

Mannerism and Heresy

1. No There, There

Most everything broadcast into the twenty-first century home via television or computer, cable, internet, or satellite dish, or outside the home by means of whatever device, I-pad or smart phone—eventually an app rigged to one’s Raybans or directly into the cerebral cortex—might reasonably be said to fall under the heading of entertainment. Relatively speaking, more and more, very little of what gets translated from “real life” into digitized scenes through the physically miraculous circuitry that reanimates those scenes before a potentially global audience pressures the receiver toward active contemplation. Or so it seems. In one of the early episodes of HBO’s phenomenally popular series, *True Detective*, a compellingly disaffected and quietly brash Rust Cohle, played with mesmerizing intensity by Matthew McConaughey, has been called into police headquarters to review the narrative circumstances of a series of ritualized serial killings he had investigated seventeen years before with his partner, Marty Hart, played with equal nuance and dissipated urgency by Woody Harrelson. In one riveting scene, the camera fixes on Rust, the nihilist detective, as he extemporizes before his two stunned interviewers on how the murdered at the moment of their deaths must have welcomed the knowledge that their lives, however lived, good or bad, were nothing more than an illusion; that the very idea of a person was itself an illusion, living as we do on this self-enwound and delusional membrane of existence. All the while Rust with his pocket knife carves, then folds a Lone Star beer can into the disposable

form of a human being. The scene is entertaining, the writing strong and informed by intellect, the acting compelling; it is also mindfully and emotionally challenging, and disturbing. Finally, the scene enacts a vision of reality that has gradually come to dominate intellectual thought and culture, at least in some academic circles, from nineteenth century positivism to postmodernism. The vision assumes, in sum, that all we experience--that consciousness itself--is nothing more than a material phenomenon, a by-product of the physical forces shaping the universe without purpose or goal. Or as the fictional Rust Cohle muses with as much assurance as a Daniel Dennett and a Richard Dawkins, human consciousness is a chemical mistake. The fictional Cohle, like the real-life purveyors of populist atheism, assumes what Marilynne Robinson calls “the one needful thing, the one sufficient account of literally everything.”¹ In short, they all embrace a monism, a univocal vision of wholly materialist reality in which accident rules: accident, which Robinson further observes, inevitably “narrows the range of appropriate strategies of interpretation.” “Intention,” by contrast, “very much broadens it.”

As a detective the character Rust Cohle is well nigh incomparable, a connoisseur of details and surfaces, as well as an orchestrator of scenarios that enable him to shape the case if not toward an end—the serial killings have begun again according to the belated investigators—then toward an apparently satisfactory stopping point. He is eminently watchable in his minimalism, a slow walker with his accountant’s notebook entering the scene, always finding precisely the sidelong and long smoldering fact. He is a man of few and at times outrageous words and, for others, excessively speculative theories--a contrarian, answerable

¹Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). 69.

finally to no authority but his own, from police procedure to the law to God himself in whom he most adamantly does not believe. He is Nietzsche's *ubermensch* as deadpan Texan genius, scanning the clues for intentions that crumble inevitably into accident, which is the groundwork of his anti-metaphysics. He is understated at first, but sinuously and eventually he is lethal in his power, untroubled by his troubled past, his troubled present. And he knows who he is, quietly knows. He has the secret knowledge that sets him apart and subtly configures his sway, his ability to manipulate the conditions, almost as though he were source of the crimes he himself investigates. He is an artist of a kind, for whom the appearance of nonpareil abilities bestows the requirement of un-paralleled self-regard not to mention the entitlements due only to the truly exceptional. We have seen his like before.

Among the moderns there are artists and poets who match the broad profile—titanic ego matched with unstoppable ambition. Then again, for all of his arrogance even Pound had in mind a project that would restore at least among the chosen few some semblance of human culture at its most highly achieved. For all of his bravado, his aims had motive and real depth—the hope of an achievement beyond his own monumental aspirations, which is undoubtedly why he became such a staunch advocate for other poets and artists. Civilization, botched, depended on the artistic remnant. Perhaps Picasso makes a better match, fueled as he was by a libidinous narcissism exceeded only by his genius. Then again, even to browse through a retrospective of Picasso's immense *oeuvre* is to recognize that from his childhood he had ingested the entire history of Western art. He was a master Renaissance painter by the time he was a teenager and his radical departures into Cubism and beyond find their source in those deep roots. Of that early twentieth century circle of greats, Gertrude Stein appears to measure up most entirely to the vision of the artist as

self-announced genius unimpeded by the past, without allegiance to any binding vision of life beyond the will to make art. Here is an art content to play among the vivid surfaces of language and reality without any other justification save for the artist's self-regard and assumptive fame. No wonder she is widely regarded as the matriarch of so much contemporary American avant-garde poetry. To venture an unlikely paraphrase from Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright," Stein was ours before we were Stein's. Her way of writing and her way of being an artist is in many ways her gift outright to a growing swathe of American poetry.

Gertrude Stein's self-engineered and self-appointed destiny to assume prominence in the literary world of her own time was nascent from the earliest age. "Our little Gertie is a little Schnatterer," Stein's aunt Rachel reflected in a letter to her father who had returned to America from Vienna in search of business success, "she is such a round little pudding, toddles around the whole day & and repeats everything that is said or done."² Decades later, Wyndham Lewis unknowingly took up aunt Rachel's "Schnatterer" theme when he characterized Stein's writing as the work of an "idiot child, but none the less sweet to itself for that," who "throws big, heavy words up and catches them; or letting them slip through its fingers they break in pieces; and down it squats with a grunt, and begins sticking them together again"—such is how Lewis portrayed Stein's "infantile" method of writing.³ Lewis's devastatingly harsh judgment would seem to be starkly at odds with Gertrude Stein's life history as one of William James' greatest devotees at Harvard, as a promising medical student at Johns Hopkins who was constitutionally incapable of pursuing a

²Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975) 3.

³Hobhouse, 3-4.

directed course of study and so quit; then as an art collector and self-taught writer who would become a literary force—the “Sybil of Montparnasse” hosting the likes of Picasso, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Matisse, among many others—before emerging as the world famous innovator who declared herself one of the three great geniuses of her time. The others were Picasso and Alfred North Whitehead. She was certain she was the greatest prose-writer of her age, and judged herself greater than James Joyce, her nearest rival; greater perhaps by her own accounting than Shakespeare—“He’s dead,” she declared, “and can’t say whether he’s greater than I am. Time will tell.”⁴

On the other hand, it is now widely acknowledged that her brother Leo was, in fact rather than legend, the brilliantly prescient collector of works by Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso, and many others before their genius had been widely recognized. They parted ways, Gertrude and Leo, on the significance of Cubism which Leo believed had ludicrous origins in Picasso’s “childishly silly” misreading of mathematics.⁵ Their parting became permanent when Alice B. Toklas assumed Leo’s place as confidant and friend. Sister and brother would barely acknowledge each other again after 1914, the year of their “disaggregation” according to Leo.⁶ Moreover, with the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Matisse, Tristan Tzara, and others accused Stein of flagrantly and falsely “legendizing” her life, levying claims of egomania, megalomania, and outright literary prostitution against her. Leo Stein called the book a “farrago of rather clever anecdote, stupid brag and general bosh.”⁷ In response, Stein claimed that history was not “something you remember” but something one

⁴Hobhouse, 190.

⁵Hobhouse, 76-77.

⁶Hobhouse, 101.

⁷Hobhouse, 168.

is bound to recreate and therefore she felt no “obligation to remember right.”⁸ At the crux of Stein’s repost to her detractors, her former friends, and fellow artists is a view of identity that anticipates the kind of valuation of consciousness acutely tuned to the materialism of more than a few philosophers of mind and not merely the fictitious Rust Cohle. Here is Gertrude Stein’s reflection on the subject of identity:

And identity is a funny being yourself is funny you are never yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself.⁹

Stein’s headlong associative stream of propulsive redundancy in this excerpt from *Everybody’s Autobiography* not only typifies her prose style, it exemplifies a vision of self as something fundamentally discontinuous and therefore illusory—if not a chemical mistake then a wholesale fabrication, or a phantom. Self is an illusion, and so by extension the invention of one’s identity, especially retrospectively in an autobiography for example, is not only well within the bounds of the writer’s authority, it is positively a requirement for the job. If one’s “personal” history is gotten wrong, or let us say invented with various modulations

⁸Hobhouse, 164.

⁹Ibid.

from the life lived, it is because they must necessarily be invented. Potential disagreements as to the promulgated veracity of the past will, by extension, arise simply out of the multifarious nature of individual memories, all of which are themselves inventions of selves that are never really themselves to begin with—legend, as Stein’s biographer Janet Hobhouse reflects, becomes more “potent” than “true history.”¹⁰ Regardless of the validity of this underlying concept of identity or the actual history of events and persons in Stein’s life, the impact of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was profound. “The book,” as Hobhouse again reflects, “bulldozed its way through facts and sensibilities and had arrived triumphant on the other side of the destruction.” It had, in short, “its own truth.”¹¹ Art trumps life since life, for Gertrude Stein, is there exclusively for art.

There is something eerily imperative in Stein’s life portrait from her childhood as the family “Schnatterer” through the years after the *Autobiography* as living literary legend through her life in occupied France during the Second World War until her death from stomach cancer in 1946. Apparently Stein had a great love of meeting people, and not only (though especially) famous people, geniuses or would-be geniuses who might come near to though not exceed her own incomparable brilliance. She and Alice worked as nurse’s aids during the First World War and she liked the soldiers, and especially the song “On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine,” which she heard them sing. While living at Belley under Marshall Petain during the Second World War one of her neighbors observed how intently Stein would analyze people so as to find “the secret that motivated their action.”¹² This impetus, this imperative,

¹⁰ Hobhouse, 166.

¹¹ Hobhouse, 168.

¹² Hobhouse, 225.

Hobhouse agrees, accords with Stein's early love of archetypes, the similarities and differences between people as exemplified in *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, the "rhythm of personality" she sought to portray in her portraits of Picasso and others, as well as in the calculating descriptions of friends and family in the autobiographies. "Her loyalties and her passions were always for ideas or for ideas of people, and rarely for people themselves," Hobhouse concludes.¹³ Undoubtedly Alice B. Toklas was a singular exception, though during her soirees Stein held court with the great men of her time while Alice was relegated to spend time with the wives. In one memorable scene during the Second World War Alice, the beloved "Mama Woojums" to Stein's "Baby Woojums," was told by the great artist to move a cow continually and at different angles around a pasture in the French countryside in order for Stein to write down the various impressions in the manner of a Cubist painter at work. There is no record how Alice felt about the day's job—one expects she accepted the role—and the cow was undoubtedly happy to eat whatever grass regardless of the positioned angle relative to the writer. Not far off, great armies were moving across Europe, soldiers dying, Jews displaced and transported to death camps.

Gertrude Stein's tendency to elide the individual for the idea of the individual, like her tendency to elide identity as experience for the idea of identity as a reality best deferred, defines the unstinting opacity of her writing. More than being about a cow in a pasture, about Picasso or Matisse or the various "objects" in the prose poems of *Tender Buttons*, her writing is about writing. The world one senses is nothing more than an occasion for more writing. Identity, in turn, is nothing more than an abstraction from that which, paradoxically, does not really exist, at least to an extent that requires genuine regard. Such willfully recondite distancing

¹³Ibid.

from life defines her relationship to the tumultuous events of World War II and the Holocaust through which she lived in a condition of protected adjacency. It also defines her relationship to the tumultuous events of World War II and the Holocaust through which she lived in a condition of protected adjacency. “A war is always not so very near. Even when it is near,” she wrote in *Wars I Have Seen*.¹⁴ While living in Belley and then Culoz, exiled safely from her Paris apartment, she became a staunch royalist and supporter of Marshall Petain, the leader of Nazi occupied France. In 1944 she was translating his speeches and hoped to obtain an American readership for them, this, just as the Jewish children of Culoz were removed to Auschwitz.¹⁵ Indeed, the war was near, but not so very near, apparently. Years before in 1934, in a piece published in the *New York Times*, Stein called for Hitler to receive the Nobel Peace Prize “because he is removing all elements of contest and struggle from Germany. By driving out the Jews and the democratic left elements, he is driving out everything that conduces to activity. That means peace.”¹⁶ While Stein’s endorsement of Hitler for the Noble Peace Prize is often interpreted as an instance of her sharp sense of irony, given the brutal realities of the time and Stein’s own Jewish heritage one would think that such an ironic clarion call would be regarded as, at best, tasteless.

It is, in fact, disturbing, the measure of an artist whose colossal ego and entitlements establish her on the sanitized side of a protective glass, coddled by privilege and self-regard, abstracted from life by an art that has been purified of life by an idea of art that cares little if anything

¹⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*. London: BT Batsford, 1945) 4-5.

¹⁵ Christopher Benfy, “The Alibi of Ambiguity,” *The New Republic* (June 28, 2012).

¹⁶ “Gertrude Stein Views Life and Politics,” *The New York Times* (May 6, 1934).

for the human. In Stein's "Four Saints," Saint Theresa answers the question "If it were possible to kill five thousand chinamen by pressing a button would it be done?" by saying "Saint Theresa is not interested." If one were to read *The Interior Castle* one would know that the real Saint Theresa, drawn to the living flame of contemplation though earth-bound, would respond in horror at the question. She would respond out of the spirit of love which is always committed to life, life emergent from the Source of life. Stein's Saint Theresa, responding as she does in the third person, the way Stein speaks of herself in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, is nothing more than a straw-mask or mouthpiece for Stein, utterly aloof, without regard for anything but art itself; that is, for her own art itself and the importance it bestows. The death of masses is uninteresting. Here, in turn, is how Stein in her personal statement on the matter regards people: "Anybody can know that the earth is covered all over with people... there are an awful lot of them anyway and in a way I am really interested only in what genius can say the rest is just there anyway."¹⁷ In short, the earth and its people are expendable for the purpose of genius, relegated for use by the designs of genius—her genius, genius that paradoxically exists absent the veracity of identity.

Gertrude Stein's genius, or the mode of her pioneering and radically obsessive writing habits, blossomed with her recognition that literary composition could be made to enact the kind of disaggregating approaches to form exemplified in the work of Cezanne, Picasso, and Juan Gris. Fundamentally, the shift involved privileging the dimension of space over the dimension of time, effectively the transposition of a painter's spatial orientation to the work of

¹⁷Quoted in Hobhouse, 211.

composition into the temporal medium of the literary work. First practiced in *Three Lives* and to some degree or another in every work thereafter with the exception of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein's approach required the suppression of the flow of past, present, and future into the shaping of a "prolonged present." As she notes in "Composition as Explanation":

A composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world as it has been these thirty years it was more and more a prolonged present. I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simply it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was not done like that, I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural.¹⁸

There is in fact very little real explanation in Stein's recounting of her theory of composition. The passage performs in a somewhat more restricted manner the slow motion effect of her "continuous present" even as the sentence careens headlong ahead while it doubles back on itself and its subject in an obsessively propulsive redundancy. Here is a more emphatic example from the same lecture:

Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. Everything is not the same as the time when of the composition and the time in the composition is different. The composition is different, that is certain.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation" in *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1909-1945*. Ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (New York: Penguin Books, 1967) 25.

¹⁹ Stein, "Writings and Lectures, 24.

Yes, the composition would appear to be quite different, though perhaps not entirely intelligible, or perhaps something like a continuous turning over of the surface of things, the plowing over of things, only to find only more, only more, and more and more surface, though the aim apparently was to get at “the bottom nature of things” through a strategy of pervasive repetition. Here is the famous opening of her portrait of Picasso:

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom one was following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.

The point to be made by citing these few examples—Stein wrote a nine-hundred page composition of her continuous present in *The Making of Americans*—is that each composition is, in fact, not really different from any other. Rather, Stein’s approach and its net effect is always the same, the gist of which is exactly contrary to the effect of the great painters from which Stein drew inspiration. Where Cezanne and the Cubists “strove to make non-narrative form convey a sense of movement in time, the continuous present was an attempt to suspend the passage of time in narrative form.”²⁰ Beyond her intent, Stein’s defining compositional effect enacts a view of reality that elides time as an expression of meaningful depth:

It is very interesting that nothing inside them, that is when you consider the very long history of how

²⁰Hobhouse, 73.

every one ever acted or has felt, it is very interesting that nothing inside in them, that is when you consider in all of them makes it connectedly different. By this I mean this. The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends on how everybody is doing everything.²¹

That which is seen, the surface, is all and all that really is, and only is. There is no inside distinguishing anyone who ever lived from anyone else who ever lived ever, one might again say in the Stein fashion. It would seem then that “the bottom nature” Stein would plumb is bottomless not because it is bottomless but in fact because it is all only surface.

Gertrude Stein’s ambition to suspend the passage of time in narrative form, to create a continuous present, trespasses on still more significant philosophical and indeed theological issues. Some sixteen hundred years before Stein desired to create a continuous present, Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessions* reflected on the impossibility of accessing anything like the present given the inevitable flow of time. “Who can lay hold on the heart and give it fixity,” Augustine muses, “so that for some little moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendor of a constant eternity?”²² The answer, as Christine Casson points out, is either no one or God. As she observes, for Augustine “there is no way that God’s eternity and the human experience of ‘temporal successiveness’... can be compared.”²³ Nonetheless, for Augustine, it is the mind’s

²¹Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 22.

²²Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009) 231.

²³Christine Casson, “Historical Narrative in the Lyric Sequence” in *The Contemporary Narrative Poem*. Ed. Stephen P. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013) 130.

ability to expect, attend, and remember—to engage in the work of intending meaning in a manner so as to hold together past, present, and future—that allows an individual to conceive of discrete actions or events as parts of a whole, the narrative of a life that though it pales by comparison is nonetheless distended, held, in God’s eternity.²⁴ Stein’s continuous present inverts Augustine’s model of narrative form. By essentially effacing the temporal movement fundamental to narrative and to human experience her continuous present constructs a false mirror image of Augustine’s “constant eternity.” The result, paradoxically, is an experience where time continually folds back on itself as one moves forward in “the space” of reading. A Cubist painting by Braque or Picasso need not worry about narrative time in the same manner, obviously, only multiple vectors or angles or planes within space, while Duchamp’s “Nude Descending Staircase,” for example, at once parses and stretches narrative action into the space of the canvas. Narrative, and even the lyric which arguably seeks to launch into the timeless, ultimately establishes in Casson’s view “a reversal of expectations,” for it is “in time that imagination configures meaning.”²⁵ As such, to assume to establish a continuous present, a constant eternity in a medium established definitively by temporal means—language—is delusional at face value, a misdirection of the imagination. From a theological standpoint it might be considered a form of idolatry. However one regards the creation of a continuous present it is certainly not “a new composition in the world” as she claimed.

Augustine and theology notwithstanding, Picasso apparently did not hold with Stein’s view that she and he

²⁴Casson, 133.

²⁵Casson, 142.

were the two great artistic geniuses of their time. When Stein's brother Leo communicated her view and her intent to use words like paint or verbal collage to the great painter he shrugged his shoulders and said: "That sounds rather silly to me. With lines and colors one can make patterns, but if one doesn't use words according to their meaning they aren't words at all."²⁶ Alfred Kazin, Edmund Wilson, Katherine Anne Porter, and Wyndham Lewis all reflect on the child-like monotone of Stein's work, as well as the absence of real emotion, though Kazin's insight that Stein really has very little concern for the subject of the work or the objective nature of the real strikes deepest. "The book" is merely "a receptacle for her mind," he rightly concludes.²⁷ For Kazin, Stein's early life "schnattering" only got more sophisticated, more marketed. By contrast, Alfred Steiglitz genuinely embraced and extolled her experiments. In any case, regardless of her detractors and her rather shameless efforts at self-aggrandizement, or perhaps because of them, Stein has become a literary touchstone linking modernism to postmodernism, the original *mater familias* of the contemporary zeitgeist; dissociative, elliptical poetry has won the day, at least in a great many academic programs and prominent journals. One example from *Tender Buttons* will show why. Here is "Apple":

Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam, colored wine,
calm seen, cold cream, best shake, potato, potato and
no gold work with pet, a green seen is called bake and
change sweet is bready, a little piece is a little piece
please. A little piece please. Cane again to the presup-
posed and ready eucalyptus tree, count out sherry and
pie plates and little corners of a kind of ham. This is
use.

26 Hobhouse, 78.

27 Alfred Kazin, "Review of Composition as Explanation," *Reporter* (February 8, 1960).

The apple as an object in the world has no place in Stein's prose poem. It exists entirely as a word that triggers a sequence of disassociated associations linked mostly sonically, sound used by Stein as a painter employs paint—all fricatives, plosives, and labials bounding off each other with the long and short vowels. The final declarative, "This is use," must be read ironically, for there is no outward use for this apple except for the usage just given—this unique mélange of language on the page savored, perhaps, by the mental tongue. It is a marvelously child-like performance, depthless, happily free of worldly identification as identity is free of any pretence of subjectivity or history, existing entirely in the continuous present of the writer's arrangement of non sequiturs, which is the product of the one mind, evidently, that counts: her own. One can see why a prospective publisher, at least in Stein's early writing years, might shy from accepting such like writing for publication, as was the case with one A.C. Fifield of London in 1912, the year *Tender Buttons* was published. His rejection is a brilliant parody of the Stein mode:

Dear Madam,
I am only one, only one, only one. Only one being,
one at the same time. not two, not three, only one.
Only one life to live, only sixty minutes in one hour.
Only one pair of eyes. Only one brain. Being only
one, having only one pair of eyes, having only one
time, having only one life, I cannot read your M.S.
three or four times. Not even one time.
Only one look, only one look is enough. Hardly
one copy would sell here. Hardly one. Hardly one.
Many thanks. I am returning the M.S. by registered
post. Only one M.S. by one post.²⁸

²⁸ Quoted in Hobhouse, 94.

Fifield's rejection not only mimes brilliantly Stein's practiced monotony, it also puts one in mind of Professor Irwin Corey, comic master of the non sequitur on many a television show during the 1960s and 1970s. Fifield's wry response rightly fixates on time, the very dimension that Stein was so interested in submerging in her writing. Yet, despite the temptation to elaborate the parodies, one must concede that Gertrude Stein surely has had the last laugh. Indeed, she has marketed her "legendary genius" and her work to a great many poets more than a generation after her death, regardless of critical dismay and disapproval and her own disaggregation from family and prominent friends. The extollers of Stein's work now far outnumber, or out theorize, those who vilify her, and her inheritors and champions fill the ivory towers. Tony Hoagland, a contemporary American poet very unlike Gertrude Stein, praises her in a recent essay as an "American Master," when he rightly describes her work's appeal as "largely decorative." By the idea of composition, Hoagland reflects, Stein "means giving up the semantic imperative of language.... She means using words like musical notes, or paint, a plastic material in relative weight is determined by sound and placement not by meaning."²⁹ Her work thereby advances an "indefinite" suggestiveness. Hoagland's characterization is exactly on target, though it neglects to point out the self-evident fact that poets who do follow "the semantic imperative" also, if they are good practitioners of the art and certainly if they are masters, use words with the care of composers and painters. In extolling Stein, Hoagland in effect affirms the sad condition of how little we have come to expect of our masters. There is no there, there, Stein famously said of Oakland upon her return to her childhood home during her

²⁹ Tony Hoagland, *Real Soffistikashun* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2006) 131.

triumphant visit to America after she had become a household name, for all the ballyhooed difficulty of much of her writing and her statements about writing. One might say the same about her work, given its success, however at first unlikely—no identity, only self-proclaimed genius; no worldly presence, only words locked into the language system; no there except for what is there—there, there—a bereft world, indefinite, flat, composed only of surfaces turning over again and again to nothing more than more surface, faceless, masterfully lessened out of nearly all amplitude, which is where, apparently, we are.

2. *In the Manner Of*

There is a photograph of Gertrude Stein taken in Beligin in occupied France during the Second World War. She is standing in doorway of what looks to be an ancient chapel dressed in a flowing white robe, as though she were a monk or priestess and where she stood was the portal to the altar where she performs her secret rites. To her left is a friend, Bernard Fay, who was among the small, late coterie of admirers; to her right, Alive B. Toklas. Both are sitting on a stone wall, both looking rather pressed into service in what is obviously a posed scene. Behind them and behind the self-proclaimed genius as High Priestess is the magnificent French countryside where, not very far beyond the orchestrated setting, Jews are being herded for transport to the concentration camps and gas chambers of the east, just as they had been in Paris not far from Gertrude and Leo Stein's celebrated apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus, her art collection protected and intact while the Nazis were stealing thousands upon thousands of the greatest art works in the history of the West and hoarding them in mines under threat of destruction should they lose the war. The camera's stage set looks like a moment excised from history, a continuous present in which the pointed cap of the chapel

rising from the roof's steep, sloping braid appears like some outsized miter, the headdress that frames the holy figure at the center. The scene is obsessively framed, even mannered. At the doorjamb behind a few boards lean haphazardly, and from further behind in the dark hutch of stone light strains to enter through a broken window. The path coming on the scene is weed-strewn. The chapel is a ruin.

It is no great insight to point out that artists, even great artists, are often deeply flawed and occasionally egregiously flawed human beings, egocentric, megalomaniacal, willing sometimes to trade human sensitivity for self-aggrandizement. Some would say such behavior is excusable, even a necessity for the art to have been produced at all. Beyond this commonplace what interests me is how the artist's and especially the poet's vision of life infuses and shapes the work, however much the life may or may not be influenced by the vision of life explicitly or implicitly espoused. During her American tour in 1927, as she rode the glory of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein repeated from her lecture "Composition as Explanation" that "the business of art was to live in the complete actual present" and, moreover, that "words had come to lose their meanings" over the last hundred years. What excited her was "that the words or words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that to me," she said, "were very exactly related themselves to the thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do to describe the thing."³⁰ For Stein's biographer it is precisely this tremorous misalliance between word and thing that belied a "mystic closeness" beneath the obscurity so endemic in particular to her poetry.³¹ "Poetry," for Stein, "has to do

³⁰Hobhouse, 184-5.

³¹Hobhouse, 175.

with vocabulary,” just as prose, for her, does not. Poetry is “really loving the name of anything and that is not prose,” she declares in “Poetry and Grammar,” and she continues: “so as I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything.”³² How does one bind the inherent misalliance between thing and word to the poet’s essential love for the name of a thing? The answer is, one cannot. Or as Stein goes on to say of *Tender Buttons*: “Was there not a way of naming things that would not invent names, but means names without naming them?”³³ In short, “the thing had to be named without using its name,” since the name of anything “is no longer anything to thrill any one except children.”³⁴ Simply put, for Stein, a poet’s naming always trumps the names of things since the names of things have become outmoded. “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” Stein famously wrote, and she regarded it as the first time in over a hundred years that the rose appeared vitally in a line of poetry.

Of course, for Stein, the point is that a rose is not a rose, the thing is not its name, and in this assertion she puts into artistic practice the difference between thing and word advanced by linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Stein’s view of language also anticipates Derrida’s philosophical position later in the twentieth century. Both hold that difference rather than identity shapes the operations of language as a system of signs. By now, to a substantial extent, the misalliance assumed by Stein a hundred years ago has been institutionalized as one of the guiding tenets of postmodernism. At the root is a disruption in relation between word and thing, sign and signified, and as such between one thing and another. In Picasso’s words, words cease to be words

³² Stein, *Writings and lectures*, 138-140.

³³ Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 141.

³⁴ Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 142.

at all if we understand that the nature of words is to have meaningful relation to things. For Stein, the given names of things are dead on arrival. Those fragments shored against ruins of which Eliot spoke in *The Waste Land*, and which he sought to bind back together in the religious quest of his later poems, are the very evanescent stuff from which Stein happily shapes her poems. The same is the case, implicitly if not explicitly, for a many poets from Stein through Ashbery and onward to a crowded house of postmodernist poets. Likewise, the vision of life undergirding art is the very antithesis of William Carlos Williams' "no ideas but in things," since ideas are composed of words and words and things exist only within the fabricated relationship established through the conventions of language's system of signs—words touch nothing, relate to nothing.

One might demure from the more epistemological and ontological implications of Stein's practice and choose to say that she was, like Pound in his way, only trying to "make it new." Nevertheless, as with Saussure and Derrida, at the foundation of Stein's vision is the most extreme outgrowth of nominalism, the complete embrace of the essential breakage between the names we use and the reality we perceive. And no path back to the realist ideal that words can communicate universals. While some forty years ago Robert Pinsky proclaimed that "the ultimate goal of the nominalist poem is logically impossible" because it assumes that "the gap between language and experience is absolute,"³⁵ and therefore the poet's experience becomes "ungeneralizable" into poems, it is certainly the case that over the same period of time nominalist poems have become commonplace in journals, on websites, promulgated

³⁵ Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

by small and large presses. The nominalist poet has become “impossibly” but pervasively institutionalized in the American academy under the nomenclature of postmodernism.

In his most recent edition of *Postmodern American Poetry*, the latest of two tradition establishing anthologies, Paul Hoover affirms the preeminence of “postmodern” poetry when he writes “as it happens with every generation the new wins the day and the broader writing culture is altered by its theories and its practices.”³⁶ With the hiring of avant-garde poets to teach in MFA Programs and English Departments, with the space afforded to postmodernist poetry in journals and presses, websites, and its prominent distribution through the Academy of American Poets, it is obvious that Hoover is right: The postmodernist poem has “come to be considered a reigning style.”³⁷ The so called “elliptical poets,” celebrated by Stephen Burt in his *Close Calls with Nonsense*, as well as younger poets who embrace “the skittery poem of our moment,” to use Tony Hoagland’s apt phrase, all fall under the broad category of “postmodern” as Hoover uses the term. I prefer to call such poems *postmodernist*, reserving the more neutral term *postmodern* historically for poems written after the modernist movement, possibly integrating some of its strategies and effects and combining them with a variety of traditional and non-traditional approaches. Hoover, in contrast, explicitly ties the ascent of postmodern poetry to the avant-garde, which it still somehow inexplicably remains despite the long advance of its methods. Postmodernist poetry as the established “Go-To” mode thus traces its early practice to Gertrude Stein’s “egalitarian theory of composition” and her own example from Cezanne in which one thing is as

³⁶Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry* (New York: WW Norton, 2009) xxvii.

³⁷ Hoover, xxix.

important as another thing in the process of composition.³⁸ Paradoxically, that very egalitarian mode involves an experimental approach that “sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality and self-expressiveness of its life in writing.”³⁹ Apparently, for Hoover, egalitarian theories of composition can also be elitist relative to mainstream culture without contradiction.

As I noted earlier, Stein was anything but egalitarian in the products of her approach to composition, except when she eschewed them, as in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, thereby reaping the spoils of a longed-for fame. Nonetheless, if Stein has become the *mater familias* of what has become the apparent mainstream of contemporary American poetry, then the *pater familias* would have to be Charles Olson, whom Hoover tells us coined the word “postmodern” in a letter to Robert Creeley in 1951.⁴⁰ Like Stein, Olson sought to free writing from what he perceived to be a worn-out traditionalism. Like Stein, space for Olson takes precedence over time through the positing of the page as “an open field” that, paradoxically, liberates the poet from “print bred” composition, or so he argues in “Projectivist Verse.”⁴¹ Distribution of words on a page’s space, according to Olson, is better suited to registering the poem’s voice than of traditional form, or the “ancient salt” as Yeats called it.

Hoover recognizes rightly that these progenitors, along with their postmodernist offspring, all hold certain

³⁸ Hoover, xlv.

³⁹ Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*. First Edition. (New York: WW Norton, 2001) xxv.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Charles Olson, *Projective Verse*. Totem Press, 1959.

stated or unstated assumptions in common, despite variations in practice and accomplishment from so called “aleatory poetics” to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry to Flarf. All, at root, are nominalist in their understanding of reality and language (though not all postmodern poets need embrace the nominalist vision, and many do not). Here is Hoover on the fundamental tenets of postmodernism:

Postmodernism decenters authority and embraces pluralism. It encourages a panoptic or may-sided point of view. Postmodernism prefers “empty words” to the “transcendental signified,” the actual to the metaphysical... With the death of God and the author appropriation becomes a reigning device... Thus the material of art is to be judged simply as material, not for its transcendent meaning or symbolism.⁴²

The epistemological disjuncture that inevitably ensues when nominalism becomes reified into its own ideology, our natural and welcome doubt about our ability to obtain some truth transformed into a hard-line way of seeing and being, finds its ontological mirror image in a thoroughgoing materialism. The philosophical forefathers of this vision of reality include, according to Hoover, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. The intellectual fuel that drives the engine behind the poetry is that essentially “Eternity was driven out completely. Eternity is reduced to Ethernity, the cybernetic universe that can be shared by all, much of which is mundane and profane. It is not that postmodernism lacks foundations, as some have suggested, Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*, xvii)

⁴²Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*, xvii

but rather that the foundations have shifted from the transcendent to the everyday.”⁴³ Another way to state this, as Hoover acknowledges, is in the words of Tam Lin: “Poetry = wallpaper.” Oh, if only we didn’t have to read poetry at all, but if it could just be looked at, like a placemat.⁴⁴

There are a number of glaring contradictions embedded in Hoover’s panegyric to the loss of Eternity and postmodernism’s artistic and ethical triumph over the gutted corpse of an outmoded metaphysics. Perhaps most glaring is the contradiction that posits a foundation for postmodernism in “the everyday” when “the everyday” lacks any subtending coherence—if language does not connect us to the world or to itself then how can one posit a foundation to the everyday, whatever that might be? That would have to be a foundation-less foundation, which need I say is a self-contradiction. Another contradiction is the foregrounding of process and procedure over “product” when it is precisely books (or something analogous to books), in short *products*, that are produced, blurbed, marketed, celebrated, and which obtain for the apparently identity-less author an agreeable salary at an institution of higher learning where he or she can teach other would-be identity-less authors to produce additionally elaborated processes (not products) we conventionally agree to call poems. Elsewhere Hoover invokes Frederic Jameson and his belief that history “ends” with liberal democracy and our culture of consumerism as a potential cause of “the blank style” of some of today’s conceptual poets, “as well as language poetry’s preference for Gertrude Stein’s continuous present.”⁴⁵ If that is the case, in yet another contradiction, how is it that postmodernist poetry can set itself a part from the mainstream when, by

⁴³ Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry II*, xxxii.

⁴⁴ Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry II*, liii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Hoover's own analysis, postmodernism is now an expression of the mainstream? Such poetry could be nothing more than a reiteration of the times, an empty mimesis composed in empty words to express a cultural emptiness.

Pushing matters further, if as Hoover states the avant-garde "opposes the bourgeois model of consciousness"—which is apparently inherently narcissistic, sentimental and concerned wholly with self-expression, unlike postmodernism—how is it that John Ashbery, the paragon of postmodernist poetry, the essential poet of "indeterminacy" whose work embodies in its "disembodied" way all the prime features of its kind, how is it that Ashbery's work can be said approvingly to point "toward a new mimesis, with consciousness as its model"?⁴⁶ Like Stein, Ashbery does not paint a picture of the apple; he paints a picture of the mind "at work rather than the objects of attention." Is Ashbery's consciousness something other than bourgeois, a different model entirely? If so, how is this model of consciousness to be conceived of without language cohering sufficiently to posit something like a world, however skeptically we might regard that world? Perhaps Charles Bernstein provides the answer in his essay "Thought's Measure," a theoretical classic of language poetry:

Language is the material of both thinking and writing. We think and we write in language, which sets up an intrinsic connection between the two. Just as language is not something that is separable from the world, but rather is the means by which the world is constituted It is through language we experience the world, indeed through language that meaning comes into the world and into being . . . I do

⁴⁶Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry I*, xxx.

not suggest that there is nothing beyond, or outside of, human language, but that there is meaning only in terms of language, that the givenness of language is the givenness of the world.⁴⁷

Bernstein's reflection on language, thinking, and the world advances the nominalist vision of reality precisely. The world is constructed in language, which also constructs our thinking. What the world may be in itself—that beyond—it is not accessible through language. It is the one a priori, utterly bound to its conventions, without relation to anything objective since the world as given is subjectively formed in thinking, in consciousness, which is necessarily bound to the materiality of language. One might say then with Bernstein that the model of consciousness in an Ashbery poem, or any nominalist poem, is nothing other than thinking seeking to narrow its prospect as much as possible to the materiality of language itself which is, because of its utter conventionality (its separateness from whatever world might be beyond) is necessarily indeterminate, contingent, arbitrary, depthless. It is poetry as “word-system” as Marjorie Perloff calls it in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, where she elucidates Gertrude Stein's poem “Susie Asado,” among other writings, as a superposition of verbal planes that create “a kind of geometric fantasy” of the kind one finds in Picasso's Cubist paintings.⁴⁸ Not only is language not a lamp, it is not a mirror either. In such a view poems exemplify nothing more than the “free play” of the language system, “constructing” as Perloff observes “a way of happening rather than an account of what has happened, a

⁴⁷Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1986) 61-2.

⁴⁸Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics in Indeterminacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 73.

way of looking rather than a description of how things look.”⁴⁹

At the same time, in an observation that anticipates Hoover’s self-contradictory claims about postmodernism, Perloff informs us that Stein’s use of repetition and variation creates indeterminacy by establishing “semantic gaps” in the text, and thus her syntax “enacts the gradually changing present of human consciousness, the instability of emotion and thought.”⁵⁰ Yet how can the word-system of a poem enact a mimesis of consciousness when the system by definition is self-enclosed? So fundamental a confusion appears endemic to postmodernist discourse, for in pressing her point further she quotes Neil Schmitz, who affirms that Stein’s *Tender Buttons* summarily performs the slippage of “signifier to signifier” even as the poet’s mind plays before the world such that words “pliable, come alive in the quick of consciousness.”⁵¹ Somehow the word as signifier makes a quantum leap outside the system and comes to exist in concert with the “play” of the poet’s mind in “the quick of consciousness.” At the same time the reality of the world is a mere matter of individual construction, to underscore Bernstein’s point. In short, the “new model of consciousness” behind the established conventions of postmodernist poetry reveals the mind to be paradoxically a selfless narcissus whose every meaning reduces to indeterminacy—words as particles untraceable in inner space. Rather than a poetry founded on genuine plurality, relational in the substance of reality however flowing, we have a poetry redounding inevitably to endless variations on the same univocal

⁴⁹ Perloff, 85.

⁵⁰ Perloff, 98.

⁵¹ Neil Schmitz, “Gertrude Stein as Postmodernist: The Rhetoric of *Tender buttons*,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3 (July 1975), 1206-7. Quoted in Perloff.

assumption, so many poems at once emerging from and skittering to the same final destination: an I that doesn't exist in a world that cannot be represented. Poems become the expressionless expressions of those slippages.

"The relation between the sign and the thing signified is being destroyed," Simone Weil reflected early in the twentieth century with characteristic prescience, a circumstance that she believed leads inevitably to a variety of non-thought masquerading as thinking—a kind of faux thinking.⁵² Any true believer in the epistemological and ontological agenda of the postmodernist would say that is precisely the point—there is in fact no destination, only impassible pathways, all generative multiplicity without end, the slippages of the word-system that reside elusively on the slippery pages of the text. "Messy rather than neat, plural rather than singular, mannered and oblique rather than straightforward, it prefers the complications of the everyday and the found to the simplicities of the heroic," Hoover opines of postmodernist poets. "Its tongue is seriously in its cheek. It is all styles rather than one."⁵³ Yet such strings of binaries like Hoover's more glaring conceptual contradictions very quickly reveal their collective and fundamental simplification—nothing in the multiplicity of styles and voices in contemporary American poetry is this neat. Regarding the circumstance, one must optimally be at once as skeptical and as non-nominalist as the ever rigorous Simone Weil. The problem in Hoover's case with claiming that postmodernism exemplifies all styles rather than one is to say, essentially, that postmodernist poetry is just this one thing—a pastiche of all possible ways of making poems—which of course is one kind of writing, not all. Thus

⁵²Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 152-153.

⁵³ Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry II*, xxx.

he misses his own point about pluralism and multiplicity. Hoover is right, however, that by and large mannerism comprises the stylistic effect of much postmodernist poetry. By mannered I assume he means a highly self-conscious heightening of stylistic affect, a de-naturalizing of the poem's voice (as if there could be a stable voice, given postmodernism's assumptions), language, and any engagement with the world, however self-referential. Perhaps Hoover is suggesting a stylization roughly akin to the overblown gestures of the seventeenth century Mannerists, or of the jarringly garish use of color in Fauvist painting early in the twentieth century, or the intentionally harsh, expressively garish anti-art of a Basquiat. Again, some forty years ago, Robert Pinsky in *The Situation of Poetry* associated mannerism in poetry with "a mock, naïve teenage sort of detachment" that produced "fey," "daffy," "idiosyncratic" poems often allied with "received ideas."⁵⁴ At the time, Pinsky intended to cast no direct aspersions against "postmodernist poetry"—he regarded some of James Wright's poems, for example, as mannerist in their use of image.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, there is something prescient in Pinsky's characterization of the mannerist mode that is relevant to the kind of poem that merely reiterates well-worn gestures and adheres, knowingly or unknowingly, to the received ideas of a doctrinaire postmodernism.

Yet, though all roads may lead to the final destination of endless digression in the multifarious self-enclosures of the nominalist poem, such poems follow their paths with great felt urgency, even if that urgency is "tongue in cheek" and at first frustratingly associative. Here is the opening of John Ashbery's "The Other Tradition," which Paul Hoover wisely included in his anthology:

⁵⁴Pinsky, *Situation*, 3-4.

⁵⁵ Pinsky, 115.

They all came, some wore sentiments
Emblazoned on T-shirts, proclaiming the lateness
Of the hour, and indeed the sun slanted its rays
Through branches of Norfolk Island pine as though
In a fuzz of dust under trees when it is drizzling:
The endless games of Scrabble, the boosters,
The celebrated omelette au Chantal, and through it
The roar of time plunging unchecked through the
 sluices
Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it
Past the lenses: the end of something.

Ashbery's poem brilliantly celebrates the "everyday over the heroic" and moves with characteristic vitality and speed from T-shirts to Norfolk Island pines to an omelette. Yet we feel confident that the poem is moving somewhere, and we feel it in the rhythms—rather traditional rhythms it turns out—carried along Ashbery's five / six stress line with its vaguely iambic back beat. Where are we heading through this first long sentence? To "the roar of time plunging," to "the end of something." In short, far from skipping the reader across the surface, Ashbery's "new model of consciousness" deliberately carries us into the territory of ultimate questions, which his where great poems should carry us—into those heights and depths, that plunging either up or down or both. Of course, the poem does not end here, but keeps us moving on its current of finely calculated perceptions and details—materializations as out of a dream of the past where a "you" appears. It is an old lover—a stand-in for the reader? And there are troubadours! And what follows is the plunge into memory and night where the addressee speaks "like a megaphone" "not hearing or caring" in a scene that slyly echoes Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West." Ashbery's is not a song sung beyond the genius of the sea; rather his is speech that memorializes

the evanescence of things that “have so much trouble remembering, when you’re forgetting” and so “Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night.”

One wonders what Hoover is thinking when he opposes postmodernist poetry’s openness to traditional poetry’s closure, for Ashbery’s “The Other Tradition” ends with extraordinary closure, the kind of explosively surprising closure that inverts and shatters brilliantly our expectations. The action of forgetting is simultaneously a saving action, as though the mind of the one remembering verged onto the edge of consciousness itself. At the end of the mind, that space as it were beyond Stevens’ “bronze décor” where language cannot venture, there is presence—the star absorbing the night—rather than absence. The star is a stock figure in traditional poetry, a long-called-upon mannerism, yet Ashbery revitalizes the mannered gesture here in an extraordinary way. Whatever “continuous present,” whatever mystical reality Gertrude Stein sought to flatten into her writing is here, but it is not in the poem as a mere surface modeling—a star is a star is a star. Instead, that reality exists just beyond the edge of the poem, and despite postmodernist convention it is that reality, its height and depth and gravity, to which the poem points and of which the poem ultimately partakes. In other words, if there is no pointing to some “beyond” outside the system as Bernstein declares then there is no reason to make the gesture at all.

In “The One Thing That Can Save America,” Ashbery declares: “It is the humps and trials / That tell us whether we shall be known / And whether our fate can be exemplary, like a star. / All the rest is waiting.” Again, the figure of a star presides. Here again Ashbery’s use of the star figure proves the inaccuracy of Hoover’s forced opposition between the heroic and the everyday. The poem begins with the question “Is anything central?” It is a good question, an essential and enduring question, at once

following on and antecedent to whether any center can indeed hold. Perhaps the center cannot, and there is no center, or perhaps more likely everything is central, nothing peripheral, all potentially worthy of regard. In any case, in Ashbery's best poems are not wholly "de-centered." If such poems are rooted in nominalism, they are not rooted in the manner in which a received idea is simply assumed and enacted. Rather, Ashbery's best poems take the proverbial postmodern condition as the given challenge and perhaps most vitally as a point of departure, drawing as urgently from the tradition as from the avant-garde. That is how they give the lie to the idea that tradition and experimentation are somehow mutually exclusive. At the same time, Ashbery's work at its best far exceeds the achievement of Ashbery where the poem before us feels oppressively mannered, as though the postmodernist view of reality required some new exemplification. In that vein, here is the first stanza of "Working Overtime":

Where is Rumpelstiltskin when we need him?
The glass is low,
the bard, weatherwise, who wrote
the grand old ballad of "Sir Patrick,"
comes on all queer.
Do you hear what's happening outside?

"Working Overtime" reads like any other dissociative or elliptical poem produced by any one of many postmodernist poets writing nearly unconsciously in the mode of the *Zeitgeist*—Ashbery's "fleas," as Yeats might call them, all daffy, skittery surface wit and non-sequitur. Even the allusion to "The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens" feels forced, clever, and unnecessary. Do we hear what is happening outside? No reason to go there, not in this poem. Of course the sheer volume of Ashbery's production—or is it

his process—warrants that there will be many lesser poems, the way artists of the kind Ashbery has reviewed for many years produce innumerable variations on the same theme. His first thirty years of published work is collected in a Library of America volume that culminates in 1986 with nearly thirty years and counting to go for the next installment. His best poems, and there are a significant number, exhibit the kind of decorative intensity in language that Matisse's work accomplished with paint, a revelation if not of the world of eternal things but of intense beauty—beauty that by its nature, however mannered, points to an amplitude from which the brilliant surface gains its import and necessity.

Without detailed reference to Ashbery's epoch-defining work, Louse Glück in her essay "On Mannerism" elucidates certain components and dangers of the kind of art that rides entirely on appearances—rides as it were along the mannered surfaces in a way that infers gravity and intelligence that is actually missing from the poems. Such poems, she suggests, assume it is "less crucial to think than to appear to think, to be beheld thinking."⁵⁶ In relief of such poems Glück's actual concern is with those that have great intellectual daring and urgency but which eschew surface difficulty. One might well cite her own work, or that of her contemporary Ellen Bryant Voigt, or any number of other contemporary American poets who do not comfortably fit within the program of "postmodernism" but which do exemplify deep engagement with our "postmodern" time. In a useful phrase that summarizes many of the effects of the standard "postmodern" "skittery," "elliptical," "experimental" poem Glück identifies several "strategies of incompleteness." These include "repetition, accumulation,

⁵⁶ Louise Glück, "On Mannerism" in *Metre 7/8* (Spring / Summer 2000) 121.

invocation of the void through ellipsis, dash, non sequitur, skidding associations, and so on. All of these strategies are applicable to any poem, of course, though the issue is effectiveness, the liberation into the poem of thought and emotion truly and duly engaged with the matter of being. The point she makes is that in mannered poems “the charged moment is always charged in the same way.”⁵⁷ “How much looseness, or omission, or non-relation is exciting,” she asks, “and when do these devices become problematic or, worse, mannered?” It is exactly the right question, as apropos to the point as asking when or how a poem’s formalism (as opposed to form) becomes a product driven exercise rather than expressively necessary to the poet’s theme. What we find in such poems, too, is mannerism: the empty performance of an idea more than likely received or programmed into the poem rather than discovered—discovery, which is the real process that renders and accomplished poem its own experiment in language.

One notable example of the programmed poem—programmed because it obviously intends to advance the theory of poetry behind language poetry—is Charles Bernstein’s “Thank You for Saying Thank You.” Here is how it opens:

This is a totally
accessible poem.
There is nothing
in this poem
that is in any
way difficult
to understand.

⁵⁷ Glück , 124.

All the words
are simple &
to the point.
There are no new
Concepts, no
Theories, no
ideas to confuse
you....

Bernstein's poem proceeds for about ninety lines in just this vein, creating what he understands to be a generic send up of the "mainstream" poem, or at least the skeletal ontological and epistemological substructure of such poems. To accentuate the irony Bernstein's poems ends: "It's / real," where the word "real" defines what the "word-system" cannot touch—reality—since whatever is real is so only within language's inescapable net. Perhaps I am misreading the poem, however, since near its end it declares itself "committed / to poetry as a / popular form, like kite / flying and fly fishing," which would suggest an idea of poetry antithetical to the highly theorized agenda of the language poets, and would suggest through the simile of the kite something like a world out there that is not wholly confined to the word-system. On the other hand, the poem "Likeness" begins "the heart is like the heart / the head is like the head / the motion is like the motion / the lips are like the lips / the ocean is like the ocean / the fate is like the fate," and so continues on accordingly, likening things only to themselves—a negation of the category of likeness through the ironically syllogistic deployment in the poem of simile. "Likeness" goes on for several pages. Together, these poems constitute clever exercises intended to bang home the theoretical point, the same noted earlier: "the givenness of language is the givenness of the world." There is no *relation* of language to the world or vice versa—the

heart is like the heart, it is not like another thing. Or, then again, does Bernstein mean that the letters h=e=a=r=t, that nominalist compendia of atomized signs, are like the bodily organ, or the center of something? That would be true only in English, however. Or does it suffice to remain an agreement among ourselves without substantive relation *through* language as opposed to *in* language? What of the poet, then, according to the strict postmodernist believer? Here is the opening of “Warrant”:

I warrant that this
poem is entirely my
own work and that
the underlying ideas
concepts, and make-up
of the poem have not
been taken from any
other source or any
other poem but rather
originate with this poem . . .

The move in these three poems, as Gluck might observe, is always the same—the manner of a manner—and the joke wears exceedingly thin. One thinks of the late Andy Kaufmann’s painfully repetitive comedic routines, how he would intentionally frustrate the audience’s expectations, coming out dressed as Elvis and lip-syncing the refrain from the Mighty Mouse cartoon—“Here I come to save the day!” “Warrant,” like a number of Bernstein’s poems, is antagonistic in just this way while remaining wedded to a theoretically driven poetry as well as the business of poetry situated as it is amidst vying schools of poetry. Such poetry is a kind of entertainment, as Jack Spicer said it should be, but it is entertainment reserved for the few who pay to get into the club. By contrast, here are the same

intellectual concerns directed outward and fueled by genuine feeling in the first stanza of “Castor Oil,” written for Bernstein’s late daughter Emma, dead by suicide:

I went looking for my soul
In the song of a minor bird
But I could not find it there
Only the shadow of my thinking.

These are moving lines, traditionally rendered by this poet for whom tradition is nearly anathema, communicating the bitterness of our seemingly soul-less existence. It does not indulge in the mannered exultation of linguistic parody. In his subsequent book, *Recalculating*, the poem “This is the last Day of the Rest of Your Life ‘Til Now” begins “I was the luckiest of fathers in the world / before I was the unluckiest.”⁵⁸ Such poems reveal a poet far less driven by poetic and theoretical ideology and far more responsive to life, by which I mean also death, which inevitably calls all our conceptual agendas up short and renders any mannered art hollow beneath the surface artifice, however superficially dazzling and inventive: unless the mind and heart—the heart as heart and quaking center—contend with a still deeper emptiness under the polished surfaces.

“Every period has its manners, its signatures and, by extension, its limitations and blindness,” Louise Glück reflects, “and it is particularly difficult, from the inside, to recognize such characteristics: omnipresence makes them invisible.”⁵⁹ Mannerism happens when a genuine poetic

⁵⁸ Bernstein, *Recalculating*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Glück, 130.

signature atrophies into an empty gesture. Such work, one believes and hopes, finally becomes expendable over time, that only “the best” of the “most characteristic” within a period carries over into the forefront of literary history. “Postmodernist American Poetry,” as defined by Paul Hoover in two impressively large anthologies, positively pursues and self-consciously proclaims the centrality of mannerism under the directive that language, poetry, and reality have no place for the genuine, to adapt Marianne Moore’s well-worn phrase. Were the culture of our period able collectively to play the old parlor game “In the Manner Of,” where one person is made to leave the room while the remaining players choose an adverb to act out such that the one asked to leave must guess the adverb when she returns, what might those who stayed enact had they chosen the adverb “postmodernly,” if such a word existed?

If the players were some of the more than one hundred poets included in Hoover’s most recent iteration of his anthology, some would act out the reigning period with close adherence to the philosophical agenda signified by the adverb—poetry as non sequitur, poetry as endless repetition, poetry as continuous present spatially represented on the page, poetry as language game, poetry as wallpaper. One, were one so inclined, could identify which poets most fully adhere to the tenets underlying the nominalist poem. I would suggest that these poems and poets are least likely to stand the test of time according to what we know of what endures in cultures and across times and cultures. The work of other poets like Olson, Levertov, Koch, O’Hara, Ginsburg, Creeley, Ashbery, Snyder—I am selecting only the most established and most obvious without judgment as to whom, especially women, might naturally follow on the list—would in no way conform to some univocal postmodernism, some presiding and defining nominalism of “the word-system.” One might ask in turn: Why are not the likes

of Jean Valentine and Heather McHugh represented in the anthology, to name only two well-established contemporaries? There is plenty of non sequitur in each, and plenty of dazzling language play. The boundaries of Hoover's anthology appear shiftily in a way that expresses more the politics of such enterprises than some period and world-defining ontological condition.

In the end, there is perhaps more than a philosophical nod to Frederick Jameson and his account of late capitalism in Paul Hoover's presentation of postmodernist American poetry, with particular reference to marketing. Here, Hoover affirms, are more than one hundred poets that write "postmodernly," and here are their shared underlying suppositions. The great carnival barker of modern poetry, Ezra Pound, gave modernism the slogan "make it new." Ironically, he adapted the phrase belatedly from an eighteenth century king of the Shang Dynasty, and as Gregory Wolfe observes the directive actually better translates as "renovation."⁶⁰ "Renovation" communicates a very different relationship to the past, a necessary and mutually supportive relationship rather than a rejection of what has come before. By contrast, in a recent issue of *American Poets*, Anne Waldman pays homage to Gertrude Stein's long poem *Stanzas in Meditation*, which Waldman calls "an heroic foray into uncharted poetic territory whose only subject is the act of writing itself."⁶¹ It is, in short, an Ur text for postmodernist poetry, embodying the now thoroughly charted poetics of so much of what is *au courant* in contemporary American poetry. "It is as though the language had assumed ownership of itself," Waldman exults of

⁶⁰ Gregory Wolfe, "Making it New," *Image 81* (Summer 2014) 3.

⁶¹ Anne Waldman, "Impossible Poetry" *American Poets: The Journal of the Academy of American Poets*, 46 (Spring / Summer 2014) 6.

Stein's poem, "there is such a wonderful solipsism in this approach."⁶²

Solipsism is the approach, defines the approach, and sets the prime example for the approach found in so many contemporary poems of the kind likewise widely celebrated in academia. In the guise of effacing the self into the very insubstantial stuff of language, language owned by language masquerading as the mind, the poet fills up the poem and the world with nothing but the self in a Narcissistic pretense of self-obliteration. Pitched to this degree and application, the nominalist impulse reveals itself to be inherently delusory. Or, as Louise Glück warns again, "narcissistic practice, no matter what ruse it appropriates, no matter what ostensible subject, is static, in that its position is self-fixed."⁶³ Perhaps even more egregiously, Glück observes, narcissism "expects us to enter into its obsession." Obsession is not inherently bad for poets, and in fact it likely is a precondition for the making of any poem. More often than not, however, the vatic betrays its vapidly especially when the vatic declares in one long-winded breath the poet's "wonderful solipsism" and the death of subjectivity. Given the privileged place of such poetry in the poems of our climate it seems apropos to quote one final time from the incomparable and pervasively imitated *mater familias* of postmodernist poetry, Gertrude Stein, the words she offered to those who fell under the spell of her own work: "It was not only that they liked it / It is very kind of them to like it."⁶⁴

⁶²Waldman, 7.

⁶³ Glück, 130.

⁶⁴ Stein, 9.

3. *Roadless Road*

What I have been seeking to tease out, to uncover in an admittedly circuitous and limited way, are the philosophical and practical roots of postmodernist American poetry in the breakdown of western “realism,” the belief that one can indeed extrapolate to universals from individual experience, that language and the world exist in productive relationship with each other not merely by convention but in reality. The purely nominalist poem in whatever manifestation assumes no such relational efficacy, or assumes in spades what Tom Sleigh has called our common “metaphysically weightless condition”⁶⁵ as an *a priori*, a given, and therefore as a *pro forma* approach to making poems. The modernists faced up to the challenge of western culture’s metaphysical free-fall in a variety of ways. Eliot embraced religious orthodoxy to the potential exclusion of any positive cultural diversity. Stevens embraced the power of imagination as a “supreme fiction,” a secular religious model of art emerging from the precious portents of our own powers. Yeats constructed his own heterodox myth to inform the “personal utterance” of his poetry, and Pound made art itself a kind of highest good—a fetish benefiting the few who can crack the code orchestrated from the ruins, the code that would make things new out of the unrecoverable past. Gertrude Stein is indeed the crucial figure in this last camp, for in her assumptions about writing and reality we find the blueprint for postmodernism where one can have a very big career in the art but one cannot, in the groundless groundwork of existence, have “subjectivity.” Again, as Sleigh laments, the “I” remains “confident of its status as a linguistic entity even while the I as flesh and

⁶⁵Thomas Sleigh, *Interview with a Ghost* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006) 117.

blood speaker whose fate is of intrinsic interest has come to an end.”⁶⁶ And with the end of the “I,” “the solace of formal wholeness” achieved by one stratagem or another defers to the idea that an artistic work must be “based on fragmentation, collage, or other nonlinear methods,” all of which collectively somehow manage presumptuously to “escape the history of styles.”⁶⁷ Sleigh, well aware of the epistemological and ontological predicament of contemporary poetry, takes the strain of that predicament but does not hold with the postmodernist program. For Sleigh, late Lowell is in his manner as associative as Ashbery, and the supposedly imperious previously presumptive “I” remains dramatically and vitally at risk without dematerializing or parading itself in a masque of parody.

In theological, historical, and sociological context, David Bentley Hart has identified the disappearance of the transcendent that so characterizes post-modernity at every level, including Paul Hoover’s encapsulating depiction of what lies behind postmodernist poetry, as something to reject. For Hart, the sources of violence and cruelty are not to be found simplistically in religion but in that which precedes any cultural form: our animal natures. No sentimentalist about religion, Rust Cohle, our fictional postmodernist detective, would surely agree. On the other hand, Hart ruefully observes, postmodernism indeed emerges from modernism out of what he calls the quintessential myth of modernity: that “true freedom is the power of the will over nature—human or cosmic—and that we are at liberty to make ourselves what we wish to be”⁶⁸ This uncontested and presumptuous value leads inevitably to Nietzsche’s

⁶⁶ Sleigh, 120.

⁶⁷ Sleigh, 187.

⁶⁸ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 107.

conclusion that “only the will persists, set before the abyss of limitless possibility—or forging its way—in the dark.”⁶⁹ Hart identifies Nietzsche’s reification of the will with our postmodern condition. Postmodernism is “post-human” in Hart’s view because it rejects out of hand the epistemological and ontological groundwork on which the idea of the human evolved, including the idea of the “I,” the person, and language as a nexus of relation to and from the world and others, along with, fundamentally, the promise of transcendence on which the idea of the human is founded. Interestingly, in his essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Wallace Stevens anticipates Hart’s vision of our “post-human” world explicitly within an aesthetic rather than theological or ethical context when he reflects:

All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever larger incoherence. This is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force, operative or imminent.⁷⁰

Stevens’ grim judgment on the social, historical, and cultural conditions in which poetry finds credence pertains even more today than it did sixty years ago. The fact that Stevens is for many poets one of the great models of the new “mannerism” only renders such claims more urgently ironic—the fraught relationship between imagination and reality was not a game for Stevens but a matter of the utmost purpose and meaning. The imagination is a necessary angel, not an arbitrary one, not the messenger of some summary existential or ontological non sequitur. The

⁶⁹ Hart, 230.

⁷⁰ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage, 195) 17.

at times dull poetry written in the name of the avant-garde, like any poetry conjured merely from any set of assumptions, maintains relevance in the history of aesthetic turf wars. Yet, when the marshal metaphor bespoken by the term “avant-garde” elides vastly more egregious eventualities of will impacting the lives, and deaths, of real persons, then the relative irrelevance of art finds common ground with far graver matters. It always has. When the purely philosophical and aesthetic assumption of “the death of the subject” abuts the deaths of millions of subjects in flesh and blood for reasons inevitably of the will to power then the favors of a postmodernist “Eternity” over a traditional “Eternity” come to sound sanitized and utopian, however well-intended they appear to be with their hope of saving us from the old brutalities of gods and empires and the various insidious oppressions of “the metaphysical.”

There are then two basic confusions underlying the postmodernist poetic program, and by the postmodernist poetic program I do not mean *tout corps* all “experimental” or avant-garde poets, some of whom have written marvelous individual poems. Again, all great poems are in some manner experimental—they at once create a world and enable us to see the world anew. I mean, rather, to take issue with the nominalist reductionism that forms the stated basis for the poetics so clearly articulated by Paul Hoover. As William Lynch explains, once “the whole action and division of the sensible world” has been “obliterated,” and language and reality set apart by an impassible gulf, then somehow the poem itself becomes a way “to get a hold of,” in Lynch’s words, “a world of pure being.”⁷¹ In short, the first confusion is to make poetry the inverse of some presumptively static Eternity—or a static “Eternity.” Here,

⁷¹ William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1960) 183.

again, we find Gertrude Stein's "continuous present." One would presume this Eternity to be ethereal, but the claim rests on a foundation of radical materialism, and Stein's practice like that of many who follow resides in a view of art as inaction: "Generally speaking," she affirms, "anybody is more interesting doing nothing than doing something"⁷² Stein's reification of inaction in writing likewise lies behind her conception of poetry as concerned exclusively with the noun—verbs need not apply.⁷³ By contrast, there is good reason to believe with William Lynch that action is "the soul of the literary imagination in all its scope and forms, and that metaphor either springs out of action as one of its finest fruits, or is itself one of its many forms."⁷⁴ It is a concept to which Owen Barfield wholly adheres when he asks: "What is absolutely necessary for the present existence of poetry?" And he answers: "the real presence of movement."⁷⁵ Movement, action, by definition, requires relation—it is relation manifest in language and in reality, requiring the real presence of both, as necessary as any sacrament. Literary imagination is an action of consciousness and without that action there is no art, indeed there is no reality, at least in any humanly conceivable terms.

This brings us to the second confusion, which as Lynch observes is nothing less than confusion about "the metaphysical structure of reality itself,"⁷⁶ as though "meaning" resided in some centrally accessible storehouse from which it is packaged and parceled and distributed. Such an Eternity would be as static as the aforementioned Eternity,

⁷² Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, quoted in Lynch, 283.

⁷³ See Lynch, 214.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction, Poetic Form: a Study in Meaning* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1973) 182.

⁷⁶ Lynch, 184.

the two existing at opposite ontological and epistemological poles: conceptual matter and anti-matter, matter and antimatter canceling each other out. What Lynch calls “the equivocal” view of reality—everything atomized and running divergently from everything else—is nothing other than the nominalist view that lies at the core the postmodernist view of reality. At its furthest reach, the equivocal collapses to the univocal—a reductive unity that erases all difference. That is why all styles converge into one style for Hoover in the endless shell game of postmodernism. By contrast, what is necessary according to Lynch is to envision reality as “the interpenetration of unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference, a kind of interpenetration in terms of which the two contraries become one and the same thing—but become this only because existentially they have always been it.”⁷⁷ Lynch calls this “the metaphysics of analogy,” and it expresses anything but a static vision of reality. Rather, unity and sameness require multiplicity and difference because all things exist through participation with and through each other—a field or fields of action. When Charles Olson enjoins poets to write in the “open field” he is unknowingly calling on the fundamentals of a very long tradition of which he does not appear to be entirely aware—hence the call for revolution, to again “make it new.” Interestingly, A.R. Ammons, a poet committed to the aesthetic of the “open field” regarded the ontological relationship between the Many and the One to be the essential question his poetry sought to address, and was form him the essential mystery of reality proper. As he observes in “A Poem is a Walk,” “The statement “All is One, provides for no experience of manyness, of the concrete world from which the statement derived. But a work of art creates a

⁷⁷Lynch, 190.

world both one and many, a world of definition and in-definition.”⁷⁸ If Lynch and A.R. Ammons are right, then in Lynch’s words “the *one* is not a dead, monotonous fact; it only becomes itself by articulating itself into many jointings and members.”⁷⁹ The analogical vision of reality has been the foundation of the mainline of western metaphysics since at least the fourth century CE, though one could trace strands of it much earlier in the culture of the West. Rather than a static straw man Eternity, the analogical vision depends and builds on adaptation, renewal, improvisation, revision and—to make itself new—ongoing renovation.

Essential to William Lynch’s analogical metaphysics is the inherently positive valuation of language and its relationship to material reality. The analogical is anything but world-denying, despite the fact that so often western culture and its religious institutions have failed miserably to live up to the affirming implications of the vision. If the analogical vision of reality has deep roots in human culture and consciousness, then so, too, does the antithetical world-denying impulse. According to David Bentley Hart it is possible to see the deep roots of so pervasive a negation of the human even in Greek and Roman culture, well before the advent of nominalism. That negation is resident in the “glorious sadness,” as Hart calls it, of both the tragic vision of ancient Greece as well as Rome’s “theatre of cruelty,” founded as it is on the imposition of power and the exploitation of the weak.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, great art flowered as always, and not only as the product of its culture but as an enduring expression of a human quest for meaning. In

⁷⁸ A.R. Ammons, *Set in Motion* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 13.

⁷⁹ Lynch, 195.

⁸⁰ Hart, 125-145.

the alternative Gnostic Christianities of the first five centuries of the Common Era, the world-denying spirit found vigorous advocacy and practice. There were varieties of Gnostic sects from Valentinianism to Marcionism to Manicheism. Collectively, they exerted a kind of useful negative pressure that enabled orthodox Christianity to gain communal, creedal, structural and ultimately cultural definition and predominance. In our postmodern period we tend to favor the heterodox, the syncretistic, the belief that all beliefs or no belief at all are equally true since belief, like all of reality, is nothing more than a cultural construction harboring no essential truth. Yet, had Marcion prevailed over the Orthodox advocates Irenaeus and Tertullian the Hebrew Bible, to cite just one example, would not have been incorporated into the Christian faith. Marcion and his followers believed “the Old Testament God” to be a false god, the god of this world, a demiurge that deludes all but the chosen, elite few. The rest are and forever will be mired in materiality. Anti-Semitism has been a virus and blight throughout history, but how much worse would things have been had the God of the Jewish people been deemed a false god, an evil god, and not the same God as the One God of the dominant Christian religion? More to the point, these two principal concepts—that the visible cosmos was ruled by Darkness (in the form of false gods, principalities, powers, archons and the like) resistant to the true immaterial God, and that escape from this world is made only by an elite few who obtain secret knowledge, *gnosis*, governed all forms of Gnosticism regardless of particular differences in doctrine.

What has Gnosticism to do with postmodernism and especially postmodern poetry? First, many have already recognized the parallel nature of our own time to the cultural ferment of two thousand years ago—that “Age of Anxiety” as Auden’s friend the historian E.R. Dodds called

it.⁸¹ If Hart is right in calling our postmodernist period a “posthuman” era, then our leveling of the cosmos to a universe defined by materialism with, in turn, the philosophical divestiture of language and reality from each other, transports us to a belated Gnostic milieu without exit. Ours, too, is a universe governed entirely by force against which and against each other individuals are bound to pit their wills. There is a second parallel identified by Elaine Pagels that makes Gnosticism’s inherent elitism prescient and relevant for postmodernist aesthetics. “Like circles of artists today,” Pagels writes, “gnostics considered original creative invention to be the mark of anyone who becomes spiritually alive.”⁸² Art, in short, must be avant-garde, revolutionary in the belated and self-contradictory meaning of the word—not a return to beginnings to renew them but an obliteration of the old under the rubric of “original creative invention.” Postmodernism at its core is paradoxically world-denying for it is a vision of the world founded on the impossibility of relation, of action. As such, all actions, including aesthetic action, reiterate and mirror the presiding and irredeemable chaos. Is the best to be done nothing more than parody and wallpaper, since the age of the literary gem is forever passé, as one follower of Charles Alteiri affirmed blithely?⁸³ Beckett’s genius was too existentially and humanly sensitive even at his grimmest to succumb to the full implications of the postmodernist vision, though like Stein he anticipates our time. His art rises above the times, however, with a kind of majestic deprivation, the analogical

⁸¹ E.R.Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: WW Norton, 1965) 3.

⁸² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 19.

⁸³ The American Conference for Irish Studies, Dublin Ireland, June, 2014.

vision alive for all in homeless clowns and talking heads enduring in their despair. Such an art is anything but elitist. Becket's is a minimalism that is vastly embracing, rather than a mannerism of maximal claims. And it resonates profoundly with Weil's understanding of affliction, so much so that his most representative work, *Waiting for Godot*, literally embodies in its title Weil's *Waiting for God*.

At the same time, there remains a drastic existential difference between the claims of Gnosticism and the claims of postmodernism, though both are world-negating in their effective vision of reality. In *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels observes that in Valentinus's version of the quest for gnosis the searcher's path begins with the recognition of *kakia*, the Greek word for illness, though illness of this kind is more like Sartre's existential "nausea," a feeling part and parcel of the material conditions of being rather than of mere spiritual disaffection. The journey begins with the Gnostic recognition that "all materiality was formed from three experiences [or, sufferings]: terror, pain, and confusion [*aporia*; literally "roadlessness," not knowing where to go]."⁸⁴ Such roadlessness existentially speaking is Dantean: In the middle of my life I found myself in a dark wood for the straight way was lost. The difference between Valentinus and the Florentine poet some thirteen hundred years later is that Dante believed bodily existence and spiritual life were one through the Incarnation. He believed, in short, in an analogical universe. For Valentinus, whatever signs might be present in the world, the world itself is materially and irreparably fallen—one follows Christ to escape it, which is why in Gnostic Christology the figure of Christ is understood more as a phantom displaying the guise of material existence than a wholly flesh and blood human being of one substance with the divine nature.

⁸⁴. Pagels, 144.

Aporia, roadlessness, is a common word used to describe the postmodern condition as well. The difference in postmodernism is that *aporia* shifts from an existential condition to a condition of language and being now reified to univocality and inescapable. What was heresy for orthodox Christians in the alternative Christianities of the first few centuries of the Common Era resonates with postmodernism's heterodox, "equivocal," orthodoxy. The word "heresy," like *aporia*, comes from the Greek and means "to choose." In short, from the orthodox perspective, the heretic "chooses" to embrace false opinions or beliefs.⁸⁵ The postmodernist embraces aesthetic heresy, happily transgressing the established boundaries. Or as Paul Hoover has outlined, the postmodernist poet falls under the rubric of a well-formed vision of reality that the poems reiterate in their aesthetic choices. Collectively those choices reflect "a zeitgeist." If not exactly a belated version of Gnosticism, postmodernism does proclaim the material, epistemological, and ontological reality of the *aporia*, of "roadlessness," the pathless path of art as an endless errancy accruing to no end, interchangeable play, leveled of value.

There are a great many practitioners of postmodernist American poetry, and one could trace some of the proclivities I have tried to outline theoretically in the particulars of a great many poems—the mannerisms of the postmodernist poetic happily and self-confidently heretical, self-thrilled with its choices to transgress, sometimes (according to its own orthodoxy) for the sake of transgression. Here, by way of example, is the first section of Michael Dickman's "Emily Dickinson to the Rescue" from his James Laughlin Award winning book, *Flies*:

⁸⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 69.

Standing in her house today all I could think of was
whether
she took a shit every
morning

or ever fucked anybody
or ever fucked
herself

God's poet
singing herself to sleep

You want these sorts of things for people

Bodies and
the earth
and

the earth inside

Instead of white
nightgowns and terrifying
letters

In a recent issue of *American Poet* one of the judges for the award praises Dickman's work for its "Kafkaesque hilarity," and his punctuation that, the judge believes, functions like Dickinson's own dashes with a hint of Frank Bidart thrown in for good measure. The outsized comparisons to Kafka and Dickinson are hard to take seriously, unless Kafka was an adolescent who had watched too many zombie movies and Dickinson was more inclined to record her regular bowel movements, her inclination toward masturbation, and her back-room liaisons with her father's hunky gardeners. More seriously, Dickman's poem begins

with the willfully “shocking” thought of Emily Dickinson voiding herself instead of facing the Void as she does so often in her poems, and moves on from there “bravely” to undo our image of “God’s poet” by immersing the figure of her ever more deeply into the mire of earthly existence, a mire more expressive of the poet’s immature psyche than expressive of any vital relation to Dickinson. The poem, in short, exemplifies the kind of knee-jerk ironic style and shock value that has become not only commonplace but feted with awards.

As Ellen Bryant Voigt observes, the ironic style offers only “cleverness” rather than a genuinely discrepant angle, as opposed to genuine irony with its power to shock and reveal sadly discrepant truths, like slaves building the Capitol of the United States of America.⁸⁶ “Worse,” Voigt continues, “poets may doubt the possibility of any sort of meaning in the world, and content themselves with an allegedly mimetic representation of disparate, even random fragments of observation and experience.”⁸⁷ From this vantage, a poem like “Emily Dickinson to the Rescue” imposes the poet’s presumptive stance toward reality upon the world like someone scratching *de facto* witticisms on a bathroom stall. In that vein, toward the end of his poem “An Offering,” Dickman declares “I have made so many mistakes that I must wake all the Lords early so we can get a head start on cleaning some of this shit up.” Shit clearly carries substantial figural weight in Dickman’s poetry. Here he calls on the “Lords”—his sister, grandma, grandpa, the boss—the way a latter day Gnostic faced with the aporia of himself and life generally might call on the false

⁸⁶. Ellen Bryant Voigt, “Double Talk and Double Vision,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 2009) 377.

⁸⁷. *Ibid.*

gods and archons of material reality to allow him to pass through. But there is no passing through, or out, except in the self-evident manner of language voiding itself into the unavoidable void that is reality and the poem, voided with considerable self-congratulation onto the page, apparently for our delectation. Look, the poet carries his poem into the public like a child in potty training handing over a fresh stool: see what I made.

It could be argued that Michael Dickman's "Emily Dickinson to the Rescue" and "An Offering" are poems that do intend to mean, that happily or unhappily express subjectivity, and that therefore do not conform to doctrinaire postmodernism. On the other hand, Dickman's poems do manifest postmodernism as a zeitgeist, if not overtly as a theoretical doctrine. In this manner they appear motivated primarily to level hierarchies and to shock. "Emily Dickinson to the Rescue" does not evoke the greatness of its subject. The height and depth of her vision flattens to the lowest common denominator—material existence embodied and exemplified by shitting and fucking. Both the aesthetic and the ontological vision embodied in such poems stands in stark contrast not only to Dickinson's own work but to the affirmation expressed by Simone Weil that ultimately "art is an attempt to transport into a limited quantity of matter . . . an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe."⁸⁸ As such, with a radical faith that would win her few supporters in contemporary academic life, she concludes: "God has inspired every first-rate work of art, though its subject may be utterly and entirely secular."⁸⁹ So assured a view of art's connection to the divine has been

⁸⁸. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) 107.

⁸⁹. *Ibid.*

very nearly if not wholly expunged from contemporary aesthetics which at times collapses even the amplitude of merely human meaning into mere materiality.

Beyond the leveling of such hierarchies, Dickman's work manifests some of the characteristics of what Stephen Burt's "Elliptical School" of poets. "Look for a persona and a world, not for an argument or a plot," Burt exhorts. The persona of Dickman's poems is fairly consistent and pervasive in the zeitgeist. It is really more attitude, as Tony Hoagland has observed, than an outright persona,⁹⁰ a kind of blithely unyielding and doggedly adolescent *weltschmerz* that takes nothing seriously except its own posture, its manner of disaffection. When emotion finds expression in such poems it is usually melodramatic. More to the core is the idea that the poems of the zeitgeist "resemble games whose rules you can learn,"⁹¹ the hinting, the punning, the skittery swerving away from sense, the particulate concentrations that forestall a sense of the whole. Still more to the core, as Charles Bernstein observed in "Pomegranates," is the deliberate crossing out of "We can't avoid structure" and its replacement with "a void structure." The vision at bottom, or perhaps on the surface, is one of language without logos, without purpose or end in every sense—language and poetry as empty structure.

By contrast, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur would have us view the matter very differently. "It is in language," Ricoeur maintains, "that the cosmos, desire, and the imaginary reach expression; speech is always necessary if the world is to be recovered and made hierophany."⁹² What

⁹⁰ Tony Hoagland, *Real Sophistikayshun* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2010) 184.

⁹¹ Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2009) 13.

⁹² Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Eds. Charles E. Regan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 99.

language gives us, rather than a void structure, is “surpluses of meaning” that are born of language’s relational capacity, its inherent “I-Thou” structure and its capacity for polysemy, for making meanings. Metaphor, for Ricoeur, reveals the quintessence of language for in metaphor we find designated “the general process by which we grasp kinship, break the distance between remote ideas, build similarities on dissimilarities” by exploiting “the tension between sameness and difference.”⁹³ Ricoeur’s view encapsulates at the scale of language’s fundamental operations Lynch’s analogical vision of reality at the macrocosmic level. Where the two meet is in the power of metaphor, the power of language, and as such the power of poetry “not to improve communication” nor ensure the power of one singular voice over another as an imposition of will, but “to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language.”⁹⁴ In Ricoeur’s view language, like reality, is metamorphosis; or as Ammons observed in his poem *Garbage*, the problem is not that there is no meaning (as postmodernism would have it) but that there is so much meaning that “we don’t know what to do with all the meaning.” As the meaning embedded in the word *heretic* teaches us, we will have to choose. One hopes that as American poetry continues to evolve more poets will choose the road that blazes a path through roadlessness back to the co-inherence of language and reality. The poet who decides to make this choice, it appears more and more, will be an outlier amid the throng of fractious voices and wallpaper hangers all passing by.

⁹³ Ricoeur, 132.

⁹⁴ Ricoeur, 133.

4. *Outlier*

In the photograph, the old poet looks out from the half-door of his stone cottage as from the inside of a pre-historic cave but for the swung-open window sash abutting a leafless shrub. He's leaning out, more than a little grimly it seems, his left hand resting on the lower jamb, in his right a pair of reading glasses held firmly. The poet's face is a sharp-edged crag, his mouth turned slightly down, the hair around his bald pate a simmering white flame waiting to increase wildly with the first breeze. The eyes looking a little away at something off-center are fierce. So appeared R.S. Thomas, called by then "The Ogre of Wales," near the end of his life. Born in 1913, two years after Charles Olson, who coined the word "postmodern" in his letter to Robert Creeley, a year before John Berryman, whose psychically fraught poems anticipate and enact the post-modern predicament of metaphysical vacuity and the poet's need to respond with self-performance and linguistic play, R.S. Thomas encountered and confronted all of the same epistemological, ontological and aesthetic insecurities of the twentieth century on into the twenty-first. He died in 2000 at the age of eighty-seven. His first two books were self-published, the second by a printer with a one room office above a chip shop, though the books that followed brought him progressively greater renown until four years before his death he was nominated for the Nobel Prize. A priest for nearly forty years in the Church of Wales, and a prolific and prodigious poet whose work many believe to be among greatest to have been produced in English in the twentieth century, R.S. Thomas is still barely acknowledged in the expansive but simultaneously closed circles of American poetry. Extraordinarily, he managed to shape his ever more intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually urgent body of work by making his artistic journey against the grain of a progressively more secular and technologi-

cally driven world. He also, quite literally, moved further out and deeper into the far reaches of Wales—finally to Aberdaron on the remote Llyn peninsula where he held his last rectorship, and onward then on the same remote peninsula to the cottage Sarn, near a place called Hell’s Mouth. If Stephen Burt’s observation that “the poets with the fewest hip connections, farthest from the metropolitan centers, are the likeliest to get overlooked”⁹⁵ carries relevance beyond our own cultural moment, then Thomas’ career is certainly among the more remarkable in recent memory. In a rather stunning synchronicity, he lost the Nobel in literature to Seamus Heaney in 1996, another great poet born to unlikely circumstances who moved, by temperament and his particular genius, into the pivotal center of literary fame and world regard.

In contrast, R.S. Thomas was by temperament and artistic inclination a contrarian, an outlier. One thinks of Dickinson, Hopkins and Bishop, his relative contemporary, rather than Pound or Lowell, and certainly not Stein, who cultivated her legend with extreme prejudice; Stein, who was born the same year as Robert Frost, that other outlier who unlike Thomas moved contrary-wise into the native admiration of his own importance before becoming an American icon. Thomas was a middle-class Welshman who spoke with a cultivated English accent, who taught himself his native tongue later in life but would write his poems in English; a priest who felt more at home wandering the wilds and the hills bird watching than among his parishioners. Though he fulfilled his ministerial duties, especially visiting the sick, with care and performed his sacramental duties with dedication, he all the while rigorously questioned his faith and its most basic principles. He

⁹⁵ Burt, 17.

was a pacifist who refused to condemn Welsh nationalists who fire-bombed English vacation homes; a father who packed his son, Gwydion, off to English boarding school to give more time to himself and his wife, the painter Mildred “Elsi” Eldridge, for writing and painting. Principally, he was a poet whose work faces head on the limits of language, the onslaught of materialism and the advance of science as the dominant prism by which human beings take stock of reality. He also faces with ferocious courage the lurking emptiness behind the self’s apparent solvency, its consciousness of being present. In short, his work takes on the lineaments of the nominalist universe that comes to fruition in the postmodern milieu but does so in a way that eschews the indulgences of the postmodernist aesthetic.

In postmodernism language is assumed to be a closed system, and so postmodernist poetry feels quite at home in the endless play of the language game. The idea of a rupture between language and reality is not unfamiliar to Thomas’ poetry, or as he reflects in “Epitaph,” “The poem in the rock / and the poem in the mind / are not one.” More troubling still, in “The Gap” Thomas posits the scenario of God awakening “but the nightmare did not recede.” Instead, “word by word / the tower of speech grew” to the point where, as with the tower of Babel to which the poem alludes, “vocabulary would have triumphed” where God rests “on the chasm a / word could bridge.” Except in Thomas’ riff of the story of Babel, God leaves “the blank / still by his name of the same / order as the territory / between them / the verbal hunger for the thing itself.” The blank of God’s true name nullifies the bridge any word might make to the thing in itself and hence to all of reality. R.S. Thomas and Charles Bernstein would appear to be, most incongruously, in agreement—there is no way beyond language to bridge to traverse. What follows in the poem marks the difference between Thomas’s postmodern vision

and language poetry's doctrinal postmodernism:

And the darkness
that is a god's blood swelled
in him, and he let it
to make the sign in the space
on the page, that is all languages
and none; that is the grammarian's
torment and the mystery
at the cell's core, and the equation
that will not come out, and is
the narrowness that we stare
over into the eternal
silence that is the repose of God.

For Thomas, unlike the poetry of postmodernism, the gap that inevitably presents itself in language—that space resident in the sign like a mote in the eye of the self and the world—is the signal of the mystery resident “at the cell's core” and in the unsolvable equation of physical reality. The apophatic blank rather than the word is the sign of God, the sign that points to a via *negativa* the poet must traverse. As he declares in “Waiting”:

Face to face? Ah, no
God; such language falsifies
the relation. Nor side by side,
nor near you, nor anywhere
in time and space.

Does R.S. Thomas as both priest and poet believe in the beginning that there was the Blank and not the Word, and emptiness underlying the Logos? In a one sense, it seems so. In another it does not. For “a word” is not “The

Word” in Thomas’s conception of life and poetry. The relation is founded on God’s side of the gap or not at all. That relation, as we have seen, is analogical and therefore mediatory, a leap as between synapses across the empty gap permitted, of all things, by God’s own self-emptying. In Thomas’s view, God cannot be an object alongside or even above other objects, an agent alongside other agents, however greater, but the Absence that allows for the very presence of the world and its longing for what is more than the world. “It is this great absence / that is like a presence that compels / me to address it without hope / of a reply,” Thomas states outright in “The Absence”; he continues: “My equations fail / as my words do. What resource have I / other than the emptiness without him of my whole / being, a vacuum he may not abhor?” Such is Thomas’s version of the *deus absconditus*, the absent or hidden God.

It is this God’s “eternal silence” that for Thomas requires an altered understanding of Eternity itself. As he reflected in an interview in *Poetry Wales*: “I firmly believe this, that eternity is not something out there, not something in the future; it is close to us, it is all around us and at any given moment we can pass into it; but there is something about our mortality, the fact that we are time-bound creatures, that makes it somehow difficult if not impossible to dwell . . . to dwell permanently in that”⁹⁶ By comparison, Gertrude Stein’s “continuous present” is a faux eternity, a turning aside from the time-bound nature of writing in which its native action must take place—and all the more so Paul Hoover’s facile “Eternity.” That momentary apprehension of the eternal emergent or irruptive for the moment in time is, as Paul Ricoeur might say, the ultimate

⁹⁶. Quoted in Philips, 72.

surplus of meaning, the basis for all surpluses of meaning. Thomas once said, in a statement that would catch the orthodox off-guard, that “resurrection is metaphor,” that is, the very stuff of language signaling across the gap, the tensile holding together of the sameness and difference extant analogically between eternity and time, God and the world, and by which the empty sign comes to signify the meaningful word in the relations by which the world can indeed be seen as world. As Thomas evokes the shaping insight in “The Answer”:

There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love’s risen body.

Or as he says perhaps with even more visionary urgency in his poem “Alive”: “Looking out I can see / no death . . . the darkness / is the deepening shadow / or your presence: the silence a / process in the metabolism / of the being a love.”

The final lines of “Alive” demonstrate that Thomas assimilates diction and metaphor from modern science as well as the world of religious practice, especially theology and mystical theology. This amalgamation of different kinds of language—the scientific and the religious—accords with the range of diction found in many postmodern poems. The difference is that in Thomas’s work such amalgamation suggests and presumes an underlying cohesiveness, an underlying analogical relation. It is an ironic fact of Thomas’s poetry, ironic in the pure sense, since Thomas

was so adamantly at odds with the modern world. His wife Elsi even removed the heating fixtures from their cottage at Sarn, this in their old age, and when he was still a rector he had preached against the use of refrigerators. More venture-some still, in “Emerging” he awaits God on “some peninsula of the spirit,” eschewing the traditionally religious “anthropomorphisms of the fancy” where the generations have watched in vain for the hand to descend out of the clouds. Instead, again, he envisions the advent of a God revealed from below rather than from above: “We are beginning to see / now it is matter is the scaffolding / of the spirit: that the poem emerges / from morphemes and phonemes... so in everyday life / it is the plain facts and natural happenings that conceal God and reveal him to us / little by little under the mind’s tooling.” In other words, it is the apparently reductive stuff of material existence and language that actually compound to form the “scaffolding” of a meaningfulness that transcends our ability to fully represent it. “Emerging” thus combines a vision of material reality very close to that of Teilhard de Chardin when he envisions the universe a divine milieu, as well as with Ricoeur’s conception of language as surplus of meanings arising across scales from the semiological to the syntactical to the metaphorical. It is at the level of metaphor that language’s true nature is revealed as part and parcel of an analogical vision of reality—emergent rather than handed down “from above.” Yet, it is precisely at the “higher” scale of metaphor that language’s true nature can be perceived. To claim that the “true” nature of language resides in signs is to miss the proverbial forest for the trees, the living, breathing body for the parts that compose it. Again, in view of Augustine’s idea of the sentence as a form whose meaning requires the existence of time and memory, such reductionism reifies meaning to the atomistic space of discrete signs—the nominal—and thereby denies temporal movement and therefore the essential drama of the real.

We find this view of material reality and language as “emergent” again in Thomas’s late poem, “The Promise,” from *No Truce with the Furies*, his final book of poems: “From nothing / nothing comes. Behind everything—something, somebody? In the beginning / violence, the floor of the universe / littered with fragments. After / that enormous brawl, where / did the dove come from?” Thomas’s string of interrogatives penetrating back to the beginning of things demonstrates that for this poet the quest for ultimate meaning takes place in a contested arena. Poetry is that arena—an “Odeon” of competing voices--and Thomas’s poetry is often filled with as much spiritual angst and bitterness as it is with epiphanies—indeed, a good deal more angst and bitterness, as in “A Species”:

Shipwrecked upon an island
in a universe whose tides
are the winds, they began multiplying
without joy. They cut down the trees
to have room to make money.

So much for Donne’s “No man is an island.” Instead, the species is shipwrecked here, consuming the singular place that might sustain it while the planet remains still “blue with cold, waiting to be loved.” The astounding human capacity for destruction, and ultimately self-destruction, originates for Thomas in a misalliance between the species’s material existence and the love that would emerge but only occasionally does. As he says in “Incubation,” “In the absence of such wings / as were denied us we insist / on inheriting others from the machine.” The “machine” is Thomas’s encompassing word both for what we have brought ourselves to and what at times seems an almost Manichean negation: we appear to be “denied” wings.

This brings us to the nature of subjectivity in Thom-

as's poetry which—unlike the disembodied, postmodernist self—refuses to relinquish itself to a performance of absence that often comes off more as attitude or egotism than any genuinely compelling encounter. Nor do Thomas's poems build a fortress around some unassailable "I." Instead, the landscape of the self in Thomas's poems is very nearly always contested:

A man's shadow
falls upon rocks that are
millions of years old, and
thought comes to drink at that dark
pool, but goes away thirsty.

In the poem "Senior" the potentially Narcissistic scene gives over to the thirst of consciousness itself, of thought, for something that in the dark might transcend it. The mind's thirst is insatiable, and profoundly sad, but it is also the trace of a divine longing, the longing that is itself divine by being withdrawn—at once in and of the dark. That does not make the mind, like the poem, any less a contested space. "Is there a place / here for the spirit," Thomas asks in "Balance," "is there time / on this brief platform for anything / other than mind's failure to explain itself?" Or again, more personally, as he confesses in "Inside":

I am my own
geology, strata on strata
of the imagination, tufa
dreams, the limestone mind
honeycombed by the running away
of too much thought.

Here, the poet's mind at first assumes a kind of a sublime vastness out of Wordsworth's "The Prelude" but

quickly reveals itself as a cavernous realm where thoughts and ideas like stalactites and stalagmites solidify into rigidity, or reify, to use a common word in the postmodernist lexicon, and where at bottom truth is nothing more than a “cold, locationless” cloud. For all of Thomas’s fundamentally religious feeling and imagination, there is no turning away from the specter of the mind as a materialist maze harkening back to the human beginning. Again, Thomas’s psychic universe, his imaginative universe, is contested territory where the summary negations of postmodernism are confronted with the utmost depth and urgency rather than with surface parody. Eternity may be nearby, like the bright field in Thomas’s poem of that title, “the pearl of great price,” but for the poet-birdwatcher God is also a raptor hunting us down, and poet and reader are nothing but “lesser denizens” of a finally intractable universe. The sum of these contested circumstances situates the poet on a threshold—it is as much a postmodern threshold as it is a threshold native to human being regardless of time or circumstance. This threshold is anything but a static continuous present. Rather, as Thomas’s poem “Threshold” counsels us, the liminal space and crux of time on which we always stand requires present and continuous action:

I emerge from the mind’s
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it is that of the bacteria
demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?

To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upward towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,

what balance is needed at
the edge of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
Of a turning planet. What

To do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

Thomas's "Threshold" reverses the expectations inherent in the old story of the residents of Plato's Cave emerging into the light and transforms it rather into a spiritual nightmare. It also reverses the expectations inherent in Michelangelo's magnificent image of Adam reaching his hand toward God's on the Sistine Chapel ceiling by erasing the anthropomorphized Deity from the scene. We are on the very edge of blankness, erasure—the postmodern condition of anti-metaphysics. Thomas's poetry brings us there, only with the true existential urgency that resides behind the condition which behind any cultural avant-garde has always been at the *spiritual* avant-garde of the species.

"Threshold" leaves us in erasure, or rather in a condition of waiting before absence. It brings us to the limit of the analogical understanding of being—brings us to the paradoxical reality of the Nothing-That-Is, to paraphrase Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," the Nothing that is nowhere, for Meister Eckhart the "Godhead beyond God." On the other hand, in "The Other," listening to an owl calling at night, and the swells rising and falling on the Atlantic "on the long shore / by the village, that is without light /

and companionless,” the poet with supreme negative capability watches the thought come to him “of that other being who is awake, too, / letting our prayers break on him, not like this for a few hours, but for days, years, for eternity.” In “The Other” Thomas imagines the reciprocating gesture for which he waits in “Threshold,” though again the gesture does not match the expectations, perhaps now because the poet has relinquished any expectations and merely lets the sound of waves, the being of things in the world, break on him. In “The Other,” the vision of God as some omnipotent immovable mover, as some presiding “transcendental signifier” that guarantees all we might say about ourselves, falls away entirely. What the poet is left with, what we are left with, is a vision of God as Other—a Love so encompassing it levels the distance between the material and the immaterial, between immanence and transcendence, absence and presence, time and eternity, and does so by virtue of the gap between all the binaries, and does so without collapsing that gap, for the gap itself is the necessary threshold that carries our being to a clarity beyond our ken. Established in the gap separating Other from the finite mind is the connection, at once asynchronous and synchronous, that is the analogical relation in the purest renunciation of divine power in favor of divine compassion, the inevitable anthropomorphized image of God distilled into the reciprocating relation of I-Thou, the other recognizing the true depth of longing and love in the Other.

For all of R.S. Thomas’ resistance to modernity his poetry nonetheless confronts urgent enduring epistemological and ontological concerns that inform and underlie the crisis of postmodernism. For many poets the postmodern crisis of meaning and the determination of value is no longer a crisis at all—the absence of determinate meaning and value is simply the nature of things. We merely have been deluding ourselves for centuries. It is remarkable also that

of all modern poets R.S. Thomas most valued Wallace Stevens, both for Stevens' artistry as a poet and for his ideas about poetry and religion. The final lines of Thomas's "Homage to Wallace Stevens" are an address to the poet with whom he felt the greatest kinship:

Blessings Stevens;
I stand with my back to grammar
at an altar you never aspired
to celebrating the sacrament
of the imagination whose high-priest
notwithstanding you are."

Indeed, echoes of Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "The Palm at the End of the Mind" inhabit Thomas' "The Other" and "Threshold." All of these poems place the reader on the edge of a vastness, sublime in Stevens' case, and more properly transcendent in the case of R.S. Thomas. Both poets through their own prism see the imagination as sacred and poetry an inherently religious art form. It is remarkable that two poets of the most disparate sensibilities, I mean R.S. Thomas and John Ashbery, trace their immediate aesthetic ancestry to Wallace Stevens, such that one could further chart the aesthetic polarities of the postmodern and postmodernist world by way of these two stars. What we find again is the heretic's choice of orthodoxies. Or as Thomas writes in his poem "Heretics" reflecting on the subject of our inevitable human congregations:

Are they selective
like me, knowing that among
a myriad disciplines each one
has its orthodoxy from which
the words flow? Alas, we are heretics all...."

And yet, in view nonetheless of circumstance, Thomas chooses the heresy of finding meaning in the world beyond the play of surfaces and with hope for “the kingdom” that would render all our heresies and foolishness worthwhile, and without which all worth fritters to displays and poses, empty gestures and assertions of self and groups and power and will.

Near the end of his life, in an encounter ideally made for documentary footage, R.S. Thomas met Czeslaw Milosz for dinner. In Dennis O’Driscoll’s account it was an extraordinary evening with two of the great religious poets of the twentieth century exchanging thoughts and experiences. At the end of the evening the two parted from each other agreeing: *We are both on the way to extinction.*⁹⁷ Reflecting again on what he calls our “post-human” world, theologian David Bentley Hart considers the simple fact that “innumerable forces are vying for the future, and Christianity may prove considerably weaker than its rivals”—no cause for despair, he observes, since faith is not merely “a cultural logic” but must be believed to be “a cosmic truth, which can never finally be defeated.”⁹⁸ The answer, Hart ventures, is to become an outlier not unlike the desert faithful at the outset of the Christian empire—a kind of protest against worldly power, cultural power however well-intentioned. Though Thomas and Milosz saw themselves as individuals on the way to extinction, and perhaps as poets whose work would eventually become unreadable or merely a brand of nostalgia within the postmodernist milieu, both finally would have assented to Hart’s trust in a vision of truth underlying the materials, and in our albeit limited human ability to represent that truth and the world

⁹⁷ Dennis O’Driscoll, *The Outnumbered Poet* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2012) 424.

⁹⁸ Hart, 241.

that truth sustains. At a time when contemporary American poetry seems to have all the channel choice of cable television or direct TV or, more accurately, self-programmed I-pads, I-pods, and I-phones, the assent even to the idea of truth—truth that would dispose us confidently and compassionately toward the other—appears remote. Dying of stomach cancer at the end of her life, Gertrude Stein spoke her last words: “What is the answer?” When Alice B. Toklas could not give her an answer, Stein asked in turn: “In that case, what is the question?”⁹⁹ It is common for a writer, like anyone else, not to have *the* answer, but it is sad to have written and lived in a manner never to have known the question or to have inhabited it with one’s life and art.

Here is the question, posed on the threshold every moment in the shadow of death: “And what then?” And here is R.S. Thomas’s answer given after the death of his wife:

I look up in recognition
of a presence in absence.
Not a word, not a sound,
as she goes her way,
but a scent lingering
which is that of time immolating
itself in love’s fire.”

It is an answer that at this late time is worthy of a Dante, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Wallace Stevens at his most sublimely trenchant and wild. And it is the answer to a question that if left widely unasked, unacknowledged, or unknown will continue to impoverish the poet and the poet’s art.

⁹⁹ Hobhouse, 230.