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EXTENDING THE FRONTIER: THE METAPHYSICAL TERRAIN OF TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

EXTENDING THE FRONTIER: THE METAPHYSICAL TERRAIN
OF TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

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Modern and contemporary American poets have consciously adapted themes, diction, poetic metaphors and rhetorical structures to speak about sacred and secular experience from the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. This study looks closely at the modes of integration and dispersal of the metaphysical poem by four twentieth century American poets: Edna St. Vincent Millay at the beginning of the twentieth century and Richard Wilbur and Robert Creeley at mid-century; it concludes with an examination of Molly Peacock's metaphysical poetry. These four poets are not only "metaphysical" writers in a traditional sense, but they have also revitalized and expanded the metaphysical poem's possibilities through innovations and ingenuity in their handling of the metaphysical poem. For example, Millay deconstructs the metaphysical libertine love lyric to examine how political, social and cultural ideologies are revealed through the rhetoric of traditional love poetry. She then reconstructs the love lyric to express and endorse the feminist attitudes and behaviors that were emerging in the early decades of the twentieth century. At mid-century, Wilbur forges a formal poetic where the mundane and the miraculous cohabit and he achieves this difficult balance by employing the same seventeenth century rhetorical tropes and figures to assume, maintain, and shift an argumentative stance within a single poem as Millay does

in her metaphysical poems. Never before placed within the metaphysical tradition, Creeley produces an open form poetry of immediate experience that is grounded on a poetic of performance reminiscent of Donne's dramatic word play. Peacock's contemporary poetry continues to incorporate metaphysical themes and rhetorical methods, blending the best of both seventeenth century and twentieth century metaphysical practices, and raising questions about traditional boundaries between modernism and postmodernism and between objectivity and subjectivity. Examined together, the metaphysical poetry practiced by these four poets, traditionally seen as writing very different modes of poetry (and often modes generally read as existing outside "The Metaphysical Tradition"), suggest an hearty strain of metaphysical poetry throughout the century that has proved adaptable to a variety of poetics.

for Terry

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INTRODUCTION

Extending the Frontier: The Metaphysical Revival

Seventeenth century metaphysical poetry experienced an appreciative critical revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. In particular, John Donne, Richard Crashaw and Andrew Marvell seemed to speak directly to the modern sensibility out of temper following the chaos of the First World War. In 1926, T.S. Eliot proclaimed, "Donne is a poet of chaos. In this, he is a modern poet" (Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry 155).[1] Metaphysical poetry's analogical method, foremost marked by its expert use of rhetorical figures to fuse intellectual and emotional responses to the complexities of human existence, powerfully denotes the psychological urgencies of human experience and the need for viable unions--however temporary these unions might be--to stave off the chaos. Since the onset of the metaphysical revival, modern and contemporary American poets have consciously adapted themes, diction, poetic metaphors and rhetorical structures to speak about sacred and secular experience from the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Not only the championed metaphysical poets of chaos but also George Herbert, Richard Herrick, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne and the Cavalier poets--Thomas Carew, Richard Lovelace and Sir John Suckling--provided modes of speaking about contemporary experience.

Modern poets revised and carried on the metaphysical tradition in part because they saw in seventeenth century metaphysical poetry a rhetorical response to existence that spoke to their own modern experience, and in part as a critical attack against the preceding periods of eighteenth century Neoclassicism and nineteenth century

Romanticism. Although many critics conclude that the metaphysical revival reached its climax in the late 1940s, metaphysical poetry has continued to present a model of writing and thinking attentive to the angst of living in a postmodern world.[2] This later strain of metaphysical poetry practiced by contemporary poets presents a unique adapting of metaphysical themes and methodology with a heightened postmodern conception of subjectivity, epistemology and language.

This study of twentieth century metaphysical poetry looks in depth at the poetry of four American poets: Edna St. Vincent Millay at the beginning of the twentieth century and Richard Wilbur and Robert Creeley at mid-century; it concludes with an examination of Molly Peacock's metaphysical poetry. Despite the various "schools" to which these four poets are said to belong, they are not only "metaphysical" writers in the term's traditional sense, but they have also revitalized and expanded the genre's possibilities through innovations and ingenuity in their handling of the metaphysical poem. For example, Millay deconstructs the metaphysical libertine love lyric to examine how political, social and cultural ideologies are revealed through the rhetoric of traditional love poetry. She then reconstructs the love lyric to express and endorse the feminist attitudes and behaviors that were emerging in the early decades of the twentieth century. At mid-century, Wilbur forges a formal poetic where the mundane and the miraculous cohabit and he achieves this difficult balance by employing the same seventeenth century rhetorical bag of tricks to assume, maintain, and shift an argumentative stance within a single poem as Millay does in her metaphysical poems. Never before placed within the metaphysical tradition, Creeley produces an open form poetry of immediate experience that is grounded on a poetic of performance reminiscent

of Donne's dramatic word play. Peacock's contemporary poetry continues to incorporate metaphysical themes and rhetorical methods, blending the best of both seventeenth century and twentieth century metaphysical practices. Read alongside seventeenth century metaphysical poets and Millay, Wilbur and Creeley, Peacock's metaphysical poetry raises questions about objectivity and subjectivity, modernism and postmodernism, as well as questions regarding literary traditions and poetic borrowing. Examined together, the metaphysical poetry practiced by these four poets, traditionally seen as writing very different modes of poetry (and often modes generally read as existing outside "The Metaphysical Tradition"), suggest an hearty strain of metaphysical poetry throughout the century that has proved adaptable to a variety of poetics. In order to fully appreciate the rich terrain of twentieth century American metaphysical poetry, however, we must first look at the metaphysical revival at the beginning of the century and examine the appeal of the metaphysical for American poets.

George Saintsbury's Minor Poets of the Caroline Period and Herbert Grierson's editing of Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, both published in 1921, mark pivotal events in the revival of seventeenth century poetry, as they brought new readers to the poetry, which had generally fallen in favor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. T. S. Eliot's seminal Clark lectures (a series of eight) delivered at Trinity College in Cambridge four years later in 1926 proved to be the critical expository prose written on metaphysical poetry during this period. While Eliot had been working out his theories of metaphysical poetry as early as 1917 in articles and reviews, it is not until these lectures that Eliot puts forth a comprehensive theory of seventeenth century

metaphysical poetry's characteristics as well as a definition of metaphysical poetry in general. Eliot had intended at some date to turn these lectures into a full-length study of metaphysical poetry entitled "The School of Donne," but it never came to fruition. They were not published as a whole until 1993 in The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry. Despite the lectures' late publication, Eliot's theories were distributed to a much larger audience than those attending his lectures. They were circulated around to other critics who would acknowledge Eliot's theories in their own published studies of metaphysical poetry. Mario Praz, George Williamson, Joan Bennet, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks quote extensively from the lectures and credit Eliot's definitions and theories for laying the groundwork for their own studies. Praz in "Donne and the Poetry of his Time" quotes Eliot's definition of metaphysical poetry in Clark Lecture Eight, accepting Eliot's division of metaphysical poetry into three distinct periods. He writes "Eliot spoke of three metaphysical periods in European poetry: a medieval period, a baroque period, and a modern one with Jules Laforgue as its chief representative" (58-9). He cites Eliot's definition again in his essay "T.S. Eliot and Dante," published in 1937: "In the eighth of his Clark lectures (not published) Eliot defined metaphysical poetry as 'that which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling'" (547). George Williamson's The Donne Tradition: A Study in English Poetry from Donne to the death of Cowley (1930) also acknowledges that Eliot's "critical thinking on the 'metaphysical poets' has so influenced my own that I can only express my deep obligation to him, without trying to define its limits" (23). More recently, C.A. Patrides in his introduction to John Donne's Complete Poems (1984) notes, "In

retrospect, it is not easy to decide which was admired more, Donne's poetry or Eliot's apocalyptic theory" (l).

Eliot strove to resurrect seventeenth century metaphysical poetry as a viable model for modern poetry, and did so as a practicing poet. He writes that as a "craftsman" his "interest [...] is centered on the present and the immediate future; he studies the literature of the past in order to learn how he should write in the present and the immediate future" (Lecture I, "Introduction: On the Definition of Metaphysical Poetry" VMP 44). As a "craftsman," Eliot's resurrection of metaphysical poetry in both his poetry and his critical prose had a profound impact on not only the way the twentieth century has read seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, but also on the way twentieth century modern and postmodern poets would use the metaphysical poem. It is necessary then, to examine closely Eliot's definition and theories of metaphysical poetry, as well as consider how metaphysical poetry influenced his more general theories of poetry, and in particular his theories of the impersonal, the tradition, and the objective correlative. As we will see, Eliot's theories of metaphysical poetry and his desire to found a new school of poetry coalesce in New Criticism.

Eliot opens his first Clark Lecture by explaining that the renewed interest in seventeenth century metaphysical poetry stems from

> besides pure literary appreciation, a consciousness or a belief that this poetry and this age have some affinity with our own poetry and our own age, a belief that our own mentality and feelings are better expressed by the seventeenth century than by the nineteenth or even the eighteenth. Donne is more frequently used as a critical measure than ever before [...].

> Contemporary poets are by their admirers likened to Donne or to Crashaw; some of them no doubt study these writers deliberately and elect to receive their influence; there are not wanting voices to declare that the present age is a metaphysical age ("Introduction: On the Definition of Metaphysical Poetry" VMP 43).

In stating the relevance of a sustained investigation into the nature of seventeenth century poetry, it is apparent that for Eliot the revival is as much an appreciative move towards the seventeenth century as it is a rejection of Neoclassical and Romantic theories. Eliot, in previous critical writings, had attacked New Classicism's "dissociation of sensibility" and Romanticism's so-called "escapism." He aimed to found a new poetic that might counter these previous epochs. These aims are nowhere more apparent than in Eliot's desire to "redefine" metaphysical poetry.

The term "metaphysical," as originally applied to the seventeenth century poets, was in part a moniker, to poke fun and fault the poets' learning and techniques. John Dryden, in 1693, first applied the adjective "metaphysical" derogatorily to John Donne's poetry to describe his poetic method in his influential essay on Abraham Cowley, "Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire." Here, Dryden claimed that Donne "affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verse, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love" (79). Samuel Johnson, in 1779, probably adopted Dryden's passage as his source in his short biography of Cowley, "Life of Cowley," where he established the now familiar usage. He declared: "About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a

race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets [. . .]. The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavor" (11). Dryden and Johnson found the metaphysical poets obfuscating. They were both offended by metaphysical poets' rejection of what they deemed as valid norms of reason and nature. As Neoclassicists, they advocated an unadorned style that aimed for concrete ideas articulated in a logical and clear manner. In their eyes metaphysical poets were guilty of using verbal ambiguities, abstruse analogies arbitrarily yoked together, and of desiring originality at the expense of the mimesis of nature. Nineteenth century critics and poets, although reacting against New Classicism's simple and unadorned methods, remained skeptical (though slightly more tempered) of metaphysical poets' use of rhetoric. Henry Hales in 1883 assessed Donne and the metaphysical poets as follows:

> Donne's contemporary reputation as a poet, and still more as a preacher, was immense; and a glance at his works would suffice to show that he did not deserve the contempt with which he was subsequently treated. But yet the chief interest is that he was the principal founder of a school which especially expressed and represented a certain bad taste of his day. Of his genius there can be no question; but it was perversely directed. One may almost invert Jonson's famous panegyric on Shakespeare, and say that Donne was not for all time but for an age. His natural gifts were certainly great. He possesses a real energy and fervour. He loved, and he suffered much, and he writes with a passion which is perceptible through all his artificialities. (English Poets 560)

Alfred Welsh in Development of English Literature and Language (1882) speaks more harshly, echoing Dryden and Johnson: "We find little to admire, and nothing to love. We see that farfetched similes, extravagant metaphors, are not here occasional blemishes, but the substance. He should have given us simple images, simply expressed; for he loved and suffered much: but fashion was stronger than nature" (413).

Unhappy with the previous demarcations of metaphysical poetry, as defined by New Classical and Romantic critics, Eliot in this first lecture sought to arrive at a new definition of what metaphysical poetry might be. He begins by dismissing Dryden and Johnson's attempt to classify the poetry based on the fact that they were "neither practicing metaphysics, nor of the philosophical cast of mind" (46).

> It will be seen accordingly, that the invention and use of the term "metaphysical" spring from what for us is hardly better than an accident. To this race of authors, Dryden and Johnson, neither fully qualified to judge, conceded profundity of thought and learning; and thought and learning dressed in outlandish and difficult imagery seemed to Johnson metaphysical. (46)

Eliot's rejection of Dryden and Johnson's seemingly careless application of the term "metaphysical" to seventeenth century poets carves out a critical niche for his own approach to the metaphysical poets. Eliot, a practicing poet, and a student of philosophy--he studied philosophy as a graduate student and wrote his master's thesis on F.H. Bradley--is clearly making his case as a qualified critic.

Although Eliot questions the aptness of the term "metaphysical" he ultimately accepts the term and tries to justify it by infusing it with different significance than the

derogatory implications originally intended by Dryden and Johnson. He begins by mapping out three distinctly metaphysical periods: the thirteenth century in Florence, the seventeenth century in England, and the nineteenth century in Paris. Enacting a "systematic study" of the language, causes and resemblance between these three periods, Eliot arrives at the following definition of metaphysical poetry: "that which occurs when an idea, or what is ordinarily apprehensible as an intellectual statement, is translated in a sensible form; so that the world of sense is actually enlarged" (53-4). He then adds, with italics, "*the Word made Flesh*" (54). Four years later, Eliot provides a fuller definition of metaphysical poetry in his essay "Rhyme and Reason: The Poetry of John Donne," written for The Listener. In this essay, Eliot finds that metaphysical poetry

> has come to mean a poetry in which the poet makes use of metaphysical ideas and theories. He may believe some theory, or he may believe nothing; but he must be a poet who experiences emotion through thought as well as one who thinks about emotion. Of metaphysical poetry in general we may say that it gets its effects by suddenly producing an emotional equivalent for what seemed merely a dry idea, and by finding the ideas of a vivid emotion. It moves between abstract thought and concrete feeling; and strikes us largely by contrast and continuity, by the curious ways in which it shows thought and feeling as different aspects of reality. (502).

Eliot again notes the unique fusing of thought and feeling in the metaphysical poem. Three additional characteristics of metaphysical poetry are now part of his definition. The first is the assertion that it "suddenly" produces "an emotional

equivalent"; second, it operates on a system of "contrast and continuity"; and third, it presents a multi-dimensional picture of reality. Eliot's definition of metaphysical poetry presents a template for his own poetic method. His poetry similarly creates emotional surprise, manifested by a contrast/continuity pattern to project sense in the life of the mind. It also denotes an acute interest in a multi-dimensional existence and a search for correspondence--between the seen and the unseen, between the conceptual and sensuous and the temporal and the eternal--while painfully denoting the difficulty in articulating the transitory, often fleeting, glimpses at the connection between these realms.

Eliot particularly admired the way John Donne and other metaphysical poets created emotional surprise: the way they "devoured experience" and for their ability to transform ideas into passionate sensations and to transform mental observations into emotive states of mind (Selected Essays 64). This was achieved through a highly charged rhetoric containing elaborate conceits, radical juxtapositions, hyperboles, puns, and puzzling paradoxes. These figures procure "a direct apprehension of thought" which is felt "immediately at the tips of the fingers" (VMP), such as we find in Donne's "her body thought" ("Second Anniversarie") or Marvell's "a green Thought in a green Shade" ("The Garden").[3]

The second characteristic of metaphysical poetry Eliot finds is its use of a contrast and continuity pattern. The poetry does not shrink from dichotomies, but embraces them as it works to reconcile the paradoxes inherent in all experience, between the conceptual and the sensuous, the temporal and the eternal and between the seen and the unseen. John Donne's poem "The Sunne Rising" presents a couple's love as a microcosm of the

world. The trope aptly illustrates how metaphysical poetry contrasts and reconciles the temporal and the eternal.

> As for these kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
>
> And thou shalt heare, all here in one bed lay.
>
> She is all states, and all Princes, I
>
> Nothing else is. (19-22)

The woman is likened to the state, which is immortal. The speaker is likened to a prince, who although he may govern and protect, is temporal. The inverted word order of line twenty-one encloses all that is of value between them, reconciling the temporal and eternal nature of the world.

The third characteristic of metaphysical poetry, as offered by Eliot, is an interest in the multi-dimensional presentation of reality, a philosophical quest which Henry Vaughan succinctly defines as one which explores "what mysteries do lie beyond thy dust; / could man outlook that mark!" ([They are all gone into the world of Light] 19-20).[4] It is this last characteristic that is most prevalent in Eliot's own poetry. Repeatedly we find in his poems an interest in the simultaneous existence of a real world and the presence of a secret world.

Eliot demonstrated an interest in correspondence early in his career. In his dissertation, "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley" he notes "the life of the soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to greater or lesser extent) jarring and incompatible ones" (132). It is precisely the friction between the two worlds and the knowledge that "the world of practical verification has no definite frontiers [...]. And this emphasis upon

practice--upon the relativity and instrumentality of knowledge--is what impels us towards the absolute" (169). Attainment of the absolute is perfect correspondence. In Eliot's pre-conversion poems this fusion is of subject and object. After his conversion, the fusion is between the individual and God. In all his poetry, however, in order for this unity to occur, one must move away from the personal. Private experience is too limited.

Eliot repeatedly asserts that poetry, and not just metaphysical poetry, must avoid the too personal. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he deems that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Selected Essays 43). This "impersonality" directly attacks the preceding epoch of Romantic verse and becomes the signature of Eliot's poetry and the impetus behind his theory of the objective correlative. Eliot's conception of "impersonal," as he explains in a letter to John Gould Fletcher, is not without passion. He claims that "there is an important distinction between the emotions which are in the experience which is one's material and the emotion in the writing--the two seem to me very different" (Letters 410). The "personal" brings the poem about, but the poem must not remain personal. The task of the poet is to find a way of speaking about personal experiences and emotions. The only way to accomplish this is to employ an "objective correlative." Eliot's now infamous, and somewhat ambiguous, theory of the objective correlative was mapped out in his 1922 essay "Hamlet and His Problems." Eliot explains the essential problem with Shakespeare's Hamlet (the man) is that he is unable to articulate his extreme psychological angst, precisely because his troubled state of mind is "excessive of the facts as they appear" (Sacred Wood 46). Hamlet's psychological disintegration is beyond the emotions that his mother's crime produces.

There is no objective equivalent to explain Hamlet's mental turmoil, and more importantly, without one, he is unable to understand his emotions. Eliot argues that what is needed is an objective correlative. Eliot defines the objective correlative, asserting that

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (48)

Eliot's objective correlative strives to articulate emotions and thoughts in a way that will be meaningful to others. As David Goldfarb notes in "The Vortex and the Labyrinth," "the objective correlative is an external thing known to addresser and addressee--that produces the same emotion in both minds. Eliot recognizes that the artist can express that intention only by connecting to the knowledge base of the receptor" (2). In this sense, the objective correlative provides an operational description of metaphor with universal meaning, produced by its very grounding in the "knowledge base" (English literary tradition). Rhetorical tropes and figures thus prove particularly apt in finding objective correlatives for emotion in that they strike an analogy between a known element and an unknown element. Seventeenth century poetry's analogies, in the form of elaborate conceits, shocking similes, radical juxtaposition of symbols, imagery and allusions, paradoxical inquiries and punning word play thus provide Eliot with an available tradition to ground his poetic theories, a strategic move that allowed him to discountenance two whole centuries of poetry.

The conceit, a favorite rhetorical figure of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, presented an ideal means for Eliot to forge objective correlatives. Despite negative perceptions of the conceit, the metaphysical conceit is not exaggerated as an end in itself, but objectifies an idea or emotion, such as when Donne figures the Trinity as a metal worker or lover, or when Carew likens courtship to a battlefield or market place. Eliot also employs the conceit to describe an abstraction or an emotion. The opening comparison of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" shows not merely the scene, but reflects Prufrock's condition, his unrest, mental confusion, and self-induced paralysis: "the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table" (lines 2-3). This opening conceit is also an exceptional example of the objective correlative. The shocking comparison objectifies Prufrock's mental status and applies to the poem as a whole. As Charles Altieri succinctly notes in "Eliot's Impact on Anglo-American Poetry," "it becomes impossible to make any firm distinctions between scene and act, or figuratively, between foreground and background" (198). Ether saturates the poem's structure as it becomes the poem's controlling trope, providing the prevailing pattern of imagery in the poem, unifying the fragmented narrative. Eliot's "Preludes" provides another example of his conceited method. In the poem, the spinning world is compared to "ancient women / gathering fuel in vacant lots" (lines 53-54) to objectify the temporal and eternal nature of time and history. In this conceit the world is compared to past generations of women who "fuel" other generations and so they continue to exist in the present. This present is a "vacant lot." The conceit yokes two opposing images, emptiness ("vacant") and plentifullness ("lot"). This paradoxical nature of time and history is the inescapable "lot in life" of all human beings. For Eliot, and many of his

contemporaries, the metaphysical conceit presented a viable means to talk about the clashing ideas and incongruous emotions concomitant of the modern period. It is important to note, however, that while Eliot's theory of the objective correlative is akin to the metaphysical use of the conceit (and other rhetorical figures) it is not identical. Eliot's theory of the objective correlative argues that the analogy is objective, not rhetorical and thus, will always produce the same emotional and intellectual response from all readers every time.[5] Eliot's emphasis on objectivity as a means to present the chaos of modern experience in an objective and orderly manner, exerted lasting ramifications, not only on the poetry written during the modern metaphysical revival, but also on the poetry that follows. His theories on metaphysical poetry and his call for a new poetic of the impersonal and the objective correlative converge in New Criticism.

New Criticism drew extensively on Eliot's critique of metaphysical poetry and his essays "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet and His Problems." His theory that a text does not express the personality of its author, but as it relates to a tradition of literature--was adopted by New Critics, along with his theory of the objective correlative as the only way to articulate emotion in a work of art. New Critics disavowed the possibility of numerous subjective meanings / contents in favor of one overriding one, which although perhaps containing ambiguities, was unified and coherent. Meanings and poems existed as they are and would continue to be, regardless of alterations in the existing culture. They also adopted Eliot's argument that the literature of Western Europe could be viewed as a "simultaneous order" or work, where the value of any new work depended on its relation to the order of the tradition. Thus, the world of the

"individual talent" does not so much express a personality as it affects and is affected by the literature of the past.

The metaphysical revival and the full fruition of New Critical theories culminated in Cleanth Brook's seminal Modern Poetry and the Tradition, published in 1939. Brooks was immensely influenced by T. S. Eliot's poetry and criticism. It was Eliot in his Cambridge lectures who planted the seed that seventeenth century metaphysical poets were not a peculiar offshoot of the main course of English poetry, but that they had deep, hidden connections with its central development. Brook's "rewriting" of literary history traced a rich and honorable poetic tradition from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century, placing substantial emphasis on the history and use of metaphor. Cleanth Brooks claimed that the appeal of the metaphysical poets to the modernists stemmed from the belief that the poet is able to "reconcile the irrelevant or apparently warring elements of experience" (33) and their "common conception of the use of metaphor" in which "the metaphysical poets and the modernists stand opposed to both the Neoclassic and the Romantic poets on the issue of metaphor" (11). Echoing Eliot, we see how Brooks, and New Critics in general, collapsed Eliot's theories of metaphysical poetry and modernist poetry into an almost undistinguishable mode of writing. The fallout is that while Eliot's criticism on seventeenth century poetry is astute and insightful, his theories regarding metaphysical poetry became intertwined with his personal poetics and desire to "found" a new school of poetry--one validated and perpetuated by New Criticism--that they have become an orthodoxy and have consequently, as orthodoxies must, masked other quite vibrant strains of American metaphysical poetry that do not mirror his particular brand of metaphysical poetry nor fit

into New Critical theories. Poetry that does not portray mixed feelings, incongruous imagery, clashing ideas, and rigorous objectivity could not be metaphysical. Metaphysical poetry must acknowledge the full discordancy of modern life. The metaphysical poet must be, as Eliot said of Donne, "a poet of chaos."

Recently, contemporary literary theories, in particular Feminism and New Historicism, have rightfully rejected the New Critical precept that texts are autonomous units. They have challenged New Criticism's liberal humanism as being elitist, depoliticizing and socially marginal. Despite this fact, New Critical mappings of metaphysical poetry remain largely intact, mostly because New Criticism's close reading still proves a useful tool in examining metaphysical poetry's elaborate modes of analogical argument. The following examination of the metaphysical poem in twentieth century poetry thus continues to enact close readings; however, I incorporate a number of post-New Critical reading strategies to produce a more open and flexible reading of the modes of integration and dispersal of the metaphysical poem by twentieth century American poets, which acknowledges social, political and cultural factors. What I propose, then, is a critical methodology that allows a recuperation of New Critical practices by pointing to the flaws in New Criticism's prior readings of seventeenth century and modern metaphysical poetry, and by taking into account later theoretical models. It is my hypothesis, for instance, that Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and Paul de Man's theories of tropes may be used in conjunction with New Historicism. The latter has shown that it is pertinent to ask what historical or cultural events might illuminate the poems and what do these poems reveal about the connections between language, knowledge, and power in a particular culture. Lacan's theories of subjectivity

and language similarly help us to answer questions regarding what image of humanity the poems imply or construct and how the poems reveal particular conflicts produced by family life or social conditions during a particular historical period. We may also ask if there is a psychic economy at work in the poems which betrays the microphysics of power relations within the individual or within the represented domestic environment and how is the hegemony of parental (secular or divine) authority, for example, translated into a speaker's own psychic economy. Deconstructive theories of reading are useful when asking the above questions that new historical and psychoanalytical theories pose and like Lacan's theories, deconstruction is based on structuralist groundwork. It argues that there is no unmediated knowledge of "reality": knowledge is symbolic. If humans cannot translate experience into symbolic form, then they cannot know it in a way that is useful to them. Paul de Man in Allegories of Reading explains that "The attributes of centrality and of selfhood are being exchanged in the medium of the language" (112). Selfhood depends on engagement with the figural.

As we will see, twentieth century metaphysical poetry, like its seventeenth century model, is marked by its aggressive engagement with the figural, exhibiting a kind of *tour de force* of language. Extended analogies, juxtapositions of extremes, a plain and colloquial style of speech and dramatic argumentation that includes argumentation by paradoxes, syllogistic structure, hyperbole, erotema (the rhetorical question), pun, simile and metaphor indicate that the metaphysical poem is highly rhetorical. It is important to note that these rhetorical devices and structures are not merely employed as ornament or as clever semantic tricks, but function integrally within the metaphysical poem. Twentieth century metaphysical poets do not merely adopt seventeenth century conceits

and structures in strict mimesis, but adapt them to uniquely address their experiences. They extend the tradition, breathing new life into it. As Robert Creeley aptly writes, "Tradition is an aspect of what anyone is now thinking--not what someone once thought [...]. A tradition becomes inept when it blocks the necessary conclusion: it says we have felt nothing, it implies others have felt more" ("To Define" in Collected Essays 473).

Finally, the examination of twentieth century American metaphysical poetry that follows is not the study that Eliot would have anticipated. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, looking back at the previous century, Eliot would have hoped that readers would point to his poetry and prose as heralding a metaphysical renaissance that reflected in spirit and form his own poetry. Poets writing within this tradition would graciously acknowledge his influence and respectfully situate their poetry without quarrel within the larger English Metaphysical Tradition he helped to revive. What we find instead is a vibrant strain of metaphysical poetry that succeeds by its very defiance against Eliot and New Critical polemics. Millay, Creeley, and Peacock explicitly reject the "objective" and the unquestioned "Tradition." Even Wilbur who most resembles Eliot's particular metaphysical bent rebels against Eliot's metaphysical chaos, desiring instead to use the metaphysical poets' rhetorical tropes and figures to argue for a world of balanced and understandable correspondences. Thus, as a group, Millay, Wilbur, Creeley, and Peacock would certainly appear to Eliot as defiant and unwieldy children. We will see, however, that it is precisely their rebellion against Eliot and New Critical politics that allows them to so richly extend the American metaphysical tradition.

CHAPTER ONE:

Edna St. Vincent Millay: Donne's "true mistress"

The extent to which T. S. Eliot's poetry, poetic theories, and criticism shaped the terrain of twentieth century poetics is vast. Roger Kimball, in a 100th birthday anniversary tribute to Eliot (1999) for New Criterion, recently chronicled Eliot's impact on the twentieth century. William Empson admitted "I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He is a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind." R. P. Blackmur likewise concluded "No modern critic has had anything like the effect of Eliot on [...] literary people." Critic Clement Greenberg went even further in his praise of Eliot's critical power. After mentioning "Aristotle, Johnson, Coleridge, Lessing, Goethe," and other figures from the critical pantheon, Greenberg concluded, "T. S. Eliot may be the best of all literary critics." Certainly one of the most sustaining and far-reaching influences that Eliot's writing has had is on the literary canon. The making and governing of the canon in the twentieth century has been largely the task of New Critics. New Criticism, which became the dominant literary theory from the 1930s through the 1960s, Kimball himself claims is "an approach to literature and culture that once seemed--and perhaps still is--the most supple, serious, and responsive of any formulated in the twentieth century." New Criticism adopted Eliot's theory of the impersonal and of unified and coherent textual meanings, regardless of alterations in the existing culture. These ideas were solidified and brought into wide practice by Cleanth

Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's textbook Understanding Poetry (1938) and John Crowe Ransom's book The New Criticism (1941).

Eliot's impact on the reading of poetry, is a striking example of how poetry and critical theories are intertwined, affecting not only the poems being written, but how we read these poems. Our interest here, however, is not on the general influence of Eliot's criticism, but on the specific influence that Eliot's criticism of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry had on poets, critics, and readers. Eliot's particular metaphysical bent is seen in the poetry of the Nashville Fugitives--John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate--as well as in the poetry of Archibald MacLeish and Hart Crane. Sonia Raiziss's book The Metaphysical Passion makes a cogent argument that all of these poets share T.S. Eliot's metaphysical bent. Important to this study, however, is how Eliot's poetry and criticism of metaphysical poetry, as understood by New Critics, gave rise to how poetry was read, and in this chapter, how Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry was read.

Nina Baym in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" writes that "We never read American literature directly or freely, but always through the perspective allowed by theories" (42). Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry presents a salient example of how New Critical theories mismapped the metaphysical terrain of modernist poetics. Her poetry is particularly interesting in that it illustrates not only an unrecognized metaphysical strain in American poetry (in fact one purposefully neglected), but also a strain highly conscious of its relationship with seventeenth century metaphysical poetry. She wrote many of her best poems using forms traditionally found in seventeenth century poetry such as the Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnet and her poetic subjects generally are those

associated with the sonnet: love, desire, fidelity and the passing of time.[1] While these themes and structures are not unique to seventeenth century poetry, her method of analyzing these themes and expressing emotional and intellectual experience through a self-conscious rhetoric mirrors the manner of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets. She employs metaphysical poetry's rhetoric of dramatic argumentation, argument by paradox, hyperbole, irony, pun, and juxtaposition. Her poetry also contains direct allusions to metaphysical forefather, John Donne's, secular poetry and to Cavalier poetry generally. My contention that Millay's love poetry evokes not only Donne's love lyrics, but also Cavalier poetry, draws on what Jonathan Culler calls "the discourse space of a culture."[2] Following Culler, I will relate Millay's poems "to whole series of other works, treating them not as sources but as constituents of a genre" (258) and demonstrate that Millay's scrutiny of secular love and the passing of time are modeled after seventeenth century metaphysical poetry's analytical investigations into the complex and contradictory emotions of love. In doing so, I will show that it is precisely Millay' re-visioning (opposed to strict mimesis) of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry that has led many critics to dismiss the idea that Millay is a metaphysical poet. My focus is thus threefold. I will demonstrate that Millay's poetry occupies a definitive place in the metaphysical tradition, but I will also examine and root out the causes as to why Millay's poetry has not been read as metaphysical. I look specifically at why her poetry was not recognized by New Critics as metaphysical when it was first published (a period coinciding with the metaphysical revival), despite the fact that early criticism of her work, prior to New Criticism's emergence as the dominant theory in literary criticism, touted her poetry as metaphysical. I also examine how New Critical theories and

readings of Millay's poetry exerted a lasting influence on how Millay's poetry has been read, so much so that those critics rejecting New Critical tenants continue to reject Millay as a metaphysical poet. This tri-focus reveals not only the bias of critical theories when it comes to "metaphysical poetry," but also allows us to begin to re-map the American metaphysical terrain. This new terrain will reflect the fertile uses to which Millay and others put the metaphysical, rather than reflect the stunted borders marked out by a number of literary critics.

Early criticism of Millay's work, before New Criticism, noted the affinities Millay's poetry shared with seventeenth century poetry, particularly in her use of wit. In 1921 Mark Van Doren declared that Millay's poetry "is independent, critical and keen, a product more of the faculties than of the nerves and heart; it is feminine; it is fearless; it is fresh [....] effected through deliberate exercise of the wits" (Thesing 45). Three years later, Carl Van Doren in a review of Millay's poem, "Thursday," specifically compares Millay's poetry with that of Cavalier poet, Sir John Suckling, saying, "Suckling was not more insouciant than she is" and praises "the candor with which she talks of love "put[ting] by the posture of fidelity which women in poetry have been expected to assume" (Thesing 124, 125). "Thursday" playfully invokes the Cavalier lyric's libertine theme, tone and rhetorical elements.

> And if I loved you Wednesday,
> Well, what is that to you?
> I do not love you Thursday—
> So much is true.

And when you come complaining

Is more than I can see.

I loved you Wednesday,-- yes--but what

Is that to me?[3]

I quote the poem in full because we hear not only echoes of Suckling, as Carl Van Doren noted, but also of Cavalier poet, Richard Lovelace in his poem "The Scrutiny." In "The Scrutiny," the dramatic speaker likewise addresses his beloved who has presumably just accused him of infidelity.

Why should you swear I am forsworn,

Since I vow'd to be?

Lady, it is already morn,

And 'twas last night I swore to thee

That fond impossibility (lines 1-5).[4]

In both Millay's and Lovelace's poems, the speaker's excuse both flippantly dismisses the infidelity and ironically substantiates it. The time of both speakers' oath is past and with the passing of time one changes and so the person, who swears an oath yesterday, is not the same person today. As the time of the oaths are in the past, it is impossible to swear oneself to another. When Millay's speaker smartly asks, "what / is that to me?" it is nothing precisely because the "me" that stands before the complaining lover is not the same that professed her love the day before. Millay and Lovelace both suggest that time is itself subjective and measured by the senses. Lovelace's speaker makes this point explicit when he asks, "Have I not love'd thee much and long, / a tedious twelve hours' space?" (lines 6-7). The poems' teasing arguments are emphasized by both poets' use of

the rhetorical question to sustain their self-serving arguments. As Paul de Man's analysis of rhetoric in Allegories of Reading makes clear, the rhetorical question instead of functioning as simply a true question or statement, is an ambiguous discourse function; it both asserts and negates itself. Functioning as an ambiguous discourse, the rhetorical question acts as a paradigm of both speakers' vows of fidelity made previously to their lovers, and thereby stresses the rhetoricality of all vows: tacitly situational and given to contingency, play and slippage. But there is still something else going on here. Rhetorical questions, as Nancy Ainsworth-Vaughn notes in "Is that a Rhetorical Question? Ambiguity and Power in Medical Discourse," present "a discourse act that is inherently face-threatening (the true question) without having to risk the consequence of that act. To put it another way, the speaker can claim the power of not intending the question as a true question" (195). So, on the one hand Millay's and Lovelace's speakers are asking if they *once loved* the beloved. In which case, the beloved would have to answer affirmatively. On the other hand, Millay's and Lovelace's speakers do not expect an answer at all, and thus their actions are affirmed again. The rhetorical question allows them to risk nothing. They are not to blame. The rhetorical question is also used by both speakers to negotiate power while simultaneously pretending to relinquish power. Millay's and Lovelace's questions "allow" the beloved to feel an active participant in the divorce of affections while at the same time, they protect the speaker from the beloved's accusations. Eliot in his second Clark lecture, "Donne and the Middle Ages," aptly points out that the rhetorical question's use in seventeenth century drama often "implies something entertained, but not precisely believed" (VMP 88). In Millay's and Lovelace's poems, it suggests that the speaker does not quite believe his / her vow either. Their

witty use of the rhetorical question masks their fickleness and the suspicion that they are lacking in their inability to commit. Thus, the rhetorical question is employed as a self-protective posturing device which carries on the jockeying for power within the social fabrication of courtship that one witnesses repeatedly in seventeenth century love poetry.

Millay's dramatic speaker in Sonnet X from Second April, ["Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!"] likewise subverts logical argument and its complimenting rhetoric through ceaseless play.

> I would desert you – think not but I would!—
> And seek another as I sought you first.
> But you are mobile as the veering air,
> And all your charms more changeful than the tide,
> Wherefore to be inconstant is not care:
> I have but to continue at your side.
> So wanton, light and false, my love, are you,
> I am most faithless when I most am true. (lines 7-14)

The speaker's argument is premised on her independence, "I would desert you," which is then qualified by the lover's mobility (line nine) and summarily concludes with "Wherefore to be inconstant is not care: / I have but to continue at your side." Millay's use of double paradox (assertion of fidelity is also an attack on fidelity), provides an example of how she cleverly employs rhetorical wit, opposed to strict logic to make an argument. Her playful introspection into her faithlessness renders her both faithful and unfaithful and succeeds in validating both, for the rhetorical figure of paradox used in the final couplet argues that it is her faithlessness and his changeability that makes them

faithful. This handling of argumentation through the figure of paradox is similar to that found in Donne's poetry, and as illustrated below in his poem "Woman's constancy."

Now thou has lov'd me one whole day,
To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons, which we were? (lines 1-5).

He blames the woman for her fickleness and for justifying it with self-serving pseudo-logic:

your owne end to Justifie,
For having purpos'd change, and falsehood; you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true? (lines 11-13)

It is the very same argument that Millay's speaker has used. By the end of the poem, however, Donne's speaker likewise proclaims his inconstancy, "For by to morrow, I may thinke so too"(line 17). In both Donne and Millay's poems, the brilliant meditation on "now," on *presentness* and the way in which vows are sutured to their moment, positions the two lovers as strangely equal in their mutual *changefullness*.

Despite early perceptions that Millay's poetry showed similarities to seventeenth century precursors, New Critics failed to recognize Millay as "metaphysical." This was in part because her poetry did not look nor sound like Eliot's metaphysical poetry or "modern" poetry in general. Millay's metaphysical poetry differs substantially from Eliot's modern metaphysical theories and poetic. Eliot championed especially the

metaphysical poetry of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvell. His metaphysical poetry adopts these poets' religious and philosophical introspection and rational scrutiny into the nonphysical realms of experience using elaborate and often shocking metaphors, conceits and allusions. In contrast, Millay, while she utilizes seventeenth century rhetoric to enact her inquiry into the inner movements of thought and feeling, almost never writes about religious themes and her use of conceits and elaborate figures is less pronounced. Her metaphysical poetry reflects a method more akin to that of the Cavalier poets, Thomas Carew, Richard Lovelace, and Sir John Suckling. Cavalier poetry yoked the highly rhetorical style of Donnean argumentation with the more classical style of Ben Jonson. Their poems, composed typically of colloquial language with simple syntax, although frequently hyperbolic, often appear deceptively lighthearted. The poems' tone and structure conclude often with an ironic turn as the poems' wit of double entendres and social critiques of human relations are made manifest.

While Millay's turn to the metaphysical, like Eliot's, stemmed from her revolt against Victorian sentimentality, against false emotions and posturing, and against Romanticism's "escapism" and decorative ornamentation, she does not, however, employ certain poetic techniques we have come to associate with the high modernist verse of this period: free verse, radical fragmentation and an impersonal tone.[5] More significantly, unlike Eliot and the other high modernists, Millay does not engage the metaphysical tradition because she sees the present as culturally bankrupt (her poems do not reflect the disintegration of culture, and thereby language) but elects to engage in linguistic, cultural and historical play with the past. She challenges the past so that she might create new

and meaningful structures that reflect the possibilities of the present. She thus adds her voice to the tradition, not as means of substantiating her poetic within a larger, and sanctioned, tradition, but to establish a dissenting feminist voice. She therefore expands not only the tradition of metaphysical love poetry, but also the larger literary tradition, in effect, fulfilling Ezra Pound's modernist dictum, "make it new."

New Critics neglected Millay's metaphysical qualities in a large part because of her gender and her explicit feminism. Influential proponent of New Critical theory John Crowe Ransom launched an out-and-out attack on Millay's feminism in his essay "The Woman as Poet," published in 1937. The date of Ransom's essay coincides neatly with the beginning of the Agrarian New Critical influence in American criticism and was very much a political maneuver to structure the canon. In this essay, Ransom responds to Elizabeth Atkin's 1936 critical biography of Millay, Edna St. Vincent Millay and her Times, in which she compares Millay with Donne. Ransom counters Atkin's assessment of Millay and proclaims that the "age may perhaps be defined with respect to its characteristic plunge into poetry. It is the age that among other things has recovered the admirable John Donne; that is the way to identify its literary taste. Therefore it is hardly an age of which it may be said that Miss Millay is the voice" (78). Ransom claimed that as a woman Millay could not be "intellectual" (76), and thus she could not write in the tradition of Donne who is a champion of fusing the intellect with the emotion. Ransom also faults Millay's erotic imagery, calling it "rude substance" (103), "antireligious and Bohemian shockers" (103) and even going so far as to suggest that Donne would have been "revolted" by it. This seems highly unlikely if we recall Donne's more shocking combining of secular and religious imagery to express erotic passion in his own poetry.

While the metaphysicists are concerned with intellectual explorations, it does not deny the physical. As Sonia Raiziss in The Metaphysical Passion succinctly notes, "Donne is concerned with metaphysical reference when he seems most physical, and vise versa" (5).

Ransom's most strident attack against Millay as a woman comes in this now infamous and often quoted passage from The World's Body:

> [...] man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect, but it should be well feminized. He knows he should not abandon sensibility and tenderness, though perhaps he has generally done so, but now that he is so far removed from the world of the simple sense, he does not like to impeach his own integrity and leave his business in order to recover it; going back, as he is often directed, to first object, the true and tried, like the moon, or the grass, or the dead girl. He would much prefer it is possible to find poetry in his study, or even his office, and not have to sit under the syringa bush. Sensibility and tenderness might qualify the general content of his mind, if he but knew the technique, however, "mental;" or self-constructed some of the content looks. But his problem does not arise for a woman. Less pliant, safer, as a biological organism, she remains fixed in her famous attitude, and is indifferent to intellectuality. I mean, of course, comparatively indifferent; more so than a man. Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual and I think everybody knows it. (74-5)

What Ransom clearly objects to in his assessment of Millay is not her poetics, but her gendered poetic. Ransom, in his self-conscious attempt to establish New Criticism and

its theory of "objectivity" as the dominant literary method could not risk the destabilizing effect that Millay's "personal" poetry would have caused. He writes: "She is an artist. She is also a woman. No poet ever registered herself more deliberately in that light. She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too" (76). One imagines that just the thought of Millay's inclusion in the canon would indeed "horrify" him.[6]

In many respects, Millay's poetry anticipates the gynophobia which Ransom's loaded tropes in the quoted passage puts forth. She refuses to play the part of the "dead girl" which traditional love poetry, and in particular the carpe diem lyric, insists upon. In her use of the carpe diem lyric, Millay repeatedly flaunts the living female body, not as a hidden trope for the poet's fear of impending death, but to openly voice female sexual desire. In Sonnet XXVIII ["When we are old and these rejoicing veins"] the female speaker unabashedly urges her beloved "Be not discountenanced if the knowing know / We rose from rapture but an hour ago" (lines 13-14). Millay further counters Ransom's so called theory that a woman is "less pliant, safer, as a biological organism, she remains fixed in her famous attitude" when she stresses the ultra changeability of her female speakers' attitudes toward their beloved. The two poems we have already examined, "Thursday" and Sonnet X ["Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!"], are perhaps two of her finest examples.

Despite Millay's in-your-face rejection of the female body's role in traditional love poetry, the repercussions of New Criticism's reading of Millay were far reaching. New Criticism, because it coincided with the concerted effort to legitimize literary criticism as a respectable discipline in English departments across the United States,

exerted a complex and lasting influence on the shaping of not only how students read, but what they read. Recent contemporary literary theory--in particular, Feminism, New historicism, and Cultural Materialism--has objected to New Critical tenets. Their investigations into biography and history have led to a reexamination of the canon and the ideologies that are implicated, and reinforced, by it. New Criticism's liberal humanism has been challenged as elitist, depoliticizing and socially marginal.

Since New Criticism, however, critics have continued to find it difficult to place Millay within the canon of twentieth century American poetry, and thereby metaphysical poetry. The most sustained body of Millay criticism since New Criticism has come from Feminist critics. Feminist critics rejected, among other things, New Criticism's "objectivity" and praised Millay's "personality," claiming it as uniquely feminine. Karen Alkalay-Gut in "Poetry by Women in America: Esthetics in Evolution" praised Millay as being among "the first burst of women poets who wrote as women, from the point of view of women, with the concerns of women" (240). Because feminist critics aimed to counter New Critical evaluations of Millay, their criticism self-consciously strove to reexamine Millay's poetry outside of New Critical, and thereby modern and metaphysical, tenets. Suzanne Clark in "Uncanny Millay" places Millay as writing within the sentimental tradition, opposed to modernism. Jan Montefore's Feminism and Poetry likewise argues that Millay's "poetic approach is traditional in a straightforward sense. The experiments of modernism passed by her; despite the freedom and colloquialism of her later work, she uses mainly romantic conventions" and that Millay's poetry "is the articulation of a straightforward subjectivity" (15).

While these critics bring to light many neglected aspects of Millay's poetry, thereby forcing us to reread Millay's poetry outside of New Critical tenets of what qualities modern poetry might assert, they also restrict our reading of Millay's poetry. Striving to resurrect Millay and place her within a new democratic canon that includes women, they have stressed her femininity, thereby defining her poetry once more by the very characteristic that New Critics used to exclude her. Also, by foregrounding Millay's poetic qualities that were distinctly different from those texts already comfortably positioned in the literary canon, they left unexplored how Millay's poetry participates in the larger metaphysical strain in twentieth century American poetry which such canonical poets as Eliot, Ransom, and Warren were accepted as participating.

Even within the feminist revival of Millay's poetry, the success of her "feminism" elicited differing views. Jane Stanbourgh's examination of Millay's poetry in "Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Language of Vulnerability" finds that while Millay speaks for the changing times and mocks outdated public opinion, she is also "unquestionably a woman who suffers, and the greatest source of her suffering seems to lie in an overwhelming sense of personal vulnerability--and ultimately of woman's vulnerability--to victimization by uncontrollable conditions in her environment" (214). Stranbough goes on to claim that the sonnet form is thus a "fit vehicle to convey her deepest feelings of woman's victimization. Through it, Millay imaginatively reenacts her constant struggle against boundaries. The wish for freedom is always qualified by the sense of restriction; couplets and quatrains suit her sensibility" (227). Stranbough's assessment is interesting in that Millay's form indeed frames her dramatic speakers' oscillation between excess and restraint. She does not consider, however, that Millay's poetic framing might work to

emphasize the intense passions rather than to temper them. Jean Gould likewise writes that Millay "found security in classical form: the sonnet was the golden scepter with which she ruled her poetic passions" (Thesing 229). Others, such as Debra Fried in "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets," and with whom I agree, see Millay's use of the sonnet as more innovative and suited to her feminist themes. Fried writes that Millay employs form to make a feminist point, and as a "bold stroke in the pursuit of freedom rather than a capitulation to male tradition or a necessary checkrein for overwrought emotions." She positions Millay as rejecting the Romantic use of the sonnet "as controlled respite from freedom" and argues that Millay employs the form to articulate "a trope for a poetics of burning one's candle at both ends, of using life up completely" (235). Her sonnets culminate "in a closure with no residue" (237).

The Skidmore Conference held in 1992 to celebrate 100 years since Millay's birth sparked a pivotal turn in Millay criticism. In the essays that evolved out of this conference, Millay's ties to the renaissance were again explored. Robert Wittenberg's essay, "Millay and the English Renaissance Lyric" writes that the "affinities run deep" (287), with Millay "indebted to [the renaissance poets] for technical hints and tricks, particularly the means of assuming, maintaining, and shifting an argumentative stance within a lyric" (288). Essays by Ernest J. Smith, Holly Peppe and Stacy Hubbard all note Millay's adaptation of the renaissance's carpe diem motif to counter traditional male poetry. For example, Hubbard's essay "'Love's Little Day': Time and the Sexual body in Millay's Sonnets" provides a particularly astute examination of how Millay counters the use of "the female body's vulnerability" to symbolize "human mortality" and how she

"rewrites the male carpe diem tradition by insistently dislodging woman from her role as abject figure for the end of something" (103).

Not only were Millay's affinities with the renaissance once again explored, but critics also essayed to reposition Millay into the canon. Robert Johnson's article, "A Moment's Monument: Millay's Sonnet and Modern Time," innovatively depicts Millay as demonstrating "clearly modernist attitudes, at least about time" (119). He writes that Millay's poetry, particularly her sonnets:

> [...] often balance the urgency of human emotional responses and the concomitant need to name what one feels against the limitations of attempting to describe the felt moment. Experience becomes a kind of *topos*, a precarious foothold maintained within the ceaseless flow of change and time, against the sure loss of sensory awareness, the inevitable death of imaginatively evoked correspondences and all the names that that language can throw at the world. (117)

This present study of Millay's metaphysical poetry draws on both Hubbard's and Johnson's essays. It agrees with Hubbard's argument that Millay refuses to use the feminine body as an abstract entity, and thus a voiceless object in her poetry, but detours from Hubbard's and other critics' claim that Millay's feminist poems are a foil to the misogynist lyrics of the carpe diem lyrics of the Cavalier poets.[7] This reading of the Cavalier poet as a sexually aggressive, self-absorbed libertine who goes about either seducing or degrading women is too simple a reading of the complexities of the Cavalier love lyric. It is possible to read Cavalier poetry as not simply indulgently misogynist fantasy, but as acute examples of social satire, and of course, it need not be an either/or

proposition. In doing so, it also provides some clues as to why Millay engages specifically the Cavalier lyric, opposed to the Elizabethan or Petrarchan love lyric, as a model for her revisionary metaphysical poetic.

All literary modes, or genres, as Donald Rosenberg explains, "have ideological dimensions that are political, social and cultural. They are texts that encode the values, ideals, and condition of a society in a particular historical situation" (258). Adopting this general view of genres along with Earl Miner's specific claim in "The Cavalier Ideal of the Good Life" that the "social mode is [...] a radical feature of Cavalier poetry" (205), I contend that the Cavalier libertine love lyric can be read as social commentary on sexual relationships in the seventeenth century and in particular, on the contradictory obligations of honor in Caroline society. Seventeenth century's poetic treatment of love grows out of, and ultimately rejects the courtly love poetry of the Petrarchan lover. Petrarchan love poetry (from the fourteenth century Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch) expresses and explores the male perspective. The male is self-tormented by the female who is depicted as an unobtainable object of his desire. The female is voiceless and viewed from a distance, reduced to both an idol and a reflection of the male's desire. Seventeenth century poets adapted the Petrarchan tradition to suit its more modern needs, which explored the changing dynamics between men and women in seventeenth century society. This change in male/female dynamics, as depicted in poetry, was partially ushered in with the ascension of Charles I in 1625. The significance this change had on the literature was that the French princess Henrietta Maria became queen. In France she was influenced by a group that was trying to refine French behavior. They hoped to refine their society by elevating women to a position of honor and glorifying idealistic Platonic

love. When Henrietta Maria came to England, she brought these French ideas with her and attempted to instill them in the English court. Consequently, a Platonic love cult, known as "préciosité" sprang up around the queen and king. Préciosité's elevation of women was especially corrupted by the Cavalier poets. Thomas Carew and Richard Lovelace manipulated it into an affected idolization of women. This pseudo-Petrarchanism placed the female on a pedestal, not to valorize her virtues, but to flatter her into yielding her "virtue" to her adoring suitor. The préciosité of the court also degenerated into the antifruition poem. It pushes the Platonic cult to its extremes, denying any physical manifestation of love. This can be defined as anti-Petrarchanism. It is this response to the Petrarchan tradition and response to seventeenth century attitudes toward courtship that Sir John Suckling adopted.

The court's fabricated morality makes clear that gender relations are always political relations, and thus grounded on a play for power. Objectifying the female into a group that can be elevated or reduced at will places the male/poet in a precarious position, because it is the poet who is to regulate the woman's status. If he elevates her too much he will feel threatened: if he degrades her, he will lose respect for her. One of the ways the Cavalier poet responded to this dilemma was by placing the seduction outside of the reality of seventeenth century society. Instead, it imagined a golden age of sexual liberty, or invoked a dream motif where the love-lorn suitor fantasizes about a fulfilling encounter. The lover always awakes from his dream just prior to its climax, so that the relationship is never consummated. Many of Carew's and Lovelace's poems envision this type of golden age of sexual freedom. Suckling's antifruition poems, in contrast, envision a golden age of abstinence. Understanding that a relationship cannot

be had with an object that merely reflects your own image back at you--like a narcissistic mirror--Suckling rejects the anti-Petrarchan poem of jouissance. He perceived how the jouissance poem was much like the Petrarchan poem it aimed to displace: objectification of the woman prevented any true relationship between the suitor and his beloved from forming. The antifruition poem is the antithesis of the Petrarchan love poem in that it does not seek to seduce the woman at all, rather it seeks to avoid consummation at all costs. In this manner, the antifruition poem is also the antithesis of the carpe diem poem. The carpe diem poem argues that succumbing to passion is the height of pleasure. In contrast, the antifruition poem purports that the jouissance of the affair is in the expectation of the consummation and not in the sexual act itself.

Just as seventeenth century poetry adapted the Petrarchan tradition to suit its more modern needs, Millay's poetry likewise adapts the rich tradition of seventeenth century love poetry to explore the changing dynamics between men and women in the early twentieth century. Millay's poetry examines how political, social and cultural ideologies are revealed through the traditional rhetoric of love poetry and then refashions the love lyric to express and endorse the feminist attitudes and behaviors that were emerging in the early decades of the twentieth century. Love and courtship provide Millay with a trope to express the intellectual and emotional experiences of human relations presented in microcosm. As both concrete experience and metaphor, the many stages of love succeed in locating a concrete sensory experience to express emotional and intellectual experience. Using love as a trope, the poetry records not only personal individual experience, but also investigates how literary genres and their rhetorical and cultural constructions determine the personal, although masquerading as "objective." Thus,

Millay's analytical and emotional inspection of secular love does not merely adopt the love lyric as enacted by the seventeenth century metaphysical poets as a form, but also as a conceit to revitalize the genre of love poetry just as the metaphysical poets refashioned the Petrarchan lyric: she not only razes the traditional love lyric, but works also to reshape the fragments into a new and meaningful structure that itself produces meaning through its determined quest for viable unions between women and men. For Millay, it is only through the serious play of language and form that one can blaze new relationships and new poetic territory and it is this that most marks Millay as a metaphysical poet.

Millay's metaphysical poetry embraces a highly rhetorical wit that negates polarizations and aims towards forging unities out of seemingly discordant objects or ideas. Her use of seventeenth century dramatic argument and rhetorical tropes and figures to talk about modern love is an element of her metaphysical wit. In her poetry we find many of the same characteristics of the typical seventeenth century lyric: attitudes of libertine sexual pleasure, eroticism, unrestrained passion and idolatry of the beloved. She employs traditional sonneteering conceits to express these attitudes. Common conceits include: love as a form of imprisonment or torment; the lover is subject to hot and cold flashes; the lover paradoxically suffers unbearable torment to be absent from his beloved, while to be in her presence is also unbearable torment. Millay, too, hyperbolically depicts love as "the sick disorder in my flesh" and as an "extreme disease" (Sonnets I and V, Fatal Interview). Love is portrayed as a dungeon which holds the speaker captive, and the lover is portrayed as her jailer.

> "Oh, God! Oh, let me out! Oh, let me go!"
> But that my chains throughout their iron length

Make such a golden clank upon my ear,

But that I would not, boasted I the strength,

Up with a terrible arm and out of here

Where thrusts my morsel daily through the bars

This tall, oblivious gaoler eyed with stars. (Sonnet V, lines 7-14)

While Millay uses a conventional conceit that can be traced back to Sappho and Petrarch, she employs the conceit in a metaphysical and uniquely modern manner. The conceit couples with witty argument to define the speaker's playful engagement with both the emotions of love and the love tradition. The hyperbole in line seven is tempered by the qualifying "but" in lines eight and ten, creating an ironic posturing in the speaker's argument for release. She boasts that if she had the strength she would break free, but she is clearly enjoying the throes of passion in which she finds herself imprisoned. Many feminist critics fault Millay's use of such conventional conceits that depict the woman subject to her male lover.[8] This passion is fueled, however, not by the ambivalent lover who offers her only the tiniest of affections, but by her own surrender to her passions. As she asserts, the chains "make such a golden clank upon my ear." It is clear that this imprisonment is the speaker's own making, one she revels in. The poem itself is Millay's playful poetic prison in which she contentedly bars herself.

Millay's use of the sonnet form, also troubling to both feminist and modernist critics, is an essential component of her poetry's wit: it creates emotional surprise by yoking seemingly contradictory feminist aims with traditional Petrarchan and Elizabethan forms. A close look at Millay's posthumous poem, Sonnet CLXVIII ["I will put Chaos into fourteen lines"], which takes the sonnet form as its subject, as well as the

sonneteering conceit of love as imprisonment, illustrates that the sonnet is a particularly well suited form for the speaker's pursuit of love, and of Millay's quest for poetic re-creation. Both the content and the form aim to resolve conflicts of mastery and servitude.

Millay's poem aims for union with the beloved, for a resolution to the conflict, and the rendering of the speaker and beloved as equals. In the following posthumous poem from Mine the Harvest (qtd. in full), Millay's personification of "Chaos" as male, a kind of fugitive, faithless lover who is at last captured, demonstrates this desire.

I will put chaos into fourteen lines
And keep him there; and let him thence escape
If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape
Flood, fire, and demon-- his adroit designs
Will strain to nothing in the strict confines
Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,
I hold his essence and amorphous shape,
Till he with Order mingles and combines.
Past are the hours, the years, of our duress,
His arrogance, our awful servitude:
I have him. He is nothing more or less
Than something simple not yet understood;
I shall not even force him to confess;
Or answer. I will only make him good.

This sonnet, while it places chaos in prison, instead of the speaker, uses the prison conceit unconventionally. The monosyllabic opening, "I will put," places syntactic

emphasis on the speaker's assertive and active "will." The mitigated command "let" repeated in lines two and three tempers the speaker's desire. "Let" paradoxically both permits and restrains. This free play of action underscores the promise that the captured lover "will strain to nothing." It suggests that the lover will both want for nothing, and his will, strained by nothing, has free reign, or rather, free will. The logic is that if the lover is imbued with free will, then he freely chooses to reside within the prison. If we accept such logic, then the seeming contradiction of "pious rape" negates itself: the ravishment is not a stealing of favors, but a temporary "holding" of her lover's "essence and amorphous shape."

Millay uses the sonnet form, as Debra Fried has cogently argued, in the same manner Donne uses a version of it in his poem "The Triple Fool".

> I thought, if I could draw my pains,
> Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,
> Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
> For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse. (lines 8-11)

The problem, however, as Donne's speaker learns is that once a reader recites these verses, he/she "frees againe / Griefe, which verse did restraine" (lines 15-16). Grief is "increased by such songs" (18). Like Millay's speaker, Donne's speaker discovers that restraint of emotional distress achieves only a temporary stay. But the type of stay in these two poems differs. Donne's poem presents the poem's structure as a container, that may be enclosed or opened at will and suitable for the sonnet form, as it is one that aims towards closure. Donne uses form as a self-protective attempt to master his fears of rejection by the woman in Songs and Sonnets and to calm his fears of sin and divine

judgment in his Holy Sonnets. Conversely, Millay's form temporarily holds her lover's "essence and amorphous shape," resisting mastery and closure. It is rendered temporary by the lover's own flux. Thus, the lover's will is equal to the speaker's, no greater, no less. Line ten with its plural pronoun "our" makes this mutual servitude to love clear.

My reading of Millay's use of the sonnet, therefore, differs somewhat from Fried. While I agree that Millay's use of the form allows her to question the assumptions that come with it, I disagree with Fried's argument that the "curt, determined vows at the end [of this sonnet] leave us with a sense that in this poetic mastery over a lover rival one takes its sweetest revenge from its substitution of an inescapable gentleness for the rival's former cruelty and arrogance" (6). I don't read the speaker as seeking revenge on the lover for unrequited love, or love withdrawn. The poem aims not to break chaos, but to contain him. A proper reading of the final line, "I will make him good" depends on our understanding the various meanings of "make." It does not merely mean to make, as in to force someone to do something but also to make, or create, something out of material that already exists. She does not force him to be good, but only re-forms him into something he already is, "simply not yet understood."

The fourteen lines of the sonnet are likewise not rigid bars of imprisonment. The poem structurally and thematically balances chaos and order. The octave is a single sentence, but controlled by rhyme and meter. The sestet is written in shorter lines, most of them end-stopped. The poem does not force the rhyme on chaos, but allows it to "mingle and combine" just as thematically the poem aims for a union with the beloved chaos. She does not make chaos "confess" nor force it to conform to the form with the

use of rhyme, committing "pious rape." She uses the form instead to urge a confession or reaction and to reveal "something simple" or "good."

The sonnet is Millay's best form, and one suited to her metaphysical search for viable unions. Traditionally a form used to temper, moderate and restrain, Millay uses the sonnet not for confinement, but for completeness and reconciliation (albeit temporary) of seemingly incongruous elements. The emphasis is on the process of union making, rather than on the static union itself. The previous discussion of Sonnet CLXVIII also illustrates how Millay's use of the sonnet form is very much modern. Like the modernist poem, there is no easy distinction between Millay's form and content. The traditional forms she writes in, especially the sonnet, uniquely embody the poems' meaning. As Cleanth Brooks notes in The Well Wrought Urn, content and form in the modern poem cannot be distinguished without distorting the overall meaning of the poem, even if the form itself seems paradoxical to a commonsense notion of "meaning." It is the language of the poem itself, which effects the reconciliation of opposites or contraries, resulting in the meaning of the poem.

Millay employs the sonnet form in her fifty-two sonnet sequence, Fatal Interview, published in 1931. Fatal Interview presents Millay's most sustained engagement with the seventeenth century love lyric, and takes its title from John Donne's Elegy XVI, "By our first strange and fatal interview / By all desires which thereof did ensue" which Millay quotes as the sequence's epigraph.[9] Norman Brittin, in his full-length book on Millay, Edna St. Vincent Millay, claims that the "title [...] implies no connection between Donne's work and Millay's sonnets" (85) and was chosen solely to commemorate Donne's tercentenary year, which was also in 1931. I will demonstrate, however, that

Millay's sequence enacts a "fatal interview" with not only Donne's poem, but also with the traditional male love lyric as a whole, by questioning the politics inherent in the presentation of women within the genre, and within the carpe diem genre in particular. The remainder of this chapter will show that Millay's sonnet sequence deconstructs the traditional male lyric (fatally "killing" it) and succeeds in constructing a new strain of metaphysical love poetry, which is feminist in character and yet in keeping with seventeenth century love poetry's larger aim, the scrutiny, through rhetorical language, of physical and nonphysical experience.

The fifty-two sonnets of Fatal Interview represent a yearlong seemingly adulterous affair, beginning in autumn and the speaker's first attraction and desire for a relationship with the object of her affection. The relationship is consummated in winter. With the advent of spring, the intensity of their affair heats up and continues throughout the summer months, with a brief break up in between. With the return of autumn, however, the relationship cools, and there is a falling off until it ends completely. The seasonal motif, in which the affair mirrors the changing of seasons, forges an analogy between the mutability and transitory nature of love.

Millay's sequence presents more than the speaker's emotional experience of being in love. Each sonnet intellectually scrutinizes the many stages and emotions of love and acts as an objective correlative to articulate the speaker's experiences as she grapples to understand and articulate her ever-changing relationship with the beloved of the poem. Each sonnet is a contained event, which the speaker turns over in her mind, inspecting its causes, effects and felt experience. The sequence describes not only the speaker's love affair, but is also employed as a trope for the more general experiences of human

relations presented in microcosm, just as Cavalier lyrics had used love as trope for political and social critique. The poems scrutinize human interactions with time--the seasons, the temporality of experience and emotions, and eventual death--with society--which watches and regulates human relationships--and with the literary tradition--which gives voice to experience.

Before the speaker has made her affections known to the beloved, she already understands the temporal nature of love. Attempting to articulate her desire, she tries to define it, thereby making it rhetorically "present." It is "This beast that rends me in the sight of all, / This love, this longing, this oblivious thing" (Sonnet II, lines 1-2). Love is an abstract "thing," indefinable and yet the repetition of the emphatic pronoun "this" places strong syntactical weight on her current emotion. "[T]his" insistently puts love into the present moment and temporarily succeeds in capturing the speaker's passion. As soon as Millay's speaker names her particular emotion, however, she is already looking forward, envisioning the end of love. Love

> Will glut, will sicken, will be gone by spring.
> The wound will heal, the fever will abate,
> The knotted hurt will slacken in the breast;
> I shall forget before the flickers mate
> Your look that is today my east and west. (lines 4-8)

That love inevitably flickers and dies maps the fatality of every lover's situation. The heavy repetition of the simple futurity of the verb "will" forcefully (and willfully) makes present the absence that love will cause. Engaging her mental faculties deliberately to choose a course of action for her emotions is an act of self-control that

conflates time. Why does Millay's speaker in the early throes of desire envision its end? Susan Sontag suggests that modern psychology "equates the discovery of the self with the discovery of the suffering self. For the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer [...]. The artist attempts to control his suffering, by making it his own creation, his choice and submit to it" (42). This is the same willful desire for control found in Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV ["Batter my heart three person'd God"] which is discussed in detail in chapter three. Like Donne, Millay's negative imagery, metaphor and repetitive sound builds until it reveals the speaker's desperate desire for permanence, even in the face of acknowledging its impossibility. Love's painful loss ("glut," "sicken," "wound" and "fever") is countered, however, with the recovering and diminution of disease ("heal," "abate" and "slacken"). Millay's sonnet successfully reconciles these polarities, of life lived and imagined through the rigorous use of rhetorical language, thereby capturing and making comprehensible emotional experience.

Robert Johnson's "A Moment's Monument" cogently argues that Millay's understanding of the temporal nature of time is a modernist one. Drawing from Henri Bergson's writings on time, he writes that modernism perceives "time as relational and experienced as personal experience, as a *duration*" rather than a concrete entity (121). "Time becomes a point of view, a species of imaginative memory" (121) for which Millay's sonnets "consciously grasp moments out of the flow of experience and then, with words, consciously construct a still point from which to view the course of life's happenings. They claim time by naming the moments they exist in" (122). Johnson cites

Millay's sonnet ["Only until this cigarette is ended"] from Second April as a paradigm of Millay's understanding of time.

Only until this cigarette is ended,
A little moment at the end of all,
While on the floor the quiet ashes fall,
And in the firelight to a lance extended,
Bizarrely with the jazzing music blended,
The broken shadow dances on the wall,
I will permit my memory to recall
The vision of you, by all my dreams attended. (lines 1-8)

The glowing tip of the cigarette aptly describes the modernist notion of time always in flux. As Johnson succinctly states it, Millay's poem willfully isolates and scrutinizes the moment, its "fleeting bundle of sensory data, captured against its physical background, while the [speaker's] mind knowingly toys with a vision soon to fade, the boundaries of the moment imaged by the burst and waning of the burning cigarette's light" (123). Millay's understanding of time does indeed appear modern and shows similarities to Eliot's own understanding of time as both temporal and eternal and the belief that we can comprehend that moment only through figural language. As Eliot wrote in his doctoral dissertation, "although we cannot know immediate experience directly as an object, we can yet arrive at it by inference, and even conclude that it is the starting point of our knowing, since it is only in immediate experience that knowledge and its object are one" (Knowledge and Experience 19). Millay's treatment of time also

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recalls Lovelace's portrayal of time as subjective and measured by the senses as was discussed earlier in our examination of his poem, "The Scrutiny."

Because relations exist within time, always in flux, Millay's speaker's moods frequently change throughout Fatal Interview. The speaker's moods shift from self-pity to accusation, from idolizing her beloved to chastising his fickleness. There are feelings of fear, ecstasy, desire, foreboding, praise, regret, helplessness and joy. Patricia Klemens has aptly named Millay's speaker as the "female counterpart to Donne's sophisticated lover" in Songs and Sonnets (8). We find the same complexity and ambiguity of the contradictory voices in Millay's Fatal Interview: the libertine or the faithful lover; the cynic or the platonic lover; the masterful or the egalitarian lover. Similarities with Donne's sonnets also include the use of bold openings, dramatic monologues, elaborate conceits, erotic imagery, extreme emotions, and the celebration of physical and spiritual love. Several critics have noted the similarities between Millay's sequence and Donne's Songs and Sonnets, but have tended to downplay the comparison.[10] It is helpful, however, to examine Millay's sequence in conjunction with Donne's Elegie XVI ["On his Mistress"] of which Fatal Interview takes its title. It is my contention that Millay's introspection into the complex and often contradictory emotions of its female speaker takes this poem as her structuring conceit.

In Donne's elegy, the speaker prepares to go on a journey and wishes that his mistress does not accompany him. Presumably, his mistress has suggested that she might disguise herself as a man so she can join him on his voyage. The speaker begs her not to persist in this desire and does so by urging her to remember their personal history together and past vows:

By our first strange and fatal interview,

By all our long desires which therof did ensue,

By our long starving hopes, by that remorse

Which my words masculine perwasive force

Begot in thee, and by memory

Of hurts, which spies and rivals threatened me

I calmly beg. (lines 1-7)

Besides indicating the couple's vows of constancy, he also, through the repetition of "by," creates a catalogue of oaths, which strive to jar the woman's memory of past shared experiences. Not only does it show solidarity with the other, but it works to exclude others from this circle of community, such as the "spies and rivals" mentioned in this passage. It is the outside world that threatens the speaker in the poem.

Seemingly unable to convince her, he moves from begging to jockeying for power:

I conjure thee, and all the oathes which I

And thou have sworne to seale joynt constancy,

here I unsweare, and overswere them thus (lines 9-11).

He argues that to accompany him is "love by waye so dangerous" (line 18) and he pleads "Tempter, o faire love, love impetuous rage, / Be my true Mistris still, not my faign'd page" (lines 13-14). The speaker's method then moves to threats; he reminds her of the nymph Orithyia and her fate at the violent hands of the ill natured north wind, Boreas who took her by force, rape: "Dissemble nothing, not a boy, no change / Thy bodies habite, nor mindes [...]" (lines 27-28). The speaker's rhetoric heavily emphasizes the

woman's appearance. Not only is she not to dress as a boy to go with him, she is not to change her appearance in any form whatsoever from what it is. It is a warning against transvestitism. It is important to note that during the renaissance, many people believed that outward appearances reflected the spiritual inner self: so that to be his "true" mistress, she must appear as such.

The speaker of the poem then argues that the woman is a female, and will be recognized as such no matter what she wears.

> Disemble nothing, not a boy, nor change
> Thy bodies habite, nor mindes; bee not strange
> To thy self onley. All will spie in thy face
> A blushing womanly discovering grace; (lines 27-30)

Stanley Fish notes that "Masculine authority can be asserted only in relation to a firmly defined opposite [...]. In order for [the speaker] to be a man she must be unmistakably and essentially a woman" (223). The male speaker's insecurity is reiterated when he portrays other men as being overly aggressive and insatiable in their lusts, and these lusts are associated with their own physical appearances, such as the "changeable cameleon" of French men (line 32) and the "spittles of dresse, shops of fashion" (line 33) of their countries are likewise perceived as a threat. In this deceptive environment, the "Players, which upon the world's stage be, / will quickly know thee, and no leese alas" (lines 36-37). Punning on lasse and lass, he argues that they will see through her disguise and will seize her femininity and know her sexually. He expounds on this saying the Italian "will hunt thee with such lust, and hideous rage" (line 39), as

well as the "hydroptique Dutch," punning on the insatiableness of the Dutch drunk of both liquor and sex.

Literary historians explain that between 1500 and 1640 female cross-dressing was prevalent in London and frequently attacked by the clergy. William Prynne attacks it as against "human nature" and "deeply censures the aspiring of women above the limits of their female sex, and their metamorphosis into the shapes of men, either in haire, or apparell" (Benet 26). Likewise, King James in 1620 ordered church ministers "to inveigh vehemently in their sermons against the insolence of our women and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doubles, their hair cut short of shorn" (Hobby 42).[11] Diana Trevino Benet in "Sexual transgression in Donne's Elegies" notes that there were a number of factors that contributed to women's sense of greater independence during this period: "a growing market economy led a large number of women into the fields of cloth making and dairy farming; the increased visibility and productivity of women outside of homes as more wives worked along side their shopkeeper or tradesmen husbands; the puritan ideal of marriage as a partnership and of the woman's moral responsibility within the domestic sphere" (20). It is not surprising that Millay's poetry, written after the First World War and the onslaught of women entering the workforce and amongst the backdrop of the woman's suffrage movement, flappers, women's bobbed hair and plummeting necklines and rising hemlines, was also examining the relations between men and women--their real and poetic appearances-- and how these relations are imbedded in literature. Indeed, many readers and critics characterized Millay as "a kind of poetic flapper" and declared that her poetry "represents our time to itself" (Atkins 8).

Millay's "First Fig" from A Few Figs from Thistles (qtd. in full) indeed seemed to speak authentically for this era of social change.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

Donne's elegy is the perfect poem for Millay to select to announce her confrontation with the traditional male love lyric and its portrayal of women. Masquerading as the libertine poet, she dons the garb of the carpe diem lyric in her Fatal Interview sequence, thereby playing the part of Donne's transvestic mistress. She does not, however, merely adopt the lyric and simply reverse the genders of the speakers. As if in defiance of Donne, she gives the love lyric a uniquely feminine voice, "undisguised" in its personal and erotic imagery. In doing so, she addresses the possibility that all guises are artificial constructs mediated by social, political and literary institutions.

Millay flagrantly masquerades as Donne's transvestic mistress as she adroitly handles Donnean wit, paradox and logical argument in Sonnet III ["No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise"]. The sonnet adopts Donne's famous metaphysical conceit from "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" that compares a woman's constancy to a compass.

If they be two [soules], they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other doe.

And though it in the center is,

yet when the other far doth rome,

It leanes, and hearkens after it,

And growes erect, as that comes home. (lines 21-32)

Despite its praise of the woman, the woman is held morally responsible for both lovers in Donne's conceit. She must remain fixed, the speaker's center: a pose not unlike that of the mistress in Donne's Elegy XVI. In contrast, Millay writes:

No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise

How love may be acquired and how conserved

Warrants this laying bare before your eyes

My needle to your north abruptly swerved;

If I would hold you, I must hide my fears

Lest you be wanton, lead you to believe

My compass to another quarter veers,

Little surrender, lavishly receive. (lines 1-8)

The compass in Millay's conceit is not a symbol of stable and moral love, but of a love based on a lie forced on the female by the male's propensity to want what he can't have. The fallout of the paradox in lines four through eight, that men want what they can't have, is that women are forced to act contrary to nature. They must act coy and create a love potion, "a philtre any doll can brew,--" that can temporarily put the male under a spell, just so that they can love him. In traditional love poetry the drinking of such a potion indicates the qualities of uniqueness and inevitability of romantic love; the

lovers are naturally fated for each other, as if the gods or destiny determined their love. In Millay's poem the potion signifies the very artificiality of the lover's affections. Drinking a potion is antithetical to what the speaker claims is her true nature, "free from guile." Paradoxically, Millay's speaker is the "truer" mistress when she appears most untrue.

Patricia Klemins in "'Being Born a Woman': A New Look at Edna St. Vincent Millay," writes that "Donne's compass encloses space; Millay's determines directions" (207). The entire concept of the woman's character changes from one of fidelity and dependency to one of experience and independence when Millay substitutes Donne's rigid mathematical tool with her geographical device which freely pivots until alignment is met with the earth's magnetic pull. Thus Millay's conceit deliberately moves toward natural unions, while Donne's anchors the couple to manmade unions. This apt distinction reflects Millay's interest in subjectivity as a site of perpetual construction. Repeatedly in Millay's poems we find emphasis placed on the woman's various experiences and self-development in response to experience rather than on the formation of an apparently stable identity that is repeatedly revealed to be merely a deceptive disguise.

The theme of female "appearance" in the traditional love lyric is the explicit subject of Sonnet XI ["Not in a silver casket cool with pearls"]. The speaker demands openness and engagement with her physical self, refusing to hide her desire.

> Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
> Or rich with red corundum or with blue,
> Locked, and the key withheld, as other girls

Have given their loves, I give my love to you;

Not in a lovers'-knot, not in a ring

Worked in such fashion, and the legend plain—

Semper fidelis, where a secret spring

Kennels a drop of mischief for the brain: (lines 1-8)

Possibly in defiance of Donne's speaker, Millay's speaker vows--through the adoption of Donnean negation--that she will be recognized, "known" as a sexual woman and opts for "Love in the open hand, no thing but that" (line 9).[12] She comes to her lover " Ungemmed" and "unhidden" (line 10), offering her love

As one should bring you cowslips in a hat

Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,

I bring you, calling out as children do:

"Look what I have! -- and these are all for you." (lines 11-14)

In an astute reading of this poem Stacy Carson Hubbard points out that the woman's "sexual treasures are displayed by the very skirt that was designed to hide them" (108). Millay's poem transfers the woman's sexuality from the "hidden interiority of the knotted ring [...] to the shameless exteriority of the child's open-handed offering" (108). In doing so, this poem counters the carpe diem genre and its regulation of female appearance.

In the carpe diem poems of Donne, Herrick, Carew and Marvell the woman's "appearance" (read as "chastity") is heavily regulated. Often using the blazon to praise the woman's youth and beauty, the male speaker urges the beloved to succumb to his

desire while she is still in possession of these traits. Herrick argues in his carpe diem lyric, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time":

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying. (lines 1-4)[13]

With its rallying cry to "seize the day," the carpe diem motif is grounded in the knowledge that time passes and with its passing the individual moves closer towards his / her death. Seventeenth century poetry employs it not only as an argument to seduce the woman to yield her virginity to the suitor while still young and beautiful, but also as a philosophical contemplation of love's passion and the battle against extinction. The argument is that if she does not offer up these gifts to him, then they will ultimately be seized by time and intimate death. As Herrick's poem concludes: "for having lost but once your prime / You may for ever tarry" (lines 15-16). She will tarry because she will have lost her looks to time's ravishment, death's predecessor. The suitor, because he too fears death, perceives time as a rival. The result is that the female body becomes not only the object of the male's desire, but also the enemy to be conquered in a symbolic triumph over death. In Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" the speaker strives to convince his coy and virginal mistress that she should prefer him over death: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none I think do there embrace" (lines 31-32).

Millay counters the objectification of the female body in her Sonnet XI. Her reference to "a silver casket cool with pearls" suggesting a coffin, alludes to the carpe diem's fascination with death and its objectification of the female body as a symbol of

human frailty. Millay's speaker refuses to place her love and body in such guise. By discarding the fatal symbolism of the carpe diem motif, Millay's poem opens up the possibility for viable unions that are physical and generative, rather than terminal. This poem's replacement of the carpe diem motif with the openness of woman's sexual desires depicted as a freely offered gift--"look what I have! – and *these* are all for you." (lines 11-14, emphasis added) shifts the woman's identity from one dependent upon the one time event of giving her virginity to one whose sexuality is just one facet of her identity. The speaker's openness in this poem procures the desired consummation in the very next poem.

Millay's sequence uniquely consummates the couple's love. In the traditional love lyric love almost never reaches fruition despite its argument that succumbing to passion is the height of pleasure. In fact, the carpe diem tradition depends on the lady's prolonged denial. As Marvell's speaker illogically declares "...though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" (lines 43-46). Consummation only speeds time up and invites death sooner. The poem itself is dependent on the lady's coyness and refusal. If she were to speak and bequeath her virginity, as does Millay's speaker, there would be no reason for the traditional carpe diem poem to continue. By contrast, love requited (and verbally expressed) in Millay's poem produces new emotions, more sexual encounters and greater expression of desire, not to mention another forty sonnets.

Millay's consummated unions are like time itself, temporary and in continual flux. Thus, consummation can not be equated with death. The yielding of one's virginity is no longer equated with power. Youth and Beauty likewise lose their power. Power,

instead, comes from experience and the open voicing of experience, rather than inexperience. Subsequently, Millay's speaker is consistently open in expressing her desires. In Sonnet XXVIII ["When we are old and these rejoicing veins"] she engages the carpe diem tradition and asks her beloved to make love now while they are still "young and warm and in [their] prime" (line 6) and before "morning strikes her spear upon the land" (line 10). The speaker's argument to seize the moment concludes with a punning flippancy toward potential social gossip. She advises her beloved to "Be not discountenanced if the knowing know / We rose from rapture but an hour ago" (lines 13-14). The sexual connotation of 'knowing' rejects the carpe diem genre's insistence of female "discountenance" and the secrecy of the woman's physical desires. Her openness directly counters Thomas Carew's male speaker's threat to socially acknowledge the woman's sexuality in "A Deposition of Love."[14] This poem takes the traditional Petrarchan convention of the lamenting lover but retaliates against the woman by threatening to disclose the fact that the woman has acted unchastely. In this poem the speaker first rebukes her "rebel sex" (line 1) and portrays himself as one of the many men whose "poor hearts that humbly sue" (line 4) for the lady's affections. But by the second stanza, we see that the lover's complaint seeks social revenge on the woman. The speaker's bold "But I did enter, and enjoy," explicitly reminds the woman of their past sexual intimacy. He threatens to reveal this information if she does not reciprocate his love. Carew's deliberately shocking rhetoric aptly satirizes the social norms of the period that dictated sexual relations between men and women. The speaker's announcement of sexual intimacy deflects from the woman and highlights the role religious and social doctrines play in human relations. By contrast, Millay's more modern speaker

unabashedly proclaims her desire to "know" her lover and "enjoy." The use of the pun invites the reader's own "knowing" as well and seeks that the reader join in destabilizing the carpe diem love lyric and its dependency on secrecy, and then in refashioning it to suit more open aims of communication. Puns consistently remind us that language, although it often depends on seemingly random or "natural" associations, does not yield arbitrary meanings, but purposeful and motivated subject constructions.

Millay employs the carpe diem tradition again in Sonnet XXIX ["Heart, have not pity on this house of bone"]. The sonnet uses the framework of the carpe diem argument and its frequent use of marketplace rhetoric to counter its tendency to objectify the female body as property for economic exchange and poetic production.[15] The speaker argues:

> Heart, have no pity on this house of bone:
> Shake it with dancing, break it down with joy.
> No man hold mortgage on it; it is your own;
> To give, to sell at auction, to destroy. (lines 1-4)

Contrary to the traditional carpe diem poem, the argument is not directed toward the beloved, but toward oneself as the speaker urges herself to seize love before "Molestful age inherits, and the ground / Will have us" (lines 10-11). What we do not find in this poem, however, is the coyness or the itemizing of the woman's bodily charms as perishable commodities to be manipulated by the lover / poet, who is identified with the potential buyer and with the merchant who displays the woman's wares. Instead, Millay's female aims to do her own spending (Hubbard 104).

When the affair ends, and the female speaker's love is no longer requited, we truly see how Millay's sonnet sequence breaks from the traditional renaissance lyric. She

refuses to threaten, insult or even blame the beloved. In Sonnet XL ["You loved me not at all, but let it go"] she confronts her beloved.

You loved me not at all, but let it go;
I loved you more than life, but let it be.
As the more injured party, this being so,
The hour's amenities are all to me--
The choice of weapons; and I gravely choose
To let the weapons tarnish where they lie; (lines 1-6)

The use of isocolon, the parallel structures of lines one and two, ironically denotes the inherent difference, between the lover and the speaker--one stays and the other remains. The ironic use of isocolon emphasizes the speaker's independence, opposed to what we might expect to find when a lover is shafted, pathetic dependence. In the first line "go" means absence, while "be" in the second line is read as presence. The speaker "presents" herself as a strong, independent and even stoic figure. Millay's portrayal of the jilted lover sharply differs from the jilted lover found in traditional love lyrics. Usually, the jilted lover reacted in one of two ways: he would complain that he would die without the love of the beloved, presenting himself as pale and wasting away; or, he would threaten revenge on the lady, such as we saw in Carew's "A Deposition of Love." Millay's speaker refuses to entertain the idea of revenge and "gravely choose[s] / To let the weapons tarnish where they lie." Her speaker is ultimately more self-assured than the male speakers. This assurance is echoed in the poem by the playful use of the pun on "grave." Unlike the traditional carpe diem suitor who seeks to triumph over death through the capture of the female and his ravishment of his victory's spoils, Millay's

suitor refuses to objectify either herself or the beloved, and so "kills" the outmoded carpe diem rhetoric, even if it means gravely facing her own impending grave.

Millay's speaker accepts the end of love, because she has played the game fairly and openly, as she says in one of the final sonnets of the sequence, "In my own way, and with my full consent" (line 2). Even in pain she repeats that she "was not one for keeping / Rubbed in a cage a wind that would be free" (lines 7-8) even with the knowledge that

> If I had loved you less or played you slyly
> I might have held you for a summer more,
> But at the cost of words I value highly (Sonnet XLVII, lines 9-11)

It is the woman's experiences, openly articulated, that provide her with her unique speaking voice. As she declares in Sonnet XIX ["My most distinguished guest and learned friend"]:

> The pallid hare that runs before the day
> Having brought your earnest counsels to an end
> Now have I somewhat of my own to say. (lines 2-4)

Punning on "hare" and "here," the poem forges a linguistic place in the world that yokes past, present and future experiences. In locating a space for her experiences, she finally puts to bed traditional lyrics' "counsel" to disguise herself as the stable identity to which male identity and male poetic utterances depend. Shaking off the deceptive dress of the carpe diem motif, she releases the poetic female once and for all from her position as stable compass point to the roaming male lover. The result may be that love is fleeting, "folly" and "madness" (lines 5 and 6) but Millay's speaker willingly chalks it up to experience: "I have done ill, it is a certain thing; / Yet breathe I freer, walk I the more

sound" (lines 11-12). Punning on "sound," she is no longer the voiceless female defined by her physical body parts, but a complete, speaking, passionate and thinking subject. In metaphysical fashion, Millay's poetry consistently reminds us that selfhood is dependent on an engagement with the figural in that it stresses our physical connection to the larger community of human existence--literary, historical and social. Her poetry, read as engaging in dialogue with the tradition of seventeenth century love poetry--remembering its own literary, historical and social contexts--reveals that the seemingly incongruous use of feminist themes, seventeenth century conventional subjects, topoi, and traditional forms is part of her larger modern metaphysical poetic of concretely defining (actively determining) emotional, physical and intellectual experience. Reading her poetry in this manner re-maps the metaphysical terrain, as first delineated by Eliot and the New Critics. It extends the metaphysical to reflect a rich and diverse strain of the metaphysical in twentieth century American poetry while it also begins to dismantle critical tendencies that erect sharp boundaries between feminism and modernism, and thereby between feminism and metaphysics.

CHAPTER TWO

Richard Wilbur: "metaphysical poet"

If Edna St. Vincent Millay represents an unrecognized twentieth century strain of American metaphysical poetry by New Critics (which I suggested in the previous chapter), then Richard Wilbur is this century's recognized "metaphysical poet." Beginning with his first book, The Beautiful Changes, published in 1947, Wilbur attracted the attention and praise of poets and New Critics such as T.S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks who deemed Wilbur representative of mid-century poetics and declared him one of the most promising voices of the young post second-world-war poets.[1] The formal, witty and impersonal poems deliberately marked by a highly stylized rhetoric--elaborate wordplay (especially puns and paradox), extended conceits, and intricate argument--seemed to signify the full fruition of the New Critical style. Since the various challenges to New Criticism, however, the popularity of Wilbur's poetry, despite that it was twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize, received a National Book Award, and that Wilbur served as Poet Laureate of the United States, has waned. Bruce Bawer in 1991 sums up Wilbur's poetic stature in his essay, "Richard Wilbur's Difficult Balance," claiming, "For all his prominence, [...] Wilbur seems nearly marginal. We do not, after all live in the Age of Wilbur," and Robert von Hallberg in his recent contribution to the Cambridge History of American Literature (1996) writes, "Wilbur is still admired, but really as the best poet of the 1950s." Thus, Wilbur's reputation, unlike Millay's which has consistently risen in the past three decades, has generally suffered--although his technical skill, unparalleled in twentieth century verse, continues to receive critical praise. The rise and fall of Wilbur's

poetic stature is important to this present study of the metaphysical terrain of twentieth century American poetry and to Wilbur's metaphysical poetry in particular. For Wilbur's literary stature as a metaphysical poet, like Millay's, reflects the rise and fall in stature of New Critical theories. Contrary to Millay, whose critical reception suffered during New Criticism's heyday, Wilbur's reputation swelled, largely buoyed by New Critics.

In 1936, just ten years prior to Wilbur's publication of The Beautiful Changes, New Critical proponent John Crowe Ransom, defined the modern period as the age which "recovered the admirable John Donne; that is the way to identify its literary taste" (The World's Body 78). It should not surprise anyone, then, that ten years later those New Critics who praised Wilbur's poetry also deemed it "metaphysical," frequently comparing it to the poetry of John Donne. Indeed, it is Richard Wilbur, perhaps more than any other twentieth century American poet, whom critics tag as "metaphysical." This chapter asks in what sense is Wilbur's poetry metaphysical and how is his poetry similar to or different from the poetry of the seventeenth century? It also investigates what is explicitly meant and what is implied by the application of the adjective "metaphysical" by critics, and how much of this critical labeling stems from political jockeying to shape the literary canon. Before beginning, however, let me qualify that my focus in this present study of Wilbur's poetry centers primarily on his first three collections of poetry, spanning the years between 1947-1956.[2] While I believe that Wilbur's oeuvre of poetry may be termed "metaphysical," I have narrowed my focus because it is the poems written at mid-century that many critics label both "representative" and "metaphysical."

Cognizant of the revived interest in the seventeenth century metaphysical poets in the first half of the twentieth century and its shaping influence on American poetics, including his own, Richard Wilbur in his 1966 essay, "On My Own Work," reflects:

> Most American poets of my generation were taught to admire the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and such contemporary masters of irony as John Crowe Ransom. We were led by our teachers and by the critics whom we read to feel that the most adequate and convincing poetry is that which accommodates mixed feelings, clashing ideas and incongruous images. Poetry could not be honest, we thought, unless it began by acknowledging the full discordancy of modern life and consciousness [...]. (152)

A few years earlier, in 1964, he cites specifically George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and Thomas Traherne as his literary influences, explaining, "I do this for simple pleasure, not at all in a scholarly spirit. Those are three people I never tire of" (Frank and Mitchell 32).[3] Whether Wilbur read these poets "scholarly" or not, all three of these writers clearly imprint their stamp on his poetry: like Herbert, he emphasizes ceremony, music and ritual and tends to conclude his poems with a revelation achieved through a complex mix of mitigated argument and the magical; his use of syllogistic frameworks to structure a dramatic debate shows affinities with Marvell; and his sincere love and awe for the material world and his method of expanding our understanding of this world by revealing its divinity reflects Trahernean philosophy.

Wilbur understood that his literary influences were spurred in part by the metaphysical revival of the 1920s and 1930s, stemming from T.S. Eliot's and then the

New Critics' championing of the metaphysical poets. He aligns himself with Eliot's theories on several occasions, such as when he counters those critics who complain that his poetry is too "remote" and "detached" by explaining, "I've always agreed with Eliot's assertion that poetry "is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality" (qtd. in Perloff). Wilbur also shares Eliot's view of history in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In his essay "Round About a Poem of Housman's" Wilbur writes:

> The past which most properly concerns the poet is, as T. S. Eliot has said, both temporal and timeless. It is, above all, a great index of human possibilities. It is a dimension in which we behold, and are beheld by, all those forms of excellence and depravity that men have assumed and may assume again. The poet needs this lively past as a means of viewing the present without provinciality, and of saying much in little; he must hope for the tact and talent to make the past usable for the audience that his poems imply." (54)

Despite the Eliot/New Critical influence on Wilbur's poetry, it is a mistake to read him as New Criticism's metaphysical boy wonder. Wilbur found that New Critic's championing of metaphysical poetry's "clashing ideas and incongruous images" to reflect the chaos of modern life limiting, for the "atmosphere of contradiction can stifle passion and conduce to a bland evasiveness" ("On My Own Work" 156). He argues, "the fact is that we are not always divided in spirit and that we sometimes yield utterly to a feeling or idea" (156).[4] Wilbur's complaint about his and his generation's poetic inheritance underscores how the metaphysical revival at the beginning of the twentieth century was inextricably linked with the rise of New Criticism. New Criticism's insistence on the

impersonal--often achieved through ironic distancing and disjunctive narrative and form--left little room for enacting viable unions between one's self and the larger world.

A growing number of poets at mid-century echoed Wilbur's complaint and search for a viable poetic. The first challenges to New Criticism came from a deepening sense of the mind's alienation from nature and of the world's alienation from reality. Robert Creeley in "On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets, 1950-1965" writes, "coming of age in the 40s, in the chaos of the Second World War, one felt the kinds of coherence that might have been fact of other time and place were no longer possible. There seemed no logic, so to speak, that could bring together all the violent disparities of that experience. [...] there was no place, finally, from which to propose an objectively ordered reality, a world that could be spoken of as there in the convenience of expectation or habit" (367). The logical and highly stylized formal poetry panegyrized by New Critics no longer provided a viable means to talk about the world. As poets searched for other ways to speak about their experiences, diverse schools of poetry began to spring up. The Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, and the New York School all reacted against the formal and "impersonal" academic verse of New Criticism.

When these open form poets revolted against New Criticism, they also revolted against metaphysical poetry, at least as defined by New Critics. The emerging new schools of poetry eschewed along with traditional metrics, syllogistic arguments and stylized rhetoric. They favored, instead, a poetic of immediate experience, spontaneous utterance and embraced the personal. Unlike these new movements emerging at mid-century, however, Wilbur's response was more tempered. Not drawn to personal confession or spontaneous articulation, he finds artifice essential. As he puts it in his

poem, "Cicadas," "There is no straight way of approaching it" (line 20).[5] He continues to practice a formal poetic of traditional rhyme and meter, syllogistic structures, dramatic argument, wit and aggressive rhetoric influenced by seventeenth century poets. Wilbur's poetic triumph, however, is that he succeeds in forging a metaphysical poetic that, while often "impersonal" in nature, enlists the literary past to discover correspondences between the material and spiritual realms, and to forge new unities of experience that emphasize harmony rather than chaos, and engagement rather than evasiveness.

Equal engagement with the material and spiritual is the overarching theme in Wilbur's poetry and we find it in nearly all his poems. For example, his well known "The World is a Sensible Emptiness" explicitly warns against valuing the spiritual over the material by depicting a world where the spiritual is valued and the material martyrly ignored as an arid desert. His best-known poem, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" likewise insists on equal engagement. In this poem, the dramatic speaker prefers the gritty world inhabited equally by nuns, lovers, thieves and angels to a purely spiritual realm. Both these poems are quintessential examples of Wilbur's insisted engagement with the material and spiritual and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter to illustrate how Wilbur uses metaphysical poetry to address this theme, a theme he readily acknowledges in his poetry. In his essay, "On My Own Work," he assesses that "All my poems have to do (a critic might say) with the proper relation between the tangible world and the intuitions of the spirit. They assume that such intuitions are, or may be, true; they incline, however, to favor a spirituality that is not abstracted, not dissociated, and not world-renouncing" (160). This search for correspondence is, of course, not unique to metaphysical poetry. The Romantic poets also explored the

interplay between reality and imagination and between the material and the spiritual. What marks Wilbur as a metaphysical poet, however, is that he forges a poetic where the mundane and the miraculous easily cohabit and he achieves this balance through a rhetorical method, in which each word is tangible and immediately felt; a method which Eliot found in John Donne's poems and described "an apprehension of thought felt at the fingertips" (VMP).

Wilbur employs the same seventeenth century metaphysical poets' rhetorical bag of tricks to assume, maintain, and shift an argumentative stance within a single poem. His rhetoric exploits the power of extended analogies, juxtapositions of extremes, a plain and colloquial style of speech and dramatic argumentation that includes argumentation through formal structure, association and punning word play to procure an emotional and intellectual response to experience. His poem "A Glance from the Bridge" (Ceremony and Other Poems) renders the familiar sight of a city's grime in winter into a new image infused with light and possibility. The poem accomplishes this through its logical structure of mirror (yet contrasting) six lined stanzas that build off the single image of a person peering off a bridge. In the first stanza the city's river is a "black facade" (line 2) restricted as if "squeezed [...] in a vice" (line 4), and gulls are immobile on the frozen and "sullied ice" (line 6). In the second stanza, the imagery turns to that of movement and light as the gulls "rise and braid their gliding, white and spare" (line 7). The river is no longer frozen, but "swirls" (line 10). These contrasts come to a head in the poem's final lines and its shocking resolution:

> [.....] the freshening river swirled
>
> As if an ancient whore undid her gown

And showed a body almost like a girl's. (lines 10-12)

The juxtaposition of extremes and vivid conceit is meant to shock the reader. It asks several questions at once: How can a whore have a body like a young girl's? How is the city's river like such a whore? And how does the careless glance of one onlooker render this miraculous transformation?

Wilbur's rhetorical method in "A Glance from the Bridge," as in his poetry in general, is overall characterized by its metaphysical wit. The New English Dictionary currently defines wit as "that quality of speech or writing which consists in apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness; later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way." Broadly defined as "to say," wit's etymological root is from the French word "savoir," meaning, "to know" (Brewster's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable). The Renaissance understanding of wit accommodated both the term's properties as a noun indicating knowledge or wisdom, and its verb properties indicating the act of articulation. The seventeenth century metaphysical poets exploited this dual meaning as it stood for the very interest of their poems: articulation of knowledge that is developed out of and through language. John Hoskins' Directions for Speech and Style, written around 1600, provides an excellent description of wit as understood by seventeenth century poets, and as I will argue, used by Wilbur. Hoskin proposed that poetic wit might be tentatively defined as the power of creating emotional surprise by the unexpected combination or contrast of generally diverse ideas or images, especially of incompatible or contraries. It is often the exploitation of a latent resemblance between incompatible ideas or images, which capitalizes on the contrast (catachresis) or a

reconciliation of contraries, which capitalizes on the union (paradox). Both can produce emotional surprise and express mixed feelings (Williamson 25). In seventeenth century metaphysical poetry we find the exploitation of incompatible images most noticeably in the form of a conceit, such as when Donne compares a happily married couple to a compass, or when Andrew Marvell compares lovers to birds of prey in "To His Coy Mistress." In the latter, Marvell's suitor argues:

> Now let us sport us while we may;
>
> And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
>
> Rather at once our time devour,
>
> Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r. (lines 37-40)

The conceit argues that the lovers will be like birds, paradoxically both "amorous birds" and "birds of prey," which grasp energetically at what they want. This conceit reveals that in seventeenth century love poetry, love and sex as an oral appetite, is paradoxically both self-consuming and self-denying. Human appetite, a common conceit for the more basic and universal fear of death, fits aptly the poem's carpe diem theme. Carpe diem, meaning, "seize the day," is grounded in the knowledge that time passes and with its passing the individual moves closer towards his/her death.

From the above examples and from Hoskin's analysis we see that wit is essentially an analogical method. Wit differs from simple analogy though, in that it is a mode of communicative discourse that is concerned with the hidden relations that connect the most diverse objects or contrary emotions. It is an essential tool, then, of poetry concerned with concretely defining abstract thoughts and feelings. Its method of yoking diverse and contrary items also denote its concern for discovering

correspondences. Correspondence works to discover or create unity, and reflects the belief that all things are related to each other and there is a truth or universal cause that gives meaning to human existence. Seventeenth century poet Robert Herrick uses wit in this manner in his poem, "a Nuptiall Song," when he writes:

The bed is ready, and the maze of Love
Lookes for the treaders; every where is wove
Wit and new misterie; read, and
Put in practise, to understand
And know each wile.
Each hieroglyphick of a kisse or smile;
And do it to the full; reach
High in your own conceipt, and some way teach
Nature and Art, one more
Play, then they ever knew before. (lines 121-130)

In this poem, Herrick's labyrinth bed is a hieroglyphic that takes the form of wit and conceit and acts as a poem of instruction to the imagination: the reader, too, is encouraged to seek correspondence between the literal and the metaphorical. As the poem suggests, there are signs "everywhere." The reader, no less the poem's lovers, must "read, and / Put in practise, to understand."

Wilbur similarly encourages the reader to engage the literal and metaphorical planes in "October Maples, Portland" (Advice to a Prophet and Other Poems) through its use of rhetoric. Dana Gioia in "Richard Wilbur a Critical Survey of His Career" notes that in this poem "There is a surface plot or situation that unfolds in literal terms.

Meanwhile, under that accessible surface level is a subtext, an unstated but implied second meaning." The poem's surface richly describes autumn in New England and its colorful foliage.

> A showered fire we thought forever lost
> Redeems the air. Where friends in passing meet,
> They parley in the tongues of Pentecost.
> Godly ranks of temples flank the dazzled street. (lines 5-8)

As Gioia points out, the quoted passage is both a literal description of the fall leaves and a "sacramental means of revealing the divine order." Moreover, Gioia astutely notes that it is precisely "Wilbur's masterful puns and word play" that "connects the levels of meaning." The "showered fire" and the emphasized "Redeems" (appearing asyntactically at the beginning of line six) equally portrays the maple's literal red leaves and suggests the Pentecostal flame. Similarly, the tree-lined street becomes a canopied temple as the townspeople figuratively and symbolically (through the use of pun) "parley in the tongues of Pentecost."

Here, and elsewhere, provocative puns enact Wilbur's larger search for correspondence in microcosm. Puns work to create a poetic union not only between two often contradictory ideas, but also between the poem and the reader. In fact, Wilbur's use of puns illustrate that the poem's emotional success is frequently dependent upon the reader's ability to co-create meaning through an intellectual and emotional interaction with the poem. As Catherine Bates in "The Point of Puns" explains, "a pun represents a disruption of the one-on-one relationship between signifier and signified, pointing to an ambiguity of meaning" (1). Instead of one signifier being attached to a single signified,

the signifier is now attached to two or more signifieds. This does not mean, however, that the poem's argument becomes ambiguous, or that all experience is ineffable. What it does mean is that the reader must logically engage in creating meaning. If the reader, the interpreter of the pun, is to "get the joke," he or she must engage in the act of reassigning the signified to the signifier. Bates reminds us that "[p]uns may challenge meaning but to interpret them--if one wishes to make any sense at all--is *faute de mieux* to restore faith in the system of communication without which there would be no understanding at all" (2). So while puns work to destabilize any given system of meaning, they also allow the reader to follow the signifiers through to their various destinations and thus effectively re-stabilize them, along with the language system. Wilbur's puns consistently work to bring about order and to re-establish viable unions between the material and the spiritual. As we will see shortly when we examine Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to Things of This World," puns are the primary trope used by Wilbur to expertly infuse the physical actions of the dramatic speaker with spirituality, and it is the reader's co-creating that fuses the figural and literal at the level of word.

Creating viable unions through language play is a function in miniature of what Wilbur believes to be the purpose of all poetry: "It is the province of poems to make some order in the world, but the poets can't afford to forget that there is a reality of things which survives all orders great and small. Things are. The cow is there" ("Poetry's Debt to Poetry" 217). Wilbur does not question the existence of reality, however unfashionable that may be in today's postmodern climate. He instead, emphasizes the material objects that make up reality, producing what Wendy Salinger in her introduction to Richard Wilbur's Creation, a collection of essays and reviews of Wilbur's poetry, calls

a poetic of "thingness" (4). Such concentration is solicited by and manifests itself in an undeniable awe for the tangible objects and physicality of this world, even when searching for spiritual, religious and meaningful connections to the non-physical realm.

To understand rhetoric's generative power to produce viable connections, it is helpful to look at Wilbur's admitted fascination for riddles. Wilbur explains that "to solve a riddle one must be both intuitive and analytic" ("The Persistence of Riddles" 33). He explains:

> To make a riddle, or to answer one, was to see the peculiar qualities of an object or creature, to discern its resemblances to other forms and forces, and to have an insight into the relatedness of all phenomena, the reticulum of the world. The riddle was thus an expression of imagination or spiritual power, and as such was employed in the settling of disputes and the winning of brides, in burial rites, fertility rites, and other religious or magical ceremonies. However, we may now conceive of riddles, it is plain that at their inception they had sacred uses, and were a way of approaching the spirits of things. (33-34)

A metaphysical method is analogous to Wilbur's discussion of riddles. After all, doesn't metaphysical poetry present its conceits and other forms of wit as riddles? Donne asks, how is sexual consummation like a flea? ("The Flea"). How are lovers like the phoenix? ("The Canonization"). And, perhaps most puzzling, how is divine salvation like physical rape? ("Batter My Heart Three-Person'd God"). Wilbur's definition of the riddle also parallels that of the metaphysical conceit, as defined by Samuel Johnson: "a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult

resemblances in things apparently unlike" (11). Conceits may include the comparison of things similar, different and contrary. The conceits used in metaphysical poetry capitalize on disparity as well as resemblance. They reconcile discordant ideas and thus bear a close relationship to wit. Indeed, the conceit is a crucial element of wit and the terms are often used interchangeably in discussions of metaphysical poetry. All three seventeenth century conceits cited above include not only "a yoking of supposedly unrelated things; it also obliges us, in the process of solution to strike out across the conceptual grid which our minds have imposed upon the world" ("Persistence of Riddles" 45). Wilbur's metaphysical poetry likewise "restores for a moment the wonder of ordinary things" (44), such as we saw in the simple regenerative beauty of the river in "The Glance from the Bridge," and thus, like riddles, "give practice in the enlargement and refreshing of reality" (47).

Wilbur's rhetorical wit and celebration of the material led many critics to associate Wilbur's poetry with seventeenth century metaphysical poetry. One of the first critics to align Wilbur with the metaphysical poets was Ralph J. Mills. In "The Lyricism of Richard Wilbur" (1962), Mills declares that Wilbur's "natural predecessors can be located most easily among the Elizabethans, metaphysical, and cavalier poets" (79). He also points specifically to Robert Herrick, "whom he resembles somewhat in the ease and perfection with which he writes, employs forms, captures the right tone and phrase [...]" (81).[6] While Mills does not provide a specific example of this affinity, his observation proves correct. Wilbur's early poem, "Poplar, Sycamore" (The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems) illustrates the same highly polished style that concentrates thematic concerns through meticulous placements and displacements of syntax and line breaks as

does, say, Herrick's "To Blossoms." The poem's elegiac tone sees nature as emblematic of human frailty and inevitable death, and the poem's form enacts both in its monosyllabic concluding lines of each stanza. For Herrick, this high-polish style resulted in his poetry, for the most part, to be undervalued and even dismissed during his lifetime. Edward Philips, for instance, observed in 1675, "That which is chiefly pleasant in these poems is now and then a pretty flowery and pastoral gale of fancy, a vernal prospect of some hill, cave, rock or fountain; which but for the interruption of other trivial passages might have made up none of the worst poetic landscapes" (rptd. in Maclean 162).[7] But Herrick, as Leah Marcus cogently points out, "isn't concerned merely with the charm and (often rude) vitality of nature, or with the sensuous tryst of human desire, but (and more deeply) with the causes and origins of things, the reality behind appearances" (177). Wilbur's "Poplar, Sycamore" employs the same simple diction and a Zen-like seeing that perceives the natural world as part of a greater cosmic world and renders the ordinary into sacramental gifts, through richly tactile, visual and auditory imagery, leading him to likewise declare, "My eye will never know the dry disease / Of thinking things no more than what he sees" (lines 16-16). This search continues throughout Wilbur's long career, as lately as Mayflies, he searches out "the hid pulse of things" ("Alatus") and "the mystery of things that are" ("In a Churchyard").

After mid-century, readers continued to see connections between Wilbur's poetry and seventeenth century verse. Donald Hill's 1967 Richard Wilbur (part of the Twayne American Author Series) was the first full-length study of Wilbur's poetry. This was a significant event as Hill in his "Preface" assesses Wilbur as "one of the most accomplished and rewarding poets writing." Wilbur was only 46 years old and had to

date published only four collections of poetry. Hill applies an adept New Critical "close reading" of Wilbur's complex but comprehensible poems, presenting a kind of "study aid" to the poetry. As part of the Twayne series, Hill's book positions Wilbur's poetry solidly within the New Critical canon. Perhaps even more significantly, Hill's study characterizes Wilbur's poetry using New Critical terminology originally applied by Eliot to the seventeenth century metaphysical poets. According to Hill, Wilbur's poetry

> [...] is a poetry of ideas, moderately learned and allusive, strict in its logic as in its phrasing, given to weighing alternative attitudes, fond of arguments and of their consequences. Wilbur often begins by describing a scene or an object and concluding by making a moral, epistemological, or metaphysical point about it [...]. He develops a poem with a rigor and coherence that recall John Donne with some of the same delight in clever turns of logic and in the sudden vistas of paradox. (17)

In 1971, Michael Benedikt finds that Wilbur's "poems tend to use the old idea of metaphysical 'wit'" (104). More recently, Peter Harris in his 1990 chronicle of Wilbur's career, "Forty Years of Richard Wilbur," notes that in Wilbur the "the presence of metaphysical pathos [...] only intensifies the poignancy of Wilbur's devotion to physicality." Similarly, William Bell sums up the metaphysical influence on Wilbur in his 1994 "At Play on the Shore: Richard Wilbur" by concluding that "the metaphysical plays a commanding part" in Wilbur's poetry and that Wilbur "is like John Donne as described by T.S. Eliot: a thought to him is an experience that modifies his sensibility. Unlike the reflective Victorian poets Tennyson and Browning, he is an intellectual poet who feels his thoughts 'as immediately as the odour of a rose.'" He goes on to assert that

Wilbur "is a poet of far-ranging and intriguing ideas, and one who practices the fusion of thought and feeling" and "like Donne and the other metaphysical poets, he is an intellectual poet who feels his thoughts passionately (21). Johnathan Grey's Ways of Nothingness: Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry similarly resurrects Eliot's characterizations of metaphysical poetry when he writes: "Wilbur is a poet of disparities as well as of unities [....] To read a poem by Wilbur--whose poems like those of the metaphysical poets are ideally suited for careful scrutiny--is to be pulled simultaneously toward anxiety and consolation, toward despair and hope, and ultimately to be deposited somewhere in between." What is interesting in all of these summations that link Wilbur's poetics with that of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry is the various phrases that the critics lift from Eliot's earlier evaluations of John Donne.[8] It is clear that Eliot's theories of metaphysical poetry have become orthodoxies in poetic criticism.

Not surprisingly, those critics who object to Wilbur's poetry point to its Eliot / New Critical / metaphysical influences, which were negatively associated with the comfortable bourgeois life of academia. Critics fault Wilbur's "control," his inability to suffer, and his stance seemingly removed from the chaos of modern life. Peter Viereck's "Technique and Inspiration: a year of poetry" (1952), marks the first in a long line of such criticism which argues "He has all the qualities of a great artist except vulgarity" (50). Randal Jarrell's 1956 review of Things of This World echoes this complaint, concluding "Mr. Wilbur never goes too far, but he never goes far enough" (48-9).[9] Theodore Holmes in his review of Advice to a Prophet (1961) issues an outright attack against Wilbur's position in academia when he characterizes Wilbur's poetry as "things

seen from parnassian Heights of wealth, privilege, ease, refinement, and education, looking down on the permanent sufferings of human kind without being part of them" (131). By the time James Clive's "When the Gloves are off" is written in 1971, Wilbur is decidedly "out" and "his poetry has lost its relevance" (109). Returning to romantic sensibilities that celebrate the immediate and the spontaneous--ushered in in-part by the Beats and Confessional poets hoping to counter the stodginess of academic poetics--dissenting voices have little use for Wilbur's measured response to experience. As Clive aptly sums up the poetic climate, "if skill got in the road of urgency, then skill was out" (107). Allen Ginsberg, not Wilbur, was now held up as the voice of the time. Ginsberg seems to faithfully portray the chaos and conspiracy in the world around him and defiantly rages and vents against this chaos of modern life, while Wilbur in contrast articulates with great poise and restraint a devotion to the enduring forms of nature and civilization. As Herbert Leibowitz in a review of The Mind Reader (1976) notes, "his mildness [is similar to] the amiable normality of the bourgeois citizen. Emergencies are absent in his poems; he is unseduced by the romantic equation of knowledge and power; he seldom rails at the world. Suspicious of grandiose gestures, of parading his ego, he mediates experience through reason"(120). Calvin Bedient also reviewing The Mind-Reader faults Wilbur's rhetoric: "He is a bell too conscious of its clapper, clapper happy [...] his poetry is completely without risks, a prize pupil's performance" (21). This line of attack continues, most recently in William Logan's "The Way of All Flesh," a review of Mayflies (June 2000). Logan calls Wilbur's work "baroque, overmannered manner" (1) and asserts that "Wilbur can still bestir himself for his endings (his rhetoric dies in full plumage like a suicidal ballerina), but too many of the new poems don't remember at

the end why they began. Slightly worn and depressive, they're edged with a melancholy that set in during the Eisenhower administration" (2). Wilbur, in effect, is too "metaphysical" (baroque and metaphysical, as Rolf Lessenich in "Rhetoric in English Baroque Literature" having shown, to be closely related, if not one and the same in the work of seventeenth century metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw). Logan's criticism, like the others' cited above, is political. Wilbur is criticized not just for his method, but for his very "representedness" of the academy. An undergraduate education from Amherst and then Harvard for graduate work, faculty positions at Harvard, Wellesley, Wesleyan and Smith along with numerous awards and prizes--not to mention a long and happy marriage and home-life that includes a closet full of tweed sport coats--are all politically translated as a throwback to the Eisenhower era.

I cite in some length these two divergent responses to Wilbur's metaphysical poetry (positive and negative), not because I wish to champion one theoretic movement over another, but because I wish to emphasize how Wilbur's poetic stature is intricately tied to New Criticism's stature. Critics who praise Wilbur's work employ New Critical terminology and value its metaphysical qualities; critics who respond negatively to his poetry do so on the very same grounds. Moreover, those critics who criticize Wilbur's poetry echo precisely Dryden, Johnson, Wordsworth and Cooleridge's objections to seventeenth century poetry. Dryden and Johnson were both offended by metaphysical poetry's rejection of what they deemed as valid norms of reason and nature. As Neoclassicists, they advocated an unadorned style that aimed for concrete ideas articulated in a logical and clear manner. In their eyes the metaphysical poets were guilty of using verbal ambiguities, abstruse analogies arbitrarily yoked together, and of desiring

originality at the expense of the mimesis of nature. The Romantic poets, although rejecting New Classicism's reason in favor of the spontaneous and organic which sprung from the poet's whole being, and not the mind, likewise regarded rhetoric with suspicion. They deemed that rhetoric impeded emotion and spontaneity. Wordsworth found that metaphors were "material to be shunned in serious poetry," and Coleridge likewise condemns the ingenious and exact figure which is "a pure work of the will, and implies a leisure and self-possession, both of thought and of feeling, incompatible with the grandeur of its subject" (Brooks 6-7). Metaphysical poetry is too witty and too contrived, and divorced one from any true feeling; it became mere rhetoric without emotion.

Wilbur's most anthologized and critically acclaimed poem, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," from Things of This World (1956), is a tour-de-force of wit and metaphor.[10] It exemplified the New Critical poem and exemplifies Wilbur's metaphysical method. Not surprisingly, then, those critics pitted against New Criticism's stronghold on American poetics, desiring a more "realistic" portrayal of modern life, widely attacked this poem. Most recently, Marjorie Perloff in "Poetry of 1956: A Step Away From Them" attacks New Critical tenants and uses Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to Things of This World" to do so, perceiving the poem as representative of "establishment poetics of the mid-fifties," an age that "demanded such equipoise, an equipoise, epitomized in 1956, in the poetry world of the Kenyon Review, Partisan Review, Sewannee Review, and so on, by metaphysical poetry, especially that of John Donne [...]."

Perloff begins her essay by quoting in full Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" and then proceeds to attack the politics inherent within the comparison of

drying laundry on a clothesline to the dancing of angels outside the speaker's bedroom window. She begins by rejecting Wilbur's claims of universality of experience, citing the following explanation of the poem's conceit offered by Wilbur in an interview, and later printed in his essay, "On My Own Work": "You must imagine the poem as occurring at perhaps seven-thirty in the morning; the scene is a bedroom high up in a city apartment building; outside the bedroom window, the first laundry of the day is being yanked across the sky and one has been awakened by the squeaking pulleys of the laundry-line" (159). Perloff faults the laundry-as-angel metaphor for "its curious inaccuracy." She posits, if the scene really takes place outside an apartment building's window, "the reality is that the sheets and shirts would probably be covered with specks of dust, grit, maybe even with a trace or two of bird droppings. At best, these shirts seen (if seen at all) from Manhattan high-rise windows in the fifties, billowing over the fire-escapes under the newly installed TV aerials, would surely be a bit on the grungy side." Wilbur's speaker, consequently, waking just as the laundry is being yanked across the sky, is oblivious to the hard work of the launderer. Perloff's reading of this poem demands mimetic realism and cites the now familiar charge that Wilbur's bourgeois existence renders him ignorant, or just plain apathetic, to the plight of the working class. This supposed ignorance most likely is what leads Perloff to find fault with Wilbur's "impersonality." Instead of speaking with the personal "I" prevalent among other poets writing in the mid-fifties (e.g. the personal howl of the Beats' "I" or the intimate anguish of the Confessional "I"), Wilbur continues to employ Eliot's objective persona. This impersonality, however, is not an indication that the poet recoils from everyday life and its common inhabitants, as

Perloff would have us believe, but rather, is meant to include the reader in the universal quest for engagement with the material and the spiritual.

Perloff, while she is an astute reader of many American poets, in particular Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery, misses the distinct wit of Wilbur's poem, both in its conceit and in its tone. The distinct charm of this poem (and I use the word charm deliberately) resides in Wilbur's wit. His use of language--especially his elaborate wordplay of conceits, puns, paradox, and dramatic dialogue--illustrates how language is a magical, incantatory, and creative force. His word play captures the very essence of his imaginative transience of the world, as well as his reconciliation with the world and thus produces a very "real" response to life for both the speaker and the reader.

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" succeeds in linguistically creating what the poem calls a "difficult balance" between the material and spiritual realms of existence. Its neo-platonic vision is similar to St. Augustine's theology of love.[11] In The City of God, Augustine asserts that God made us "coupling and connecting in some wonderful fashion the spiritual and corporeal natures [....] and this work of His is so great and wonderful, that not only man, who is a rational animal, and consequently more excellent than all other animals of the earth, but even the most diminutive insect, cannot be considered attentively without astonishment and without praising the creator" (116). Augustine, therefore, argues that humans must not aim for otherworldly aspirations, but embrace the everyday material world. Wilbur, like Augustine, also believes that it is only possible to achieve transcendence through the material.

Wilbur's deliberately balanced two-part structure of roughly equal line lengths (34 in total), with line seventeen marking the poem's turn, foregrounds the contrast between

the material and spiritual. The first part of the poem celebrates the spiritual while the second praises the material. The precise diction vividly renders the different textures of the two realms, while each pun and incident of wordplay explores the contrasts and connections between the realms, producing the "difficult balance" in the poem's final line. Humor also aids in achieving this balance. Humor is a crucial element of Wilbur's wit and he frequently employs it for serious ends. As Wilbur once remarked about Robert Frost's poetry, "comedy is serious; it is the voice of balance; and its presence in a serious poem is a test and earnest of all its earnestness" ("Some Notes On Lying" 140). As we will see, there is something delightfully funny and charming in the speaker's imagining that the laundry outside his window are angels. A pure play of language entices us into the poem.

> The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
> And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
> Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
> As false dawn.
>
> Outside the open window
> The morning air is all awash with angels. (lines 1-6)

The repeated long i sound in line one combines with enjambment and the heavy alliteration of "s" to propel the speaker into an imaginative engagement with his surroundings and the reader likewise into the poem, only to then hover on "hangs." In the pause, the conceit, which compares the homely image of laundry with the spiritual vision of angels, yokes the material and spiritual realms. Word play procures this fusion. The speaker's "eyes" are engulfed by the sound of "pulleys" (surely a visual pun on *pull*

eyes) physically and imaginatively drawing the speaker (and the reader) into the imaginative realm of the conceit. The playful pun on "spirited" in the second line presents the speaker as he is "spirited" from sleep and his "astounded" soul is struck with wonder. The soul, in a mirror image of the laundry "hangs for a moment" as pure spirit, though the speaker is not to stay suspended in this abstract realm. A second pun occurs in line six, which portrays the early air as "awash" with angels. Playing on the laundry conceit and on awash's several meanings (1. level with; 2. washed by waves; and 3. flooded), Wilbur's laundry-as-angels conceit exists on many levels: figural and literal, never sacrificing the one for the other, again achieving "a difficult balance" (American Heritage Dictionary).

In the second stanza, the spirited laundry receives full description as the speaker explores his analogy:

> Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
>
> Some are in smocks: but truly there they are. (lines 7-8)

The use of anaphora (the repetition of the leading phrase "some are in") denotes a general and mundane description of the physical laundry, thereby emphasizing with the declarative "but truly there they are," the spirited laundry. Once more, truth (or correspondence) is discovered always in the delicate balance.

The angels outside the speaker's window paradoxically rise "in calm swells" (line 9) and fill the laundry with "the deep joy of their impersonal breathing" (line 11). This second stanza thus concludes with a balanced softness produced by the contrary images, a balance however soon thrown into a more forceful movement in the next stanza. The laundry becomes more "spirited."

Now they are flying in place, conveying

The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving

And staying like white water; and now of a sudden

They swoon down into so rapt a quiet

That nobody seems to be there. (lines 12-16)

Wilbur's precise diction captures the thrill of the discovered correspondence. Each word operates on a figural and literal level that links the spiritual and the nonphysical realms. The clothes convey (both transport and communicate) the "terrible" speed that alarms and elicits awe as its omnipresence is everywhere, actively making present the spiritual realm in the speaker's physical surroundings. The clothes truly "rapt" the speaker's being (wrapped around and spiritually move the speaker) momentarily eclipsing all else, even from the impending "punctual rape of every blessed day" (line 19). Enraptured, he cries out:

"Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,

Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam

And clear dances done in the sight of heaven." (lines 17-23)

The speaker however is soon brought out of his Homeric reverie as he awakes with a "yawn" (line 28). Awakening marks a return to the material world with deep spiritual implications. Waking is that state of awareness as well as the aftermath or visible track of moving through water. The speaker too has been immersed in the spiritual waters of the wash and emerged clean. Yawning (to open the mouth with deep inspiration) reveals that the speaker has indeed been filled with the spirit.

In the last stanza, the speaker's "changed voice" (line 28) commands:

"Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;

Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;

Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,

And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating

Of dark habits,

keeping their difficult balance." (lines 24-34)

Engaged once more in the material world he demands that the spiritual be brought down among the everyday world and its inhabitants: the thieves, lovers and nuns. The allusion to Christ on the cross, accompanied by the two thieves, suggests that life on earth is itself a world of paradox and moreover, one negotiable only through a rhetoric modeled after the Logos. As Wilbur writes in another poem, "flesh made word / is grace's revenue" ("Grace" lines 4-5).[12]

If Wilbur's rhetoric and imagery pose a problem for some critics, his use of traditional forms and metrics also present difficulties. The twentieth century is, after all, largely the epoch of free verse. Critics who attempt to assuage the claims that Wilbur's forms are "escapism" argue that Wilbur employs these forms to stave off and thereby control the very chaos that critics accuse him of either avoiding or being merely oblivious to. Wendy Salinger proposes that "Wilbur's generation came out of World War II and its preoccupation with craftsmanship seemed as one of 'protection.' A way to contain the chaos" (2). Wilbur's own acknowledgement of this "conservative impulse" supports Salinger's suggestion. Wilbur admits, "My first poems were written in answer to the inner and outer disorders of the second world war and they helped me, as poems should, to take a hold of raw events and convert them, provisionally, into experience" (Responses

118). Wilbur's use of traditional forms, meter and rhyme then seems similar to Donne's desire to control his emotions as articulated in his poem "Triple Foole," previously discussed in the preceding chapter. Like Donne's speakers, Wilbur's speakers often discover that restraint in poetry achieves only a temporary stay. In Wilbur's poems, however, it is not so much the emotion, which he seeks to restrain, but rather, the moment of the experience, be it emotional or rational, which he desires to contain. Moreover, unlike Donne's formality, which is often employed as a self-protective attempt to master his fears of either rejection by a woman or judgment by God, Wilbur's formality is not employed in self-protective escape. He repeatedly insists that "no poetry can have the strength unless it continually bashes itself against the reality of things" (Responses 217). Wilbur is precise when he calls his poetry a "conversion" of "raw events." Conversion is both a change and an exchange of thoughts and feeling and one that is frequently a spoken interchange; it requires mutual giving and receiving (American Heritage Dictionary). Unable to convert raw events into an understandable and articulative experience is to live without meaning. Wilbur engages form in conjunction with metaphysical rhetoric as the catalyst to convert raw events into experience.

Wilbur is committed to the power of rhetoric and form. "An Event" directly addresses this power. It begins by flaunting its make-believe rhetoric with its speculative opening:

> As if a cast of grain leapt back to the hand,
> A landscapeful of small black birds, intent
> On the far south, convene at some command
> At once in the middle of the air, at once are gone

With headlong and unanimous consent

From the pale trees and fields they settled on. (lines 1-6)

In this first stanza, the speculative tone invites the reader's engagement as it imagines that gravity has ceased and time and action move backwards. The birds immediately, and *en masse,* freely accept the speaker's imaginative hypothesis and fly in answer to "some command."

In stanza two, a more direct inquiry focuses on the individual and the reason.

What is an individual thing? They roll

Like a drunken fingerprint across the sky! (lines 7-8)

Wilbur's simile is both viscerally and phonetically exciting. Its vividness captures their mobility. It fixes the birds in language even as they fly from such stability. He seems to take pleasure in his figure as it contemplates equally the birds and his own speech. The exclamation point indicates that he takes even a kind of linguistic joy in his simile, however temporary this fix.

Conscious of the need to create tropes to understand experience, he admits his role as trope-maker:

Or so I give their image to my soul

Until, as if refusing to be caught

In any singular vision of my eye

Or in the nets and cages of my thought, (lines 9-12)

Thought is singular, and aims to trap simultaneously the birds and the viable figures of speech in its nest so that he might cage the singular image that will render understanding.

But objects and events rebel: "They tower up, shatter, and madden space / With their divergences" (lines 13-14). They are

> Swallowed from sight, and leave me in this place
> Shaping these images to make them stay:
> Meanwhile, in some formation of their own,
> They fly me still, and steal my thoughts away. (lines 15-18)

The delightful punning of "Swallowed from sight" reveals the speaker's good-natured acceptance that he cannot capture perfectly this event. The swallows get the better of him, determining their own movement, which is more perfect in its blending of noun and verb in one great flourish. But he does forge a place for them to be within the cage of his poem. That this net of language is temporary is finally okay with Wilbur. For,

> It is by words and the defeat of words,
> Down sudden vistas of the vain attempt,
> That for a flying moment one may see
> By what cross-purposes the world is dreamt. (lines 15-18)

Language, the poem argues, renders the world coherent. In "Poetry and the Landscape" Wilbur likewise explains:

> People feel a real unease and separation when confronted by the nameless, and it is perfectly understandable that the first man, set down in the center of the first landscape, applied himself at once to redeeming it from anonymity. What has been spoken into being he spoke again, recreating the creation, giving each a creature a relation to himself, and gaining a kind of symbolic control over what lay around him. (121)

Naming, for Wilbur, is a metaphysical act. Chris Eliasmith explains that metaphysics "is the attempt to say, (of those entities believed to exist), what they are....one's metaphysics in an *explanatory theory* about the nature of those entities" (emphasis mine). Metaphysical poetry does not create the reality of the world--in fact, it does not question its existence-- but it does bring it into the field of thought and rational understanding. It is thought, articulated in language, that brings the individual into full existence with reality.

Wilbur's early metaphysical poem, "Ceremony," similarly illustrates the convergence of form and rhetoric to bring one into full existence. It also provides an apt rebuttal to those critics who fault both his form and his rhetoric for painting "unrealistic" pictures of life. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe has cogently argued that the metaphysical shapes this poem. He writes, "It contrasts the idea of artistic decorum--the effort to assimilate subject to form--with the divergent practice of stressing their disjunction, as in the metaphysical conceit. Such disjunctions, Wilbur implies, alert us to the ceremonious nature of art, the stylized gestures which draw attention to the materials their very stylization fails to accommodates, and thus seems to betray."

The poem begins:

> A striped blouse in a clearing by Bazille
> Is, you may say, a patroness of boughs
> Too queenly kind toward nature to be kin.
> But ceremony never did conceal,
> Save to the silly eye, which allows,
> How much we are the woods we wander in. (lines 1-6)

A debate is set up between art and nature in the comparison between the woman in French impressionist Bazille's painting, and the "woods we wander in." As in the metaphysical conceit, however, Wilbur's contrast links the human world of art and nature through the verbal and imaginative likeness and difference of the woman's "blouse" and nature's "boughs." The wild wood likewise disrupts the disjuncture between art and nature, recalling the literal and psychological "deep woods" of Milton's Comus. It represents the mysterious and the untamed, both within and outside the self.

The logical framework of the poem emphasizes the debate between nature and art and formal and informal. In this first stanza, the speaker's "you may say" premises the anticipated argument of the realist, only to be qualified by the speaker's "but" that art and form do not conceal reality. This debate continues in the second stanza. He posits:

> Let her be some Sabrina fresh from the stream,
> Lucent as shallows slowed by the wading sun,
> Bedded on fern, and the flowers' cynosure:
> Then nymph and wood must nod and strive to dream
> That she is airy earth, the trees, undone,
> Must ape her languor natural and pure. (lines 7-12)

The argument's imagery seems sound. The monosyllabic pace of the speaker's speech in line ten suggests its reasonableness. But the speaker becomes bored and yawns, "Ho-hum. I am for wit and wakefulness" (line 13). The poem's playful and yet serious wit reminds us that pastoralism is also an artful feigning. The easy analogy of a striped shirt and a striped tiger along with the slightly old fashioned diction are not enough. He prefers instead, the "feigning lady by Bazille" (line 14) to this romanticized illusion of a

harmonic landscape. The feigning woman is not so much false as she is inventive. As Wilbur states in a much later poem, "Odd that a thing is most itself when likened" ("Lying"). Analogy refreshes not just by showing similarities, but differences.[13] Likewise, in "Ceremony," he insists: "What's lightly hid is deepest understood" (line 15). It is only when the woman's "social smile and formal dress / [...] teaches leaves to curtsey and quadrille" (lines 15-16) that the woods truly produce "tigers" (line 17). Ceremony (and poetry) enlivens the natural world, just as the speaker's inner thoughts are enlivened.

Wilbur writes with the very ceremony he praises, a highly stylized rhetoric of rhyme, meter, puns, alliteration and paradox, which shocks the reader into seeing anew the familiar. His use of contraries to refresh our reality is similar to Robert Herrick's use of contraries. Herrick's poems also refresh the familiar by de-familiarizing through a series of contrasting ideas. For example, in his poem, "Delight in Disorder," Herrick contrasts order and disorder, civility and wilderness, formal and informal. Just as Bazille's feigned lady in Wilbur's poem conjures tigers in the woods, in Herrick's poem "A sweet disorder in the dress / Kindles in clothes a wantonness" (lines 1-2), which leads Herrick's speaker to playfully declare:

> I see a wild civility:
>
> Do more bewitch me than when art
>
> Is too precise in every part. (lines 12-14)

Wilbur's use of contrasts is just one more method he employs to discover correspondence between the material and the spiritual. Wilbur's "A World without Objects is Sensible Emptiness" explicitly expresses this need for correspondence between

the body and the spirit. The poem's title derives from seventeenth century poet and mystic, Thomas Traherne. In Mediation 65 Traherne writes: "For certainly he that delights not in Love makes vain the universe, and is of necessity to himself the greatest burden. The whole world ministers to you and the theater of your love. It sustains you and all the objects that you may continue to love them. Life without objects is sensible emptiness, and that is a greater misery than Death or Nothing" (80). In his poetry Traherne also celebrates the body and the soul. His poem "The Salutation" illustrates his awe for this world, this "Eden so divine and fair" (line 35), where life is "A gift from God" (line 28) which he embraces whole-heartedly: "[...] I take / The earth, the seas, the light, the day, the skies, / The sun and stars are mine; if those I prize" (lines 29-30).[14] The repetition of the article "the" catalogues God's gifts, which the speaker aims to embrace. The concluding clause "if those I prize" (line 30) suggests that these are just some of the treasures that God bestows. If the speaker does not desire these, he can claim others.

Wilbur, likewise, celebrates the natural world and argues that only an aggressive engagement with the material facilitates transcendence. As he stated in an interview published in the Amherst Student Review, "I simply cannot finally stomach any kind of idealism or spirituality which is contemptuous toward the body or what we call the material. I'm for bringing the body and the spirit to terms, rather than annulling the body" (Butts 151-2). In this poem, he likewise criticizes spirituality that attempts to do without images or symbols drawn from physical reality--the "negative way" advocated by some mystics because no image can adequately represent God. The poem begins with

the image of camels traveling across the desert, the very antithesis to his ideal engagement:

> The tall camels of the spirit
> Steer for their deserts, passing the last groves loud
> With the sawmill shrill of the locust, to the whole honey of the arid
> Sun. They are slow, proud,
> And move with a stilted stride
> To the land of sheer horizon, hunting Traherne's
> *Sensible emptiness*, there where the brain's lantern-slide
> Revels in vast returns. (lines 1-8)

The camel, capable of going days on end with little sustenance, moves at a slow and dispassionate pace, underscored by the monosyllabic beat of its gate. The bareness of the desert described through the heavy alliterative "s" is a vast emptiness. The alliterative description leaves no concrete tangible image of the desert in the reader's mind: it slips from our cognitive mapping like the very sand it is made of. Wilbur thus enacts formally Traherne's *"Sensible emptiness."*

The camel, a "connoisseur of thirst" (line 9), nurtures its desire, instead of satisfying it. Practicing a kind of via negativa, it seems doomed to live unsatiated. But the poem's argument turns and contrasts the via negativa with a richer engagement. The speaker rejects the *"Sensible emptiness"* and directs the reader to

> Think of those painted saints, capped by the early masters
> With bright, jauntily-worn

Aureate plates, or even

Merry-go-round rings [...]. (lines 15-17)

His directive becomes more insistent, his language richer:

[.....] Turn, O turn

From the fine sleights of the sand, from the long empty oven

Where flames in flamings burn (lines 17-19)

The circular imagery of the artists' renderings lead through associative thought to the speaker's directive to "turn" and the poem's argument simultaneously turns. As if infused with the early masters' artistic gifts, the imagery and diction used to describe the natural world intensifies. Mirroring the circular imagery of the "aureate plates" and merry-go round rings" in the old masters' paintings, nature is first a "halo" (line 21) and then a "tiara" (line 22). These crowns seem fitting images (the first spiritual, the second material) for nature to greet the Christ-child whose birth is announced by the "supernova."

The poem concludes:

Wisely watch for the sight

Of the supernova burgeoning over the barn,

Lampshine blurred in the steam of beasts, the spirit's right

Oasis, light incarnate. (lines 25-28)

Just as the paradox of the Christ-child irrevocably connects the human and the divine, the poem balances the material and the spiritual: the rare celestial phenomenon of the supernova is perfectly balanced by the very domestic image of the animals' hot breath.

These animals, in contrast to the earlier camels, are not abstracted but very real. And it is as material objects, and not as abstractions that their spirituality is felt.

Wilbur's "The Terrace" also powerfully evokes the theme of desire and fulfillment and the need for material and spiritual engagement. It serves as a good companion piece to "A World Without Objects is a Sensible Emptiness," also published in Ceremony and Other Poems (1950).

The action of "The Terrace" proper occurs on a terrace, that place where the inhabitants rest on the margin between the civilized domestic world and the natural green pastures that lie before them. Perched there, they are open to rich experience, for as Wilbur says in another poem, "Things concentrate at the edges" ("Marginalia"). The landscape is hyperbolically drawn. The steep mountains rise and fall excessively so that the terrace becomes like a roving raft. The grass is not merely green, but a fresh vibrant and fertile pasture. The speaker and his companion drink in this grandeur thirstily; they image the landscape as extremely rich food, glazed in sauce. Abundant vegetation saturates the landscape, but though they feast, their hunger is unsatiated and increases. Their hunger and imagined feast takes on eucharistic implications as they "drink in tinted glasses of rose / From tinted peaks of snow" (lines 8-9) and dip their "cups in light" (line 10). They become drunk, not just on the cup, but from each breath they take. But their benedictions and "gay / Readily said graces" (lines 33-34) fail to procure the endless heaven they desire. Evening steals away their light. Too late they realize it was their own greedy desire that created the scene and infused it with divine meaning.

> And we knew we had eaten not the manna of heaven
>
> But our own reflected light,

And we were the only part of the night that we

Couldn't believe. (lines 45-48)

Wilbur refuses to idolize nature, just as he refuses to idolize the spiritual. The quiet heroism of this poem celebrates the divinity that resides within the ordinary by emphasizing the emptiness that occurs when the ordinary is not celebrated for what it is. A similar stance occurs in George Herbert's poems where the humdrum of every day is invested with a divine hospitality. Herbert's metaphors often derive from remarkably tangible items: money, musical instruments, the natural world, food and "household stuff" ("Affliction I"). Herbert also employed the extended metaphor of eating in his poem, "Love III" to reveal the spiritual in the domestic. In this poem, tasting, eating and being nourished by love symbolize redemption. In Herbert's poem, Christ is both the host who welcomes and the host of communion. The meal the guest digests thus not only sustains, but also propels life. This dual nature of food is rooted in the word "manna." Herbert's manna is the direct contrary to Wilbur's "imagined" manna. But the message of both poems is the same. Herbert's poem celebrates the generosity and the self-sacrifice of God's love for the "marr'd human" just as Wilbur's celebrates the generosity of God's material gifts to humanity. Both poems make their arguments quietly: Herbert's through a kind of quiet faith, and Wilbur's through negation. In both, the reader must puzzle out the last phrase, drawing him/her into a full engagement with the correspondence between the material and the spiritual.

Wilbur's "The Writer" published in 1976 in his collection The Mind Reader, although a slightly later poem than the "representative lyrics" of the mid-century on which we've been focusing our discussion seems a good poem for concluding our

analysis of Wilbur's metaphysical poetry. "The Writer," both a love poem to his daughter and *ars poetica*, encapsulates Wilbur's desire to name experience (emotional and rational) through a metaphysical method.

"The Writer's" highly structured narrative contains a distinct beginning, middle and end. The beginning sets up the place and action of the poem proper, the middle produces the climax and the end concludes with a resolution to the poem's argument. In the first part of the poem, the speaker hears his daughter typing in her upstairs bedroom which he figures as "the prow of the house / Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden" (lines 1-2). Surely a pun on linden, (flowers / poesy) we are meant to believe that he, a father and writer, understands this bumpy act of her creative efforts. His prosaic defining of her actions, "My daughter is writing a story," flatly underscores this "understanding" (line 3).

He continues to figure his daughter's activity with nautical imagery as he listens to the "commotion of typewriter-keys / Like a chain hauled over a gunwale" (lines 5-6). The imagery leads effortlessly to the speaker's imagining that his daughter's "life is a great cargo" (line 8) in which he "wish[es] her lucky passage" (line 9). The daughter's typing ceases, and the speaker imagines that she "pauses, / As if to reject my thought and its easy figure" (lines 10-11). There is indeed something too easy in the speaker's analogy. The metaphor, which compares the "commotion" of keys to a chain pulled along a ship's side, fails to capture fully the emotional fervor of his daughter's creativity. It notes only the sound of the keys. Her life figured as heavy "cargo" aboard a ship positions her as more a passenger than as captain or even the moving vessel itself.

Likewise, his analogy falls short, defining only her outward movements, but speaking nothing about her inner state of mind.

The rejection of the too easy analogy marks the turn in the poem and a turn in the speaker's perspective. He rejects his first figure and engages in a search for a more precise analogy. The fits and starts of his daughter's typing soon recall the memory of two years earlier when a starling became trapped in the same room where his daughter is now writing. He remembers,

> [...] how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
> We watched the sleek, wild, dark
>
> And iridescent creature
> Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
> To the hard floor, or the desk-top,
>
> And wait then, humped and bloody,
> For the wits to try it again; [...] (lines 20-28)

The image of the trapped starling proves a more intense and precise analogy. It provides what Eliot terms an objective correlative: it immediately calls up the fervent emotions of both the starling and the young typist. The bird, literally, and the girl figuraly, are "humped and bloody." The Speaker then recalls,

> [.....] how our spirits
> Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,

Beating a smooth course for the right window

And clearing the sill of the world. (lines 29-32)

The bird perched at "the sill of the world" in the moment of transcendence brings us to the largest implications of Wilbur's metaphysical pathos. Peter Harris explains, "The finding of the right analogy for his daughter's situation is both the measure of the quality of his love and of the quality of his poem [....] either we are exacting in our search for what is right and, thereby, affirm life or we are seduced by fatal ease and become, symbolically, unquickened" (424-5).

The poem does not end with the bird's flight or the daughter's literary rite of passage. Instead, Wilbur adds a final stanza:

It is always a matter, my darling,

Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish

What I wished you before, but harder. (lines 33-35)

The conclusion is more decisive and fitting because the speaker has avoided easy sentiment. The love expressed feels sincere precisely because the father/poet has weighed his verbal options. He does not conclude his love poem until he has rightly understood and named his daughter's experience. This naming of experience, both his daughter's and his own, turns out to be nothing less than a matter "Of life or death."

As in "The Writer," Wilbur's poetry overall denotes an urgency to handle emotional responses and the concurrent need to name experience, despite the limitations of attempting to describe the felt moment. By engaging the seventeenth century metaphysical poets' rhetoric, modes of argument and debate, wit and search for

correspondence, Wilbur forges a poetic that succeeds in naming experience. His poetry, in the end, counters those critics who charge that his formal and witty poetry is too "impersonal" and removed from the everyday realities of mid-century American life. Studied articulation rather than spontaneous confession, and metaphoric engagement rather than mimetic representation, names difficult experience. Wilbur's poetry also breaks with early modern poetics of T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom and others. His formal poetry frames experience and discovers new unities of experience that emphasize harmony rather than chaos, and engagement rather than evasiveness. Perhaps most importantly, his poetry refreshes reality through a metaphysical method that restores the wonder of ordinary things. As he writes in the title poem of his first collection of poems, The Beautiful Changes:

> [.....] the beautiful changes
> In such kind ways,
> Wishing ever to sunder
> Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
> For a moment all that it touches back to wonder. (lines 14-18)

CHAPTER THREE

Metaphysical Performance in Robert Creeley's Poetry

New Criticism's relationship with the study and appreciation of metaphysical poetry in American poetry in the first half of the twentieth century was intertwined with political maneuverings to shape the literary canon. At mid-century, many poets were acutely aware of New Criticism's stranglehold on American poetics. For a growing number of these poets, the logical and highly stylized formal poetry acclaimed by New Critics no longer provided a viable means to talk about the world. Robert Creeley in his introduction to The New Writing in the USA (1967) explains: "The forties were a hostile time for the writers here included. The colleges and universities were dominant in their resistance upon the idea of form extrinsic to the given instance. Poems were equivalent to cars insofar as many could occur of similar pattern--although each was, of course, 'singular'" (Collected Essays 89).[1] The poets included in The New Writing revolted against the formal (mechanical) and "impersonal" academic verse of New Criticism. They favored, instead, an open form, immediate experience, spontaneous utterance, and embraced the personal.

Robert Creeley's open form poetic marks a distinct break with New Critical formalist tenets. In his quest to express his individual experiences within a new poetic form--which evolves out of that experience rather than out of traditional metrics--he develops a poetic that breaks with New Critical modes, and yet utilizes a metaphysical method that continues to reject the previous epoch of nineteenth century Romanticism. Creeley's poetry therefore participates in the larger strain of mid-twentieth century

American metaphysical poetry to which Richard Wilbur's formal poetry belongs. Unlike Wilbur's mid-century metaphysical poetry that exists within the New Critical / Eliot / Metaphysical tradition, however, Creeley's mid-century poetry resides within a Projectivist / Pound – Williams / Metaphysical tradition.

Creeley along with other poets associated with the Black Mountain School Movement--Charles Olson (the chief theoretician of the group), Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, and Denise Levertov--map the possibilities of a projective poetic that draws heavily on Ezra Pound's and William Carlos Williams's poetry.[2] The first sustained discussion of Projectivism occurs in Charles Olson's essay, "Projective verse," published in 1950. The first part of Olson's essay is based largely on letters written between himself and Creeley from April 1950 until its publication later that same year.[3] Creeley, who has also written substantially on his poetics of sound and organic form, consistently comes back to Olson's essay, citing it to reflect his own poetics and as a shaping force in American poetics. In his introduction to Olson's Selected Writings II (1966) Creeley writes about the impact of Olson's "Projective verse": "It was an excitement which many of us shared, because what confronted us in 1950 was a closed system indeed, poems patterned upon exterior and traditionally accepted models. The New Criticism of that period was dominant and would not admit the possibility of verse considered as an 'open field" (CE 126). Creeley likewise asserted in his review of Olson's Y & X (1951), "if poetry is to get further, develop, it will depend on those who, like Olson, make use of its present gains, push these beyond. Olson's work is the first significant advance" (CE 98). Critics of Creeley's poetry have therefore tended to read his poetry solely within the Projectivist / Pound-Williams tradition and its association with the avant guard

movements emerging at the onset of the postmodern era.[4] They have thus ignored or overlooked that Creeley's poetic, situated within this counter tradition, forges a metaphysical poetic that engages and articulates emotional and intellectual experience. In this sense, Creeley's poetry is unique: he uses both the metaphysical mind (which T.S. Eliot and New Critics championed) and the breath / ear mechanics of Projectivism.[5] The result is that Creeley's Projectivist poetic is not only metaphysical, but also marks a shift from a modern metaphysical poetic to a postmodern metaphysical poetic in American poetry: informality is valued over formality, performance over product, engagement over detachment.

The Projectivist Movement, like many other mid-century movements (Beat, Confessional, San Francisco Renaissance and New York School) turned to Pound and Williams as poetic mentors, deliberately countering the stranglehold T.S. Eliot's poetry and literary criticism had maintained on the first half of the twentieth century. Whereas Eliot had advocated a poetics of objectivity, impersonality, and poetry as an autonomous artifact situated within the larger English Tradition, Pound's and Williams' poetry emphasized openness, directness, colloquial language and personal involvement grounded in the local.

From Pound's Imagist poems, open form poets adopted the language of common speech, exact diction and freedom in subject matter. Creeley in particular adopted its hard, clear poetry where concentration is of the very essence. Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" (qtd. in full) is the quintessential Imagist poem.

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
>
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Another important facet of Imagism was the attention to rendering the spontaneous moment. Pound's expert use of cadence, which included juxtaposition, shifting tones and allusions, successfully renders spontaneous movement. Pound's dictum, "Listen to the sound it makes!" resounded.

Williams, too, provided invaluable instruction for a new open poetic. He sought a poetry that was forward-looking and experimental and self-consciously rooted in American soil. For Williams, Eliot's major weakness had been his relying on an abstract sense of culture, ungrounded in any actual communities or practices. The local must provide the materials for the artist's art, which in turn provide the subject of the poem. The local is the natural environment, culture, both historic and contemporary. "[P]lace is the only reality, the true core of the universal [...]. We live only one place at one time, but far from being bound to it, only through it do we realize our freedom [...] if we only make ourselves sufficiently aware of it, do we join with others in other places" (Selected Essays). In his epic poem "Paterson" (an admitted refutation of Eliot's "Wasteland") Williams argues that only through direct interaction with the world, represented historically and presently, can one forge an awareness of being.[6] "Paterson" concludes:

> We know nothing and can know nothing
>
> but
>
> the dance, to dance to a measure
>
> contraptually,
>
> Satyrically, the tragic foot. (235-239)

Projectivism draws heavily on the poetics of Pound and Williams. Creeley proclaims: "Any movement poetry can now make beyond the achievement of Pound,

Williams, et al, must make use of the fact of their work, and, further, of what each has stressed as the main work now to be done. We can't discard either of these men by calling them 'experimentalists' or by thinking that however right their method may be for their own apprehension of form, we can not ignore its example in our own dilemmas. ("Charles Olson "Y & X," CE 97). Olson, too, declares in "Projective Verse," "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (The revolution of the ear, 1910, the trochee heave, asks it of the younger poets)" (15). Williams' theory of the local and the ear/breath mechanics of both Williams and Pound become the keystones for a Projective poetic that continues to reject nineteenth century Romanticism while it breaks with New Critical tenets. The Projective also becomes the cornerstone for Creeley's metaphysical poetic; I wish, therefore, to spend some time here discussing briefly the major tenets of Projectivism.

Insisting on the poet's direct engagement with the local, the Projective poets move from objective representation (e.g. Eliot's objective correlative) and symbolic reference to performance. In "'Poems Are a Complex'" (1966) Creeley writes, "poems are not referential, or at least not importantly so. They have 'meaning' in that they do 'exist through themselves'" (CE 490). Later, in an interview with Roberta Obermayer (1999), Creeley explains what he meant when he said, "meaning is not importantly referential."

> I was trying to make the point that what's particular in the words as they say things, seems to me the real point, not what they refer to that's outside.

> When I'm reading poems, that's what's moving to me is not that these words river or tree refer to a platonic river or tree, a river or tree that's not there. As I read, those rivers and trees become actual in my mind. Now in some obvious ways of course, the words refer to a tree that permits that, but it doesn't refer to a tree that's not in the poem. In fact, the tree in the poem, in a funny way, is no-where else. And that's what's wonderful. The point being, that in poetry the noun or verbs or the activities thus, are the things that are actually there.

Creeley's emphasis on the *activity* of a poem's language punctuates his emphasis on the poem as an event. As performance, the Projective espouses a poetic that is dramatic, expressive and directly engaged in exploring and articulating the tenuous relationships between immediacy of thought, emotion, place and event and does so at the *word level.* For Creeley, word is thing, opposed to abstract reference. Not surprisingly, then, Creeley explicitly rejects the "the damn function of the simile, always a displacement of what *is* happening" ("Echo" Pieces). His minimalist style in fact forgoes much traditional description (adjectives, adverbs, and visual imagery). His paired down style, however, is not devoid of rhetoric for dramatic argument and play. Manipulation of syntax and rhythm, juxtaposition and complex metaphors permeate his poetry. These tropes and figures aid in creating inroads into experience and understanding by familiarizing the unfamiliar and by defamiliarizing the familiar. As Creeley matter-of-factly states, "you can't derail a train by standing directly in front of it, or not quite. But a tiny piece of steel, properly placed" (CE).

Olson in "Projective Verse" provides a usable explanation of how performative rhetoric exposes and counters traditional modes of poetic articulation such as those exhibited by the simile.

> It is the function, *comparison*, or, its bigger name, *symbology*. These are the false faces, too much seen, which hide and keep from use the active intellectual states. Metaphor and performance. All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing (these likenesses and differences are apparent) but that such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which call our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. (56)

Olson continues, proposing that "there must be a means of expression [....] which bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not--in order to define--prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering" (56).

Metaphor as performative utterance is akin to Renaissance understandings of metaphor. Classic rhetoric, practiced by seventeenth century poets, sought the connections between thought and language. Metaphor points to this process of learning

and discovering, an activity grounded in its very name: metaphor (phora = motion). Metaphor creates semantic motion (energy) through the fusion of terms within the metaphor. Energy becomes the central component of the poem, placing full focus on the fusion of experience, and not on any outside meaning referenced by simple analogy or symbol.

We see, then, how Projectivism's rejection of facile comparison (simile) and detracting reference (symbolism) challenges both New Critical symbolic modes championed by Eliot and the poetically "correct" (transparent) similes of the preceding century's Romanticism. Symbolism and simile both transfer the focus from the word as thing to word as referent so that the energy is diffused. This runs counter to the Projective. Energy is crucial and the most important quality required in a poem. "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it ... by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to the reader. The poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" ("Projective Verse" 16). This is defined as the breath line. The breath line, in that it creates the poem as well as shapes the poem, is as breath is itself, life giving and life sustaining. The breath line structures the poem, determined by the speaker's emotional, physical and mental relation to the event and place of his/her experience. While the breath is a biological response, it is a mistake to view the projective breath as intuitive, or Romantic, opposed to logical. While Projectivism like Romanticism deems that the poem must be spontaneous and organic rather than mechanical, Romantics regarded with suspicion rhetoric and all modes of logic that emphasize the mind. In contrast, Olson characterizes Projective Verse not as illogical, but rather, "post-logical" ("Human Universe" 55). Projective Verse's

spontaneity is dependent on the mind, a point that Creeley and Olson are both dogmatic about. In "A Note on the Objective" (1951) Creeley directly confronts the outworn debates between the objective (the scientific mind) and the subjective (Romantic intuition).

> Whether from an altogether 'scientific' attitude, or from some wish to dissociate, only, by way of the surface of language, one idea from another, *objectivity* has become the apparent trademark of the careful mind. Common use would put upon this *objectivity* the air of the cool head, that is, one capable of confronting diverse phenomenona in their own particulars, rather than as extensions of one's own senses. It was this battle, between the *objective* and the *subjective*, then, which had replaced the looser and more worn fight between classicism and romanticism. (436)

Creeley concludes that it is "perhaps best to junk both terms, or at least to understand this necessary balance, one with the other. We can't stand outside our content and at the same time we can't eat it like an apple, etc." (464).

Projectivism works out a method to attain this balance between the subjective and the objective by collapsing them within the poet's physical being. Drawing on Pound's and Williams' poetics of sound and breath, Olson figures this process in terms of the ear (the objective) and the breath (the subjective):

> The HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
> The HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE ("Projective Verse" 19)

According to Olson, the ear is directly linked with the mind. The poet listens to the world around him/her, which is then transferred to the mind and then sent to travel through the rest of the body. Only then is the fusion of thought and feeling released through the breath, creating a unique sensory (mental sense and physical sensation) experience and expression. Asserting the direct link between the ear and the mind, the syllable in poetry becomes the "king and pin of versification" (17).[7] The syllable, however, is not secondary, but immediate. The syllable "is spontaneous this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed ..." (18). The deliberate parallelism in Olson's formula above underscores the unifying ability of Projective Verse to yoke the intellectual and emotional realms of immediate experience through sound.

Creeley's unusual word order, puns, and ellipses operate most often on the level of sound (intricate sound patterns of assonance, consonance, vowel sounds, off rhyme and near rhyme, fractured words, fragmented lines, and innovative punctuation) and provides one possible way the projective might balance the objective and the subjective. This use of sound has been the consistent performative method throughout Creeley's career. Forest Gander in "The King is Old? Long Live the King!" a review of Creeley's recent collection, Life and Death, notes this aspect of his poetry. He finds that "Sound and word play seem primary, existing before idea [...]. Discovered meaning results from the cadence of the phrases, enjambment and line break." Creeley acknowledges, "that undertaking most useful to writing as an art is, for me, the attempt to *sound* in the nature of the language those particulars of time and place of which one is given instance, equally present" ("Charles Olson "Y & X," CE 96). While Creeley, like other Projectivists, cites

Pound as influencing his use of sound, Creeley's unique fusion of thought and feeling made manifest at the level of word, syllable and sound--an equal engagement with the literal and figural--can be traced back to the seventeenth century poets, in particular to John Donne.[8] For example, writing about Donne's lasting influence on poetics, C. A. Patrides in his introduction to John Donne's Complete English Poems, finds that Donne's major contribution to poetry is his "introduction into lyric poetry of elements innate to dramatic literature, his boldness in adjusting those elements to his immediate purposes, his use of variable cadences to evoke diverse emotional states" (xxxi). He goes on to assert that "Donne's 'rough cadence taught generations of poets to look with their ears" (xxxi).

Patrides' assessment proves particularly astute when we examine the way Donne and Creeley both use sound for dramatic purposes and we can begin to see how Creeley moves away from the purely projective toward a poetic that is both projective and metaphysical. In his analysis of Donne's dramatic use of sound, Patrides finds, "where the skill is commensurate to the sense [...] Donne persuades utterly. The grammar and the punctuation are on such occasions to be torturous in the extreme, broken in order forcefully to make a point" (xxix). "The Canonization" provides just one of many examples.

> The phoenix riddle has more wit
>
> By us, we two being one, are it.
>
> So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
>
> We dye and rise the same, and prove
>
> Mysterious by this love." (lines 22-4)

Donne similarly employs sound to express a speaker's emotional distress. The syncopated rhythm in "The Legacie" denotes the lover's agony and the throbbing consonance used in "Batter My Heart Three Person'd God" reveals the speaker's conflicting emotions towards divine purgation. The latter poem's opening lines are a typical example of how Donne blends emotion and intellect by combining sound and metaphor:

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend
> Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new. (lines 1-4)

In this conceit, the speaker imagines God as a metal worker, by whom he desires to be remade. The divine metal worker's desired skills are described using verbs grouped in triplets--"knocke, breathe, shine," "rise, and stand, o'erthrow" and "breake, blowe, burn"--enacting the power of the Trinity. The final grouping of verbs are the extreme extension of the initial grouping: excessive knocking can break the object; blow is forceful breath; and something that shines too intensely burns. It is not enough that the speaker be mended and cleansed from sin; he must forcibly be made "new." The monosyllabic lines mimic the blows that come with the violence of the divine correction. The speaker's desperateness for forceful action manifests itself through the almost exclusive use of monosyllabic words, high number of active verbs, enjambment and alliteration.

Extreme emotions passionately felt and enacted by a correlation of sense and rhythm for emotional impact and psychological purposes is similarly executed by Creeley. For example, Cid Corman has written that in Creeley's much discussed poem "I

know a Man" (qtd. in full For Love), "words and feelings are 'scored' freshly" so that "[e]very syllable pulls its weight and no punch pulled."

As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking,--John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.

The frequent enjambment between lines and stanzas, dashes and crowding of stresses, unnatural pauses and hesitations illustrate the speaker's emotional struggle to articulate his desire for meaningful experience and discourse. Michael Davidson in The San-Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century cogently sums up the poem's dilemma: "The speaker is caught between two conflicting positions: whether to solve his existential despair by escaping from the world (by buying a 'goddamn big car')

or by paying a greater attention to what is immediately in front of him [....] to drive and thus escape such despair is an inadequate solution to a problem of much greater proportions" (74).

While at first the poem's ordinary rhythms of speech, its colloquial slang and sparseness seem incongruous with the poem's large philosophical considerations, "I know a Man," as Charles Altieri in Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s has cogently argued, contains Creeley's "most fundamental dramatic statement on the problem of language and its relation to the void." The speaker's speech communicates little: it is vague, abstract, and thus alienating. Alluding to "John Doe," the speaker grandiosely claims he "knows" Everyman. But such claims generalize and fail to engage directly the immediate: his friend and their circumstances. The repercussions can be deadly; he nearly drives off the road. Thus, instead of bringing the speaker closer to his surroundings and understanding, his speech, as Altieri points out, "further broadens the gap between human subjectivity and the world which it must comes to terms" (109). He is engulfed by the darkness which "sur-/rounds" him. The enjambment accentuates the utter enveloping of the speaker's failure to truly "know" his companion, who he calls "John"--despite that he knows it is "not his name"--but also himself. Word level enjambment enacts the dismemberment of the speaker's unified and stable identity.

"I Know a Man" illustrates that meaningful speech requires meaningful engagement with others as well as the physical, everyday world. Quoting Robert Duncan, Creeley contends, "You have to confront it and get with it not straighten it out. Optimism and pessimism have nothing to do with being alive'" (CE 375). Thus, Creeley

does not romanticize engagement, but insists on grounding experience in the everyday mundane world where one worries about whether the cupboards are stocked, if laundry is done and how the next month's rent is to be paid. Insistence on the mundane derives from the fact that Creeley believes that all form and emotion derives from engagement with the local and the immediate. For Creeley repeatedly stressed the concept of composition by field opposed to the inherited line: "form is never more than an *extension* of content" (Correspondence 79).[9] The poem must be free from a preconceived rhythmical structure, and yet still adhere to the rhythmical patterns that evolve out of the poem as well as out of the poetry as he/she experiences the poem. In an interview with William Packard, Creeley provides the following analogy for this engagement: "take a glass of water and spill it on the ground. It takes place on the ground in the nature of itself as water, being fluid, etc., and in the context of the ground, that nature and circumstance it's now met with [...]".

Writing about place and his choice of personal landscapes and the relationship between place and form, Creeley asserts: "art is local, local to a place and to a person, or group of persons, or just what's in the air despite how vague that sounds. It happens *somewhere* not anywhere" (emphasis mine, "Why Bother?" CE 485). It is the poet's relationship to the local, the "somewhere" in which the poet lives his/her life, that defines both the poet and the place. In turn, each place has its own rhythm and measure, whether the fast pace of the city or the fragmented pace of solitude. The poet in his/her relationship with this place has his/her own rhythm, measure and breath in which he/she writes. As he writes in an early poem, "...always the beat from / the breath" ("Le Fou," For Love). Noting the primacy of this relationship, Creeley in an interview with Robert

Sheppard remarks: "I was charmed to recognize the root--that etymologically the "world" is a compound of "wers" and "eld": it means literally "man's life." A man's life is the world. What one experiences and/or fact of "all else" in a lifetime is his or her fact of the world" (The Poetry Workshop 50). Identity, then, is a primary issue in Creeley's poems. A person's identity is dependent upon his/her relation to the local. This local includes geographic place as well as one's relationships with lovers, friends and children.

Creeley's poem "The Measure" (Words, qt. in full) exhibits the relationship between man and world and its correlating relationship between experience and form. The self is situated in place and time through language, but is always in motion as there can be no absolute fixed points in spontaneous experience.

I cannot
move backward
or forward.
I am caught

in the time
as measure.
What we think
of we think of--

of no other reason
we think than
just to think--

each for himself.

There can be no objective system of measuring or describing the individual's experience. The poet can only measure things in relation to him/her self. The "I" of the poem can only be conscious of his relational identity to the place and time in which he writes. Thus, the poem may focus only on the present moment and the poet's relation to it. "The world cannot be 'known' entirely [....] Reality is continuous, not separable, and cannot be objectified. We can't stand aside to see it" (Creeley, "The Writer's Situation," CE 519-520).

Obtaining continual contact proves no easy task. Creeley's poem "Soup," written during a tour of Southeast Asia (Hello: A Journal, February 29-May 3, 1976), physically grounds the poem in New Zealand, although the poem takes place emotionally inside the speaker's mind. This poem represents the possibility of linguistic articulation of experience but also notes the risk of distorting the social reality and in doing so, losing contact. The speaker in this poem is trapped, haunted by inability to forget the past and inescapable anticipation. The speaker admits his fallibility in the lines "I suppose it's letting go, finally, // that spooks me" (lines 32-33). The poem's form as a journal entry and the use of conversational dialogue offer a sense of immediacy and naturally occurring experience, seemingly without any imposed structure. The speaker, however, instead of living spontaneously and moving freely in the moment, tries to suspend time in the lines "ok old buddy, / no projections, no regrets" (lines 49-50), and again when he insists that he will not look back, asserting "I don't travel that way" (line 39). The speaker is presented as trying too hard.

The letter from the friend, reporting "She looks well / happy, working hard--" (lines 6-7) suggests that the woman is defined in a realistic and socially acceptable place; working hard and being happy is very much a part of the American dream. Therefore, the poem presents the speaker's desire for a reunion as going against the acceptable norms of society while additionally acknowledging the seduction of such desires. The speaker's inability to escape his limitations and fate, though, are noted most acutely in the following lines:

> Back to the weather,
>
> and dripping nose
>
> I truly wanted to forget here,
>
> but haven't. (lines 45-48)

What the speaker cannot ignore is not only the physical separation and social constraints, but also the natural order of the world: the weather, the seasons, its effects and therefore its necessary act of preventing the speaker from rerouting the events of loss.

The poem's title, "Soup," provides the primary trope of the poem although soup is not directly referred to until the final lines.

> Say that all the ways
>
> are one--consumatum est--
>
> like some soup
>
> I'd love to eat with you. (lines 57-60)

Soup aptly represents the speaker's desire to gather past, future and present into one single moment. If we envision a bowl of soup we see a food that is nourishing, made from various ingredients, usually containing vegetables in a broth. It is the quintessential

comfort food, and it is precisely comfort that the speaker desires. Soup also requires heat and someone to prepare it. Thus, soup requires four essential ingredients which represent the four elements: the vegetables are grown from the land and thus represent the earth, the heat is fire, the liquid is water, and the speaker who prepares the soup is the poet's breath, or air, which shapes the poem. The unified ingredients, the soup itself, provides a metaphor for the poem. In addition, the word soup holds the slang meaning of energy, such as in a souped-up car. The soup as an energy force may be linked to the poet's own energy derived from his immediate experience.

Creeley's love of puns is one more way in which his poetry is reminiscent of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry. Creeley's pun on "soup" to structure his poem is similar to George Herbert's use of a pun in his poem "The Collar." Like Creeley's poem, Herbert's title provides the controlling trope for the poem and is also a pun. "Collar" represents the speaker's clerical collar (physical dress and emotional servitude) and the speaker's choler. The polysemous pun provides a safe means for Herbert to maintain his devotion to God at the same time that he resists the constraints that clergy life places on him. Creeley's soup pun likewise provides a means to express his emotions within the very language he self-protectively employs to mask them. He saves-face in his time of loss. The image of the soup allows the speaker to express his desire for reunion with the woman who truly is his whole world (earth, fire, water and air).[10]

The various levels of meaning in the metaphor of soup are intensified further when we examine the poem's form. Creeley's use of four line stanzas may at first seem in conflict with his ideas that poetry should not come from a preconceived stanzaic form. However, if we view the soup metaphor as symbolizing both the poem and its

formulating energy as well as operating homodiegetically as a metaphor for the natural harmonized world, then Creeley's use of quatrains reinforces the soup metaphor. In an interview, Creeley remarks, "I tend to posit intuitively a balance of four, and foursquare circumstance, be it walls of a room or legs of a table, that reassures me in the movement otherwise to be dealt with" ("Poems are a Complex," CE 494). It is quite possible, though, that these quatrains come not only from manmade structures of squared tables or chairs but from a circle or sphere which is made up of four points, each representing the four elements in a harmonized balance, or from the poet's own form of two legs and two arms. Either way, the poem's structure, like the soup metaphor, may be seen as representing the elements of nature and is thus a microcosm of the world and the poet's relationship with the world.

Creeley most often situates his poems within small domestic spheres--a bedroom, a bed, a chair, a window--to act as miniatures of the larger world. These places also hint at potential intimacy while also enacting the prevailing tension in Creeley's lyrics--especially his love poems--between desire and satiety. Thus, objects such as doors, windows and fences operate as teasing barriers to the intimacy that might assuage his desire for true contact. In "You" (Windows) the speaker's lover walking out of a door opens the speaker's mind to severe existential loss.

You were leaving, going
out the door in

preoccupation as to
what purpose it

had served, what

the point was, even

who or what or where,

when you thought you

could, suddenly, say,

you understood, and

saw all people as if

at some distance, a

pathetic, vast huddle

up against a fence. (lines 1-14)

The use of interrogatives should bring about the "understanding" desired, but fail, leading her to a kind of roadblock up against the fence. The speaker, however, is not merely reflecting on the situation in the past tense, but is simultaneously being propelled forward--from the door, to the street, to a waiting car--by the flux of his emotions and their evolving status. The [e]motion of the poem is seen in the truncated lines and words at the end of the poem.

Would they listen, presuming

such a *they*? Is any-

one ever home to such in-

sistences? How ring

the communal bell?

All was seen in

a common mirror, all

was simple self-

reflection. It was me

and I was you. (lines 29-38)

Creeley's use of reflection and accelerated lines positions the speaker dead center of the moment in which he acknowledges his being; his identity exists only in relation to the moment and to the woman walking out on him: "It was me / and I was you." Similarly, Creeley's italicized "they" foregrounds that if one understands the interrelatedness between individuals and their place (this includes other individuals) then "they" cannot exist, only a unified "us." The emphasis on union is further stressed in the intricate sound patterns linking "communal" and "all" and the visual rhyme of "common mirror" (line 26).

In "Goodbye" (For Love, qt. in full) a window is the originating location or "place" of the poem.

She stood at the window. There was

a sound, a light.

She stood at the window. A face.

Was it that she was looking for,

he thought. Was it that

she was looking for. He said,

turn from it, turn

from it. The pain is

not unpainful. Turn from it.

The act of her anger, of

the anger she felt then,

not turning to him.

The window where the woman stands, unlike the door, acts not as a place in which people travel through but one that keeps the speaker and his lover apart. Again, Creeley uses sound--repetition, fragmented lines and the sharp contrast between the woman's declarative stance in the first stanza and the speaker's interrogation that follows--to metaphysically enact the psychological tension of the poem. The woman's declarative remove from the speaker is denoted also by the splitting of verb and action in lines one and two and the omission of a verb altogether in the last line of the first stanza. The repetition stalls the poem and prevents the speaker from making contact with the woman

at the window. The repetition of "turn from it, turn from it" becomes perpetually cyclical and ushers a sense of paralysis into the poem.

Paralysis is the most dangerous of positions in Creeley's poems. Desire for intimacy is underscored by the need for motion, continual discovery and interactions with others. In fact, motion animates Creeley's poems. Despite Creeley's condensing the playing field of his poems into short-lined stanzas, often composed in couplets or quatrains, the jerky syncopated rhythm created from truncated words and lines suggest a spontaneous movement within the form. Creeley's speakers likewise are animated as they move through their personal landscapes, mapping their tenuous involvement in the unpredictable events of human relationships. Their very movement, directed by powerful passions, create an intense poetic of [e]motion. On the use of the emotive in poetry, Creeley explains, "Emotions and feelings particularly, were for me, the absolute bonding, binding element of poetry and the modus was always involved with its sounds and rhythms. Not simply the wise guy disposition but the playfulness and the pleasant action of the mind bringing all this together was my delight also. There was always feeling, it was at the root" (Obermayer).

The chief [e]motive factor in Creeley's poems is love. More than mere feeling, love gives form and meaning to experience. All things develop from love. As he describes in his poem "For Love," it is

> ..... that sense above
> the others to me
> important because all

that I know derives

from what it teaches me. (lines 2-6)

This insistence that the world of love contains everything of value; that it is the only one worth exploring and possessing recalls Donne's portrayal of love in "The Good Morrow":

And now good morrow to our waking soules,

Which watch not one another out of feare;

For love, all love of other sights controules,

And makes one little roome, an every where.

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,

Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,

Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one. (lines 8-14)

In both Creeley and Donne, the microcosmic world of love becomes larger and more important than the macrocosm. Love is the agent of creation and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend the larger cosmos. In Donne, secular and sacred love cohabit. Donne's unique approach to love never foregrounds one over the other. In Creeley, the sacred and secular are one and the same, as he concludes "For Love": "Into the company of love it all returns" (lines 61-2).

For Creeley, love becomes the Logos, the supreme unifying principle of the world, linking not only man to woman, but man to humanity at large, to nature and to the larger cosmos. In ancient and medieval theology and philosophy, the Logos was the divine reason that orders and gives form and meaning to the cosmos. Logos, in a metaphysical sense, was first used by sixth century BC philosopher Heraclitus. For

Heraclitus, the Logos was fire, a "divine force that produces order and pattern discernible in the flux of nature" (Stamatellos). In Christian theology, the Logos was adapted to signify the intermediary between God and the cosmos, being both the agent of creating and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend God. In the beginning of the Gospel of John, Christ is portrayed as the Logos: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1) and in verse 1.14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . the only begotten of the Father [...]". The Logos is the will of God and the ideas that are in the mind of God. Christ's incarnation is the manifestation of these divine attributes. Creeley's conception of Love as Logos builds off ancient and Christian conceptions. The Logos also provides the perfect trope for Creeley's metaphysical poetry. In Greek, 'Logos' is the term for both "word" and "reason". In Hebrew, the word is "Dahvar," which means "thought" and "deed." Charles Olson in "Human Universe" likewise speaks of the Logos as both "discrimination [...] and of shout" and stresses that we cannot "extricate language from action" (54). As we saw in the poetry of Richard Wilbur, metaphysical poetry, in general, exploits the dual nature of the Logos as both "word" and "reason" and "thought" and "deed" as part of the metaphysical method. Characterized by T.S. Eliot, metaphysical poetry "elevates sense to regions belonging to abstract thought, or on the other hand, clothes the abstract for a moment, with all the painful delights of flesh" (VMP 55). In Creeley, the physicality of thoughts and emotions are similarly felt. As Forest Gander notes, "Reading his poems, we experience the gnash of arriving through feeling at thought and word." Mark Doty similarly finds that "The operation of intellect, for Creeley, seems to lie almost entirely within the form itself [...]. Almost void of

concrete objects, the poems somehow succeed in making feeling itself seem concrete" (cite).

In his poem "The Language" (qtd. in full Words) Creeley stresses the interrelationship between the individual and the physical place, between language and desire and between man and woman through a series of contrasts. The poem also provides a superb example of how Creeley makes the most abstract of all words, "love," concretely felt through his insistence on grounding the poem in the material (here the physical body) and in its various cadences of speech and thought.

Locate I
love you some-
where in

teeth and
eyes, bite
it but

take care not
to hurt, you
want so

much so
little. Words
say everything.

I

love you

again,

then what

is emptiness

for. To

fill, fill.

I heard words

and words full

of holes

aching. Speech

is a mouth.

In the first part of the poem, the speaker seeks to make love real, first through a series of contrasts between the abstract and concrete with its very line breaks, and secondly through direct statement in his final lines. The poem's declarative conclusion, "Speech / is a mouth," asserts that language is not only thinking, or articulating, but the physical act of speaking with the mouth and from the body. Arthur Ford in Robert Creeley, the first full-length study of Creeley's poetry, astutely notes that in this poem "love, like words are holes aching to be filled, both linguistically and sexually" (64). Love thus provides

the perfect trope for Creeley to explore his larger philosophical considerations of subjectivity and language.

Creeley's love poems unrelentingly try to assuage the desire for physical, mental and emotional contact with the world and others, a need inevitably tied up with language. His love poems published in For Love aggressively probe the limits of thought and language and do so by grounding this examination within the human quest for love. The poems repeatedly ask the fundamental question, how to make the abstraction "love" concrete? It is with this collection of poems, thus, I wish to focus my discussion on in the remainder of this chapter. In these poems, we see that Creeley's metaphysical poetry, modeled after the Logos, formally and contextually renders the abstract concrete.

In For Love, love is not easily won; its rules and methods prove tricky, engaging the speaker simultaneously in physical, mental, and linguistic trials. Robert Duncan points to this aspect of Creeley's poems and determines that Creeley "continues the art of the troubadours with its themes of love and trial. He loves the daily, popular tunes, the ring of contemporary coinage, flashes of wry and sardonic humor, the lover's chagrin" (book jacket, Selected Poems). Troubadour love poetry can be traced back at least to the eleventh century. According to the conventions, a married lady was to be venerated, placed on a pedestal, where she inspired the lover to great and glorious deeds. Her lover, her knight in shining armor, was to fall madly in love with her, immediately taken by her bewitching charms. Sometimes a glance was enough to capture the lover; at other times, a love potion was helpful or necessary. The drinking of such a potion indicated the qualities of uniqueness and inevitable nature of romantic love; the lovers are surely fated for each other, as if their love was determined by the gods or destiny. The beloved and

her knight were then to engage in illicit love with the tacit approval of the husband, but only after the knight had courted his lady with religious devotion and suffered great torment and despair. While Creeley's suitor indeed suffers and pines for his beloved, his treatment of love is more in the fashion of the Cavalier love lyric, than in the style of Troubadour love poetry.

Like the Cavalier love lyric, Creeley's witty treatment of love mocks romantic conventions and explicitly critiques the various tropes of courtly love. He frequently rejects the idyllic garden as a site for his declaration of love and locates his beloved in the everyday world of domesticity.[11] He tries to place his beloved on a pedestal, but she refuses to stay put. Indeed, the beloved walks out on him leaving him with either an empty cupboard or no clean laundry. To add insult to injury, she refuses to keep silent and barrages him with profanity. Perhaps most different is that the beloved in these poems is not some other man's wife but his own. Thus, the poems in For Love are frequently anti-romantic. For example, "Song" contrasts the romantic conventions of song against angry speech and diction. "The Rose" likewise mocks literary convention that places the supreme value on romantic love and ironically contrasts the romantic epistle with the colloquial jargon of contemporary speech:

> Up and down
> she walks, listless
> form, a movement
> quietly misled.
>
> Now, speak to her.

"Did you want

to go, then why

don't you." (lines 1-8)

Because the speaker's desire is continually thwarted, he is portrayed as oscillating between cynicism, bitterness, or ironical detachment. Throughout For Love the speaker postures as either detached or reservedly ironic. This protective stance renders him a bit of an outsider, solitary and anxious. He tries too hard, or not hard enough. So desirous of love, he either resorts to fantasy or stubbornly insists that the daily domesticities are meant as proof of his beloved's affection. When they are not, he angers. As he writes in "The Crisis"

let me say (in anger) that since the day we were married

we never had a towel

where anyone could find,

the fact." (lines 1-4)

The "factual" tone recalls the self-protective posturing of the cavalier poet who on the one hand desires a relationship with the beloved, but fears rejection and more importantly, is willing to retaliate when the beloved fails to reciprocate his affections. The lady, despite the poet's praise is never put in a good light. Moreover, the speaker's narcissism (although more a self protective stance rather than true ego) often composes a song of declaration which is not about the woman at all, but the suitor's own need to find meaningful utterance for his own thoughts and feelings. Creeley, in the "Ballad of the Despairing Husband" cavalierly attempts to reverse the tradition of courtly love but in the process all but destroys the beloved to whom he directs his poem.

When the poem begins, the speaker's wife has already left him. The regular rhythm and pat rhymes create a jovial, sprightly tone as the speaker attempts to put a lighthearted spin on the events.

My wife and I lived all alone,
contention was our only bone.
I fought with her, she fought with me,
and things went on right merrily.

But now I live here by myself
with hardly a damn thing on the shelf,
and pass my days with little cheer
since I have parted from my dear.

Oh come home soon, I write to her.
Go fuck yourself, is her answer.
Now what is that, for Christian word?
I hope she feeds on dried goose turd. (lines 1-12)

Juxtaposing the narrator's simple declaration of love and the events of the separation with the wife's coarse response work to place the blame for the split on the wife. The husband's description of the wife's actions, however, suggest that she is at fault not so much for leaving, but for not playing the part of the courtly Lady. Ladies in courtly ballads simply do not speak as she vulgarly does. But is the speaker as innocent as he postures? For what kind of courtly lover rhymes "Christian word" with "dried goose

turd"? The result is humor and bitter mockery not only on the two estranged lovers, but also on the romantic convention of courtly love poetry. Still, the speaker claims his fidelity.

> But still I love her, yes I do.
>
> I love her and the children too.
>
> I only think it fit that she
>
> should quickly come right back to me. (lines 13-16)
>
> [.....]
>
> That may be right, she will say then
>
> but as for me, there's other men.
>
> And I will tell you I propose
>
> to catch them firmly by the nose. (lines 21-24)

Again, the wife refuses to subscribe to courtly poetics. Unlike the destiny of one true love, she claims she may show her affections to "other men." This attack on the speaker's masculinity (the chief characteristic and focus of all courtly love poetry) jars the husband into asking, "Was this the darling I did love/ --/.../.../and made my own world self to sing? (lines 25-28). But this question seems too much to ask. He vows instead to counter her rejection with his determined affection.

> She was I know, And she is still,
>
> and if I love her? then so I will.
>
> And I will tell her, and tell her right ... (lines 28-31)

Because love is more than mere feeling--as Logos it gives form and meaning to experience--the speaker's ability to "tell her right" is pivotal to the relationship. If he

fails to locate the right words, then he fails to make love concrete, or real. He loses not only his "lovely wife," but also his identity as the "despairing husband," or more generally, as the courtly suitor who pines away from his unrequited love.

The wife's attack on her husband's "masculinity" translates into an attack on his virility as a courtly suitor. He vows to rectify the situation by quickening her affections through his composing the perfect courtly song of praise.

> Oh lovely lady, morning or evening or afternoon.
> oh lovely lady, eating with or without spoon.
> oh most lovely lady, whether dressed or undressed or partly
> oh most lovely lady, getting up or going to bed or sitting only.
>
> Oh loveliest of ladies, than whom none is more fair, more gracious, more beautiful.
> Oh loveliest of ladies, whether you are just or unjust, merciful, indifferent, or cruel.
> Oh most loveliest of ladies, doing whatever, seeing whatever or being whatever.
> Oh most loveliest of ladies, in rain, in shine, in any weather.
>
> Oh lady, grant me time,
> Please to finish my rhyme. (lines 32-41)

Playfully punning on "time" (tempo and duration) the speaker understands that love, because it is the Logos, is only possible when said rightly. If he cannot bring his song to

an acceptable *en*-closure, then not only does his song fail, but he fails to win her favor. In the end, the husband's poetic tribute proves inept; the lines flatten themselves into aimless banter. Void of concrete details, the generality of his profession fails to render love in event or discourse.

Despite the humor of petty shows of affection, Creeley's modern suitor genuinely suffers: he endures pain and distress; he sustains loss, sometimes even injury and punishment; he always appears at a disadvantage. But he suffers also in that he *permits* himself to be both victim and torturer, much as Edna St. Vincent Millay's lover suffers in Fatal Interview. Earlier, we saw how Millay's dramatic speaker modeled after the various speakers of John Donne, willfully suffers so that she might discover and fulfill her full selfhood. This suffering is serious business. For as Susan Sontag explains, "suffering [is] the supreme token of seriousness (the paradigm of the Cross)" (47). The fallout is that "it is not love which we overvalue, but suffering--more precisely, the spiritual merits and benefits of suffering. The modern contribution of this Christian sensibility has been to discover the making of works of art and the venture of the sexual love as the two most exquisite sources of suffering" (Sontag 48). We already saw how the estranged husband in "The Ballad of the Despairing Husband" attempts to control his suffering, by making it his own creation, his choice, and submitting to it. This attitude recalls Thomas Carew's "Mediocrity in Love Rejected" where love is also a matter of all or nothing. The speaker calls for more love or more disdain, more fiery passion or more frozen rejection: "Either extreme, of love or hate, / is sweeter than a calm estate" (lines 5-6). That love encompasses all, gives origin and end, Carew's poem begins and ends

with the claim "Give me more love, or more disdain." As long as he suffers, he might have poetic control over that suffering.

Since suffering is physical and linguistic, the beloved in Creeley's poems is muse, desired companion and adversary. She promises sexual fulfillment while simultaneously threatens to deplete the speaker's linguistic energy if the poet's desire is satiated. "The Whip" (qtd. in full) encapsulates this paradox, as woman is both the spur and the rein to the speaker's desire. The poem presents the speaker's encounter with his stimulating and yet disappointing reality as he lies in bed fantasizing "another woman" while, presumably, his wife lies beside him.

I spent a night turning in bed,
my love was a feather, a flat

sleeping thing. She was
very white

and quiet, and above us on
the roof, there was another woman

I also loved, had
addressed myself to in

a fit she
returned. That

encompasses it.

The "other woman" may be read as either a real woman or as muse; the poem leaves this ambiguity unanswered, adding to the otherworldly feeling of the speaker's nighttime fantasy. Creeley captures the moment of fantasy in the back and front vowel sounds (white / quiet, had / addressed) which alternate in increasingly rapid succession and climax in the long e rhyme in the "she / returned." Thus, the diction reflects the speaker's mounting (sexual and linguistic) excitement as he fantasizes about the woman / muse. In the middle of the poem, the tone changes as it introduces the speaker's feelings of loneliness and guilt.

But now I was

lonely, I yelled,

but what is that? Ugh,

she said, beside me, she put

her hand on

my back, for which act

I think to say this

wrongly.

The blurred syntax, however, makes it unclear as to which "act" he regrets: his fantasy (sexual and linguistic) or caring about the woman who is physically beside him? Because

"wrongly" echoes "lonely" the poem ultimately suggests that the speaker's guilt is self-directed, and perhaps stems from the speaker's belief that it is wrong for him to be in a lonely relationship, to think about it, and to even speak about it. Just as "I Knew A Man" fails to produce meaningful discourse for its speaker, fantasy-love likewise fails to produce concrete meaningful speech because it is not grounded in the physical. The failure to ground the speech is evident in the long vowel sounds in the poem. These build up the emotion of confusion, while blurring, even wiping out completely the situation and the details of the bedroom. By the end of the poem, even the straightforward opening couplet becomes ambiguous. In the opening metaphor, does "my love" refer to his wife or his emotions? Whether we read "my love" as his affections or his wife, the paradoxical promise of sexual pleasure or restless angst concludes anticlimactically with the image of a flat feather. The outworn modes of troubadour sanctioned infidelity prevent engagement with place and people, and thereby the speaker's identity proves less substantial than the poem's flat feather. Once more we see how for Creeley failure in love is precisely the failure to use language "rightly."

Sexual and linguistic engagement is the focus again in "The Business" (For Love). The poem begins with the speaker objectively separating himself from the emotion of the situation as seen in the opening simile.

> To be in love is like going out-
> side to see what kind of day
>
> it is. Do not
> mistake me (lines 1-4)

As in "The Whip," the poem's tone proves difficult to access. The poem's opening simile presents the speaker as a detached spectator who is perhaps even a little bored. One wonders if the speaker really cares if the woman returns his love. After all, what does he mean by comparing love to weather? Creeley, like Olson, asserted the danger of the simile since it points to an outside reference, a pulling away from the thing at hand, the woman in this case. The poem puns on the speaker's posturing for the upperhand with his declarative "Do not / mistake me." The asyntactical break emphasizes the directive "not." At the same time, the strangely fragmented line also reads as subtle pleading, "do not *mis-take* me." He does not wish to be toyed with. If she does not fully reciprocate his affections, he does not wish to invest his heart. Despite his misgivings, as the poem progresses he is actively drawn into the act of loving.

> ... If you love
>
> her how prove she
> loves also, except that it
> occurs, a remote chance on
> which you stake
>
> yourself? But barter for
> the Indian was a means of sustenance.
>
> There are records. (lines 5-11)

Bartering, an act of giving and taking, is one that demands risks or "stakes" and is as unpredictable as the weather in the first stanza. The detached speaker of the opening couplet is thus drawn into the poem and the experience of love so fully that this poem becomes exactly that "record" spoken of in the final line. It is important to note, though, that this kind of record is not a static product of love experienced, but one of ongoing "sustenance," to be re-offered, re-taken and most significantly, as life-sustaining as the poet's breath which forms the poem.

Love in "The Business," thus provides a fine example of Creeley's belief in Love as Logos. Love gives shape and meaning to the experience and the poem through its articulation ("record"). As Logos, Love, spurred by physical and linguistic desire, is the supreme performance. It is not something *outside* of the speaker that he speaks *about*. Rather, he dramatically performs his love, simultaneously experiencing and articulating it from *within*. Because he gives voice to his experience from the midst of the experience, the interrogative seems to naturally accompany it. Creeley repeatedly asks,

> "O love,
>
> where are you
>
> leading
>
> me now?" ("Kore" lines 21-24)

We must ask the same question of Creeley's poems: O *words*, where are you leading me now? For if Creeley's poems *perform* (at the level of sound and word), they demand a similar response from the reader who is asked to struggle with their difficult syntax and asyntactical line breaks, the direction and indirection of their arguments, their condensed playing fields, and to probe the strange cadences and puns that change and complicate the

meanings of the poems. Unable to stand back as spectators, we must likewise perform, asking, where are you leading me now? Stop asking this question, and the performance ends.

Likewise, this chapter's reading of Creeley's poetry as "metaphysical" is not meant to shut the door on other interpretive modes or performative strategies. Rather, by showing that Creeley's open form poetic--spurred by the Projectivist / Olson, Pound and Williams tradition, and actively engaged in rejecting New Critical modes--participates within an American metaphysical tradition that is richly large enough and varied enough to include the New Critical / Eliot tradition of Richard Wilbur and the Feminist re-visioning of Edna St. Vincent Millay. In doing so, it extends the frontier of American poetics, inviting one more performer, Robert Creeley, to the drama of metaphysical poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

Molly Peacock: Contemporary Wit

Poets coming of age post mid-century and its chief poetic movements--Beat, Projectivist, Confessional, Deep Imagist, and New York School--prove more difficult to classify than their poetic parents. In his practical "A Field Guide to the Poetics of the '90s," R. S. Gwynn cogently explains:

> [...] the members of the younger generation of poets seem reluctant to identify themselves as members of the existing schools [...]. It is unlikely that any contemporary poet under fifty would refer to himself or herself as a 'confessionalist' or 'deep imagist.' Most of these poets, who were learning their craft when the schools were at their height, absorbed diverse influences in their early careers and have arrived at poetic styles that, with only a few exceptions, are not readily distinguishable from each other.

While one may quarrel with Gwynn's assessment regarding the uniformity of contemporary poetics, he presents a valid argument about the lack of definitive schools or movements. If the mid-century presented an epoch of poetic movements and their manifestos--largely directed against New Critical modes of objective analysis--the end of the twentieth century presented individual poets who inherited the spoils of the previous rebellion--writing most often highly autobiographical poems, emphasizing the poet's personality. A counter movement to the autobiographical poem, however, is the theoretically spurred poem about poetry. If one had to map the poetic terrain, one might tentatively mark out the boundaries of contemporary poetics within the debates between

the autobiographical and subjective nature of the lyric (spurred in large part by the previous epoch of Confessionalism, at its height in the 1960s) and the theoretical postmodern poem (incited by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry of the 1970s). Late twentieth century poet, Molly Peacock (her first book, And Live Apart, is published in 1980), forges a unique contemporary poetic that presents a viable means to transverse the lingering boundaries between subjective and objective poetics, and between modernism and postmodernism, while also extending the metaphysical tradition.

Peacock, frequently termed an expansive poet, or a New Formalist--she refers to herself as "a low new formalist"--consciously uses form to break with the preceding epoch of autobiographical free verse Confessionalism.[1] Form for Peacock, like for other New Formalists, provides a way to balance the ultra personal "I" with the universal inspection of larger themes--love, death, God, loss, family--along with the hope that these themes will prove accessible to a larger reading audience.[2] New Formalist poet and critic Dana Gioia, in "The Poet in an Age of Prose," explains, "meter is a means of making the language of poems understandable to the greatest number of people." In addition to using formal metrics in her poetry, Peacock strives to broaden poetry's audience by deliberately deciding to work outside of the academy, preferring instead the poetry circle and the mentoring workshop. She has also served as president of the Poetry Society of America from 1989 to 1995 (she is now serving emeritus) and was one of the founders of the Poetry in Motion™ program which brought over one-hundred poems to subways and busses across the country. Her practical, if not sometimes didactic, handbook, How to Read a Poem.... and Start a Poetry Circle and her collaborations with the Oxygen Network on the web also work to make poetry more accessible.[3]

The New Formalist label, however--as do most labels--fails to describe or measure the full throttle of a poem's activity, and in the case of Peacock's poetry this proves especially true. While Peacock writes using formal metrics, the term says relatively little about *how* she incorporates formal metrics for dramatic punch and for what she terms "psychological urgencies" ("From Gilded Cage to Rib Cage" 76). Nor does the label say anything about her direct treatment of subjects or her deft use of rhetorical wit to concretely define experience. Peacock uses form dramatically, in conjunction with other rhetorical devices (extended simile and metaphor, elaborate conceit and witty word play) to fuse physical, mental and emotional experience. Her poetic method is essentially a metaphysical one.[4]

Peacock's poetry hearkens back to seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, which is foremost, marked by its expert use of rhetorical figures to fuse intellectual and emotional responses to the complexities of human existence. Rhetorical tropes and figures prove particularly apt for such metaphysical questioning, as figurative language essentially evolves out of the need to understand; they rally imagination and emotion as well as intellect in order to make analogical leaps from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Incorporating seventeenth century metaphysical practices, Peacock's contemporary metaphysical poetry thus separates itself from the two major channels of mid and late twentieth century American poetry: the highly subjective confessional poem on the one end of the twentieth century poetic terrain and the theory driven language poem on the other. Broadly defined, the confessional poem rejects the New Critical persona and so-called objectivity and aims for immediacy of expression and authenticity grounded in the personality of the speaker. Language poetry proposes that there is

nothing outside of language--no essential being, no universal truths, no center. A unified subject becomes impossible. These two approaches to poetry stem in part from the belief that science is no longer capable of presenting an objective reality. The "truths" of science can no longer be considered as final or objective since scientific facts and laws repeatedly break down and cede to new and better explanations of reality. Language is likewise perceived as incapable of conveying fixed meaning. Language, as a system of arbitrary signs, is at once determined in a given social system, yet indeterminate in its signification. All discourse, then, is bounded by its temporal and spatial contexts and all unions of subject and object are no more than in Jacques Derrida's terms, "a momentary fix" (Of Grammatology).

Peacock's metaphysical poetry, like other twentieth century strains of poetry, does not deny the ambiguity of language; however, unlike these other strains, it writes from the premise that truths exist and can only be known through language. The poetry's semantic play celebrates the fluidity of humanity's complicated, often contradictory, relationships with a reality that it maintains exists, however out of fashion that may appear in a period of postmodern skepticism. In "Altruism" (Take Heart), for example, Peacock asks: "What if we got outside ourselves and there / really was an outside out there, not just / our insides turned inside out?" and "What if, when we said I love you, there were / a you to love as there is a yard beyond / to walk past the grill and get to?" (lines 1-3 and 9-11). While consistently interrogating her experiences, Peacock retains a faith in language, a faith in reality. What is at the heart of Peacock's poetic is the belief in truths and correspondence, which the poet, if diligent enough, if attentive enough, and if flexible enough may discover proofs of their existence and accurately articulate these

proofs through language. As Cleanth Brooks in Modern Poetry and the Tradition explains, "it is a postulate implicit in a metaphysical poet that nothing is ineffable, that the most rarified feeling can be exact and exactly expressed. If you cease to be able to express feelings you cease to be able to have them, and sensibility is replaced by sentiment and in the end by vague expression of the vague" (200).

Peacock's contemporary metaphysical poetry also extends the practices of twentieth century American metaphysicals, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Creeley. Just as they adopted the metaphysical method from the seventeenth century poets, expanding it in invigorating and challenging new ways to rebel against nineteenth century Romanticism and early twentieth century High Modernism, Peacock likewise finds innovative means to incorporate a metaphysical method to question traditional designations of objective and subjective poetics. As previously discussed, Creeley persuasively shows how the outworn debate between subjective and objective poetics is largely the re-figuring of the more worn out fight between the intuitive poetics of Romanticism and the logical poetics of Classicism ("A Note on the Objective," CE 436).[5] Like Creeley, and Millay before him, Peacock explicitly rejects the "objective" and the unquestioned "Tradition." Like Millay, she scrutinizes the complex and contradictory emotions of love in a uniquely feminine voice, undisguised in its personal and erotic imagery.[6] She grounds these explorations of love in precise detail, positioning them in defined physical places in a manner similar to Creeley's insistence on the local. Her poetry also resembles Wilbur's metaphysical bent, which uses seventeenth century metaphysical poets' rhetorical tropes and figures to argue for a world of patterned correspondences between the physical and the spiritual. Peacock figures this

correspondence most often in terms of life and death: "Dying itself is a shimmering verge between life and death. For me, poetry always takes place in the verge, and verges always shimmer because the light of the mind shines on both categories at once, trying to distinguish between them"(How to Read a Poem 182). In her poem, "Cutting Tall Grass" (Raw Heaven) she suggests that life itself requires our full attention to this shimmering verge:

> [.....] But one must love the vehicle, the sun,
> the bugs thrown up behind and the swallows
> snatching bugs at the wheels to love a lawn,
> the old grass spewn in the bleak shadows,
> the new grass smelling of wet and slight rot,
> to love to live between what is and is not. (lines 10-14)

Unsurprisingly, like her metaphysical grandfather, Donne (whom she resembles most), one of Peacock's central poetic themes is death.[7] In fact, she writes that "there are really only two subjects of lyric poetry, and these are the two things that most rivet our attention: love and death" (How to Read a Poem 34). It is love that she writes about most often (although often within the context of death, loss and sacrifice) and in a short autobiographical piece for the recent edition of Contemporary Poets, she writes that her central poetic theme is love, "in all its manifestations: family love, eroticism, love of self, altruism, religious love, and hatred, of course too" (933). Unflinchingly she writes about these complex themes with a scrupulous gaze and a willful and unabashed attention that avoids self-pity. She insists on examining each detail of them, even the taboo: masturbation, oral sex, menstruation, abortion, child abuse and alcoholism. In Donnean

and Millayan fashion, Peacock describes her experiences with great bravado: erotic desire and spirituality cohabit in the surge of her lover's rising penis and physical and emotional loss manifests itself in the sticky afterbirth of an abortion or in an imagined subway ride to an urban Hades.

Despite the highly personal nature of Peacock's subjects, her metaphysical scrutiny steers her poems away from the autobiographical confessional utterance prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century and works towards universalization of experience.[8] She explains in her critical prose on privacy "Sweet Adversity": "Truth always forms its own integrity, separate from whatever emotional and social context that generates it. Truth lifts experience out of the personal into the universal, exploding secrecy, and by doing so grants the personality of the writer her integrity, her privacy, even if she has just used an intimate detail of her own life. This is the age-old concept of everywoman [...]" (94). For Peacock, the move from the personal to the universal, however, is more than telling secrets; it requires what she refers to on several occasions "vigilance" or even "hypervigilance" (HRP 308 and 85). Peacock acknowledges in her memoir, Pieces, that her poetry depends upon it.

> A person changing violently, like my father, requires vigilance. But a concept evolving requires awareness, calmly satisfying and deep. I valued this understanding because events drove me inward so far that I often lost touch with them, living instead through a book. While fantasies saved my mental life, they still made a wall between me and my own felt experience. [....] Yet for richly lived experience--and that includes pain--denial must give way to awareness. And for poetry awareness must

> operate keenly because it is the source of precise language. And so you must perceive sharply, whether that is the stab of a crimson dahlia against a wet wrought-iron fence, or the stab of realization as its spreads across your tearstained face. (308)

In her introduction to The Private I: Privacy in a Public World, she again explains her poetic vigilance: "hypervigilance [...] provided me with a capacity to notice details that hardly anyone else noticed. When a poet describes such details, she can fill her poems with shocks of recognition for readers. Everyone knows what the poet is talking about, yet it all feels original because it is so sharply perceived that the imaginary garden comes to seem as real as the toad squatting in it" (85). Peacock's vigilant poetic--enacted through precise diction, unflinching detail, and felt multi-dimensional experience-- steer her not only away from the personal confession towards universal recognition, but also toward a metaphysical poetry of wit.

Metaphysical wit is characterized by its calculated surprise and its delight in the unexpected, what Peacock above calls "shocks of recognition." It creates emotional surprise by precise diction, extended metaphors and similes, puns and other rhetorical tropes and figures to project psychological states. These rhetorical devices play up the unexpected combinations or contrasts of generally diverse ideas or images, especially of incompatible or contraries. In metaphysical poetry we find the exploitation of seemingly incompatible images most noticeably in the form of a conceit, such as when Wilbur compares laundry to angels, when Marvell compares lovers to birds of prey, or most notoriously when Crashaw describes Mary Magdalene's eyes as "Two walking baths;

two weeping motions, / portable and compendious oceans" ("The Weeper" lines 113-114).[9]

As with seventeenth century and twentieth century metaphysical poetry, we are acutely aware of the disparities of materials Peacock's poems and their conceits present. In riddle-like fashion, we must puzzle out her analogies: in "Anger Sweetened" we must solve how anger is like a chocolate covered grasshopper, in "Guilt" how a sister's letters are like crawling insects, and in "The Fare" how love for a deceased mother is like a subway token. Not only must we work to reconcile the disparities between the poems' tenors and vehicles, but we are confronted with the analogical machinery of the analogies themselves--driven by the poems' formal metrics and dramatic cadences. The effect is that emphasis rests on not only the items compared, but on the rhetorical (analogical and emotional) act itself.

Eliot assessed this very aspect in Donne's poetry. He defined Donne's characteristic use of the conceit as "the extravagant development of a simile or a metaphor to emphasize an idea; the focus is transferred from the original idea to the pleasure of the exactness with which the simile can be carried out in detail" (Clark Lecture VI [Crashaw] VMP 180). We perceive this effect when Donne likens two lovers to a compass in his poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." The poem is a farewell, but one in which the speaker forbids weeping; demonstration of emotion would profane their love. He argues, instead, that their separation should be as unobtrusive as the passing of a holy man, so quiet that the rest of the world would not know when body and spirit had separated: "'Twere profanation of our joys/ To tell the laity our love" (lines 7-

8). He proposes, instead, the following lovers-to-compass analogy to argue for the role their love should play in each other's absence.

If they be two [soules], they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other doe.

And though it in the center is,
yet when the other far doth rome,
It leanes, and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like the' other foot, obliquely runne.
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begune. (lines 21-36)[10]

Donne's comparison is a prime example of metaphysical wit enacted through conceit. A metaphysical conceit attempts to express the incomparable nature of spiritual or sensual experience by way of figural comparison--in the above conceit, human love. It differs from traditional metaphor in that it is a functional comparison, which links images and ideas from heterogeneous realms, with the goal of producing intellectual insight, often based on several logical parallels. A conceit succeeds, as Helen Gardner points out in her introduction to her anthology of metaphysical poetry, Circumference, "when we

are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness." Stressing the intellectual aspect of the conceit, Gardner links the conceit with wit. The conceit creates a shock of recognition, precisely because the two items being compared do not physically resemble each other. Donne's compass conceit involves surprise. It startles us into looking at things in a new, unconventional manner. The analogy is both unexpected and remarkably appropriate.

Peacock's "Anger Sweetened" (qtd. in full Take Heart), perhaps her most playfully linguistic poem, provides a similar example of Donnean wit enacted through conceit.

> What we don't forget is what we don't say.
> I mourn the leaps of anger covered
> by quizzical looks, grasshoppers covered
> by coagulating chocolate. Each word,
> like a leggy thing that would have sprung away,
> we caught and candified so it would stay
> spindly and alarmed, poised in our presence,
> dead, but in the shape of its old essence.
> We must eat them now. We must eat the words
> we should have let go but preserved, thinking
> to hide them. They were as small as insects blinking
> in our hands, but now they are stiff and shirred
> with sweet to twice their size, so what we gagged
> will gag us now that we are so enraged.

The poem's seemingly simple opening declaration, "What we don't forget is what we don't say"-- accented by its syntactical parallelism and closure (a complete sentence)--emphasizes human tendency to mistakenly perceive *forgetting* and *not saying* as not only compatible, but one and the same. The rest of the sonnet sets out to illustrate just how devastating this mistake might be through its comparison of unspoken anger to a grasshopper covered in coagulating chocolate. The unusual comparison (a component of Peacock's wit) draws on biblical, literary and social tropes and thus in metaphysical fashion permits logically consistent meanings within the scope of single image. The grasshopper holds various meanings in literature and Peacock incorporates several of them in this strange analogy. The grasshopper recalls the locusts in the Bible, those hoards of pests that God sends as punishment: first as a plague on Israel (Exodus 10:4) and later, it is predicted, as final retribution, leading to human devastation (Revelations 9:3). Both accounts stem from God's anger and direly warn of the havoc anger can evoke. The grasshopper is also a familiar trope found in literature (and a favorite poetic symbol in English renaissance poetry). The grasshopper, as D.C Allen in Image and Meaning: Metaphoric Traditions in Renaissance Poetry informs us, was believed to "had once been a human artist and continued to accompany and instruct human artists; that it was a king, an aristocrat, a badge of royalty, a poet; and that it was identified with men in political disfavor" (82). In Richard Lovelace's "The Grasshopper," the grasshopper serves perfectly to express the royalist lament following the execution of King Charles. The poem begins in summer when the grasshopper (the Cavalier) sings his merry song, but with autumn comes the harvest and the sickle (the ascension of Cromwell). The grasshopper's "golden ears are cropped; / ... / Sharp frosty fingers all your flow's have

topped, / And what scythes speared, winds shave off quite" (lines 13-16). Peacock's chocolate covered grasshopper incorporates several logical meanings of the grasshopper-image: anger induced plague (excess) and as a linguistic mute (lack). The use of contrary images (excess and lack) emphasizes the disparate qualities not only between tenor and vehicle, but also within the vehicle. The result is that when the conceit's discordant images are reconciled, the conceit's wit is felt.

The poem works towards reconciliation of its contrary images through its parallel syntactic structures and precise diction. The tenor, "anger covered / by quizzical looks," is perfectly balanced by the vehicle, "grasshoppers covered / by coagulating chocolate." The parallel structure of the two parts of the metaphor emphasizes the analogy, which the repetition of "covered" fuses. Peacock's diction is likewise precise: the spurring action of "leaps" is the polar opposite of the retardant "coagulating," creating a linguistic stalemate that will only increase as the poem progresses and the anger congeals. Peacock's use of the adjective "quizzical," meaning both puzzling and mocking, suggests that the doomed couple are at least semi-cognizant of their mistake and yet find themselves caught up in the sheer delicacy of the event.[11]

The poem concludes with a tour-de force of interlocking aural and visual play in which the sweetened anger overpowers the initial emotion, "so what we gagged / will gag us now that we are so enraged." The verb-to-noun transformation of the active "gagged" to the acted upon "gag" leads inevitably to the couple's new state in which they find themselves stuck in coagulated anger, "enraged." Anger *sweetened* turns out to be not only anger *tempered*, but also anger *intensified* by the very additive meant to make it palatable. The irony of the poem, of course, is that anger sweetened becomes completely

distasteful. The very thing they had wished to obliterate, traps and transforms ("coagulates") the couple and the poem itself is forced to end. The far-fetched association of the sonnet creates a functional image, which objectifies the emotion. In fact, anger is so concretely rendered that the speaker and her poem are gagged by it! We see now, how Peacock's far-fetched association, like Donne's compass conceit, proves precisely appropriate.

Peacock bumps up the voltage of this poem's metaphysical play through her use of the sonnet form. Traditionally a form used to temper, moderate and restrain, the sonnet suits Peacock's theme and metaphysical method. In her essay on form, "From Gilded Cage to Rib Cage," she argues that form may be employed not only "to match the feeling" but also as "a choice to contain, to control, or otherwise make the feeling safe to explore" (70). "The verse form almost becomes the *arms of comfort* in which to express the enormity of emotion" (emphasis mine 71). Peacock's form-as-body metaphor asserts her belief that form, instead of confining ("gilded cage") becomes the skeleton ("rib cage") that holds the poem--its emotions and its narrative--together. Peacock uses this body metaphor again in a symposium on New Formalism, published in the journal Crosscurrents. Here, she is quick to point out that containment does not mean something outside of the speaker or the experience, and warns against "the fallacy of the verse form as a container or the *outside* of something, and therefore, as an outside, something superficial, not deep, merely technical." She goes on to explain that "If you think of form as the outside of an Inside, that is only half the truth. Verse form is also inside the Inside. It acts as a skeleton as well as a skin. Form is body. Verse form literally embodies the emotion of the poem, in the sense that embodiment both *is* and contains the life it is the

body of" ("From Gilded Cage to Rib Cage" 72). Form tempers--contains and enhances--the poem's complex emotions, concretely rendering the poem's experience. In "Anger Sweetened," the interlocking rhyme scheme of the sonnet insists on its analogies, thereby helping to concretely define anger; it *sweetens* the poem's emotive and intellectual experience.

Similarly, Peacock's "Prayer" (Take Heart) thematically explores how experience is s*weetened* through restraint. Reflecting on adolescent sexual curiosity, the poem emphasizes how social, religious and logistical restraints (similar to a poem's metrical restraints) placed on desire only intensify the desire. Recalling her own adolescence, she remembers:

> [.....] How sexy to be
> In Sunday School class hunched with girl-chasing,
> Necking-prone boys and boy-crazy Christian
> Girls cajoled, attended to, by Herbie." (lines 4-7)

Physical and mental tempering of desire is learned before adolescence, of course, and the speaker recalls that children are taught early the game of "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, / And see the people" (lines 8-9). Instead of assuaging their desire to escape the sermon's drone, the game "simply focuses the wiggling. / So prayer on dates focuses writhing" (lines 11-12). Metrical form and rhetoric similarly focus the poet's emotions.

"The Guilt" (Original Love) employs another emotion-as-insect conceit to concretely define an emotion, this time the speaker's guilt. Guilt (arising from her sister's letters written to her and which she has not opened) is likened to "sheets of

insects that erase / bodies down to their skeletons. I can't face" (lines 1-2). She has witnessed such destruction through the "horrible advances in photography" (line 4) of *Natural History* magazine: carcasses destroyed by the insatiable appetite of insects blown up "to a sticky, gargantuan hairtaffy" (line 5). Rhyming "hairtaffy" with "photography" cements the mental image of the insect to the speaker's horror so that the letters and their concomitant guilt, take on, literally, a life of their own, and worse, they begin to take over hers.

> [.....] The orthography
> of my name crawled across the floral paper
> like fragile, thoracic legs. Unanswered, her letters
> came faster, their hoardlike script the raper
> of each envelope's field.
> [.....]
> The insectile inscribing became an erasing
> of what I hoped to be by what I felt I was,
> occasionally pictured in science magazines,
> something entirely obliterated and picked clean. (lines 11-15, 17-20)

The guilt-insect conceit turns out to be a strikingly apt analogy. Like the grasshopper conceit in "Anger Sweetened," the insect--what is normally a mere pest--becomes an overwhelming plague when ignored. Her sister's letters are like the anger unspoken in the previous poem. The unread and unanswered letters eat at the speaker until she is "something entirely obliterated and picked clean" (line 29).

However intellectually apt Peacock's conceits, there is something fanciful about them; a pleasure felt in her ability to formulate her experiences through wit. Peacock's wit not only creates emotional surprise by the unexpected combination or contrast of diverse ideas or images (the two insect conceits) or in the use of juxtaposition ("Prayer") but also includes humor. Humor is a crucial element of her wit and she employs it for serious ends. Like Wilbur, she often engages humor to fuse physical and spiritual experience. She also uses humor in a manner that is reminiscent of Creeley, for whom humor provides a protective distancing for the poet to articulate experience.[12] The comic mode hearkens back to seventeenth century poetry's use of wit to serve a psychological purpose. It relieves psychic tensions while enabling the speaker to deal with matters that would otherwise be too emotionally painful or socially forbidden for discussion.[13]

"Petting and Being a Pet" (Raw Heaven) provides a salient example of how Peacock wittily employs humor to address the often painful emotion of human need and to merge physical and nonphysical realms of experience. The sonnet demands quoting in full so that we can appreciate its aural and visual play.

> Dogs, lambs, chickens, women—pets of all nations!
> Fur or feathers under the kneading fingers
> of those who long to have pets, relations
> of softness to fleshiness, how a hand lingers
> on a head or on the ear of a head, thus the sound
> of petting and being a pet, a sounding horn:
> needing met by kneading of bone which is found
> through flesh. Have you ever felt forlorn

looking at a cat on someone else's lap, wishing
the cat was you? Look how the animal is passed
from lap to lap in a room, so many wishing
to hold it. We wish to be in the vast
caress, both animal and hand. Like eyes make sense
of seeing, touch makes being make sense.

Peacock mercilessly plays on "pet" as noun and verb (a conceptual pun) and on "kneading" and "needing" (an aural pun) to emphasize the emotional, intellectual and physicality of human desire. Puns ask the reader to emotionally and intellectually strike out across the multidimensional grid of human experience, and as discussed previously, they are a favorite device of metaphysical poets because they stress the very possibilities of language play. They "restore faith in the system of communication without which there would be no understanding at all" (Bates 2). Readers follow the signifiers through to their various destinations and thus effectively re-stabilize them, along with the language system. Peacock's puns consistently work to bring about order and to re-establish viable unions between the material and the spiritual, and between self and other. Aural and visual puns expertly infuse the physical actions of the dramatic speaker with spirituality, and it is the reader's co-creating that fuses the figural and literal at the word level. Thus, Peacock ingeniously enacts the fusion of intellectual, emotional and physical experience through rhetoric.

Peacock's playful manipulation of the Shakespearean sonnet fuels the fusion of multidimensional experience. Liam Rector in the recent edition of Contemporary Poets has noted this particular quality of Peacock's poetry in general, positing "the most

important formal device of her poetry is the underlying dramatic form that is always driving the machine, bending the meanings in their propulsion toward closure, sculpting a lineation in which each line is both an action, a recovery, and a horizon" (933). "In Petting and Being Pet" the fourteen-line sonnet is highly crafted to induce conceptual and emotional understanding. Its three quatrains and a couplet dramatically pushes towards closure and correspondence. Note how the rhymes pair up: "nations / relations," "fingers/lingers," "sound/ found," "horn / forlorn," "wishing/wishing," "passed / vast," "sense / sense." Each rhyme enacts the poem's desire for union. For example, the large scale "nations" is rendered intimate by "relations," while the desire for touch, "fingers," is answered by the complimenting "lingers." The "wishing /wishing" pair, with its repetition, drives home the speaker's desire (wish). The poem concludes with its exact rhymed couplet ("sense / sense") which enacts a final pun (mental sense and physical sensation) that collapses the boundaries between self and other, and between giving and receiving. The pun thereby drives home the poem's desire for correspondence between the physical and the nonphysical realm, enacted by rational and emotional engagement: "sense."

Peacock's "The Fare" (Original Love), written following Peacock's mother's death, similarly uses humor to navigate the tenuous realm between the physical and the nonphysical, between life and death and between holding on and letting go. Humor provides the necessary balance to steer through her complex emotions to arrive at the realization that while we can never fully let go of the human need to be mothered, even while we continue to fight it, we must let go. In How to Read a Poem, Peacock provides a reading of this poem, explaining, "my inability to conceive of my mother without a

living body (right down to handing her perfume to the mortician--absolutely true, and true to what he said) turns toward the dread of making a hideously permanent mistake, and ultimately toward not being able to let my mother go, even as I instruct her to drop the earrings, to *let go*..." (185).

"The Fare" is an imagined dialogue between the speaker and her deceased mother. The daughter imagines her mother lying in her coffin lamenting the fact that her daughter has buried her in a pair of earrings that seem destined to pinch her ears for eternity. She hears her mother chastising, "Take my earrings off! / I've had them on all day, for God's sake!" (lines 6-7). The daughter, equally as worried as she is exasperated with the mother who will always test her, thinks, "You'll never relax" (line 12) and concedes, "I should have buried you in slippers and a bathrobe" (line 16). The dialogue's climax occurs when she must face head on the complex emotions she feels: guilt, inadequacy, sadness and most importantly, the realization that she must let her mother go.

> [.....] O please
> do it for me. I can't stand the thought of you
> pained by vanity forever. Reach your cold hand
> up to your ear and pull and hear the click
> of the clasp hinge unclasping, then reach
> across your face and get the other one
> and—this effort could take you days, I know,
> since you're dead. Let it be your last effort:
> to change my mistake and be dead in comfort.
> Lower your hands in their places

on your low mound of stomach and rest, rest

you can let go. They'll fall

to the bottom of the casket like tokens,

return fare fallen to the pit

of a coat's satin pocket. (line 17-31)

The speaker's realization of her "mistake" allows for the transformation of the earrings from that which plagued her mother, into the very tokens the mother needs to make her safe journey. Perhaps because she cannot fully imagine death, despite her knowledge she must accept it, the daughter imagines the earrings as subway tokens for her mother's safe travel and return. The subway's descent under ground is of course a descent into a kind of urban Hades, where the dead must offer coins as payment to be ferried across the river Styx, and to someday be returned home again. Peacock's token metaphor provides a means for the daughter to accept the physical loss of her mother, while assuring the daughter that she may recall the memory of her mother whenever needed. The humor of the conceit thus provides a safe distance from which the speaker may come to terms with her mother's death.

Creeley, praising Peacock's poetry, points specifically to its "saving humor" (Original Love jacket). Peacock's poetry in fact shares many of the same metaphysical qualities we see in Creeley's poetry, especially in her treatment of love. Peacock, like Creeley--and Creeley's metaphysical father, Donne--insists that that the world of love contains everything of value and that it is the only one worth exploring and possessing. The microcosmic world of love becomes larger and more important than the macrocosm. For Peacock, love also provides a model for her metaphysical poetry. She explains,

"understanding is gained just the way a love relationship is deepened--through the blind delight of examining it with the senses and the intellect all at once. Emotive brainwork creates luxurious understanding" (How to Read a Poem 4).

In the opening poem in Raw Heaven, "Distance Up Close," Peacock likens embracing the world and its attendant emotions--loss, sorrow, death, acceptance--with the invitation to love making:

> [.....] Embracing the world, nose
> to brow with what we've got and lost, hugging old sorrows
> as they fade into mud and leaves, is like shedding clothes,
> is like lovers saying, *let's-take-off-our-clothes*,
> The world is made flesh in their bodies: does is knows.
> The world is made flesh by the snows
> fading, then merging into mud and leaves, goals
> of long ago emerging among trees in rows
> in a distance molten as the world comes up close. (lines 14-22)

The poem renders the world of love as one complete with its feat of perfect rhyme from its very first line to its last. The long "o" creates a circle that contains, as in Donne's and Creeley's poetry, a world of love, a world "made flesh."

Despite the spiritual infusion of Peacock's poems, however, she insists on the physical. As she writes in "Forgiveness" (Original Love): "Forgiveness is not an abstraction / it needs a body to feel its relief" (lines 1-2), and it is the erotic physical body we repeatedly encounter in Peacock's inspection of love. In "Lullaby" (Original Love) the physicality of lovemaking is positively sexy.

The poem is structured using analogies between the natural world and the human body and between the intimate bedroom and the larger cosmos. The Ontario night sky is "Big as a down duvet" (line 1) drawn close "over the naked earth" (line 3). The lovers in bed mirror this image:

> [.....] here we lie
> gossiping in a circle of light
>
> under our own big comforter,
> buried nude as bulbs. [...] (lines 3-6).

Peacock's fairly straightforward analogies between the natural world and the human body, between God's universe and the world of the bedroom recall a slew of renaissance poems: Donne's "The Rapture," Lovelace's "To Chloris, Love Made in the First Age" and Thomas Carew's "A Rapture." Peacock's graphic metamorphosis of the body into vegetation to depict her lover's aroused sexual organ, however recalls most notably Herrick's masturbatory reverie, "The Vine." An examination of Peacock's "Lullaby" and Herrick's "The Vine" illustrates a similar metaphysical method, and yet a method that yields contrary results. While both poems take place upon a bed and speak of sexual encounters, Herrick couches his in the popular seventeenth century dream-motif; Peacock's sexual encounter takes place in a distinct place, under a "real sky" (line 9) and a "real earth" (line 10) in Ontario Canada.

Herrick's poem begins:

> I dreamed this mortal part of mine
> Was metamorphosed to a vine

Which crawling one and every way

Enthralled my dainty Lucia. (lines 1-4)

The speaker imagines that his sexual organ has been changed into a vine which has the power to subject his beloved, Lucia, to his will. In his dream, he subtly seduces her; his "tendrils did surprise" her (line 6). That he dreams of such sexual prowess, suggests that when he is awake he is unable to make Lucia his subject. Moreover, the poem's curious analogy that compares Lucia to a "Young Bacchus ravished by his tree" (line 13) intimates that the speaker's reverie is as much a power fantasy as it is a sexual one. The verb "ravished" (like "enthralled" used in line four) holds two possible meanings: 1. Lucia is enraptured by the vine, the producer of grapes, which is intoxicating; 2. Lucia is raped by the vine, alluding to the violent effects of the grape's intoxicated frenzy in the Bacchus myth. The reference to Bacchus emphasizes the fleeting nature of the speaker's fantasy.

Such fleeting pleasures there I took

That with the fancy I awoke,

And found (ah me!) this flesh of mine

More like a stock than like a vine (lines 20-23).

The speaker awakes just before sexual climax, "more stock than vine." Remembering the high use of imprisonment adjectives however, "stock" may refer not only to the speaker's erection, but also to the prison stockade: he is a prisoner of his own fantasy which renders him powerless to reach his climax.

In contrast, Peacock's poem (reminiscent of Millay) rejects the pining suitor / resisting lady motif found so often in seventeenth century metaphysical poetry and requites her lover's sexual desire. Love is unabashedly fulfilled and celebrated:

> [.....] I slide south
>
> to grow your hyacinth in my mouth.
>
> far above, the constellations blur (lines 6-8).

The earth moves for these lovers. Sexual intimacy, opposed to sexual fantasy, offers a unique power--the very power Herrick's speaker lacks in his monastic fantasy; it strikes a momentary correspondence between the larger universe and the couple's intimate sphere. "Stars make a pattern / above; down here our pattern is fireflies" (lines 10-11). Peacock's patterns recall Donne's "patterne" of love in "The Canonization" (line 45). Thus while her metaphysical figure recalls Herrick's, her treatment of love in more akin to Donne's: "The Canonization" also grants sexual love religious significance and provide a "patterne" for others. Also akin to Donne's treatment of love, Peacock does not privilege spiritual union over physical union. Thus, in "Lullaby, she shifts her focus back to the physical: "Earth settles / real hyacinths in place" (lines 13-14).

Peacock's highly erotic aubade, "The Surge," likewise imbeds the spiritual within the physical act of lovemaking using an admixture of the erotic, the religious and humor to define fully the complexities of human love.[14] The poem bluntly celebrates her lover's morning erection which she gleefully claims, "I hadn't tried / by any conscious gesture to raise" (3-4). She revels in the awareness that "there was nothing I did to earn its praise / but be alive next to it" (6-7). Robert McPhillips in "The New Formalism and the Revival of the Love Lyric" cogently explains how "the lover's erection becomes a symbol [...] of

the sacred as well as the erotic 'surge' which unites the lovers, spirit embodied in flesh" (83).

> there is nothing I need do to please but be.
> To do nothing but be, and thus be wanted:
> so, this is love. *Look what happened*, he says as he
>
> watches my hand draw out what it did not raise,
> purpled in sleep. The surge inside me must
> come from inside me, where the world lies,
>
> just as the prick stiffened to amaze us
> came from a rising inside him. The blessing
> we feel is knowing that out there is nothing.
> The world inside us has come to praise us. (lines 13-22)

The poem's form enacts the spiritual and physical fusion of the lover's morning arousal. Blunt sexual language couples with the sensually alliterative and rhymed stanzas so that the "prick" of recognition is emotionally felt as the poem's form simultaneously swells. The "surge" thus denotes not only the physical swelling, but also the sudden surge of recognition and the energizing electrical current. This prick of recognition is similar to the daughter's recognition that she must let her mother go in "The Fare." Peacock defines this moment as:

> The O of recognition, of orgasm, the facing of what we suddenly have to admit is the shocking reality of a single moment. *Oh* points to the moment

> as we experience it, without past or future impinging on its nowness. *Oh* heralds genuine emotion, the feeling underneath all other feelings, surfacing with the thrill of a dolphin as it arches above water always made bluer by the arc of its presence. (How to Read a Poem 183-4)

The dolphin's graceful arc proves an apt metaphor for Peacock's metaphysical poetic. Her intensely felt experiences surge within the formal and analogical framework of her poems. Dramatic, rhetorical and physically grounded in precise details of the material world, Peacock's poetry brings to contemporary poetry all the best qualities of the metaphysical tradition, "without past or future impinging on its nowness."

Peacock's poetry consistently presents an intense scrutiny into emotional, psychological and physical experience and insists that this scrutiny may only be achieved through a highly rhetorical poetic of conceits, puns and textual allusions. In addition, it combines this metaphysical method to uniquely American imagery, diction, and postmodern sensibilities. It extends the metaphysical tradition.

Whether Peacock's innovative metaphysical play stretches into the twenty-first century, or whether contemporary poets follow her example, we will have to wait to see. However, because the metaphysical poem strikes at the heart of the centuries-old debate between the mimetic and the rhetorical, between the intuitive and the analogical, and between the individual confession and the dramatic performance, the present seems ripe for metaphysical poets. Poets writing today grudgingly inherit nearly a half-decade of poetry steeped in romantic idealization of the individual and the unhampered utterance of confessional verse. The last two decades bequeath a poetic inheritance that flaunts its

postmodern skepticism toward language and denial of the centering of experience or the voicing of universal themes. Happily, poets at the crux of a new century may draw from yet another tradition. They inherit what Dana Gioia terms an "available tradition" of metaphysical poetry. Opposed to "the tradition," an available tradition is "namely that small portion of the past a poet finds useable at a particular moment in history. The available tradition is not a fixed entity but a dynamic concept. It changes and indeed must change--not only from generation to generation but also from audience to audience" ("The Poet in An Age of Prose" 32). The present proves ripe for a renewed look at the metaphysical in which contemporary poets may draw on not only seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, but also twentieth century American metaphysical poetry.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1] All subsequent references to The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry will appear as VMP. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[2] Sona Raiziss's The Metaphysical Passion provides an informative catalogue of metaphysical studies between 1900 and 1950, including a graph that takes into account about 1500 items. Critical studies on metaphysical poetry peaked in 1935, with 73 studies. By 1950, the numbers were down to 15 (Raiziss 244). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[3] All subsequent references to John Donne's poetry are found in John Donne: The Complete English Poems, edited by C. A. Patrides. All subsequent references to Andrew Marvell's poetry are found in George Herbert and the Seventeenth Century Religious Poets, edited by Mario A. De Cesare. Complete citations located in Works Cited.

[4] All subsequent references to Henry Vaughan's poetry are found in George Herbert and the Seventeenth Century Religious Poets, edited by Mario A. De Cesare. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[5] A postmodern reading undercuts the modernist belief in the objective correlative in a way that brings the move closer to the metaphysical move. That is, it makes the objective correlative rhetorical: metaphoric and not objective.

CHAPTER ONE

[1] I adopt this generalization knowing one could push the case that much poetry touches on these subjects.

[2] I classify Andrew Marvell's secular poetry as existing within the Cavalier genre of love poetry. I am using the term "Cavalier" to denote the love poetry that revolted against Petrarchan conventions and its idealization of the female and which did so by incorporating a metaphysical method to do so. Thus Marvell, although he was not a royalist, may be still classified as Cavalier.

[3] All subsequent references to Millay's poetry are from her Collected Poems. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[4] All subsequent references to Richard Lovelace's poetry are from Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets, edited by Hugh Maclean. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[5] I use the terms "sentimentality" and escapism" as tactilely employed by New Critical readings of these two periods to underscore Millay's affinities with New Criticism which New Critics elected to ignore.

[6] New Critical proponents Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks likewise criticize Millay's poetry for not being intellectual and being too sentimental. For reviews of Millay's poetry by Tate and Brooks, see Freedman. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[7] Stacy Hubbard's essay provides an astute reading of how Millay effectively escapes the "carpe diem's discursive logic, in which the female auditor's virginity and

her associations with the grave virtually effect her silence and are figured by it" (104). Nowhere in her essay, however, does she consider why the Cavalier poets so frequently employed the carpe diem motif in their own poetry, often in revealing ways that ridiculed their speakers. Hubbard seems to accept at face value the carpe diem motif as self-indulgent reverie on the seventeenth century poet's part, without any social or political bearing.

[8] See, for example: Stacy Carson Hubbard's "Love's 'Little Day'" and Cheryl Walker's "Antimodern, Modern, and Postmodern Millay: Contexts of Reevaluation." Complete citations located in Works Cited.

[9] Unfortunately in the Collected Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay the author's epigraphs are omitted.

[10] Most notably is Debra Fried in "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets." Fried argues that while Millay's sequence recalls Donne's Songs and Sonnets, it is not necessary for the modern reader to be familiar with Donne's poems in order to fully appreciate Millay's sequence.

[11] The report of James I's order appears in a letter from John Chamberlain dated January 26, 1620. Segments are reprinted in Elaine Hobby's "The Politics of Gender." Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[12] Donne's "The Negative Love" presents his most sustained use of negation.

[13] All subsequent references to Robert Herrick's poetry are from Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets, edited by Hugh Maclean. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[14] All subsequent references to Thomas Carew's poetry are from Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets, edited by Hugh Maclean. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[15] For an astute feminist and historical discussion of economic metaphors in seventeenth century poetry see Elaine Hobby's "The Politics of Gender." Complete citation located in Works Cited.

CHAPTER TWO

[1] T.S. Eliot in 1954 remarked, "I must admit to a continuing respect for Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur" and Cleanth Brooks admires Wilbur's refusal to "retreat from this world and take refuge in an abstract order; rather, he accepts the things of this world as having their own powerful reality, but a reality that reaches beyond themselves"("This World and More: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur." Christianity and Literature 42.4 (Summer 1993): 541-550).

[2] Wilbur's first three books are as follows: The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems (1947), Ceremony and Other Poems (1950) and Things of This World (1956).

[3] In 1967 when asked which philosophers and theologians impacted him most, Wilbur again cited Thomas Traherne, along with Augustine and Pascal (Cummins 43). Complete citation found in Works Cited.

[4] In 1966, when Wilbur made this remark, he saw himself as writing more of a dramatic poem than the ironic meditative poem championed by John Crowe Ransom. He explains that the "virtue of the dramatic poem is that, while it may not represent the whole self of the poet, it can (like the love song, hymn, or curse) give free expression to some one compelling mood or attitude" ("On My Own Work" 156). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[5] All subsequent references to Wilbur's poems are from New and Collected Poems, unless otherwise noted. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[6] More recently, Ashley Brown's review of Mayflies links Wilbur's use of form and rhyme to Herrick, though she too fails to cite any specific example of this affinity. Instead she belittles the similarity saying, "Herrick also lived through a violent period of English history that didn't affect his verse" (World Literature Today 75.1 (Winter 2000): p. 123).

[7] Marcus provides this interesting analysis of Herrick's literary reputation: "During the early twentieth century [...] his association with lyric ease and country jollity did not help his reputation among critics who admired the 'strong lines' of Ben Johnson and John Donne [....] For F. R. Leavis he was 'trivially charming'; for T. S. Eliot he was the paradigmatic 'minor poet'" (171). Complete citation location in Works Cited.

[8] For a full discussion of Eliot's evaluation of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, please see the earlier Introduction to this dissertation.

[9] Numerous critics have since repeated Jarrell's criticism. Jarrell's criticism of Wilbur was not always negative, however. He did call Wilbur's "A Baroque Wall-Fountain" "one of the most nearly perfect poems any American has ever written" ("Fifty Years of American Poetry"). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[10] Things of This World won the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Award.

[11] In "Conversations" Wilbur notes the connection between Augustine and this poem.

[12] Wilbur's belief in the Logos and its metaphysical potential is possibly indebted in part to Eliot. If we recall, Eliot wrote: "poetry makes truth more fully real to us; it is the creation of a serious embodiment. It is the making of the Word Flesh" ("Poetry and Propaganda," Selected Essays). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[13] Discussing the poem "Lying," Wilbur deems that "It is a fundamental impulse of poetry to refresh the aspect of things" ("On Lying" 139). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[14] All references to Thomas Traherne's poetry are found in George Herbert and the Seventeenth Century Religious Poets, ed. by Mario A. De Cesare. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

CHAPTER THREE

[1] All subsequent references to Robert Creeley's Collected Essays appear in text as CE.

[2] Since such an extensive number of books and essays have been written about Creeley's association with Charles Olson, the Experimental Black Mountain College and the Projectivist Movement, I feel it is unnecessary to review this biographical material here. Instead, I wish to focus only on how the Projective is akin to the metaphysical.

[3] Robert Creeley and Charles Olson's correspondence began in April 1950 and continued until Olson's death in January 1970. When they first began writing to each other, Olson had already begun thinking about his theories of the Projective (in fact he mentions that he is working on an essay about Projective poetry in his very first letter to Creeley, dated April 21, 1950. While the germ of the essay was clearly there, we see in

subsequent letters how Creeley had also been working out similar ideas, though more directed towards prose (which he was writing mostly at this time). Between their first letters to each other and the time "Projective Verse" is published, we witness the co-mapping of ideas and structure for Olson's eventual essay. The mutual influence and respect between Creeley and Olson is prominent in their letters. For example, in his letter dated September 19, 1951 Creeley writes, "You have been the only possible influence on me; you are the only one who can give me a sense of my own work, which allows me to make it my own work" (Volume VII 173). Olson responds similarly in his letter dated September 22, 1951: "olson is as much or more influenced by creeley than is creeley influenced, for which the sort of thanks that, once in a life, it can be so" (Volume VII 175). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[4] Creeley has positioned Olson's writings on the Projective as distinctly contributing to the shift from a modern to a postmodern poetic, claiming "Olson has developed theories on the writing and understanding of poetry which place him, historically, as a bridge between the first leaders of the modern movement, such as Pound and Williams, and some of the most important later innovators" (Book jacket Charles Olson: Selected Writing). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[5] Repeatedly in Creeley's and Olson's writings we see that the Projective is not only a call for a new open poetic but a deliberate rejection of Eliot's formal poetic. In fact, Olson argues that Eliot "fails as a dramatist" precisely because he "stayed inside the non-projective."

> [H]is root is in the mind alone, and a scholastic mind at that (no high *intelleto* despite his apparent clarities)--and that, in his listenings he has

> stayed where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where the coincident is, all act springs" ("Projective Verse" 26).

Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[6] When Williams later recalled how he felt when Eliot's "The Wasteland" first appeared, he wrote:

> It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust. To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I 'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself-- rooted in the locality which should give it fruit" (William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays).

Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[7] Olson's focus on the syllable derives in part from Pound's assertion that "poetry / is the dance of the in/tellect/among the syllables" which Olson cites in a letter to Creeley, dated June 21, 1950. Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[8] In "A Note on Ezra Pound," Creeley notes Pound's "three chief means" to "charge language with meaning to the utmost degree":

> 1. throwing the object (fixed or moving) in to the visual imagination

2. inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of the speech.

3. inducing both the effects by stimulating the association (intellectual or emotion) to have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed.

(phanopoeia, melopoiea, logopoeia) (CE 27).

Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[9] Creeley makes this proclamation in his Monday, June 5, 1950 letter to Olson who goes on to quote it in "Projective Verse." Creeley's declaration resounded, becoming an icon of the Projective Movement. Fellow Black Mountain Poet, Denise Levertov, adopts Creeley's famous mantra, but changes it slightly to read, "Form is never more than the revelation of content," to which Creeley agrees. He further explains his statement in his essay "Tales": "I would now almost amend the statement to say, 'Form is what happens: It's the fact of things in the world, however they are. So that form in that ways is simply the presence of any thing [....] What I was trying then to make clear was that I felt that form--if removed from that kind of intimacy--became something static and assumptional. I felt that the way a thing was said would immediately declare *what* was being said, and so therefore form was never more than an extension of what it was saying" (CE 30). Complete citation located in Works Cited.

[10] For a more general discussion of puns used by seventeenth century poetry, see in this dissertation chapter two, pages 74-75.

[11] A notable exception to this includes Creeley's poem "The Door" (For Love).

CHAPTER FOUR

[1] Peacock defines herself as a new formalist in a discussion with Mahlon Coop. "Contemporary Profile: Molly Peacock, Non-Buddhist Poet (Online).

[2] Broadly speaking, the expansive poets seek to return to the pleasures of rhyme, meter, music and storytelling. Their goals are to speak to the larger world outside them, escape the confessional I and to add easy use of science and technology along with colloquial speech. For an excellent introduction to Expansive Poetry and New Formalism, see Timothy Steele's Missing measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990) and After Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition, ed. by Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 1999).

[3] All subsequent references to Peacock's How to Read a Poem...And Start a Poetry Circle will appear in the text and in parenthetical references as How to Read a Poem

[4] Several critics have noted Molly Peacock's metaphysical qualities, and anyone who picks up her second book, Take Heart (1989), reads on the inside jacket that her "deeply personal and universal" poems present "metaphysical observations about human nature and human bonds [which] take root in a lush physical world where form meshes with feeling, the cerebral with the earthly." Liam Rector in Contemporary Poets similarly points to her "metaphysical idiom and approach" and "her signature use of rhyme, employed for dramatic effect" (933). The most sustained argument for Peacock as a metaphysical poet occurs in Steve Kronen's "Earthly Quires," a review of Take Heart. Kronen acknowledges the affinities between Peacock's poetry and that of John

Donne: "There is a Donnean wit at work in much of Peacock's best verse. She is able to produce and seize upon her idiosyncratic conceits, and with conversational diction (as guided by the stanzaic rhyming), follow her ramifying logic to its self-made conclusion." While Rector and Kronen both herald Molly Peacock as a "metaphysical poet," neither of these critics present a sustained discussion of her metaphysical method or provide analyses of metaphysical poems, although Kronen does point to Peacock's comparison of anger to a chocolate covered grasshopper in her sonnet "Anger Sweetened" where he writes "Peacock's conceit-making avoids the violent yoking Dr. Johnson speaks of and is closer to Eliot's "elaboration ... of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it." Kronen offers no further analysis. For my analysis of this conceit, see pages 156-160. Complete Citations for the references to Peacock's poetry are located in Works Cited.

[5] For a complete analysis of Creeley's assessment of these debates, see Chapter three, page 113.

[6] Arthur Mortensen's review of Peacock's Original Love notes the similarities between Peacock and Millay, finding Peacock's "independent expressions of love and emotional intimacy" to Millay's: "She is one of those writers, like Millay, who not only wants that passion but insists on it" (Expansive Poetry and Music Online Review March 1997. 25 February 25, 2002. <http://home.earthlink.net/~Arthur 505/rev 0397.html>).

[7] Peacock acknowledges her affinity with seventeenth century metaphysical poetry, and cites George Herbert, rather than Donne, as a shaping influence on her poetry. She lists Herbert's The Complete English Poems as one of the top twenty books and her first book, And Live Apart, takes its title from George Herbert. As Peacock explains in

Paradise, Piece by Piece: "To live apart was a way of having heaven, a calm place, or a least a way of avoiding hell, a jammed place" (160). Peacock's use of traditional poetic form, as this chapter will show, reveals an affinity with Herbert's own desire to temper to his experiences so that they might be both manageable and understandable. Dr. Hutchinson wrote in the introduction to The Works of George Herbert that "Herbert often shows a fear of unlimited space and loves the shelter of an enclosure" (Knight 244).

[8] Peacock's move away from the confessional poem concerned with the poet's unique personal anguish, often at the expense of intelligibility, toward the universal, was a deliberate action on her part. She rejects the confessional utterance prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century in the verse of pioneering poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, even as she acknowledges the influence of their work on her own. On Anne Sexton she writes, "She was the Confessional I liked least, but who, of course, influenced me most [...]. "Sexton wrote straight out about subjects that were supposed to be kept under wraps: love affairs, abortions, her loathsome fifties wifehood. In a paradoxical way, by revealing secrets she was protecting her privacy--insofar as privacy created identity. When I considered what I would take for my subjects as a poet, I knew that my sexuality would be one of them [....]" (The Private I 89-90). What she did not like about Sexton was that she "was undeveloped, inchoate, always becoming. The voice kept sliding, disappearing as the speaker slipped behind the mirror of metaphor, like my ...my ... oh dear." In contrast, Peacock tells us that she "like[s] poems with distinctly developed, sustained conceits" (90). As we will see later in this chapter, Peacock's general metaphysical method fuses the confessional's freedom of

subject matter and the intense scrutiny into experience through rhetorical modes (in particular the conceit) which the seventeenth century metaphysical poets perfected.

[9] Donne's infamous conceit is from "A Valediction forbidding Mourning" and Marvell's conceit is from "To his Coy Mistress."

[10] For an analysis of Donne's compass conceit as well as how Millay responds to his conceit in her Sonnet III ["No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise"] see chapter one, pages 53-55 of this dissertation.

[11] Peacock's inventive word play in this poem vividly enacts what literary critic Herbert Read in "The Nature of Metaphysical Poetry" cites as the overall characteristic of all metaphysical poetry: "an opacity, or 'charged' effect ...as though behind each word lurked considerable processes of thought" ("Reason and Romanticism," Essays in Literary Criticism. London: Faber & Gwyer, 1926 p. 55).

[12] For a discussion of Wilbur's use of humor see chapter two of this dissertation, page 86, and for Robert Creeley's use of humor, see chapter three of this dissertation, pages 137-140.

[13] Bruce King in "The Strategy of Carew's Wit" defines seventeenth century wit as follows: "There is for example the wit of double entendre which allows the speaker to mention what is socially hidden. Donne's early poems offer obvious examples of this. There is also the wit of Dryden's satires, which mocks its victims by comparing the lesser to the greater. And there is the wit of Hamlet's irony which, in its implications, reveals a personality caught between conflicting demands of conscience and society. Thomas Carew's poetry deals with the side of reality that is often hidden from public discussion: sexual appetites, the desire to dominate over others, the need for warmth and security,

and the need to protect oneself against harm (Review of English Literature 5 (1964): 43-44).

[14] See for example Donne's "The Canonization" or "The Relique."

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