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We hope you enjoy the fall 2014 edition of the *Philological Review*. Scholarly submissions can be uploaded to the APA website: [arkansasphilological.com](http://arkansasphilological.com). We are currently accepting submissions for both spring and fall 2016. Instructions for uploading literary, pedagogical, and film-based papers are explained at the website. Length requirements should approximate standard, conference-length presentations. Please format submissions in MLA, and include a works cited page; additionally, please include: name; institutional affiliation; and, email address at the top of the paper.

We are excited about the 2017 APA Conference hosted by the University of Arkansas @ Little Rock. The dates for the 2017 APA Conference will be posted on the institutional website: [arkansasphilological.com](http://arkansasphilological.com).

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# Our Crucial Need for Physically Impossible Time<sup>1</sup>

Bainard Cowan

The title of this essay is a rough attempt to preview my argument, which is that we in the humanities dare not lose our grip on the varied and finely attuned multiple means we have of accounting for the human experience of time. As my target I take the clock itself, relentlessly ticking, deceptively counting up, up, up as it is never-endingly reminding each of us of our impending end, when we shall be out of time. Yet the clock itself, on which our entire technological civilization depends, is but an image of time and tells us nothing about the human conquest of time, a conquest that has nothing to do with technology. Lest we be hypnotized by the clock's swinging pendulum, or by the glamour of Big Science, I'm here to offer my mortal "No," my impassioned defense of imagination and consciousness.

Now I'm aware that in some way none of the examples I'll be discussing are actually physically impossible. And my subject is not fantasy, but our ways of negating time's relentless plunge forward. It is true that, as Andrew Marvell said, "we cannot make our sun/Stand still" (Logan 1704). And in this sense making time do anything at all other than tick, tick, tick, is in a very real sense impossible. Yet we do it all the time, and must do it, not only to be humanists, but to be human, as I shall explore.

I'm given a rudimentary map into this topic by the current controversy going on, concerning the authority of science over the humanities, or whether they have separate magisteria, as biologist Stephen Jay Gould characterized them.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was delivered as the keynote address on Saturday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at the conference *Reminiscing into the Future: 40 Years of the Arkansas Philological Association* in Little Rock, Arkansas.

## Our Crucial Need for Physically Impossible Time

It was not too long ago that the redoubtable and ever-readable Steven Pinker issued a challenge to humanists in *The New Republic*, titled “Science Is Not Your Enemy,” which he called an “impassioned plea” to “enrich and diversify the intellectual tools of humanistic scholarship” (33). He insisted, “A consilience with science offers the humanities countless possibilities for innovation in understanding.” (“Consilience,” meaning roughly the property of things fitting together with other things, is a word usually found only in the confines of this argument.) If we were to understand better the connections between the sciences and the humanities, Pinker pleads, “Both sides would win [:] the humanities would enjoy more of the explanatory depth of the sciences,” and he adds that we could thereby gain “a progressive agenda” -- yes, he actually says this: “that appeals to deans and donors.” His offering of how science would be salutarily challenged by the humanities in turn is a bit double-talky and includes the phrase “ecologically valid phenomena.” But we can tell that he has all the good will in the world on this generous offer of consilience.

One month later Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, replied with his own article “Crimes Against Humanities.” Deflecting all of Pinker’s good will and in fact all of his reasonable arguments, Wieseltier argued that Pinker’s offer is just another move in the campaign of the hard sciences to dominate all areas of knowledge and to set a single standard of knowledge in place. “The idea of the autonomy of the humanities,” he claimed,

the notion that thought, action, experience, and art exceed the confines of scientific understanding, fills [these proselytes of science] with a profound anxiety. It throws their totalizing mentality into crisis. And so they respond with a strange

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mixture of defensiveness and aggression. As people used to say about the Soviet Union, they expand because they feel encircled. (Wieseltier 34)

Wieseltier observed, “By the time Pinker is finished, the humanities are the handmaiden of the sciences, and dependent upon the sciences for their advance and even their survival” (35).

Thus, to hear the claims of confident mastery by spokesmen of science is to hear a single clock, ticking uniformly the always-exact seconds of life away toward final disintegration. Many of these men of science in fact sponsor a project to create the most accurate timepiece ever fashioned, the *Clock of the Long Now*, telling us it will be good for us to have that much reality in our ken. Yet one cannot help fearing a dread monotonous calm settling down over all fields of knowledge as they submit one by one to the claim of science’s supremacy. But Wieseltier has an important caveat, phrased particularly well, I think:

In literature and the arts, there are ideas, intellectually respectable ideas, about the world, but they are not demonstrated, they are illustrated. They are not argued, they are imagined; and the imagination has rigors of its own. What the imagination imparts in the way of understanding the world should also be called knowledge. (37)

It hardly takes a doctorate in psychoanalysis to recognize that such an over-the-top claim of calm Olympian supremacy as Pinker makes must arise out of a sense of inadequacy and insecurity, a nagging feeling that the age of mechanical reason, of the eternal repetition of the same, is ending, and that it might be prolonged a few ticks of the clock longer by intimidating everyone into agreeing to its absolute apotheosis, just before it goes poof, or--like the Emperor Claudius, in that

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excellent satire of Seneca's, *The Pumpkinification*, which, like all good menippean satire, is a blend of realism and fancy--turns into a pumpkin. We need not, however, turn to the overt fantasists in the canon of great authors to see a much more varied landscape regarding time.

The recent dispute over hard science's authority over the humanities is only a recent version of an earlier battle. Already at the turn of the twentieth century the domination of science over the humanities was virtually taken for granted, and the subject of time had to be rescued as an essential medium for non-quantifiable meaningful human experience by two famous friends in two adjacent fields, Henri Bergson in philosophy on the *durée* and Marcel Proust in literature, with his quest for *temps retrouvé* in the novel. Later French thinkers on time owe their insights to these beginnings: Georges Poulet, Paul Ricoeur, and Julia Kristéva seem still ahead of us English-speakers in their ability to characterize the infinitely variable nuances of temporal experience.

The history of human *consciousness* of time, however, goes much further back than a century ago. Our species' thinking on the matter received a tremendous early boost from the musings of Saint Augustine, the fifth-century African bishop and Father of the Church who tied our experience of time to our ability to speak a sentence.

Augustine outlined quite concisely the same conflict that the *New Republic* is calling "science versus the humanities" in his agonized attempt to grasp the concept of time. It is more clearly understood as a conflict between the facts about time and our consciousness of time, Facts versus consciousness, our species' ineradicable conflict; and nowhere does it show itself more clearly and simply than in our experience of time.

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### **Time Consciousness: Augustine**

“What is time?” asks Augustine, famously, in *The Confessions*, continuing: “Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know” (230). Approaching it from the point of view of language, he proposes: “Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they ‘be’ when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present?” (231). From that simple physical fact the Bishop of Hippo concludes unswervingly, “indeed we cannot truly say that time exists *except in the sense that it tends towards non-existence*” (my emphasis). So our being is being-toward-death, as the relentless slippage of time out of our grasp reveals.

But Augustine is not content with that account. “Nevertheless, Lord,” he continues, addressing the whole monologue to his divine evaluator, “we are conscious of intervals of time, and compare them with each other, and call some longer, others shorter” (233). So there must be some kind of reality that time past and future possess. After all, he reasons, “Where did those who sang prophecies see these events if they do not yet exist?” Past and future must exist somewhere, or in some mode, then.

Augustine hits his stride only when he comes to an example of the kind he knows best: in essence, his own *Confessions*. In a veiled reference to the whole autobiographical project of his master work, he continues: “But when I am recollecting and telling my story, I am looking on [the] image [of my boyhood] in present time, since it is still in my memory” (234). The real mystery of time becomes manifest in narrative, in story. And he does not commend story because it is

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imaginative or fanciful: he was greatly ambivalent about the potential vanity of fiction. It is rather that recounting events enables us to see the very *facts* of our lives coherently.

Augustine is led, then, to sum up:

What is by now evident and clear is that neither future nor past exists, and it is inexact language to speak of three times -- past, present, and future. Perhaps it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come. In the soul there are these three aspects of time, and I do not see them anywhere else. The present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is expectation.

(235)

So it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time....That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it.

(242)

For the mind expects and attends and remembers, so that what it expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers.

(243)

The mind, which for the Greek originators of philosophy tended to be only either a true or a false presenter of things as they truly are, here takes a massive step forward as Augustine presents his case: the mind is a synthesizer of what is with what is not, in a project to gain a greater compre-

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hension of the design of the whole. What is not, either by being past or by having not yet occurred, *changes* the depth of our comprehension of what is. Moreover it testifies to us that what is is not all that can be.

My contention, then, is simply that literature allows human beings to make meaning out of their experiences in a more complex way than quantitative measurement allows, enabling human beings to envision, adapt and build a more complex, more adaptive, and more responsible future. As a corollary, it might be good to keep in mind the difficulty Augustine has in measuring time at all. As we might say, we can't fit time in any suit of clothes that we can know it by, because it won't stand still for the tailor's tape. Some historians of that fifth-century genius's world have pointed out that Augustine would not have had this difficulty with time if clocks had been invented; but I think they have it backwards. Clocks, ubiquitous as they are, only *mask* the substantial slipperiness of time, ultimately contributing to that false consciousness that scientists, journalists, and others often display in thinking that nature is under our control.

At the same time (so to speak), clocks change our consciousness. As has been much remarked, Renaissance literature came alive with anxiety over the passage of time, as can be seen in Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time":

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.

(Logan 1659)

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Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress":

But at my back I always hear

Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near...

(Logan 1703)

or Shakespeare's sonnets, whether in the well-known #65, "O how shall summer's honey breath hold out/Against the wrackful siege of battering days" (5-6, p. 787) or in the less familiar but more intimate #64:

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced

The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;

When sometime-lofty towers I see down razed,

And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain

Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,

And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,

Increasing store with loss and loss with store;

When I have seen such interchange of state,

Or state itself confounded to decay,

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat:

That time will come and take my love away.

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose

But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

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(787)

The terror is sometimes increased by the counting of the clock itself, as in the famous death scene of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus:

*[The clock strikes eleven.]*

FAUSTUS. Ah Faustus,

Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,

And then thou must be damned perpetually.

Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,

That time may cease, and midnight never come...

Logan

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,

The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.

(13.57-61, 13.67-68, Logan 1054)

The heavens are still Ptolemaic, but the clock is as relentless as any Timex. More brilliantly, in Shakespeare's version of a damned soul's soliloquy, Macbeth curses time rather for running so slowly. He measures time in syllables, just as Augustine would have had it:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death.

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(5.5.18-22)

Why is the word “recorded” there? Though life has become “a tale told by an idiot,” it seems Macbeth can’t help indicating his awareness that “recorded time” will inexorably tell of his murderousness.

### **Time Represented: Spatial Form**

But I’d like to get back to that earlier, fifteen-hundred-year-old thought experiment of Augustine’s, for though I’ve squeezed a very tiny amount of thought out of it compared to what Paul Ricoeur and other master commentators have done, I haven’t yet shown all of my modest insight. It is this: Augustine was really on to something in choosing language, tenses, and sentences to begin his thinking about time. Language is indeed the medium in which human beings attack and neutralize the iron rule of time. Augustine didn’t notice, or didn’t comment on, the most amazing temporal behavior that we see in sentences. And that is that in order to speak even a simple sentence, the human mind has to travel in time. Every sentence begins not with a word but with an intention to complete it in the future, and the entire articulation of it is dependent on that unrealized future event. Moreover, as we make our way through the utterance of a sentence, we return to the principles of structure laid down in the opening words, now vanished but having left their syntactical laws not really in the memory, but in *expectation*--just the opposite of what Augustine assigns to the past. Indeed, we expect an ending articulation because of what the past has sent forward to us, and we are disappointed if we don’t get it that way.

If we look a little closer at the goings on in the making of a sentence, we can see a more frequent, more varied weaving back and forth in time. Even a simple sentence does not cooperate so easily with mere sequentiality. Any pronominal reference flows back against the stream of time in order to make sense at all. So, ultimately, do all parts of the sentence, referring ultimately to an idea the sentence puts forward that exists, if not outside time, certainly outside the temporal sequence of the sentence itself, whose completion is posited in the future as the master key that goes back and unlocks the syntactic meaning of every part.

Any analysis of this kind, to the most rudimentary degree, uncovers the mysterious fact about ourselves, a fact with which we are so familiar that we scarcely ever recognize it: that we constantly come unstuck in time, like Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, in order to figure out the meaning of *anything*, be it profound art or the bus schedule.

What happens in sentences happens more prominently in literary works, as Augustine has already alerted us. Augustine writes that because of the work of memory and expectation, each part of the sentence contains the whole sentence. We recognize this self-similarity as a property of organic form in the work of art -- in which not only is the whole greater than the sum of the parts, as we often hear: each part actually contains the whole.

Joseph Frank argued in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" that although it is a temporal and not a spatial medium, literature can take "spatial form," in which the work is "apprehend[ed] ... spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (10). In a way, argues a line of esthetics from Coleridge to T. S. Eliot, a work possessing organic form negates sequentiality in uniting all its parts together in a single meaningful whole--"to fuse seemingly disparate experi-

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ences into an organic unity” (11). The concept of organic form fell out of favor, of course, in the revolt against aestheticism in the 1970s and 80s. Because it had often been espoused as a rare, prestigious, highly cultured achievement, it was thrown out for that same reason in the cultural revolution. Now is a good time to go back and revisit the writing on organic form, because our age now has a new name for that exact same property that Kant, Coleridge, and others noticed: we call it self-organization and we observe that behavior in complex adaptive systems. So we should revive organic form not to elevate an aesthetic standard but simply to think with, to consider how the literary work deforms time and allows us to form relationships with the past and the future, without which our lives would be deprived of the eros by which we live.

So organic form continues and concretizes the work of our consciousness. It is an “emergent” phenomenon, jumping to a new level of organization that totalizes and completes what our consciousness has only aimed at. Hence Frank’s “spatial” form: it is as though time has woven and rewoven itself backward and forward so densely that it has become space. It’s not out of the question that physicists still have something to learn from *us*, for, as they will admit, they have still not figured out the complete essence or interrelationship of space and time.

### **Physics and Frost: Time Is Real, and It Runs Down in Sending Up**

There are intriguing new murmurs about time in physics that might open up a dialogue. Astrophysicist Lee Smolin announces in a recent book (*Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe*) his quest to reconnect timelikeness (which he equates with “reality”) to time in physics. First, though, apparently, he must confess the error of his former ways:

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I used to believe in the essential unreality of time. Indeed, I went into physics because as an adolescent I yearned to exchange the time-bound, human world, which I saw as ugly and inhospitable, for a world of pure, timeless truth....

I no longer believe that time is unreal. In fact I have swung to the opposite view: Not only is time real, but nothing we know or experience gets closer to the heart of nature than the reality of time. (xii)

The “real relationships that form the world are a dynamical network,” says Smolin (quoted in Gleick 8). As James Gleick paraphrases Smolin’s argument, “the network itself, along with everything on it, can and must evolve over time....In a universe where time is real and fundamental, it is natural for complexity to evolve and for systems to become more organized” (8). For Smolin the *growth* of complexity is an index of time’s reality and can only happen in and because of time. Although the second law of thermodynamics applies to any isolated system within the universe, it does *not* apply to the universe taken as a whole.

So if there is a clock of the universe, and it is always ticking away, even though it is ticking our deaths, it is not necessarily ticking universal death. It is “sending up” something.

Robert Frost’s poem “West-Running Brook” speaks to us in dialogue with these concerns. Troubled by the orthodoxy of the triumph of death and nothingness, but unwilling to revolt openly against it, the two speakers of the poem, a man and a woman who are apparently very close if not lovers, walk along a brook and see it in various ways. At one point the conversation becomes more ponderous, as the man speaks of

The universal cataract of death

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That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,  
Save by some strange resistance in itself,  
Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,  
As if regret were in it and were sacred.  
It has this throwing backward on itself  
So that the fall of most of it is always  
Raising a little, sending up a little.  
Our life runs down in sending up the clock.  
The brook runs down in sending up our life.  
The sun runs down in sending up the brook.  
And there is something sending up the sun.  
It is this backward motion toward the source,  
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,  
The tribute of the current to the source.  
It is from this in nature we are from.  
It is most us.

(56-72, p. 260)

The woman, apparently impressed, replies, "Today will be the day/You said so" (72-73).

Time, fleeing relentlessly toward our death, the first property Augustine noted of it, is here equally the flow of the life force, repeatedly "sending up" a higher form and capacity of knowing and loving, that is "most us." It is not just that we have the perennial ability to store up

things against that universal erosion; and hence that memory is the real mystery, the real defier of the tyranny of time. It is for Frost that the movement itself “sends up” a higher organization that can establish a lasting beachhead on the eroded field of time.

As an unending ticking, time tyrannizes us. But if time has any *meaning* -- even the meaning of a hated oppressor or an undeniable bottom line -- that building of meaning must be conceived as a sequence of meaningful moments. But what sequence, sequences? It is here that time starts to be conceivable as variable -- and not unidirectional -- looping backward and forward as needed.

And even Smolin’s argument against timeless truths can be taken as an argument against overextending the reach of science into untestable areas. He makes an important concession: “Logic and mathematics capture aspects of nature, but never the whole of nature. There are aspects of the real universe that will never be representable in mathematics. One of them is that in the real world it is always some particular moment” (quoted in Gleick 10). So we are back to the mystery of the moment we live in -- and the ineradicable problem of consciousness— What Smolin calls “the *really* hard problem.”

For it is in consciousness that the really complex explorations of time occur.

### **Impossible Histories**

There is another way to sketch out a kind of literary time that I think we can legitimately call at least seemingly impossible time, and that is to be in several historical times at the same moment. Once we have understood the consciousness of time as drawing on a remembered moment and tending toward an expected moment, it is quite easy to see that we live in not only our

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own personal time but in several scales of time schemes, each a series of past, present, and future. In relating history to time consciousness, we must keep in mind that history is human and cannot be reduced to mere chronology. Insofar as it is meaningful, history is not a canonical sequence but a configuration of events, each giving meaning to the other. Walter Benjamin observed: “No fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years” (263). Factual, mechanical causal connections of past to present have nothing to do with what is to be understood as history. In this vision history is rather what is meaningful, what is given as in instance to recall, to ponder, to reinterpret and to seed the present with new desire.

History is not a given. A living relation to the past is chosen by our desire, our eros. The relation to the past is an erotic one. This is why Benjamin also attacked the modern concept of progress, insisting that, as he said, “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time” (263). One might paraphrase Benjamin by saying that dead history kills us. History is a duty to spread our minds and hearts out to the study of the past to give life to the present. The best kind of this study, of course, is literature, which has always known that erotic relation of past to present. The great Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, who died last year, has called literature “a countertime and a second reading of the historical” (11).

In the West the parallel development of temporalities proliferated as civilization developed. Dante and Shakespeare provide examples ready to hand. Dante adopted the Medieval sys-

tem of sermon formation for literature, insisting that his cosmic pilgrim should be read as moving in four kinds of time at once. As he says of the *Commedia* in his letter to Can Grande:

...the meaning of this work is not simple, but rather it is polysemous, that is, having many meanings....So that this method of exposition may be clearer, one may consider it in these lines: "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from people of strange language, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion." If we look only at the letter, this signifies that the children of Israel went out of Egypt in the time of Moses; if we look at the allegory, it signifies our redemption through Christ; if we look at the moral sense, it signifies the turning of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace; if we look at the anagogical sense, it signifies the passage of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory.

(37)

At one and the same time we have the time of the Exodus, the time of redemption, the turning motion of the soul, and the passage of the soul to eternity. Together they constitute a temporal dynamic so complex, so complete, that it can be daunting, even stultifying, when laid out so explicitly. But when only hinted at by a master poet, as Dante does in his actual poem, seen as a glimpse at certain moments of the pilgrim's voyage, it can surprise us with the momentousness of human time.

Such a master poet too is Shakespeare. Is Hamlet moving in the personal time of the soul, in the political time of kingship and statecraft, or in the time of the change of era from the Me-

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dieval to the modern world? Is the play viewable in English national time, in the time of all civilization in its development, or in the progression of all creation toward its dissipation and yet toward reconciliation with its creator? “The readiness is all” (5.2.168). In some sense Hamlet’s frenetic motion is a mimesis of all these temporalities, all of which are imagined in a distinctively Western way.

This compact syncretism of timescales, whether Dante’s or Shakespeare’s, is a master medieval synthesis. It has never existed in such robust fullness since the end of the Middle Ages, the last gasp of a unified culture in the West. But its memory has continued to seed many of the masterworks of literature. The participation of the soul in multiple times at once is affirmed in James Joyce’s Gabriel Conroy in “The Dead” and in Stephen Dedalus in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*; and it is achieved again by Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in the wanderings and travails of the Buendía family in that mythical but very real Macondo, living out the life of a family, a town, a country, a civilization, and the entire human community from creation to apocalypse.

For these reasons, we ought to cherish, protect, and teach those miraculous resources in poetry and the novel against the clock’s tyranny. We must not give in to the multiple pressures telling us that the great literary works have nothing substantial to teach us. And we must not be afraid, or too impatient, to ask these works the most probing questions about human life--or to be open to *their* questioning *us* in turn. Our consciousness gives meaning to our motion through life; and nowhere is that motion endowed with fuller meaning than in great literature.

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And with that remark I give in, as even speakers eventually must, to the relentless pressure of that tick, tick, tick.

Appendix: Significant Works on Time in Literature (Listed in Chronological Order)

Müller, Günther, *Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der Erzählkunst* (1947)

Poulet, Georges, *Études sur le temps humain* (1949)

Romilly, Jacqueline de, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (1968)

Lynen, John F. *The Design of the Present: Essays on Time and Form in American Literature*  
(1969)

Turner, Frederick, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Time* (1971)

Frank, Manfred, *Das Problem Zeit in der deutschen Romantik* (1972)

Mendilow, A. A., *Time and the Novel* (1972)

Quinones, Ricardo, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (1972)

Medina, Angel, *Reflection, Time, and the Novel: Toward a Communicative Theory of Literature*  
(1979)

Barthold, Bonnie, *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (1981)

Ricoeur, Paul, *Temps et récit* (1983)

Holdheim, Wolfgang, *The Hermeneutic Mode: Essays on Time in Literature and Literary Theory*  
(1984)

Ermarth, Elizabeth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crises of Representational Time*  
(1992)

Kristeva, Julia, *Proust and the Sense of Time* (1993), *Time and Sense: Proust...* (1996)

Morson, Gary Saul, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994)

Kinney, Arthur F., *Go Down Moses: The Miscegenation of Time* (1996)

Allemann, Beda, *Zeit und Geschichte im Werk Kafkas* (1998)

Schleifer, Ronald, *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930* (2000)

Hoy, David Couzens, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (2012)

West-Pavlov, Russell, *Temporalities* (2013)

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## **In and Out of the Postmodern Crisis of Identity in “Lost in the Funhouse”**

Terrell L. Tebbetts

Ambrose Mensch is both narrator and central character in John Barth’s short story “Lost in the Funhouse,” as Charles Harris attests in calling him the “narrator/protagonist” of the entire volume the story appears in and lends its title to (107). Both Ambrose/narrator and Ambrose/character are lost, and they do a good job of getting readers lost as well. Because they “lose” readers as well as themselves, they become central characters in not only a Kuntslerroman offering “portraits of the artist” Ambrose/narrator as a young man (Tharpe 2), but also a Bildungsroman portraying the postmodern “identity crisis” facing both Ambrose/character, as James Burton Fulmer recognizes (342), and the story’s readers as well. While as characters the two Ambroses have interested most critics as figures in the former, they may be of most interest to readers as figures in the latter, for though few readers are likely to follow Ambrose into writing careers, many readers are either questioning or needing to question their natures, their paths, their very identities. In fact, critics who focus on the story as a Kuntslerroman can and do fall short in considering the story’s reflections on the nature of postmodern identity and its intentions for its general readers as it loses them as well as Ambrose. Those intentions include a path out of the postmodern crisis of identity.

Ambrose/narrator and Ambrose/character seem to lose their sense of self though an ironic means, through what Michael Hinden calls the “unbearable self-consciousness” that marks them both (108). Losing themselves by becoming acutely self-aware, they detach themselves from events narrated, events remembered, and even events experienced within the narration, Ambrose/

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narrator becoming an observer and critic of the mechanics of his own narration, Ambrose/character becoming an observer and critic of his own and others’ behavior, and both of them becoming lost as to how they might do and become what they wish. They lose themselves doubly in this acute self-consciousness. First, Ambrose/narrator says Ambrose/character “lost himself” (94), having “deceived himself into supposing he was a person” (93): he no longer knows who he is. Second, without a sense of self, both Ambroses “lose their way” (80), unable to chart and follow a course through life. If such acute self-consciousness ironically leads to a double loss of self—loss of personhood and loss of direction—the story would seem to be suggesting that the more one reflects on one’s identity, the more unstable identity becomes. Yet, as we shall see, the story also seems to hint at a postmodern way out of this paradoxical postmodern crisis of identity.

### I. Double Instability

Ambrose/narrator’s self-consciousness leads him to interrupt his narration repeatedly. He cannot seem to get it out of his head that he is constructing a piece of fiction, an artificial construct, a discourse similar to those that others have constructed, following customary patterns. He interrupts the beginning of the narration, for instance, to recall the rule guiding the use of italics—“They should be used *sparingly*” (72)—and the customary “principle of verisimilitude” (73), both of which he flouts even in recalling them. He alludes to other fiction—to modern experimental fiction like *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*, for example, and *Ulysses* (73-74)—as if he is afraid that the irregularity of his narrative means that he “will never be an author” and that he must defend his work by connecting it to other highly innovative works (86). He alludes

as well to classical works like Homer's *The Odyssey*, as if to further defend his innovation by connecting to the great traditional narratives of Western Civilization. These allusions show the narrator to be full of what Patricia Tobin succinctly calls the "artistic anxiety" of the writer of what Barth himself called the literature of exhaustion (84).

Then Ambrose/narrator moves from anxious self-consciousness to outright self-criticism, as if he were responding to his narrative as an editor or creative writing professor would. He tells himself, for example, that a "long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person wonder" (77). He is so self-conscious as a narrator that he seems to have two identities: he is both the narrator of the story he tells and a second person, the critic of the narrator's work, pointing out its every flaw, like the Siamese twins in "Petition," the story immediately preceding "Lost in the Funhouse" in the full volume the story first appeared in. Thus the narrator's self-consciousness turns the story into metafiction, as much about the uncertainty of the narrator *telling* the story as it is about the *story* he is telling. If the narrator cannot rest in his identity as narrator, what can he be? Does he have any essential identity?

Inside the story Ambrose/character is as self-conscious as Ambrose/narrator, for both are marked, Harris asserts, by the "same self-consciousness" (108). Ambrose/character is self-conscious about both his identity as a boy in the present and his identity as the man he would like to be in the future. His self-consciousness in the present is as explicit as Ambrose/narrator's. He stands "beside himself with awed impersonality" (78); he continually experiences "an odd detachment" in which he hears "his mind take notes upon" whatever scene he is in (84). He is both himself and a separate person hovering just outside his own experience. In each present moment

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he is as unsure of his essential identity as the narrator is. As he considers future moments, though he has a future life in mind, believing he knows “*exactly* how it would feel to be married and have children of your own, and be a loving husband and father” (84), and though he imagines having a son whose shoulder he will “put a strong arm around” as he offers “advice” (85), he nevertheless fears that such life would be purely artificial, for “there are other persons in you” (85), and that “someone else” could be the real “Master” of his life (84). He remains as detached from the future life he dreams of as Ambrose/narrator is from his story, doubtful that he can find, claim, and live any essential identity he could call his own. Though he would like to be the “hero” of the story of his life, he senses that he might end up “the villain” or even “the coward” without “a single thing he could do about it” (91). Clearly he feels that he cannot find, claim, and live out an identity essential to his being. He is in the midst of the postmodern crisis of identity, a crisis described by postmodern psychologist Kenneth Gergen as springing from the sense that “we have no real center” and that we thus have “no core [identity] to know about” (“Identity,” 59). In *The Saturated Self*, Gergen puts it this succinctly: “In the postmodern world there is no individual essence” (139). Gergen is hardly alone. Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has called “the coherent self or ego” a mere “illusion” (“Foreword” x). Gerhard Hoffman has described postmodernism’s “destruction of identity” (278). And Doreen Fowler has claimed that the “unified, coherent, autonomous self” has disappeared in postmodernism” (98). Brian McHale has written perhaps the most philosophical explanation of postmodernism’s crisis of identity. He points to postmodernism’s interest in ontology, its insistence that humans live in separate, self-created, subjective worlds that are repeatedly being “violated,” the result being “ontological . . .

instability” (11). Some two decades before psychologist Gergen and various literary critics described the postmodern crisis of identity, Barth’s Ambrose was living it.

II.

Double Reasons Why

Ambrose/narrator’s self-consciousness seems rooted in his education. When he assures readers that “Nobody likes a pedant” (82), he indicates that he has been subjected to perhaps one too many pedants. Certainly he learned the outline of the “conventional dramatic narrative” from pedants and illustrates it for readers using Freitag’s Triangle (95). He remains too much the student of such pedants, lapsing into naïve “student” writing as he informs readers that John Dos Passos wrote the novel *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and that James Joyce is an “Irish author” (73, 74, 89). If he is those Siamese twins from the volume’s companion story, he shows how double his identity has become: he is both a story teller and the pedants who taught him how to tell stories, for neither is he “separated,” having become either just a story teller or just a critic, nor is he single, having fully absorbed the pedants’ advice and made it organically his own.

On the personal level, Ambrose/character’s self-conscious critique of his desired identity seems rooted in his pubescent sexuality. Beginning with the unexpected sexual encounter with Magda in the tool shed, Ambrose/character feels like anything but a “Master” when it comes to sex (84). Even at that seminal event, he remembers feeling an “odd detachment, as though someone else were Master,” while he “heard his mind take notes on the scene” (84). This acute self-consciousness originating in sexual experience creates a second self that observes the first self,

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which was hitherto the sole self. This dual identity continues in his present attraction to Magda and her “remarkably well developed” body (83), in his pubescent voice that he tries to keep from swinging from high to low pitches, and in his uncontrolled erections (85), which he repeatedly tries to disguise as “limping” due to a foot gone to sleep (81, 88, 97). When he stumbles on a sexual encounter under the boardwalk just before entering the funhouse (86), he may well sense that others’ sexuality, adult sexuality, is as uncontrollable as his own and that self-consciousness will never produce the kind of self-control powerful enough to return him to a single “Master” identity. Ambrose/character comes to fear that his and others’ inability to control either desire or the body’s response to it indicates that neither he nor anyone else can control life enough to construct a stable identity and thus that “no one chose what he was” and that “there wasn’t one thing” anyone could do about it (91). He is doubly horrified to sense that “*nothing* was what it looked like” (91), because, presumably, the identities people project are nothing but masks for the uncontrollable sexual lives they lead beneath the surface of those projected identities. How can he live a life he self-consciously critiques with such “dreadful self-knowledge” (93)? His self-consciousness rooted in sexuality becomes the ironic destabilizer of his identity.

On the societal level, Ambrose/character’s consciousness of the instability of identity may stem from his growing awareness of both domestic and international instability. Domestically, he is clearly becoming aware of racism and its pernicious effect on African Americans. It was, of course, a game of “Niggers and Masters” he and Magda were playing in the garden shed, which doubled as a “Torture Chamber” out in the “Slave Quarters” (77-78). Even then, Ambrose/character was becoming aware that the kind of life narrative he imagines himself constructing

was not available to many African Americans in the pre-Civil Rights setting of the story. In the present episode of the story, as Ambrose/narrator relates “one possible ending” of Ambrose/character’s tale, he indicates that Ambrose/character would like to find a girl, become her closest friend and sweetheart, and then, upon emerging from the funhouse, discover something astounding—that she was “a blind girl,” or perhaps more astounding, “a Negro” (87). In the very dreaming of such a dream, Ambrose/character is recognizing how nearly impossible it would be to make it real, for himself or for such a girl. In the America of the early 1940s, all lives were not the smooth-sailing, happy-ending ordered life he imagines constructing for himself. He has already discovered that though all people may have been created equal in that America, America was nevertheless constructing identities differently for people of different races. As in matters of sexuality, Ambrose/character seems to sense that there is not one thing people can do about their socially constructed identities, no matter how different those identities may be from the desired identities of individuals. He senses that not only sexuality but also social constructions give people dual and even multiple identities.

If instability marks social lives within the nation, it absolutely rules of the international scene. World War II is underway as the story unfolds. Bananas are hard to come by. Ocean City is browned out “on account of German U-boats” (85), sailors on leave are everywhere, and the surf is “spoiled with crude oil from tankers recently torpedoed offshore” (79). The safe world of Ambrose/character’s childhood home presided over by loving parents and of his schooldays presided over by his father the principal have given way not only to sexual and social anxiety but also to geopolitical turmoil. In other words, the stable national and international order he once

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believed in has proved to be unstable on every level possible, as unstable as personal identity plagued by unruly sexuality and social identity constructed under racist ideology. Ambrose/character has now come to see that on every possible level “*nothing* was what it looked like” in his naïve boyhood (91). He has become as acutely aware of and detached from the world as he has from his own body. He fears he will never be able to construct a stable personal or social identity.

### III. The Way Back

Yet lost as both Ambrose/character and Ambrose/narrator are, in both identity and in direction, Barth provides a way out of this crisis. He does so by making his story thoroughly metafictional, repeatedly interrupting Ambrose/narrator’s tale of Ambrose/character in order to eradicate any semblance of verisimilitude and to highlight the fictionality of the entire story. Driving readers out of the story again and again, Barth effectively turns them from that interrupted story to himself as author of the story, by surprising them, perhaps by infuriating them, and certainly by making them wonder what he is up to as writer, the overt artifice of the story insistently pointing toward the artificer behind the story’s fourth wall, pulling the levers. Thus Barth makes himself as writer the ultimate central character in his story. Thus when he has Ambrose/narrator keep Ambrose/character concocting stories with “himself as the hero” (91), “telling himself stories in the dark,” vowing to “construct funhouses [or stories] for others and be their secret operator” (97), Barth is converting both Ambroses into writers and by implication into himself, a writer who constructs narrators who tell stories so self-consciously.

As the two Ambroses write their own stories, turning life into words rather than actions, they will turn themselves into writers, thus conferring an identity upon themselves as such, morphing into words, becoming “a poem or a story” and thus becoming at last “entire” (92). As Todd Martin puts it, the “prescription” that will cure Ambrose’s affliction is “telling his own story” in autobiography (155), transforming experience into language. David Morrell agrees, asserting that the “remedy” of the crisis of identity suffered by Ambrose in both of his roles is to turn from “the funhouse of life” to the “funhouse of fiction” (93). When life, which is uncontrollable, becomes narrative, which writers can control, writers achieve an identity they cannot achieve until they turn actions into words and finally construct personal identity through characterization. Writers become the unchallenged, stable Masters of the stories they create, both the stories of fictional characters as Morrell has it, and stories of their own lives, as Martin has it. The absent yet very present artificer John Barth is the role model for the two characters he has created.

The story’s final move, then, when it “loses” not only Ambrose/narrator and Ambrose/character but also its readers, is really a challenge, a challenge to the readers it tries to “lose.” The real way one gets lost, it suggests, is to live without realizing one’s identity is an artificial construct, built either by oneself or by others. Those who are unconscious of that fact will always be at the mercy of other Masters, those little old men on the other side of the wall pulling levers. Those who remain unself-conscious will be caught in someone else’s story, minor characters in others’ master narratives, heroes, villains, or cowards willy-nilly, perhaps, like J. Alfred Prufrock, even “the Fool.” They will be lost indeed, lost without ever knowing they’re lost. Those who become self-conscious, on the other hand, though they first feel “lost,” can find themselves by con-

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structing their own identities just as a writer constructs characters, "authoring" themselves, as Zack Bowen puts it (53). They can then construct their own funhouses, their own life narratives, just as writers construct stories, following their own self-willed patterns. They can alter those life narratives, those funhouses, as they wish, pulling the levers freely, creating "any reality [the] fictive mind can make" (Bowen 54). They create word-worlds they are not at all lost in, each with what William Faulkner called "a cosmos" of his own, a word-world each knows the way into, through, and out of. After all, despite all the instability he creates in the narrator and Ambrose, isn't Barth pulling levers as author of this story? Isn't he constructing his own life narrative as an author as he does so? Is he not Master of what he has created?

Acute self-consciousness brings initial anxiety as its price, of course, as getting lost always does, but Barth's story seems to agree with Robert Frost's "Directive," suggesting that only when "you're lost enough" will you "find yourself" (l. 36), only then constructing a word-built identity. Where Fulmer finds only existential "meaninglessness of language in the story (338), it seems more accurate to think, as E. P. Walkiewicz puts it, that when Ambrose/character announces his decision to become Ambrose/narrator, "we are being invited to help create and lose ourselves" (97). Barth is inviting his readers to so claim and live their own identities as he has done, for is not Barth the writer fully in control of both of his lost Ambroses and the story he places them in? As such he is perhaps replaying *The Divine Comedy* for the postmodern age: in this story as well as in Dante's, authors become characters in their own stories, discover themselves lost, and begin to reset their directions and to reclaim their identities. The mature artist produced in the story as *Kunstlerroman* becomes the mature individual produced by the story as

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Bildungsroman. As Virgil is to Dante, his Master, so Dante is to Barth. And as Dante is to Barth, Barth is to the reader. The Word is the Way.

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## Likings, Likenings, and the Push of Reading

Andrew Osborn

[Delivered as the Keynote Address at the annual Arkansas Philological Association Meeting on 24 October 2014]

Because much lyric poetry addresses itself elsewhere than to its audience—because, in the words of J. S. Mill, it is meant to be not heard, like a rhetorical appeal, but *over*-heard—and because it is, as Helen Vendler says, “the genre of private life,” akin to diary-writing or prayer, and because it more or less by generic definition sets itself against the increasingly dominant, even imperialist genre of narrative *epos* and the spectacle of drama—because of all of this and more, lyric poetry frequently risks alienating its audience (Mill 348, Vendler xlii). Or, put another way: it is quite common to feel uninvited or even expressly excluded by a lyric poem. Although I do not know you, I suspect that you all have had this experience. And the many of you who sometimes teach poetry no doubt have had to deal with your students’ experience of this feeling. As a committed reader and writer of lyric, I have long concerned myself with investigating the ins and outs of poetic difficulty.

One reason that poetry has sometimes been so difficult is that its makers have sought to be true poets. They have sought to truly make (*poein*): not just new wine to pour into old bottles or new bottles for old wine but new organically indiscernible form-content conglomerations, new methods of making, new modes of understanding, new criteria for evaluating success. As I wrote in a recent book review:

As makers, they must not remain content with the world as represented in others’ words. And they must not allow the rest of us to think of any given vocabulary or grammar or perspective [. . .] as natural. Being a poet entails relaxing the bound-

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aries of the familiar until they ripple or blur before, perhaps, securing new definitions, new boundaries. (Osborn 95)

All this innovation is inconvenient for readers. Opening a book, even to page one, we may feel as if we had been blindfolded and flown to an undisclosed location in a foreign territory before being set free to negotiate the terrain and local idiom.

Finding ourselves bewildered within a text, most readers would appreciate it if the author offered some form of reassurance that we were being attended to, cared for. I like to think of the reader's predicament in the face of a difficult poem as an inversion of Keatsian Negative Capability. Keats wrote to his brothers that it had suddenly dawned on him "what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, this is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (193). Well, sure, any *writer* might be good about not irritably reaching, not spoiling "a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery"—after all, *as* the writer, he or she is in charge and knows what's up (193-94). But if I read something several times and don't "get" some part of it, how do I know to be "content with half knowledge"? How do I know that others aren't getting at more? Am *I* at fault for the apparent dearth of capital-m Meaning? Perhaps the poet is simply a poor practitioner—not so much negatively capable as *in-capable*.

Although *Walden* will strike few today as difficult, Thoreau anticipates some confusion and directs his readers: "You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would

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gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint ‘No Admittance’ on my gate” (16). Similarly anticipating their readers’ feelings, some challenging poets sporadically make what I call lective gestures, with which they acknowledge the act of interpretive reading. A poem may mention “meaning,” for example, or introduce a reader as a character; another may provide a gloss on its own progress, or its speaker may breach the fourth wall of private lyric by asking readers whether they understand, and so on. The gesture may be as explicit as a direct address to the “dear” or “gentle” reader, or as inconspicuously implicit as a self-descriptive comment made in passing. Each is a rhetorical device by which a poet builds or preserves good *ethos*, urging patience and assuring readers that, evidence to the contrary, he or she remains committed to what the philosopher Paul Grice calls the Cooperative Principle of communication. According to Grice’s theory of conversational implicature, a bilateral allegiance to this principle (usually left tacit) allows the flouting of lesser conventional maxims of efficient communication to be recognized as meaningfully motivated (26-30). To come across a lective gesture in an otherwise disorienting lyric is to feel that the speaker has winked knowingly to you, or held your hand for a while, or made some similarly intimate overture. As Lyn Hejinian writes in *My Life* (1987), albeit with no securer referencing than any sentence in that book-length prose poem’s radically loose weave, “It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view—so that we are ‘coming from the same place’” (21-22).

Poets have made lective gestures throughout the history of poetry. But in the last half-century—largely, I suspect, in reaction to High Modernism’s valorization of allusive difficulty—

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several prominent American poets have frequently acknowledged not only their readers' acts of interpretation but the difficulty thereof. One of my favorite examples of a lective gesture that explicitly acknowledges impedance occurs in the second of John Ashbery's *Three Poems*, "The System" (first published in 1972). After some twenty-five pages of meandering, vaguely philosophical prose and immediately following a full-page sentence that features mixed metaphors and nested parentheses, Ashbery writes:

The unsatisfactoriness, the frowns and squinting, the itching and scratching as you listen without taking in what is being said to you, or only in part, so that you cannot piece the argument together, should not be dismissed as signs of our chronic all-too-human weakness but welcomed and examined as signs of life in which part of the whole truth lies buried. And as the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it [...], this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. (79-80)

Curiously, Ashbery not only acknowledges the act of interpretation; he also assures his readers that what they are likely to classify as difficulties—the frustrated sense of not "taking in what is being said," of "not getting anything out of it"—are crucial guarantors of communication.

A similar gesture is made in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," roughly four-fifths of the way through which Walt Whitman ostensibly questions whether he has been effective in mediating not just a communication-*to* but a communion-*with* his audience. In doing so, he names even as he downplays a species of interpretive resistance. Throughout the now standard 1881 version of the poem's first seven of nine sections, the poet addresses his fellow ferry-riders and future readers, declaring the likeness of his and their perceptions, feelings, and thoughts:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,

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I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,  
Just as you [. . .]  
Just as you [. . .]  
Just as you [. . .].

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,

[. . .].

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,

[. . .].

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,

I too lived [. . .],

I too walk'd the streets [. . .],

I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me[.] (130-31)

Figuring the cognitive intimacy he seeks upon the perspicuous expressiveness of his own face, Whitman steers his readers to a point where, regardless at what spatial and temporal remove, they may be addressed as “you who peruse me.” He then maintains the poem’s apostrophic strain in a series of questions, the last several of which concern the sometime challenges of effective communication and interpretation. To offer context, I quote the whole of section 8:

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than my mast-hemm’d Manhattan?  
tan?

River and sunset and scallop-edg’d waves of flood-tide?

The sea-gulls oscillating 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 highest name as I approach?

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?

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Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?

What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?

What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not? (132-33)

These are rhetorical questions: those of the first verse paragraph are not meant to be answered, and the remaining three elicit an affirmation that will not *confirm* an already tacitly accomplished understanding between the reader and author but rather *accomplish* their communion by spontaneous fiat. Whitman claims to provide for perfect communication between himself and his reader. But Whitman's promise does not acknowledge so much as preempt the reader's sense of resistance.

In the four previous editions—including that of 1856, when the poem was first included in *Leaves of Grass* as “Sun-Down Poem”—section 8 concludes with an additional question: “What the push of reading could not start, is started by me personally, is it not?” (219). I take this wonderfully salient phrase “the push of reading” to suggest an opportunity for interpretive progress to be made in the face of resistance: no impassable obstacles in the path of understanding, just some conceptual friction that requires cognitive or empathic effort—brain work or heart work—to move through so as to minimize the initial distance between one's point of view and the literary subject's. Whitman presumably omitted the line from the 1881 and subsequent editions because this *push* is exactly what “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” discounts. Because from the get-go he has “personally” assured us of his similarity *to us*, and because he here indicates that what counts as understanding is an intimate sharing of experience, there has been no occasion for

readers to feel the friction of a superable impedance, no incentive to push. The poem, writes Ker-ry Larson: “is moved to stipulate that those ties which bind listener to author are absolutely ex-trinsic to interpretive reflection. What Whitman would impress on us is not a method of reading but its irrelevance” (12). Ashbery’s argument in the passage that I quoted is similar. Numerous writers expect and reward the push of reading, however, and I’d like to investigate with you some of what this pushing may entail.

This year’s conference title is “For the Love of Language.” Stopping short of linguistic Love, for the moment, let’s explore the central role that the recognition of likenesses plays in our interpretive endeavors, including those that would not strike most of us as especially difficult. For if, with Allen Grossman, we think of metaphor in the broad sense inclusive of simile as “a device for reducing [something’s] unknowability . . . by eroding its uniqueness,” if we think of erosion as a concomitant of friction, and if *eros* amounts to pleasurable friction, then it makes sense that the likenings of metaphor and simile might not only lead to likings but also might help start something with the push of reading that Whitman’s effusive assurances cannot (348). Be-cause writers are seldom personally present before their audiences, they let their words, sen-tences, paragraphs, metaphors, statements of value, selections of criteria, calibrations of tone, and the like stand in for their person. Most importantly, the face—with its capacity to express congeniality or confidence or trustworthiness—is absent and must be made up for. In *On Christ-ian Doctrine*, Augustine tells us: “no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure” (6.8). I want

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to follow up on his pairing of similitudes and pleasure, of likenings and liking, with the aid of difficulty.

I should confess that I did not discover Whitman's "push of reading" on my own. The contemporary poet Jorie Graham, with whom I studied at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and about whose lyric poetry I have done much of my most apparently fruitful thinking, recovers the phrase in her fifth collection, *Materialism*, in which manifestations of a desire to provide anchors for her disorienting unlikeness whelms the epigraphic front matter and spills into the body of the text itself. There, many lightly edited daybook-entry-like quotations from such works as Plato's *Phaedo*, Sir Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Audubon's *Mississippi River Journals*, and Brecht's theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* are presented to blend in as much as possible among the original poems. She includes two passages from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the latter being that sequence of four questions, running from "We understand, then, do we not?" to "What the push of reading could not start, is started by me personally, is it not?" (*Materialism* 108).

For her five-part epigraphic "A Cappella," Graham also quotes from Whitman's concluding apostrophe to the enduring objects he addresses as "you dumb, beautiful ministers" ("Crossing" 134):

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward;  
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us;  
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us;  
We fathom you not—we love you. (*Materialism* x-xi)

In their original context, these lines lend further credence to my claim that Whitman downplays movable resistance or “push,” conceding the incomprehensibility of objects even as he celebrates their perfect availability to human use. Graham concludes the quotation early, thereby emphasizing a phrase that precedes Whitman’s ending by two and a half lines. And the questions she is asking herself and us by doing so, I strongly suspect, are these: How to steer my readers over that em-dash, from the one side of the gaping caesura to the other, from “We fathom you not” to “we love you.” How not to make it too easy? The first line of the first poem in her more recent book *Swarm* announces: “The wisdom I have heretofore trusted was cowardice, the leaper” (3). So she might now pose the question thus: How not to simply leap the chasm or synapse from thwarted understanding to affection.

Other inclusions in Graham’s *Materialism* help to secure the sense that many readers of her poetry already had that she was deliberately employing resistance as a blunt guiding trope. The first of her two “Adaptation”s from Bacon begins, “Let the first motion be that of the resistance of matter”; it concludes with the eighteenth in his long list of motions, “that of trepidation,” which “must necessarily occur in all bodies which are situated in a mean state, between convenience and inconvenience. // So that being removed from their proper position, they strive to escape, are repulsed, and again continue to make the attempt. . . .” (21, 24). “Such,” Bacon writes, “is the motion of the heart and pulse of animals” and such, Graham exemplifies in nearly every poem, is the motion of her reader’s feeler-like, probing point-of-view, testing, testing new perspectives, new frames of mind, new modes of empathy for an “in” (24).

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In her “Adaptation” from Brecht’s *Short Organum for the Theatre*, Graham reviews his sense of the classical-fourth-wall theater as apt to entrance its spectators and his argument for why, therefore, “the theater must alienate what it shows” in large part by disallowing actors to identify with the characters they play. I quote:

empathy, or identification with the character, . . . is something to be *absolutely* avoided in performance. For it is the crudest form of observation when the actor simply asks: what should I be *like*,

what should I be like if this or that were to happen to me? what?

(*Materialism* 65)

And yet this crudest form of observation is exactly what the spectator, audience, or reader of a resistant work must employ. Inconvenienced by language that will not come to him, or come together *before* him, he must seek to go to it and because he does not know what “it” is, the resituation will often be slow-going and awkward, often a matter of getting a *feel* for the terrain instead of seeing his destination and navigating confidently toward it. Interpretive difficulties push the otherwise nimble mind back on its nerves, thwarting its usual efficiencies, forcing it to rely on as yet unsettled feelings and intuitions rather than well-defined thoughts.

As a reader of the resistant material world and of its soulful intelligence, Graham lashes at things, probes into them, dissects them, pulverizes them, describes if and how their parts reform. She is not gingerly or respectful of the numinous like a Henry James or John Ashbery. We find her roughening the grounds of memory and invention and poetic momentum, so that, as she puts it in the *Erosion* poem “San Sepolcro,” she can do “what the living do: go in” (3). Graham gives herself a “push” every now and then to expand her possibilities, to feel the frictions be

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tween herself and the should-be stony stones of the world, to feel the knives of her own acumen clash with those of her readers. In the title poem of her fourth collection, *Region of Unlikeness*, for example, as she imaginatively seeks to recall a thirteen-year-old version of herself making her way home through Rome after waking in a man's bed near Trastevere, she takes a

Left into Campo dei Fiori—  
And though it should be through flames dear god,  
it's through clarity,  
through the empty thing with minutes clicking in it,  
right through it no resistance. . . . (39)

With that *should*-statement, the older Graham writing behind the scenes from Wyoming suggests that her young self should be judged or punished—subjected to the firewall of Mt. Purgatory's terrace of lust, maybe—but the girl runs unimpeded. She hears the merchant women calling out the prices of artichokes, the too-slippery, fungible freedoms of commercial exchange:

—this price then that price—  
right through it, it not burning, not falling, no  
piercing sound—  
just the open, day pushing through it, any story pushing through.  
(39)

Without friction, without judgment, the poet could be writing anything, telling us and herself any story about her younger child-self's sprint home. The adult poet thinking back through the years from a field in Wyoming could fail to reacquaint herself with what it was like to be that girl. So when the older Graham asks,

Is there a way to move through which makes it hard  
enough—thorny, re-  
remembered?

and when she then shifts to the imperative, telling us perhaps but also certainly herself,

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Push. Push through with this girl  
recalled down to the last bit of cartilage, ash, running along the  
river now, then down the bridge, then quick,  
home[,]

we have good reason to understand that at the heart of this poem is an uneasy likeness: the girl's apparently blithe running through frictionless daylight becomes a figure for the older self's problematically blithe writing without any medium of feedback that would tell her if she was getting it wrong (39-40).

Mostly, however, Graham foists us into a condition of needing to provide our own interpretive pushes by denying us a ready fathoming or easy harvest. She introduces *The End of Beauty*, the book with which she would take Ashbery's unwanted mantle as the generation's "difficult poet," with two Adam-and-Eve poems. "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them" opens with an unsettling likening: "The gesture like a fruit torn from a limb, torn swiftly" (3). The simile's two terms do not connect-up as one would expect. Clipped like a cinematic still filled with action, the unpredicated noun phrase begins with "The gesture" and concludes by conjuring the image of a hand swiftly tearing a fruit from a limb, but those kinetic parallels are not the terms linked by "like." "The gesture" is explicitly likened to the fruit, the object of tearing, not the movement. If one had less reason to trust Graham's mastery, or were this matter less relevant to the mythic context established by the *dramatis personae*—"Adam and Eve," as indicated in brackets below the poem's title—one might disregard this as a mistake. It is not a mistake. It is an error (from *errare*), a wandering from the straight and narrow path. Colored by their consciousness, as if with free-indirect discourse, this broken-seeming simile anticipates the original

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couple's growing frustration with the monotonous similitude of Eden—"these two, sick of beginning, / revolving in place like a thing seen"—and their veering from the prescribed course into a region of unlikeness (*End 3*). By frame 24, the erring impulse of that gestural fruit has swelled and unbalanced:

24

the balance like an apple held up into the sunlight

25

then taken down, the air changing by its passage, the feeling of being capable,

26

of being not quite right for the place, not quite the things that's needed,

27

the feeling of being a digression not the link in the argument,  
a new direction, an offshoot, the limb going on elsewhere,

28

and liking that error, a feeling of being capable *because* an error,

29

of being wrong perhaps altogether wrong a piece from another set

30

stripped of position stripped of true function

31

and loving that error, loving that filial form, that break from perfection[.] (7)

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That wrangling with difficulty may be valuable and should not automatically be minimized or discounted, that not every knot is a Gordian nuisance to be sliced through, should be evident to us from life experience and learnings. We have not only to work at things but also to take pains in doing so, ostensibly as a result of our fallenness, so this goes way back. However, as Yeats implies when in “Adam’s Curse” he quips, “A line may take us hours maybe / but if it does not seem a moment’s thought, / all our stitching and unstitching has been naught,” one wants credit both for the effortlessly-inspired-sounding result and for the effort (78). Kimberly Johnson introduces her translation of the *Georgics* with a very compelling argument that “the labour advocated most persistently [therein] is that of interpretation” (xix). “Virgil thematizes the labour of reading,” she argues; “all other skills are contingent on the skill of interpretation” (xx). Modern georgic poetry like Frost’s and Heaney’s, no less than Virgil’s, seeks to earn for itself the dignity of physical labor by emulating it at the level of form.

Lately I have been formulating an argument, making a case for treating Graham, who replaced Seamus Heaney at Harvard, as a different kind of georgic poet. From *Death of a Naturalist* onward, Heaney substituted the imaginative labor of digging with his pen for his father’s and grandfather’s muscular workings of the earth, and one of the Northern Irish poet’s pervasively informing similes is that sounded language is like elemental matter, the haphazard resistance of which is to be shaped and rerouted. Graham introduces her first book with “The Way Things Work,” suggesting that she, too, is concerned with the *ergon* of *georgic* (*Hybrids* 3). And in recent collections she has grown more obviously committed to witnessing our human impact upon

the earth. But her prevalent conceptual metaphor for language is not dependent on the signifier's physicality as sound. She is more a syntactic than a phonetic poet. She is concerned, rather, with readers' attention and comprehension, with their ability to recognize what is going on in a poem, why phrase R follows from phrase Q, and before that phrase P. For Heaney, the friction of air through the articulated mouth and the resulting friction of sound waves upon the ear stand in for the material resistance of the earth to humankind's work. For Graham, the most important friction or resistance is the poetry's difficulty, its resistance to swift and confident mastery.

Is it possible that what I have been calling "the push of reading" is no more and no less than an entrance into the textured field of tolerance created and exemplified by a likeness? Let's explore this on new ground, by turning aside from lyric and engaging a difficult narrative, *The Sound and the Fury*. Reading both Benjy's and Quentin's chapters, we have to push and push, and we make progress largely by discovering the logics of the brothers' likenings.

How do we get to know Benjy Compson and even come to feel a fondness for him? We get to know him, his *ethos*, from the friction between his point of view and our own. We may think of perspective as visual and thus unimpeded by friction, but that opening chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* corrects the mistake in such thinking. The inconvenience for the reader of witnessing the Compson household over roughly three decades through an idiot's stream of consciousness, bereft of explicit cues to temporal shifts, draws us to him. We learn some sense of what it is like to be Benjy by gradually recognizing the temporally remote but memorially proximate likenesses that he tacitly recognizes, the triggers that occasion his serried alternations between time frames: between, for example, his narration of Caddy with her beau, Charlie, on the

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swing in 1907 or thereabouts and of Caddy's daughter Quentin with her beau on the same swing a generation later in 1928. It is in large part because Benjy (and behind him, Faulkner) does not facilitate our recognition of these likenings with the word "like" that we must push through the process of reading and in doing so, in learning the contoured limits and sometimes surprising depths of his consciousness, get closer and closer to him, going in. Benjy reports other characters' uses of "like" much more frequently than he uses the word in his own first-person observations. When he does, it is usually to liken Caddy's smell (when she's not wearing perfume) to that of trees, though he also explicitly likens the way his six-year-old brother Jason's mouth moves to "tasting" and, two sentences later, likens his seven-year-old sister's hair to another of his favorite things, "fire" (72).

Quentin, as a Harvard freshman, not only discerns much more abstract likenesses; he is also obsessively self-conscious about the process and nature of this discernment. From the get-go in the "June, Second, 1910" chapter that relates his final day leading up to his suicide by drowning, Quentin obsesses about time, approximating it from the sash shadow's position on the curtains, hearing his grandfather's pocket watch, thinking of his father's many fatalistic aphorisms. But even as he ponders the needlessness of such active attention—of "listening"—because passive "hearing" alone suffices to inaugurate the funeral procession toward what Jason Lycurgus III called "the mausoleum of all hope and desire," Quentin reflects on his use of the adverb "like":

I dont suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to a watch or a clock. You dont have to. You can be oblivious to the sound for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn't hear. Like Father said[:] down the long and lonely light-rays you might see

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Jesus walking, like. And the good Saint Francis that said Little Sister Death, that never had a sister. (76)

When Quentin thinks “like” at the end of that one sentence’s reflection, he is, I am sure, neither anticipating nor inaugurating the Valley-girl tic whereby every sentence came to conclude with “like” through much of the 1980s and with such staying-power that my fifteen-year-old daughter speaks thus to this day. Rather, the rejoinder reflects on the implications of his recalling his father’s aphorism. He has done this already in markedly pronouncing the suffix marker of likeness, *-ly*, at the end of the adverb “excruciating-ly” when recalling the chapter’s first aphorism (76). There, too, the tail of likening wagged the dog. Everything puts Quentin in mind of something his father has said, such that he cannot emerge from his fatalistic father’s long and lonely shadow. A “like” is always available, always heard even when not listened-for, so that the diminishing parade of Quentin’s life is timed with “like like like like like” no less than “tick tick tick.” Indeed, Jason III’s aphorisms cease to stream through Quentin’s consciousness—breaking off following his definition of women as a “Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced” and reemerging to quicken their frequency with “liquor teaches you to confuse the means with the end”—only during Quentin’s countryside evasion of clocks (128, 174).

Furthermore, the final sentence of the chapter’s second paragraph suggests that Quentin believes that “good Saint Francis” could speak of his immanent expiration with a welcoming intimacy as “Little Sister Death” only because he “never had a sister.” That is, what strikes him as problematic is not Francis’s familiar acceptance of death but his acceptance of a sister. The likening, he thinks, is predicated on unfamiliarity, a naïve willingness to overlook the salient particu

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lars—which is, in fact, true of likening in general. As Robert Hass writes in his poem “Meditations at Lagunitas,” “a word is elegy to what it signifies” because each word is a concept that gathers examples into a bramble that corresponds to no one of them exactly (4). Conceptual likening entails the erosion of uniqueness. Like Benjy’s, Quentin’s likenings and, unlike Benjy’s, Quentin’s self-awareness regarding his likenings are too rigid, too intolerant, to avail the swerve to genuine liking or love.

We may see similar dynamics in myriads of examples, from which I offer here a few. When I teach my English Department’s gateway-to-the-major course on lyric, I begin with Wallace Stevens’s “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” so as to recommend the kind of relationship my students should develop with their focal poets. The first of six tercets sets a scene in which, albeit “for small reason,” we are said to “think / The world imagined is the ultimate good.” Each time I push my way through a reading of the poem, I find myself especially curious about the implications of that thought and of Stevens’s subsequent claim that “It is in that thought [. . .] that we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing.” He could so readily have written of making a collection out of *differences*. The difference between the residually emotional hollows of the word *indifferences* and the relative inertness of mere *differences* makes all the difference in bringing about “the intensest rendezvous” one may have with lyric.

W. H. Auden’s “Law Like Love” turns from various interest groups laying down the law to an acknowledgment between an “I” and an intimate addressed as “dear” that, while “we” can suppress neither the “universal wish” to transcend self-interestedness nor vanity, a new opportunity is inaugurated by the acknowledgment of shared inclinations—by the formalizing of “sim

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larity.” This likeness, Auden implies, sponsors a kind of love, one that depends not *only* on likeness—for the gardeners, judges, youth, and especially the individuals in the “loud angry crowd” declaring that “law is we” have surely recognized like interests—but also on the *tolerance* implied by likeness’s recognition. I leave a more substantial engagements with Stevens’s and Auden’s poems on the cutting-room floor.

In the title poem of Richard Wilbur’s first collection, “The Beautiful Changes,” the poet, by leaving the recognition of likenesses largely to readers, does not *get* the push of reading started but *avails* such a push, which in turn acquaints readers with the conditions of liking—empathic imagination, tolerance of difference—and even of love. Consider the poem’s opening lines:

One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides  
The Queen Anne’s Lace lying like lilies  
On water [. . .].

The sentence continues, but there’s a semicolon after “water,” and this clause is syntactically independent. Although another reader might first be troubled by the claim’s universality (“One . . . finds . . .”), what first nibbles at my attention is the claim of similarity. One species of flower is said to lie “like” another. The statement initially seems to be unmotivated. Usually we liken an X to a different kind of thing, Y, so as to provide a second perspective, a new constellation of associations. Thus: “his right hand rested on her shoulder *like a dead squirrel*.” Not: “his right hand rested on her shoulder *like his left hand*.” The latter comparison does us no good. But it turns out that the vehicle of this simile has been enjambed; the terms likened here are not Queen Anne’s Lace and lilies but, as we can discern only upon broadening our syntactical scope, a lying-on-the-meadow and a lying-on-water. The “lilies / On water” are presumably waterlilies, whose

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stems are seldom visible while their circular green leaves and flowers float on the surface. The conspicuous white cluster-blossoms of Queen Anne's Lace seem similarly to float atop a fluid surface of windblown grasses. Aha! The comparison makes sense.

Having been drawn into the act of interpretive motive-hunting by the explicit *like*, however, I soon become aware of and amwhelmed by Wilbur's multiplicity of implicit likenesses. It is as if he wanted readers to recognize how very saturated even ordinary language is by metaphor. The weedy flower also known as wild carrot is often called Queen Anne's Lace, after all, because its blossoms resemble a fancy tatted textile; the name is a figure. To speak of "wading" through a meadow is already to be thinking of it as water. What had seemed perhaps an innocuously autumnal meadow suddenly appears postlapsarian (and, indeed, Wilbur elsewhere makes clear that he thinks of the Fall as the inauguration of metaphorical possibility, of the figuring swerve from sure, Adamic naming). Even "lying" becomes suspect. One finds on all sides that words are saying more or saying other than they initially seemed. And this has everything to do with setting up what Wilbur, later in the poem, terms "a second finding":

One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides  
The Queen Anne's Lace lying like lilies  
On water; it glides  
So from the walker, it turns  
Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you  
Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed  
By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;  
As a mantis, arranged  
On a green leaf, grows  
Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves  
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.

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Your hands hold roses always in the way that says  
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes  
In such kind ways,  
Wishing ever to sunder  
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose  
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

Metaphorical estrangement and poetic likening alike occasion a momentary loss (of meaning, of balance) but then “touches” readers “back to” the generatively tolerant, in-taking attitude of “wonder.”

No one would classify Wilbur as a “difficult poet” as critics have been liable to label Eliot, Stevens, Stein, Ashbery, Graham, and many of the so-called Language writers. No reassuring admissions of impedance are needed here. Like Frost, Wilbur rewards even shallow readings. But, again like Frost, he more thoroughly rewards those who push beyond initial satisfactions to discover richer treasures as when, having secured the opening lines’ meadow/lake likening, he devotes what is only his second simile-marker, *as*, to liken the floral gliding and transformative turning to what happens when the poem’s beloved “you” comes to mind. Apparently inspired by “the slightest shade” of her generous, generative spirit, he changes the plural noun *valleys* into a present-tense verb to describe how his mind becomes an ambiguously reflective terrain, equally hospitable to the blue waters of the Alpine valley Lake Lucerne and, perhaps along its valley shores, to the blue-flowered alfalfa plant known as lucerne. Fabulous, and multiply interpretable as a fable, indeed.

“The Beautiful Changes” as a whole is about metaphor in the etymologically strict sense of a bearer (*phor*) of change (*meta*). To say that “a forest is changed / By a chameleon’s tuning

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his skin to it” is to claim that both terms of a likening—both the tenor and the vehicle—are altered by it. When he writes that “The beautiful changes as a forest is changed,” Wilbur not only surprises us by revealing the mutability of his title—for most readers will have assumed that *Beautiful* is an adjective modifying the plural noun *Changes*—but also grammatically emulates his own subsequent figure of likening’s reciprocity by using the discovered verb *to change* in both its active and passive voices. For the epigraph of a coeval poem, he quotes G. M. Hopkins’ *Notebooks* to appreciate such ambiguation of agency in the bounding of young lambs: “*They toss and toss; it is as if it were the earth that flung them, not themselves. It is the pitch of graceful agility when we think that*”—when we reflect that an action may be passive, a passion.

The third and final stanza brings me back to my main thesis, however. The addressee’s hold on beautiful things—here roses—is not proprietary, not exclusive, but touched with surrendering, giving them away for others’ appreciation, both losing them and loosing them. What is beautiful in this “you” and the roses both is this changeability, this flickering between noun and verb (like *valleys*, like *rises* among the *roses*) that sunders a soulful essence from a thing, allowing its Scotist and Hopkinsian this-ness to escape one’s manual or mental grasp long enough—for a second? no, Wilbur writes, “for a moment”—but “for a second *finding*,” an opportunity for a new metaphorical naming. One comes to feel the abundance of likenings as truly sensuous. There is an inevitable *eros* in such numerous overlapping boundaries, a favorable *ethos* implied by such a giving disposition, and these make credible Wilbur’s otherwise gratuitous and uncharacteristically colloquial addition of *kind* to what could have been “in such ways.” “Such kind” idiomatically means no more than “such.” But he means “kind” in the sense of generous. So

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again we find that likening shades into liking when the erosion of differences is made to be felt as *eros* and *ethos* against indifferences.

Recall Whitman's line as emphasized by Graham: "We fathom you not—we love you" (*Materialism* xi). I agree with Augustine and Graham and Faulkner and Stevens and Auden that we develop a special fondness for what we fathom only with difficulty—by pushing. And I think that this process of fathoming most often entails the discovery of initially unexpected likenesses, the provisional, indefinite quality of which introduces an affective dimension to understanding, a liking to the likening. But with Thoreau I would not want us to mislocate such rewards. Thoreau appreciates how the rumored bottomlessness of Walden Pond bespeaks the human drive to believe in an infinite: "I am thankful this pond was made deep and pure as a symbol" (277). All the same, the analytical scientist and surveyor in him is frustrated with the credulous locals for locating the transcendental—the impossible to fathom—where an afternoon of sounding would discover a secure bottom 102 feet below the pond's surface at its deepest point. Thoreau "laboriously seek[s]" so as not to "labor under a mistake" (98, 3). Richard Wilbur's poem, by availing second and higher-order findings without defying first-finding, by opening out upon or valleying down into troves when readers push, reminds us to look for meaningful encounters with language—and love—in the changeably beautiful as well as the sublime.

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## John Zheng

### Rereading Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

Since the publication of *Cathay*, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" has received much criticism, but I think it still deserves an analysis with a focus on cultural complexity. The original title of Li Po's poem is "Changgan Xing" (《长干行》, "The Song of Changgan"). Changgan, spelled as Chokan (in Japanese) in Pound's version, is a name of a street in ancient Jinling, now Nanjing, by the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, but "The Song of Changgan" was also a poetic form Li Po adopted in writing this poem. Originally, it was a form of folksongs popular by the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, mainly about the miserable life of the fishermen's wives, and in Pound's translation, about a river-merchant's wife. This poem is a dramatic monologue that presents a humble, young wife's love and loneliness. The poet leads us to see the charming image of the persona and listen to her emotional telling of love, shyness, desire, anxiety, sorrow, despair, loneliness, and longing. Thus, her reflection on marriage and her present situation of loneliness pluck a correlative chord on the reader. The original poem has thirty lines, each containing five monosyllabic characters, with a rather regulated rhyme pattern:

妾发初覆额，折花门前剧。  
郎骑竹马来，绕床弄青梅。  
同居长干里，两小无嫌猜。  
十四为君妇，羞颜未尝开。  
低头向暗壁，千唤不一回。  
十五始展眉，愿同尘与灰。  
常存抱柱信，岂上望夫台。  
十六君远行，瞿塘滟滪堆。

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五月不可触，猿声天上哀。  
门前迟行迹，一一生绿苔。  
苔深不能扫，落叶秋风早。  
八月蝴蝶黄，双飞西园草。  
感此伤妾心，坐愁红颜老。  
早晚下三巴，预将书报家。  
相迎不道远，直至长风沙。

Here's Pound's translation:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-tō-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.

John Zheng

If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you

As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

Pound's translation shows some variations from the original. He eliminated allusions, alternated text and title, adopted stanzas, and re-imaged the persona. He divided the poem into five stanzas

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<sup>2</sup> The version is quoted from *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957). However, in the second part of Pound's essay "Chinese Poetry" published in the May 1918 issue of *To-day*, his earlier version of this translation, which is composed of four stanzas and thirty lines, has variations in stanza breaks, spellings, and punctuation marks:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
 I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
 You came by on bamboo-stilts, playing horse.  
 You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
 And we went on living in the village of Cho-kan:  
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married you, My Lord.  
     I never laughed, being bashful.  
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.  
     At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
 I desired my dust to be mingled with your dust  
     Forever, and forever, and forever.  
 Why should I climb the look-out?  
                     At sixteen you departed,  
 You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies.  
     And you were gone for five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.  
 You dragged your feet, by the gate, when you departing.  
 Now the moss is grown there, the different mosses,  
 Too deep to clear them away.  
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August,  
 Over the grass in the West garden.

They hurt me.  
 I grow older.  
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang  
 Please let me know beforehand  
 And I will come out to meet you,  
     As far as Cho-fu-sa.

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of totally 29 lines with "irregular unrhymed lines cast in informal, colloquial diction" (Hamill 311). Pound made it informal and colloquial because he changed Li Po's title about a place to a letter addressing the wife's sorrows to her river-merchant husband, and this change made the title catchy and pertinent to the theme.

The first four lines in stanza one is the young wife's reflection on her blue-plum childhood play with her boyfriend playing bamboo-horse in front of the house. With a careful comparison of Li Po's original and Pound's translation, one can note a few variations in Pound's translation. For example, in line 1, Pound abandons the first character "妾" (pronounced as *qie*), which literally means concubine and which Fenollosa translated into "mistress" in his word-for-word version, but the word is used in Li Po's poem as a modest term, which shows a cultural and linguistic complexity, to indicate the wife's humbleness or inferior status. Pound abandoned the word 妾 probably because the literal translation of it into either concubine or mistress would be misleading or lose its subtlety. The literal meaning of the original line is "when the concubine's hair was covering her forehead for the first time." Instead of using the first-person pronoun "I," Li Po uses the third-person word 妾 (concubine) to indicate her humbleness. Fenollosa translated this line into "my hair was at first covering my brows."<sup>3</sup> According to Michael Reck, Pound once considered using the word "bangs" in the opening line, but his English wife declared this a "beastly Americanism" and said one used "fringes" in England. Later, Pound found a way to avoid using both words (171). The two phrases, "bamboo stilts" (which should be a bamboo

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/pound/othertranslations.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/othertranslations.htm) (Assessed May 20, 2010)

stick played as a toy horse) and “blue plums” (which means green plums in the original) in lines 3 and 4, suggest another cultural complexity. Réka Mihálka assumes that Pound chose “blue” because the word “has connotations that express moodiness....” (152). His assumption might be right considering the wife’s lonely feeling, but Pound in fact had no other word to choose as “blue” is the only word in Fenollosa’s notes: “And going about my seat, you played with the blue plums.”<sup>4</sup> Also, even though moodiness lingers over part of the poem, the first stanza presents a happy memory of the wife’s childhood; therefore, that “blue” has connotations to express moodiness is questionable. The word “青,” pronounced as *qing*, may mean three colors: green, blue, and black in Chinese. When associated with fruit, it usually means green. Furthermore, in Chinese culture, when “bamboo horse” and “green plum” are used together as a phrase, they metaphorically mean a boy and a girl, who used to be childhood playmates, are married to each other when they grow up. “You” in line 3, “You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,” loses yet another cultural complexity and linguistic subtlety in translation. The word replaced by “you” is 郎, pronounced as *lang* (a third-person word to suggest “you”) in Chinese and *ro* in Japanese. Fenollosa’s notes indicate it means “second person, masculine, you, young man.”<sup>5</sup> Sanehide Kodama explains, “In the T’ang period, *lang*...was used by Li Po to denote the husband with a tone of reverence” (76). Kodama is right, but Li Po used the word here mainly as an endearment used by the girl for her boyfriend she loves and admires, and this meaning is always used in classical Chinese poetry. For instance, the two lines in “The Song

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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of Xizhou" (《西洲曲》, a folksong of the Nan dynasty) recite: "Missing *lang* and *lang* is not coming, I look up at the flying geese" (忆郎郎不至, 仰首望飞鸿) (Wang 225). Therefore, the words *qie* and *lang* in Li Po's poem denote an intimate but innocent relationship between the girl and the boy.

Also, the use of *lang* in stanza one and the use of *jun* (君/lord) in stanza two shows a slight change of the wife's status and her attitude toward the person she loves. More discussion about *jun* comes in the next paragraph. Although he had to abandon *qie* and *lang* because of their cultural complexities and linguistic subtleties, Pound gained from what he had to lose by creating an image of a lovely young wife through the tone that conveys an intense emotion, because "emotional force," as Pound states in his essay "As for Imagisme," "gives the image" (349). Another example that indicates linguistic complexity is "seat" in line 4. This word could be an acceptable rendering of the character "床" (pronounced as *chuang*) in Pound's translation, not because he knew it in Chinese, but because it was the only word in Fenollosa's transcription. Also, the translation of *chuang* into "seat" shows that Fenollosa's Japanese teachers did know that *chuang* meant "seat" though its common meaning is "bed." Some translators, who might be wavering in the meaning of the word, either chose "seat" or "bed" or simply avoided translating the word:

1. And loiter about the bench with green plums for toys. (Shigeyoshi Obata)
2. And wreathed my bed with greengage branches o'er. (W. J. B Fletcher)
3. We ran round and round the bed, and tossed about the sweetmeats of green plums.  
(Amy Lowell)
4. And around the bed we play with green plums. (Wai-Lim Yip)
5. Came trotting in circles and throwing green plums. (Witter Bynner)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

However, the accuracy of its meaning in Li Po's line still draws argument and discussion, for it can mean not only "seat" or "bed" but "head wall of a hand-dug well" as well. If we relate the boy's bamboo horse riding and playing around the girl sitting outside the gate, we may assume that "seat" would be a proper choice for *chuang*, but we may also assume that *chuang* means "the head wall of a well," because in ancient China a well was usually dug in the alley or in the courtyard. Thus, Li Po's two lines could be: "You came by on a bamboo horse, trotting around the well and playing with green plums."

The second stanza presents the inner state of the bashful wife married at the age of fourteen, too young to understand the married life. Line 7 in Fenollosa's version is a plain statement: "At fourteen I became your wife." Pound, however, chose the word "lord" (君 *jun*) from Fenollosa's transcription and changed the line into "At fourteen I married My Lord you." *Jun* is a respectful word that means husband in Li Po's poem. Pound's choice of "lord" is accurate and *reliable* in that it also means husband in English, thus keeping the wife's respectful tone to reflect the feudal ethical code in ancient China that the wife is subordinate to her husband. In line 9, "Lowering my head, I looked at the wall," Pound deleted "dark" that modifies the "wall" in Fenollosa's transcription. He might think this adjective didn't contribute to the line, according to his Imagist principles.

In the third stanza, line 13—"Forever and forever and forever"—is Pound's own adverb phrase added as a colloquial emphasis to reinforce the wife's strong desire. Here, he abandoned Fenollosa's translation, "I always had in me the faith of holding to pillars," which is a mistranslation of the original line that implies the husband's, not the wife's, faith. Pound might also think

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this allusion in Li Po's line would not be easily understood by English readers because of its cultural complexity. He further revised the second allusion in line 14 of the original into a general, but concise, expression: "Why should I climb the look out?" In the original, Li Po's two allusions suggest the wife's confidence in her husband's faithful love: "Since you keep the faith of holding to a pillar, / Why should I climb the expecting-husband-lookout?" The allusion to the faith of "holding to a pillar" is recorded in the *Zhuang-zi*,<sup>7</sup> a collection of the texts of pre-Qin and Western Han dynasties more than two thousand years ago. It is about a man, whose name is Weisheng, going to meet his love under a bridge, but the girl never shows up. Suddenly the river starts to flood. To keep his promise, Weisheng waits there by holding to the pillar and gets drowned. The allusion of "holding to a pillar" thus indicates a man's unbroken promise and unbending love. The second allusion, the "expecting-husband-lookout," tells a legend that a woman transforms into a stone by standing year after year on the lookout to expect her husband's return. In ancient China, a man may have to be far away from home either for business or for war while his wife, without knowing when he will return or whether he is alive or dead, has to wait alone for years or even till her death. In line 14 of Li Po's poem, the wife asks a rhetorical question to imply she will not have such a misery as the woman in the legend does because she believes her husband, who has the faith of holding to a pillar, will return some day. Pound chose to abandon the first allusion and modify the second because he might want to avoid adding footnotes or to make the lines understandable for readers without encountering any cultural complexities. He might also think it was not necessary to keep the two allusions together since they were not ap-

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<sup>7</sup> The "holding to a pillar" promise from *Selected Poems of the Tang Dynasty* (page 152): "抱柱

appropriate in tone for a naive persona, not an educated one, he wanted to present. Therefore, the adaptation of lines 13 and 14 could be an example of Pound's unreliable translation. Though line 14 may still sound a little unexpected or ambiguous to English readers, Pound did not lose much of the essential meaning of the original by trying to generalize the allusion or to break away with cultural complexities. In fact, even for a reader in China today, the two allusions may also be language barriers if he is not well-read to understand the allusive suggestions.

Stanza four presents the wife's concern about her husband's safety. Lines 15 and 16 present the most dangerous part of her husband's long journey. The original lines in Li Po's poem mean that the Yanyu Dui—a giant reef in the Qutang Gorge, one of the three Yangtze River gorges—becomes a danger in the fifth month of the lunar year when the river is in flood, and boats must sail carefully to avoid the reef. It is obvious that Pound, who might be a bit confused by Fenollosa's note of this line, mistook the Yanyu Dui (Yenyotai in Fenollosa's notes) as a place by, not in, the river, and he further combined the name of the reef and that of the gorge into "Ku-to-yen" (Qutang Yan) as a place where the husband goes. Also, he twisted the meaning of line 17 by choosing to use the five months from Fenollosa's word-for-word rendering, "five month not much touch," to suggest that the husband has been gone for a long time rather than considering Fenollosa's somewhat correct translation: "In May not to be touched." In line 18 Pound seemed to juxtapose the cry of the monkeys onto the wife's, not the husband's, emotion in order to objectify her feelings of longing and loneliness. In the original, Li Po means that while the boat sails through the narrow gorges, the sad cries of the monkeys on the cliffs along the river arouse the feeling of homesickness of the husband. However, without much knowledge about Chinese language and cultural complexities and without much more information he could get from Fenol-

losa's draft line ("Monkeys cry sorrowful above heaven"), there was no way for Pound to juxtapose the monkeys' cries onto the husband's emotion, no matter how skilful he was as a modern poet.

In stanza five, line 19 reflects Pound's Imagist principles when he worked on Fenollosa's draft line. Here are the two versions of this line for comparison:

1. Your footsteps, made by your reluctant departure, in front of our gate. (Fenollosa)
2. You dragged your feet when you went out. (Pound)

Pound used the action verb "drag" to show a concrete image and to suggest the meaning of "reluctant," an adjective that gives only the abstract idea. As an imagist, Pound focused on bringing out the real sense of the original and dropping what he thought did not make sense in translation. The original meaning of Li Po's lines 19 and 20 is "your reluctant footprints in front of the grate / are all covered by green mosses." But Pound adapted these two lines probably based on his imagist view of "use[ing] absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (Pound, *Literary Essays* 3). In addition, instead of using mosses for the covering of the footprints, he juxtaposed "different mosses" in line 20 to the wife's endless loneliness, and the word "different" suggests a double meaning of mosses. Besides, there are two versions of Li Po's line 19 in the original: "门前迟行迹" and "门前旧行迹" in which the third characters are different. Fenollosa's note shows he used the first version in which the third character "迟" means late or reluctant, but the third one in the second version means old. Some translators adopted the meaning of "old" in the second version, for instance, in Shigeyoshi Obata's translation: "Do you know your foot-marks by our gate are old."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, it is interesting to note

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<sup>8</sup> See Note 2.

that Li Po has a similar expression in another poem of his, “Written in Behalf of My Wife” (《自代内赠》), which seems an echo to “The River-Merchant’s Wife”:

别来门前草，秋巷春转碧。扫尽更还生，萋萋满行迹。  
Since we parted, the grass before our gate  
In the autumn lane has turned green in spring.  
I sweep it away but it grows back,  
Densely it covers your footprints.<sup>9</sup> (5-8)

Interestingly, line 25, which consists of two simple sentences with three words for each, could also be an example of Pound’s “unreliable” translation. It is highly condensed from Fenolosa’s notes: “The longer the absence lasts, the deeper I mourn, my early fine pink face will pass to oldness, to my great regret.”<sup>10</sup> Originally, Li Po’s lines 25 and 26 are “Seeing this saddens my heart / and my rosy face grows old in lonely sitting,” which indicate that seeing the paired butterflies fluttering over the grass in the West Garden, the speaker feels sad and old in her lonely expectation. Why does the sight of butterflies hurt her? This indicates another cultural complexity. The paired butterflies symbolize a happy and inseparable marriage in Chinese culture; but, in contrast, the wife is left alone at home to grow old in waiting. Pound compressed the two lines into one probably because his Imagist principles urged him to abandon the romantic idea of loneliness. In comparison to the image of butterflies, a similar expression is again found in Li Po’s “Written in Behalf of My Wife: “The singing phoenixes were happy together; / Startled, the male and the female each flies away”<sup>11</sup> (“鸣凤始相得，雄惊雌各飞。”). Furthermore, in line 26,

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<sup>9</sup> The translation was Joseph J. Lee’s on page 112 of *Sunflower Splendor*, edited by Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo.

<sup>10</sup> See Note 2.

<sup>11</sup> See Note 8.

Pound dropped “Yangtze” from Fenollosa’s notes, but retained the word “Kiang.” The correct pronunciation is *jiang*, which means river in Chinese, but in Pound’s version, the word becomes a proper name of the river. The selection of “Kiang” is an example indicating that either Pound did not know the meaning of the word or he wanted to play with the word for its emphatic sound.

On the whole, Pound’s adaptations may show his unreliability in translation, but he did so because of his interest in using translation as training, as he says in “Chinese Poetry” (an essay published in April 1918 in *To-day*) about Li Po’s role as a great compiler of classical Chinese poetry: “A compiler does not merely gather together, his chief honour consists in weeding out, and even in revising” (Nadel 298). Pound, as a compiler of Fenollosa’s manuscripts, seemed not just interested in translating but also in weeding out the unnecessary words and revising or adapting what he felt necessary. Yet, we should also notice what Pound says again in his “Chinese Poetry” essay: “I can add nothing, and it would be an impertinence for me to thrust in remarks about the gracious simplicity and completeness of the poem” (Nadel 303). This seems to mean that Li Po’s poem is still Li Po’s, not Pound’s, in translation. As a translator, he felt it was his duty to keep Li Po’s style without ruining the “simplicity and completeness of the poem.”

Most likely, the success of Pound’s translation, exemplified by “The River-Merchant’s Wife,” lies in that he rendered with a creative hand a charming monologue by a deserted young wife who sounds innocent and naive. The adaptations of lines 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, and 25 give evidences, but Pound mainly avoided or dismissed cultural complexities imbued in the original. Li Po’s poem contains an emotional force with cultural complexities so that the wife appears to be an educated young woman who knows how to use the proper language to express her sorrow and is so well-versed in Chinese classics that she is able to use allusions in her monologue, but

Pound's translation shows an emotional force with "gracious simplicity and completeness." And this emotional simplicity and completeness moved Ford Madox Ford so deeply to say, "The quality of great poetry is that without comment as without effort it presents you with images that stir your emotions; so you are made a better man; you are softened, rendered more supple of mind, more open to the vicissitudes and necessities of your fellow men. When you have read 'The River Merchant's Wife' you are added to. You are a better man or woman than you were before" (Homburger 221).

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