Austria and Spain; returning to Italy, they set sail for Sri Lanka, then Australia, and arrive, at long last, in New Mexico, where the voyage of the collection ends.[69] The book is divided into several sections, grouping the poems into a system of ecological classification, from 'Fruits', 'Trees', and 'Flowers' through to 'Reptiles', 'Birds', and 'Animals'. With a handful of exceptions, the poems consider natural subjects, offering a deep investigation into ideas of otherness and symbolism.

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[68] Quoted in Keith Sagar, *D. H. Lawrence: Life Into Art* (London: Penguin, 1985), 198

[69] Jenkins, *The American Lawrence*, 52

The collection has proven popular. Lawrence himself considered it to be his 'best book of poems,' and many individual works have gone on to become among his most anthologised pieces of writing.[70] Among their admirers is Joyce Carol Oates, who conducts a radical defence of Lawrence's poetry in her book, *The Hostile Sun* (1973). Oates interprets Lawrence's writing, in part, as a reaction to the Romantic view of Nature as a means of symbolic or spiritual access to divinity. For Oates, the poems are resolutely anti-spiritual. Lawrence 'is not trying to project himself into these creatures,' she writes, 'nor is he really trying to interpret them. They remain alien, brute, [and] essentially unknowable.'[71]

The poems quickly introduce us to Lawrence's persistent language of inquiry, a precise and at times almost casual mode of questioning which he sustains through the collection. 'Why so velvety, why so voluptuous heavy?' begins a stanza in 'Peach', only the second poem:

> Why hanging with such inordinate weight?
> Why so indented?
>
> Why the groove?
> Why the lovely, bivalve roundness?
> Why the ripple down the sphere?
> Why the suggestion of incision?[72]

Lawrence's questions don't have answers, nor do they appear rhetorical. Instead, they carry what seems like an honest curiosity, admiring and quizzical, both attentive and

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[70] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 995

[71] Joyce Carol Oates, *The Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 37

[72] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 279

uncertain. By the time we arrive at the next section – 'Trees' – Lawrence's questions are beginning to spill over, as in the following lines from 'Bare Almond-Trees':

> What are you doing in the December rain?
> Have you a strange electric sensitiveness in your steel tips?
> Do you feel the air for electric influences
> Like some strange magnetic apparatus?
> Do you take in messages, in some strange code,
> From heaven's wolfish, wandering electricity, that prowls so constantly round
> Etna?
> Do you take the whisper of sulphur from the air?
> Do you hear the chemical accents of the sun?
> Do you telephone the roar of the waters over the earth?
> And from all this, do you make calculations?

'Like iron implements twisted, hideous, out of the earth,' as he describes them in the opening stanza, Lawrence's almond trees can't, don't, or won't answer him. Their silence is solidified by Lawrence's strange metallicizing process, turning them first to iron and then to 'sensitive steel'. Their branches become 'steel tips,' feeling out 'Like some strange magnetic apparatus' (resembling a lightning rod), straining for 'messages, in some strange code,' absorbing 'sulphur from the air,' hearing 'the chemical accents of the sun,' receiving and transmitting like a 'telephone'.[73] The trees possess a set of meanings Lawrence has no way to understand; the mechanical and electrical (not to mention *metrical*) tools at his disposal are simply not up to the task. As Keith Sagar writes of 'Cypresses', another poem in the collection, 'If the trees are messengers, [then] their message is undecipherable, cannot be rendered into discursive language.'[74]

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[73] Ibid., 300-01

[74] Sagar, *Life Into Art*, 218

The question of insufficient or inadequate language is also raised by Joyce Carol Oates. '[T]he great problem for Lawrence,' she writes, is that 'he must use ordinary language, but he must use it to express an extraordinary event,' or at least to express a thing which doesn't seem to want (or be able) to speak for itself.[75] This is a familiar question to poetry. 'The great lunacy of most lyric poems,' suggests the poet Mary Ruefle, 'is that they attempt to use words to convey what cannot be put into words.'[76] Language 'is an imperfect medium,' acknowledges Lee M. Jenkins in *The American Lawrence*, 'a proxy expression of the actuality to which it may aspire but can never attain.'[77] 'How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,' begins a poem by Jack Gilbert, 'and frightening that it does not quite.'[78]

By tracing the movement of signifiers and signifieds throughout the collection, the poet and novelist Amit Chaudhuri has illustrated the sheer refusal of Lawrence's language to mean (and *only* mean) one thing. Indeed, Chaudhuri's appreciation of Lawrence's poetry builds from a sense of its fluidity, arguing that the language and imagery of one poem may come to inform or revise another. 'These poems are not formally complete or perfected in the Yeatsian sense,' he writes. Instead, 'their very verbal and formal inadequacies compel them to be open-ended and, rather than closed and independent, unfinished and dependent,' both on the reader and each other.[79]

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[75] Oates, *The Hostile Sun*, 28

[76] Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2012), 15

[77] Jenkins, *The American Lawrence*, 80

[78] Jack Gilbert, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 125

[79] Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 11

We come away from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* compelled by the resistance of Lawrence's subjects to be pinned down by the poems. As he puts it at the end of one of the collection's best-known pieces: 'But I, I only wonder / And don't know. / I don't know fishes.'[80] For Joyce Carol Oates, the collection amounts to a kind of 'worship,' whereby Lawrence ultimately embraces his inability to understand the natural world's 'strange code[s]'. 'What interests Lawrence in a creature,' writes Sagar, 'is precisely what makes it uniquely [itself],' 'the incommensurability of its nature [...] with anything human.'[81]

We gain further insight into Lawrence's thinking about otherness from his comments about the post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne. 'Cézanne's apples are a real attempt to let the apple exist in its own separate entity, without transfusing it with personal emotion,' he writes in an introduction to a book of his own paintings, suggesting that the painter's 'great effort' was 'to shove the apple away from him, and let it live of itself.'[82] It is telling that, just months after his death, Rebecca West brought Lawrence into orbit with Cézanne herself, defending him from what she thought to be the overzealous criticism found in several prominent obituaries. 'By a natural magic he unsealed the eyes of those in his company,' she writes, speaking directly to the poems:

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[80] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 340

[81] Sagar, *Life Into Art*, 214

[82] Lawrence, *Phoenix*, 567; While Lawrence doesn't draw an explicit connection between Cézanne's painting and Whitman's poetry, the two men clearly occupy a similar territory in his imagination. What they have in common is an attempt to meet the world of things head on, to give 'full contact' to 'whatever comes,' as Lawrence writes of Whitman. Curiously enough, the poet and painter Marsden Hartley – who visited New Mexico a few years before Lawrence – aligned Cézanne and Whitman in the second essay of his collection, *Adventures in the Arts* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), where he argues that the two 'have done more [...] for the liberation of the artist, and for the "freeing" of painting and poetry than any other men of modern time.' Hartley praises 'the quality of "living-ness"' in Cézanne's paintings, describing his achievement in terms strikingly similar to Lawrence's: 'We shall find him striving always toward actualities, toward the realization of beauty as it is seen to exist in the real, in the object itself, whether it be mountain or apple or human.' Whitman's poetry strives to articulate the livingness of things, as well, for Hartley, bringing them into constant 'relation to one another' through the poet's aesthetic of inclusiveness. The two men exemplify a purity of self, what he calls their 'essential personalism,' forging an artwork 'of direct expression out of direct experience,' 'prophets of the new time.' (30-36)

'birds and beasts and flowers became new-minted as in Paradise; they stood revealed as what they were, and not the poor objects of our dull and common seeing.'[83]

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'Of all nations,' wrote Whitman in the 1855 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass*, 'the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest.'[84] Leaving the question of greatness to one side – the word 'great' and its variants appear just shy of fifty times in Whitman's preface – it doesn't take long for Whitman's readers to discover that his poetry is full of 'stuff'. *Leaves of Grass* ripples with long lines, extending out across the page, filling the white space with text, as if the poems were somehow striving for the broad, full-bodied shape of prose. In 'Song of Myself', Whitman describes his own poetic persona as being 'Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse, and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine', while the poems routinely shift gears into Whitman's characteristic catalogues, in which he crams as much 'poetical stuff' into his verses as he can.[85] As Ed Folsom notes in *Native Representations*, 'Whitman is the poet of the grand conjunction, the singer of "and." [...] He is the poet of conjoining, of singing the parts of the world into a massive juxtaposition. He forges a vision of wholeness out of disparate parts held together by his adhesive voice.'[86]

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[83] Rebecca West, 'Elegy', in Geoff Dyer, ed., *Life With a Capital L* (London: Penguin, 2019), 474

[84] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed., Michael Moon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 619

[85] Ibid., 39

[86] Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ix

Whitman saw nine editions of *Leaves of Grass* during his lifetime, stuffing each successive volume with new poems, the original 1855 collection growing like a living thing, increasing in both scope and size like the nation itself.[87] The poems do not discriminate, affording anything and everything a place, spreading out and making room for Whitman's endless stream of people, regions, landscapes, and phenomena, inviting us to witness an extensive, panoramic sweep of the United States:

> See, streamers streaming through my poems,
> See, in my poems immigrants continually coming and landing,
> See, in arriere, the wigwam, the trail, the hunter's hut, the flat-boat,
> the maize-leaf, the claim, the rude fence, and the backwoods village,
> See, on the one side the Western Sea and on the other the Eastern
> Sea, how they advance and retreat upon my poems as upon their
> own shores,
> See, pastures and forests in my poems – see, animals wild and tame
> – see, beyond the Kaw, countless herds of buffalo feeding on
> short curly grass,
> See, in my poems, cities, solid, vast, inland, with paved streets, with
> iron and stone edifices, ceaseless vehicles, and commerce,
> See, the many-cylinder'd steam printing-press – see, the electric
> telegraph stretching across the continent,
> See, through Atlantica's depths pulses American Europe reaching,
> pulses of Europe duly return'd,
> See, the strong and quick locomotive as it departs, panting, blowing
> the steam whistle,
> See, ploughmen ploughing farms – see, miners digging mines – see,
> the numberless factories,
> See, mechanics busy at their benches with tools – see from among

[87] When Whitman was born (31st May 1819), only twenty-one states had been admitted to the Union. Beginning with Alabama, when he was just seven months old, this figure would more than double during the poet's lifetime, increasing – with a final, four-state flurry in November 1889 – to forty-four, a rate of approximately one state every eighteen months for Whitman's seventy-two years. 'America is not finished,' he wrote in his preface, and 'perhaps never will be' (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 643).

them superior judges, philosophs, Presidents, emerge, drest in
working dresses,

See, lounging through the shops and fields of the States, me well-
belov'd, close-held by day and night,

Here the loud echoes of my songs there – read the hints come at last.

The penultimate section of 'Starting from Paumanok' reels with the locomotive energy of Whitman's anaphoric lines, 'panting' and 'blowing' with 'many-cylinder'd' activity. Each begins with the same rhythmic imperative, 'See,' coming up for air (like a swimmer) before the unspool of each line; Whitman gathers his disparate parts with something like thematic or associative logic, though often places juxtaposing features side by side, as in the 'Western' and the 'Eastern' seas or the 'mechanics,' 'judges,' and 'Presidents,' equalizing everything by folding it into the poem. Each item flickers by, 'continually coming and landing,' barely having time to register before the poet shifts his gaze elsewhere, an unending buzz of 'advance and retreat,' like the waves licking the nation's shore. Whitman's verse becomes a huge container ship, filling with the 'countless' objects of his catalogue, growing heavier and heavier with the freight of itself. The poetry is undoubtedly a celebration of these fragments, but it is also an act of communication, an outward transmission, winked at by the image of the 'printing-press' and the 'electric telegraph,' not to mention the 'loud echoes' that reverberate the final line.[88]

In an important sense, it is the United States themselves which are communicated by Whitman's poetry, not only the meticulous inventory of their contents but the essential vastness of their nature, the poet's 'omnivorous lines' (as he describes them in 'Song of Myself') stretching across each page just as America's

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[88] Ibid., 24-25

telegraph wires and railroads had begun to stretch across the continent.[89] In his preface, Whitman had already declared America to be 'essentially the greatest poem,' 'not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations'.[90] With the poetry he was now trying to express this sense of greatness, both qualitatively and quantitively, producing an articulation of the country that could be carried in a pocket. At the same time, *Leaves of Grass* becomes a record of its poet too, a long transmission of the man himself. '"Leaves of Grass" indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature,' ends Whitman's 'A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads', a retrospective essay included in the 1889 edition published for his seventieth birthday. Believing this to be the final new edition of his work that he would witness in his lifetime, Whitman describes his project as 'an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record.'[91] Two years later, having completed preparations for yet another (and this time final) publication, he reiterates this sentiment in a moving letter of December 1891, three months before he died:

> L. of G. *at last complete* – after 33 y'rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old – the wonder to me that I have carried it on to accomplish as essentially as it is, tho' I see well enough its numerous deficiencies & faults.[92]

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[89] Ibid., 67

[90] Ibid., 616

[91] Ibid., 484

[92] Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 292; This blurring of subject and object is a consistent presence in *Leaves of Grass*, perhaps best

Much has been written about the connection between the America of Whitman's poems and his complex sense of selfhood. 'I celebrate myself,' reads the opening line of the 1855 edition, 'And what I shall assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,' establishing a fluid and apparently coextensive relationship between the poet and his addressee, who appears to be the reader and the nation simultaneously.[93] For the most part, Whitman maintains his insistent, atomic connectedness to all things, routinely claiming kinship or communion with whatever passes by, making frequent use of a linguistic tone that echoes through the Bible, particularly the rhetoric of Christ in the New Testament: 'And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.'[94]

This is, of course, the same process of kinship that so irritated Lawrence, who believed Whitman to have lost sight of his individuality, cooking himself into 'the awful pudding of One Identity,' as he memorably put it. A recent strain of criticism has argued that passages of Whitman's poetry reveal, like Lawrence, the poet's inability to identify with aspects of the natural world, including Christine Gerhardt, who reads 'A Noiseless

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encapsulated by a famous poem of 1860 titled 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand', in which clearly Whitman implies his writing and his personhood to shimmer coextensively.

[93] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 26

[94] Ibid., 39; These lines are especially reminiscent of a verse in Matthew, Chapter 25, following Jesus's explanation of the Parable of the Talents, in which he claims a spiritual connection to His followers:

> *Then the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?*
>
> *When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?*
>
> *Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?*
>
> *And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

Patient Spider' as 'a poem about connections that will not work,' a failure 'to bridge the gap between human self and nature,' calling the poem 'an important counterbalance to the grand all-absorptive reach in Whitman's poetry.'[95] In a well-known passage from 'Song of Myself' – '*What is the grass?*' – Whitman has difficulty interpreting the 'hopeful green stuff' at his feet, referring to it as 'a uniform hieroglyphic,' in need of understanding. Convinced that 'it means,' Whitman makes a series of guesses, though the grass remains stubbornly emblematic, fizzing with several possible meanings while revealing nothing definite. At best, Whitman understands the grass to be a 'rememberancer' of creation, 'the handkerchief of the Lord,' 'designedly dropt,' the word 'sign' itself hidden in the body of 'designedly'. Alternatively, he reads it as a mark of communality, uniting life across the continent, 'Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white,' 'the same' stuff growing everywhere. Most compellingly, he understands it to be a kind of *memento mori*, 'the beautiful hair of uncut graves,' suggestive of a process of renewal and decay, a motif underpinning much of Whitman's poetry. Even here, however, Whitman runs into a problem of exegesis. 'I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,' he writes, 'And the hints about the old men and mothers'. Far from giving answers, however, he ends up asking questions of his own, directed at the reader from the pages of the poem: 'What do you think has become of the young and old men? / And what do you think has become of the women and children?' It is as if Whitman turns his face to us, making direct eye contact, and shrugs his shoulders: *Your guess is as good as mine*.[96]

[95] Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 83

[96] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 30-31

Nevertheless, despite these moments of uncertainty, the pervasive force of Whitman's writing is to fold the world into himself, to become a chronicler of the United States, emphasising the relatedness of its many disparate parts within the form of 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos'.[97] The expansive, metaphysical rhetoric of Whitman's poetry provides, again, the cue for Emerson, whose famous letter greeting the poet 'at the beginning of a great career,' praising the 'wonderful gift' of his writing – 'the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed' – Whitman saw fit to reproduce (without Emerson's permission) as a means of self-promotion.[98]

Emerson frequently explores the interconnectedness of things, finding evidence, time and again, of a divine presence within the natural world. 'We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree,' he argues in 'The Over-Soul', 'but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.'[99] For Emerson, the soul not only binds these 'shining parts' together, allowing us to see the inherent connection between all things, but it also reveals the fact of God in us, a part of His creation, too. In *Nature* (1836), the most famous of Emerson's statements, he considers the fact that so few people seem to understand the world this way. 'To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature,' he writes:

> Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward sense are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.

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[97] Ibid., 45

[98] Ibid., 637

[99] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 164

Emerson's 'superficial seeing' is concerned with outward appearances, etymologically related to the world of outer surfaces. This superficial seeing is dull, blunt, and empirical, lacking 'the spirit of infancy' through which the 'heart' and 'inward' sense are reached. Though he doesn't say so explicitly, Emerson appears to count himself among the 'adult persons' to have retained this way of seeing. 'Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,' reads a famous passage, 'all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.' Just as Whitman claims a kind of atomic relation to the natural world, so Emerson becomes a 'part or particle of God,' partaking in creator and creation simultaneously. At the same time, he is 'nothing,' lacking bodily substance – his 'egotism' (the thrust of his essential selfhood) vanished – though gaining a literal *insight* into everything surrounding him. 'I become a transparent eye-ball,' he writes, an eyeball through which the illuminating light of the sun can bounce the world into his mind without a mediating retina, though an eyeball, also, through which Emerson projects himself, casting the knowledge of God's authorship over the world, like X-ray vision, from the inside out.[100]

The image of the X-ray is a useful one for illustrating Emerson's complicated (at times seemingly paradoxical) treatment of sight. It clarifies his sense that the 'spirit of infancy' allows us to see *into* nature, uncovering its secrets. In his famous essay, 'The Poet', published in 1844, Emerson makes reference to the classical figure of Lynceus of Messene, whose eyes 'were said to see through the earth,' drawing a comparison between Lynceus and the poet, who 'turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in

[100] Ibid., 29

their right series and procession.'[101] For Emerson, the poet stands 'one step nearer to things,' seeing 'the flowing or metamorphosis' between all aspects of creation. Building on a theological tradition that sees Adam as the namer of phenomena in the Garden of Eden, Emerson describes the poet as a 'Namer, or [a] Language-maker,' though one for whom the original, Edenic purity of language has been lost. Recycling his discussion of 'natural symbols' and hieroglyphs from *Nature* (outlined above), Emerson refers to language as 'fossil poetry,' in which the 'etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture'; 'the world is a temple,' he imagines, 'whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity.'[102] It is the poet, for Emerson, who 'comes one step nearer' to deciphering this world 'than any other,' seeing – like Lynceus of Messene – back through the geological crust of language's great 'archives of history' to the 'poetic origin' of things as they are.[103]

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[101] Christopher Windolph draws attention to two sources which are likely to have influenced Emerson's sense of sight. The first is the seventeenth century English writer Thomas Browne who, in his *Religio Medici* (1643), argues that when we behold the natural world we can see 'directly into nature's secret order,' witnessing the resurrection of dead matter 'into the parts of minerals, Plants, Animals, [and] Elements'. Windolph also alludes to John Glanvill's *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661), which speculates on Adam's prelapsarian sight in terms akin to Lynceus of Messene. '*Adam* needed no Spectacles,' he writes, 'It may be that he saw the motion of the bloud [*blood*] and spirits through the transparent skin, as we do the workings of those industrious *Animals* through a hive of glass.' (Christopher J. Windolph, *Emerson's Nonlinear Nature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 5, 9)

[102] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 189-90

[103] Further insight into Emerson's semiotics can be found in an unlikely source. In Paul Auster's 1985 novel, *City of Glass*, the protagonist Quinn – a writer of detective fiction involved in an investigation – is tasked with tailing Peter Stillman, the father of his client's husband. As part of his investigation, Quinn reads Stillman's eccentric theological monograph, containing a lengthy examination of the role of language in Christian mythology. 'Adam's one task in the Garden had been to invent language,' Quinn reads:

> to give each creature and thing its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. Names had become detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs;

Emerson's interest in the emblematic relationship between language and signs is brought to light by a famous hieroglyphic letter to his older brother William, dated 10th November 1814 **[Fig. 4]**. Emerson substitutes individual words and syllables for small pictorial sketches: an antlered stag for *Dear*, a conical yew tree for *you*, an algebraic letter /x/ beside a boxy printing press for *express*, and so on. Somewhat appropriately, given his interest in sight, the pages of Emerson's letter are stared out of by a series of dark-pupiled eyes.[104]

> language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language.

Quinn later confronts Stillman, who reiterates his thoughts about the inherent failure of human language, revealing his desired project to create 'a new language,' one 'that will at last say what we have to say.' Like Emerson and Lawrence, Stillman desires to find a way back to a form of expression that reveals the 'essences' of natural things.

While Quinn doesn't exactly get to the bottom of the Stillman mystery, Auster makes a brief return to semiotics in *Ghosts* (1986), the second story (following *City of Glass*) of his so-called *New York Trilogy* (1987). Here, a new detective (Blue) is hired to keep a watchful eye on a man in the opposite building, about whom he produces a daily written report. We discover Blue's apparent mastery of language, a purity of expression resembling Stillman's 'new language'. 'Words are transparent for [Blue],' writes Auster, 'great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there. Oh, there are moments when the glass gets a trifle smudged and Blue has to polish it in one spot or another, but once he finds the right word, everything clears up.' On the following page, Blue's ability abruptly stops and 'For the first time in his experience of writing reports, he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things that they are trying to say':

> Blue looks around the room and fixes his attention on various objects, one after the other. He sees the lamp and says to himself, lamp. He sees the bed and says to himself, bed. He sees the notebook and says to himself, notebook. It will not do to call the lamp a bed, he thinks, or the bed a lamp. No, these words fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world.

While the 'snugness' of Blue's language bears a resemblance to the quality of language in the Garden of Eden, there is nothing inherently remarkable about the words at Blue's disposal: *lamp*, *bed*, *notebook*. What's more, where Adam's language emerges from the 'essence' of the thing described, as if from the inside out, Blue's words 'fit snugly around the things the stand for,' like a cloak or a protective covering. While we learn that 'Words are transparent for him,' like 'great windows' – reminiscent of Emerson's Lynceus and his X-ray vision – the words remain a barrier, a solid, man-made pane which (though transparent) Blue must still see *through*. (Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 43, 77, 148-49)

[104] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 531-33

As Emerson did on his behalf, Whitman casts himself in the role of America's great classifier, sifting the 'stuff' of his poetry into endless categories and groups. Despite his obvious interest in material phenomena, however, it is difficult to overlook the spiritual aspect of Whitman's poetry, especially his apparent draw towards an Emersonian sense of divine interconnectedness. For his friend and disciple, the naturalist John Burroughs, Whitman 'is not merely an observer of Nature, he is immersed in her,' producing poems that 'approximate to a direct utterance of Nature herself'.[105] And yet, the frequently cosmic rhetoric of the poetry pulsates with the Alpha-and-Omega-ism of the New Testament. Elsewhere in Whitman's writing, the apparent influence of Emerson is more explicit, as in *Democratic Vistas* – combining several prose essays from the late 1860s – where he refers to Nature as '(the only complete, actual poem,) existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all,' or in the opening paragraph of *An American Primer*, where he addresses the question of spirituality directly:

> Much is said of what is spiritual, and spirituality, in this, that, or the other, – in objects, expressions. For me, I see no object, no expression, no animal, no tree, no art, no book, but I see, from morning to night, and from night to morning, the spiritual. Bodies are all spiritual. All words are spiritual – nothing is more spiritual than words.[106]

At least as far as Lawrence understood it, however, Whitman's poetry amounts less to an Emersonian sense of spiritual revelation than a deliberate and effusive

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[105] John Burroughs, *Notes on Walt Whitman, As Poet and Person* (New York: American News Company, 1967), 41

[106] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 772; Walt Whitman, *An American Primer*, ed. Horace Traubel (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1904), 460

celebration of 'the body electric'.[107] For all their spiritual gestures, the poems are excessively populated with figures and bodies and Whitman is prone to anatomically detailed passages in which he lingers over the human form in the spirit of a medieval blazon. In a famous passage of 'Song of Myself' he describes a group of male bathers, observed by a young woman commonly regarded to be a substitute for the poet himself.[108] 'The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from their long hair, / Little streams pass'd all over their bodies,' he writes, watching them 'float on their backs,' as 'their white bellies bulge to the sun'. 'An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,' we learn, descending 'tremblingly from their temples and ribs': immediate felt contact.[109]

The fact of Whitman's interest in the male body especially has generated a great deal of valuable academic criticism concerning the poet's sexuality.[110] It was also arguably the cause of his dismissal from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1865, when Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan (having discovered a copy of *Leaves of Grass* on

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[107] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 81

[108] It has become commonplace to pair Whitman's twenty-eight bathers with Thomas Eakins's 1885 painting, *The Swimming Hole* **[Fig. 5]**, which depicts a group of six nude male figures at Dove Lake, outside Philadelphia. While opinion is divided as to whether the painting is a direct response to Whitman's lines, it ripples with the softness and sexuality of the poem, an Arcadian scene celebrating the contours and muscularity of the male form, emphasised by the formal studio poses of the three men on the central rock. Eakins painted Whitman's portrait two years later. Between 1882 and 1886, he made a series of approximately eighty photographic studies, mostly of models and his students at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Among the nudes is a sequence of seven pictures of a bearded older man **[Fig. 6]**. While it isn't certain that the photographs are Whitman – there is no accompanying caption – the resemblance is striking enough not only to strengthen the connection between Whitman's and Eakins's work but to remind us that Whitman's fascination with the body would, of course, include his own.

[109] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 34

[110] Academic engagement with Whitman's queer identity is at least as old as Robert K. Martin's book *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), though the conversation owes much to Gary Schmidgall's 1997 biography, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life.* The contemporary landscape continues to celebrate Whitman's queerness, inspiring a wealth of contemporary poetry in dialogue with the older poet, as evidenced by the recent anthology *Lovejets: Queer Male Poets on 200 Years of Walt Whitman* (2019), published for the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising of 1969.

the poet's desk) was said to discharge Whitman on the grounds of moral indecency. At the same time, Whitman's interest in bodies sheds significant light on Lawrence's appreciation of the poet, particularly his insistence on the poetry of the present.

Many critics and readers have commented on the cinematic quality of Whitman's writing. The essential rapidity and restlessness of his catalogues creates a constant stream of images, rolling past the stationary reader on the reel of Whitman's unravelling lines. Frequently, we witness something like a panning shot as Whitman leads us through a city or a region, documenting its contents. At other times he makes use of a range of techniques easily described in cinematic terms: jump cuts, close ups, long takes, montage, points of view. At times, Whitman's writing doesn't just resemble filmmaking but *avant-garde* filmmaking, more Jean Luc Goddard than Cecil B. DeMille. What's more, the influence of his writing on the development of American cinema can be seen as early as Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), an exalting documentary portrait of New York City interspersed with lines from Whitman's poem of the same name. 'I often heard him say,' wrote the cinematographer Karl Brown of the influential director D. W. Griffith, 'that he would rather have written one page of *Leaves of Grass* than to have made all the movies for which he received world acclaim.'[111]

Ezra Greenspan draws an illuminating comparison between Whitman's writing and the 'kino-eye' (*cinema-eye*), a concept attributed to the Soviet director Dziga Vertov. 'I am a kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye,' suggests Vertov of his cinematic practice, 'I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it':

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[111] Quoted in Kenneth M. Price, 'Walt Whitman at the Movies: Cultural Memory and the Politics of Desire', in Ed Folsom, ed., *Whitman East and West: New Contexts for Reading Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 43

> Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recoding movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations[.]

Whitman writes about his poetry in similarly fluid terms in his preface, where he emphases the poet's role in capturing the 'mighty present age,' 'To absorb, and express in poetry, any thing of it – of its world – America – cities and States – the years, the events of our Nineteenth Century – the rapidity of movement' and (as if imagining the flickering projections of the ghostly silver screen) its constant, ever-changing 'fluctuations of light and shade'. Bearing in mind Whitman's interest in bodies, it is curious to note that Vertov reaches for the language of *dis*embodiment in describing his craft, transcending the limitations of physical shape and 'human immobility' to find himself in 'constant motion,' unencumbered by the obstacles of space – crawling, climbing, and moving without impediment – free to gallop at the speed of a horse or 'outstrip running soldiers,' even to 'plunge full speed into a crowd' or 'ascend with an airplane' without a fear of bodily harm.[112] While Whitman's poetry retains the essence of this freedom, taking equal pleasure in 'the sheer chaos of movement,' he maintains an apparent insistence on the body and its presence. More precisely, he desires a kind of contact, a physical encounter. 'I will go to the bank by the wood and become

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[112] Ezra Greenspan, 'Some Remarks on the Poetics of "Participle-Loving Whitman"', in Ezra Greenspan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96-97

undisguised and naked,' he writes in 'Song of Myself', imagining himself returning to a state of prelapsarian nakedness, 'I am mad for it to be in contact with me.'[113]

The word 'contact' appears five more times in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. In 'A Song for Occupations', Whitman even seems to metaphorically align the contact mechanism of the printing press – 'the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us' – with his closeness to the reader. He claims to be 'chilled' into the pages of his work, as if an imprint of himself were left, but 'I pass so poorly with paper and types,' he writes, 'I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.'[114] As with Lawrence, the recurrence of the word 'contact' in Whitman's writing invites a comparison not with cinema but with photography. As Ed Folsom reminds us, it is important to remember that Whitman's poetry 'emerged at precisely the time photography was literally taking hold of the American imagination,' teaching him 'to see how all the actual stuff of the world was crucial to its wholeness.' Not only does Folsom return us to an idea of *stuff*, he goes on to draw a connection between the 'brash informality' and 'quickness' of photography and the rapid, undiscriminating thrust of Whitman's poems: 'What may not have seemed worth a painter's time was, for the photographer, always worth a few seconds,' just as 'what may not have been a fit subject for a formal poet of classical

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[113] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* 2; Lawrence appears to rehearse these lines directly in a scene from *Women in Love* (1920), in which his protagonist Birkin, lying on a hillside, surrounded by flowers, decides to take off all his clothes:

> He wanted to touch them all, to saturate himself with the touch of them all. He took off his clothes, and sat down naked among the primroses [...] It was such a fine, cool, subtle touch all over him, he seemed to saturate himself with their contact. (D. H. Lawrence, *Woman in Love* (London: Viking Press, 1968), 120)

[114] Walt Whitman, 'A Song of Occupations' https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1871/poems/100 (accessed 12 May 2020)

education would slide effortlessly into the open forms of the democratic poet who is out to turn America into the greatest poem.'[115]

While conspicuously absent as a subject of his poetry, Whitman's interest in photography frequently surfaces in his notes and correspondence. In an unpublished prose fragment, he even appears to conceive of experience in precisely photographic terms, writing that for 'every show & every concrete object & every experience of life the serious question is, What does it stamp – what will it leave daguerreotyped [...] upon the mind,' deploying an image not only of the daguerreotype – a popular and widely available photographic process of the mid-nineteenth century, named for its developer, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre – but also an imprinting 'stamp,' leaving a trace or mark behind. In another unpublished note, Whitman is more explicit: 'In these *Leaves*,' he writes, 'everything is literally photographed. Nothing is poetized, no divergence, not a step, not an inch, nothing for beauty's sake, no euphemism, no rhyme.'[116]

While Folsom has illuminated Whitman's interest in staging photographs of himself (what he refers to as the poet's method of 'self-iconography'), it is clear, in another sense, that Whitman was attracted to photography as a wholly democratic technology; the photograph captures everything, rendering every detail; it leaves nothing out, even that which the photographer may well have missed themselves.[117] 'I find I like the photographs better than the oils,' states Whitman, 'they are perhaps mechanical, but they are honest.'[118] In the 1840s, William Henry Fox Talbot – who had

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[115] Folsom, *Native Representations*, 100, 113

[116] Ibid., 104

[117] Ibid., 128

[118] Ibid., 101

developed in England a parallel process to Daguerre's – published an early photographic book in which he characterised photography as nature's way of making art about itself, 'without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil,' enthusiastically introducing his collection of 'sun-pictures,' drawn not by him but by 'the pencil of nature'.[119] Whether Whitman saw Fox Talbot's book or not – he refers to photographers, at one point, as the great 'Priests of the Sun' – he certainly adopts a similar set of linguistic terms in describing his own poetry, emphasising the democratic reach of sunlight as it bathes the world in equal light.[120] For Whitman, the new poet of America 'judges not as the judge judges,' he writes the preface, 'but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.'[121]

Returning to 'The Poetry of the Present', we see that it is the photographic, spontaneous Whitman – the poet of contact, not democracy – that captures Lawrence's imagination, exemplifying 'the unrestful, ungraspable poetry of the sheer present,' a poetry of 'life surging itself into utterance.' Auden alludes to the same instant, photographic quality of Whitman's poetry – somewhat fittingly – in his essay about Lawrence, noting how 'No detail is dwelt upon for long' but rather 'snapshotted and added as one more item to the vast American catalogue.'[122] For Folsom, the photographic Whitman even anticipates the 'intense, fragmentary, momentary seeing' of Ezra Pound's Imagism, with which Lawrence was peripherally associated, appearing in Amy Lowell's anthology *Some Imagist Poets* in April 1915.[123] For Lawrence, the

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[119] William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1844), 1

[120] Folsom, *Native Representations*, 105

[121] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 292

[122] Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 288

[123] Folsom, *Native Representations*, 111

photographic lens of *Leaves of Grass* speaks, above all, to Whitman's insistence on the present moment, capturing an immanent America forever at the point of coming into being, 'The present now and here,' as Whitman puts it in 'Eidólons', 'America's busy, teeming, intricate whirl'. 'I do not talk of the beginning or the end,' suggests 'Song of Myself', because the present moment offers the poet much more than enough. 'There was never any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more youth or age than there is now, / And will never be any more perfection than there is now, / Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now,' writes Whitman, a brief sequence whose line-endings exemplify a new poetics of immediacy: *there is now*, *there is now*, *there is now*, *there is now*.[124]

It is this quality that Lawrence attempted to infuse into his poetry, an attempt to express, in the words of Whitman's 'Spontaneous Me', the 'Beautiful dripping fragments' of the present, 'the negligent list of one after another as I happen to call them to me or think of them'.[125] Indeed, Lawrence's own conspicuously named poem 'Manifesto' concludes with a quatrain channelling the spirit of Whitman in 'Song of Myself': 'We shall not look before and after. / We shall *be*, *now.* / We shall know in full. / We, the mystic NOW.'[126]

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Appreciating his debt to Whitman in this way, the early criticisms of Lawrence's poetry are rendered self-consuming (like Lawrence's favoured image of the snake devouring

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[124] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 7, 3

[125] Ibid., 89

[126] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 268

its own tail). Far from a cutting remark, T. S. Eliot's 'more notes for poems than poems themselves' strikes to the very core of Lawrence's poetic aims. The poems 'are meant to be spontaneous works, spontaneously experienced,' writes Joyce Carol Oates, filled with 'moments of clumsiness, ugliness, and sheer stubborn spite,' but equally 'a kind of mystical appropriation of Lawrence's life,' or even '*life itself*'.[127] Just as Whitman considered *Leaves of Grass* to preserve '*a Person*, a human being,' so several readers of Lawrence have alluded to the blurring of the poems and their author. '[H]ow fluid, how personal, how imperfect,' remarks Richard Aldington in his introduction to the 1932 edition of *Last Poems* and *More Pansies*, 'a series of inconclusive adventures only related because they all happened to the same man.'[128] 'It becomes increasingly clear,' concludes Amit Chaudhuri, 'that Lawrence's poetic discourse is meant to be read, as much as the Bible, in its entirety,' conjuring an echo of the opening verses of John's gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with Lawrence, and the Word was Lawrence*.[129]

True to his discipleship of Whitman, Lawrence succeeded in creating a body of poetic work as fluid, spontaneous, and unpredictable as himself, embodying Whitman's vision of the poet as expressed in his first preface:

> The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I

[127] Oates, *The Hostile Sun*, 8

[128] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 594

[129] Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 5

will not have in my writing any elegance or originality to hang in the
way between me and the rest like curtains.[130]

Lawrence's poetic commitment to the fluctuations of the self, his unmediated 'channel of thoughts,' is precisely what allows the myriad objects of his experience – the various birds, beasts, and flowers that resist interpretation – to remain so stubbornly and vibrantly themselves. 'Hostile critics have called Lawrence's poems 'sketches,'' acknowledges Keith Sagar, 'but a sketch is often superior, in terms of life, to the finished product.'[131] As Frieda wrote of Lawrence, 'Everything he met had the newness of a creation that had just that moment come into being,' a 'newness' – or a *now*-ness – he transmitted to his writing. At their best, the poems retain the unpredictable, even chaotic spirit of this creation, preserved in such a way that future readers might be able to experience the same, as if the energy of Lawrence's 'sheer present' were still radiating from the text itself.

Indeed, it is precisely this phenomenon – a poetic transmission of the present to the future – that so preoccupied Walt Whitman, whose poetry abounds with deep astral projections, 'launching his imagination beyond the constraints of time and place,' in the words of Ezra Greenspan.[132] Whitman frequently conjures visions of his future readers, addressing them directly from the pages of the poem, adopting the prophetic tenor of the Old Testament, styling himself as an 'acme of things accomplish'd, and [...] encloser of things to be.'[133] The final section of 'Song of Myself' concludes with an image of the poet dissolving into the very grass that has served as the conceptual framework of his

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[130] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 624

[131] Sagar, *Life Into Art*, 218

[132] Greenspan, *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, 102

[133] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 70

poem, assuring the reader of his continued worldly presence: 'I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles':

> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.
>
> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you.[134]

In something like an act of poetic self-sacrifice (mirroring the template of the Christian Resurrection), Whitman's physical body is given in exchange for the democratic union of his readers, each connected to him (and, by extension, to each other) through their encounters with the poem, a community of readers that transcends time, life, and geography, the omnipresent Whitman waiting patiently for a 'you' both intimately singular and infinitely plural.

'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' is frequently regarded to be the epitome of Whitman's future-gazing poetry, the ferry in question serving as a powerful metaphor for transporting Whitman and his readers back and forth through time. The poem begins by establishing the constant meteorological and celestial presence of the 'Flood-tide,' 'Clouds,' and rising sun, which Whitman meets here 'face to face,' as if anticipating the 'hundreds and hundreds' of readers looking down into the poem 'years hence,' an image triggered by the 'Crowds of men and women' on the ferry who have captured his attention. As in 'Song of Myself', the poem's second section sees Whitman imagining himself 'disintegrated' into the 'simple, compact, well-join'd scheme' of the world,

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[134] Ibid., 77-78

conjuring the broad interconnectedness of 'all things at all hours of the day'. It is as if the world of Whitman's experience and the reader's future experience of the poem take place simultaneously, emphasised by the radical consistency (as Whitman sees it) of the weather, ferry, crowds, and tides:

> Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
> Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
> others will see the shipping Manhattan north and west, and the
> heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
> Others will see the islands large and small;
> Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an
> hour high,
> A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others
> will see them,
> Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-
> back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

Whitman collapses the distance between reader and poet. 'It avails not, time nor place,' he writes, 'distance avails not,' insisting on his continuing presence even as he pictures it: 'I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence'; 'Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?' It is far from a surprise to find that the poem's shifts between a first-person 'I' and the abstracted 'you' of his addressee dissolve, in the poem's final moments, to a unified, collective 'we'.[135]

For Whitman, the poet reshapes the linear flow of history into a full and focused present moment, encompassing the past and future at once. After all, 'Past and future are not disjoined but joined,' he writes, suggesting that 'The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their

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[135] Ibid., 134-40

coffins and stands them again on their feet….he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson….he places himself where the future becomes present.'[136] Crucially, the poet accesses eternity through a conscious and unwavering engagement with the 'inconceivable vagueness and infiniteness [...] of today,' the 'immediate age' with which he 'flood[s] himself,' the same 'urgent, insurgent Now' Lawrence would later emphasise in 'The Poetry of the Present'.[137]

Looking more closely at 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', we see that while Whitman imagines the future, he also somehow manages to bring it before him:

> Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-
> hemm'd Manhattan?
> River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
> The sea-gulls osciallting their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight,
> and the belated lighter?
> What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with
> voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I
> approach?
> What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man
> that looks in my face?
> Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

[136] Ibid., 623; The image of the transcendent, resurrected Whitman, present in the future, has proven powerful in American culture. In their editorial introduction to *Walt Whitman: Where the Future Becomes Present* (2008), David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson allude to the contemporary Whitman impersonator, Darrel Blaine Ford, who attempts to literalize the physical endurance of the poet into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, regularly volunteering at the Walt Whitman Historic Birthplace Museum in Huntington, New York. 'I have loved the poetry of Walt Whitman, studied his life so assiduously [...] and now so closely resemble him,' reads a paragraph on Ford's website captioned 'Walt Whitman Returns', 'that I may be excused for so completely identifying with our greatest poet. 'Whitman said, "If you seek me, look for me under your bootsoles,"' he continues: 'I am not nearly so remote.' (http://www.waltwhitmanofli.com/ (accessed 20 June 2020))

[137] Ibid., 633

By giving himself entirely to the present, Whitman accesses the infinite. He is able to 'fuse' into the material 'stuff' of his poems, preserving an aspect of his Self and spirit to be experienced again during the act of reading. This is the same conclusion Lawrence drew from Whitman's poems and, indeed, goes some way to defining the contours of Lawrence's own theory of poetry. As he wrote of *Pansies*, Lawrence conceived of his poems as 'merely the breath of the moment, and one eternal moment easily contradicting the next eternal moment,' exposing – in the apparently paradoxical 'eternal moment' – a delicate hairline fracture between the immediacies of the present and the borders of eternity.[138] As Jessie Chambers wrote of Lawrence: 'I always saw him, in the strictest sense of the word, immortal.'

Emerson, too, arrives at a belief in the ability to transcend time and place through fierce attention to the present moment.[139] As he puts it in 'History', published in 1841, 'The man who has seen the rising moon break out of the clouds at midnight, has been present like an archangel at the creation of light and the world.'[140] Emerson's most striking expression of this thought comes in his famous essay, 'Self-Reliance', in a passage which is worth quoting at length. '[Man] is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose,' he writes, but:

> These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower, there is no more; in the leafless

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[138] Lawrence, *Complete Poems*, 424

[139] Considering the similarities in their thinking, it is all the more surprising to remember that Emerson is largely absent as a subject of Lawrence's prose, most obviously from *Studies in Classic American Literature.*

[140] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 111

> root, there is no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.

While Emerson acknowledges the forward growth of the flower through linear, historical time, from 'leafless root' and 'leaf-bud' to 'full-blown flower,' the rose always remains 'simply the rose,' 'perfect in every moment'. It is as if all stages of the rose's growth existed simultaneously, 'in all moments alike,' every stage of growth expressing the essence of the plant with equal vitality. As in 'The Poetry of the Present', Emerson advocates for a life rooted in the present tense, through which man will find himself somehow 'above time,' not within it.[141] In the words of critic James R. Guthrie, 'Encoded within Emerson's image of the rose in "Self-Reliance" is a paradox: One may rise above or surmount time only by possessing it and inhabiting it absolutely. For Emerson [...] living "above" time implied an ability to live *in the moment* – not *for* the moment, but rather to live fully in the present tense.' 'Seen properly,' Guthrie asserts, the universe becomes 'a simultaneous event, in which the present moment ripples progressively outward rather than decaying into the past or ushering in the future.'[142] Viewed through the lens of Emerson's writing, Whitman's past, present, and future do not just resemble one another with metaphorical 'similitude': they are fully simultaneous, 'above time,' happening at once.

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[141] Ibid., 128-29

[142] James R. Guthrie, *Above Time: Emerson's & Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 92-93

Returning to Whitman's poetry a final time, we suddenly discover glimpses of our own contemporary world staring back at us from the poems. From time to time, certain catalogues in *Leaves of Grass* untether from their nineteenth-century contexts and appear, instead, to show the world as it is now. More specifically, these passages appear to describe the America of Whitman's 1800s, of our present, and of the future simultaneously, an America of 'Interlink'd, food-yielding lands,' a land 'of coal and iron! land of gold! land of cotton, sugar, rice!':

> Land of wheat, beef, pork! land of wool and hemp! land of the
>   apple and the grape!
> Land of the pastoral plains, the grass-fields of the world! land
>   of those sweet air'd interminable plateaus!
> Land of the herd, the garden, the healthy house of adobie!
> Lands where the north-west Columbia winds, and where the
>   southwest Colorado winds!
> Land of the eastern Chesapeake! land of the Delaware!
> Land of Ontaria, Erie, Huron, Michigan!
> Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land! land of
> Vermont and Connecticut!
> Land of the ocean shores! land of sierras and peaks!

This is America *then*, in the poet's nineteenth century, but it is also America 'in the swimming shape of today,' bearing the contemporary signs of agriculture and industrialism, settlement and civilization, not to mention the 'interminable' natural phenomena of the country's rivers, shores, and mountain ranges. Glimpsed in this way, Whitman's poetry is not so much prophetic – imagining the future – as it is fully transparent, opening a portal or a window through which the country can be seen at all times in its history and future, from prehistoric 'ocean shores' to nineteenth-century 'sierras and peaks,' from the 'sweet air'd interminable plateaus' of the present day to the 'north-west Columbia' and 'southwest Colorado' winds that will be (and crucially, in

Whitman's poems, already *are now*) blowing in the future.[143] In 'Song of Myself', Whitman's temporally unanchored poetry appears again, evoking a series of images that seem to be occurring now in front of us, before our eyes, simultaneously historical and present, even appearing to refer obliquely to some future present moment where the scene described is taking place:

> The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
> The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane
> whistles its wild ascending lisp,
> The married and unmarried children ride home to their
> Thanksgiving dinner,
> The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong
> arm,
> The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon
> are ready,
> The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
> The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
> The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big
> wheel,
> The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe
> and looks at the oats and rye,
> The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case[.]

As this section of the poem continues, further glimpses into lives-in-process slide past like a roll of film: a surgeon casting 'malform'd limbs' into a pail; a 'connoisseur' admiring paintings in an 'exhibition-gallery'; a young wife and her week-old child, 'recovering and happy'; numberless immigrants, arriving at the country's edge; 'The President holding a cabinet council,' 'surrounded by [...] great Secretaries.' These images are evergreen, a once and future America. Moreover, where the imagery of

[143] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 22

Whitman's poetry seems steadfastly rooted to his century – a century of slaves, masters, and overseers, of ballroom dances and 'Flatboatmen,' 'canvas tents' and 'trappers' – we are invited to imagine a future where these once-pervasive details have, like the sure, cycling seasons 'pursuing each other' through the poem, come round again 'for their time'.[144]

Just as Whitman and the 'stuff' of his poems achieve a kind of afterlife, Lawrence hoped that by attending to the present moment the subjects of his poetry (himself included) might come to shimmer on the page not as the objects of subjective experience but as the shape and essence of themselves, a record of the thing itself. As such, the future readers of Lawrence's poems would come to experience the continuation of that process, the energy of creation, pulsing through the poems like blood, a living, breathing photograph.

Whether Lawrence achieved this 'pure expression' or not – a 'quality of "living-ness,"' to recall Marsden Hartley on Cézanne – the implications of his thinking about poetry are prescient. Indeed, it would not be until the middle of the twentieth century, two decades after his death (let alone his final departure from the United States in 1925), that America would yield a crop of poets explicitly devoted to the textures of the present tense, answering Lawrence's call for a poetry 'of that which is at hand'. These poets, too, would celebrate the speed and the stuff of 'the incarnate Now,' relishing – as Geoff Dyer writes of Lawrence – 'the shock of his first encounter,' producing a body of poetry which, above all, ripples with 'immediate *felt* contact'.[145]

[144] Ibid., 36-37

[145] Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*, 116

While Lawrence's reception as a writer of fiction has fluctuated since his death – enjoying a period of immense popularity during the 1960s almost immediately followed by widespread academic condemnation – his importance as a poet remains unusually overlooked. When we examine the contours of American poetry following the Second World War, however, we discover that Lawrence's fingerprints are clearly smudged about the place. Though his influence in Britain may endure primarily as a novelist, it seems more than time – a century after his arrival in New Mexico – to re-explore the legacy of his writing to the country that loomed so large in his imagination.

II

Then Again

The death of Frank O'Hara on July 25th 1966 has taken on the quality of American mythology. Struck down by a dune buggy on Fire Island in the early hours of the morning, O'Hara was rushed to nearby Bayview Hospital where he succumbed to his internal injuries. The shock of O'Hara's sudden loss is clear from the attendance of his funeral two days later, where close to 200 people (including a long list of writers and artists) came to pay their respects to the man with whom they felt, in many instances, a uniquely special bond.[1] 'Frank O'Hara was my best friend,' said the painter Larry Rivers during his highly charged, emotional eulogy, but then again 'There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O'Hara was their best friend'; 'He was a dream of contradictions. At one time or another, he was everyone's greatest and most loyal audience.'[2] O'Hara was buried in Green River Cemetery in Springs, New York, a stone's throw from the grave of Jackson Pollock, whose funeral had taken place a decade earlier (in August 1956) after his own death in a late-night car crash.

The mythical quality of O'Hara's loss is made explicit in Alfred Leslie's series of paintings *The Killing Cycle* (1967-75), three panels of which dramatize the accident on Fire Island. Subtitled *The Killing of Frank O'Hara,* Leslie's paintings present a highly

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[1] Brad Gooch opens *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (London: Harper Perennial, 1993) with a cinematic portrait of the poet's funeral:

> The mourners arrived from all points. Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler drove down from Provincetown (because small planes made Frankenthaler nervous). The poet Bill Berkson flew in from Newport. Alex and Ada Katz made the trip down from Maine. Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky chanted "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama" all the way from Manhattan in Larry Rivers's car. Barnett Newman had vowed never to return to the Hamptons after Pollock's funeral in 1956, but he and his wife, Annalee, reneged and rented a limousine and driver [...] Al Leslie heard the news on the beach and came straggling to the cemetery in his swimsuit with towel [...] Willem de Kooning wore splattered workclothes as did many of the other painters and sculptors. [...] A yellow bus hired by the Museum of Modern Art made a sweltering three hour trip from Manhattan filled with curators, directors, assistants, and secretaries.

[2] Quoted in Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur, eds., *Homage to Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: Big Sky, 1979), 138

stylized, even dreamlike account of O'Hara's death. Three nude, almost grotesquely muscular figures in *The Accident* **[Fig. 7]** evoke the witches in *Macbeth* (c.1606), lending a supernatural aura to the moment of collision, particularly by association to a play concerned so much with the inevitability (or not) of tragedy; the figures are especially reminiscent of Henry Fuseli's 1783 portrait of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters **[Fig. 10]**, depicted in profile, their bony arms outstretched and pointing. In the second panel – *The Telephone Call* **[Fig. 8]** – O'Hara's body lies prone across the painting, drawing a parallel both to Mantegna's *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* (c.1480) and Hans Holbein the Younger's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-22) **[Figs. 11-12]**. The association of O'Hara to the Christ figure is clear in Leslie's third painting (*The Loading Pier* **[Fig.9]**), which shows O'Hara's body stretchered by a group of eerie beachgoers, arranged in a loose pyramid, an apparent reference to depictions of the Deposition and Entombment. The painting draws upon Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* (1603-04) **[Fig. 13]**, whose stone platform becomes the pier from which O'Hara's body is unloaded, while the central figure of Nicodemus, hunched over at a ninety-degree angle, is clearly echoed by the presence of a woman staring from the frame. While *The Killing Cycle* doesn't offer up an image of O'Hara rising from the Tomb, his life restored, Leslie's use of this religious imagery implies the next stage of the narrative: the poet's Christ-like resurrection.

Much has been written about the cultural staying power of O'Hara's poetry. *The Collected Poems*, edited by Donald Allen (who had earlier included O'Hara in his seminal anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960)), acted as a resurrection of sorts. Published in 1971 – just five years after O'Hara's death – the collection painstakingly gathered as much of the poetry as possible into a single volume; mostly unpublished during O'Hara's lifetime, *Collected Poems* won the National Book Award in 1972. Since then, the poet's canonical afterlife has been assured. Indeed, as the American poet Tony

Hoagland has suggested, 'Frank O'Hara has had the most widespread, infiltrating impact on the style and voice of American poetry in the last thirty years.' The critic Andrew Epstein has usefully documented O'Hara's perennial presence on the American stage, citing British poet Sean O'Brien's sense that O'Hara has become 'now as ubiquitous as weather'. Epstein charts the solidification of O'Hara's critical and cultural legacy, from Marjorie Perloff's 1977 study *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (regarded as the first critical survey of the poet's work) and Brad Gooch's biography of 1993, to his influence over popular music, queer writing, and even the appearance of his poetry in an episode of the popular TV show, *Mad Men* (2007-15), whose protagonist – the existentialist ad executive, Don Draper (John Hamm) – recites O'Hara's 'Mayakovsky' at the close of a climactic episode. 'Sales of O'Hara's book *Meditations in an Emergency* shot up overnight,' writes Epstein, and a previously 'rather obscure' poem has now 'become [one] of O'Hara's best known – or at least most tweeted'. Epstein goes on to explore the ways in which O'Hara's work has been persistently sustained online, particularly on social media, the product of 'his uncanny ability to seem continuously new and of the moment.'[3] In the words of poet Adam Fitzgerald, O'Hara's writing reflects 'the immediacy of a consciousness formed by the internet: fragmentation, collage, name-dropping, checking in, quotations, gossip, scandal, click bait and trends, laconic witticisms and gushy, full-breasted rants. Call him a prophet of the internet.'[4]

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[3] Andrew Epstein, 'Also a Poet' https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/90078/39also-a-poet39 (accessed 28 February 2022)

[4] Todd Tietchen has also explored the connection between O'Hara's poetry and social media, suggesting that 'O'Hara's ability to transform the details of his life into an involved and involving poetics of the self might help engender a series of pertinent questions regarding the emergence and characteristics of life narration within social media.' Tietchen relates a revealing anecdote from the classroom, recalling a student's response to O'Hara's 'The Day lady Died': 'That's not a poem, it's just a tweet. All he's doing is cataloguing the events of his life like people do on Twitter' (Todd Tietchen, 'Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of the Digital', *Criticism* 56.1 (Winter 2014), 45-46).

'Why does it seem so impossible to believe that Frank is dead?' asked Kenneth Koch a few weeks following O'Hara's funeral. 'Maybe,' replied his wife, Janice, 'because he was so full of life.'[5] A decade later, writing in 1976, Anthony Libby begins a critical article on the poet in similarly life-affirming terms:

> Still with us, walking his poems' streets or dreaming through their jungles, Frank O'Hara creates a sense of presence unique even in our time of poetry [...] For once, the immortality conferred by art seems actual; what walks, behind the imprint of voice, is not simply a ghost. The problem is to define the quality of his presence, to discover the nature of the creative motion so intense that the poet in the poem moves always before us.[6]

Recollections of O'Hara's liveliness and energy are everywhere. His reputation – as both a writer and a socialite – was for relentless spontaneity, an immediacy of action and enthusiasm he applied to every aspect of his life, from his work at New York's Museum of Modern Art (where he rose from a position at the front desk to become Associate Curator) to his ability to seem present at three parties at once. 'The portrait of Frank that rings truest for me is Alex Katz's cutout **[Fig. 14]**,' writes Bill Berkson in his *Frank O'Hara Notebook*: 'on the balls of his feet, poised, ready to spring into action – to deliver a tirade, a gushing accolade, a smack on the lips.'[7] 'He was a tireless partygoer, a heavy drinker, a restless, inexhaustible, eclectic, and wildly energetic genius,' begins Perloff in *Poet Among Painters*, affixing to O'Hara the same passage from Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* we have witnessed in regard to Lawrence: '"To

[5] Gooch, *City Poet*, 5

[6] Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', in Jim Elledge, ed., *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 131

[7] Bill Berkson, *A Frank O'Hara Notebook: Life on Earth* (New York: no places press, 2019), 266

burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life," might well have been his motto.'[8]

O'Hara's tirelessness accounts for the production, also, of his poetry. The huge *Collected Poems* runs close to 600 pages, evidence of O'Hara's ability to write whenever he felt called to, regardless of the circumstances. His famous *Lunch Poems* – published in 1964 as part of Lawrence Ferlighetti's influential Pocket Poets Series – includes a number of important pieces written, as the book's title suggests, during O'Hara's office lunch hour. 'The first time I ever saw him working at the museum,' remembers James Schuyler, 'he was in the ticket booth with a yellow legal pad writing a poem in the intervals between selling tickets.'[9] He could 'write a poem when other people were talking,' confers Koch, 'or even [...] get up in the middle of a conversation, get his typewriter, and write a poem, sometimes participating in the conversation while doing so.'[10] A famous anecdote – itself smacking of literary mythology – relates a reading given at Wagner College in 1962, during which O'Hara read a poem composed *en route* aboard the Staten Island Ferry, much to the irritation of his fellow-reader, Robert Lowell. More strikingly still, O'Hara was frequently known to mail his only copy of a poem within the pages of a letter, or else to store the loose leaves of his writing around his apartment, hidden in clothes or dresser drawers, even discarded in the laundry basket. 'I have followed every suggestion and clue I could recall from conversations and correspondence [...], every hint I could find in his papers,' writes Allen in his preface to *Collected Poems*, conceding that 'There is every reason to expect that other lost poems

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[8] Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 3

[9] Carl Little, 'An Interview with James Schuyler', *Talisman* 9 (Fall 1992), 177

[10] Berkson and LeSueur, *Homage*, 26

will surface during the years following the publication of this volume.'[11] In the words of Diane di Prima, who bore witness to O'Hara's peculiar indifference to his poems: 'My guess is that [the] huge collected Frank O'Hara has only about one-third of his actual work.'[12] It is as though one answer to Koch's question – *Why does it seem so impossible to believe that Frank is dead?* – lies in the fact that 'new' poems of O'Hara's (where 'new' means 'old' or 'lost' or 'as-yet-undiscovered') have the possibility of turning up, as if freshly composed.

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The movement, speed, and spontaneity of Frank O'Hara's poems – the *life*, for want of a better word – has been identified by many readers as their underlying principle. '[T]he offhand remark, the fleeting notation of a landscape, the Christmas or birthday verse, the impromptu souvenir of a party – these are his common forms,' suggests the critic Helen Vendler, 'as though he roamed through life snapping Polaroid pictures, pulling them out of his camera and throwing them in a desk drawer sixty seconds later.' '[S]ome of these poems would better be called verbal movies,' she concludes, positioning O'Hara as the heir apparent to Whitman's rolling, *reeling* catalogues.[13] 'We can now understand why O'Hara loves the *motion* picture, *action* painting, and all forms of dance,' agrees Perloff, 'art forms that capture the *present* rather than the *past*, the present in all its moving, chaotic splendour.'[14]

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[11] Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), iv-v

[12] Quoted in Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 115

[13] Helen Vendler, 'Frank O'Hara: The Virtue of the Alterable', in Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 234; 'Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!' exclaims the final line of 'To the Film Industry in Crisis', hinting perhaps at Whitman's poem of 1856, 'A Song of the Rolling Earth'.

[14] Marjorie Perloff, 'Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention', in Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 174

Reading O'Hara's poems, it doesn't take long to discover evidence of movement and 'chaotic splendour'. 'Let's take a walk, you / and I in spite of the / weather,' invites an early poem:

> [and] if it rains hard
>   on our toes
>
> we'll stroll like poodles
> and be washed down a
> gigantic scenic gutter
>   that will be
>
> exciting!

Immediately, the motion of the walk proposed is buffeted by the counter movement of the weather; at the same time, O'Hara executes a quick, figurative shift, transforming the speaker and his guest semi-surreally into 'poodles', his imagined rain now washing everything 'down a / gigantic scenic gutter,' like the steep drop of a log flume: 'that will be // exciting!'[15] 'The trees toss and plunge in a skyblue surf! / an automobile comes whizzing by,' begins another early poem ('The Satyr'), which adopts the imagery and conventions of a pastoral sonnet only to deliberately dishevel them, the poem flinging 'needles and leaves like a kiss or scarf'. 'I'll become the Lover of the quick world,' ends O'Hara in a rush of enthusiasm punctuated only by a burst of exclamation marks: 'For these trees waves and thieves I'm eager! whirled / and drowned in maelstroms of rhododendrons! / full flowers! round eyes! rush upward! rapture! space!'[16]

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[15] O'Hara, Collected Poems, 41

[16] Ibid., 68-69

As has been noted, 'The quick world' of O'Hara's poems is inherently connected to the 'molten streets' of New York City, where he moved, aged 25, in 1951.[17] Alongside the creative and aesthetic developments taking place in New York's art world, which he was soon at the centre of, O'Hara discovered in New York a giant, real-time metaphor for restless, unrelenting change. As Charles Altieri reminds us, 'there are no enduring seasonal motifs or patterns of duration underlying and sustaining the multiplicity of city phenomena. They exist completely in the moment. And they exist superficially. In the city, as in O'Hara's ontology, interesting and engaging details are continually becoming present.'[18] '[W]hat a pity they're tearing down those brownstones,' O'Hara's friend William Weaver once suggested to him. 'Oh no, that's the way New York is,' came his reply: 'You have to just keep tearing it down and building it up.'[19]

O'Hara winks in the direction of his cultivated anti-pastoral position in a famous poem. 'One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes,' reads 'Meditations in an Emergency', 'I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life,' his single 'blade of grass' another nod, perhaps, to Whitman. As the poem continues, O'Hara drifts into a meditation on the ever-presentness of change, on the world (in Altieri's phrase) 'continually becoming present'; 'forever / now', as he puts it in an earlier poem. 'My eyes are vague blue, like the sky, and change all the time,' continues 'Meditations' in a complicated passage:

> they are indiscriminate but fleeting, entirely specific and disloyal, so
> that no one trusts me. I am always looking away. Or again at

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[17] Ibid., 198

[18] Charles Altieri, 'From "Varieties of Immanentist Expression"', in Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 193

[19] Gooch, *City Poet*, 218

> something after it has given me up. It makes me restless and that makes me unhappy, but I cannot keep them still. If only I had grey, green, black, brown, yellow eyes; I would stay at home and do something. It's not that I'm curious. On the contrary, I am bored but it's my duty to be attentive, I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth. And lately, so great has *their* anxiety become, I can spare myself little sleep.

In its dramatization of the relationships between looking, change, and worldly phenomena, there is something of Emerson's 'transparent eye-ball' here. While he doesn't go so far as to claim an affinity (either literal or spiritual) with the material stuff of the natural world, as Emerson appears to, O'Hara does suggest part of the poet's role to be a 'duty' of attention, bearing witness to the world around him. His 'vague blue' eyes become a site of constant movement, 'indiscriminate but fleeting,' 'always looking away' from one thing to the next. O'Hara seems to literalize this restless movement with the image of his eyes suddenly changing colour ('grey, green, brown, yellow'), an optical expression of frustration that he 'cannot keep them still'. More complicated is O'Hara's sense that sight gives meaning to phenomena, confirming (even producing) their existence through the act of looking, which he shifts into an image of the planet's atmosphere: 'I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth'. We get a vision of O'Hara – omniscient and airborne – soaring high 'above the earth,' as though his opening statement of comparison had suddenly been actualized: O'Hara's 'vague blue' eyes are not just 'like' the sky – they *are* it.[20]

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[20] O'Hara, *Collected Poems,* 197-98; O'Hara returns to something like this image of himself floating above the world on several occasions. 'I do not climb you, mountains!' reads a stanza from 'Snapshot for Boris Pasternak', 'you rush / under me, [...] thrusting me into the frigid air / of the sun.' 'Oh to be an angel,' ends 'Three Airs', 'and go / straight up into the sky and look around,' 'to be part of the treetops and the blueness, invisible' (112, 299). It's an image that connects him, whether consciously or not, to the Whitman of 'Salut au Monde!', in which the poet soars over the globe, extending his democratic vision to nations beyond the USA. 'My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the

O'Hara's tone in the above passage is difficult to locate. At times he seems laconic, off-hand, even casual, although he claims to feel both 'restless' and 'unhappy' at his inability to keep his eyes fixed in one place. A few lines later, he articulates a kind of apathy – 'It's not that I'm curious. On the contrary, I am bored' – although this apathy immediately prompts his statement on the 'duty' of attentiveness: 'it's my duty to be attentive, I am needed by things,' and 'so great has *their* anxiety become' – an anxiety of not being looked at, of being ignored – that 'I can spare myself little sleep'. It is as though O'Hara's duty were a vow to never let the world out of his sight. After all, reads a passage in Emerson's *Nature*, 'To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again.'[21]

The constant flitting of O'Hara's eyes – always looking away, continually distracted by 'the city's darling diversions,' as he writes elsewhere – accounts, in large part, for his poems' fullness. 'Oh! Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas! / You really are beautiful!' opens 'Today', a short poem of 1950, 'Pearls, / harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all / the stuff they've always talked about,' the same 'stuff' to be found, perhaps, stuffing Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. 'We must keep interested in foreign stamps, // railway schedules, baseball scores, and / abnormal psychology, or all is lost,' suggests a poem written later the same year. Whatever else they are, O'Hara's New York poems are a record of the city's raw materials. 'The life of the city and of the millions of relationships that go to make it up hums through his poetry,' writes John Ashbery in his Introduction to *Collected Poems*: 'a scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide drifts across it,

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whole earth,' begins the poem's final section: 'You vapors, I think I have risen with you, moved away to distant continents,' 'I think I have blown with you you winds' (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 125-26).

[21] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 33

making it the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place New York is.'[22] Neal Bowers even goes so far as to suggest that 'the collection *is* a city, as diverse and incoherent as any city is likely to be, and yet whole.' In this sense, the poems come to resemble the boxes of artist Joseph Cornell, whose famous assemblages – eccentric, fragmentary collections of found objects and bric-a-brac – were well-known to O'Hara **[Fig. 15]**.[23] To borrow the opening phrase of O'Hara's faux manifesto, 'Personism': 'Everything is in the poems'.[24]

As Ashbery implies, the flitting of O'Hara's poetry is matched – possibly prompted – by the humming of the city. Indeed, O'Hara is best known for his so-called 'I do this, I do that' poems, which see him traversing the city on foot, walking its streets, recording their occurrences. '[T]he pelt of the whole city moves forwards as a flame,' he writes in 'Second Avenue', a line in which we hear, again, the echo of Pater's 'gemlike flame', the city somehow self-consuming, forever refreshing itself.[25] The critic Russell Ferguson goes on to write about O'Hara's poems in distinctively Paterian terms: 'At any moment, the whole world that surrounds him and through which he moves can suddenly come into the sharpest focus, and it is necessary to be absolutely in that moment'; 'Until it is over, life has to be lived with style, but also with an intense emotional commitment to each moment as it passes.'[26]

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[22] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 105, 15, 40, x

[23] Neal Bowers, 'The City Limits: Frank O'Hara's Poetry', in Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 323; Cornell's work was exhibited at MoMA several times during O'Hara's tenure; a poem of 1955 – composed of two uniquely squared-off stanzas – is named after the artist (237).

[24] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498

[25] Ibid., 142

[26] Russell Ferguson, *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 40

A number of O'Hara's best-known walking poems have received generous critical treatment, including 'Steps' – 'and in a sense we're all winning / we're alive' – and 'The Day Lady Died', O'Hara's real-time replay of his movements on the day he learned about the death of Billie Holiday.[27] Andrea Brady offers a detailed account of O'Hara's early long poem, 'Second Avenue', describing its achievement of 'a dramatically perpetuated present tense'. '[T]he poem strains to keep up its presentness,' she writes, urging 'time, language and image into rapid motion; and motion is counterpoised to 'paralysis', an artistic and emotional condition which threatens to halt [...] the poem to a still life.'[28] In 'Meditations', O'Hara describes 'the ecstasy of always bursting forth!', a mode of Pater-like existence driven by his duty of attentiveness. O'Hara equates an absence of attention with a kind of stillness or 'paralysis'. Speaking about the sculptor David Smith, he voices this position clearly: 'Don't be bored, don't be lazy, don't be trivial and don't be proud. The slightest loss of attention leads to death.'[29] Describing 'Second Avenue' himself, the critic Cal Revely-Calder summarizes O'Hara's aesthetic of attention in terms that reach explicitly for the language of resurrection: 'O'Hara's love for seeing the urban scene afresh, his dexterity and change [...], are what make his city visions come repeatedly alive.'[30] Maintaining constant attentiveness to the world, then,

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[27] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 371, 325

[28] Andrea Brady, 'Distraction and Absorption on Second Avenue', in Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery, eds., *Frank O'Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 64

[29] Quoted in the television film *David Smith: Sculpting Master of Bolton* Landing (WNDT-TV, New York, 18 November 1964); We might, at this stage, draw a comparison to D.H. Lawrence, whose essays on the novel express a similar position: 'In the novel, the characters can do nothing but *live*. If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead.' 'O'Hara remains committed to ceaseless change, especially given the alternative,' writes Andrew Epstein, echoing Lawrence, 'he fears the human tendency to settle into familiar patterns that are inherently limiting' (Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 97).

[30] Cal Revely-Calder, 'Frank O'Hara in Transit', *Journal of American Studies* 52.3 (2018), 735

floods O'Hara's poems with life, creating 'a poetic structure which is always changing, shifting, becoming,' both for him and for the reader.[31] 'Attention was Frank's gift and his requirement,' concludes Bill Berkson, 'You might say it was his message.'[32]

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While it might be tempting here to draw a throughline back to D. H. Lawrence and 'The Poetry of the Present' – or further back to Emerson – it is worth taking a moment to consider William Carlos Williams. In the popular imagination, Williams's poetry is known for its attention to minute details, to the easily missed or overlooked parts of American experience: white chickens, red wheelbarrow. To write poetry is 'Not to attempt [...] to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures,' reads a passage from *Spring and All* (1923), published the same year as Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 'but to write down that which happens at the time.'[33] 'To Williams, the task of the poet was to demystify,' writes Geoff Ward, 'to purge writing of metaphysics, and to celebrate what actually impinges on the senses as the sum total of what is.' Cue Williams's poetic edict: 'No ideas but in things'. Ward credits Williams for his contribution to a 'layered-space' poetics (akin to Cubism or collage), an aesthetic bringing 'any metaphysical depth to the visible surface,' giving primacy to 'the experienced moment'.[34] While we might recall the mantra of Williams's contemporary, the Anglo-American novelist Henry James, who suggested that a writer must 'try to be

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[31] Perloff, 'Aesthetics of Attention', 172-73

[32] Berkson and LeSuer, *Homage*, 161

[33] William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems I 1909-1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 206

[34] Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 54, 11

one on whom nothing is lost,' it is Henry's older brother, William, whose thinking is most useful here.[35]

William James explores the philosophical implications of attention as early as *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). 'Everyone knows what attention is,' he writes, 'It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.' For James, attention functions as a kind of filter. '[M]illions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience,' he claims: 'Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to.* Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind – without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos.'[36] With its 'clear and vivid' attention to specific objects, scenes and individuals, the highly 'selective' poetry of William Carlos Williams is usefully attended to by way of James's writing, which would later play a role in the development of Pragmatism, a philosophical movement grounded in the testing of philosophical maxims against their practical and consequential outcomes. And yet, the 'clear and vivid' attention found in William Carlos Williams – the avoidance of 'an utter chaos,' in James's term – does not fully account for the texture of O'Hara's poetry, its constant movement and 'chaotic splendour'. The difference is, perhaps, best put by the art historian James Breslin, who remarks that while 'Williams slows us down and concentrates our attention on both the object and the words representing it, O'Hara captures the 'ever-changing' nature 'of [the] temporal process itself.' 'Rather than slow down and linger over his perception of things,' writes Micah Mattix, 'O'Hara moves from one experience to the next in his poems with few moments for pause,' an attempt to reflect 'the ever-changing flow of

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[35] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 13

[36] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 402-04

experience,' resulting in 'a moment of fullness rather than [...] a moment of loss,' a movie, not a photograph.[37] 'The speed and accidental aspect of his writing are not carelessness but are essential to what the poems are about,' notes Kenneth Koch, 'the will to catch what is there while it is really there and still taking place.'[38]

Enter D.H. Lawrence, whose insistence on a poetry of 'mutation, swifter than iridescence,' of 'haste, not rest, come-and-go, not fixity,' fizzing with 'the quality of life itself,' seems on the tip of Frank O'Hara's tongue. Just as Lawrence believed that his 'seething poetry of the incarnate Now' might somehow keep the present from turning stale – creating an 'eternal moment' – so O'Hara's New York poems appear to render his experience 'repeatedly alive' (to cite Revely-Calder). The poems are 'irreducible, multiple, and always changing,' continues Mattix, a process through which O'Hara manages consistently to 'renew our present experience of the world.'[39]

Although he doesn't figure prominently among O'Hara's common influences – a list that typically includes the French Surrealist poets Pierre Reverdy, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé with the Russians Pasternak and Mayakovsky – Lawrence's presence flickers like a shadow in the corner of the room. Berkson mentions Lawrence's *Complete Poems* (1957) several times in his recent *Frank O'Hara Notebook* (2019), listing it as an essential volume in the '(Mini) Frank O'Hara Library'; he recalls that 'Frank always seemed to have James Joyce's *Collected Poems* lying around somewhere in his apartment, ready to be opened. Then, around 1963 or so, it was D.H. Lawrence's poetry in the 3 [...] volume set.' 'He referred to Lawrence's "Ship of Death" constantly,' he

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[37] Quoted in Micah Mattix, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Saying "I"* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 61

[38] Elledge, To Be True to a City, 33

[39] Mattix, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Saying "I"*, 21-22

suggests, a late poem of Lawrence's from the posthumous *Last Poems* (1932).[40] O'Hara references the poem in 'Joe's Jacket', in which he narrates a conversation with the poet Joe LeSueur in language that is strikingly Lawrentian: 'we talk / only of the immediate present and its indiscriminately hitched-to past / the feeling of life and incident pouring over the sleeping city / which seems to be bathed in unobtrusive light'.[41] Andrew Epstein registers O'Hara's use of 'the immediate present' here, drawing a connection between Lawrence's interest in the 'shapeless energy' of the present moment and O'Hara's 'skepticism of fixity, eternity, and finished products,' so much so that Lawrence's preface, for Epstein, 'could stand as an epigraph to [O'Hara's] *Collected Poems*.'[42] Epstein goes on to argue that Lawrence's 'greatest influence was perhaps exerted on the Beats, who especially responded to the Romantic, erotic, Whitman-like fervor of his rhetoric.' Nevertheless, we find that there are greater similarities to draw between the two than this deferral might suggest.

At the very least, early critical responses to O'Hara's work often express concern over the casual, diaristic quality of his poetry, the same concern levied at Lawrence, recalling T.S. Eliot's complaint that Lawrence wrote 'more notes for poems than poems themselves.' O'Hara 'writes lightly off the top of his head' with few 'radical changes in style or subject matter,' suggests Herbert Leibowitz, an early reviewer: 'he produces too many shapeless poems.' 'O'Hara was a compulsive reporter of his daily rounds, not a chooser and shaper,' grumbles another, an 'incoherent potpourri of his giddy life in New York.' '[O]ne must endure huge trash-heaps of what he calls his "I do this, I do that"

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[40] Berkson, *Frank O'Hara Notebook*, 150, 250

[41] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 330; O'Hara refers to Lawrence again in a poem written later the same month – 'I don't know as I get what D. H. Lawrence is driving at / when he writes of lust springing forth from the bowels' – and chooses the final stanza of Lawrence's 'Tommies in the Train' as an epigraph to his 1961 poem 'For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson' (334, 389-93).

[42] Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 121-22

poems, full of campy gossip, silly jokes, travel notes, subway rides, newspaper headlines, movie stars, sentimentalized shadows of anxiety,' the same review continues, but 'For the reader, the cumulative effect of this colossally self-absorbed journal of happenings is numbness, not pleasure.' 'Frank O'Hara is one of the nicest bores around,' concludes Gerald Burns of the *Selected Poems* (1974), 'The less of him you read the better he is.' While Marjorie Perloff has pointed out that O'Hara's 'command of language and verse forms [and] his knowledge of European literature rivaled not only Lowell's but Eliot's and Pound's,' we can defend him from these criticisms in the same way we defended Lawrence, by noting that his shapelessness is crucial to the poems' central project, its expression of the texture of life *happening now*. Even Liebowitz, in his review, concedes the presence of 'a life-giving chaos'.[43]

Further exploring the reception of O'Hara's poetry, we find another link to Lawrence in the notion that his work, in an important sense, becomes inseparable from him, seen as somehow coextensive with the person who produced it. The critic Roger Gilbert has usefully noted that individual poems, for O'Hara, 'do not constitute watersheds or momentous statements that can be made only once; they are part of the natural produce of living,' a comment that finds rehearsal in a reflection of Joe LeSueur's about O'Hara's practice: 'I didn't realize right away that if you took poetry so much for granted as you did breathing it might mean you felt it was essential to your life.'[44] It is obvious that a great many of O'Hara's poems offer detailed recollections of the people, places and events of his life – a 'journal of happenings' – but there is something more complex at work here. Even more so than Lawrence, O'Hara deliberately blurs the boundary between his writing and existence. 'I can't really tell /

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[43] Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 27, 39, 70, 60

[44] Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 175; LeSueur quoted in Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 117

that I'm alive except / I name the world,' he writes in 'Four Little Elegies'. 'Poetry is not instruments / that work at times / then walk out on you,' suggests 'To Gottfried Benn', 'poetry's part of your self'.[45] If (like Neal Bowers) we are inclined to view O'Hara's *Collected Poems* not as a person but a *city*, it is curious to note several occasions where O'Hara imagines himself dissolving into the material stuff of Manhattan itself.[46] 'My eyes, like millions of / glassy squares, merely reflect,' reads 'Nocturne', presenting an image of O'Hara as a many-windowed skyscraper, 'Everything sees through me, / in the daytime I'm too hot / and at night I freeze; I'm / built the wrong way for the / river and a mild gale would / break every fiber in me.' He is more direct in an earlier poem: 'I'm becoming / the street.'[47]

O'Hara resisted the label 'confessional' to refer his poems. Beginning in the 1960s, the word was frequently used to describe a mode of autobiographical poetry associated in particular with Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* (1959) produced the first use of the term in a review by M. L. Rosenthal.[48] O'Hara was suspicious of the genre. 'Lowell has [...] a confessional manner which (lets him) get away with things that are really just plain bad,' he suggests in an interview of 1965, 'but you're supposed to be interested because he's supposed to be so upset.'[49] Nevertheless, the consistent selfhood on display throughout O'Hara's work – the personal anecdotes, the lists of friends, the meals, the trips, the books and threads of conversation – cohere into a kind of photo album: quotidian, casual, full of intimate

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[45] O'Hara, Collected Poems, 250, 309

[46] '[A] man in himself is a city,' wrote Williams of his epic poem *Paterson* (1946-58), 'beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody.'

[47] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 225, 126

[48] See M. L. Rosenthal, 'Poetry and Confession', *The Nation* (19 September 1959).

[49] Quoted in Ward, *Statutes*, 38

(inconsequential) biographical details. Indeed, with what Helen Vendler has referred to as the poems' sketch-like quality, 'Life Studies' wouldn't be a *bad* way to describe *Collected Poems*.[50] 'O'Hara was writing a continuous autobiography,' concludes Harriet Zinnes.[51] And yet, the poet's attraction to the autobiographical is not so much an impulse to confession as a keenness to be blurred together with his work, for the man and the poems to become indistinguishable. 'Poetry and life – O'Hara refused, at least consciously, to make a distinction between the two,' writes Perloff, drawing once again on Pater: 'He regarded both as part of the same vital process, living every moment as if it were his last.'[52]

Plenty has been written – not least by Perloff – about O'Hara's association to the Abstract Expressionist painters of the so-called New York School, particularly in relation to the 'surface' of O'Hara's poems, a flattening or equalization of phenomena to a single textual plane, akin to the all-over painted surfaces of work by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and others. More significant to O'Hara, perhaps, than an aesthetics of the surface is an idea that the work of art might exist as an extension of the self. In lieu of traditional subject matter (no portraiture or landscapes), the Abstract Expressionist canvas becomes a record of its own creation, bearing the brushstrokes, drips and marks that helped to bring it into being.[53] As their

[50] 'If these poems are photographic in their immediacy,' writes Vendler, 'they resemble too the rapid unfinished sketches done by an artist to keep his hand in or to remind him of some perishable composition of the earth' (Vendler, 'The Virtue of the Alterable', 234). We might recall Keith Sagar's defence of Lawrence: 'Hostile critics have called Lawrence's poems 'sketches,' but a sketch is often superior, in terms of life, to the finished product.'

[51] Elledge, *To Be True to a City*, 55

[52] Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 117

[53] While the project of abstraction moves beyond representation, it isn't accurate to say that the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters is devoid of figuration. Very often, we discover shapes and forms that have a clear relation to worldly phenomena, as in the eyes, hands, limbs and animals that recur in

other generic title – Action Painting – suggests, the canvases bear witness to the gestures that created them, each movement of the painter's hand, each drizzle, stab, or splash of paint. With enough patience, we might follow the looping, fluid lines of Jackson Pollock's work to recreate the movement of his arm exactly; at times, it almost seems like we could trace their loops right back into the tin. For James Breslin, O'Hara was inspired by American painting 'not in the sense of subject matter, or anything like that, but in the ambition [...] to be the work yourself.'[54] Describing his method of painting on the floor, Pollock gives accidental life to the suggestion that he might somehow become his art. 'I feel nearer, more a part of the painting,' he suggests, 'since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting'.[55] A famous photograph of Pollock working shows him standing with his left foot planted firmly on the canvas **[Fig. 19]**; the heavy contrast of the picture triggers an illusion, Pollock both the painting's maker and an image on its surface, as though he were painting himself into existence. As O'Hara wrote of Pollock in his monograph of 1959: 'His action is immediately art'.[56]

Jackson Pollock's work (see *The She-Wolf* (1943) or the later *Portrait and a Dream* (1953)) **[Figs. 16-17]**. Equally, even works that appear entirely abstract on a first encounter seem to swim with elements and patterns on the cusp of figuration. In de Kooning's *Excavation* (1950) **[Fig. 18]**, for example, a mass of line gestures and coloured scrawls behaves, the longer we consider it, like a kind of cave painting; some marks are suggestive of eyes, teeth, even musical notation; others seem related to the limbs we might find in a Cubist painting, as if abstracted twice (from reality to Cubism, then Cubism to this). Alternatively, *Excavation* reads in some sense as a map or landscape, an aerial view over unfamiliar terrain. There is even a suggestion that we're face-to-face with written (albeit alien) language, a wall of violent, non-disclosing hieroglyphs.

[54] James E. Breslin, 'Frank O'Hara, Popular Culture, and American Poetry in the 1950s', in Sidra Stich, ed., *Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s & '60s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 215

[55] Jackson Pollock, 'Two Statements', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 571

[56] Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966*, (New York: G Braziller, 1975), 26

With this in mind, we begin to see O'Hara, too, dissolve into his writing, channelling the fullness of his life into the poems, creating 'a record of his [...] motion from instant to instant,' suggests Walter Clemons, 'modestly turning what comes his way into the poems.'[57] This image of O'Hara coming face-to-face with his experience, absorbing it into his work, returns us, of course, to Whitman on the Open Road – 'On two slow feet. Meeting whatever comes' – evidence, for Lawrence, of 'immediate felt contact'. O'Hara's poems not only capture his experience, they preserve it, somehow renewing the energy of each moment, making it available for us in the time of our reading. More than this, O'Hara is himself preserved. If the poems exist, in some sense, as his own autobiography, they enact another crucial function: keeping him alive. 'Camerado, this is no book,' writes Whitman in his farewell poem, 'So Long!', 'Who touches this touches a man, / [...] It is I you hold and who holds you, / I spring from the pages into your arms – decease calls me forth.'[58]

While the quality of resurrection in O'Hara's writing – his attempt 'to beat time at its own game,' says Geoff Ward – has been examined in a number of his best-known walking poems, a cluster of late pieces have received far less attention.[59] The critic David Herd has usefully suggested that O'Hara's sense of movement revolves 'around the gesture of the step'. 'One thinks of him – because he thinks of himself this way – as stepping out into the New York street,' writes Herd, and so 'the step, in O'Hara's poetry, is integral to his thinking.'[60] It's clear to see how Herd's framework might lend itself to famous poems that see O'Hara on the move, not least 'A Step Away from Them' and

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[57] Elledge, To Be True to a City, 30

[58] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 424

[59] Ward, *Statutes*, 60

[60] David Herd, 'Stepping Out with Frank O'Hara', in Hampson and Montgomery, *Frank O'Hara Now*, 71-72

'Steps' with its often-quoted closing lines, O'Hara's emphatic celebration of love, life and being alive: 'oh god it's wonderful / to get out of bed / and drink too much coffee / and smoke too many cigarettes / and love you so much'.[61] Throughout *Collected Poems*, we find innumerable references to walks and walking, as in the early poems 'Walking to Work', 'Walking with Larry Rivers' and 'A Walk on Sunday Afternoon'. A later poem, dated February 1964, is simply titled 'Walking':

> I get a cinder in my eye
> it streams into
> the sunlight
> the air pushes it aside
> and I drop my hot dog
> into one of the Seagram Building's
> fountains
> it is all water and clear and windy
>
> the shape of the toe as
> it describes the pain
> of the ball of the foot,
> walking walking on
> asphalt
> the strange embrace of the ankle's
> lock
> on the pavement
> squared like mausoleums
> but cheerful
> moved over and stamped on
> slapped by winds
> the country is no good for us
> there's nothing
> to bump into

[61] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 371

or fall apart glassily

there's not enough

poured concrete

and brassy

reflections

the wind now takes me to

The Narrows

and I see it rising there

New York

greater than the Rocky Mountains

O'Hara rapidly establishes the stage-dressing and climate: 'sunlight,' 'hot dog,' 'fountains,' 'wind'. He sets off – 'walking walking on / asphalt' – describing his movements as he goes, recording 'the shape of the toe,' even 'the pain / of the ball of the foot'. He compares the movement of his walking to the deadness of the sidewalk – 'like mausoleums / but cheerful' – 'moved over and stamped on' by pedestrians, 'slapped by winds'. And yet, O'Hara finds something of value in the act of collision, in the literal 'felt contact' between his foot and the pavement, concluding that 'the country is no good for us' because 'there's nothing / to bump into'. The poem ends with a view of New York from 'The Narrows', a tidal strait separating Brooklyn and Staten Island, from where O'Hara sees the city 'rising', a sublime view 'greater than the Rocky Mountains'.[62] The poem implies a walk on foot from Midtown's Seagram Building to the Bay Ridge neighbourhood of Brooklyn, where a scenic view of Manhattan is waiting at Shore Park. If we are to believe O'Hara took this walk – there are no subways mentioned in the poem – then it's no wonder that his feet are hurting: a distance of at least 10 miles.

[62] Ibid., 476-77

While irregular lineation is not uncommon to O'Hara's work, 'Walking' introduces a number of late fragments (16 of the *Collected*'s final 18 poems) whose form is chiefly characterized by experiments in indentation. Phrases slip and drop from one line to the next, alternating between left- and right-hand justifications, mimicking – it seems – the movement of the poet's steps, as though the poems were leaving footprints. To replay Anthony Libby: 'For once, the immortality conferred by art seems actual; what walks, behind the imprint of voice, is not simply a ghost.' If these lines become O'Hara's footprints, then we are in the role of follower. Reading the poem, it is almost as if we might somehow catch up to him, walking a few pages ahead of us. As in all good detective fiction, however, the trail of footprints disappears: we follow them as far as 'Little Elegy for Antonio Machado', the final poem in the collection, before they suddenly run out, as if O'Hara had mysteriously vanished, nowhere to be seen.

'Little Elegy for Antonio Machado' is dated 27th March 1966, exactly four months (to the day) before the poet's funeral. And yet, through his constant sense of movement and attention to the present moment, O'Hara somehow survives. After all, as he wrote of the poet Edwin Denby, 'attention equals *Life*'.[63] In this sense, Kenneth Koch's question invites a different answer. *Why does it seem so impossible to believe that Frank is dead?* Maybe it's because he isn't.

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The American postwar period has been characterized as a uniquely fertile and permissive environment, responsible for the development of a wide range of creative and artistic projects, from the cultivation of Abstract Expressionist painting (considered

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[63] Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (New York: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 87

by many to be the first truly *American* genre of art, with no ties back to Europe) to the various poetic groups presented by Donald Allen in *The New American Poetry*.[64] In his preface to the anthology, Allen notes that the work included 'has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse.' By the 1940s, the radical shifts of literary Modernism had solidified around the highly intellectual, academically oriented position embodied by New Criticism, a formalist mode literary theory that attempted to examine texts based on their structural and aesthetic qualities alone, excluding conversations around authorial intention, reader response, and historical or cultural context. The radical upsurge in highly (self-) expressive, formally loose writing represented by *The New American Poetry* reveals a concerted shift away from the academy, taking a stand against the 'dreadful posturings' (in Kenneth Rexroth's phrase) of poetry championed by the New Critics.[65] As Robert Lowell put it in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1960, which he received for *Life Studies*, 'Two poetries are now competing': 'The cooked, marvelously expert, [which] often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. [And] The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience [...] dished up for midnight listeners.'[66] We hear echoes of

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[64] See Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960). Since its publication, the rightness and wrongness of Allen's groupings has been perennially contested; in some cases, the very existence of certain 'schools' has been firmly (even humorously) denied. Indeed, 'Like the Holy Roman Empire, which was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire,' writes David Lehman, for example, 'the New York School of poets has always been an anomalous term' (David Lehman, ed., *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 20). Though Allen acknowledges the 'Occasionally arbitrary' nature of his divisions, the anthology remains a valuable snapshot of the period's poetic evolutions, featuring poets representing Black Mountain College, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beats and the New York School. Perhaps revealing the shakiness of his own system, Allen rounds off the anthology with a miscellaneous fifth group with 'no geographical definition', featuring 'younger poets who have been associated with and in some cases influenced by the leading writers of the preceding groups,' but who don't – in Allen's view – belong to them (Allen, *The New American Poetry*, xi-xiv).

[65] Elledge, To Be True to a City, 3

[66] Quoted in Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 53

Lawrence's own distinction in 'The Poetry of the Present' here, between a poetry of 'Perfected bygone moments' (the 'gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats') and 'the poetry of that which is at hand,' where 'The living plasm vibrates unspeakably'.

Andrew Epstein outlines Modernism's interest in moments of ordinary or mundane experience, moments that take on a profound or even mythic quality, as in Virginia Woolf's call to 'Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day,' or the quiet, quotidian observations of William Carlos Williams.[67] In the words of critic Liesl Olson, 'Literary modernism takes ordinary experience as its central subject.'[68] But in the decades following the Second World War, Epstein continues, 'something happens to the everyday-life aesthetic: it seems both to shift into a higher gear and, in some ways, to turn in new directions.'[69] Above all, this shift not only sees increased attention given to the present moment – its immediacy and *now*-ness, as distinguished from the Modernist 'epiphany [or] special moment' – but a newfound sensitivity to the textures of experience and spontaneity, to the flux and flowing of the present in the moment of its taking place. From Abstract Expressionism and the improvisational impulses of Bebop and Jazz to the spiritual and environmental *presentness* encouraged by a number of popular countercultural movements – many of the so-called Beats were practicing

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[67] Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6-8

[68] Leisl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3

[69] Epstein begins his critical study on attention with another useful observation:

> Despite the extended history, it is only in the twentieth century that phenomena such as "the everyday," "the ordinary," and "the nature of attention" seem to become codified and reified, turned into topics of overt concern for poetry, philosophy, psychology, and science. For example, even though nineteenth-century poets certainly began to prize the mundane as a subject for poetry, it is telling that the words *everyday, ordinary, attention, quotidian, mundane,* and *dailiness* never appear in the *Lyrical Ballads* [...] nor do they pop up in the voluminous pages of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. (*Attention Equals Life*, 5)

Zen Buddhists – a new generation of postwar Americans were waking up to the potential of D. H. Lawrence's 'incarnate Now'. In the words of Benjamin Lee, 'Across the arts and in the realms of philosophy, cultural commentary, and everyday life, a movement was afoot that embraced spontaneity as an alternative to American materialism and conformity.'[70] By the end of the century, the critic Daniel Belgrad saw fit to name his survey of the American postwar period with unambiguous assurance: *The Culture of Spontaneity.*[71]

The influence of Emerson and William James here (to say nothing of Walt Whitman) is undeniable; while their work may not have been as prominent as conversations about the new painting and music spilling out of New York City, their contribution to ideas of attention, flux and presentness in the American imagination is clear. 'There are no fixtures in nature,' writes Emerson in his famous essay, 'Circles', 'The universe is fluid and volatile' and 'In nature, every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten [...] Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.'[72] Indeed, several critics have commented on the 'fluid and volatile' nature of Emerson's prose. 'Like the weather,' writes Eduardo Cadava, Emerson's writing 'moves and happens according to the rhythms and crises of its own atmospheres, storms, and pressure zones,' resisting 'all our efforts to bring together or stabilize whatever we might call his 'thought."[73] 'He looms up like a thunder cloud,' suggests an anonymous reviewer of 1849, then 'comes down in a shower of tinkling

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[70] Benjamin Lee, 'Spontaneity and Improvisation in Postwar Experimental Poetry', in Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 76

[71] See Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

[72] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 181

[73] Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1

sleet and rolls away like a fire on the prairie.'[74] Equally, James's writing frequently privileges ideas of flexibility and movement, grounded in the Pragmatist philosophy that we must constantly be willing to revise and update our beliefs. '[W]e have to live to-day by what truth we can get 'to-day,' he writes, 'and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.'[75]

Allen invited each of the poets in his anthology to write a brief statement accompanying their poems. 'I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it,' wrote O'Hara: 'What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else; they are just there in whatever form I can find them.'[76] The cultural output of the 1960s reveals countless examples of artists, writers and musicians embracing this philosophy, attending to the moment 'as [they] experience it,' 'in whatever form' it comes. As Geoff Ward astutely reminds us, we would do well to remember that this period was 'contemporary with a noted B-movie, *The Blob* [(1958)], in which a pink jelly from Outer Space hoovers up most of the contents of an American small town, with undiscriminating appetite.'[77] Within this climate, poetry rose to prominence 'as perhaps the quintessential genre for the rendering of concrete, everyday experiences and objects,' argues Epstein, 'for an investigation of the workings of attention, and for a method of responding to the moment-by-moment unfolding of daily time.'[78] By the early 1970s, Allen had been

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[74] Emerson, *Poetry and Prose*, 588

[75] Quoted in Ruth Anna Putnam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179

[76] O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 500

[77] Ward, *Statutes*, 9

[78] Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 12

invited (with the critic Warren Tallman) to produce a follow-up anthology, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, presenting a list of foundational statements from twenty-five poets who, in Tallman's phrase, 'achieve spectacular fulfillments in our century of what Whitman was calling for in his.' Appearing fourth in the running order, between Ezra Pound and Hart Crane, is D. H. Lawrence and 'The Poetry of the Present'.[79]

The Poetics of the New American Poetry appeared in 1973, a decade during which the shift towards the present moment grew to full fruition; 'Call it the Age of Paying Attention,' suggests art critic Peter Schjeldahl.[80] Throughout the decade there appeared a range of works devoted to the flow of everyday experience, many of them ambitious, long-form, diaristic projects concerned with the apparently mundane, incorporating aspects of immediacy and real-time temporality into their formal strategies. Recently achieving first position in the British Film Institute's list of 'The Greatest Films of All Time' – updated every decade in an extensive poll run by *Sight and Sound* magazine – Chantal Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* sits at the heart of the 1970s. A striking portrait of a bourgeois Belgian housewife, mother and part-time prostitute, Ackerman's avant-garde statement follows the life of its protagonist over three ordinary days, rigorously documenting what Rita Felski has called the 'remorseless routine' of domestic labour; Ackerman's camera is often in a fixed position, allowing (or forcing) us to watch Dielman's life unfolding in extensive detail **[Fig. 20]**.[81] 'In a film that, agonizingly, depicts women's oppression,' writes Laura Mulvey for *Sight and Sound*, 'Ackerman transforms cinema,

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[79] Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, eds., *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), ix

[80] Peter Schjeldahl, 'Shades of White: A Robert Ryman Retrospective', *The New Yorker* (21 & 28 December 2015), 43

[81] Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 82

itself so often an instrument of women's oppression, into a liberating force.'[82] In the United States, the late Bernadette Mayer's temporal-process projects of the 1970s provide a useful analogue to *Jeanne Dielman*. In August 1976, Mayer and her partner Lewis Warsh produced their month-long project *Piece of Cake* (2019), taking turns (writing on alternate days) to generate a collaborative meditation on the experience of balancing domestic and artistic life. Mayer's work takes Frank O'Hara's 'I do this, I do that' aesthetic to its furthest endpoint. *Midwinter Day* (1982) was composed in its entirety on 22nd December 1978, reconstructed from the poet's 'notes, tapes, photographs, and memory.'[83] The book-length poem recounts the day in full meandering, digressive detail, describing dreams and meals, walks and thoughts, the presence of friends and family and the particulars of parenting. The urban topography of Mayer's Lennox, Massachusetts, is painstakingly mapped; street after street, storefront after storefront. At turns personal and intimate, surreal and associative, even straying into passages of listlessness and boredom, *Midwinter Day* matches Ackerman's film as a powerful portrait of 'ordinary' mid-century womanhood, relentlessly presenting nothing but 'the present writer / At the present time'.[84] The decade was inaugurated by Mayer's flagship project, *Memory* (1971), for which she shot one roll of 35mm film (36 photographs) each day in July 1971, simultaneously maintaining a meticulous diary of her day-to-day encounters. Mayer's photographs – all 1,116 of them – were exhibited chronologically at a performance space in New York City in February

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[82] Laura Mulvey, 'The Greatest Film of All Time' https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/greatest-film-all-time-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles (accessed 19 April 2023)

[83] Bernadette Mayer, *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New York: New Directions, 1992), vii

[84] Bernadette Mayer, *Midwinter Day* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 16

1972 **[Fig. 21]**, accompanied by close to six hours of recorded audio of the poet reading from her text.

This type of daily record-keeping occupied the minds of many other poets. Mayer's exhibition coincided with the publication of Robert Creeley's *A Day Book* (1972), made with the artist R. B. Kitaj, a project that is 'precisely what it says it is,' writes Creeley, 'thirty single-spaced pages of writing in thirty similarly space days of living.'[85] 1980 saw the publication of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, consisting of 37 sections (composed of 37 sentences) corresponding with the poet's age; Hejinian later expanded the book into 45 sections of 45 sentences, bringing her new version to date. While *My Life* does record events and anecdotes from Hejinian's life, they are scattered through the text obliquely. Rather than autobiography, *My Life* represents a narrative of snapshots and fragments exploring the distance between lived, daily experience and the narratives we construct about ourselves after the fact. Like Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, *My Life* exposes how 'the everyday routine of domestic work [...] is simply part of life,' writes Bronwen Tate, 'tedious and pleasurable in turns, both impediment to and source of poetry.'[86] The poet A. R. Ammons similarly published two book-length temporal projects in the 1970s, each an exercise in dutiful attention to the present. In *Sphere* (1974), Ammons figures experience as a constant flow of motion; after all, he writes, 'motion is our place', both *where* and *how* life happens, forever caught 'between an event of some significance and another / event of significance'. For Ammons, this is a process through which 'we are fueled and provisioned,' recalling Tate's description of domestic tedium as 'both impediment [...] and source of poetry.' *Sphere* is a poem in search of home – 'our place'

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[85] Quoted in John Latta, 'Creeley's *Pieces*' http://isola-di-rifiuti.blogspot.com/2010/06/creeleys-pieces.html (accessed 18 April 2023)

[86] Bronwen Tate, 'The Day and the Life: Gender and the Quotidian in Long Poems by Bernadette Mayer and Lyn Hejinian', *Journal of Modern Literature* 40.1 (Fall 2016), 58

– and meaning, a daybook that discovers value in the recurrent and the everyday. Both are represented by the sphere of the poem's title, referring to the globe itself; not merely our place of residence, the globe produces each new day through its rotation, literally 'a home of motion'.[87] The following year, Ammons published *The Snow Poems* (1977), taking the quotidian project of *Sphere* to its formal extreme, an attempt to prove the inexhaustibility of human experience. As he suggests in an interview with William Walsh, 'I had meant to write a book of a thousand pages of trash that nevertheless indicates that every image and every event on the planet and everywhere else is significant and could be great poetry.' Though he settled for three hundred rather than a thousand pages, Ammons continues, 'I went on long enough to give the idea that we really are in a poetically inexhaustible world, inside and out.'[88] The book received a largely negative response, criticizing Ammons for a self-indulgent, wayward project, abandoning his powers of lyric observation. Nevertheless, along with *Sphere*, *The Snow Poems* arguably stand as the apex of the poet's attention to the American present, the completion of a project represented best by Ammons's *Collected Poems: 1951-1971* (1972), which won the National Book Award in 1973.

Collected Poems omits extracts from Ammons's 1965 publication *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, another book-length work that prepares the ground for his projects of the 1970s. Written as a daily journal from December 6th 1963 to January 10th the following year (36 days in total, matching the number of photographs in each of Mayer's rolls of film), Ammons composed the poem on a roll of adding-machine tape affixed to his typewriter, allowing both the narrow dimensions of the paper and the unknown spool of its length to determine the poem's formal parameters. '[T]oday I / decided to

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[87] A. R. Ammons, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 75-76

[88] A. R. Ammons, *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 65-66

write / a long / thin / poem,' the text begins, 'narrow, long, / unbroken,' 'one / rolling end, one / dangling, coiling end' as the tape unravels to the floor.[89] Ammons records the minutiae of each day throughout the poem: the weather, the objects on his desk, his view through the window; on several occasions, he keeps up with a daily news report about a plane crash over Delaware, the aircraft struck by lightning in a thunderstorm. Time and again, Ammons expresses his anxiety about keeping an accurate record of what happens, of grasping 'the inexhaustible / multiplicity & possibility / of the surface', a lesson in unfeasibility: 'even if I could know & / describe every event,' he writes, 'my / account would / consume the tape & run / on for miles into air'.[90] In this sense, he discovers the same inherent paradox of attention expressed by William James. 'One of the most extraordinary facts of our life is that, although we are besieged at every moment by impressions from our whole sensory surface,' reads a passage from *The Briefer Course* (1892), 'we notice so very small a part of them.' 'The sum total of our impressions never enters into our *experience*,' James continues; instead, they 'run through this sum total like a tiny rill through a broad flower mead.'[91]

In *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, Ammons is forever 'lagging behind the event,' constantly 'running to catch up: to / be at the / crest's break, the / running crest' of the present moment, the instance of 'event becoming word'. This is a process he describes, in an important passage, as 'anti-art & non-classical':

> in art, we do not run
> to keep up with random
> moments, we select

[89] A. R. Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 1-2

[90] Ibid., 13, 18

[91] William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (New York: Henry Holt, 1892), 217

& create
the moment
occurring forever:
    timelessness held
    at the peak of time:
(just went to take a leak:
jay on the back lawn,
hopping, looking around,
    turning leaves)

but this may turn back on
itself, motion by motion,
a continuum, held in
    timelessness

Like Lawrence, Ammons understands poetry's ability to arrest the moment, to keep it in place, 'held at the peak of time,' 'occurring forever'. But this is somehow different to the texture of the poem he finds himself writing, 'a continuum, held in / timelessness' by the motion of the poem, the 'weaving in & / out' of 'a / tapestry,' he writes later, 'looking for all / the world / as if it were alive'.[92] Even the comic disappearance of the poet to 'take a leak' off-screen doesn't disrupt the poem's continuum, still in motion in his absence, returning to find a new 'jay on the back lawn'. This constant movement – 'motion by motion' – is dramatized by the poems frequent outbursts, which seem to illustrate Ammons's 'crest' forever crashing into existence: '& so & so & so & / so & so / & / so & so & so & so' reads a wave-like passage several pages later, recalling Ed Folsom's sense of Whitman as 'the poet of the grand conjunction, the singer of "and."' Alongside the poem's many ampersands, Ammons favours the word 'just' in *Tape*, consistently attentive to unexpected nature of phenomena, the always *just-now* of experience, frequently accompanied by to-the-minute time-stamps: '9:35 pm: lighting!

[92] Ammons, *Tape*, 37, 41

[…] just flashed / blue-bright'; 'a deep blue / sweeping smooth / cloud mass went just / between us / and the ocean'; 'just sat down / to smoke, and the sun cast / my head against the wall'; '11:16 a.m: a blur of light / just came into / the room, / lived a few seconds, then / died away'. '[H]ome is every minute, / occurring?' he wonders on 10th December, 'just like this?'[93]

Perhaps inevitably, Ammons becomes increasingly self-conscious of his project as the poem unfolds. What begins as an exercise in recording experience gives way, instead, to an extended meditation on the activity of paying close attention, its rewards and limitations. 'I've / given up hope of / understanding for / what good is / understanding?' he writes: 'why can't / every thing just be itself?' By the end of the poem, Ammons has produced not only a lasting record of his 'frazzling reality, / many-fingered & / dividing', but a record of his own attempts to make a record in the first place. As such, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* not only contains the results of attention – 'held / at the peak of time' – it shows attentiveness in action. The experience of reading the poem is one of undeniable momentum; although we know it to have been written almost six decades ago, we cannot help but feel as though the poem is describing what has only 'just now' taken place. More than this, the phenomena of the poem almost seem to be occurring as we read them, as if the poem were a live feed through to Ammons at the moment of writing. 'I try to transfigure these / days / so you'll want to keep / them: / come back to them,' he writes, echoing Whitman's own address to readers of the future. 'I hold these days aloft, / empty boxes / you can exist in: but / when you live in them / you hurry out of your own / life,' as though by reading the poem we momentarily suspended our own experience in exchange for Ammons's, living it with

[93] Ibid., 39, 15, 29, 37, 28

him.[94] It is as though the poem inverts the trope Ammons has earlier identified; this is not so much 'event becoming word' as word becoming the event, as though the poetry were somehow generating, from itself, the world.

At the end of *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (2011), the critic Oren Izenberg recounts an experience of reading Ammons's *Tape*, citing its ability to bring out an awareness of our own acts of attention: to the phenomena of the poem, to the experience of reading, to the passage of time (both in our own world and the poem's). More than this, Izenberg goes on to argue that the poem somehow enables a shared or collective experience, akin to Whitman's imaginative encounter with his readers on the Brooklyn Ferry. For Izenberg, as we grow into awareness of the poem (and what it produces), we develop an awareness, too, of other readers' reading of the text, the poem serving as a meeting-place, a site of congregation. 'As I read it, I know that she too has noted it,' writes Izenberg of his 'fellow reader', 'and now my reading is of her noticing': 'I follow her reading as it proceeds in my own mind,' and 'If I go on long enough, what I arrive at is not a reading of the poem [...] [but] a life together, hers and mine, produced as a function of my own intention.' While Izenberg has a specific reader in mind – a former partner, 'a woman I loved and could no longer live with' – he presents us, also, with an image of community; it is as though all readers of Ammons's poem, whether past, present, or future, are reading together, their individual experiences of the poem collapsing into one another.[95] As if by way of illustration, the cover of Izenberg's book shows a print by the digital artist Jason Salavon, whose work deliberately collapses the temporal duration of existing films into a single image. In a sense, the title of Salavon's image is all that we need: *The Grand Unification Theory (Part*

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[94] Ibid., 21, 72, 88

[95] Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 171-76

Three: Every Second of "It's a Wonderful Life") (1997) **[Fig. 22]**. We see the entire film simultaneously, resembling a photograph of outer space, just as the original scroll of *Tape* enables us to see the whole poem in a single glance. As such, the present moment of our own reading corresponds and overlaps with the present moment of each reader's reading, including all those of the past and future. We read Ammons's *Tape* at once, like dreaming a collective dream.

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Known for his elusive and retiring nature, James Schuyler's whereabouts around December 1963 – as Ammons was producing *Tape* – are difficult to locate. Cited as a member of the so-called New York School of poetry, Schuyler is often linked to Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, each of whom he lived with for brief phases through the 1950s. Prone to bouts of mental illness and depression, shyness, anxiety, not to mention periods of hospitalization for his (largely dormant) schizophrenia, Schuyler spent the final decade of his life living in Room 625 of Manhattan's Chelsea Hotel. He gave his first public reading, aged 65, on November 15th 1988 at the DIA Foundation on Mercer Street, where he was lovingly introduced by Ashbery: 'I give you a poet who knows the names for things, and whose knowing proves something.'[96] He died just over two years later in the spring of 1991. To coincide with the publication of his posthumous *Collected Poems* (1993), the American publishing house Farrar, Straus & Giroux arranged for a commemorative plaque to be unveiled at the Chelsea's entrance. Though his reputation may not yet have scaled the heights of Ashbery's or O'Hara's, a

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[96] John Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 210

visit to the hotel in 2023 – the centenary of Schuyler's birth – finds the poet in arresting company: Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Brendan Behan, Leonard Cohen.

1963 is conspicuously absent from the chronology included in the final pages of *The Diary of James Schuyler* (1997), edited by Nathan Kernan. The diary itself does not begin until September 1967, while Kernan's long-anticipated biography of the poet remains (for now) unpublished. Schuyler's life before the *Diary* can be pieced-together through his correspondence – *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler 1951-1991* (2004) – but again we stumble on a year-long gap between two letters dated 'March 29, 1963' and 'Feb. 22, 1964' respectively.[97] Looking elsewhere, we find a handful of Schuyler's poems included in Ted Berrigan's influential *C: A Journal of Poetry*, which ran for thirteen issues from 1963 to 1967. Schuyler first appears in volume 5, 'October/November 1963', represented by a single poem ('The Infant Jesus of Prague'). Five more poems appear in volume 7, 'February 1964', but Schuyler is missing from the issue between, the journal's 'December 1963/January 1964' edition, the same two months accounted for in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. Until more of his papers are available, it is hard to know for sure where Schuyler was during this period, a Christmas and New Year. The two letters above, however, each addressed to Ashbery, are stamped as being sent from Southampton, New York, which likely places Schuyler in the realm of 49 South Main Street, the home of painter Fairfield Porter.

Following his recovery from a psychological collapse during the spring of 1961, Schuyler lived sporadically with the Porters – both in Southampton and their summer house at Great Spruce Head Island, Maine – throughout the 1960s. That Porter and Schuyler had an immense affection for each other is well documented and (at least as

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[97] James Schuyler, *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler, 1951-1991* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2004), 142-144

far as Justin Spring is sure in his biography of Porter) their relationship navigated sexual and romantic phases. Schuyler's perennial financial troubles, estrangement from his family and vulnerability to periods of mental instability cast Porter – not a wealthy man himself – in the role of Schuyler's carer.[98] Nevertheless, Porter found Schuyler's creative influence and range of references (both artistic and literary) hugely valuable to the progression of his painting; like Frank O'Hara, Schuyler worked sporadically as a critic for *ARTnews*, reviewing Porter's work on multiple occasions. At the same time, despite their fondness for the poet – 'an adopted uncle,' writes Spring – Schuyler's indefinite presence became a cause of friction in the Porter household. 'A certain tension would, of course, always exist between Anne Porter and James Schuyler,' Spring notes, 'since both were seeking the affection of the same man.'[99] This tension is detectable in Porter's painting *The Screen Porch* (1964) **[Fig. 23]**, which shows a seated Schuyler reading in the Porters' glazed conservatory, very much at home; engrossed in his book, he is apparently oblivious to the awkward stiffness of the Porter children by his side, while Anne herself is pictured on the far side of the glass, alone in the garden, on the outside looking in (quite literally). Spring notes that the painting was 'not popular' among its subjects. Indeed, 'Porter's visual statement of the complicated ambiguities – sexual, emotional, and personal – that ran through his family and his home was disturbing enough that within the group it was soon known jokingly as "The Four Ugly People."'[100] The tension of Schuyler's constant presence in Southampton – part affection, part exasperation – is perhaps best captured by Anne Porter's quipped

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[98] 'Now he seems to be much better since Fairfield has more or less officially adopted him,' wrote O'Hara to Ashbery of Schuyler's mental health in 1959 (Justin Spring, *Fairfield Porter: A Life in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 252). Despite the sexual nature of their friendship, the word *adopted* seems revealing of a Parent-Child relationship.

[99] Ibid., 207, 229

[100] Ibid., 273

reflection in a later interview: '[Jimmy] came to lunch one day and stayed for eleven years.'[101]

Just as Fairfield Porter's work was shaped and influenced by Schuyler, we gain insight into Schuyler's poems through his writing about Porter. 'A painting has the advantage of fixing our attention on what is there, in the painting,' he wrote in a review of 1967:

> What we are given is an aspect of everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor as an exaltation. Its art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What these paintings celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are concentrated instances.

For Schuyler, Porter's painting is a celebration of what is, simply put, *available*. His canvases are 'concentrated instances' of ordinary life, unadorned and unaffected. As Schuyler puts it in an early poem, 'What is, is by its nature, on display,' ready to be witnessed. Porter's art '[fixes] our attention on what is there,' encouraging a patient, careful looking that we might later fix upon the world beyond the painting, attending to its details and its constant changes, accessing (for Schuyler) 'the most varied and desirable knowledge' available to us: 'the everyday'. 'Their concern is with immediacy,' he concludes of the paintings: 'Look *now*,' they say, 'It will never be more fascinating.'[102]

Schuyler's poetry shares the chatty, casual vernacular of O'Hara's writing, along with the dashed-off, notational quality characteristic of the New York School poets. Schuyler seems self-aware of this in 'Four Poems', an early piece that not only begins in

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[101] Quoted in David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1998), 25

[102] James Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, ed. Simon Pettet (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1998), 16-17

the style of Frank O'Hara – 'It's 4:30 in Cambridge,' reads the opening line, reminiscent of 'It is 12:30 in New York a Friday' from 'The Day Lady Died' – but gains awareness of the similarity as it goes: 'Oh shit (excuse / me, Frank, for stealing your stuff)'. We discover the scattershot attention of the New York School aesthetic everywhere in Schuyler's poetry. 'Another night. / The grass / yellower. And the elms close in,' read lines from 'Ilford Rose Book', showing the dart of Schuyler's own attention, shifting rapidly between his simple observations of the outside world and objects close to hand: 'Flaming gray to the west / a blinding shadow. Dusty Easter / eggs, an ashtray no one / will wash'.[103] The constant vying for attention of phenomena is strongly visualized in 'Flashes', another early poem whose lines dart, drop and relocate from one thing to the next:

> Dark day
>
> hard, swarming
>
> west
>
> the Chrysler Building
>
> silver, soluble
>
> south
>
> not a hole
>
> a depth
>
> brightening
>
> almost to pinkness
>
> smoke
>
> spreading, climbing
>
> moving back on itself
>
> hanging dissolving forming going renewing
>
> mixed with cloud
>
> steams
>
> and darks

[103] James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Frarrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 67, 14

a bird

snapped by

it's raining

just in one spot

From the 'Dark day' to the 'silver, soluble' Chrysler Building, the 'depth / brightening / almost to pinkness' to the 'smoke / spreading, climbing / moving back on itself' mixing with 'cloud / steams / and darks', right through to the bird snapping by through its 'one spot' of rain, 'Flashes' is a poem in constant visual and descriptive movement. Schuyler not only flits between his observations but blends them together, creating a composite image, 'snapped' (by the camera *flash* of the poem's title) but also 'soluble' and 'dissolving' like a motion-blurred photograph, retaining something of the fizz and energy of New York City in the poem's ceaseless present-tense participles: 'swarming', 'brightening', 'spreading, climbing / moving', 'hanging dissolving forming going renewing', 'raining', and even the Chrysler's own nominal 'Building'.[104]

It is easy, in this sense, to see how we might interpret Schuyler's work in terms of a postwar vogue for spontaneity. However, Schuyler's poems insist on their interest not so much in movement, motion, and spontaneity but a quality of dailiness. As such – while academic interest in Schuyler's poetry is still gaining momentum – there exists already something of a critical consensus. As Raphael Allison notes, writing in 2011, 'It has become axiomatic in commentary on James Schuyler to call him a poet who celebrates everyday experiences,' what Allison terms the poet's 'predilection for the ordinary.'[105] Merely glancing down the contents page of James Schuyler's *Collected Poems* gives an indication of this predilection: fifteen poems include the date within

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[104] Ibid., 22-23

[105] Raphael Allison, 'James Schuyler's Beef with Ordinary Language', *Journal of Modern Literature* 34.4 (Spring 2011), 106

their title, while a further thirty-three reference a season, month, or temporal marker. 'Today', time-stamped '*July 26th, 1965*', describes a summer at Great Spruce Head Island, a gentle gathering of observed phenomena and sensory details, like a bouquet of flowers. It is a poem of focused and delicate lyric attention, from the water's 'ripples of applause' and the 'Spruce and bright-leaved birch' to the mewing gulls, the wind ('with a noise like water') and the 'spiked brown seed cups of red columbine'. Schuyler's picture gradually accumulates, like a painter adding careful brushstrokes to a canvas, taking what's in front of him, transferring it into the poem:

> Round and brown as rabbit droppings,
> seed pods of blue-eyed frass
> bobble and split along the seams:
> so big for a small flower.
> A sailboat scuds,
> a poplar tugs at roots
> in soil a scurf on rock.
> Everything chuckles and creaks
> sighs in satisfaction
> reddens and ripens in tough gusts of coolness
> and the sun smites[106]

'Schuyler transforms the poem into a space for tracking, seemingly in realtime [*sic*], an attention to the world outside his window,' writes Mae Losasso of Schuyler's 'trope of attention,' 'a kind of poetic ethos'.[107] 'Today' performs this real-time tracking, revealing Schuyler to be something of a painterly Impressionist. 'Today / you could take up the / tattered shadows off / the grass,' he writes in 'Shimmer', 'Roll them / and stow them. And collect / the shimmerings in a / cup, like the coffee / here at my right hand.' 'I can't

[106] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 26-27

[107] Mae Losasso, ''Remember to slam the parentheses behind you': Structures of Attention in the Lyric Poetry of James Schuyler', *Textual Practice* (2020), 732

get over / how it all works in together,' suggests 'February', which closes with a moment of observational precision tinged with revelation: 'It's the yellow dust inside the tulips. / It's the shape of a tulip. / It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in. / It's a day like any other.'[108]

Justin Spring notes Schuyler's 'wildflower arrangements' as one of the poet's more charming habits as a houseguest ('When not immobilized by depression'), while his first published poem, 'Salute', includes its own significant image of *gathering*, offering a useful way to understand the braided observations of Schuyler's poetry.[109] 'Like that gather- / ing of one of each I / planned,' it reads, 'to gather one / of each kind of clover, / daisy, paintbrush that / grew in that field / the cabin stood in and / study them one afternoon / before they wilted.' These are lines that capture the gentleness of Schuyler's descriptive activity – *gather* rather than *pluck* or *pick* – but also reveal the sense that he is happy to attend to whichever phenomena happen to be lying around at the time, to 'study' what he finds before it wilts and disappears, selecting and arranging what he sees into a lyrical bouquet.[110]

Schuyler's theme is change. More specifically, it is the strangeness of acknowledging both change and similarity, what Siobhan Phillips has called the 'continual, ever-renewed harmony between expectation and discovery.'[111] As Schuyler wrote of Porter's paintings, 'the everyday' is 'the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge,' a knowledge, it appears, of the inherent paradox of daily time.

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108 Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 163-64, 4-5

109 Spring, *Fairfield Porter*, 253

110 Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 44

111 Siobhan Phillips, 'Stevens and an Everyday New York School', *Wallace Stevens Journal* 36.1 (2014), 97

'The / Days tick by, each so unique, each so alike,' read lines towards the end of 'Hymn to Life'. 'Most things, like the sky,' agrees 'Greenwich Avenue', 'are always changing, always the same.' 'Discontinuity: in all we see and are:' writes Schuyler in 'June 30, 1974', 'the same, yet change, / change, change.'[112] Where Frank O'Hara's writing grows from the insistence of the city, Schuyler's poems concern themselves with natural scenery and observations: landscapes, coastlines, birds and insects; flowers, grasses, trees and shrubs; weather, clouds, the time of day. For Schuyler, the natural world exists as a site of experience, a zone where the 'uniqueness' and 'alikeness' of each day is taking place, offering an invitation to the poet to make a record of the world, repeating and departing at the same time, simultaneously. '[I want] merely to say, to see and say, things / as they are,' suggests Schuyler in 'Dec. 28, 1974', as if answering Wallace Stevens's question in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1937) – 'So that's life, then: things as they are?' – with a low-key, half-bemused response: *I guess so. What else would there be?*[113]

In his introduction to the poet's *Diary*, Nathan Kernan has commented upon the notational tendency of Schuyler's descriptive writing, his ability 'to see and say, things / as they are'. 'Schuyler's poems often draw our attention to the idea of Day as the infinitely varied and yet unchanging, inexorable unit of passing time,' he writes, while noting that the *Diary* often reads like an addition to his poems, 'as though we are in the medium of his poetry: in the presence of something that is about to be poetry, yet isn't, or, looking again, perhaps is.'[114] Simon Pettet notes the same of Schuyler's *Selected Art Writings* (1998): '"The best criticism is simply the best description" was Porter's

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[112] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 223, 169, 230

[113] Ibid., 234

[114] James Schuyler, *The Diary of James Schuyler,* ed. Nathan Kernan (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1997); Kernan goes on to say that 'Schuyler [often] found that what began as prose, in the *Diary*, turned to poetry' in the act of writing; there are several entries in the *Diary* where Schuyler's writing drifts into the shape of a poem (9-11).

yardstick,' he suggests, and 'Schuyler here is pretty much following his mentor's advice,' as though the *Art Writings* were merely 'a logical extension of his poetry, or, rather [...] an illuminating parallel attention.'[115] Far from a 'parallel attention', Schuyler's looking seems not to discriminate: he attends to paintings, to nature, to people and poetry with the same acute descriptive focus, a serious, ambitious looking, straining to take notice, a strain disguised by his routinely casual, off-hand style. 'To me much of poetry is as concerned with 'looking' at things and trying to describe them, as painting is,' Schuyler remarked, a comment he rehearses in an interview discussing Fairfield Porter. 'Did you ever try to write poems about [Porter's] paintings?' asks the interviewer. 'No,' Schuyler responds, 'but I tried to write poems that were like [them].'[116] This likeness finds its clearest expression in the poet's contentedness to take the world on its own terms, to receive it as it comes: *What is, is by its nature, on display.* Schuyler celebrates each day as he finds it, equally admiring of its differences and similarities. 'Everything happens as I write,' he suggests to Carl Little, evidence of Mae Losasso's sense that Schuyler's poems are vehicles for 'tracking' his attention.[117] In this way, Schuyler's looking and the poems' lives are somehow coextensive. As he puts it at the end of 'Linen': 'Now, this moment / flows out of me / down the pen and / writes.'[118]

Schuyler's insistence on the world as it is at the moment of writing – like Porter's 'concentrated instances' of time – creates a textual environment that not only documents the subtle shifts and noticings of the poet's attention but keeps the present in a living stasis. More than anything, Schuyler is drawn to descriptions of the world in

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[115] Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, xiv

[116] Mark Hillringhouse, 'An Interview with James Schuyler', *The American Poetry Review* 14.2 (March/April 1985), 7

[117] Carl Little, 'Interview', 168

[118] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 253-54

metamorphosis, the moment of transition between seasons, hours, minutes, days; the emergence of afternoon light through a window; a change in the wind; the 'woods, / frantic with life'. What Schuyler captures in his poems is 'The impermanence of permanence,' a world forever in the act of changing – of 'hanging dissolving forming going renewing,' to reiterate 'Today' – as if unable to complete the process, to graduate from *changing* through to *changed*.[119] 'The procedure of Schuyler's poems,' writes Tom Clark, 'is to follow the divining rod of the moment in the direction in which it is being pulled,' an inherently pastoral mode in which 'there's no forgetting [that] we're in the world of time passing, where loss makes all things deeper, and the light of day is always enriched just before it goes.'[120] For Peter Campion, 'such immediacy' in Schuyler's poems 'stretches beyond the immediate moment,' while, for Raphael Allison, Schuyler attempts to 'write outside the boundaries of lyric poignancy,' striving for something temporally unfixed and flowing.[121] Both comments are reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson's sense (in 'Self-Reliance') that man's attention to the present is the only route to the eternal or transcendent:

> But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present,
> but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches
> that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot
> be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present,
> above time.

Schuyler attempts, as Emerson prescribes, to 'live with nature in the present,' to make a record of the world that manages to be both *in* and *above* time at once. 'His work is

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[119] Ibid., 199, 217

[120] Tom Clark, 'Schuyler's Idylls: Notes and Reflections on the *Collected Poems*', *The American Poetry Review* 23.3 (May/June 1994), 9

[121] Peter Campion, *Radical as Reality: Form and Freedom in American Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 107; Allison, 'James Schuyler's Beef', 111

[…] driven by a burning need to pay attention to immediate, quotidian experience,' writes Andrew Epstein, with 'a constant awareness of how much easier said it is than done.'[122] Schuyler's poetry keeps his 'immediate, quotidian experience' alive, ensuring that 'the surprise is that / the surprise, once / past, is always there,' as he writes in 'A Stone Knife', that 'The un- / recapturable returns'.[123] In the words of poet Douglas Crase, Schuyler's friend for many years, 'The reality Jimmy wanted us always to have was a reality still alive'.[124]

Schuyler's achievement of this *still-aliveness* is apparent in what has become his best-known work, 'The Morning of the Poem', the title poem of his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, published in 1980. The poem is a gentle collage of happennings and observations, unfolding in a running, real-time commentary, blending anecdotes, shopping lists and newspaper headlines with Schuyler's typically acute descriptions of the weather and the objects close to hand. The poet reflects upon his friends and distant family members, recalling trips and holidays and previous apartments; he peruses headlines, checks the view, and dwells on fashion, shaving foam and poetry. His verse lines stretch in a Whitmanesque sprawl, straining to contain the poem's sheer volume of content.[125] A highly diaristic text, Schuyler's thick-and-fast digressions reveal his paradoxically laissez-faire anxiety to note down everything that happens, not to let the world slip by. 'This day, I want to / Send it to you,' reads a passage several pages in:

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[122] Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 74

[123] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 111-12

[124] Douglas Crase, *Lines from London Terrace: Essays and Addresses* (Brooklyn: Pressed Wafer, 2017), 137

[125] 'It's really just one long line,' Schuyler suggests to Mark Hillringhouse of the poem: 'When I wrote it I set the typewriter as wide as I could and that determined the length of the line' (Hillringhouse, 'Interview', 9). It is as though the expansiveness of Whitman's project, in Schuyler's hands, breaks away from lineation. In this sense, 'The Morning of the Poem' has more in common with Whitman's prose in *Democratic Vistas* and the development of the American prose poem.

the sound of stirring air, soft
sunlight, quivering trees
That shake their needles and leaves like fingers
improvising on a keyboard
Scriabin in his softest mood, and the wind
rises and it all goes Delius,
The sky pale and freshly washed, the blue flaked
off here and there and
Showing white, flat and skimpy clouds haunting
a bright green, soft blue day.[126]

What begins here as a sleek description of the 'sound of stirring air, / soft sunlight, [and] quivering trees' transforms into a brief image of 'fingers / improvising on a keyboard' which in turn begins a minor musical comparison of the styles of two composers. When Schuyler returns to his description of the sky, his images seem to be tinged by laundry ('pale and freshly washed'), swim-/underwear ('skimpy'), chips of paint ('flaked off here and there and / Showing white'), as though the poet's seeing were generated – even 'haunted' – by the domestic situation around him; that the trees suggest a keyboard indicates the presence of a nearby piano. It is 'the ultimate "anything" poem,' writes James Campbell: 'maple trees, TV, jokes, animals in the garden,' representing 'a lifetime of compressed emotion in a morning's introspection.'[127] Indeed, what Helen Vendler writes in her review of Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems* just as easily applies to Schuyler:

> Why should poetry be confined in a limited or closed form? Our minds ramble on; why not our poems? [...] He believes in colloquies, observations, memories, impressions, and variations – all things with

[126] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 275

[127] James Campbell, 'Me, Me, Me', *Bookforum* 17.2 (June-August 2010) https://www.bookforum.com/print/1702/james-schuyler-put-anything-in-his-poems-especially-himself-5782 [accessed 18 May 2021]

> no beginnings and no endings, things we tune in on and then tune out of. […] In one sense, there is no reason why a poem of this sort should ever stop.[128]

Vendler's is a sense that Schuyler seems almost aware of. In a striking passage, he turns to the notion of 'déjà vu, that / Strange and not unwonderful feeling [that] I have experienced this, this light, these trees, these birds, heard the very / Words you are saying, before, or, it all clicks into place and I know what you are about to say,' as if the poem were already in anticipation its own rereading, its 'un- / recapturable returns' (to re-quote 'A Stone Knife'). '[C]an't one, / Just one, mortal person or animal be immortal, live / Forever?' asks 'The Morning of the Poem': 'Not […] in an improbable Cloud-Cuckoo- / Land' but 'ageless, immortal, speedy / Here in Vermont, chasing rabbits, having a wonderful roll in the horse shit'.[129]

Schuyler's achievement in 'The Morning of the Poem' is to offer us a present moment forever on the move, a 'reality still alive'. In the moment of our reading, the poem reanimates, convincing us, through a combination of its casual, diaristic style and lyrical attentiveness, that the world occurring in the poem is a world occurring as we read – experience, not recollection – the 'incarnate Now' of Lawrence's phrase. Schuyler's poetry 'deliberately evokes the fluid transit and blur of time passing,' writes Epstein, 'the way the year evolves almost without our fully noticing.'[130] In doing so, his poems seem to come adrift, untethered from their temporal moorings. It is as though Schuyler's poetry, by being so attentive to the present moment, to what is available, shakes off any specific dates or calendrical references; even his poems with dated titles

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[128] Vendler, 'The Virtue of the Alterable', 235

[129] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 289, 278

[130] Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 102

seem somehow free from – perhaps even 'above', to borrow Emerson's term – the very dates in question.

As with Frank O'Hara's poems, several critics have drawn a comparison between the real-time observations of Schuyler's poetry and the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters, arguing that Schuyler's poems exist (at least in part) as a record of their own creation.[131] Nevertheless, Mark Silverberg is right to note that 'Schuyler's temperament and poems incline not toward the heat of Pollock [...] but towards the unspectacular "non-school" [...] of figurative painters like Jane Freilicher, Darragh Park, John Button, and Fairfield Porter.'[132] For Schuyler, these painters are not devoted to a 'new reality' but to the one 'they find already there, in changing light and weather'.[133] In the same way, writes Silverberg, Schuyler's 'is a poetics that attempts to put the self aside [...] to change nothing.' 'I hate fussing with nature and would like the world to be / All weeds,' he writes in 'Hymn to Life': 'So much messing about, why not leave the world alone?'[134] John Ashbery, writing about Jane Freilicher – with whom Schuyler was also friends – describes the method of her realism. '[L]esser artists correct nature in a misguided attempt at heightened realism,' he suggests, 'forgetting that the real is not only what one sees but also a result of how one sees it – inattentively, inaccurately perhaps, but nevertheless that is how it is coming through to us, and to deny this is to kill the life of the picture.' 'It seems that Jane's long career,' continues Ashbery, 'has been one attempt to correct this misguided, even blasphemous, state of affairs; to let

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[131] 'This is a poem that documents its own process of composition,' writes Mae Losasso of 'I sit down to type', 'and, in doing so, must remain forever stuck in *that* present moment, the moment in which it came into existence' (Losasso, 'Structures of Attention', 8).

[132] Mark Silverberg, 'James Schuyler's Poetics of Indolence', *Literary Imagination* 11.1 (2008), 28-29

[133] Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, 52-53

[134] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 218

things, finally, be.'[135] Indeed, Ashbery may have had in mind Schuyler's own writing on Freilicher, particularly a review in *Art and Literature* published in 1966. 'While abstract painting has, in large part, gone toward a calculated placement,' Schuyler concludes, 'the best figurative painters have availed themselves of the unexpectedness of nature, where the right place for a thing is where you find it.'[136] As he wonders in 'The Island', a cluster of poems composed in 1969 from Fairfield Porter's house in Maine, perhaps 'Getting the most out of a stone might be to leave it alone.'[137]

Cézanne's 'great effort' was 'to shove the apple away from him, and let it live of itself,' wrote Lawrence in 1929. Forty years later, James Schuyler appears to champion the same noninterventionist aesthetic, 'merely to say, to see and say, things / as they are,' to recall 'Dec. 28, 1974'. Throughout *Collected Poems*, we find Schuyler's descriptions always sparse and to the point, simplistic and elegant, lacking flourish and descriptive fanfare. 'It's today I want / to memorialize but how can I? What is there to it?' he asks in 'A Few Days', immediately answering his question with a litany of household objects: 'Cold coffee and / a ham-salad sandwich[.] A Skinny peach tree [that] holds no peaches,' and 'On this / desk, a vase of dried blue flowers, a vase of artificial roses, a bottle with / a dog for stopper, a lamp, two plush lions that hug affectionately, a bright / red travel clock, a Remington Rand, my Olivetti, the ashtray and a coffee cup.' Schuyler often goes no further than to name the objects of his seeing, leaving them to stand for themselves. When he does make use of adjectives, they tend to aim for both simplicity and accuracy-of-description: 'cold', 'skinny', 'dried blue', 'artificial', 'plush', 'bright / red'. There is a knowing self-awareness of this tendency on

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[135] John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 242-43

[136] Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, 33

[137] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 95

display in 'Seeking', a poem from Schuyler's first collection *Freely Espousing* (1969). Birdwatching in Maine, Schuyler stumbles on a hidden nest. 'Here is its nest, in this old New England / woodpile,' he writes, looking down to find 'three robin's-egg-blue / robin's eggs.'[138]

Craig Watson goes one step further in his treatment of Schuyler's writing, emphasising the poet's sensitivity to 'The notion that words have a material presence,' that 'The words are themselves / The thing said,' as Schuyler writes in 'The Morning of the Poem':

> love,
> Mistake, promise, auto
> Crack-up, color, petal,
> The color in the petal
> Is merely light
> And that's refraction:
> A word, that's the poem.
> A blackish-red nasturtium.[139]

'The poem [...] lives in the transcription of reality and becomes as much about language as it is about what that language represents,' continues Watson. 'To put it another way, words are Schuyler's medium, and the phrase *blackish-red nasturtium* has a material presence as real as the nasturtium itself.'[140] It is as if Schuyler's ultimate achievement were the realization of a famous passage by the American poet Jack Spicer in his epistolary sequence *After Lorca* (1957):

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[138] Ibid., 356, 29

[139] Ibid., 268-69

[140] Craig Watson, 'Fairfield Porter and the Plane Tree: Some Thoughts on James Schuyler's 'A Cardinal'', *Southwest Review* 98.2 (2013), 140

> I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste – a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem – a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger.[141]

Schuyler is 'our poet of is,' writes William Corbett, 'who loves to point / and declare.' Indeed, as Schuyler once suggested to Joe Brainard: 'Perhaps there isn't much more to poetry than point and snap.'[142] Overall, the impression of Schuyler's poetry 'is of things left tactfully alone, to stand forth naturally,' writes Crase: '[T]here could hardly be a more loving technique.'[143] 'Let's love today, the what we have now,' read lines from 'A Few Days': 'this day, not today or tomorrow or / yesterday, but this passing moment, that will not come again.'[144]

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[141] Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killman (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press,2010), 133

[142] Corbett quoted in Allison, 'James Schuyler's Beef', 106; Brainard quoted in Watson, 'Porter and the Plain Tree', 142

[143] Crase, Lines from London Terrace, 18

[144] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 362

III

Still Hungry?

Six months after his death on September 3rd 2017, there appeared a publication of John Ashbery's collages and poems. *They Knew What They Wanted* 'was about to go to press' when Ashbery passed away, writes editor Mark Polizzotti, though he had thankfully 'reviewed and approved the final layouts' of the book, close to a decade in the making. The volume's introductory texts were written 'while John was still alive,' continues Polizzotti, so 'naturally speak of him in the present tense.' 'Because this volume was for all intents and purposes finished before his passing, we decided to keep them as they are,' he concludes, extending the living Ashbery six months into the future.[1]

In 2021, Ecco Press published a posthumous collection of Ashbery's poems, gathering five unfinished projects into a single volume. Mostly composed between the 1990s and the mid-2000s, the work included in *Parallel Movement of the Hands* was discovered between Ashbery's homes in Manhattan and Hudson, boxed in basements, filed in drawers, the majority 'kept just several yards from where Ashbery wrote poetry and correspondence,' according to editor Emily Skillings, who served as Ashbery's personal assistant for the last years of his life. The collection ranges from 'The History of Photography', in which Ashbery swerves through photographic traffic, passing Daguerre, Mapplethorpe, and Muybridge on the way, to *The Art of Finger Dexterity*, an unfinished sequence written in response to a set of instructional piano compositions. Rounding off the collection is *The Kane Richmond Project*, an antic, listing, hybrid work that makes use of a number of cliffhanger television serials from the 1930s (starring the eponymous Kane Richmond, of whom Ashbery kept a 'handsome photograph'), as well

[1] John Ashbery, *They Knew What They Wanted: Poems & Collages,* ed. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 7-8

as collaging the texts of several popular adventure novels, a practice of manipulating found texts that was a mainstay of Ashbery's six-decade career.[2]

The poems in *Parallel Movement of the Hands* chirp with the familiar music of Ashbery's many-textured lyricism, rippling with the same 'signature patterns that lend his language a living, off-kilter quality,' writes Skillings, a quality which has always resisted being nailed down in criticism.[3] 'Ashbery poems are like involved daydreams from which, as with real dreams, there is no obvious exit,' suggests Ray Armantrout. '[Ashbery's] is a fully human poetry,' writes Oli Hazzard, 'in which, as it is with us, the marginal is thrust constantly and unexpectedly into the centre.'[4] Indeed, as Ashbery writes in 'The History of Photography', 'you are never sure of arriving, / or making any progress' in these poems, as 'one vignette sheds another, cancels its own credibility / in a fever of slight adjustments,' a constant 'froth of activity,' 'confusion and unfinished business,' frequently missing turnoffs, changing lanes, and finding yourself, somehow, in another place entirely, like the man 'battling blizzards to a place he thinks / is the North Pole, but is in reality hundreds / of miles from there'.[5]

In his foreword to the collection, poet and novelist Ben Lerner considers the nature of unfinishedness in Ashbery's work. 'To be finished is to be fixed and already fading,' he suggests, 'but that's not the fate of all artworks, all poems; poetry can also be a machine for suspending time.' As Lerner sees it, the living, off-kilter quality of Ashbery's writing – to borrow Skillings's earlier phrase – is connected to his 'genius for

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[2] John Ashbery, *Parallel Movement of the Hands: Five Unfinished Longer Works* (New York: Ecco Press, 2021), xviii, 299

[3] Ibid., xxxv

[4] Rae Armantrout and Oli Hazzard, 'Tributes to John Ashbery (1927-2017)', *Frieze* (11 September 2017) https://www.frieze.com/article/tributes-john-ashbery-1927-2017 (accessed 6 January 2020)

[5] Ashbery, *Parallel Movement*, 13, 36, 25

deferral,' a constant, gentle waywardness that keeps the ink of his poetry from ever fully drying. For Lerner, Ashbery's poems 'never take their place in the past, but instead invite us into their perpetual present,' setting 'the machinery of meaning-making into motion each time we read'. They generate 'a recurring wave / Of arrival,' as Ashbery puts it at the beginning of 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', the title poem of his best-known collection, the only book to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in the same year. 'The Ashbery poem, no matter how carefully composed [...] has to be left a little unrealized, open to the participation of future readers,' writes Lerner, 'that's how it cheats death.' 'There is no last page to the poetry,' he concludes, 'You will have had the experience; you can always have it again.' As Ashbery winks in '21 Variations on My Room', at the heart of *Parallel Movement*: 'Still hungry? Read on.'[6]

The repeatable present of Ashbery's poetry has been alluded to by several critics. 'You never step into the same river twice,' notes Dennis Brown in a review of Ashbery's collection *A Wave* (1984), 'but you can swim back upstream'. For Charles Altieri, Ashbery's poetry 'makes the importance of "now" in writing visible and lasting,' 'a pure celebration of process'. In a familiar move, Leslie Wolf draws a comparison between Ashbery's poetry and Abstract Expressionism, citing the 'freshness and unpredictability' of Ashbery's work, whose 'lack of "finish" allows it to breathe.'[7] Like Lerner, Wolf notes the importance of unfinishedness in Ashbery's writing, although the influence of Abstract Expressionism seems less pronounced than in the case of Frank

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[6] Ibid., xi-xiii, 105

[7] Dennis Brown, 'John Ashbery's *A Wave* (1983): Time and Western Man', in Lionel Kelly, ed., *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 66; Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 212-13; Leslie Wolf, 'The Brushstroke's Integrity: The Poetry of John Ashbery and the Art of Painting', in Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, 244

O'Hara. For one thing, Ashbery's interest in 'unfinished' artwork is detectable elsewhere. 'Bonnard once horrified the guards in the Grenoble museum by going up to one of his own canvases and calmly proceeding to paint on it,' reads an early article: 'And in a sense, his paintings are unfinished, in the same way that nature is.'[8] 1962 saw the publication of Ashbery's second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, a heavily fractured and discordant set of poems challenging poetry's capacity for meaning-making. Its title comes from an incomplete painting by Jacques-Louis David, depicting a pivotal event in the history of the French Revolution **[Fig. 24]**. David's unfinished painting – used on the cover of Ashbery's book – shows a group of muscular nudes, revealing the artist's unique process of producing anatomical sketches over which he planned to paint his figures fully clothed; several heads and parts of hands have been completed, floating strangely on the picture's surface.

Ashbery has certainly acknowledged an interest in Abstract Expressionism, though at times he seems suspicious as to what exactly the term means. 'It was obviously pretty easy to write about,' he reflects on his career as an art critic, 'since it was brand new and nobody knew anything about it, so what you had to say was as valid as what anyone else might.'[9] At the same time, as with Schuyler and O'Hara, he notes the guiding principle behind abstraction as analogous to writing, that the canvas and the poem reflect 'a record of [their] own coming into being.'[10] As he writes in 'No Way of Knowing', it is as if the poems present 'both the surface and the accidents / Scarring

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[8] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, xiii-xiv

[9] John Ashbery, *Something Close to Music: Late Art Writings, Poems, and Playlists*, ed. Jeffrey Lependorf (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2022), 20

[10] See Ashbery to Alfred Poulin: 'These are examples of poetry, or art, which makes itself up as it goes along, which is the subject of any one of my poems – the poem creating itself. The process of writing poetry becomes the poem' (Alfred Poulin, Jr., 'The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery', *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20 (Summer, 1981), 251).

that surface,' an image not only reminiscent of the surface 'accidents' of Action Painting, but of the looping, scarring lines created by the metal blades of ice-skates, gesturing in the direction of Ashbery's earlier long poem, 'The Skaters'.[11] More revealing, perhaps, than a head-on comparison of these paintings and the inner workings of an Ashbery poem – a comparison addressing ideas of painterly and poetic surface, as well as the idea of the poem as a record of its own creation – it is interesting to note the frequency with which Ashbery's work is discussed (and described) in terms that highlight its fluidity and liquid movement. While this might draw an implicit connection to the essentially liquid nature of Abstract Expressionist painting, it seems equally valuable in relation to ideas of open- and unfinishedness in Ashbery's writing, its generation of a 'perpetual present', as Lerner has it, successfully 'suspending time.' Ashbery 'has created a language that restores newness as you read,' writes Douglas Crase, 'a language that is always cresting with potential like a wave.'[12]

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'Like Emerson, and like O'Hara,' writes Andrew Epstein, 'Ashbery is obsessed with kinetic motion and its paradoxical dance with stasis,' 'the oscillation *between* motion

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[11] Allegedly inspired by *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (c.1795) **[Fig. 25]**, attributed to Henry Raeburn, 'The Skaters' demonstrates productive self-awareness of its own linear growth. 'Here I am then,' the poem seems to say of itself, 'continuing but ever beginning / My perennial voyage,' reflecting on the way its lines suggest both presence and absence: 'the carnivorous / Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving / Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence, but still.' Just as the marks left by the skates record the one-time presence of the skater(s), so the lines of Ashbery's poem are evidence not only of the absent poet but the poem he has left behind. The lower portion of Raeburn's painting shows the scores marking the ice; though sharper and somehow more deliberate, it's easy to see how the damaged surface of the loch resembles, in its way, an Abstract Expressionist canvas, a record of the skater's (or the painter's) movements.

[12] Crase, *Lines from London Terrace*, 15

and repose'.[13] John Berger makes a similar connection in a piece on the Hungarian photographer André Kertész, whose photographs of people reading emphasise a gulf between the stillness of the text – held steady in the reader's hands – and the imaginative 'displacement' of the act of reading. '[T]he displacement becomes a journey and the pages become a vehicle, a means of transport,' writes Berger, such that 'Long before man could fly, this journey was like flying.'[14] Rather than flight, Ashbery himself is drawn to images of water, of floating, flow, and of the ceaseless movement of the wave cycle, where 'the center / Keeps collapsing and re-forming,' refreshing itself constantly.[15] Srikanth Reddy has noted Ashbery's preference for 'floating speakers' who 'commonly address us from the drifting literary platforms of houseboats, hot air balloons, and countless other pleasure craft.' Indeed, 'To compile an exhaustive archive of the imaginary vessels mobilized by [Ashbery] would be to rival Homer's sonorous catalog of ships in *The Iliad*,' he suggests, noting the collection titles *April Galleons* (1987) and *Houseboat Days* (1977) as the least of Ashbery's personal fleet.[16] Asked about the image of the houseboat, Ashbery responds that he felt attracted to 'the idea of being on the move and being stationary in one's home – which is sort of what life is like,'[17] while the titles of several other collections further indicate a preference for fluidity, as in *A Wave* and the oceanic, book-length *Flow Chart* (1991). Even the title of the poet's third collection, *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), appears to reflect Epstein's sense of Ashbery's 'obsession with kinetic motion and its paradoxical dance with stasis,'

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[13] Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 129

[14] John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Penguin, 2013), 137-38

[15] John Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), 455

[16] Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28, 131

[17] Ross Labrie, 'John Ashbery, An Interview', *American Poetry Review* 13.13 (May-June 1984), 33

as does *The Moorings of Starting Out: The First Five Books of Poetry* (1997), tethering the motion of 'Starting Out' to the stasis of the harbour 'Moorings'. Other collections give a clue to Ashbery's interest in vehicles – *Shadow Train* (1981), *Breezeway* (2015) – while the poet has been quick to share the history of *The Vermont Notebook* (1975): 'most of it was written on a bus,' he suggests to Sue Gangel, 'which I found to be an interesting experience. Writing on a moving vehicle. Not only did my mind move, the landscape was moving as well.'[18]

Bonnie Costello has explored the 'shifting ground' of Ashbery's landscapes, showing that even the would-be solid terrain of his poetry is prone to throw us 'off balance.' 'His disappearing paths and slippery topography, his shifts in scale and perspective,' she writes, create 'an environment in which space is not absolute, a reality of shifting tectonic planes that can never be mapped, a "ground" that is not stable.' Indeed, 'The term "landscape" is a deliberately porous one for Ashbery,' she continues, 'who can mean by it either environment or painting, or, more often, both at once,' so that it is frequently 'unclear whether the poet is describing a painting or imagining an actual scene.' 'Ashbery invents a landscape we cannot stand in the middle of,' she concludes, 'that won't stay still within its frame, a frame that keeps slipping.'[19]

That Ashbery's landscapes are governed by the same logic as water – revealed, at least in part, by Costello's use of language ('shifting', 'slippery', 'porous', and so on) – confirms the poems' fundamental drift between stability and movement. 'Everything is landscape,' begins a stanza of 'French Poems', from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970):

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[18] Sue Gangel, 'John Ashbery Interviewed by Sue Gangel', in Joe David Bellamy, ed., *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 15

[19] Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 174-81

Perspectives of cliffs beaten by innumerable waves,
More wheatfields than you can count, forests
With disappearing paths, stone towers
And finally and above all the great urban centres, with
Their office buildings and populations, at the center of which
We live our lives, made up of a great quantity of isolated instants
So as to be lost at the heart of a multitude of things.

From the seemingly paradoxical opening statement ('Everything is landscape'), which immediately trips us, we proceed to the strange double 'Perspectives of cliffs', unsure whether we are staring at the cliffs themselves ('beaten by innumerable waves') or looking down from them over a landscape of 'wheatfields'. Any solidity we might cling to is compounded by Ashbery's use of unquantifiable language: waves are 'innumerable', wheatfields 'More [...] than you can count,' forests unmappable 'With disappearing paths'. Furthermore, due to our precarious perspective(s), Ashbery's landscape proves almost unimaginable; not only is it torn between the rural and the urban (both 'forests' and 'office buildings'), the vantage point we're given seems both on the ground and elevated, 'above all the great urban centres,' looking down from the cliffs, but also walking on the forest paths, positioned 'at the heart of a multitude of things.'[20] Ashbery's topography 'is the opposite of Wordsworth's revolving world of 'rocks and stones and trees,'' writes Dennis Brown: 'Everything [...] is shifting, dissolving – appearing only to disappear.' '[Y]ou may not know where you were or where you ended up,' suggests John Emil Vincent of the poems, 'but you know you've moved from one level, place, or plane of consciousness to another.'[21]

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[20] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 201

[21] Brown, 'John Ashbery's *A Wave*', 67; John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 53

More than anything, the instability (even disorientation) of Ashbery's poetry reflects his belief in the essential flux of experience. As he suggests to *The Paris Review*:

> Things are in a continual state of motion and evolution, and if we come to a point where we say, with certitude, right here, this is the end of the universe, then of course we must deal with everything that goes on after that [...] We might realize that the present moment may be one of an eternal or sempiternal series of moments, all of which will resemble it because, in some ways, they are all present, and won't in other ways, because the present will be past by that time.[22]

This sentiment echoes throughout Ashbery's poetry, including the above lines from 'French Poems', in which he notes the way 'our lives' are 'made up of a great quantity of isolated instants'. Forever rushing forwards, the present moment of Ashbery's poetry already 'seems like yesterday / And yesterday the place where we left off a little while ago.' Like the figure he describes above – 'lost at the heart of a multitude of things' – Ashbery's poems wonder, time and again, how best to orient themselves. 'Is anything central?' asks the speaker of 'The One Thing That Can Save America', 'Orchards flung out on the land, / Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?' The landscape passes 'with a rush'; details 'come on like scenery,' wheeled in from the wings, a flurry of 'Snapped-off perceptions'.[23] 'There is neither a centre that can hold nor a periphery that can be reached' writes Willard Spiegelman of Ashbery's poems. 'His central

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[22] Peter A. Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry No. 33: John Ashbery', *The Paris Review* 90 (Winter 1983) https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery [accessed 12 May 2021]

[23] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 206, 457

question, […] always hovering over every page, is the same as that of Elizabeth Bishop: Where is our home?'[24]

'While it has become a critical commonplace (following Ashbery's lead) to speak of his work's flux and meandering style,' suggests Stephen Ross, 'critics have tended to ignore his tendency to literalize the stream-of-consciousness metaphor,' a famous image that returns to the work of William James.[25] 'Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits,' writes James in *The Principles of Psychology*. 'It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.'[26] The connection is not missed by Ann Lauterbach, Ashbery's friend and fellow poet, who notes that 'Ashbery's reluctance to make any statement or declaration that does not appear to arrive and disappear on the heels of his miraculous syntax seems to me evidence of the kind of conceptual relativity that James first enunciated.'[27] Nor is James's presence overlooked by Srikanth Reddy, describing Ashbery's 'floating speakers'. 'Formalizing William James's notion of "the stream of consciousness," Ashbery ultimately constructs a riverine poetics,' he argues, 'modeled upon the very rivers that convey his literary protagonists to their fugitive elsewheres.'[28]

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[24] Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139

[25] Stephen J. Ross, *Invisible Terrain: John Ashbery and the Aesthetics of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 72

[26] James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 239

[27] Ann Lauterbach, 'What We Know as We Know It: Reading "Litany" with JA: *As We Know* (1979)', in Peter Gizzi and Bradford Morrow, eds., 'A Writers' Aviary: SPECIAL PORTFOLIA: John Ashbery', *Conjunctions* 49 (2007), 341

[28] Reddy, *Changing Subjects*, 28

As Lauterbach herself alludes to, much has been written about the significance of Ashbery's syntax here, a dizzying framework of long sentences and run-on lines that keep the poems moving forwards. Ashbery's sentences are often so long, his syntactical arrangements so complex – especially in longer poems – that the reader finds it difficult to hold their meanings comprehensively in mind. Successive clauses and transitional phrases create the feeling of contingent sense. And yet, as Charles Bernstein has noted, 'Ashbery introduces a nonlinear associative logic that averts both exposition and disjunction'; the poems are prone to digression and distraction, disrupting the trajectory of meaning, though the syntax does enough to make us feel that meanings is 'perpetually imminent,' to cite Marjorie Perloff.[29] 'Ashbery ingeniously enhances the inherent temporality of his medium by undermining the grammatical, syntactic and rhetorical devices which give it stasis,' writes Costello in an illuminating passage:

> Main clauses are lost in the "forward animation" of the line, subordinate clauses momentarily taking over until yet other clauses replace them. Punctuation, too, is violated, not in a conspicuous way but by allowing the grammatical subject to change in midsentence, giving the effect of a run-on sentence or fragment. Beginnings and endings tend not to match up, and middles evade dénouement, so that when we glance up from our book we are unable to say what we have been reading, even though the words are perfectly clear.[30]

The effect of Ashbery's syntactic acrobatics is a strain between the text to come and that which has already passed. The reader constantly attempts to fit the meanings of successive lines to those that have flown by, an interpretive process complicated by the

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[29] Charles Bernstein, 'The Meandering Yangtze: *Rivers and Mountains* (1966), in Gizzi and Morrow, 'A Writers' Aviary', 264; Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10-11

[30] Bonnie Costello, 'John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader', *Contemporary Literature* 23.4 (Autumn, 1982), 509

constant promise of the poem's future, stretching indefinitely ahead, evidence of Ashbery's 'genius for deferral,' noted earlier by Lerner. The result of this strain – an attempt to resolve the text's past with its as-yet-unread future – is a sense that all we can attend to in the poems is the moment passing by, the line we happen to be reading now. For Ashbery, the present moment accounts for the pervasive texture of experience. Not only is the present moment all that we have access to, but the past itself is built of moments that were previously 'present' once; and 'the future, an open / Structure, is rising even now, to be invaded by the present'. The future is the present, too; it just hasn't arrived yet. After all, '[T]he end is not far off,' writes Ashbery, 'since it will occur / In the present and this is the present.'[31]

In an article of 2010, Lerner explores this quality of Ashbery's writing, arguing that 'Part of the bizarre power of Ashbery's best poetry is that it seems to narrate what it's like to read Ashbery's best poetry,' as though the present moment of the poem were able 'to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading'.[32] Following the example of James Longenbach, Lerner draws attention to Ashbery's poem 'Clepsydra', named for an ancient timekeeping device that uses water as its means of measurement. For Longenbach, the poem comes to reflect 'the way in which one moment supersedes another, slipping from the future to the past without any sense of teleology,' strategically exploiting the complex play of past, present, and future syntax outlined in the previous paragraph. Speaking to Richard Kostelanetz in 1976, Ashbery describes the poem as 'a meditation on how time feels as it is passing,' 'all of a piece, like a stream' (drawing again, it seems, on William James).[33] Ashbery even seems to

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[31] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 239, 703

[32] Ben Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2* 37.1 (2010), 203

[33] Quoted in James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95

have 'Clepsydra' in mind in later poems: 'one / Is always cresting into one's present,' read lines from 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', 'the present we are always escaping from / And falling back into, as the waterwheel of our days / Pursues its uneventful, even serene course.' There is 'something about time / That only a clock can tell you,' offers *Houseboat Days*: 'how it feels, not what it means.'[34] Each line of 'Clepsydra' flows into view, 'scarcely called into being / Before it swells, the way a waterfall / Drums at different levels':

> Each moment
> Of utterance is the true one; likewise none are true,
> Only is the bounding from air to air, a serpentine
> Gesture which hides the truth behind a congruent
> Message, the way air hides the sky, is, in fact,
> Tearing it limb from limb this very moment: but
> The sky has pleaded already and this is about
> As graceful a kind of non-absence as either
> Has a right to expect: whether it's the form of
> Some creator who has momentarily turned away,
> Marrying detachment with respect, so that the pieces
> Are seen as parts of a spectrum, independent
> Yet symbolic of their staggered times of arrival;
> Whether on the other hand all of it is to be
> Seen as no luck.[35]

This passage – the poem's longest sentence – slides past in 'a serpentine / Gesture', drumming through its 'different levels', snaking from line to line 'so that the pieces / Are seen as parts of a spectrum'; the different fractions of the text (each word, each line, each punctuated clause) are parts of a cohesive whole, despite their 'staggered times

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[34] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 483, 509

[35] Ibid., 140

of arrival'. 'Each moment / Of utterance is the true one,' passing through us as we read, 'Precisely in the time of its being furthered'; 'likewise none are true,' no instant more significant or meaningful than any other, each of the poem's 'present moments' neither quite present nor fully absent – 'a kind of non-absence,' perhaps – the way a single stretch of river implies both source and destination, 'symbolic' in the river's flowing.[36]

The self-awareness of our reading generated by 'Clepsydra', what Lerner terms the poem's 'lyric mediacy', enables an interpretation of the text not only as 'a meditation on how time feels as it is passing,' but also as a commentary on 'the experience of experience,' Ashbery's well-known description of his poems in an interview of 1972. '[T]he particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through me,' he continues, 'a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long.'[37] 'And not just the major events,' read lines from 'Pyrography', 'but the whole incredible / Mass of everything happening simultaneously and pairing off, / Channeling itself into history.'[38] This is a preference and a way of thinking evident in Ashbery's art writing. He describes the painter R. B. Kitaj as 'the chronicler not of our "strange moment" but of how it feels to be living it'.[39] Elsewhere, his friend Jane Freilicher exhibits 'a democratic urge to avoid the solemnity

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[36] In an important sense, slicing an extract from 'Clepsydra' defeats the function of its form, reliant on the wholeness and intactness of the poem, its length, movement, and syntax. Brian McHale has warned against the critical tendency 'to proceed by selecting "key" lines or passages,' reducing long poems 'to a collection of decontextualized "key" quotes' so that 'the bulk of the poem goes uninterpreted – unread, to all intents and purposes' (Brian McHale, 'How (Not) to Read Postmodernist Long Poems: The Case of Ashbery's 'The Skaters', *Poetics Today* 21.3 (Fall, 2000), 566). Oli Hazzard similarly suggests that 'reading parts of 'Clepsydra' in isolation […] can be considered as potentially damaging to the poem' (Oli Hazzard, *John Ashbery and Anglo-American Exchange: The Minor Eras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 93). Beyond a strong recommendation to read the text in its entirety, I'm not sure how to solve this problem, given the practical limitations of close reading both in this context and generally.

[37] Poulin, 'Experience of Experience', 245

[38] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 497

[39] Ashbery, *Reported Sightings*, 308

of "privileged moments" in favor of a feeling for how nature and objects just keep plugging along'.[40] More significantly, it accounts for Ashbery's own sense of his writing practice, as revealed in several interviews conducted in the 1980s. 'I've conditioned myself to write at almost any time,' he says to Peter Stitt:

> Sometimes it doesn't work, but on the whole I feel that poetry is going on all the time inside, an underground stream. One can let down one's bucket and bring the poem back up. [...] It will not be dissimilar to what I have produced before because it is coming from the same source, but it will be dissimilar because of the different circumstances of the particular moment.

Ashbery reiterates the same idea both to Bryan Appleyard ('I don't look on my poetry as closed works. I feel they're probably going on all the time in my head and I occasionally snip off a length') and Sue Gangel ('I think I can plug into poetry whenever I want to, and it will come out much the same way at any given time').[41] It is striking, however, to note the image of 'an underground stream' in his conversation with *The Paris Review*, further evidence, perhaps, of Ashbery's riverine poetics.

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The distinctive texture of Ashbery's poetry – its willingness, writes Douglas Crase, 'to live in the present,' 'ruthlessly available to whatever is waiting there' – reflects, then, our experience of experience, 'a disparate account of the thing happening just now,' as

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[40] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 278-79

[41] Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry', 55; Bryan Appleyard, 'Interview with John Ashbery', *The Times* (23 August 1984) https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=1;doctype=interview (accessed 20 July 2022); Gangel, 'John Ashbery Interviewed', 18-19

Ashbery writes in *April Galleons*.[42] That this texture necessarily involves an openness to 'whatever is waiting there', to whatever happens to be flowing by, has been met with anger and confusion.[43] With its meandering syntax, lack of centre, and its tendency to wander amiably off course, Ashbery's reputation is for poems that are difficult to get a handle on, their meanings wilfully obscured. Speaking of his 2002 collection *Chinese Whispers*, Ashbery suggests that he considered 'using the definition of Chinese Whispers in the *Oxford English Dictionary of Word Games* for its jacket copy. But then I thought that if somebody picks it up and sees the phrase 'word games' next to my name, they'll think, 'Oh it's just Ashbery trying to pull the wool over our eyes again."[44] 'There are [...] a great many concerned and sensitive readers of poetry who consider Ashbery representative only of a decadent philosophical surrealism,' writes Charles Altieri, 'the kind of poetry that becomes important because it gives academics something complex to write about.' '[F]rom the perspective of the year 2040, Ashbery will be a curiosity,' grins the poet Mark Halliday, 'and smart people in 2040 will find it sweetly baffling that smart people in the 80s and 90s took [his poems] so seriously.'[45]

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[42] Douglas Crase, 'The Prophetic Ashbery', in Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, 33; Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 815

[43] No criticism is more spirited than that of Harold Bloom, who largely champions Ashbery as the heir to Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman, extending a tradition of American poetics stretching back through to the English Romantics. Nevertheless, Bloom sharply dismisses Ashbery's experimental second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, an 'outrageously disjunctive volume' and 'a fearful disaster'. 'How could Ashbery collapse into such a bog by just six years after *Some Trees*,' he wonders, 'and how did he climb back out of it again to [...] touch a true greatness in *The Double Dream of Spring* and *Three Poems*?' (Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 172-173).

[44] Mark Ford, 'John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford', in *Seven American Poets in Conversation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 66

[45] Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 139; Halliday quoted in Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 81

While we wait on the outcome of Halliday's prediction, it is worth considering Ashbery's own frustration at his reputation for obscurity. 'I often wonder if I am suffering from some mental dysfunction because of how weird and baffling my poetry seems to so many people,' he says to Peter Stitt. 'Let me read you a comment which appeared in a review of my most recent book [*Shadow Train*], from some newspaper in Virginia':

> It says: "John Ashbery is emerging as a very important poet, if not by unanimous critical consent then certainly by the admiration and awe he inspires in younger poets. Oddly, no one understands Ashbery." [...] So I live with this paradox: on the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers, and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't.[46]

Ashbery doubles down on this position in his opening statement as Professor of Poetry at Harvard University, a position he held from 1989-90:

> There seems to be a feeling in the academic world that there's something interesting about my poetry, though little agreement as to its ultimate worth and considerable confusion about what, if anything, it means.
>
> Unfortunately, I'm not very good at "explaining" my work. I once tried to do this in a question-and-answer period with some students of my friend Richard Howard, after which he told me: "They wanted to key to your poetry, but you presented them with a new set of locks."[47]

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[46] Stitt, 'The Art of Poetry', 45

[47] John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1

The imagery of locks and keys in this description is familiar to Ashbery criticism. Each volume of his poetry has produced a healthy crop of disgruntled reviews, bemoaning Ashbery's difficulty and apparent lack of meaning. At the same time, Ashbery has an equal number of defenders, often defiantly protective of his writing and its proneness to hostility. 'No other poet of our time has managed so consistently to polarize his public,' notes David Lehman, 'as though there could be no middle road, as though it were impossible to respond to an Ashbery poem with a complacent nod or shake of the head.' Indeed, 'A poem by Ashbery will often adopt a bland expression,' writes Geoff Ward, 'as if it made perfect sense *to itself* and wanted very badly to get on with the reader: so what's the problem[?]'[48]

One reason for Ashbery's reputation for difficulty may be his prolific output, including over twenty-five collections of poetry, two books of selected art criticism, a generous publication of assorted prose, a handful of plays, his Harvard lectures, a novel (co-written with James Schuyler), and a wealth of (mostly French) translations; the twin Library of America editions of Ashbery's *Collected Poems* prove an intimidating, heavy set, whose thin paper, small font and ribbon mimic the material properties of a religious text, setting the tone, perhaps, for studious exegesis. Ward relates a telling – if amusing – anecdote from the world of academia. 'Recently I examined a Ph.D. thesis for the University of London,' he writes, and 'The candidate noted in his Preface with an absolutely heroic evenness of tone that Ashbery had published more new poetry in the four years it took to write the thesis than Philip Larkin had published during his entire lifetime.'[49]

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[48] Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, 15-16; Ward, *Statutes*, 125

[49] Geoff Ward, 'Before and After Language: The New American Poetry', in Kelly, *Poetry and the Sense of Panic*, 174

While the sheer volume of Ashbery's poetry contributes to allegations of impenetrability, its breadth and broad range of stylistic modes – from highly wrought formal arrangements (sestinas, pantoums, and archaic stanza forms) to flowing blank verse sequences and dense blocks of prose poetry – have proven near-impossible to summarize. 'Any summation of Ashbery's oeuvre [...] is notoriously difficult,' notes Arthur Krystal, reaching for an appropriately liquid metaphor: 'the man simply tested too many bodies of water when learning how to swim.'[50] Other critics have reflected on the ability of Ashbery's poems to reflect whatever genre is required of them. 'There is a meditative Ashbery, a formalist Ashbery, a comic Ashbery, a late-Romantic Ashbery, a Language poet Ashbery, and so on,' writes Susan Schultz, as though the poet embodied Whitman's famous declaration in 'Song of Myself': *I am large, I contain multitudes*. 'A John Ashbery poem behaves like a lazy Susan,' suggests Wayne Koestenbaum, 'Spin it and get whatever condiment you want, without having to say "pardon my reach."' Ashbery is 'the master of the loose embrace,' writes Ward, claiming an affinity with everything while strategically denying his participation in a range of genres or poetic schools.[51] John Vincent and Christopher Hennessy have valuably reflected on Ashbery's apparent reluctance (or disinterest) to assert himself as a practitioner of queer poetics, while Ashbery has himself expressed confusion at his prominence at the head of the New York School. 'When I returned to live in America, I was told about the New York School and that I was in it,' he wrote in 1968, 'although most of my creative years had been spent in France,' going on to show his tongue-in-cheek indifference to attempts to categorise and label poets: 'I found that the [...] thing had grown to be a kind of movement. In fact, after a recent article about it in the *Times Book Review* a lady wrote

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[50] Arthur Krystal, 'John Ashbery, the Poet of Our Clime', *Raritan* 39.1 (Summer, 2019), 9

[51] Susan M. Schultz, ed., *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 1; Wayne Koestenbaum, 'John Ashbery's Lazy Susan', *The Mississippi Review* 31.3 (Fall, 2003), 173

Kenneth Koch asking for the address of the New York School [...] because she wanted to enroll in it.'[52]

Above all, the alleged difficulty of Ashbery's poetry relates exactly to its openness not only to the material phenomena of the world but to the mind's real-time responses to it. 'There are no themes or subjects in the usual sense,' wrote Ashbery in the 1975, 'except the very broad one of an individual consciousness confronting or confronted by a world of external phenomena.'[53] If this resembles Ammons's ambition 'to prove the inexhaustibility of human experience' in *The Snow Poems*, it also chimes with Whitman's own poetics of democracy, a belief that 'Nothing is too "unimportant," / Or too important, for that matter,' as Ashbery shrugs in *Houseboat Days*.[54] In the words of editor John Unterecker, 'Ashbery focuses hard on the way the mind deals with the random stuff that drifts into it,' a paradoxical state between focus and daydream that usefully characterises the highly digressive, even distracted nature of the poems.[55] It is no wonder Ashbery's poetry has been accused of failing to cohere into a single, undistracted meaning. 'My poetry is disjunct,' he admits, 'but then so is life.'[56]

Matthew Bevis has usefully explored the importance of distraction throughout Ashbery's writing, drawing attention to its function as 'a compositional principle'. 'My best writing,' Ashbery suggests, 'gets done when I'm being distracted by people who

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[52] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 113-115

[53] James Vinson, ed., *Contemporary Poets* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 36

[54] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 499

[55] John Unterecker, 'Foreword', in David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), xii

[56] Appleyard, 'Interview with John Ashbery'

are calling me or errands that I have to do.'[57] As Ward has memorably put it, Ashbery's writing proceeds with 'An apparent (at times alarming) sense that not only does he not mind where the poem is headed, but he is quite happy to turn around from the steering wheel in order to chat with us on the back seat.'[58]

Cavalier though this may sound, Ashbery strives (for Bevis) towards an 'indirect, half-conscious attention' to the world, counter-intuitively following his own sense of distractedness: it isn't that Ashbery is taking his eyes off the road, so much as he is keen to give his passengers his full attention. Moreover, Bevis shows that 'to "attend" is "to stretch to" [...] so attention itself should be conceived not so much as fixity, but as a kind of motion,' emphasising the extent to which distraction and digression play a role in keeping Ashbery's poems on the move. Although he doesn't reference it directly, Bevis may well have in mind a passage from an essay on the poet Elizabeth Bishop, in which Ashbery quotes Bishop's description of the journals of Charles Darwin. The following begins with Bishop, before Ashbery takes over:

> ["]What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration" – a formulation not unlike Gaugin's "placing oneself in front of nature and dreaming." Only out of such "perfectly useless concentration" can emerge the one thing that is useful for us: our coming to know ourselves as the necessarily inaccurate transcribers of the life that is always on the point of coming into being.

Bishop's 'perfectly useless concentration' seems to account for the digressive quality of Ashbery's poems, a willingness to follow where the poem leads, however 'self-forgetful'

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[57] See Matthew Bevis, 'In Search of Distraction', *Poetry* (November 2017), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/144656/in-search-of-distraction (accessed 9 November 2021)

[58] Ward, *Statutes*, 100

or 'inaccurate', equally attentive to the 'nature' and the 'dreaming' of Paul Gaugin's famous phrase.[59] Returning once again, in his essay, to an image of the present moment 'coming into being,' we might be tempted to return to the meanders of 'Clepsydra'. However, Ashbery is nowhere more expansive – or distracted – than *Three Poems* (1972).

Written in response to a suggestion from his psychoanalyst, *Three Poems* consists of three large prose-poetic movements ('The New Spirit', 'The System', 'The Recital'). While new paragraphs and fleeting passages of free verse indicate the poet's formal intervention, the closest we come to a stylistic procedure in *Three Poems* is the collection's famous opening statement: 'I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.' With its frequent catalogues and mammoth paragraphs – several pages long, in some cases – the collection often appears like an attempt to 'put it all down,' 'to include everything,' writes Ashbery: 'the furniture of this room, everyday expressions, as well as my rarest thoughts and dreams, so that you may never become aware of the scattered nature of it [...] as it rolls from view, like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace.'[60] Despite his image of a rolling river, forever 'moving on someplace,' Ashbery seems to have in mind his earlier prose poem 'For John Clare', in which he reflects that 'There is so much to be said, and on the surface of it very little gets said,' concluding that 'There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out,' a roominess afforded to the poet by prose.[61] 'Without line breaks, the prose poem is free – like this paragraph – to extend across and down the page as far as

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[59] Ashbery, *Selected Prose*, 167-68

[60] Ashbery, *Complete Poems*, 247, 254

[61] Ibid., 198-99

the printer's margins will allow,' states Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'And it is in this freedom that we can locate the distinctive feeling to which the prose poem gives form: expansiveness.'[62]

At the same time, *Three Poems* claims that its 'truer' project is 'to leave all out', as though the paragraphs of Ashbery's work were constructed, paradoxically, from discarded phenomena. This idea finds partial explanation in Ashbery's psychoanalyst's suggestion – 'Why don't you think about all the people who've meant most to you in your life, and then don't write about them, but write about what you think when you think about them?' – a process of simultaneous production and withholding whereby Ashbery's text comes to be built from placeholders alone.[63] This is further illuminated by a comment Ashbery makes about the difference between poetry and painting. 'A picture is a picture – it's what's there – whereas poetry is what's there and also is everything that isn't there':

> [T]he words suggest other words, the thoughts other thoughts, and when one starts to think about it the whole thing expands out of the frame in a way that a painting can't once it's pinned down and [...] painted.[64]

Ashbery makes the case for a procedure of association, where the object of attention prompts or generates a wealth of language, thoughts, and imagined phenomena. Reading from the 'The System' at St. Mark's Church in New York in 1971, Ashbery is recorded on tape suggesting to his audience that they should feel free to get up and leave, returning to the poem later in his reading. '[I]t won't really matter,' he suggests,

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[62] Jeremy Noel-Tod, ed., *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem* (London: Penguin, 2018), 9

[63] See John Koethe, 'An Interview with John Ashbery', *SubStance* 37-38 (1982/83), 180

[64] Poulin, 'Experience of Experience', 247

'You're only supposed to get out of it what you actually get out of it. You're not supposed to really take it all in…you know, think about other things.'[65] By encouraging their minds to drift – to engage 'a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration,' perhaps – Ashbery confirms to his audience the subtle paradox of *Three Poems*: not only is the text itself the result of free association, but the poem is best experienced though 'everything that isn't there'. As Lerner goes on to write in his article of 2010, Ashbery's writing behaves 'as if the poem we have describes a poem for which we've already arrived too late,' exposing a gulf between subject and object:

> His poems are glosses on poems we can't access; it's as if the "real" poem were written on the other side of a mirrored surface: when we read, we see only the reflection of our reading. But by reflecting our reading, Ashbery's poems allow us to attend to our attention, to "experience our experience"; they offer what we might call *lyric mediacy*.[66]

Like 'Clepsydra', *Three Poems* returns, time and again, to an image of experience in flux, the notion 'that not a breath can be drawn nor a footstep taken without our being forced in some way to reassess the age-old problem of what we are to do here and how did we get here'. It dramatizes the reality 'that we and everything around us are moving forward continually, and that we are being modified constantly by the speed at which we travel and the regions through which we pass,' suggests 'The System', 'so that merely to think of ourselves as having arrived at some final resting place is a contradiction of fundamental logic'.[67] For Stephen Ross, 'The cumulative

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[65] Quoted in Dan Piepenbring, 'The Clear Movie-Theatre Dark', *The Paris Review* (20 July 2015), https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/07/28/the-clear-movie-theater-dark/ (accessed 18 May 2022)

[66] Lerner, 'The Future Continuous', 209

[67] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 286, 295

effect is one of constant narrative interruption, as if part of the text were missing or had been torn away,' a sense that 'there is always something fading out or just coming into focus,' as the poem later puts it.[68] Indeed, when asked about 'the 'core' of *Three Poems* in an interview, Ashbery's response is telling: 'Does anybody know what's at the core of their work? I think probably looking for a core is the core.'[69]

With no climatic moment, the huge mass of *Three Poems* reflects the full breadth of experience, unending and ongoing; following a procedure of association, it contains not only everything within it but also, somehow, everything without. In the St. Mark's Church recording, Ashbery refers to the poem as an 'environment' that readers (or listeners) are free to leave or enter as they please. 'Oh, I don't think I have the last page of it with me,' he mumbles, shuffling his papers: 'Well, it doesn't really matter'. Mary Ruefle recalls another reading from *Three Poems* at Bennington College, Vermont. '[He] said that it was a lot like watching TV,' she remembers, '[that] you could open the book anywhere and begin reading, and flip around the book as much as you wanted to.'[70] This description of *Three Poems*, notably recurring, imbues it with a quality of simultaneous occurrence, as though the whole poem were apparent in the moment of our reading. Rather than the ceaseless linear flow of Ashbery's rivers, *Three Poems* adopts a mode of temporality closer to that of *block time*, an epistemological theory that imagines space-time as an eternal four-dimensional 'block' containing past, present, and future; an objective or omniscient view of the block would reveal not so much a linear movement but an object showing all of time occurring simultaneously. When we hold *Three Poems* – itself constructed from large blocks of text – we are

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[68] Ross, *Invisible Terrain*, 54; Ashbery, Collected Poems, 298

[69] Poulin, 'Experience of Experience', 254

[70] Ruefle, *Madness, Rack and Honey*, 236

holding its entire duration, like the simultaneous duration of a river witnessed from above, it source and its tributaries, its meanders and mouth.

In this sense, *Three Poems* is again connected to the poet John Clare, the subject of Ashbery's inaugural Harvard lecture.[71] 'Clare's poems are dispatches from the front,' he suggests, referring to the poet's famous declaration (in 'Sighing for Retirement') that he 'found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them down.' As with James Schuyler or the paintings of Fairfield Porter, Clare's poetry records what is available at any given moment, waiting to be experienced. When you read Clare's poetry, writes Ashbery, you find that 'he is already there, talking to you before you've arrived on the scene, telling you about himself, about the things that are closest and dearest to him'. In the same way, when we open the 'environment' of *Three Poems* we discover that the poem is 'already there, talking to [us],' just as switching on the television finds the channels broadcasting 'before you've arrived on the scene'. Indeed, 'the effect of Clare's poetry, on me at least, is always the same,' Ashbery concludes, 'that of re-inserting me into my present, of re-establishing "now"'.[72] 'What is it for you then,' asks a passage at the close of *Three Poems*, with a small echo of D. H. Lawrence, 'the insistent now that baffles and surrounds you in its loose-knit embrace that always seems to be falling away and yet remains behind[?]'[73]

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[71] 'Poets, as has often been noted, in writing about other poets tend to write about themselves,' notes Ashbery in his later lecture on John Wheelwright, a comment that seems all too relevant here (Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 70).

[72] Ibid., 16-19

[73] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 323

Surveying, from above, the four-dimensional block of Ashbery's career, the logic of *Three Poems* would appear to send us forwards almost twenty years to *Flow Chart*, a huge, two-hundred-plus page poem which (though technically lineated) makes use of elongated lines that stretch from left margin to right, mimicking the shape of prose. If *Three Poems* exists, for Ashbery, as a kind of 'environment', then *Flow Chart* is a country spanning multiple terrains. While its title is suggestive, once again, of linear progression, this is a flow chart that is more than happy – like a spaghetti junction, or a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' novel – to circle back on itself. As Charles Bernstein has suggested of 'The Skaters', 'You get the sense that you could start anywhere [...] and move around in whatever direction.' '[E]ven if *Flow* Chart is read segmentally, rather than sequentially,' notes Don Share, 'it still *flows*.'[74] The poem's expansiveness outgrows *Three Poems*, offering not only an exhaustive experience of the present moment but 'a litany / of all that has ever happened to me'.[75] 'A flow chart itself is, among other things, a metaphor for life,' writes Fred Moramarco, 'one thing leading to and affecting the next, all of the major life events linked in an inexorable and interconnected pattern.'[76]

For Stephen Ross, '*Flow Chart* does all it can to totalize our reading of it, to have us read it as a poem that describes "flow" while embodying it'.[77] *Flow Chart* encapsulates the riverine poetics of Ashbery's writing, but also zooms out to reveal a complex time-defeating mechanism: this is not only the river's progress, flowing from

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[74] Bernstein, 'The Meandering Yangtze', 268; Don Share, ''It seems I was reading something': John Ashbery's *Flow Chart*', https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2551;hilite=john%20ashbery (accessed 17 July 2022)

[75] John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1991), 105

[76] Fred Moramarco, 'Coming Full Circle: John Ashbery's Later Poetry', in Schultz, ed., *Tribe of John*, 39-40

[77] Ross, *Invisible Terrain*, 94

source to sea, but an entire water cycle of evaporation, rainfall, flash floods and returning tides. Describing the initial Library of America edition of Ashbery's *Collected Poems*, published in 2008, Lerner anticipates that the first volume 'stops just before *Flow Chart* to ensure there will be sufficient materials for a similarly sized second volume.'[78] 'If one were attempting to divide Ashbery's writings into periods, however,' he continues, '*Flow Chart* might well be read as the culmination of a style, not a new beginning – as the dilation of "Clepsydra" on an epic scale, or as a synthesis of the prose line of *Three Poems* and the flowing verse of, say, "A Wave."'[79]

With its sense of 'block time' simultaneity, *Three Poems* also finds an analogue in Ashbery's double-columned poem, 'Litany', beginning his ninth collection, *As We Know* (1979). Over a hundred pages in length, 'Litany' consists of two pillars of text, what Ashbery describes – in the poem's introductory note – as '*simultaneous but independent monologues*.'[80] While the litany of Judeo-Christian worship typically involves a procedure of call and response, Ashbery's poem provides no further clues for how it should be read. For Marjorie Perloff, the poet's 'nicely noncommittal' introduction 'suggests that we can read "Litany" in almost any sequence we like.' Indeed, by 'creating a text that can be read both across and down, and sometimes even diagonally,' she continues, 'Ashbery has fulfilled his own earlier aim of producing [as he notes of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1956)] "an open field of narrative possibilities"'.[81]

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[78] *Collected Poems: 1991-2000*, gathering seven collections (from *Flow Chart* to *Your Name Here* (2000)), was published by Library of America in 2017.

[79] Lerner, 'The Future Continuous', 202

[80] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 553

[81] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 281

Ashbery has cited the influence of a work by the composer Elliott Carter – 'a duo for violin and piano [...] performed at Cooper Union, on a very wide stage' in which the instruments are 'more or less doing different things' – which he hoped might inspire a poetic environment 'like eavesdropping on two different conversations at a cocktail party'.[82] A short poem in two columns ('To the Same Degree') appears towards the end of *The Tennis Court Oath*, formerly noted as a blueprint; we might also look to Ashbery's collaborative novel with James Schuyler, *A Nest of Ninnies* (1969), for which the two poets began to write by alternating sentences, at least in the initial phase, following the system of a parlour game. Composed on and off over seventeen years, it is 'all but impossible to tell where one writer stops and the other starts,' writes Brian Evenson; as Ashbery admits in an interview, 'our voices were really interchangeable, I think, and there are many passages which neither of us knows which one of us wrote'.[83]

In 1980, Ashbery invited Ann Lauterbach to a studio in upstate New York to record a joint reading of 'Litany', bringing its two voices to life. Ashbery remembers moments when 'one of us would be reading solo' during stanza breaks, so that 'whatever was being said at that particular moment had an overwhelming meaningfulness,' while Lauterbach herself recalls a feeling of disorientation, trying to read aloud while paying half-attention to another speaker. 'I found myself out of sync, in totally wrong places,' she suggests, 'nowhere near where I was supposed to be according to the poem's lineation.' At the same time, she continues, 'These unsteady, disorienting pointers or skips [seem] so typical of Ashbery,' as if the poem had discovered a new way to express the ruptures and distractions of experience.[84] With its

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[82] Ford, 'John Ashbery in Conversation', 58-59

[83] Brian Evenson, 'The Art of Curling: *A Nese of Ninnies* (with James Schuyler, 1969), in Gizzi and Morrow, 'A Writers' Aviary',276; Labrie, 'John Ashbery, An Interview',30

[84] Ford, 'John Ashbery in Conversation', 59; Lauterbach, 'What We Know', 345

double proliferation – two subjectivities at once – the poem draws awareness to the fact that there is always something else occurring, regardless of our focus. It describes '*the exact feel / And slant of a field in such a way as to / Make you wish you were in it,*' suggests the poem's right-hand, italicized voice, '*or better yet / To make you realize that you actually are in it / For better or worse, with no / Conceivable way of getting out.*'[85]

For Lauterbach, 'Litany' teaches us 'to listen for the multiplicity, the plurality, of experience,' not merely our own, but that of every other consciousness. While delivered by two voices, the suggestion of the poem is for infinite potential speakers, indicated by the central absence at its centre, the white space in between the columns. When reading 'Litany', we not only wonder how its two voices relate, but are invited to imagine 'everything that isn't there', to restate Ashbery's comment about poetry to Alfred Poulin. Moreover, the central absence at the poem's heart appears to offer us a place within the poem ourselves, anticipating the title of Ashbery's nineteenth collection, published in the year 2000: *Your Name Here.*

'[A]t its best,' writes Ward, Ashbery's poetry extends 'a kind of generosity that allows the reader a genuinely creative role.' We discover 'an invitation in every passage,' agrees Donald Revell, to bring '[our] own *immediate* circumstances' with us when we read them poems.[86] Much has been written about Ashbery's use of the distinctive pronoun 'you', which draws us constantly into the poems, although – as with the recipient of Shakespeare's sonnets – the identity of Ashbery's target remains critically uncertain. Ashbery himself has said that 'The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation,' suggesting that it may be someone he's

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[85] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 601

[86] Ward, *Statutes*, 100; Donald Revell, 'Purists Will Object: Some Meditations on Influence', in Schultz, *Tribe of John*, 92

addressing, or the reader, or himself.[87] Indeed, it seems appropriate to borrow a line from Schuyler, here: 'When you read this poem you will have to decide / Which of the "yous" is "you."'[88] 'It is just such a "you" that reaches out to us uncannily from the pages of *Leaves of Grass*,' reminds Bonnie Costello, 'But the self that speaks out of Ashbery's poems has never had the primacy or imperial authority of Whitman.' Instead, she continues, Ashbery's poetic identity 'is a composite reality and the poem a polyphony of writer and reader,' a slippage Ashbery seems aware of in his poem 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons'.[89] 'This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level,' he begins, 'Look at it talking to you'. 'You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.'[90]

What *Three Poems*, *Flow Chart*, and 'Litany' begin to show is Ashbery's leasing of control over the poems he is writing, a willingness to step aside to let another voice or process in. Whether open to the distractions of experience, the intrusions of another speaker, or even the impressions and associations of the reader, Ashbery's poems are less interested in asserting a coherent poetic self than in establishing a text that, in a crucial sense, sustains itself. As he says to Adam Fitzgerald, 'The self [in my poems] has been replaced by the simultaneity of all life; everything happening in a given moment becomes the source of the poem, rather than the writer thinking about what he or she is going to write.'[91] This is nowhere more apparent than 'Self-Portrait in a Convex

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[87] Quoted in William Packard, *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1974), 123-24

[88] Schuyler, *Collected Poems*, 294

[89] Costello, 'Idea of the Reader', 495

[90] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 698

[91] Adam Fitzgerald, 'A Refutation of Common Sense: An Interview with John Ashbery', *Boston Review* (29 April 2011) https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/npm-2011-interview-john-ashbery-adam-fitzgerald/ (accessed 25 August 2022)

Mirror', Ashbery's complex meditation on Parmigianino's painting of the same name **[Fig. 26]**, part ekphrasis, part investigation, in which Ashbery seems – at some point – to vacate the poem entirely.

The poem begins straightforwardly enough, describing the distorted features of Parmigianino's painting, 'the right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect / What it advertises.' Even this, however, establishes the contrary push and pull of the colossal hand, protective, like a shield – as if to block the viewer's gaze – but also 'swerving easily away,' almost slipping off the painting's curve, just as Parmigianino's face 'swims / Toward and away' from the viewer at once.[92] Ashbery exploits the painting's complicated doubles and reflections, here: Parmigianino captures his reflection in the painting, whose tondo surface matches the dimensions of the mirror itself; the painting mimics the reflective surface, distortions and all, while knowing that its oils remain motionless and fixed; Ashbery's poem, in turn, attempts to recreate the painting through a textual description, while somehow also standing in for Ashbery's own likeness – this 'Self-Portrait', after all, is his. This confusion is deliberate, setting the machinery in place for Ashbery's later disappearance, just as the 'real', historical Parmigianino is no longer on the scene. Anticipating *Chinese Whispers*, Ashbery indicates the possibility that an 'original' might be replaced. 'This always / Happens,' reads a passage later in the poem:

> as in the game where
> A whispered phrase passed around the room
> Ends up as something completely different.
> It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
> What the artist intended. Often he finds

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[92] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 474

He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place.

If Ashbery's poem starts out as, in some sense, a self-portrait, we find that by the poem's close he has successfully 'omitted' himself. As in *Three Poems*, *Flow Chart*, and the absent centre of 'Litany', 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' becomes 'a metaphor / Made to include us, we are part of it and / Can live in it as in fact we have done,' all along.[93] As Lerner puts it, 'The artwork attempts to affirm the present,' and 'in order for it to do so, the authors, Ashbery and Parmigianino, must get out of it, must make way for a viewing [or a reading] public. Ashbery has to vacate the "I" so that we, along with future readers, can inhabit it.'[94] Once Ashbery has left the building, the encounter with Parmigianino's painting – and with the poem flowing by – is ours. When we look into the surface of the mirror, reflecting our reading, our experience of experience, the figure looking back is neither poet nor reflected painter. Instead, the face we see is us.

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Ashbery's poetry 'cheats death', to use Lerner's phrase, not because its life is resurrected or reanimated, but because it borrows the aliveness of the present moment of the reader. As Ashbery moves aside to open up a space within the poem, we fill it with our own experience and imaginative associations, the portrait of ourselves at the time of our reading. Ashbery's poems are never finished because each reader brings them something new; even the same reader returning brings a different version of themselves, reading the poem in a different context. It is this that gives the poetry – in

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[93] Ibid., 485, 481

[94] Lerner, 'The Future Continuous', 211

the case of *Flow Chart*, *Three Poems* and 'Litany', at the very least – not only a quality of simultaneity, but a sense that Ashbery's writing is ongoing all the time, like the 'underground stream' that he refers to in his interview with Peter Stitt. Just as the paintings in a gallery are always present and occurring, 'even as the public / Is pushing through the museum now so as to / Be out by closing time,' so Ashbery's poetry appears ongoing even when not being read.[95] 'Opening to any page in this book reveals the work's oscillations,' writes Andrew Epstein of *Three Poems*, a comment that extends as well to Ashbery's *Collected Poems*.[96] Like the rivers they embody, we open Ashbery anywhere to find the poems up and running.

At the heart of *Rivers and Mountains*, a few pages before 'Clepsydra', is a poem for which Ashbery makes use of another striking liquid mechanism. 'Into the Dusk-Charged Air' runs to one hundred and fifty-one lines, each uttering the name of a world river and describing its behaviour. 'Far from the Rappahannock, the silent / Danube moves along toward the sea,' it begins:

> The brown and green Nile rolls slowly
> Like the Niagara's welling descent.
> Tractors stood on the green banks of the Loire
> Near where it joined the Cher.
> She St. Lawrence prods among black stones
> and mud. But the Arno is all stones.
> Wind ruffles the Hudson's
> Surface. The Irawaddy is overflowing.

The poem darts around the globe, from Virginia, New York and Canada, to Egypt, Italy, France and what is now Myanmar; the Danube flows from Germany to the Black Sea on

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[95] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 484

[96] Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*, 134

the east coast of Romania. Ashbery's poem is written in the present tense, each line describing what its river happens to be doing at the moment we encounter it: 'The Irawaddy is overflowing'; 'the sinuous Humboldt gurgles wildly'; 'The Liffey is full of sewage, / Like the Seine, but unlike / The brownish-yellow Dordogne.'[97] In the absence of a steady metrical arrangement, the lengths of Ashbery's lines vary extensively. At times they seem reflective of the rivers' different lengths and speeds; at other times the poem appears to turn and meander, a river itself.

Ashbery's poem is intensely linear, flowing from source to sea, its rivers inherently related to the forward movement of each line; at the same time, 'Into the Dusk-Charged Air' is entirely simultaneous, a snapshot of the globe at one specific moment, as though every line were spoken in the same breath as the rest. As we ooze to its close, the poem becomes clogged with ice, as if trying to freeze itself, preventing its flow. 'The Ural / Is freezing slowly in the blasts. The black Yonne / Congeals nicely'; 'The Japurá is a pack of ice'; 'The Niger freezes, slowly'. This freezing characterises the poem's final third. Some rivers seem stationary: 'The Oka is frozen solider / Than the Somme,' while 'the Canadian / Is solid ice.' And yet, before the poem ends, Ashbery hints towards a thaw, sure to include 'Grass banks', 'freezing [but not *frozen*] rain', and – uncoincidentally – the word 'unfrozen' in the closing lines. It is as though the poem tries (and fails) to freeze the moment it describes. As Ashbery puts it earlier, 'You cannot freeze / The Yenisei.'[98]

'Into the Dusk-Charged Air' appears to literalize a sense of Ashbery put forward by Douglas Crase. Like the poem's globe of rivers, 'Ashbery not only lives very much in

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[97] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 131-2

[98] Ibid., 133-35

the world,' he writes, 'he seems to live by all existing conceptions of it simultaneously, regardless of how contradictory the lot may be.'[99] Borrowing the language of Library of America publishing copy, Lerner puts it best when he describes the power of Ashbery's livingness: 'the poems will be refreshed by the future present of every reading and so, like the [Library of America] volume itself, will "last for generations and withstand the wear of frequent use."'[100] '[I]t's a question of "these times,"' after all, writes Ashbery, 'Now and forever.'[101]

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[99] Crase, 'The Prophetic Ashbery', 35

[100] Lerner, 'The Future Continuous', 213

[101] Ashbery, *Collected Poems*, 861

BRIDGING STATEMENT

The poems in *Things to Come* have an interest in the present moment: in how to attend to it, to apprehend its fleeting nature; in how to make a record of experience in words that seem both durable and accurate. Taken together, they explore ideas of attention and distractedness, time and its manipulation, as well as the possibility (or not) of poetry to grasp experience at all. Individually, the poems are experiments in precision and attentiveness, remaining open to the endless arrivals and distractions of the present (both in the world and the imagination); very often, they test poetry's ability to challenge (even defeat) linear time, striving for an afterlife untethered from the moment(s) they describe.

Beginning with the poetry and surrounding prose of D. H. Lawrence, my research project considers the importance of the present moment to a branch of North American poetics, a branch that appears to place a higher-than-usual aesthetic value on ideas of attention, spontaneity, and the poem as 'a record of its own coming into being' (to borrow from John Ashbery). While these themes are not exclusive to the New York School, it is my sense that this cluster of poets best illustrate the fruition of Lawrence's thinking about American poetry; at the very least, they seem particularly rooted in the writing of Walt Whitman (an important subject for Lawrence) and the legacy of Transcendentalism, whose ideas about temporal flux and the present moment clearly resonate into the 1950s.

While Whitman's poetry is, in one sense, explicitly concerned with record-keeping, producing a democratic transcript of the United States, he is equally attuned to the afterlife of his own verse, its ability to preserve not only the present moment it describes but the present poet describing it, transmitting both into the future. To differing degrees, each of these impulses – the poem as transcript and time-capsule – occupy the minds of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and James Schuyler. At the same time, Whitman's concerns also look back to the Romantics, particularly to Keats's brief

fragment, 'This living hand, now warm and capable' (1819), in which the poet's hand, 'veins red [with] life [...] again', appears to reach out from the poem, just as Parmigianino's hand is thrust in the direction of the viewer in his warped *Self-Portrait*:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again,
> And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is –
> I hold it towards you.[1]

In his 2020 book, *The Lyric Now*, the late American poet James Longenbach (1959-2022) considers the persistent present of lyric poetry, exploring 'the way in which a particular poem's language creates the repeatable event of itself'. '[W]hether written in 1920 or 2020,' he continues, 'a poem creates the moment as we enter it. The poem is happening now.'[2] As I hope is clear, this (re-)creation, even a kind of resurrection of a former present moment informs my readings of both Schuyler and O'Hara, whose poetry seems to me to be preoccupied with *now*-ness. Schuyler's poem 'Linen' offers a meditation on exactly the relationship between the moment and its written transcript. 'Is this the moment?' he asks: 'No, not yet. / When is the moment? / Perhaps there is none. / Need I persist?'

For Schuyler and O'Hara, one way to address this problem – the problem of the moment slipping by, unnoticed – is to acknowledge the inherent staying-power of

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[1] John Keats, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 378

[2] James Longenbach, *The Lyric Now* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), ix-xi

language; as with photography and film (in which both poets had an interest), the poem creates the conditions for the present moment to be held back or arrested, preserving something of it to be experienced again. As such, it is possible to see in the work of these poets an anxiety of attention, an urgency not only to record as much of a given moment as possible before it slips away, replaced by something else, but also to find language clear enough to do it justice. In both Schuyler and O'Hara's poems, we experience something of Longenbach's 'repeatable event'; the poetry somehow reanimates the present moment of its being written, allowing us to participate in its creation.

With the help of Emerson and Lawrence, the question of attention becomes one not only of reanimation – the present moment replaying, like a needle hitting an LP – but transcendence. Focused attention to the present moment, according to Emerson, is the only possible route to revealing the (metaphysical, spiritual) truth of the world, the essences of natural things, which exist somewhere 'above time', as he writes in 'Self-Reliance'. This explains Emerson's interest in the mythological figure of Lynceus of Messene, whose X-Ray eyesight penetrates the surfaces of natural things, seeing their inner truth; it is no surprise to find that Emerson draws a connection between Lynceus and the Poet, who stands 'one step nearer to things', he writes, revealing their essences. Lawrence's own poetry betrays, at least in part, his own attempts to discover hidden meanings in the world, 'to get to the heart of the matter,' to quote Simone Kearney's collection *Days* (2021), the 'heart / of thing, leaf, oil, spring'.[3]

Of course, poetry's capacity for this kind of attention has been contested since at least Plato's *Republic*. 'The great lunacy of most lyric poems,' writes Mary Ruefle, 'is that they attempt to use words to convey what cannot be put into words.' 'The more

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[3] Simone Kearney, *Days* (Brooklyn: Belladonna*, 2021), 1

you look the less you will observe,' wrote Henry David Thoreau in his journal: 'I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest,' becoming self-defeating. By way of the critic Allen Grossman, Ben Lerner explores his belief in the essential failure of poems in his essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), describing the poet's inherent inability (due to the clunkiness of human language) 'to get beyond the finite or the historical [...] and to reach the transcendent or divine.' 'You're moved to write a poem', he writes, 'But as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms'. For Lerner (as for Grossman), this compromise reveals a gap between the 'virtual' and the 'actual'. As Shelley puts it his 'Defence of Poetry' (1821), even 'the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet'.[4]

If the act of writing – turning the world to language – somehow deadens what is written about, a kind of rust or calcification, then Lerner is interested in discovering how to soften, slow, or stop the process; to shift language beyond 'the finitude of its terms' in such a way that gestures to the 'The thing itself', in the direction of the virtual. Maybe this accounts for his interest in '*virga*, my favourite kind of weather', as he notes in *The Hatred of Poetry*: 'streaks of water or ice particles trailing from a cloud that evaporate before they reach the ground', rain 'that never quite closes the gap between heaven and earth', flickering somewhere in between them.[5]

In Lerner's own poetry, one way to attempt this is to keep language from getting stuck, to create an environment where words are endlessly recycled and repurposed, open to the possibility that they may never mean one thing. This is true, certainly, of

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[4] Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2016), 12, 30

[5] Ibid., 99-100

his third collection, *Mean Free Path* (2010), whose stanzas seem to know that 'There is no way to read this / once', an experience, in the words of poet Sarah Howe, 'like turning over two pages by accident and then carrying on regardless'.[6] It is also true of Lerner's use of found and clichéd language in *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), a collection of sonnets in which he manipulates language lifted from a range of fixed and rigid contexts – advertising, corporate jargon, bumper stickers, turns of phrase – spinning his fragments through the washer-dryer, exposing their strangenesses while hinting at the infinite constructions language hasn't taken yet. 'In my day, / we were reasonable men', reads one poem, 'Even you women and children / were reasonable men'. 'I wish all difficult poems were profound', concludes another: 'Honk if you wish all difficult poems were profound'.[7] The Lichtenberg figures in question appear to nod in the direction of Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941), which describes a fictional novel whose protagonist, when faced with alternative choices, 'chooses – simultaneously – all of them', creating 'various futures, various times which [...] branch out and bifurcate in other times'.[8] Discovered in the eighteenth-century, Lichtenberg figures refer to fractal, tree-like shapes created by high-voltage charges; typically captured on glass or acrylic, the figures often turn up on the skin of people struck by lightning.

For Lerner, it is Ashbery whose poetry best manages to resist the essential deadening effects of language, remaining closest to the 'virtual' by refusing to be fully fixed. As I have tried to show in my research, Ashbery achieves this through a combination of his riverine poetics, constantly flowing, but also through his self-

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[6] Ben Lerner, *Mean Free Path* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2010), 51; see Sarah Howe, 'Printed Grapes: An Essay on Ben Lerner', *Oxford Poetry: 100 Years* (2014), 64-67

[7] Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), 3, 23

[8] See Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 1964), 44-54

eviction from the poems; with no subjective poet – no lyric "I" – to anchor them, Ashbery's poetry appears to float, 'to get beyond the finite or the historical'. While they may not 'reach the transcendent or divine', as Lerner puts it, it might be that they occupy a similar territory to virga, hovering somewhere in between the hard earth and the sky.

I don't wish to make any specific claims about my own poems: the success of their attentiveness, their preservation of the present, or their ability to 'get beyond' the moments they describe. Nevertheless, I think the poems in *Things to Come* might best be understood within the context of the poets and ideas outlined above (both in this statement and the thesis). The poems' preoccupation with the moment of writing, with seasonal change and the tensions between linear and cyclical time, their self-awareness of their own materials (i.e. the language they are built from), and their recurring desire (it seems to me) to discover hidden meanings in the world, stem directly from my explorations of these themes in all the writers I have spent this period researching. From Whitman and Emerson to Walter Pater and William James, from D. H. Lawrence and Bernadette Mayer to A. R. Ammons and the poets of the New York School, my poems have developed both alongside and in response to their example, which forms a core of influence around which *Things to Come* rotates. Whatever else they are or include, the poems reflect the process of my thinking through these writers and their invention of the poetry of the present.

Things to Come

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What does the hard look do to what it sees?
Pull beauty out of it, or stare it in?

– Denise Riley, 'Outside from the Start'

But the existence of all these things and especially
The amazing fullness of their number must be
For us a source of unforgettable questions:
Such as: whence does all this come? and again:
Shall I some day be a part of all this fullness?

– John Ashbery, 'French Poems'

Outtakes

The world occurs to me.
I feel my way into the space and cooling air
outside, leaving behind an article about
the bridge collapse in Genoa, a city I once visited,
the sun now (relatively speaking) level with the upstairs
windows, slumping down and to the right.

I destroy my house and everything in it. I crack out
thirty ice cubes from the ice tray to the sink, return the ice tray
to the freezer and then entirely destroy the freezer.

Later on the house is fine, repaired while we were out buying
whatever. I run my hands across the table's grain, feeling
its coolness underneath my palms. When you're asleep
I come downstairs and stay up doing this for hours
for reasons which will sound insane.

At some point it becomes midday:
I study the asparagus fern, admiring the way each frond
is just another fern in miniature, immaculately detailed,
vanishingly small. But why should what I'm seeing
now be interesting to me at all? What about yesterday,
or the day before, or gearing up and planning for
whichever trip we're taking next? (Mexico City?
Back to Greece?) So what the grass is rising
after all that unexpected snow, or that those
partygoers seem to us so strange and otherworldly?
The worst has passed, not that it matters now.
A pattern of tilted squares emerges on the kitchen floor.

Another night I dreamt I went the opposite of blind,
which was to suffer an excess of sight, each substance
freshly rendered with outrageous clarity, silver-outlined,
sickeningly tangible. Since then the world appears as if

reduced to its most basic parts – sky, trees, jutting rocks –
more than enough, I think, or just about.

The sun has dropped. The garden
is very still, low-key. I'm wondering how
much of this I might remember, straining to take it in,
even these ugly, overlapping clouds. I'm reminded
of a story I was told about a woman falling off
a balcony and getting up and laughing and simply
limping away, the blue air darkening the corners of
the house, baring its newly-strengthened teeth.

Nothing Personal

The century surges,
shuddering on, accelerating in pursuit
of someplace rumoured up ahead, swallowing

dusk after dusk of wilful, uninfected time
in cold-blooded mouthfuls, growing huger
and more disarranged.

In the end isn't the point that this is all meant
to relate to us? To tell us – in a broad sense – that
the message is about ourselves?

Instead, maybe the message is that *we*
are understood by *them*, giving us a meaning
at the time we most require it.

Still, like the inhabitants of a city
soon to be razed by a unit of cavalry, know
that this is happening *in spite of* not *because of* you.

The mountains are silent, though they speak
to each other, the gold air thin at the top of them,
a flowering peak, from which point can be seen

a valley of arrivals and departures,
smouldering campsites, a bend in the river,
livestock and settlements, not an inch of land unclaimed.

The Hare

I wake into the morning

and find unanimous spring

and the windows are pale with filtered light

and the day asks, *How shall I survive myself?*

and read a poem which ends, *let it be small enough*

and my throat feels dry

and the new rains have defanged the night

and the blackthorn is over, or its blossom is

and the lights burn blue

and imagine a harvest and dry stacks of wheat

and answer my e-mails in record time

and feel deep currents of understanding

to find a living mosaic, polished and repetitive

smothering the yellow dawn

and the white sky is canoeing south

and have certain phrases in my head, including *silent stroboscopic waves*

and see ghosts and know that one of them is Robert Frost

and consume a pear from Argentina

and take in the general feel of the place

fading like a set of tracks

and write *I wake into the morning / and find unanimous spring*

and pass my hand through my own body

and feel omnipresent cloaks of rain

and the oceans appear silvery

which is stabbing into months of ice

and think *what kind of poet writes 'I wake into the morning / and find unanimous spring'?*

and the harvesters are lying down, taking a rest

and its knowable sequence

and it caverns

and it opens like an eyelid

and it stalks us as you stalk a hare

Near-Life Experience

So far the year is imprecise,
spelling itself out using a limited vocabulary.

Outside it is greys and browns and dark, rich, spruce-hued greens,
life, or very close to life, the wind whipping in twos and threes,
rain seeking us out.

I test the coffee and the coffee table, which seem
real enough, as does the eucalyptus tree I've noticed only
just now after many months.

Acre-hungry fires are licking the outback,
exposing giant sketches on the surface of the earth: an eye, a hand,
a mouth starting to speak.

Everything looks futuristic, as though it hasn't really happened yet
or like it's only just pretending to have happened and will
suddenly switch on 'for real'.

The pure contralto still sings in the organ loft;
the mate is always ready with his lance and his harpoon.

Liz is hunting rabbits in Wisconsin;
Adam is bowing his head during *The Burial at Ornans* (1849-50),
inhaling luminously painted air;
Becky turns her head in Miró's studio in Palma;
Stephen, Jane, and Ariel are sleeping now in Montreal.

The grasslands here have all grown back.
The grey waters recede.

I delete myself, returning to a previous save-point.

When I arrive, so light I can barely move – loopholes, static, terrible
slaughters – the situation hastens, veering about, and the wind whips past again
cutting my younger, cleaner, stranger face.

Freighter

How much can it
take – the level evening
and its centre like a season
shifting gear?

Hardly any time
has passed – is it just me, or
is it just me that's getting this?
The bait-and-switch
of the dying light,
the unfinished business
of the waves, the feeling
something's missing – and I mean
really missing.

On the mainland –
now radiating some of
its great strength – granite,
breccia, hornblende
schist – best understood
in motion – you can feel the tilting
of the earth.

A few miles
down the coast a town has lost
its people, proving
nothing – or nothing yet.

Still, can you hear
the susurration of the headland?
See the insanely circular movement
of the gulls?

And this is what the poem
is like – the shape of a room
and the objects in it
scattering like fish – arriving
into somewhere else – dragooning us
along with it – a pendulum
distributing its weight – like sailing into secret
waters – different when remembered –
and disembarking nimbly
somehow here and now refreshed.

Known Unknowns

Unobserved, I pot
        these weightless seeds
in compost – hurling something at
        the future, like making it happen.

Some are fang-shaped,
        others orbed – the eyes
of tiny fish swimming now
        blindly out of sight, still living.

Is this what you might call
        a lyric situation, a moment
like a giant wave that
        seems to have predicted you?

The difficult thing is to prove
        what one believes: insect casings,
almonds, grass; your question, *Trees* –
        your answer, also *Trees*.

Is this what happened
        when a child I knew said
Music is the night awake – or was this
        something different?

Seed like a basketball,
        seed like an arrowhead – shower
of seeds raining down on a battle,
        dusting its corpses, sprouting on impact.

This is a type of knowledge, too –
        of knowing when to let yourself be
planted and watered – like being – though
        unseen – believed or believed in.

Double Vision at the Sink

Every time you're looking out you're really / looking in

– lines removed from the poem

Today I'm looking down into a white ceramic sink,
the water running coldly and opaquely
from the tap: my task is shelling jumbo shrimp,
snapping the carapace away, slipping my index
finger in beneath the lightly cracking exoskeleton
to peel the interlocking segments of the abdomen
apart, the empty casings piling up like shavings
from a wooden bowl. I try to think of looking
down as looking out into the sky, receding as you reach it
as if desperate to get somewhere. Across
its face I see a shimmering man, winking and smiling.
I witness his intrusion and acknowledge it,
watching his limbs become translucent, ultimately
wasting to a single point of greenish light.
That afternoon we'd been up at the Cloisters, which
I hadn't known was where they keep the so-called
Mérode Altarpiece (c.1428): in it the Annunciation takes
place in a private room, a simple, square
domestic space, furnished unassumingly, at least until
the objects come to stand for something
else, as in the just-extinguished candle or the table,
which has sixteen sides. To the right of this
is Joseph, drilling holes into a piece of wood. Behind
him is a street-scene of a European
town, outdating him by something close to
fourteen hundred years. In the pale base
of the sink I see what looks to be a tapestry.
Everything is foreground: the chase, the capture,
the imprisonment, the cheeky crowds of onlookers
– dressed lavishly, I'd say, even for them –
an instantaneous parade of different cloths

        and coloured silks, intricately woven
by the makers of the scene, in which the hunters
        seem to run as if they had no weight at all.
I develop a talent for identifying symbolism,
        seeing it everywhere in fruits and flowers
and hand gestures in photographs, in insects, rodents,
        and varieties of birds, in the camouflage
of reptiles, plane trees, and specific moths, the touch
        lamp on the bedside table, the heat from
the oven, even in the bowl of glossy, naked, blue-grey
        shrimp, which stand for something like fragility
or time or the unknowable. Another layer of snow,
        mid-week. Another tapestry beneath the first,
this one showing the miraculous revival of a man
        who very nearly died. A woman on the sidelines
holds what looks to be a piece of glass. A second
        figure fades into the lush textural scenery.
Three or four days on, I chart the progress of our
        journey on a small tiltable screen,
embedded in the headrest of the window seat
        in front of me. The screen offers a plane's
-eye view, allowing me to gaze down on the plane
        in which we're travelling. The crew switch
on the cabin's artificial night, induced by deep
        fluorescent strips running the whole length
of the fuselage. The planet is divided into time zones
        on a gridded map. I zoom in on the country
then the city we've just left, then the apartment,
        then the kitchen where I see myself before
the sink, my fingers working neatly on the silvery-grey
        shrimp, the sink's shimmering surface pale,
more or less reflecting me, winking and smiling,
        looking out into the room like looking
down into the opaque non-reflection of the sky.

Eight Studies of a Hand

The image deepens and solidifies,
becoming almost memory.
I see the fingers and think *fingers*.
I see the wrists and say to myself *wrists, wrists*,
as if with superstition (which I won't go into now).

The skin starts to emit its own unusual blaze.
I experience what feels like an exposure
to the obviously waxy quality of time,
considering the steady restoration
of a building and its furniture.

Yesterday we drove out to the Suffolk coast
and watched our friend bury his face in stones.
My hands, during this time, appeared increasingly
unlike my own, the way that basic truths
about yourself can come to sound

entirely unreasonable. On the drive home
I thought about a moment I remembered from
The Grapes of Wrath (1939), in which
a nameless woman laughs to find
she's had part of her hand shot off,

a chuckling hysteria in her throat that grew
louder and higher with each breath,
her shattered hand – *a hand which had*
no knuckles – appearing to me as it
would've appeared to her family

decades later: frail and unsatisfied,
pitifully underused. September's rolling
slowly in. I feel certain of my own name,

of the resistance of the brake pedal,
of feeling drawn on by a force that feels,

to me, a bit like magnetism, dragging us
ahead to somewhere no one can be
sure about. And that's what seems to be
the thought of Lange's migrating labourer,
whose hands are scarred and carved

out of the very wood he's leaning on,
as if you could stop and read his whole life
from the creases of his open palm
or even tell him what the future holds
before he grasps and handles it.

The Sure Season

This morning we were struck
by frost: new crispness, solid underfoot,
more blue, really, than silver, each
leaf and blade of grass held fast,
hoping to melt (using the sun) to life.

It doesn't take a lot to find
that everything looks out of place, newly disturbed,
unreturnable, perhaps, to how
you remember it.

Here lacks the certainty
of mountain ranges, wise in their similarity,
or the jagged crashing of the coastline, which at least
everyone knows is changing – the sea eating
the land like acid, the bone grip of the cliffs
occasionally loosening, revealing
a new shelf of fossils.

I used to think that every day
the world stayed pretty much the same
but you woke up a little different. For a while, I felt
the opposite: that I was me, all of the time, and seasons
shed the world like skin, proof of their growth,
just as volcanoes, tree rings, even dust are
proof of something being made.

Now I think a blend of these – or quickly
change my mind between them so that both appear
true at once, like a nineteenth century illusion
where two separate illustrations can be merged
by twiddling a string: bird and cage, horse and rider.

This reminds me of the first time
that I drove home through a snowstorm, early December,
two-thousand-and-something, snow falling in uneven
clumps – accumulation and erasure – the road
quietly vanishing, no signs of resistance.

Landscape III

A sun lifts up the floating ground.
The grass goes orange then goes green again
and stays green. The mostly cloudy sky
repeats – the clouds have cartoon eyes
and smiles, which I wasn't expecting.
A cluster of palm trees is taking everybody
by surprise, waving their approaching branches,
gesturing for help.

Carnivorous plants stretch up
and open out their mouths, alike but also not
alike, doubles and near-doubles, like the twin lakes
in the valley whose oval surfaces have borrowed a
religious colour scheme, the one suggesting the other
as if holding it in memory.

I get the feeling I'm about to learn
something, the kind of knowledge you gain at
great expense to yourself and those around you
but which nevertheless comes in handy, time and again,
proving its value. I make a complete pause, peering
strategically ahead towards a huddle of de-leafing
trees: the used terrain behind us has begun
to fade away.

In one version of what happens next,
I make a choice to leap, unambiguously,
into the empty space beyond, gathering momentum
as I steadily outrealm myself.

In this version begin what seem like intermittent
snows, melting instantly on contact with
the landscape's terraced floors.

And maybe it was also like this there,
that time, for you, deciding what to do
and in which order to do it, the clouds changing
their functions – the snow now rushing up to meet them
to be carried off elsewhere – the twin lakes finally
overflowing and becoming one lake, unlikely, you may think,
though we should probably get used to that, peering
strategically ahead towards the unresponsive fields,
calling to them, asking *Can you hear me*
now? and *How about now?*

A Lull in the Birds

To the left, let's say
a country lane

The hour
begins to eat itself

No redemption
can happen to you
just like October can
happen to you

A pavement
in the end
can blossom

α

Language eclipses itself
an eye leaving its socket

Today was
like today was
in the surface of a helmet's dome

We miss
another different window

What, if anything, is
with you?

α

This accidental dance
resolves

The time

fizzes with
autoplay

A picture of the Earth
morphs into
all times in the
future

The speaker
in the wake of things

Un-ordinary
longish
years

α

'Tomorrow' and 'today' collide

The missteps
trips us up

For a moment
sheer
ongoing changes

Meaning has
a kind of
form

α

Continue together

Elisions and
a three-way street

No flowers
can happen to you
just like eye contact can
happen to you

If we have to disappear
we can

Binoculars at Dungeness

Through the binoculars the light and wind are everywhere at once.

The sharp curves of the shore are like
the sharp curves of the shore in a painting by Paul Nash,
the sand the colour of setting plaster.

I will myself to see in glowing uranium green.
I will myself to see from the perspective of a low-hanging
marsh harrier, circling the reeds.

The weather looks like old school PC-graphics weather.
The lapwings seem to be on loop and/or – through the binoculars –
the lapwings seem to be on loop.

I call the poem 'Nash Light'. Later, it becomes 'The Shore'.

I make the poem surreal by inserting a man with bandaged hands,
passing among buildings as if passing among sleeping friends.

I make the poem green, from the perspective of Paul Nash.
I make the poem on loop and circling the reeds.

But what if, altering nothing, the poem starts to have no roof?
To be precise: what if there's another poem, so thin you barely make it out,
adjusting its flight 300 yards away?

I will myself to see as I would see if I had twice the eyes.
The light takes on the shape and feel of many-layered, distant sound.

Views of the Winter (November 1899)

for AH

I

because it is winter,
because the yellow afternoon is short,
because the grass can't move as it wants to,
because the crowds around the pool have stopped,
because you can still feel the night's residual cool in the earth,
because the dirt hems their cloaks,
because it has happened,
because it is happening,
because the light skims at the edge of things,
because the new wet low sky pinks,
because the water petitions you, calling you out,
because the darkness wants to know where you go each day,
because the colours break their surfaces,
because this scheme of things is fixed,

I

because it is winter,
because it strips the park in sheets,
because the people are strolling, controlling the atmosphere,
because the trees are shielding trees,
because you have a thought and feel it,
because your inattention jolts,
because water is one way and sun is another,
because it punctuates the earth,
because this all takes up its place again a century ahead of you,
because the upper branches merge,
because if you think about it nothing that much has changed,
because you see it seeing you,
because it is happening,
because it stands to happen soon,

Feeling and Painting

If you look closely at the hunters
in *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565)
you'll see the slight translucent aspect
of the central figure's head, which seems to let an outline
of the deep-set winter tree trunk through.

It makes me think he's fading very slowly from the scene,
that in another five hundred years or so
only his footprints will be left, that his companions
won't have clocked he's gone or even recognise his name
when later questioned of his whereabouts.

I like to imagine him materialising into the stable world
of other paintings, phasing into contexts that he doesn't have
the knowledge or the language to describe. Lately I've seen him
in *The Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689), walking alone
between the not quite parallel lines of the trees

beneath a sky that seems both day and night,
as if time in the picture were somehow getting ahead of itself.
And between the paintings I imagine | warping and assimilating
lights, the | microbial jungling of | colours
            | splintering the tide | like foliage

| leaving an image there | like foliage behind your
      | crashing down behind your
                                  | eyes
| then shifting | yes, but no rain
            | and a slight | bend in the

                                                  | superimposition
| of the trees | an entirely mosaicked
                                            | planetary light

| pushing the | cloudy, yes, but no rain
| into | drastically foreshortened

| life | which lets an outline of
| both day and night
| into the stable | not
| mosaicked | lines of | slight translucent
| fading | sky | cloudy, yes, but no rain, though it's coming,

| crashing down behind your | image there
of | footprints | phasing into | snow
| getting ahead of itself | to let an outline
of | his whereabouts | appear like foliage
beneath the trees. Back in the Breughel painting,

beyond the black cross of a bird preserved
in low mid-flight – the only thing existing in the deep space
of the painting's frame – the villagers are skating
in the valley on the frozen lakes. In the distance
is another village or the same village

repeated with its own returning hunters looking
back across the view to us: another pack of hungry
dogs, another bonfire kicking in the wind, another
oblivious community, making the most of it,
another disappearing man. I've been here,

somehow, to this other place. And I have been
that bird, witnessing a scene that both rejects you
and invites you in, repeating to myself along
an avenue of trees: *Under the skates: ice.*
Under the ice: apparently the sky.

Shattered in Fall

That sword is sad and beautiful and, / This visionary cave

– machine learning algorithm

Should we have seen that coming? Should we have seen that weird terrific scenery, silent and often not silent, rising high with multi-coloured curvature and stones? I'm being present in this landscape, an upward-sloping maze of little arches and depressions, staying the winter, with woods that loom and thin back out, scissoring down from level to level as if branching in reverse. Meanwhile: air-conditioned rooms; a jug of just-in-season flowers; a book on which I see the words *ecstatic* and *Detroit*, as in 'Don't you feel ecstatic to be visiting Detroit?' *Repair your ship from beneath your ship*. *Don't you prefer dismantled art to art?* What life there is is out of sight and quietly commingling, entirely aware of us, hypnotic though invisible, though invisibly moving, which is key: we sense it more than anything, like reading and discovering a hidden communality, the same day lived from opposite ends at a similar speed, inhaling and exhaling at once, mid-season, which is completely understandable, if only understandable in part, the way the images you picture never seem to picture you

The Citizens

There used to be an image here, or not so much
an image as the first few muddled outlines of a scene,
encompassing a range of different timescales, lives and geographies,
and maybe something comes of it and maybe it doesn’t,

but really it’s the fact that there’s a known amount of uncaptured
activity around – the kind of stuff that tends to go especially
unnoticed, like the slow work of the gardener who takes immense
care with the trees – although exactly who this tragedy belongs to

is really anyone’s guess. So much has changed since then, for me:
perhaps it doesn’t matter if the scratches find a form or not;
it’s just you have to wait until you’ve seen them to have
seen them. In a play I saw a while ago, the citizens conspire

to erase themselves completely, disappearing street by street
by methods which remain unclear. Towards the end of the final act,
the play falls open like the two halves of a piece of fruit, essentially identical,
the one half near-enough intact, the other half intact, though bruised.

A Week in March

I cannot bite the day to the core

– Edward Thomas

How does the day remember itself?
A payload of activity
braiding together – catkins,
nettles, long gradients of shape and shade.

The winter seemed like it had more to say
this year, though it'll have to wait.

The spring's already slingshotting around,
moving the furniture from room to room.

It makes me think about a house
that could turn out to be the house
in an American novel: screen door, porch,
consumptive child.

In the next chapter, a neighbour
no one really knows decides to leave
and not come back.

α

Everything's returning, Champ, but
where's it all returning from?

The river hammers silver sheets.
The buds seem acupunctural.

I'm learning there are rules and then
exceptions to the rules.

Just so you know: in my head
it is Iceland and snowing hard.

α

I spend an hour thinking, *The afternoons,*
are they giving or taking more?
watching a shadow slide its way across
the floorboards to my wooden chair.

Then I read a story by Lydia Davis
which is like peering into someone's garden
and feeling several types of jealousy at the same time.

After that I look up the meanings of the following words:
hearing, *seeing*, *backcloth*, *prose*.

I imagine a battle scene involving
chariots and naked men.

α

Tomorrow there's a polar wind,
whatever that might mean for us.

The morning comes in widescreen – roll credits.
Even the air knows to inhale itself.

I sit for a long while at my computer screen.
Eventually I write *and the rain feels cool / and the rain is cool*,
although there isn't rain.

In the next chapter, I return after many years
to find that nobody remembers me,
not even my kids, who understand me
to be a violent stranger.

α

The wind flattens the plants outside.

I read the final acts of *Titus Andronicus* (c.1592)
and again am saddest for the pigeon-keeper,
who always dies feeling confused.

Night blooms like an olive tree –
I dream I'm trekking through a country
which is part-way through a civil war.

α

One evening soon, I'll think about myself
this week, like having it all back again:
not the time, exactly, but the shape of it,
the way a piece of music or a sentence has a shape.

The wind retreats –
we behold the smooth wealth of the coming year,
all ornaments and bracelets.

Sometimes it feels as though the great effort of my life
has been to get myself to here.

Finally the rain comes, and the rain feels cool
and the rain is cool.

The River More Than Ever

I am filled with all things seen / for the last time

– Linda Gregg

A page has turned – been folded over. The week like a gigantic
sentence – narrow and self-unravelling – spilling with a kind of motion,
cutting, like a knife, the year. Nobody's shown. A rustling of pines, like pines hundreds
of years ago – some of them, in fact, the same, though thicker and (of course) more scarred.

Imagine turning up here now – too late, perhaps,
or much too soon – and trying to figure out what happened:
a scene made up entirely of touches and impressions, though nothing that
you might call *tangible*. Perhaps you think it's best this way – perhaps even more realistic.

The river occurs – is held by the country. Funny how it's always
moving but from up here looks completely fixed – the way moments
of stillness feel – or grief, or sleep – in life, which seem to be composed of nothing
but in fact are always on the move – like what exactly? Growth? The weather? Thinking? Little
rushing birds?

Poem with Richard Diebenkorn

Why is it that
this field, for example, fuzzy
and scribbled in, or the cupcake
icing of each
bungalow, reminds
me of a corridor – the kind
that seems
a metaphor for
something (though this often
happens, the mind
moving itself) – the
heat blurring the edges
of the roof tiles and the summer grass,
pine trees generating needles
in their tens of thousands, forming
cones, the sun making
its slow way
out, recorded in
the colour of the tarmac and the
bursting leaves?

Shirtless, maybe, brush
in hand, I summon
Richard
Diebenkorn, measuring
the distance from his rooftop
to the beach,
narrowing his eyes
to try and pick out the horizon, the
day shrugging its shoulders, forcing in
an evening which has
already begun
elsewhere.

I think about
the year to come – imagining it running
through to
August, autumn, Halloween –
until eventually
it's out of sight, a long uneven desert road,
dissolving up
ahead into a sky
-creating
haze.

Turning back now,
Richard
speaks – *There's more time. Do you*
need it? – his
voice bringing the night
air, rushing out to the Pacific, a hum
of electricity
left crackling for many miles.

The Sunlight Falls Partly in a Cup

and tomorrow the same
and then still the same
and then not. I detect a slip
between seasons, from autumn
to another, less-full kind of autumn,
still humming with a loose control
as if to stave off the inevitable.
What I mean to say is, for the most part
you see nothing: a clueless sky, a shadow
thickening the walls, an all but empty
street that seems to widen to include you.
And here's the creak of branches against
other branches. And here's a well-proportioned
view of the whole town, resting silently
at night, waiting for us. Come on and
feel precise. Come on and feel this
CGI-style rain, falling in unnumbered
threads, and the Impressionist rustling
of the leaves as you pass over them,
as in a short dream of a forest floor
you'll certainly forget. I equip a battered
leather shield. The skateboarders begin
to glow. Beneath my window is
a heavy vase of scentless artificial
flowers, amazingly lifelike, and behind
them the street, in which whatever
light there is seems of the shallow
underwater kind. Why so many white
Toyotas? Is there anything Rembrandt
didn't know? While we're at it: what's with
all these particles of soon-to-be extinguished
air, shimmering like cells viewed through
an optical device? They live in one sun, we

in another, pressing the glass as if to whisper,
That's right, when we go, we're taking you
with us. I sense a gentle phasing out.
I imagine a body pulling its history from
the ground, examining each strand as if with
shaky recognition. You get the picture: crammed
with imperfections but in its own way beautiful,
staggering even, like an unspecified canopy,
stretching out for miles into the adjective-resistant dark.

Lynceus

It’s here already:
moisture, light, pale sun on the house fronts –
shallow mackerel scrapes of cloud.

The visible stays visible. It seems to clarify
itself – lush meadows and woodlands,
yellow lichen on the stones.

I take stock of the weather,
see the quick facts of the racing birds –
not touching, but close – then blink

to find the names for things
now chiselled to their surfaces – *BONE*,
LEAD, *ACORN, SHADE* – like damaged skin.

And then a kind of glassiness, a deep strain
in my open eyes: odd streaks and beams
baptizing the shape of things – bright

sheens and halations – shoals of crystal
-coloured light. It all appears, revealing
its underside – true, but only true for me.

When you see it it changes you.
It changes itself. The words you try to reach
for and their definitions fail.

It flows like blood – rushing and pulsing.
You feel alone and far away. And when
it melts itself away again, like sun moving

behind the clouds, you stay changed
and a voice sings, *Are you known here?*
Do you want to be?

An Atlas

It's summer
around us, a
picture we're
living in, as
though living
were a substance
that could ease
out like a taken
breath – the same
breath you are
taking now,
drifting your
slow way
through lakes
of experience,
crushing up
at last against
tomorrow
which is
like today.

Time happens
here in hills
and slopes,
increments of
everything de
-caying in soft
sequences –
replaced at
once invisibly
by sequences
ahead – though
everything that's

seen from here
absorbs you
like a leaf
the sun.

Eventually it's
just a case of
how long you
go on for,
two hands
writing side
by side down
two halves of
an empty
page, one
producing
what it sees,
the other what
it thinks about,
reacting in re
-sponse to sight
like blossom
flipping from
the trees.

And so, the scene
abandons you,
the new
afternoon
now describing
itself, its colours
and connectedness,
the sun proposing
no alternative
to the way

that things are
playing out,
faster and faster,
believe it
or not, summer,
winter, winter,
spring.

Landscape Unevenness

In spring, when rain
that fell some days
ago has all but
evaporated, becoming purposeful humidity,
the ground gives slightly
in to you, your
feet meeting the half
resistance, a landscape unevenness.

Usually this has no
impact – is largely ignorable –
unless your movement makes
it happen, where “it”
equals everything and everything
that comes to mind,
each step bringing about
the trees, engendering clouds.

Today produced a single
muntjac – or so it
appeared – initiated by a
slip, the colour of
raw clay, emitting centuries
of heat – millennia even –
like watching myself crash
away through the brush.

Confirm Humanity

Sitting in a square in
Europe – coffee and tables,
a small child in a
puffer jacket.

It's good for a city
to build around water – the coast
and other knife-like edges,
a series of canals and rivers.

I saw a man
preparing gooseberries
in a kitchen
through a ground floor window.

I imagine – in some
detail – his hands holding
the paring knife, his knuckles,
wooden handle, blade.

A couple
cross the square
in sunglasses
of uncertain ironicness.

There are planters
where I'm sitting
but whatever grew inside
them's died.

I think about a scene from
Train Dreams (2011),
a scene I can't seem
to forget about.

It knows – I think –
that ghosts are more
a presence than
an absence;

that haunting's
what we've always
wanted and – in many ways –
have always had.

Apparently, Matisse
once went to see
the aging,
arthritic Renoir,

moved to find him
painting with
a brush
tied to his fingers.

Two trees
growing side-by-side
have branches
that are making contact – as if

in friendship, curiosity
– another body, similar but not
my own – something to touch, a thing
that knows me.

Sites of Instruction

All this is a ghost: big sky, big land, big feeling of being
here. Wind in the grasses. Ridges and fields. Rain-washed trees and
non-trees. What business is the dawn of mine? now crushed by
the weight of it, feeling not myself, exactly, though not
not myself – the same thing in a newer way – the snowman's great abstractions. Yon
cursor lingers o'er the face of a seventeenth century serving maid. An oaken
table drenched in flowers. Water jugs and loaves of bread. A goldfinch on
a bowl of fruit – breathing different
air to you. *Soak up the beautiful*
springtime vibes. You're free to move,
so move. That's a palm leaf. That's the dusk. That's an
airplane over Massachusetts sounding its way through to you. Here's
a question meaning *What did you know?* and *When did you know it?*
Here's a thing you haven't named. I see a river, but
what is a river – other than
a thought that cancels everything
in front of you? Move quickly. Touch nothing.
The mornings leave themselves unmade.
Sensation in reaction. You know how it goes. Understand you
understand it – know the thaw implies the freeze. Choking out the newer shrubs
the cold makes its own silence, producing relatedness, line after
line. Great Scott, Marty! Shapelier and
shapelier – the sea cutting the flurried rocks. A beetle shining
in the sun. A billboard made of lights saying, *It happened, only*
where were you? Unforeseen and unfore-
seeable. Should we have memorized these trees? It is
what you say it is. Malformed. Incomplete. A landscape missing
mountains. We eat it and it
braces us. The taste of it. Its substance.

Prologue

Can you explain   how, like a cloak,
this water, soaking   up the minor variations
of the trees, is   spreading over what was
once in semi-tropic   fecund light? And
what about these coral-   coloured, spectral
seas, hovering an   inch above the features
of the – is it? – land?   Dusk begins its strange
descent, search   -and-destroying itself
in our direction, starting   up a point somewhere
beyond the point that   we can see, crawling
its way through to us   in modulating,
strophic waves. *What's a guy   gotta do to*
entirely regenerate   around here? What kind
of collapsing civilization   even is *this?* your
body swaying gently like   a body standing in
a boat. This is certainly   the place that we
set out for all those   years ago – not what
I pictured, sure, but basically   the same: same
rising hills, same   cliffs, same polygonic structures
underpinning everything. If this   were a movie,
I guess this'd be the moment   I get eaten by
a pack of dogs.   If this were a novel, this'd
surely be the   moment I quit reading the
novel, wild and   unbelievable and yet too
easy to predict the end.   I toggle between
vantage points: my own –   seeing my empty
hands – and then a full three   -sixty overview,
which shows the dusk still   brushing its way here,
coproducing new activity   that blossoms
from the outside in,   hymning the chameleon
shift of the terrain from ochre   to a reddish
– even purple? – shade,   like, not a forest exactly,
more like the idea   of a forest solidifying in

your mind.   A blue line marks our progress
on the map, blank   at the edges, as though the
countryside dissolved to mist   at some point farther
off, *a dark / Illimitable   Ocean without bound*, etc.,
a frontier which, for   now, is still closed off to you,
like thoughts   released into the night, roaming
the precincts for a place   to – like a raptor –
land. It is what   it is, as my brother would say.
Not much we can   do but feel the surf of young
night coming on, increasingly   material, the way
you hold some   objects and they suddenly feel
true. And after that,   who knows? We push on,
departing and   arriving both, watching ourselves
wading through the   oversaturated land.

Signs of Life

https://i.ytimg.com/vi/BPba3d7KMYI/maxresdefault.jpg

Imagine encroachment.
Imagine it vanishes from the mind as it scrolls past,
awaiting comparison.

Once it starts, it's difficult to stop,
although there's something in the way
the colour reaches then horizons you, seeping beyond itself,
disequipping you of every sense.

If it were up to me, I know what I'd ask that ultimate
window, the sky, or I'd know what *not* to ask.

The water's grey.
The Netherlands are algal bloom.
What was once the San Diego River glistens like a dark blue glass.

Whither beachfront condos? Whither the beach
for that matter, its undiscovered fossil life,
more than photography?

Think *Planet of the Apes* (1968) – the waves, the sand,
that long-haired, shrivelled astronaut who died, like,
two thousand years ago.

About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Apes…
Because I could not stop for Apes – / They kindly stopped for me –

Planktonic drifts calve the perimeter.
Check out those conifers flourishing with belief, I said,
which sounded good at the time.

It didn't seem unusual to look around and feel *expanse* –
not strength, as such, but the sensation of strength,
muscular and sinewy, a new version of fullness.

Was that the end? Maybe we missed our stop
or (worse) hadn’t got started yet.

You have no other option but to row yourself
to shore, listening for horses you may have imagined,
scanning for signs of life up on the ridge, your escape
pod in the middle of the lake
starting to flood and sink.

Loose in the Field

after Mark Ford

So, the sea   The head suffers
outgrows its edges,   its images. That
these buildings at the   mossy, rain-slicked
shoreline either   boulder's getting
too close
or not close   for comfort,
enough.   don't you agree?

Get in there   The night comes
and walk around;   usefully to hand,
the textures are quite   like a specific, built-in
real. The wind is   quality, the moon
keeping itself
busy, performing   to itself, both quiet
some function or other.   and unwavering.

But on the surface   Alternatively, you can
of things, there's   hear the clouds
no reason   and watch the swifts
you should understand   bombing the greasy sky, noting
their movements
are a kind of   and their counter
dance.   -movements.

Under the Equalizing Night

A mountain stream descending to the sea.

The radiation of the snows.

Thousands of insects smashing the windscreen.

Thousands of insects not smashing the windscreen.

An uncontainable, retreating view.

A water-damaged athlete under many-angled, greenish lights.

The somewhat imaginary noises of the sea.

A woman with a horse's skull or with a rock shaped like a horse's skull.

A room of silent de Chiricos, eyeing themselves in the empty gallery.

A quarter moon cresting the Alps.

Infrared cameras monitoring temperature.

Apollinaire's lines: *I am everywhere or rather I am beginning to be everywhere*.

Hart Crane's last bear, *shot drinking in the Dakotas*.

A single horse standing in a field doing nothing.

The ongoing approach of spring.

The ongoing approach of spring.

Us travelling at close to three-hundred kilometers per hour.

Us eyeing the dawn as it absorbs into itself the night.

Locust Blossoms

We two, we are the last suns of the year \

We are the redwings and the blackcaps on the vine, eating the purple grapes \

We are the grapes, we are the heart-shaped leaves \

We are these trees catching the light, holding it back although the day is done \

We are these thin lingering floating shapes, the grooves in the bark, the focus of the muddy river \

We're deer in the bracken, wading birds, ridges, furrows, shaking grass \

We are whatever unbeknown frontier \

We branch out and are obvious like ice freezing across the lake \

We are the lake in its entirety, its flow and flow and flow of content \

We're next year's now-descending geese now-skidding over pools of cloud \

We're speech in between things, our tongues petalling out like flowers \

We're lightning and are struck by lightning \

Footprints, willows, pavements, owls \

We are the oak that's made it through to spring without shedding its crisp dead leaves \

Projections and Interstices

Sometimes I regret that I am not
the dying afternoon, completing in dull furrows
of fading light, level-balanced in anticipation of the evening
and its territory. Nor am I the gap between
these two adjacent, moving points, doing their best to resemble
each other, like a gap between experiences or time
you can't account for though it happened and included you.
I picture a bridge linking neighbouring countries
where the languages are similar and so is the terrain,
except the sun feels maybe stronger here
with deeper, sharper contrast and a cross-hatched shade
that baffles you, forcing you to reconsider
the relationships between things.

And yet, arriving in another place, a new landscape
of pristine hills and cities joined to other cities
by a clutch of intersecting roads, I become
not what catches sight of the world from a great height,
now floating over high white peaks, nor somebody
remembering the stages of an awkward journey,
but instead a thing of contemplation as the wind here
contemplates the trees, shaking them back and forth, sensing
their woodenness. Sometimes, also, I regret that I am not
the wind, in constant motion and unpredictable,
like a section of river into which occasionally
a fish will swim against the current
and be driven back.

A Letter from Delft

Since you departed, nothing much of anything has happened,
in the grandest sense. The March days are becoming
brighter – the sky today, at times, is clear, with skins of cloud
departing and arriving slowly, revealing different blues and sunlight.

I like to watch the shadows travel wearily across the streets – like
a feeling of boredom, absorbing all the coloured brickwork, the buildings
now in darkness, now illuminated, now shadowy and dark again,
as if they were in some way, flickering with secret thoughts.

The trees lining the streets are naked – same shade as the blackish
water. Boats constantly come in and go, some bringing news here with
their sheep and cattle, others loaded heavily with fabrics, flowers
and different herbs, dark barrels of herring from the coast of Scotland.

At last, I visited Utrecht and saw the inside of your father's church,
vaulted and cavernous – like walking through a giant whale,
seeing its ribcage. A young woman who looked like you observed me from
a balcony. I sat for some time in a daze – so long, in fact, I missed my carriage.

I like, I think, Utrecht – although the people there seem not as friendly
and in Delft I'm not a stranger. Even so, I found the party strange:
I knew not many of the guests and many were just local children
– an ugly baby weeping and laughing and a raucous chubby village boy

singing his silly, moon-shaped head off, his friend smoking a foot-long
pipe – not more than nine years old! The table was a lavish spread of
grapes and oysters, wheels of cheese – silk napkins for the guests of honour
and a strange decorative salt cellar with salt shipped from West Africa,

although it tasted just the same to me. There was a conversation that
I couldn't follow on the flights of different kinds of birds – about their
hollow bones and feathers, their continuance of movement – and a gift
from some unpresent relative, an illustrated book of little creatures

and exotic plants: a blackbird, a woodcock, a donkey, a watermelon.
And on the final page an etching of a smiling, black-eyed skeleton,
dancing with an hourglass across the grave of his own gravedigger,
which seemed an unwise thing to do.

Last night, I dreamt the same dream that the sky was blending
with the buildings – as if chewing away at them. In the dream
this was a curse, a kind of punishment drawn down by
Nature, making everybody very frightened.

I haven't told my mother but some evenings I can still feel that
my eyesight is disintegrating – both blurring and becoming faint.
Today I looked towards the orchard and saw nothing, only
grey and white – a fact which I have told to no one.

I wonder if the soft world will reveal some hidden virtue:
an absence of ugliness, of sharp edges and harsh distinctions.
Will I see you again when you return? Your face? Even your outline?
Would I know you from my hands alone? What colour will my eyes be?

Think Fast

Light filters in.
There is a tightness in the dusk, like love.
Each day evolves beyond your need for it.
So, tell me, are you

feeling seen?

α

The rain outnumbers us.
No sign of it stopping through these hours
of unglistened night. Nothing to do but to give
yourself over. Marvel at the

squeegee dawn.

α

Same problem, same solution.
The solid-seeming water holds the mountains
like a cradled face. Drag your deer to the roadside,
splattered with headlights.

Any questions?

α

Coffee and apple juice
out on the deck. I watch the shadows leeching
colour from the bracken and the fleeting dew.
Pray, how do you

enlanguage that?

α

Fade out autumn.
Bring in winter's sleek returns.
A friend wipes ash from the hood of her car.
Horizons razorblade

to view.

α

What does your suspicion say?
Freezing waters. Mulching leaves. A sun
-bronzed cafeteria. The morning scoops light
on the sand. Nobody sees.

Go figure.

α

Total yellow. Screens of trees.
I sit at the window, through which I see
other things. I watch for them, I listen out,
and that is

the situation.

α

The meagre light remembers you,
touching up your skin-gloved hand. The weather mirrors
yesterday's. Simple and uncomplicated. Enjoy it, Pal,
while you still can. Let day's train

overrail you.

α

Funny thing is, you give it
shape and – giving shape – a meaning.

The brief reign of the frost is done.
Is it really

any wonder?

α

At last, the thick-skulled hours
retreat. What's in it for them, anyhow? The sun crowns
lightly into view, a silent transmission, and the feeling comes to you
like warmth or like an almost abstract kind

of pain.

The Nature of Arrival

he will / become a fine thing, perhaps, but a different one
– Jack Gilbert

He tries to refuse it: stone fields and exhausted sky,
a landscape built of repetitions. Absolute rockface,
meaningless sea – now still, now vibrating, the beginning
and the end of something. The dusk falls gracefully
apart, a building designed to be easily moved. Across
the island, stone walls split the empty hills like two sides
of a single thought. Walking back up from the beach,
remembering a time that seems now definitely over,
remembering, also, a man reaching his hand into
a bucket of discoloured squid, he feels an unknown
sense of order, dull but sharply clear, the weight of
an unusual rock. In the morning, looking out to sea,
there appears to be another island, ten or twenty miles
away, that either wasn't visible or didn't used to be there.

Mid-June Sonata

Early evening light appearing lately
in the garden leaves, an
ongoing influence, shredded petals taking
on the colours of a
canyon wall, the light passing
abruptly through them like a
thunderstorm that breaks from nowhere.

Time hurries in unusual ways,
a day the days begin
to shrink, as if in
retraction, exposing the continuous *away*
of things, a mode of
abandonment – endless departures – so that
even what arrives is leaving.

Have I been here all
this time or is this
something I in part imagined?
Swifts half-sleeping in the thermals,
clambering shadows, blues I don't
believe in fully – seeping as
a tide into an estuary.

This means nothing new, although
it seems completely unexpected – and
so achieves a kind of
newness, like a tree thinking
itself to leaves – each flowerhead
and bud somehow the present
and the future, simultaneously clear.

Poem for Charlotte and Jacob's Wedding

A strange goodbye, like the end of a summer,
though autumn's round the corner with a summer of its own,
inviting you to wander through its evenings and its pitching rain,
a place beyond imagination, shivering with trees.

There's light in the botanic gardens, pulsing
with a kind of life, and friendly sounds out on the street
(which are other lives too, of course) in which you play a crucial part,
like heat or the wind or the shape of the clouds, now filtering
above you like a newfound sense of clarity.

It's like a framed map on a painted wall – contours
and mountains and mountainous seas – becoming a part
of you simply by being there, adding to your memory in thin,
unnoticed increments, zone by faded, sun-washed zone – a section
of forest, a slice of the lake – until the whole thing pushes out of you,
a light source or an energy.

In the meantime, don't forget to tell yourselves that
life has architecture, too, with dust that needs sweeping
and space for new furniture, which will always be true, I think,
however full or clean it seems.

And know that there are parts of you that never really
change at all, parts you don't know about, that only others know
in you, the future floating quickly here in bright winters and coastlines,
the sweet sweat of a wood in spring, the warm airs of Connecticut
and England and Greece, Chicago and Denver, New Jersey
and New York itself, which is where you are alive today,
receiving the sun, which is how we imagine you.

Skeleton's Song

for AH

cold sky over colder earth – the weak
blades of the sun – greyly observing
hot orangey leaves – what am I now
exactly – can't remember hoisting through

this thick unhaunted clogged-up
mud – dirtclay – grit – grass shagging
up beneath my feet – an ugly living
browning rug – what's left of what's

still left of me – the wind makes numb
my shocking bones – trees eyeballing
my whiteness – thinking blood I must
have had – its warmth and almost endless

-ness – my life's crumpling syntax – I used
to be a something here – encrusted
in cottons and jewellery perhaps –
unspoilable beauty – magnesium

mind – none of which I think is with
me – deadly and naked – scourge
of the birds – but one day I will take
this – drape it beautifully about

myself – a new set of muscles – elaborate
skins – November clinging on to me – I
longed once for horizons – long nights
sitting up awake – watching through eyes

the oblivious moon – imagining objects
– oblivious too – smashing their charcoal
shapes into its face – ocean of
impact – a field of unrest

An Unripe Plum

We've been waiting all October for this last plum
to ripen, still hard and inedible, resisting the process
or somehow refusing it. It changes colour
in the light getting weaker each day – sometimes purple,
sometimes mauve, even the dark blue that Cézanne uses
to underline his apples. The surface isn't smooth
but dented, cratered by the pressures of our forefingers and thumbs,
testing its readiness, pushing the flesh, like waiting for a corpse
to lose its rigor mortis and get up
and live. A single white shine near the stalk, taut
skin reflecting the shadowy room with me (another
shadow) in it – a mirror in a murky painting. I take in the dish –
oval, irregular, earthenware brown, hand painted with
a single swan – fluid feathers, downward beak, the surface
of the plate almost the same shade as her
root-like feet, between a solid and a liquid somehow –
a solid muscularity – meat and feathers, organs,
blood – but also like a patch of oil, a slight swirl in the body
like the ripple in a piece of fabric. Meanwhile, the plum's imperfect
curves rhyme with the curved edge
of the dish itself, the edge part of a wholeness
not completely comprehensible, the neck of the swan
curving down to the earth, apparently unbreakable or on the verge
of breaking like the things in Sharon Olds, where you're dealing
with the fixed or nearly fixed or nearly
broken – bones and ceramics, branches, waves, a
marriage, the body, each line as you read – as if the whole
world were composed of breaks that somehow hold it all together,
the way the planet's held together by
invisible tectonic plates.

Things to Come

I'm in the bath: the water
is condensing like a deep fog in a silent film.
The book I'm reading's open at a picture of Chardin's, complete
– as usual – with an open drawer. There's even steam in the painting,
lifting slightly from a china cup.

The walls around me have been limewashed white.
I've just shaved in the mirror and decide that I look nearly dead:
my hands are biblically pale and scarred;
my eyes feel very tired.

I'm listening to Bert Jansch singing folksongs about
failing love. Outside several birds address the morning,
though it's really night, as though life
were somehow moving without going anywhere –
waiting round the corner at a place where
everything is known.

What's in the drawer?
Could I remove it if I wanted to?

Yesterday I read a new story of Isaac's
about a woman growing up beside a family from Sicily
and about the moon landing, fifty years ago, which – on the night
they make it up there – she says feels, now, *part of my life*.

I sink my head beneath the surface of the water
and just lie there like I'm in a film, imagining the wild night
shouldering the house.

Then I imagine a map of many cities and rivers
and a columned, marble loggia – repeating itself, over and over –
a couple of saints in heavy medieval robes
floating the archways side by side.
One passes me a book, which I reach out to take;

the other wears a mask that makes him
look like many animals.

So, what do I want from this? A grand confession?
An explanation of some kind?

I sit for a while in the empty tub.
The music's finished, though I didn't hear it end.
When I stand my knees have soap on them and one of them
is bleeding. Apparently, it's nine o'clock.

I don't know it yet,
but tonight I'm going to wake up from a dream
that understands me back.

Sometimes I think life would be improved if we lived only once.

Epiphany, or Lines for the Poet on His Thirtieth Birthday

simply the thing I am / Shall make me live

– Shakespeare, *All's Well That End's Well*

A cold coming you've had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a birthday, and such a strange birthday:

Soft footfall through the parks and streets, narrow and shaded, Mediterranean, the date palms and the empty fountains, *the very dead of winter*.

The bland daylight caresses you like a shoulder of hillside.

Plane trees reshadow the slick paraphrase of the grass.

At some point, not a week goes by without something shattering open like a flower, wouldn't you say?

What is this, a Thursday?

Accept that your body has known you like the cold snap of the year has known you, as the always-surprising woods have been known by the breeze.

Accept that sometimes in life you pass a window of uncertain sights or pass a window of cured meats hanging like instruments; other times you catch a glimpse of yourself in the wintery glass, passing through an unknown place you may never return to.

There are moments when what's normal seems unlikely and miraculous, like the daily suicides of the afternoon, and other moments when the miracle is so mundane it disappears.

Remember to remember to remember to remember that – the common, at-the-roadside birds moving aside, implying the sky's unimaginable edge.

What happened to the total openness of the day?

How much sherbet is too much sherbet?

but set down / This set down / This:

Not leisure, not the insincere rejoicing in the plaza,
Nor the historical thrust of the abandoned parks,
Not tedium, not the brunt adjustments of the clock,
Nor the frescoes' necessary tropes.

No, none of that.

Instead, all early evening you stabbed today into new calm, feeling perplexed feeling the sun go down.

How is it that you're breathing?

You used to be ten.

You used to think exactly nothing of the year yawning awake, much less about its rain-washed streets, its refillable moon, its patches of appearing light igniting everything around you.

Even now, what do you make of the hotels and bars? The city shifting back to life, the people blinking and rubbing their eyes?

Do you know what I'm asking? Will you know it eventually?

Before you consider this, make way for the travellers: three out-of-towners, coming in from the desert, relieved to find their way here.

It's the least you can do, given that you were once beset like them.

The stars – if you could see them – are exploding and exploding.

Animal History

Again I'm looking out over a January afternoon,
ranged with emblems of the finished year. It conceals

nothing, establishing the first few layers of colour,
although this doesn't seem to matter now as much as

it used to, neither evidence nor a lack of evidence
of anything. A child throws a red ball on the lawn.

Behind, a blue whale yawns apart its mouth, the same
as history, which opens, gaping, to receive us.

A telegenic couple holding hands are wearing backpacks
with adjustable straps. Elsewhere, a room of identical

-seeming men dance with their eyes closed thinking,
Music? What music? as the sky turns lilac, pink,

then white and looks miraculous. Feel the texture
and you become the texture; dive into the sea

and you become the sea, zigzagging the shore
like an endangered species. It's like walking through

the many centuries of an existing landscape,
a double consciousness, witnessing the ritualistic frenzy

of each year as it goes by, accelerating past you like
a string of ornamental beads. And the animals

– damning, yes, and violent, but also beautiful and
beautifully curious – are eyeballing you carefully:

saying *snake* a snake appears, green, patterned
with triangles; up on the roof, between the lounger

and the potted palm, a woman jabs her rifle at
a curtain of approaching crows. In the same building

– or so I imagine it – a man, hunched over
on his hands and feet, finally admits everything

to himself as the walls fall flatly open and away,
the building rushing upwards like a tree

growing without constraint. On a clear day
in winter, you can see yourself down on the ground,

sussing out the difference between this year
and the next, and if it’s summer, which feels less clear

each time you come back to it, the country seems more
open somehow, greater distances between the days.

Human Remains

You miss the beginning, beautiful though not essential, a quality of being staged – rows of gooseberries, raspberries, beans, their fingers pointing at the earth as if to prove how they arrived here. For a short time, I became convinced that every heron I encountered was the same heron I'd seen before, not motionless, exactly – how could he be, appearing everywhere at once? – but certainly uniquely still, surveying the water, the water also slowing down. *Would you not deem he breathed?* – each blade of grass now made of paper: though would that be so bad? Would anybody even notice, like those other miniature bemusements that have always been there, waiting to be seen, the objects in your room that wait all night for you to wake, as if coming to life themselves? Why, when I see birds, do I think *Appalachian Mountains*, a place I've never been before? Coal tits, sparrows, red-hooded goldfinches, distributed throughout the yellows of the autumn, custard, brickwork, grapes – and feeling something of themselves in these. Dust settles and is settling. A woman sweeping flagstones in a cottage between major scenes, minding her business, repositioning a water jug, recalling her brother and the war-torn summers of her adolescence, unaware of what is riding through the fields to acknowledge her, like a searchlight finally arriving on an object it has so far skimmed, the past uprooted like a tree, showing human remains. I could go on – my Galápagos imagination, a dark archipelago, its depth concealing many creatures – slow whales and angelfish, hammerheads, an ice-cream shark. The thing I can't get over is the mystery behind the bones: no unsolved case or local folklore, no riddles, no site of suspected historical significance. The heron can remain in place for several hours when it hunts, hoping to impale a fish it typically will swallow whole. Observing its behaviour, the ornithologist takes out his notebook, writing that the bird *almost behaves like he's invisible, which perhaps – on second thoughts – he is –*

Uppsala

Eventually it's clear that we are always in
a kind of transit, forever *en route* – blinking curiously around
at all the suddenness of things we see, whether flying
over Norway's coast, unreasonably bright, wide sashes of silver water
snaking inland, or driving through the cork trees of
a burnt valley in Portugal, the ridge studded with wind turbines.
It's strange to think that someone was the first
to venture up this way, to follow these steep lines of quartz,
feeling the cold through many layers of fur. What must they
have thought of it? Why not remain? Perhaps they felt
apart, a distance, which happens fairly often now – that
the world feels at a slight remove, temporarily shut off from you.
The question, badly put, is how to figure out a route
back in, readjust to your surroundings
like recalling a lost memory. I, for example,
used to feed the same horse at the far edge of a bumpy field
and remember its eyes and the star on its nose, though
not – surprisingly – its name or whether there were any others.
All you can do sometimes is look around and get to know
what's there before you, before you speed off in a new direction,
past the churches and whatever else – the river and the river's movement.

Vision of Ezekiel

The sky is patching.
Outside the clouds
are doing that *are we*
secretly smoke thing
they sometimes do
Their specific meanings
heavy-laden,
obviously full of weight

the frail sun
feels good and nice
just-now mounting the
horizon
in every century
an outrageously
beautiful mountainous
view

whose shape is yet to
be determined
What else was there?
teenage bathers
unimpressed by the
spectacle
the crowd making its
way back down

And what to do about
the new haze of
crispness
retooling
this part of the plain,
an unstable mixture

of things as they are
all of the time

whatever that means
for you.
Imagine, as you're
forced to in this scene,
the unevenly
distributed weight of
the present
A familiar door

pointing out how
language stretches
over something it can't
quite cover
overwhelmed by detail
announcing itself
into the speaker's
mouth, not with an 'I'

but an 'us.'
It feels dark blue
I feel like if I close my
eyes I'll see
a group of future-
holding
days
not yet embarked upon

submarining
with the promise of
anticipation
which also reminds
me of various scenes

in Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).
and the snow, it keeps

coming back across all of these,
a kind of shorthand for experience.
it "spreads" you.
it has many lives.
how else would anybody ever notice

the deep-ice connection between things described [and] other things?
the splendour of meaning
bleeding out of them at every turn

Forest of Error

There is no better time than the present when we have / lost everything

– Peter Gizzi

What seems familiar is often not; is not even as old as you.
Here, rows and rows of planted trees, identical
enough – someone's idea of
comprehensiveness, someone's idea
of leafy fractured light, constructing your idea
of sky. This thought is probably impossible, a place
somewhere about which there is
nothing to be said at all, nothing of note,
no archaeology or symbolism, nothing more
than what there is – clumps of moss, a broken
gate, the hoofprints of a herd of cows now
nowhere to be pointed at; things happen
or do not happen, are seen (perhaps) or not seen.

It's reasonable to ask if this
is asking something of you, the past shredded to ribbons,
the future, curling, also ribbons. I felt that
once myself, back in a landscape from my childhood
– wilderness, applauding rain – where I
discovered the reflections and the blurriness between
things, their shapes not so different and pointless apart,
like threads of the imagination. If *you* had
the task of composing the land, wouldn't you
at least try to inspire and enable this?
Give voice to the birds, connect up the trees,
even if your motives were entirely
obscure to you?

Ghost I

The silent life of night
    at night, switch
and unswitch, mingling the rock
that moves the open understanding
land, land heating as it changes,
    a low rumble
beneath the surface,
    trembling

and trembling, steam
    emerging from
the plains like wind over the
mountain. You are watching
it happen, fine for now. Inside,
    the roots burst
through the floor, shifting
    their weight, finding

the air at last, making
    their own sound,
being forced to speak. How dawn
across this fragile place arrives with
rain almost a fog or mist, feeling for form,
    I'll never know
or ever want to know. Plastic prints
    in molten layers,

grasses, buildings, creatures
    in motion, in movement,
at rest. When my time comes
– is no longer lost – a signal flares up
like a tree: *I loved it here,*
    I promise you.

The colours connect,
smudging like

music – the ocean, the wind, the over
-hearing, beating sky – akin
to and unlike me. In one sense,
I am always here, pushing around
and up against the world. But all there is
is quiet sounds,
the whispering of leaf
on leaf.
.

Work of Forgetting

I travel by a stagecoach often down adventurous avenues, wool
-gathering a landscape through which stagecoaches arrive and go.

This is what I see today: – a wide-eyed traveller; the ground turning
to mud streaked with the furrows of a coach ahead; the streaks

filling with water like a silver sky beneath the mud; that sky grasping
its clouds like handfuls of arriving flowers. The horses are blinkered,

running in and out of sync; the hedges blur with naked twigs like rain
in chaotic wind. In the mud-flecked distance, a generic town. In the road,

mounting a rise, a deer. Somewhere beyond this is the unmade sea to
which all this is (headlong) rushing. The frantic landscape churns with life

until I wake, rushing along myself, the sky drawing a blank above,
my coach swaying and tilting. Through the window I see fields

of sheep, recalling a time I would never have noticed them, the road
slipping beneath the wheels, the wheels rotating like an eye.

Unconformity at Jedburgh

The earth
doesn’t lie. There is mud
on my boots – a young
landscape of
fences and trees,
a man whipping his leaping
horse, a phaeton keeping
up behind.
Grass
and open, sloping hills.

α

Calcareous rock – white
shellfish and chalk: the hard
presence of present things,
upheavals
of land.
My nails are grubby,
abrupt as a cutbank. My coat’s
cuff has a single fray.

There will be unrest in town
and disbelief.
All rain
obliterates on contact.

α

Tilted and upright,
standing on successive
ends. We are moving
in circles – a system
of stones.

Once I saw
an eye change colour.
Once I watched a hoofprint
at the road’s edge, in
the evening, ice.

I wonder what became
of my son, whom
I abandoned and have
never met.

Look at my shadow,
dark and oddly accurate
against the rock.

Look at my hands.

Look at my ageing skin.

Hand as Long-Awaited Rain

Imagine
a flowering tree
in a vase

What message
can you take
from this

You smell
the fragrance
of your breath

the flowers
communicating
speed

the bristling
presence of the
branches, mind

attending to itself
whatever appears
there

Note
these underwater
voices

somewhat longer
somewhat
unexpected

a moment you
in part
predict

The speaker, generally
a
bird

remembering
wide-ranging
overhead environments

its different narrows
clumps of
ledge

the sounds of
ordinary
field[s], his home

What's it like
to reach
to touch

to find
the everyday
exhausted,

dry cicadas, feathers
unpreserved, inescapable
abundant loss

distraction and focus
how / quantifiable" by gesture,
by another

absent
angled view,
viewing your hand

as long-awaited rain

that blossom somewhere

blossoms into

The Vast Hour

after Genevieve Taggard

Now only is there certainty for me / When
all the day's distilled and understood – the moon
    drives at the present –
the light from here un-
    yous you.

I want to shoot myself in the face
with love – a beautiful thing in a strange
    and beautiful place. Something something
"sweet unrest" – the huge night
    an enclosure.

So stir my thoughts at this slow, solemn time –
the short-haul flights of evening: beacons of winter,
    continuous air – what if you could
read up on the day's thoughts
    about you?

Strike up music! Scope tomorrow's printless straits!
I slice the tomatoes, saving their skins – their seeds
    freckle the countertop. No ideas but in
No ideas but in things – tell me
    about it...

I stand and watch the pewter darkness. Snow
here is self-cancelling. Muscular
    planets, unread
-able moon – now *that's* what I
    call emptiness!

Cast your minds back – dredge it up: ice on
the river, mud on the trees, dataless for many miles.
    I sleep and I dream of

the previous year – and possibly (I hope)
    the next.

Now light meets darkness: now my tendrils
climb / In this vast hour – wilderness backwards,
    wilderness on. Release the hounds
of opal night, whatever you think
    that means.

This much I do know: light on the housetops,
alluvial plains, the old heart and its loyalties.
    And the evening disa
-ppearing – first the ending, now
    the end.

Notes

‘Eight Studies of a Hand’ quotes from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and makes reference to Dorothea Lange’s *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona* (1940).

‘Poem with Richard Diebenkorn’: Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) was an American painter who lived and worked in California.

‘Lynceus’: In Greek mythology, Lynceus of Messene was said to possess a heightened sense of sight. As well as seeing clearly in the dark, he is occasionally described as having the ability to see through solid surfaces, including the earth.

‘Loose in the Field’ borrows the form of Mark Ford’s poem ‘Then She Said She Had to Go’.

‘Epiphany, or Lines for the Poet on His Thirtieth Birthday’ makes use of T. S. Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’ and owes a debt to Graham Foust’s poem ‘To Graham Foust on the Morning of His Fortieth Birthday’. I was born on Epiphany (6th January).

‘Animal History’ was written in response to a collection of paintings by Liz Scheer: https://www.lizscheer.com/animal-history.html.

‘Vision of Ezekiel’ borrows its title from a painting by David Bomberg (1890-1957). The poem is constructed from bits and pieces of correspondence about the other poems in this collection.

‘Unconformity at Jedburgh’ owes something to John Clerk’s 1787 illustration of geological unconformity on the banks of Jed Water in Scotland. The poem is written in the voice/mind of Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726-1797).

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APPENDIX

Fig. 1

Thomas Cole, *The Garden of Eden* (1828)
Oil on canvas, 80 x 134 cm
Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX

Fig. 2

Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains* (1827)
Oil on panel, 47 x 64.5 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Fig. 3

Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke,*
Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm – The Oxbow (1836)
Oil on canvas, 130.8 x 193 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

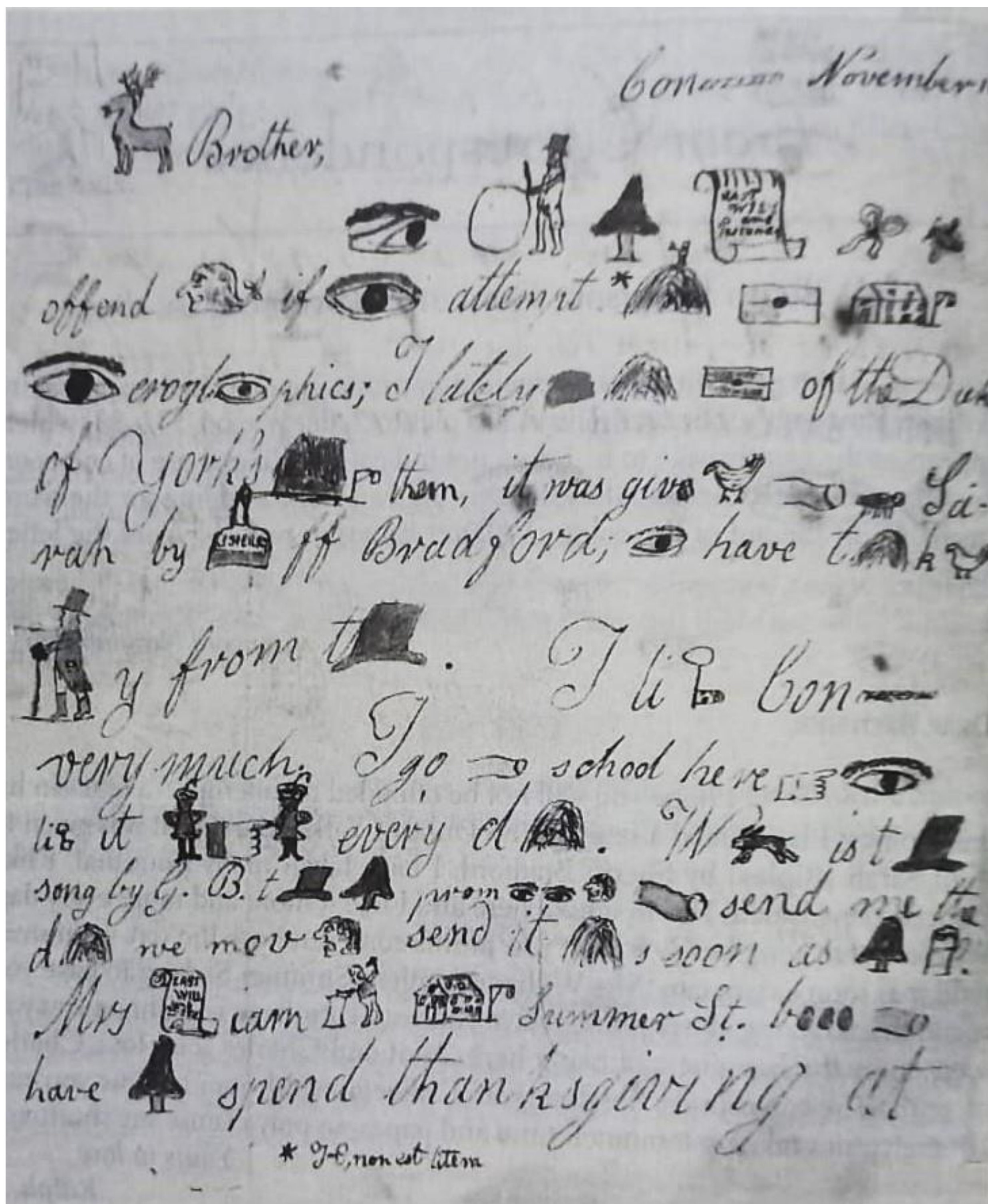

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Fig. 4

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Letter to William Emerson, Concord, November 10, 1814'
The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton (1939)
Reprinted in Joel Porte and Saundra Morris, eds., *Emerson's Poetry and Prose*
(New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), p.532

Fig. 5

Thomas Eakins, *The Swimming Hole* (1884-85)
Oil on canvas, 70 x 92 cm
Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX

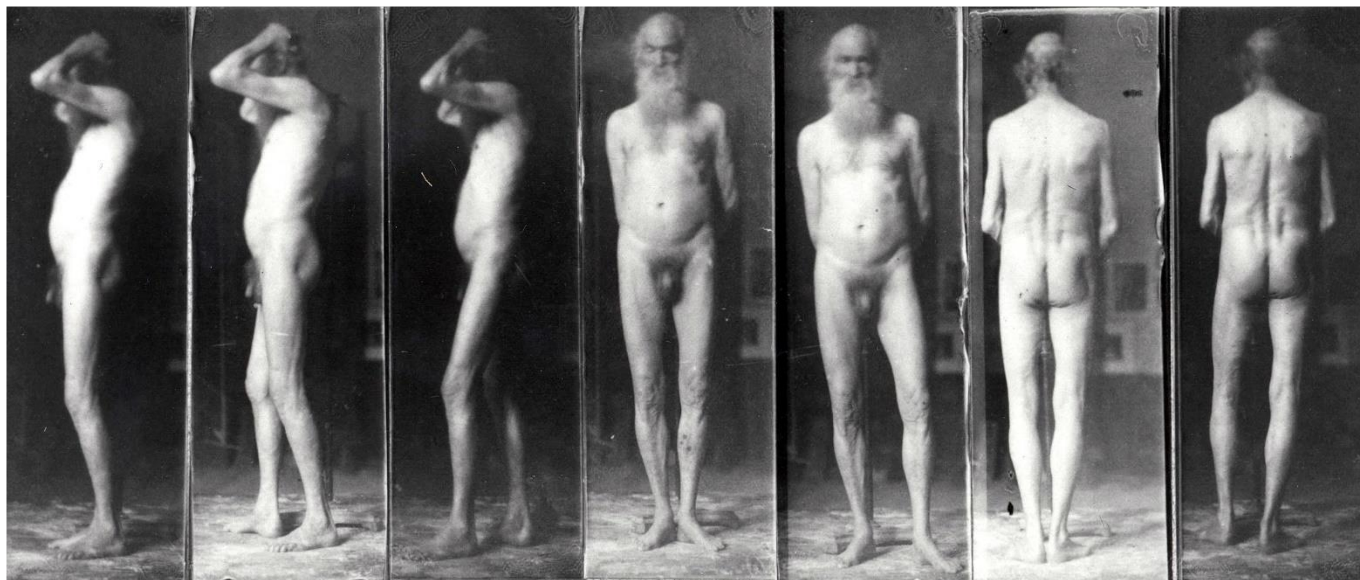

Fig. 6

Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of an old man in the nude (said to be Walt Whitman)* (c.1885)
Gelatin silver prints, 8.1 x 19.4
Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, CA

Fig. 7

Alfred Leslie, *The Killing Cycle: The Accident (The Killing of Frank O'Hara)* (1969)
Oil on canvas, 182.8 x 274.3 cm
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

Fig. 8

Alfred Leslie, *The Killing Cycle: The Telephone Call (The Killing of Frank O'Hara)* (1971-72)
Oil on canvas, 243.8 x 304.8 cm
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

Fig. 9

Alfred Leslie, *The Killing Cycle: The Loading Pier (The Killing of Frank O'Hara)* (1975)
Oil on canvas, 274.6 x 183.6 cm
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

Fig. 10

Henry Fuseli, *The Weird Sisters (Shakespeare, MacBeth, Act 1, Scene 3)* (1785)
(engraving by John Raphael Smith)
Mezzotint, 45.8 x 55.5 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Fig. 11

Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* (c.1480)
Tempera on canvas, 68 x 81 cm
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy

Fig. 12

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-22)
Tempera on board, 30.5 x 200 cm
Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland

Fig. 13

Caravaggio, *Entombment of Christ* (1603-04)
Oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm
Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City

Fig. 14

Alex Katz, *Frank O'Hara* (1959)
Oil on wood (double-sided cutout), 152.4 x 38.1 cm
Robert Miller Gallery, New York, NY

Fig. 15

Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Hotel Beau-Séjour)* (c.1954)
Wooden box with glass and drawer containing branch driftwood, mirror,
metal ring, rod, cork ball, and printed paper, 45.1 x 31.1 x 11.4 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

Fig. 16

Jackson Pollock, *The She-Wolf* (1943)
Oil, gouache and plaster on canvas, 106.4 x 170.2 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

Fig. 17

Jackson Pollock, *Portrait and a Dream* (1953)
Oil and enamel on canvas, 148.6 x 342.3 cm
Dallas Art Museum, Dallas, TX

Fig. 18

Willem de Kooning, *Excavation* (1950)
Oil on canvas, 205.7 x 254.6 cm
Art Institute Chicago, Chicago, IL

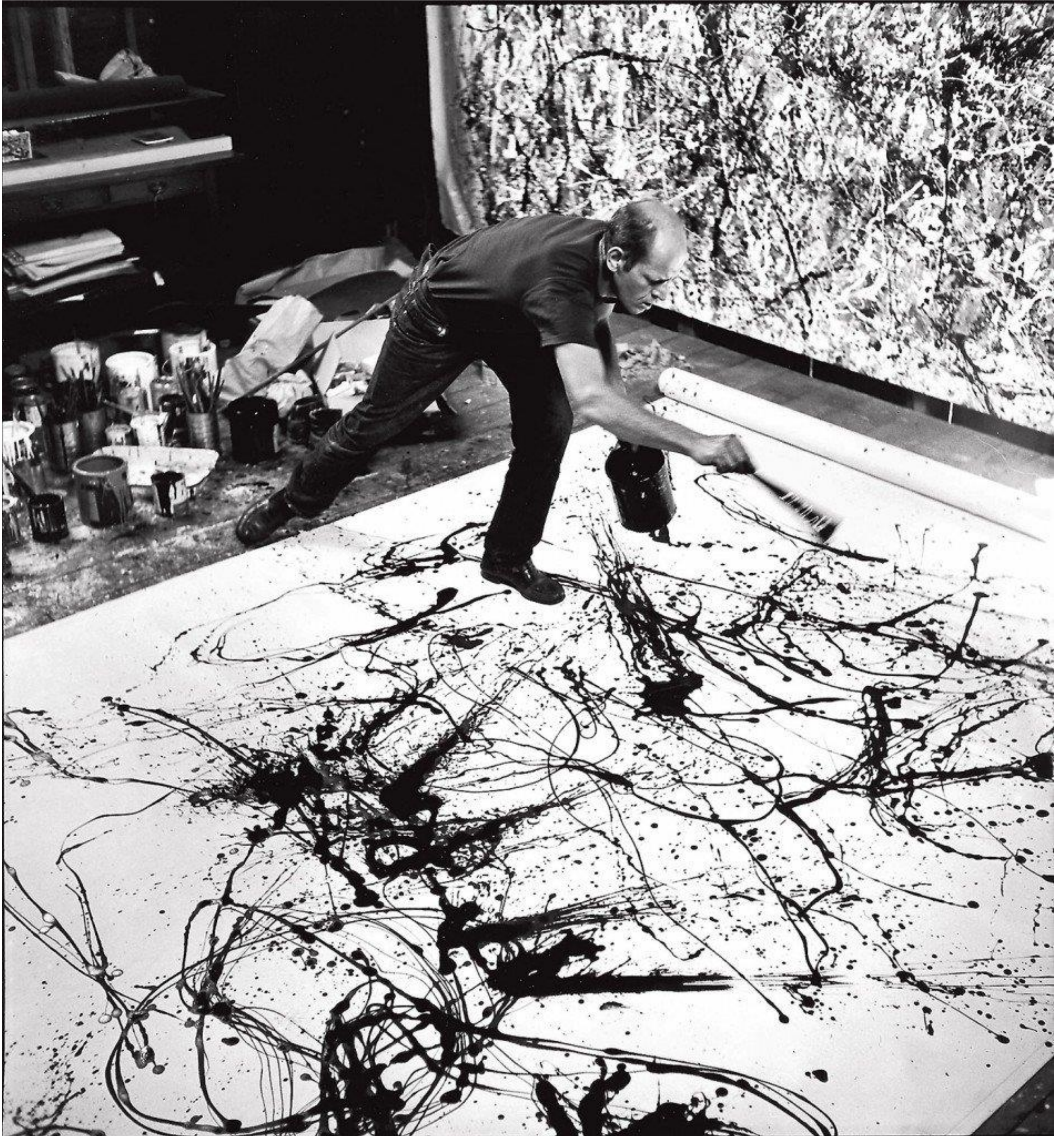

Fig. 19

Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock* (1950)
Gelatin silver print, 48.5 x 38.7 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Fig. 20

Chantel Akerman, dir., *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) [still]
201 mins, 35 mm photographic print
Paradise Films, Unité Trois, Olympic Films (France)

Fig. 21

Bernadette Mayer, *Memory* (1971)
1,116 35 mm colour prints, 10 x 15 cm
The Canada Gallery, New York, NY (2017)
[recreation of original installation at 98 Greene Street, New York, NY (1972)]

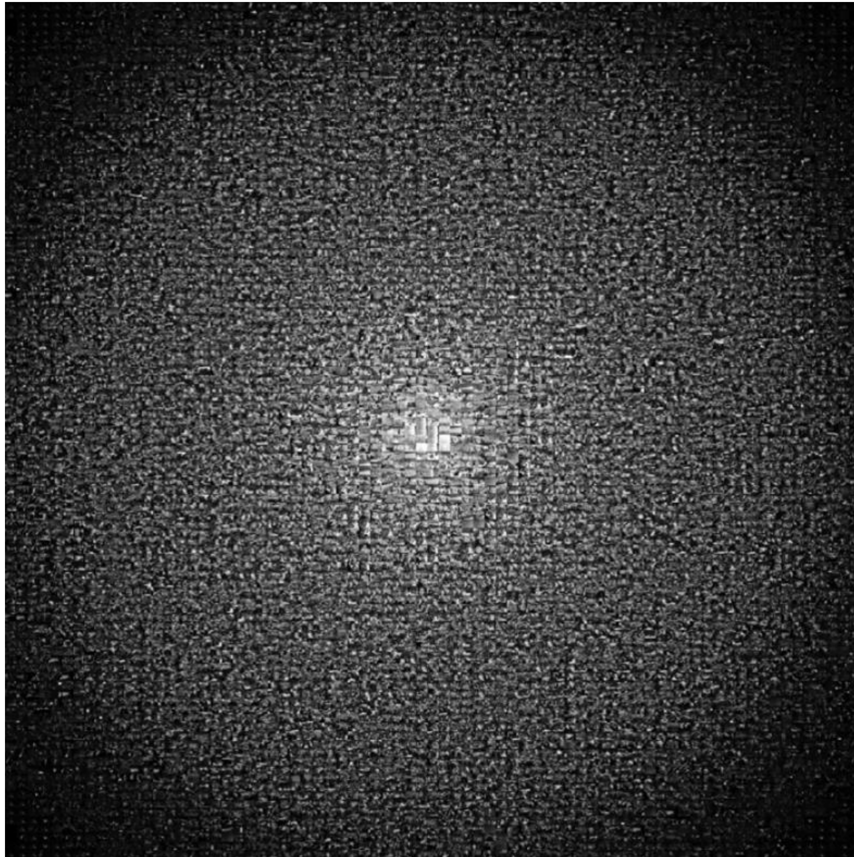

Fig. 22

Jason Salavon, *The Grand Unification Theory (Part Three: Every Second of "It's a Wonderful Life")* (1997)
Cibachrome print, 91.4 x 91.4 cm
http://salavon.com/work/GrandUnificationTheory/image/208/

Fig. 23

Fairfield Porter, *The Screen Porch* (1964)
Oil on canvas, 203.2 x 203.2 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Fig. 24

Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath (Le Serment du Jeu de paume)* (1790-94)
Pencil, ink and oil on canvas [unfinished], 400 x 600 cm
Musée National du Château de Versailles, France

Fig. 25

Henry Raeburn (attrib.), *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (c.1795)
Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm
Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Fig. 26

Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (c.1524)
Oil on convex panel, 24.4 (diameter)
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria