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"OUR WORD IS OUR BOND":
T.S.ELIOT, GEOFFREY HILL, AND
THE (POST)MODERNIST PROBLEMATIC OF LANGUAGE

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**“OUR WORD IS OUR BOND”:
T. S. ELIOT, GEOFFREY HILL, AND
THE (POST)MODERNIST PROBLEMATIC OF LANGUAGE**

VOLUME I

By

Yangsoon Kim

A DISSERTATION

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1998

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ABSTRACT

“OUR WORD IS OUR BOND”: T. S. ELIOT, GEOFFREY HILL, AND THE (POST)MODERNIST PROBLEMATIC OF LANGUAGE

By

Yangsoon Kim

This dissertation explores the place of language within a poetic and critical rethinking in modernism and postmodernism. The discussion of language has formed part of the “theory exploration” of last three decades, and can be seen in large measure as an inheritance of modernism. My study brings together contemporary critical theory and a detailed analysis of individual texts by T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill. This is “a fruitful juxtaposition” likely to yield a greater understanding of both theory and poetry. Since the “crisis of language” and the theory “explosion,” the theorists and the poets, though differing in striking ways from each other, have in common the view that language is a problematic vehicle with which to communicate complex intellectual and emotional experience. Chapter 1 focuses on how some theorists radically revise the empiricist notions of language in their theoretical and critical writings. This chapter investigates the work of Gerald Bruns, Marjorie Perloff, Gertrude Stein and the Language poets, Roland Barthes, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Raymond Williams, establishes a new conflicting picture of this topic, and suggests the major implications of that picture. They all oppose empiricist notions of language as reflective instrumental, but use diverse methods, announce different goals, and redefine fundamental questions that can be asked concerning language, literature, and culture. Chapter 2 provides a full discussion of the critical issues that confronted the twentieth-century poet. Assuming that postmodernist probing attentiveness to language is at the center of Eliot’s poetry and criticism, I examine Eliot’s work against a widening and deepening retrospect on modernism through contemporary

perspectives. The analysis is mainly concerned with the complexity of Eliot's idea of language, and takes issue with the character of modernism as embodied in his writings, and his relation to contemporary letters, including Gadamer's hermeneutics. Chapter 3 discusses Geoffrey Hill's unique and uncompromising work. Through his two volumes of criticism, *The Lords of Limit* (1984) and *The Enemy's Country* (1991), and his poetry up to *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), the chapter pursues his idea of language in and out of modernist tradition, and demonstrates "his understanding of the textual and moral responsibilities of postmodern writing." For Hill, "our word is our bond"--a phrase from J. L. Austin--not only indicates "reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol" but also suggests "shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility." Although Hill is keenly aware of language's duplicity, slipperiness, impurity, and opacity, he confronts openly its helplessness, far from sinking into "negative skepticism." My intention is, then, to ground the discussion of language as being double-edged, for language is limited and fallen, while at the same time always working against its own limitations. This study concludes with one of the impressive characteristics of poets like Eliot and Hill: unlike disciples of theorists, they do not opt for self-indulgent references to the "abysses" and "aporias" of interpretation; their stance is critical, exploratory, and productive. Standing in the middle of the ongoing, confusing, confused, and complex ideas of language in our age, they explore their own idea of language--possibilities of language joining with the limitations of language.

For reasons too numerous to mention,
I dedicate this dissertation to my parents:
Jin-Kyu Kim and Ok-Jin Yoo.

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ABBREVIATIONS

By Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein

LB The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book

By Roland Barthes

PT The Pleasure of the Text

RL The Rustle of Language

WDZ Writing Degree Zero

By T. S. Eliot

C&C Christianity and Culture

CPP The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot

KE Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley

OPP On Poetry and Poets

SE Selected Essays

SW The Sacred Wood

TCC To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings

UPUC The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism

By Hans-Gerog Gadamer

PH Philosophical Hermeneutics

TM Truth and Method

By Geoffrey Hill

CP Collected Poems

EC The Enemy's Country

LL The Lords of Limit

By Fredric Jameson

PHL The Prison-House of Language

By Raymond Williams

CC The Country and the City

CS Culture and Society 1780-1950

K Keywords

ML Marxism and Literature

PL Politics and Letters

PM The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists

WS Writing in Society

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of a topic like modernism, postmodernism and the ideas of language necessarily involves a wide range of disciplines. Beyond the obvious ones--linguistics and literary history and criticism--there are also various aspects of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. At the same time, most discussions of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism assume a particular definition of the former, and proceed to consider the emergent character of the latter. Although it may be true that modernism has receded into the cultural past, the variety of modernism indicates the issue of modernism is far less settled than many postmodern readers would like to believe. "Modernism," Julian Symons notes, "is a word often used but rarely defined" (9). The term is "subject to extreme semantic confusion," and "no international agreement has ever been reached on [its] use and significance" (Chefdor 1). Consequently, it is also difficult to characterize the term (postmodernism) with the prefix (post). A great deal is staked on this "post"-prefix.¹ Moreover, in the ever-widening debate over the postmodern, there is no satisfactory definition of postmodernism.

In recent years, however, it has also become increasingly difficult to consider modernism without reference to the prefix of postmodernism that presumes to mark the temporal closure and conceptual limits of modernism. In other words, not only the semantic instability of modernism makes the definition of postmodernism impossible, but also the emergence of postmodernism contributes to the rereading of modernism. As Sanford Schwartz points out, "the arrival of postmodernism has significantly reshaped the terrain upon which the study of modernism takes place" (10). To be sure, in the last few decades, modernism has come under scrutiny in its entanglement with the postmodern, and its concept has been altered significantly. To borrow Schwartz's expression, modernism "seems to have found new life in the posthumous encounter with its heir" (9).

In retrospect, it is clear that modernism was a much more diverse movement than its single name suggests. After a so-called “paradigm shift” that the past three decades have witnessed, the modernist enterprise becomes more uncertain, and needs to be revised.² And in this postmodern age, Foucault, Gadamer, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Lyotard, and Jameson are the names of problems, not authors of doctrines. Their work is interrelated, but in no way homogeneous. Furthermore, it reflects contemporary intellectuals’ perplexities. At this point, the aim of this study is neither to offer another definition of modernism and postmodernism nor fully to explain the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Rather, on the basic assumption that contemporary theories are confusing and confused, my study will pursue the idea of language which is a center of modern and postmodern arguments.

It has been accepted that there has been a “breakdown of meaning” in modern culture, and this has been reflected in modern literature. A general weakening of confidence in language and in linguistically-based meaning as a whole is in fact an aspect of the post-Romantic philosophical sensibility. Faced with an objectified world which seems to be inadequately intelligible to our intuitive awareness, the experiencing agent becomes conscious of his discontinuity from that world and its categories, and questions whether any categories or language can be adequate to the true nature of human experiencing. According to George Steiner, that great “crisis of sense” occurred “in the concept and understanding of language” at the turn of our century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this anxiety about meaning sometimes turned to be dangerously absolute, and any attempt to express oneself in language seemed to lie under some kind of metaphysical threat. This apparent breakdown of the ordinary expressiveness of language dominated the work of a poet like Rimbaud, and his response to it was to surrender to the experiential disorder deliberately. Mallarmé, by contrast, sought to purge language of its worldly meanings altogether and to move towards a poetry of pure structure which had no reference beyond itself. A poet such as T. S. Eliot acknowledged the inadequacy of language, and

demonstrated an “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” or a “raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating” (*CPP* 179, 182). Joyce expressed the dilemma: “I’d like a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service. I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition” (qtd. in Ellmann 410).

Apparently, the crisis of language, or intensified linguistic self-consciousness, has become built into our modern sensibility. Comparatively recently, however, it seems to be suggested that this breakdown is in effect the discovery of a necessary truth, and that the idea that language relates to and expresses--whether more adequately or less adequately--the nature of reality is simply a philosophical illusion. In *Real Presences*, Steiner called this breakdown the “crises of the word and of meaning” (108) in the twentieth century that have disrupted traditional Western apprehensions of the possibilities of transcendental significance in experience--significance, most specifically, in relation to God. Properly speaking, this crisis of language and meaning is a crisis of truth; it is a result of our loss of the mythically-unified world of ideas and values.

In the present study, I attempt to explore this crisis of metaphysics and language that Steiner and others have felt to be the defining feature of modern Western culture on the grounds that the “crisis of sense” has generated “our present agenda for debate, which situates the problem of the nature of language at the very center of the philosophic and applied *sciences de l’homme*” (“Real Presences” 2). This study brings together contemporary critical theory and a detailed analysis of individual texts by T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill. This is “a fruitful juxtaposition” likely to yield a greater understanding of both theory and poetry. The theorists and the poets, though differing in striking ways from each other, have in common the view that language is a problematic vehicle with which to communicate complex intellectual and emotional experience. To be sure, the theory “explosion” has loosened the grip of traditional empiricist assumptions about language and literature. Noticeably, however, Eliot and Hill also raise questions about the empiricist

notions of language as reflection or window or instrument, and acknowledge a troubled relationship between reality and language. Although Eliot and Hill show mistrust for language as bearer of meaning, and struggle with the question of language, at the same time, they try to revitalize language, and to explore the possibilities of language through their own poetry and prose.

At this point, Hill's remarkable essay, "Our Word Is Our Bond" (1983), needs to be introduced. "Our Word Is Our Bond" is in many ways an apologia for Hill's view of poetry and, more particularly, for his sense of himself as poet. This essay is a meditation on what happens to language when it enters a poem. How much play is there in language which is not reduced to plain, denotative, logical prose? Hill directs his questions against a Hobbesian view of language, which regards words as clear and unambiguous signs that identify a world of things we can confidently know. Hill's own view of the matter seems to be that the world cannot be as aggressively captured by language as Hobbes and his admirers assume. It has its own claims, almost its own aggressions, and these are registered through a language which is accident-prone and enables its user to discover or become aware of matters which will lie hidden from those who naively see the sign as "neutral" and "colorless" in itself. For Hill, "our word is our bond"--a phrase from J. L. Austin--not only indicates "reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol" as Austin claims, but also suggests "shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility" (*LL* 151). If we take the phrase in Hill's sense and in its relation to ideas about poetic language, this has further advantages: it keeps our focus on what has been the central concern of modern and postmodern criticism--language; and it makes clear the significance of Eliot and Hill for criticism now.

Chapter 1 will examine conflicting views as to how we should set about the idea of language. In my first chapter, I shall confine myself to outlining the ideas of some exemplary figures who are preoccupied with language. For the sake of exposition, I will not be dealing with the specific arguments between these writers, even if these are

obviously of the greatest interest. Although there are many forms of postmodernism, they all express the sense that our inherited forms of knowledge and representation are undergoing some fundamental shift: modernity is coming to an end, strangled by its own contradictory logic. In this world not only self but also consciousness is discovered to be adrift, increasingly unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason, and is thus itself “decentered.” Certainly, in seeking to understand our postmodern age in particular, art has something to illuminate theory just as theory offers conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches to art. Thus it is arguable that the powerful theoretical movements in postmodernism are themselves belated responses and theoretical reorientations to positions taken by a previous artistic movement. In other words, it is an interesting question if we can trace theoretically postmodern elements in modernist art, especially elements like the radical reworking of attitudes towards the representation of reality, the nature of the human individual and the conception of historical and social forces exemplified in modernist practice. If theory is in some sense always conceptualization after the event (as much as a mode of prediction), it may be interesting to return to the literary text precisely as an “event” and to see how the “postmodern” has always, perhaps, inhabited the “modern.”

Chapter 2 will offer a reading of a key debate. Contemporary critical theories have transformed our response to Eliot’s work, especially *The Waste Land*, and simultaneously returned us to ideas introduced in the 20s, 30s, and 40s. Although we do not live in the “age of Eliot,” what he can still offer us is invaluable not only in terms of the relationship between modernism and preceding periods, but also in the context of postmodernism. First of all, as Eliot explains, the poet writes his age. In the nineteenth century, the age was still unified enough that Wordsworth could tinker with the nuances of a diction, a vocabulary--a relatively more stable and clearly defined language. Before Eliot’s time, the late Victorian poets had, he felt, unwittingly exposed the exhaustion of possibilities for a new diction. Instead, Symbolists dreamed of a new language with new levels of potency

and impression unapproached within the English tradition, one that could tap “an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness,” in the words of Arthur Symons (1). Denigrating contemporary English poetry, Symons writes that “the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the re-arrangement of material things.” Now with the Symbolist movement “comes the turn of the soul” (2). Eliot’s poetic career started in the midst of the crisis of language and meaning. In the first sentence of *The Waste Land*, “mixing memory with desire,” Eliot confronts the anguish of modern condition and the challenge his language confronts. Eliot took over from the Symbolists the quest to write a literature of the modern age in a new language, drawing on a new sense of consciousness. In poetry, he said, expressing a view representative of modernism, “there is always the communication of some new experience, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility” (*OPP* 18). He embraces the flux, uncertainty, and confusion that are essential to a language reflecting the truth of modern instability. At this point, the complexities of poetic language equally show the inadequacy of the simplistic idea of language as a transparent, neutral milieu.

It is true that Eliot’s later career from *Four Quartets* to his dramatic writing has often been criticized in the sense that he ceases his development of a language. However, his awareness of the problems of language and rhetoricity is still persistent. In *Four Quartets*, he is concerned with the “intolerable wrestle with words,” that recalcitrance of the material, or what Wallace Stevens called the “inaccessibility of the abstract” (*Letters* 434). Such awareness presses towards some expression of aesthetic self-referentiality, for even a pure idea of the symbol embodying a reality beyond itself is ever poised on the edge of recognition that its own linguistic materiality will, unavoidably and subversively, interpose itself. For if the subject matter of poetry cannot be that “collection of solid, static objects extended in space,” and must be the reality of composition itself as an “artifice that the mind has added to human nature” (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* 25, 36).

Jacob Korg explains that the writers of what he calls the modernist “literary revolution” refuted the objectivity of language (4). For the “revolutionaries,” of whom Eliot is a central figure, the fundamental basis of literature--language--must be questioned and reworked. At this point, Pound’s dictum applies to much of modernism: “If we never write anything save what is already understood, the field of understanding will never be extended. One demands the right, now and again, to write for a few people with special interests and whose curiosity reaches into greater detail” (*Cantos* 679). He also said “Willingness to experiment is not enough, but unwillingness to experiment is mere death” (qtd. in Korg 4). Thus in dealing with the modernist skepticism about linguistic objectivity, we come to raise questions about modernism: “What is its language? Who speaks this language? How is it spoken? How does it problematize its own language? How is meaning rendered accessible through this language?.” Eliot, like most modernists, fills his writing with explanations of what his own writing means, and why he is writing in a new language. Thus Chapter 1 will focus on both Eliot’s poetry and prose, and demonstrate that the elaborate commentary on its own strategies embedded in Eliot’s work provides a full discussion of the critical issues that confronted the twentieth-century poet. Moreover, it may be time to reconsider Eliot’s work against an enriching retrospect on modernism through contemporary perspectives. Eliot exhibits the model of a modernist poetry ready to experiment with montage techniques and the clash of registers, but free from the constricting effects of a more complete submission to empiricist ways of thinking about the place of language in poetry. In this way, more interestingly, like Pound, Eliot as a “precursor of contemporary theory” has perhaps more to offer a postmodern poetry than some of his immediate successors (Jay 4). At any rate, I am not suggesting that Eliot was or was not a postmodernist but rather that Eliot’s work initiates a logic which can illuminate current notions of postmodernism, and that his ways of negotiating his particular cultural situation pre-echo some features of what is currently meant by postmodernism.

Chapter 3 will discuss Geoffrey Hill's unique and uncompromising work. Through his poetry up to *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), and his two volumes of criticism, *The Lords of Limit* (1984) and *The Enemy's Country* (1991), this chapter will examine his idea of language in and out of modernist tradition, and demonstrate "his understanding of the textual and moral responsibilities of postmodern writing, and 'the values of poetic work itself'" (Meiners, "Upon the Slippery Place" 228). As R. K. Meiners aptly points out, because of such a different mode of engagement and radicalization, it is difficult to compare Hill's practice with that of other postmodern authors (Ibid. 228). His solitary position may stem from the difficulty of his poetry. In a period more overtly preoccupied with the self, Hill's poetry is non-confessional, and reticent. Intellectual, scholarly, literary and sometimes severely formal unlike anything presently being written, it has an uncommon passion and force. Hill's poetry is as Harold Bloom notes, "strong poetry." A seeming modernist wary of the totalitarian seductions of order and tradition, a profoundly religious sensibility at once attracted by and deeply suspicious of the forms of Christian orthodoxy, a craftsman keenly aware of the duplicities of language, Hill is a poet who both demands and rewards close and subtle critical reading. In this respect, Meiners argues, following Merle Brown, that "Hill is one of the few contemporary poets to dare to work very close to the daunting shadow of T. S. Eliot, not only in the critique of poetic crafting in language but in other ways." He goes on to say "Brown's point is not that Hill follows Eliot, but that he works *through* the experience of Eliot, in part to criticize the severe inadequacy of the forms of Eliot's greatness" ("The Fourth Voice" 41-42).

Hill says, quoting Rush Rhees, ". . . a sense of language is also a feeling for ways of living which have meant something" (LL 11). One of the clear differences between Eliot and Hill can be found in Hill's own critical writing, especially in his opening essay of *The Lords of Limit*, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement.'" Perceiving Eliot's later position as "a kind of resignation," "abstention," or surrender to the ineffability of music, Hill stresses

that “a poet must also turn back with whatever weariness, disgust, love barely distinguishable from hate, to confront ‘the indefinite extent’ of language itself and seek his ‘focus’ there” (*LL* 9). Hill has an unusual kind of conceptual sense of language which always involves a definition of the place and function of poetry and of the poet within his inheritance and his own time. A model of engagement must replace the model of alienation. Postmodernism is thus distinguished from modernism by the belief that artistic autonomy is neither possible nor desirable. It would worthwhile to think over Hill’s idea of language, considering an open intellectual community which shares a lively interest in contemporary writers for whom the activity of language itself has been an important theme.

Notes

1 Normally, “post” signifies that which comes after, that which supervenes and supplements. The peculiarity of postmodernism, in literature at any rate, is that it is not merely an “anti-modernism,” but is rather a process by which the tenets and practices of modernism are pressed to self-contradictory extremes. For example, the exploration of multiple points of views in the works of Woolf, Joyce, Eliot leads in the end to a liquidation of the sense of the stable perceiving self especially in the inaugural texts of postmodernism. For a discussion on the problems of literary history, particularly the contradiction in the case of modernity, see de Man, *Blindness and Insight* 142-65.

2 If the previous dispensation in literary studies developed after 1930 in Britain by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis and in the United States by New Criticism, presumed the literary text as a given--“the words on the page” or a “verbal icon”--in which the imaginative and sympathetic reader could participate on the basis of shared human values, the new paradigm denies that the text exists “in itself” apart from the way it is read in a context of interpretation. The shift has been from the poem as point of origin to recognition of the poem as being in process in its reading, which is to say, without an absolute point of origin at all. It is important to note the shift of linguistic distinction introduced by Saussure between the word as signifier or shaped sound and the word as signified or meaning. At this point “reality” as the referent to which words may refer becomes a secondary or derivative effect on human discourse. Philosophy can no longer conceive itself as a mirror of nature.

Chapter 1

THE PROBLEMATICS OF LANGUAGE

Critical approaches influenced by structuralism and deconstruction have challenged the view that language is a stable, predictable medium, and have put into question the notion that writing merely represents speech, thought or experience. This chapter is to present some theories of twentieth-century language consciousness. Examining several different theories of language, we shall observe how they relate to one another and how they contribute to the making of various and often mutually conflicting modernist-postmodernist paradigms. In the chapter, I will discuss the work of Gerald Bruns, Marjorie Perloff, Gertrude Stein and the Language poets, Roland Barthes, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Raymond Williams, by showing that they all oppose empiricist notions of language as reflective instrumental, but use diverse methods, announce different goals, and redefine fundamental questions that can be asked concerning language, literature, and culture. I am aware that there will certainly be more to be said about the idea of language. Since my aim here is to establish a new conflicting picture of this topic and to suggest the major implications of that picture, it seems to me important to concentrate on setting out outlines of each theory.

(1) Modern Poetry and the Ideas of Language: Hermetic or Orphic, Indeterminate or Symbolic

“On or about December 1910, human character changed” (Woolf 96). So declared Virginia Woolf in a statement that virtually all subsequent writers on modernism have felt obliged to quote. It is difficult to show the absolute beginning of modernism¹ because as with other cultural phenomena, a constellation of events and ideas preceded it, each of which we could claim as an origin. Some see modernism’s starting point as the beginning of the First World War. The generation of 1914 would never free themselves from

apocalyptic visions. One world had died before their eyes; another labored to be born. Meanwhile the task of the “modernists” within this generation was to contribute to the destruction of the old and work toward the construction of the new. The war then confirmed and legitimated the modernist thesis of a cultural break. It called into the question the continuity and viability of the traditional European cultures. If “modern” poetry had any clear, dramatic beginning, breaking sharply with the past, some may date the new era from 1912. It was then that Harriet Monroe sent out from Chicago the famous circular in which she announced the founding of Poetry magazine and promised poets “a chance to be heard in their own place, without the limitations imposed by the popular magazine” and by an audience “primarily interested in poetry as an art.” Loosely associated through the new network of little magazines such as *Poetry*, *Others*, and *The Dial*, modernists believed themselves to be participating in an artistic renaissance that would throw off the conventions of the past, allowing them and their readers “to step barefoot into reality” (Pound, “A Retrospect” 12). An alternative inception might be found in the first Imagist anthology, *Des Imagistes* (1914), put together in London by Pound and obscurely published in New York.

Though historians tracing the origins of modernist culture have quarrelled with Woolf’s exact choice of date or other beginnings, they have increasingly come to agree that sometime around the turn of the century the intelligentsia in Europe and America began to experience a profound shift in sensibility that would lead to an explosion of creativity in the arts, transform moral values, and in time reshape the conduct of life throughout Western society.²

In *Man and Crisis*, José Ortega y Gasset describes the early twentieth century in terms of a period of insecurity and crisis; change characterized by massive epistemological disorientation in which the backbone of the universe gives way; an epistemological vacuum³ made by the collapse of the skeleton from Newton, Locke, and Descartes. Ortega y Gasset argued that the change consists in the fact that the basic model of reality, the

system of conviction that had served many generations, suddenly collapses, and for a while there is no new model. Heidegger depicts the beginning of the twentieth century in a similar way. He calls this time between the collapse of Newton's God and the appearance of his not-yet apparent successor a great "between" ("Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" 312-13). If this abstract "betweenness," the feeling of being between something and nothing, is related to how we know what we know, it produces profound anxiety or uneasiness. Intellectuals in many fields in the period around the turn of the century had this consciousness of being caught between dispensations in history.

A world then, of uncertainty and ambiguity and contradictions; a world without unity, and unknowable; a world in which the solid security of shared assumptions and traditions is no longer available; a world in which masterpieces are no longer recognizable and works of art no longer identifiable: the modern struggle is the struggle to make sense of the world by defective means, to discover how to live amid disorder. The story of modern poetry is of those poets who do indeed have one thing in common: their perception of the world as fragmented and uncertain. It is in their attitudes toward that world, the assumptions they bring to bear, the devices and strategies that they adopt, the resources they exploit or reject, that modern poets can be characterized, and it is in this context that their work can be read: "To be modern," Marshall Berman has observed, is to experience personal and social life as "a maelstrom," to find one's world and oneself in "perpetual disintegration and renewal," trouble and "anguish," "ambiguity and contradiction"; to be part of a universe in which "all that is solid melts into air" (15).

The definition of modernism⁴ is also a complex matter now as it always was, in part because on detailed inspection it dissolves into a plurality of different, often substantially conflicting, movements or tendencies, with many different sources, many different philosophies and culture-readings, many different versions of the modern, and the deliverances required of the modern arts. The complex problems of definition are discussed at length in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's "The Name and Nature of

Modernism,”⁵ where they note the heterodoxy of ideas that has gone into most of the attempted definitions.

It is what happened to the medium, in every art, that I consider most decisive in fixing the beginnings of modernism. Whatever the variousness and complication of background, the main fact is clear: there occurred in the first quarter of this century a crisis of language and a re-examination of language in the light of that crisis. Anglo-American poetic modernism took shape in the years preceding and following World War I, when a number of young poets were struggling to revitalize the language of their art; or in Ezra Pound's words, to “make it new.”

Let us consider the literary and historic situation that explains somehow why modernism compelled medium innovation in a way that it had never, apparently, been compelled before: disturbingly, shockingly, provocatively. In fact the notion of a crisis of language is not something entirely modern. Many poets have experienced, at one time or another, a sense of the inadequacy of established poetic idiom; words are clumsy vehicles with which to communicate complex intellectual and emotional experiences. From Shakespeare to Sterne writers have explored the range of their medium with as much intensity and depth as painters have their palettes. They felt, for personal or broader cultural reasons, the urgent need to revitalize the resources of language. There had always been innovation in the arts. If there is a unique fervor in what we call the modernist age in literature it is the single-mindedness with which our most important authors have tested the limits of their medium.⁶ Looking back now to the years just before the First World War, to “the simultaneous developments in linguistics, symbolic logic, and mathematical philosophy,” we can recognize the beginnings of a “language revolution.” A new theory of meaning and of the central role of the linguistic in man and culture was at work in a wide range of sensibility and formal pursuit.⁷ The new linguistics arose from a drastic crisis of language; the mind loses confidence in the act of communication itself.

When language became “an obsessive preoccupation” of intellectuals, Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* was published posthumously in 1916, which made a complete break with the eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century linguistics studying language in the historical context. Saussure has called this the diachronic study as against the synchronic study that takes language as it exists at a particular time and focuses on its structure. Studying the structure of language, Saussure rejected the notion that words simply reflected ideas and the inherent shape of the world with an argument that “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (67). That linguistic signs are arbitrary had been said before Saussure by other thinkers.⁸ Where Saussure differs from all the previous thinkers is in challenging the referentiality of language. He is of the opinion that linguistic signs do not refer to external objects but to each other and therefore language is not referential but self-referential. Saussure says that because of the arbitrariness in the conceptual system of language, its concepts are not simple, positive terms that achieve their meaning by corresponding to objects in the external world or to nonlinguistic facts; instead, they achieve their meaning by the place they take within the system of language and, in particular, through differentiating one category of things from another. As Saussure says, “concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relation with other terms of the system” (117).

The linguistic shift from substance to relations⁹ also has its counterpart in modern philosophy. Many philosophers of the period declared that conceptual knowledge does not represent a preexisting reality but presents a system of relations for projecting form upon reality. Cassirer maintains that a conceptual system does not “copy a fixed, given being,” but posits a system of relations--a “plan for possible constructions of unity”--that bestows order on the sensory flux.¹⁰

Pointing out “the throes of deep crisis” of language, Terry Eagleton raises a series of questions:

How was one to write, in an industrial society where discourse had become degraded to a mere instrument of science, commerce, advertising and bureaucracy? What audience was one to write for in any case, given the saturation of the reading public by a 'mass', profit-hungry, anodyne culture? Could a literary work be at once an artefact and a commodity on the open market? Could we any longer share the confident rationalist or empiricist trust of the mid-nineteenth century middle class that language did indeed hook itself on to the world? How was writing possible without the existence of a framework of collective belief shared with one's audience, and how, in the ideological turmoil of the twentieth century, could such a shared framework possibly be reinvented? (*Literary Theory* 140)

Modern poets found that conventional syntax and vocabulary silently insinuated assumptions about time, space, matter, causality, the mind, the self and other elementary concepts which were becoming obsolete. Journalism and popular literature circulated a debased linguistic medium, limited to the expression of simple, familiar ideas through stock phrases and trite, sensationalizing rhetorical devices. For the writer who feels that "society is a blind alley," language ceases to exercise control over a fluid and elusive reality and comes to lie like a thick crust over his imagination; ceases to be a transparent vehicle for self-expression and turns into something like an opaque and impenetrable wall. Kafka points out the broken link between thought and language, between language and the external world: "What I write is different from what I say, what I say is different from what I think, what I think is different from what I ought to think and so it goes on further into the deepest darkness" (In a letter, July 1914). Samuel Beckett also explains the modern theme of negative discourse in this way: "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (qtd. in Bruns 198).

We can begin simply by noting that modernism is associated with being unhappy with its medium. Frustration expresses more than an individual psychological state. It is a dominant theme of modernism's dynamic. It is associated with being burdened by the very materials--the beliefs, institutions, and forms of language--that are also our source of support as we labor under the burden. Gertrude Stein points out the burden of writing in a "late" age:

Now listen. Can't you see that when the language was new--as it was with Chaucer and Homer--the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there. . . . And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just worn-out literary words. The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them; they were just rather stale literary words. . . . (*Writings and Lectures* 7)

This is Stein's refusal to sign the literary pact others have written for her, her refusal of what Barthes calls "this fatal character of the literary sign, which makes a writer unable to pen a word without taking a pose characteristic of an out-of-date, anarchic or imitative language. . . ." (*WDZ* 84). Stein explains the limitations of language in our own age: "One century has words, another century chooses words, another century uses words and then another century using the words no longer has them" (*Lectures in America* 27). The modern mind affirms a state of linguistic desperation that results in a linguistic "preoccupation" we have come to know as modernism. An essential modernist task is to fill the vacuum by replenishing the words--that is by creating and propagating a new language.

Modernists' awareness of the problematic nature of language that is the most indicative of the modern spirit leads to the linguistic experiment as an effort to search for new expressive resources and new ways of understanding the world. The linguistic innovations¹¹ of the modern period are so diverse, not only because they arise from representational motives, but also because autonomy itself has opened varied possibilities to language. The consequences of medium experimentation led to the development of art forms that were critiques of art. One central problem engaged the attention of serious modernists: how can the gulf between what the artist actually perceives and the conventions and tools he uses to record his vision be reconciled. Let us focus upon this problem in the literary realm. In "Portraits and Repetition" Stein explains her own poetry, the central work of "lively words," as an attempt to re-create her still-life subjects in pure language, using not words that "mean it" but words that are "equivalent to it." That statement is premised on the central avant-garde notion of the autonomy or purity of the

artistic medium, a notion which transforms the relation of art to reality from imitation or mirroring to reinvention. Art re-creates a subject in “pure” paint, sound, or words.

One of the central features of modernism is that it brought in an era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and nonrepresentationalism, in which art turned from realism and humanistic representation toward style, technique or form. The task of art is its own self-realization. An impulse from the appearances of a world they neither trust nor understand takes refuge in pure form. In other words, “high” literature’s problematic status in commercial societies permeates its form. Clement Greenberg, probably America’s best known art critic of the fifties and early sixties, gives a kind of brief sketch of the abolition or deconstruction of representation in art:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape--not its picture--is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. . . . This is the genesis of the “abstract.” In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. The non-representational or “abstract,” if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extraverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature. (6)

Declaring their independence from mimetic constraints, modern artists no longer represent a preexisting reality but present a new set of relations, a model, through which to order the world anew.¹² This attenuation of reality and aesthetic self-referentiality has often been taken as a base for a definition of modernism and has laid it open for attack, especially by early Marxist critics. The hermetic and nonreferential tendency of modernism can be seen as an aesthetic that has lost any real oppositional force, and as the obsession of an alienated high brow. It was conceived as an art of metaphysical anxiety and social alienation rather than an act of revolutionary affirmation. Georg Lukács, perhaps, the most famous Marxist literary critic and also, perhaps, the most implacably anti-modernist, argued that the job of the artist was to “penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper,

hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society" (*Aesthetics and Politics* 38). According to Lukács, by showing the individual as being "thrown into existence," modernism basically negates outward reality, and equates man's inwardness with an abstract subjectivity. Lukács seems to confound modernism with the decadent and to give to the former the negative value inherent in the latter, distinguishing the two only as different aspects of the degeneration of bourgeois culture. It seems to the Marxist critics that modernism is built on highly subjectivist premises: by directing its attention so predominantly toward individual or subjective experience, it elevates the ego in proportion to a diminishing awareness of objective or coherent outside reality. Writing in 1976 Terry Eagleton argued that in the "alienated worlds of Kafka, Musil, Joyce, Beckett, Camus, man is stripped of his history and has no reality beyond the self; character is dissolved to mental states, objective reality reduced to unintelligible chaos" (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 31). Fredric Jameson points out that "the crisis in modern criticism is surely closely linked to that more fundamental crisis in modern literature and art which is the proliferation of styles and private languages" ("The Ideology of the Text" 208). On the other hand, in his defense of modern writing, Roland Barthes makes the same attack against realism. "The writing of Realism," Barthes argues, "is far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication. . . . The writing of Realism is condemned to mere description by virtue of this dualistic dogma which ordains that there shall only ever be one optimum form to 'express' a reality as inert as an object, on which the writer can have no power except through his art of arranging the signs" (*WDZ* 67-68).¹³ Touching on certain Marxist readings of such an "escape" from history, we will move through approaches to modernism as a historical counterpart of social modernity on to various readings of it as a culturally subversive enterprise that revolts against dominant notions of the bourgeois subject or of bourgeois-capitalist historical development.

The writing practice of artistic modernism has favored linguistically productive texts over representative texts. The tendency of modernist writing to concentrate on linguistic creativity is a necessary reaction to the flat prosaic nature of public speech where the practical end of quantitative communication spoils the quality of expressive means. Such literature no longer refers positively to society by critically presenting norms and values, but rather attacks the ossification of society and its language. Thus the seemingly hermetic language of modernism has a social task “in the tensions of our bourgeois, capitalistic and technological society” (Poggioli 107): it functions as “at once cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration afflicting common language through conventional habits” (*Ibid.* 37).

The next part will take an overview of Gerald L. Bruns’s idea of language, which is a good example to show the difficulty of defining the idea of language, and to furnish a meaningful starting point in pursuing the language of modernism. In *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (1974), Bruns has shown that the idea of the primacy of language has diverged into two theories of poetic speech. This book is not exactly about modern poetry and the idea of language. It is a book about ourselves and our history viewed from a new perspective. It makes us see that behind our critical and philosophical terminology lie attitudes about language which condition our view of art and, indeed, our view of reality. It is an effort to consider language and literature together and, more specifically, to examine two antithetical conceptions of poetic or literary language: the hermetic and the Orphic. The major premise of the book is that a basic dichotomy exists in our conception of language and its functions, and furthermore this dichotomy has operated throughout Western history.

One side of this dichotomy, which Bruns terms “hermetic,” is the idea of the “pure expressiveness” of literary speech, the view that “a writer’s use of language deviates

sufficiently from the structures of ordinary discourse to displace or arrest the function of signification.”¹⁴ From this point of view, a poem is considered as a self-sufficient whole, admirable and analyzable in itself, the world-reference of its words suspended. The other side of the dichotomy, the “Orphic” view, is the idea of poetic speech as the “ground of all signification--as an expressive movement which ‘objectifies’ a world for man or which establishes the world within the horizon of human knowing and so makes signification possible” (1). A poem is then considered much as Heidegger takes the work of poets, as establishing a world in which meaning can be found, as instituting a condition in which words and being are indistinguishable.

These contrastive perspectives of the role of language in poetry insist on the primacy of language and on the transcendental effect of poetry on language. The hermetic idea of language gives less importance to verbal signification than to the concept of a poem as a self-contained linguistic object, whose extrinsic referents are irrelevant or incidental. In this perspective, poetic activity is directed toward the literary work as a linguistic structure in which language is transformed from its ordinary use to become itself an “object for experience.” The Orphic idea of language, on the other hand, maintains the mythical ideal unity of word and being, and carries us beyond the immediate confines of a poem into the world which that poem virtually creates. That is to say, the world is objectified for man. The transcendence of language and the focus of poetic activity is in relation to the world and not in relation to language itself and the literary work. Although “Hermes” is present in “hermetic,” the term essentially signifies closure, as when we speak of an hermetically sealed container. “Orphic” is explicitly named for “Orpheus,” whose songs created if not the world then at least man’s perceptions of his world. But, when meditated upon, “hermetic” and “Orphic” have several mystical as well as mythical implications which tend to converge; this feature itself can be seen as functional in Bruns’s ultimate stance. At first, however, the two are used as polar opposites: “the speech of language” and “the speech of the world” (3).

Rather than deal with these two ideas as parts of an aesthetic of language or a theory of poetry, Bruns has chosen to examine their historical meaning, and he arranges the book accordingly to show that literary history itself expresses a continuous dialogue between these two ideas of language. These two conflicting views of language are not only central to modern literature but have, in Bruns's view, a long history in poetics from antiquity to the present and derive from the Januslike character of the linguistic sign which functions in a formal system but has also the power to transcend that system and unite with the world of things.

Bruns's concern is to point out that history and to explore its significance not only in modern poetry but in modern fiction and criticism as well. In the present century the debate is represented, on the one hand, by French critic Roland Barthes and Russian and French Formalists and , on the other, by Heidegger and his followers. Bruns cites Barthes's comment that modern poetry "destroys the spontaneously functional nature of language, and leaves standing only its lexical basis" (5) as a radical statement of a traditional Formalist idea of literary language which stands in clear opposition to Heidegger's view that the poet gives meaning to reality and in an important sense creates it.

The long central section of the book and in fact its most fully developed argument treats the diverse ways in which the hermetic conception of language is articulated in modern literature. In a discussion of the theories of the Russian Formalist critics, the Prague Structuralists and contemporary French critics who draw upon these schools, Bruns emphasizes the extent to which art is for these critics a process of defamiliarization. Against the habitual and automatic nature of ordinary perception, art is a medium for the authentic perception of the world. In art, language is "foregrounded," used in such a way as to attract attention to itself and not to serve simply as a means of communication. The aesthetic experience becomes then an experience of language itself, an experience of a world of words whose significance is formal, not semantic.

The key to these two opposing viewpoints lies in the structuralist and phenomenological conceptions of the sign. The former thinks of the sign as negative, as having no value save in the relationships it forms with other signs; but for the phenomenologist "its value lies in its identity with being," it is a positive thing, a door which opens to admit reality.

The literary theories and opinions of the Russian Formalists, the Prague Structuralists, Valéry, Barthes, and Foucault are presented as the first modern move towards a hermetic sense of poetry; the literary object is considered as determined by a system of pure relations. The movement is further studied in a chapter on Mallarmé and his attempt to isolate the book and writing from any worldly context, to employ the physical and spatial character of words written on a blank page as the ultimate setting for what is stated; even syntax begins to evaporate, leaving spatial constellation as the principle of order. The hermetic is further intensified in Flaubert and Joyce.

After this theoretical inquiry, Bruns turns to a critical examination of the ways in which language takes possession of literature in the poetry of Mallarmé and the fiction of Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett. They have different ways of destroying the reference of language to the world. But the position which these writers hold in common is their concern with literary language as distinct from and even in opposition to ordinary speech. This hermetic view of language is the source of one important movement in modern literature. The Romantics, on the other hand, he sees as holding a Kantian view of things: "The objective world is only the primitive, as yet unconscious poetry of the Spirit," for the poet's mind forms the universe for itself out of the chaos of sensation. And he quotes Heidegger: "Only where there is language is there a world" (215). Wallace Stevens is presented as the modern poet best exemplifying this attitude.

Mallarmé's desire to make the natural object disappear beneath the written word, the aspiration of his poetry to the condition of nothingness, his desire to make words attain the condition of music, all indicate the extent to which he was interested in the work of art

hermetically sealed off from the world. Mallarmé's sense of the hermetic nature of language and its separateness from reality begins with the *fin de siècle* assumption that the world is called into being by the poet, a version, paradoxically, of the Orpheus myth. However, Mallarmé turns this assumption into the view that the poet, rather than establishing the world in being, returns the world to the original void. Mallarmé's vision, then is of the transcendent word--of language which belongs neither to the world of things nor to the human world of speech but rather to primordial emptiness, in which the splendor of beauty exists as a sheer presence, a pure quality unpredicated of any reality but the word. This separation releases language from its union with the world and establishes it in the purity of nothingness where, according to Mallarmé, beauty is to be found.

In a very perceptive analysis, Bruns shows that this perversity leads naturally to the theory of impersonality in art. He explores the philosophical origin of this idea in Hegel's dialectical position that "the absolute negates all things that are not absolute" but shows that in Mallarmé's application of this idea to poetry he emphasized the aesthetic implications of the artist's state of mind. Mallarmé conceived of this state as a kind of death, a purging of the artist's interior feelings so that he could annihilate himself as an experiencing subject in order to recreate his thought as pure object. As Mallarmé himself put it, "My thought has thought itself through and reached a pure idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony, is indescribable. But, fortunately, I am quite dead now" (104). In this concept of the creative process, as Bruns points out, the structure of words must be closed to the poet himself in order to free the work of his feelings and experiences and thus to allow it independent existence.¹⁵ The structure that emerges will exist in its own laws of development. Words, in such a view, will no longer function as signs but will become, instead, objects with physical and even magical properties. It is out of this theory that Mallarmé created his experiments with syntax and typography, efforts to fix the word in "empty space."

In Flaubert, Bruns sees a tension between the desire to duplicate our experience of the world and the desire to seek a transcendence of the world comparable to Mallarmé's *le néant*. For Bruns, Flaubert's concern for "*le mot juste*" is not simply an interest in selecting the right word as an exact presentation of the object but an interest in the word that will form the integral part of a more purely formal structure. Flaubert's dream to write "a book about nothing" anticipates in Bruns's view Joyce's work in *Ulysses* and to a greater extent in *Finnegans Wake* where the art of fiction is displaced by what Barthes called the pure "act of writing." Joyce transforms the function of language as a system of differences into a system of equivalences.¹⁶ Bruns follows the same line of argument in examining Beckett's trilogy: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. He contends that the minds of Beckett's heroes gyrate like closed systems independent of the world. In making storytellers out of these minds, Beckett places them in the most difficult of circumstances, forcing them to seek in human speech capacities of a kind that do not require for their fulfillment any sort of subject matter. Once again we see the foregrounding of language, but with this difference: Beckett foregrounds language not by heightening devices of style but by dramatizing the breakdown in the operation of language.

Bruns uses Jakobson's opposition of metaphor and metonymy as a framework here; metaphor is the process of substituting one word or unit of language for another, metonymy the process of annexing other units to the one we have; it works in combination, association, syntax, and the linkage of sentences. Metaphor is normally dominant in poetry, metonymy in narration and prose. But in the prose of Flaubert and Joyce, metaphor comes to prevail. Bruns applies Jakobson's description of language as bipolar to the writing of *Madame Bovary* and *Ulysses*. He sees Flaubert's doctrine of *le mot juste* as bipolar, since the "right word" not only operates on the realistic level to describe the action but at the same time transcends reality to become part of the formal structure and style of a work of art. Thus Flaubert writes of Emma in a language that she could never have used about herself. It is but a short step to Joyce's revisions of *Ulysses*, in which he creates a

form of discourse which abolishes the narrative level of the story entirely. In the work of Beckett, the ultimate confrontation between speech and language takes place--“the confrontation of the necessity of speech with its radical impossibility” (165). In Flaubert there still remains room for metonymy and its narrative element, but in Joyce metonymy is overwhelmed by metaphor. The extreme is reached in *Finnegans Wake*.

Next, we are into the “Orphic” currents, wherein one will find what is surely a most curious rationale for modern poetry. One may glimpse it here in Bruns’s paraphrase of Blanchot: modern poetry “approaches the condition of negative discourse--a discourse which disrupts or reverses the act of signification--a way of holding the world in being against the annihilation that takes place in man’s ordinary utterances” (201). The modern Orpheus’s song “shields the world against the void into which ordinary speech seeks to cast it” (201). Then the Orphic insists upon the presence of the poetic speaker, upon the nature of the poem as a speech event. Bruns suggests that the effort of modern writers to return to that moment before speech, to negative discourse in which a form of speech is isolated from the act of signification, is historically important because it is the negative of the power of Orpheus to call the world into being. By his silence, the man may return himself to the world of things, may establish himself in the immediate presence of the world. This discussion prepares the ground for a very brief examination of the Orpheus myth and its modern counterparts in the work of the English Romantics, Poe’s “The Power of Words,” Martin Heidegger, and Wallace Stevens’s poetry of pure reality.

In exploring the Orphic mode of discourse in his last two chapters, Bruns uses Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, and others, who speak of poetry as an attempt to get to the “moment before speech,” when the world is still available, before the emergence of an opaque discourse which draws attention to itself. Behind this attempt is a Hegelian conception of language as “annihilating” the object it means, as substituting the presence of names for things, and instituting a new kind of absence for objects (193). The Orphic poem attempts to annul this annihilation and restore things as sayable. Schelling, Novalis,

and Coleridge are taken as Kantian variants on the theme of poetry as constituting a world: Hölderlin is related to Husserl, who becomes more frequently quoted; but the dominant figure in the last chapter is Stevens.

The Orphic power of the poet to bring the world into being, is explored in the work of Wallace Stevens. Stevens's particular importance in the long history of this Romantic idea comes from his extensions of the assumptions of Kant, Schelling, Coleridge, and Shelley concerning the preeminent power of the mind and the imagination in ordering and, indeed, creating the world. Bruns explains very clearly the progression of this idea from Kant to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and finally Heidegger: "From the phenomenological standpoint, the phenomenal world is to be understood, not in the Kantian sense of a world of 'mere' appearances that implies an unseen and unknowable noumenal reality, but in the purely descriptive sense of a world that comes into appearance before man--a world which is present to human consciousness and which consciousness cannot escape except by adopting attitudes which orient it away from the world" (216). Thus to Heidegger being is never transcendent and cannot be deduced from what is present. It must be created by the past through the naming power of speech.

Stevens's distinction lies in his poetic formulation of the world of the imagination in which we all dwell. Though we each exist in the incorporeal world of the mind, the corporeal world is the dimension of our experience which we share with others. Even though the world comes to us through imagination, it is for us a real world of people and places and things. Bruns relates both perspectives to the central problem of meaning which he discusses from both philosophical and linguistic points of view. He concludes that an adequate poetics must contain both the hermetic and the Orphic, both a "structuralism which defines the poem in relation to itself as a system of internal dependencies" and a "phenomenology which defines the poem in relation to its situation" (262).

In a final chapter, Bruns draws together the discussion of the two aspects of poetic speech, its hermetic and Orphic characters, now identified as the structuralist and

phenomenological views, by considering them in relation to the problem of meaning in the act of speech. The Orphic and hermetic modes of poetic speech disclose the two essential movements of any poetic act: a withdrawal from the world into a universe of language and a return to earth which is a movement that brings word and world together. He claims structuralism and phenomenology can be reconciled by adopting a "historical viewpoint." He uses Ricoeur for this first, then Chomsky, Barthes, Halliday and others, and concludes that a poem is the intersection of the hermetic and Orphic, that is is both "structure and event," "object and utterance."

For the conclusion would have us reject neither the objectivity of formalism nor the contextualism of--what shall we call it--Orphism? Here Bruns's true pluralism is shown. Let us accept both the hermetic and the Orphic dimensions of language, for both, he argues and we are convinced, are in language. Let us admit the truth of both structuralism and phenomenology. For the poem is somehow both an object and an event, both a kind of universe unto itself, as we prove when we turn it into the subject of our contemplation, and an utterance spoken in the here and now, as we prove when we re-create it as a speech act in oral interpretation. Bruns's next-to-last statement is, "The poem must be understood both as structure and as event--as a text which possesses its own harmony of relations but which at the same time can only come into being within a network of other texts, or within literary history, and beyond this within the human life-world" (262).

The value of Bruns's presentation of the two streams of thought about language is that he provides a context for judging many of the attitudes toward literature which we encounter daily but fail to understand in terms of their historical and philosophical origins. If we accept his historical view of these two traditions, we are likely to agree with his conclusion that no single critical point of view explains the complexity of poetry and the function of language. Even though many of his specific comments on structuralism and linguistic analysis are interesting, the real value of his work seems to be in its demonstration of how fundamentally our ideas about literature are ideas about language and

go back to assumptions about the nature of being and reality. Bruns makes us realize that finally even the most specific act of criticism is a statement about ourselves and our ideas of the world.

However, his argument seems to have the flaws of its merits. As a work of synthesis, it is also in some ways a work of simplification. We might also raise a question how the reconciliation between these two antithetical schools of criticism is to be effected--or why we should try to effect such a reconciliation. Not everyone will want to make the connections Bruns makes between the hermetic and Orphic conceptions of language and structuralism and phenomenology. Nor is Bruns's division of literary language into two conflicting conceptions absolutely definitive. "Poetics," says Bruns "in this sense, must be a structuralism which defines the poem in relation to itself as a system of internal dependencies; but it must also be a phenomenology which defines the poem in relation to its situation, that is, in terms of its historical existence" (262). The trouble with this formulation is that the poles of opposition are not clearly drawn, because what Bruns calls a phenomenology seems to be not one at all but an extension of a structuralism. Thus, these two related, but separable impulses are scattered throughout the work and thinking of the revolutionary writers, often generating innovative uses of language that collaborate with or contradict each other.

The question around which the book revolves is whether language or the language of poetry--it is not always clear which--is opaque or transparent. That is, does language--or specifically the language of the poem--refer to something outside itself or is it always a self-referential thing-in-itself? Bruns's own position on this question is not clear. For the most part he takes the role of a neutral observer who reports what has been said on both sides of the question. The question of the meaning of meaning is crucial, but it is one that Bruns does not tackle head-on. Does a poem "mean"? If it does, then how does it mean? If a text does not mean, then is it still a text, and what is it possible to say about a text that does not mean? If the text means, are we to locate the meaning in the text or in the

consciousness of a hypothetical reader or interpreter, or are we to locate it, as some critics have suggested, in some kind of middle ground between the text and consciousness? At any rate, handling both linguistic and literary matters with insight and skill, Bruns has written a highly technical but knowledgeable and provocative analysis of the relationship between language and poetry in the broad sense.

With Bruns's analysis as a backdrop, the section of "Poetheory or Theorypo," Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will focus on the ideas of language of Gertrude Stein and the Language poets, and T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill. Roughly fitting each poet's idea of language into Bruns's antithetical paradigm, we may suppose that while Stein and Language writers' poetics of the material presence of language can be considered as hermetic, and Eliot's "difficult, confusing, obfuscatory" language can often be understood as hermetic, Hill's idea of language can be Orphic. It is evident, however, the difference between these poets' conceptions of poetic or literary language is not distinctive enough to back up Bruns's dichotomy. In the next part of this section, we will examine the main arguments of Marjorie Perloff's book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, and see how provocative is her attempt to explore modernist poetic constructions and how blurred is her dichotomy to categorize complex modern poetry into two distinctive ideas based upon different understandings of language.

Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*¹⁷ is a reassessment and extension of our understanding of modernism to take account of "difficult" poets from the "other tradition." What Perloff posits are two distinct literary traditions emerging out of the revolutionary milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries though the historical and social context is not discussed:

... what we loosely call "Modernism" in Anglo-American poetry is really made up of two separate though often interwoven strands: the Symbolist mode that Lowell inherited from Eliot and Baudelaire and, beyond them, from the great Romantic poets, and the "anti-Symbolist" mode of indeterminacy or "undecidability,"

of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations*. . . . we cannot really come to terms with the major poetic experiments occurring in our own time without some understanding of what we might call “the French connection”—the line that goes from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound, and Williams by way of Cubist, Dada, and early Surrealist art, a line that also includes the great French/ English verbal compositions of Beckett. It is this “other tradition” (I take the phrase from the title of a poem by John Ashbery) in twentieth-century poetry that is the subject of my book. (vii)

Structures of language and culture not only engender but also delimit our understanding of reality. Therefore, there will always be revolutionaries, anarchists, deconstructionists, experimentalists of one sort or another: an avant garde, defying the gravity of established order or just ignoring it, reinventing invention. According to Perloff, however, the willful indeterminist act in literature of the sort we find in the work of Gertrude Stein or John Cage, appears to be a relatively recent development. Beginning with Rimbaud, the original exponent of indeterminacy,¹⁸ Perloff traces the development of this concept and technique in the poetry of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, John Ashbery, John Cage, and David Antin.¹⁹

The concept of “indeterminacy” is itself quite interesting and is central to an understanding of modernism and of postmodernism. An established principle of French art and literature, its presence in English literature, if less pervasive, is no less important. The opposition here is essentially between Symbolism and subsequent movements: Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism. In post-Symbolist poetry, as the author states, ambiguity and complexity give way to inherent contradiction and “undecidability,” metaphor and symbol to metonymy and synecdoche, the well-wrought urn to “an open field of narrative possibilities,” and the coherent structure of images to “mysteries of construction” and free play. Of crucial importance in understanding the modern movement, this distinction is the key to unlocking the mysteries of even the most hermetic texts.

Perloff identifies and explores a number of suggestive contexts, which together provide a framework for her illuminating discussions of Rimbaud, Stein, Pound, etc.: the concept of indeterminacy itself more implicitly than explicitly; literary genealogy; extra-

literary influences; the indeterminist or “non-Symbolist” stance (intentions and effects).

Some crucial issues related to this last context are raised:

Art becomes play, endlessly frustrating our longing for certainty. . . . poetic texts . . . derive force from their refusal to “mean” in conventional ways. . . . with the recognition that “phenomenological reality is itself ‘discovered’ and ‘constructed’ by poets,” the question of how to create poetry in a post-Symbolist age has been a primary concern. (34-35)

An interesting tacit assumption throughout much of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* is that the world we must construct or reconstruct in reading Symbolist poetry, the restoration of the lost half of the equation, symbol = thing, is a world less vital and less authentic, less “in process” than the immediate world of language which does not point beyond itself.²⁰ What Perloff finds especially exhilarating in the most interesting poetry of our own time is “an open field of narrative possibilities” (qtd. 281), indeterminacy, the free play of ideas that refuses to harden into “statement”—this refusal to create the dense Symbolist network of High Modernist Poetry.

“What is the relationship of such an ‘enigma text’ to the poetry of High Modernism?”

(1) The chief difference between “rival strains” is, in her view, that the Symbolist poem suggests meanings that lie below the surface, while the indeterminate poem expresses “the play of the surface itself.” Thus poetic meaning dissolves into novel arrangements of words—she insists that “Williams’ ‘wheel/ barrow’ exists nowhere but in the words on the page” (129 n)—giving us nonrepresentational verbal patterns that are like abstract expressionist painting.²¹

In High Modernist poetry, however difficult the meaning may be to decode, “the relationship of the word to its referents, of signifier to signified, remains essentially intact,” whereas this relationship is undermined in the other tradition (17-18). In the Symbolist line, the way to meaning is difficult but possible; in indeterminate art there is no meaning but the surface (27-28). In the first, words have “specific connotations”; in the second they have, rather, a “compositional value” (23).²²

But the critical question remains. If the poem primarily presents us with a charged linguistic field, charged for instance by the “tension between reference and compositional game, between a pointing system and a self-ordering system” (72), as Perloff describes the dynamics in one of Gertrude Stein’s poems, what is to be done with it? What form can the act of criticism take? Clearly this is a language game for which the Symbolist rules don’t work. To read an indeterminist work looking for qualities and effects of a Symbolist epiphany poem is an injustice, not to say a waste of time. Other critical methods are demanded. Perloff refers to New Critical reading of an eight-line passage of *The Waste Land* as a “Norton Anthology reading” (13). Its purpose is to serve as a kind of negative model. This is what we should not attempt to do, cannot succeed in doing with indeterminist poetry.

Let me explain that much of what Perloff discusses under the rubric “indeterminacy” has to do with the effect of a text on the reader. This effect, which she sometimes calls “undecidability,” is lodged in the nature of the event, the text, which because of random references or syntactical dislocations or illogical juxtapositions, resists the reader’s attempts to pin down a coherent exegesis. (Text as irreducible enigma.) The reader may not even be able to perceive a correspondence of references to referents, signifiers to signifieds.

While the Symbolist concept of ambiguity allows several meanings to coexist simultaneously, this is not possible in indeterminate texts in which an either / or situation exists. Nor can a single interpretation be imposed by force, for each possible meaning is systematically subverted by the others. We are thus confronted with a poetry of continual possibility. In every case the solution to the dilemma is connected with the notion of “process.” It is not the final state of the poem that matters so much as its evolution. The meaning of a work is to be found in the creative process itself, in the immediacy of recorded thought with all its inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.

It is thus the burden of a poetics of indeterminacy to demonstrate that these intentional deconstructions are indeed constructive; that the experience of indeterminacy in literature is

not all frustration and disappointment; that it can nourish us with a particular kind of linguistic feast, perhaps not entirely dissimilar to the great wild game of free-playing signifiers in portions of Shakespeare. The task of the reader is thus to experience the unfolding of the poem in all its complexity. The lack of “coherence” is compensated for by the vividness of the experience.

This poetry, moreover, is uniquely suited to the modern age and its endless quest for identity. In the absence of existential certainty and moral absolutes, modern man must sort through mounds of conflicting evidence about the human condition. Since existence itself is indeterminate, and truth is perceived as relative, there are an infinite number of answers to the problems confronting him.

The main burden of her argument is historical: “Modernism was itself a time of tension between rival strains, the Symbolists or ‘High Moderns’ and the ‘Other Tradition’ which is the subject of my book” (33). This “Other Tradition” places certain modern poets of recognized merit and originality, like Rimbaud and Pound and Williams, into juxtaposition with extreme experimentalists like Stein, Beckett, Ashbery and Antin. Perloff does not distinguish between a relative and an absolute notion of “indeterminacy.” As she recognizes, in retrospect, the limitation of her own argument (*The Dance of the Intellect* ix), the dichotomy between Symbolist and anti-Symbolist modes of signification is “too neat.” Writing is only “indeterminate” by comparison to relatively determinate writing, by reference to the conventions of meaning and formal coherence that we have come to expect. The most interesting of Perloff’s indeterminists can be considered not so much antisymbolists as reformed symbolists. As Perloff implies in her discussion of Pound’s *Cantos*, complex modernist poems may occupy “a middle space between the mimetic on the one hand and the non-objective or ‘abstract’ on the other; the referential process is not cut off but is subordinated to a concern for sequential or spatial arrangement.” Modernists dislocate language so as “to create new verbal landscapes” (181-82). There are also times when indeterminacy means the subversion of formal coherence rather than of referentiality:

the words may reliably evoke images of things in the world, but one cannot interpret those images as parts of a whole. Such distinctions would have provided a way of explaining the obvious differences among Perloff's indeterminist writers, and they would have allowed a more rigorous definition of the senses in which a work can and cannot be "indeterminate."

The problematic of Perloff's dichotomy can be also revealed by Kenner's argument: "A language is simply an assortment of words, and a set of rules for combining them. Mallarmé and Valéry and Eliot felt words as part of that echoing intricacy, Language, which permeates our minds and obeys not the laws of *things*, but its own laws, which an organism's power to mutate and adapt and survive" (*The Pound Era* 123). Ironically, though Kenner is describing a Symbolist aesthetic, we are on our way to the view of language that makes Perloff's account of indeterminacy in non-Symbolist poetry possible. This may indicate that the division between the two is not so clear after all. But Kenner moves us further along. It seems that what we respond to is "effect"--"an effect being something hypnotic we cannot quite understand" (*Ibid.* 130) produced by: the "extra-semantic affinities" of words, the "molecular bonds of half-understood words," the "structure of words, where the words exchange dynamisms in the ecology of language," the "chemistry of Language [which] supersedes meaning," the "characteristic force fields" of Language. Our view of language as reference pure and simple is assailed by new possibilities of linguistic impact, what with signifieds sliding out from under signifiers and meaning rudely detached from its transitional objects. As we approach the modern scene, indeterminacy as historical accident becomes indeterminacy as intentional effect--a structural principle of the Symbolists, according to Kenner: ". . . we may say that Symbolism is. . . an effort to anticipate the work of time by aiming directly at the kind of existence a poem may have when a thousand years have deprived it of its dandelions and its mythologies, an existence purely linguistic, determined by the molecular bonds of half-understood words" (*Ibid.* 130). Eliot, Kenner says, "has withdrawn in favor of the language" (*Ibid.* 136), calling the chapter in which he deals with this development "Words

Set Free.” Set free as in: “the Symbolist willingness to lift words out of ‘usage,’ free their affinities, permit them new combinations” (*Ibid.* 142). But the point is that both processes enable us to pay a new kind of attention to language; language is no longer rendered invisible by dailiness or precise reference, because of course when we “refer,” we are attempting to point with language at something beyond language.

Perloff’s study does help us to see that what some artists of the other tradition are offering is not necessarily pleasure, but ways of creation and of expanding our awareness of language as creators and audience. To explore “the mode of undecidability” in twentieth-century poetry is to “suggest that much of the poetry now emerging has different origins and therefore makes rather different suppositions” (44). It has opened the doors wide to speculation that is new thinking about new areas of concern.

As a first stage in the critical reception of the difficult poets, Perloff’s genealogy of the other tradition reveals interesting continuities between modern and supposedly “postmodern” literature; in the polemical struggle of the more recent writers to establish the originality of their work, these continuities have often been overlooked. If we take W. C. Williams and Gertrude Stein, rather than W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot, as representative modernists, such contemporaries as John Ashbery, John Cage, and David Antin appear as heirs of a hundred-year-old literary movement, not as repudiators of the past. One main result of this discussion has been that we have had to rework old definitions of modernism and, in particular, to reassess the work of many modernist writers. Such reassessment has brought about a change not only in the modernist canon but in our coming to understand better the achievement of some modernist writers. For instance, critics have recently recognized the work of Gertrude Stein as having had a strong influence on postmodernist writing. Particularly, Stein’s influence is discernible in the writings of the Language poets whose theories and poetics emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The Language writers share with Stein an interest in the surfaces, opacity and polysemy of language, and, like Stein, they approach writing as universally poetic. In the next section, concerning the works of

Stein and the Language poets, we will examine their preoccupations with language and the relationship between theory and poetry, which are the primary concerns of both modernism and postmodernism.

(2) “Poetheory or Theorypo”: “Language as a real thing” from Gertrude Stein to Language Poets

We discover another tradition of modernism and enlarge our understanding of both literary history and of the writers who created that other tradition. Marjorie Perloff sets out to do nothing less than recast the modernist canon, writing with evident pleasure of poets disdained for their incoherence and exclusively cerebral appeal. Moreover, once identified, this “Other Tradition” begins to encroach on its High Modernist opposite.

There are some texts produced during the past hundred years that take particularly troublesome liberties with language. The critic faced with this fact might be led to ask *why* writers have taken to writing this way, in other words, what the cultural function and value of such art might be.²³ Many aesthetic theories, which apply equally well to radical or avant-garde forms in any of the arts, have been invoked to explain fully experimental writing. Twentieth-century art must reflect the new fragmented twentieth-century reality, with its subjectivist epistemology, its emphasis on nonrational areas of the mind, its notion of consciousness as a chaotic flow of private association, its vision of events as acausal, of time as nonlinear, of truth and reality as plural and undetermined. As I implied before, art is no longer seen as primarily representational or mimetic. It tends to be instead autonomous, responsible to its own formal dimensions, important as the source of the privileged aesthetic experience rather than as an instructive mimesis of life.

The diminishing faith in science and logic is reflected in Gertrude Stein’s movement from a view of the world as rationally ordered, implied in the elaborate human typology of *The Making of Americans*, to a nonscientific and arational but immediate acceptance of the world as “simply present.” That is to say, the movement away from the assumptions of

nineteenth-century rationalism toward a more modern view of the world as flux is reflected in the change of Stein's idea of language. According to Weinstein, "Conventional English syntax compels its user to accept the model of a sequential, linear time / space realm that is not true to the modern . . . world view" (83). He believes that "In *Tender Buttons* the Jamesian universe of flux and process is dramatized by the processual syntax; the description, the verbal embodiment of the object, is as plastic, as multidimensional and as protological as the objective reality itself" (*Ibid.* 84). Hoffman also sees the lack of rational order in *Tender Buttons* as representative of this century's view of things: "If Gertrude Stein was an inevitability for the twentieth century, then as products of the same age we can probably learn much about ourselves in her enigmatic works. The supposed irrationality of her writing may be no more than a reflection of our world" (*The Development of Abstractionism* 197).

What distinguishes Stein from her chronological contemporaries is that until quite recently most of her works were commonly misunderstood. The principal reason for such continued incomprehension is that her experiments in writing were conducted apart from the major developments in modern literature. The aim of this section is to examine *Tender Buttons* among a range of Gertrude Stein's literary productions in the light of twentieth-century ideas of language. I wish here to support the claim that Stein's work is a "precursor of Language poetry" and a key to "an important missing link" between modern and postmodern. Previous studies of Stein's writing, particularly of her "different" works, have tended to concentrate on her idiosyncratic uses of words and syntax, without placing these experiments in the broader content of modern experimentation with language, its limits, and its levels of usage. Moreover, the most influential canonizers of modernism have either left Stein out altogether, or considered her as "personality" and influence rather than as a serious writer. To be sure, however, writers such as Joyce, Beckett, and Stein compel us to consider a realm of linguistic possibilities that were utterly unthinkable before our age.

During Stein's lifetime, however, her innovative writing was considered as boring, repetitious and childish. This is one publisher's response to *The Making of Americans*:

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

Many thanks. I am returning the M.S. by registered post. Only one M.S. by one post. (Gallup, ed. 58)

Eliot could see Stein as a threat. "There is something precisely *ominous* about Miss Stein. . . . Her work. . . is not good for one's mind," he wrote of "Composition as Explanation" in 1927. "If this is of the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested" ("Charleston, Hey! Hey!" 595). Interestingly enough, however, Edith Sitwell's exclamation was proper: "In the future, it is evident that no history of the English literature of our time could be of any worth without a complete survey of the work Miss Gertrude Stein is doing for our language. She is, I am convinced, one of the most important living pioneers" (Salter 113).

We no longer read Gertrude Stein as an isolated genius or as an eccentric; instead, we begin to understand her connections to the movements in literature and the visual arts which preceded her and which came after her. As a major figure at the intersection of a number of literary traditions--American, modernist, feminine, avant-garde, postmodernist--Gertrude Stein is "half in and half out of doors." In *Picasso* Gertrude Stein wrote, "A creator is not in advance of his generation but he is the first of his contemporaries to be conscious of what is happening to his generation" (30). This also describes Stein as an innovator who participated in the making of the twentieth century. A revaluation of Stein's work in the seventies is signaled for instance by Michael J. Hoffman's appraisal in 1976, placing her squarely in the center of modernism: "to reject Stein any longer is to reject Modernism" (*Gertrude Stein* 134). It is easy to agree with Marianne DeKoven that as a whole Stein's work "fits neatly nowhere" (Nadel 14). Because Stein is central to so many divergent

twentieth-century cultural phenomena, she inevitably becomes marginal or eccentric to any unified, coherent tradition. The recently surging Stein criticism, much of it feminist and poststructuralist, has found her to be representative for an aesthetic or literary relation to modernity. As a central figure of *modernisms*, Stein is bound to become, in a sense, typical of what modernism is about.

Stein reinvented literary signification, creating a language that both disrupts conventional modes of signification and provides alternatives to them: The modes Stein disrupts are linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, and heavily focused on the signified. The modes she substitutes are incoherent, open-ended, anarchic, irreducibly multiple, often focused on what Roland Barthes calls the “magic of the signifier.” Stein asked and investigated deceptively simple questions that reflected key issues of the century: theoretical concerns to do with being, time, entity, identity, mind, language, human nature, knowledge, poetry and prose, literature, and composition. She was suggesting a new vocabulary of thought. She realized that she must invent a way of showing that could not be written about. Writing about things, explaining, was a nineteenth-century way of seeing: in the twentieth century there had to be ways of seeing what seeing itself was. In her work, as in Wittgenstein’s thinking, the subject seems to disappear as the telling, the seeing, and the language system itself are placed in the foreground. The total effect is a radical shaking of the false Victorian stability. She investigated in literature what would later be documented by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Stein observed, “words had lost much of their variety, and I felt. . . I had to recapture the value of the individual word, find out what it meant, and act within it” (*A Primer* 16). Stein realizes, like Mallarmé, that in language, as in painting, the medium is more often used as a mere mediator, effaced by the message it carries.²⁴ The language itself remains unseen, unrecognized. The habits which twentieth-century readers can no longer “see,” are a partial explanation for the paralysis that Stein finds in language. The problem, like all problems of habit, lies in our ready acquiescence

to conventions. Therefore, she creates a completely conscious and visible language. Stein makes the reality of signs apparent and makes the habits of language and of reading conscious by foregrounding her language. *Tender Buttons*, she tells us in the work, “is a monster and awkward quite awkward” (*Writings and Lectures* 506). Her monstrous work warns us of the habits that culture and print have embedded in language. She shows us that the blanks between words are actually filled with “no sense . . . that is to say, music, memory, musical memory” (*Ibid.* 489)--the agents of custom--that reassemble the habitual meanings in language; she forces us to reexamine the way we read by creating a “visible writing” that we cannot look through. Stein revises meaning so that we see it again, and see it as if for the first time.

Thus we have an impression like the following account on her work: “It gives words an oddly new intimate flavor and at the same time makes familiar words seem almost like strangers, doesn’t it?” (Anderson 5). Indeed, *Tender Buttons* does make “familiar words seem almost like strangers,” and such familiar strains help lead us, I believe, to some of the “sense” behind these difficult compositions. I shall argue that Stein exploits the vocabulary, syntax, rhythms, and cadences of conventional women’s prose and talk, the ordinary discourse of domesticity to create her own new “language.” This language is not only, according to her own terms, a “poetic” one, but one which is highly unconventional.

On the whole, interpretive criticism of *Tender Buttons* has tended to be cumulative, each reader discerning new possible codes or stories behind these very open, indeterminate texts, without such readings being mutually exclusive. Rightly, many critics have focused on how *Tender Buttons* plays with meaning, its semantic games, its indefinitely indeterminate nature, to use Marjorie Perloff’s term. Stein’s strategy, of course, is subversive: to subvert conventional feminine prose and talk, while intimating her own new language and ways of seeing.

Since Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* was published in 1914, its colorful chunks of language and imagery have been shaken in the kaleidoscopes of a dozen critical modes to

produce a myriad of reading, designs, and explanations. *Tender Buttons* did attain “a certain notoriety” in the press and attract polemical criticism, perhaps because it does seem to “veer off into meaningless,” at least in conventional terms. But it is more than a literary curiosity. The stylistic change, the abandonment of traditional syntax, it marks was a break-through that influenced the direction of much of Stein’s future work. Stein’s critics have given us numerous amplifications of her account. Bridgman explains *Tender Buttons* as a continuum of private association which is everyone’s real experience of the external world; as a product of the free imagination, its deepest material rising to the surface from the recesses of the unconscious mind, bursting forth in liberated vocabulary. Sutherland invokes the fusion of “inside and outside”--outer reality expressed in terms of inner reality -and also Stein’s religious sense of the physical plenitude of the world, of life as an immediate, physical, moment-to-moment miracle which can be captured only in a special language--a religious sense which is the source of her affinity with saints. Stewart interprets, finding Jungian archetypes. Weinstein gives us linguistic relativism, the subjectivity of perception, James’s notion of language as a falsifier of mental reality. He sees *Tender Buttons*, and all of Stein’s experimental work, as an attempt to express in language the areas of consciousness language normally ignores, to delineate the true contour of mind, and to create an autonomous, plastic literature. In one of the most important studies of *Tender Buttons*, “Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of *Tender Buttons*,” Neil Schmitz properly locates the work as a harbinger of contemporary postmodernism in that it calls into question our defining notions of language, narrative, literature, and ultimately, the world. But how do we read this writing? Where in it does meaning reside, what are the dimensions of that meaning, how does it reach us, and how is it generated?

Tender Buttons is a book of definitions divided into three sections: *Objects*, *Food*, and *Rooms*. Her own categorization into *Objects*, *Food*, and *Rooms* is deliberately deceptive, for her definitions overlap, the distinctions break down, so that “Roast Beef” sounds like a

room, “In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening”²⁵ while a room is described as time and action: “The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning. Explaining darkening and expecting relating is all of a piece” (499). Rebelling against the confinements of definition, and reexamining the processes of language, Stein liberates our habitual ways of seeing ordinary objects. She turns our eye to what the domestic woman traditionally deals with: household objects, kitchen items, the home. Then she explodes our traditional perceptions, asking us to understand eye-glasses as “A color in shaving” (470), or asparagus as “wet wet weather” (491).

The text itself is set within an interrogative framework, a refrain of questions, persistent calls for identification, for naming: “Nickel, what is nickel, it is originally rid of a cover” (461); “Cloudiness, what is cloudiness, is it a lining, is it a roll, is it melting” (481). In *Objects*, each item is listed in capital letters with the definitions listed beneath. Then, we find word-portraits or meditations on everything from the trivial to the obscure. In the *Food* section, all the items to be described are listed together before individual definitions. It is curious that this master catalogue promises descriptions of several items not found in the text.

So far, what is most individual and startling about *Tender Buttons* seems to be that it is a book of “descriptions” that do not describe or “definitions” that do not define. For example, the first object listed appears:

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (461)

It is immediately clear that this is far from a conventional depiction of a carafe. When faced with words and phrases so totally removed from conventional usage, one is tempted to seek out those words that might suggest a carafe. With some ingenuity such an approach might come up with the following results: a carafe is made of “glass” as are “spectacles.”

All glass items have “a single color” (whatever light they happen to reflect at the moment of observation). What distinguishes a carafe from other glass objects is its shape: “the difference is spreading.” However ingenious this method of interpreting *Tender Buttons* may be, it is an absolutely wrong approach toward this work.

“A Substance in a Cushion” is characteristic of *Tender Buttons* and of “lively words.” It is anchored, quite literally, in the material world: filled with “substance” by the concrete nouns which, as we have seen, give the writing in this style solidity. Some, though only a small amount, of that substance is suggestive of cushions, or the materials and actions that make them: “a cushion has that cover”; “feather and cotton”; “chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.” Elsewhere in the fragment: “A circle of fine card board and a chance to see a tassel”; “The disgrace is not in carelessness nor even in sewing it comes out out of the way”; “What is the sash like. The sash is not like anything mustard it is not like a same thing that has stripes, it is not even more hurt than that, it has a little top” (462-63).

However, precisely through such small relatedness to content, this writing demonstrates clearly to what extent it is not about anything. If we read it honestly, without imposing on it our culturally inculcated demand for sense, order, and meaning, we see that the cushions and their sensory nexus are only a tiny part of the writing, hardly substantial enough to bear the responsibility of integrating it thematically. What we should notice about “A Substance in a Cushion” is not that it does indeed at times suggest cushions, but that most of the time it does not. The phrase “a substance in a cushion,” for example, links the abstract noun “substance” with the concrete noun “cushion” in a richly polysemous way, but does not make an interpretable thematic point either about cushions or about substance. Then, in reading of Gertrude Stein’s *Objects*, we are liberated from the objects themselves by an atmosphere of play, between them as well as between them and her, which associates and transforms. It is as if she let the “words write” their own meanings, but certainly, certainly not unconsciously.

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein seems to give up her authority as an author to guide and direct a reader, to point the way toward meaning. She took language farther and farther from its denotative and connotative functions, her words becoming counters, sounds and syllables, weights, textures whose referential meaning--carafe, teacup, tumbler, feather--while still inherently active as presences, is no longer predominantly what concerns us. We do not read these words as if they are a window opening on to the world, signaling that world, inviting us to pass through them into it; rather, she stops us here, at words on the page, making us conscious of our perceptions of the dynamics of words working together. Thus, the reader experiences each dismantling as an expansion of consciousness, an exposure to one of the otherwise partially concealed powers of language.

As Bridgman says, "For Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* represented her full scale break out of the prison of conventional form into the colorful realm of the sensitized imagination" (124). It marked a change from mimesis of external reality to mimesis of the intersection of the present moment of consciousness with an object. It also marked the emergence of her "literature" as a piece of independent reality, as a thing in itself with no need to represent any other objective reality to justify its existence.

The new interest in the word itself--in the noun especially and the work's associative powers--was what Stein considered the essence of poetry. She says: "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. . . . Poetry is doing nothing but losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns. That is what poetry does, that is what poetry has to do no matter what kind of poetry it is" (*Lectures in America* 231). In *Tender Buttons* and other works that Stein labeled poetry, the chief linguistic operation is association²⁶ and word choice, variously labeled by structuralists as substitution, selection, and system. The association of words and concepts by similarity or opposition and the selection of a word from a group of synonyms are operations involving the vertical axis of language. Interestingly, the *Tender Buttons* style suppresses syntax (the horizontal axis)

while it expands vocabulary. Syntax becomes increasingly fragmentary, disappearing altogether in some of the more extreme passages.

In *The Making of Americans*, the chief stylistic interest is syntax. But in *Tender Buttons*, the central concern is diction, the selection of words based on association, on the basis of either similarity or opposition. The long sentence-paragraph is abandoned,²⁷ as more attention is focused on the noun. Stein writes:

After I had gone as far as I could in these long sentences and paragraphs. . . I then began very short things. . .and I resolutely realized nouns and decided not to get around them but to meet them, to handle in short to refuse them by using them and in that way my real acquaintance with poetry was begun. . . . I began to discover the names of things. . .to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names. . . . They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry. . . it made the *Tender Buttons*. (*Lectures in America* 228-35)

However, as Stein abandons extension of the sentence and enriches diction, the result is not more conventional writing but rather a new style that is as obscure as her earlier style, if not more so, and even harder to read in the traditional sense.²⁸ Namely, in a different sense *Tender Buttons* is more abstract than *The Making of Americans*, because its words are used plastically, arbitrary, and because it is less concerned with traditional discursive description. Thornton Wilder said:

In the previous centuries writers had managed pretty well by assembling a number of adjectives and adjectival clauses side by side; the reader "obeyed" by furnishing images and concepts in his mind and the resultant "thing" in the reader's mind corresponded fairly well with that in the writer's. Miss Stein felt that that process did not work any more. Her painter friends were showing clearly that the corresponding method of "description" had broken down in painting and she was sure that it had broken down in writing. . . . Miss Stein felt that writing must accomplish a revolution whereby it could report things as they were in themselves before our minds had appropriated them and robbed them of their objectivity "in pure existing." To this end she went about her house describing the objects she found there in the series of short "poems" which make up the volume called *Tender Buttons*. (viii-ix)

As the concerns of Stein's writing gradually shift from orderly analysis of the world to the immediate perception of the world by the consciousness, her writing deals increasingly

with the word itself; with mental images called up by and associated with words (signifieds), and with the qualities of words as things in themselves (signifiers).

In any discussion of Stein's writing, the word "abstract" is bound to come up. Too often the term "abstract," when used to describe Stein's writing, is taken to mean *nonrepresentational*. She never really abandons subject matter.²⁹ In her early work the subject matter was the representation of types of people or of particular people, which led to interest in the process of perception itself. As attention becomes focused on the process of perception, that process becomes as much a part of the subject matter as the object perceived. Stein said, "As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going" (*Lectures in America* 194-95).

In the style *Tender Buttons* exemplifies, the subject matter is not limited to description of the objective world; it also includes the intersection of the real world with the writer's consciousness.³⁰ As Weinstein explains, description in *Tender Buttons* "consists of a moment in the subjective continuum of the writer that corresponds to the moment of visual perception of the object" (84). Weinstein, in defining linguistic moment, states: "Each second of experience has its corresponding moment in mental time. And in any second of mental time there are words, both in and out of sequence. I would suggest that we call this linguistic in any moment of mental time the 'linguistic moment'" (62). What Stein represents in *Tender Buttons* then is this linguistic moment in the writer's consciousness. "In that moment, the moment, the words that came to Miss Stein's mind were disjoined, disembodied, unassociated, not the conventional descriptive words associated with the object in everyday discourse" (Weinstein 84).

In Gertrude Stein, the attention, the conscious perceptual apparatus, is heightened in intensity, so much so that synesthesia occurs--she speaks of *Tender Buttons* as the first composition to totally mix sight with hearing with sense. In this moment of heightened

perception, words emerge in the mind which are not words of conventional semantic correspondence, so that SAUSAGES are:

Sausages in between a glass.

There is read butter. A loaf of it is managed. Wake a question. Eat an instant, answer.

A reason for bed is this, that a decline, any decline is poison, poison is a toe a toe extractor, this means a solemn change. Hanging.

No evil is wide, any extra in leaf so strange and singular a red breast. (491)

Neil Schmitz maintains that *Tender Buttons* is a “moment by moment” record of the play of Stein’s mind with the world, and he points out that

. . . since the writer is not fixed, writing from a position, from a clarifying knowledge of the nature of things, and since the world (carafes, cushions, umbrellas, mutton, celery) is also in process, presenting only phases and attributes in their time and place of existing, nothing can be named and then classified, given as real. Everything is contingent, changing as it moves and the mind moves. . .the denoted world collapses. . . Words as buttons, fastening side to side, signifier to signified, become tender, pliable, alive in the quick of consciousness. (1207)

The obscurity is frequently due to disjunction between the two operations of language. The words selected may be similar in terms of sound or sense but do not combine with each other syntactically, or grammatically. “There is a way to see in onion and surely very surely rhubarb and a tomato, surely very surely there is that seeding” (482). Sometimes one word seems unrelated to the others in the sentence except in terms of their existence as pure words (grammatical structure, rhyme, or wordplay). For example, the words in the following sentence are linked chiefly by alliteration and grammar: “The settling of stationing cleaning is one way not to shatter scatter and scattering” (463).

By placing words in the most unorthodox sequences possible and by choosing words with no immediately known referents, the reader is faced with only two alternatives. Either he can brand the stuff nonsense and reorganize the words to make conventional sense, or he can consider the phrase as an artful construction in its own right. Kenneth Rexroth proposes that

Gertrude Stein did this with words. You say that poetry is different, disinterested, and structured. It is not the same kind of thing as "Please pass the butter" which is a simple imperative. But Gertrude Stein showed. . .that if you focus your attention on "Please pass the butter" and put it through enough permutations and combinations, it begins to take on a kind of glow, the splendor of which is called "aesthetic object." This is a trick of the manipulation of attention. (10)

The point here is that Stein's syntax, like that of the symbolists before her, seeks to disturb the reader's conventional consciousness of words and their so called corresponding realities and compels the reader to enter a realm of aesthetic possibilities and values foreign to his experience in his practical reality.

Of course, words cannot be divorced from their meanings. Each word (signifier) calls up a mental image or idea (signified). But, as Perloff put it, ". . .words, as even Gertrude Stein recognized, have meanings, and the only way to MAKE IT NEW is not to pretend that meaning doesn't exist but to take words out of their usual contexts and create new relationships among them" (*The Poetics of Indeterminacy* 75). Thus one cannot read *Tender Buttons* or works like it with the conventional concern for subject matter because the total configuration of these mental constructs cannot be used to mentally reconstruct the "subject matter."

Critics have tried to find discursive meaning in Stein by metaphorical interpretations meant to reunite the disjunctive subject and predicate or adjective and noun, or by supplying a syntax. Critics and readers should neither assume that every Stein composition contains discursive meaning in every line nor dismiss her writing as devoid of sense. Although it is sometimes possible to discern obvious discursive meaning in Stein, because of her obscurity the critic or reader often has only minimal information and must be careful not to explicate more than that information can justify.³¹ Stein critics will continue to chart a difficult path between an overdetermined and a random text, between what is meaningful and what is not, between what is acceptable and what is not. The two concepts--oscillating between liberation from meaning and an inquiry into the very production of meaning--are intimately related, both pointing to a shattering of our automatized view of reality,

indicating a process of becoming aware that conventionalized relations between reality and received modes of communication are by no means “natural” and inevitable.

Stein often plays with the word as a thing in itself in *Tender Buttons*, and she chooses words because of their associations with other words as signifiers. There is no coherent, referential meaning in them, but they are dense with multiple, open-ended connections of lexical meaning (image, association, connotation, resonance). At the same time, they function powerfully at the level of the signifier, through sound and rhythm. This successful combination of pluridimensional and presymbolic signification makes “lively words” one of the best examples yet produced of experimental writing as anti-patriarchal language. For instance, she often uses rhyme within the line, “all the joy in weak success, all the joyful tenderness, all the section and the tea, all the stouter symmetry.”

Similarly:

CHICKEN

Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third alas a dirty bird (492),

and “The sister was not a mister” (499).

She also associates words on the basis of alliteration: “the sight of a reason, the same sight sligher, the sight of a simpler negative answer, the same sore sounder, the intention to wishing, the same splendor, the same furniture” (463); “The teasing is tender and trying and thoughtful” (486). She even uses onomatopoeia:

CHICKEN

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in. (493)

The devices Stein uses in her poetry are sometimes traditional (or at least they seem so now): indirect associations of imagery, obliqueness, fragmented syntax, rhyme, rhythm,

and alliteration. What is it, then, that so many have found upsetting? Perhaps it is the lack of discursive meaning or the fact that the “subject matter” cannot be reconstructed from the words and images. But these expectations may be inappropriate for Stein’s writing.

Ironically Stein’s intention in writing *Tender Buttons* was to capture immediate experience as consciousness grapples with it; but there have been many problems in reading the book. One difficulty caused by the text is the disjunction of the two axes of language, which makes it almost impossible to read the work for conventional discursive content. This problem leads to yet another problem: the effort of trying to figure out or reconstruct the content not only exhausts readers but also overdistances them from the work itself. Such effort is futile anyway, for *Tender Buttons* demands to be dealt with on its own terms. Stein gives the reader none of the literary allusions that Pound, Eliot, or Joyce give. There is no reason to struggle to interpret or unify either the whole of *Tender Buttons* or any part of it, not only because there is no consistent pattern of meaning, but also because we violate the spirit of the work in trying to find one. Like the rest of the “lively words” writing, *Tender Buttons* functions anti-patriarchally: as presymbolic *jouissance* and as irreducibly multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning. Its primary modes are dissonance, surprise, play. As for inventing glosses for the little pieces in *Tender Buttons*, Sutherland points out that it is possible and amusing to create them, “it is perfectly idle.”

Such a procedure puts the original in the position of being a riddle, a rhetorical complication of something rather unremarkable in itself. It would be rather like an exhibition of the original table tops, guitars, pipes, and people which were the subject matter of cubist paintings. The original subject matter is or was of importance to the painter as a source of sensations, relations, ideas even, but it is not after all the beholder’s business. The beholder’s business is the picture in front of him, which is a new reality and something else, which does not add up to the nominal subject matter. (77)

As Sutherland suggests, what the reader of Stein must do is also look *at* the work rather than *through* it. The reader cannot look through it because it is a flat and opaque rather than deep and transparent style. If one does look at the work, what does one see in

Tender Buttons ? One sees the word presented as an entity in its own right. By forcing the reader to pay attention to the word, Stein makes the word seem new again. Stein does not ignore the meanings of words, as so many critics alleged. But by presenting each word in an unusual context, she directs attention not only toward its sound but also toward its sense, as the reader is forced to grapple with each word one at a time. The reader must confront the word and language itself with a sense of bewilderment, wonder, and discovery. Therefore, when we listen to this statement: "I found myself plunged into a vortex of words, burning words, cleansing words, liberating words, feeling words, and the words were all ours, and it was enough that we held them in our hands to play with them; whatever you can play with is yours, and this was the beginning of knowing" (qtd. in Walker 149), we can easily accept that it highlights the fundamental seriousness of Stein's most playful texts. They are all based on the premise that knowledge must begin with a knowledge of language. Rigorously investigating its laws and testing its limits, Stein's texts continue to challenge their readers to a new awareness of the system of language as both the necessary instrument and the inevitable "prison" of thought. Stein is fully conscious that poetry's role is to rejuvenate and revitalize the word: "you can love a name and if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, violently more persistently more tormentedly. Anybody knows how anybody calls out the name of anybody one loves. And so that is poetry really loving the name of anything. . . " (*Lectures in America* 232).

In respect of the attack on conventions and norms, Stein's name is sometimes linked with other writers of the twentieth century, especially Joyce, Eliot, and Pound. Those writers also use language in innovative ways and are difficult and obscure. But their obscurity is of a different sort than Stein's. Joyce, Eliot, and Pound all use words with cultural information, an historic density and a depth of literary allusions. Sutherland sees the writings of Pound and Eliot as less modern than Stein's: "The school of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound is evidently of the twentieth century, but with their everlasting historicism,

their infatuation with tradition. . . they are still not weaned from the superstitions of the nineteenth century” (152). On the other hand, Stein “insists upon using words as if they never before realized in literature” (Weinstein 56).³²

Stein’s writing presents unique and perhaps more difficult problems than those Joyce presents to the reader. Hoffman points out that Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* provide the reader “a seemingly inexhaustible well” of allusions, but “the student of Gertrude Stein is offered slim rewards in this direction, for in her conscious drive toward abstraction, Miss Stein reduced the psychologic and mythic overtones of her writing to such an extent that occasional appearance seems almost accidental” (*The Development of Abstractionism* 18). Stein does not give the reader any clues that can be used to solve the puzzle of her obscurity as does Joyce with what Brinnin calls his “acrostic methods of mythological reference”: “Joyce is bound by references; his technical puzzles can be solved with erudition, patience, and ingenuity. As Picasso supposedly said of him. . . ‘He is an obscure writer all the world can understand.’ Because she offers no references by which bearings can be taken, Gertrude Stein cannot be ‘solved,’ she can only be accepted” (Brinnin 304).

The root of Stein’s difficulty lies not in the meanings of obscure words or erudite allusions, but in the fact that she pushed language to the very limits of intelligibility in her apparently systematic exploration of its workings. Stein herself recognized that her writing was unique in its own time. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she writes: “She [Gertrude Stein] realises that in english literature in her time she is the only one. She has always known it and now she says it” (72). With the advent of *le nouveau roman* and the theater of the absurd, however, Stein no longer is quite as alone in her writing as she once was. What once seemed shockingly radical and incomprehensible in Stein’s work seems much tamer in light of literature produced fifty years later, just as the assimilation of cubist techniques by twentieth-century culture has made Picasso’s art seem less barbaric and revolutionary. Stein herself commented on the slow acceptance of the new in art: “For a

very long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts. In the history of the refused in the arts and literature the rapidity of the change is always startling. . . . When the acceptance comes. . . the thing created becomes a classic” (515). Indeed, she is among the very best examples of her own assertion: “Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical. That is the reason why the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic. . .” (514). Her contemporaries were seldom her contemporaries; most of them were fifty years behind.

Stein’s real contemporaries³³ can be found in Douglas Messerli’s *“Language” Poetries* (1987), Ron Silliman’s *In the American Tree* (1986), and Paul Hoover’s *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994), which are the most problematic anthologies of contemporary American poetry since Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* in 1960.³⁴ Although the Language poets vary widely in their specific backgrounds and concerns, as Messerli notes in his introduction to *“Language” Poetries*, they were associated in one way or another with a group. Since 1976, according to him, they “have published over 150 books of poetry and criticism--demonstrating a resourcefulness and energetic rethinking of the nature of poetry both in social and aesthetic terms” (1). In his introduction to *In the American Tree*, Silliman acknowledges a wide range of transformations and challenges within American poetry: “. . . The pluralization of American writing has permanently altered the face of literature, and for the better” (xxi). Generally the Language poets turn to extra-canonical models, or to what Silliman euphemistically calls “a latent tradition” (xvi). They turn either to poets who are still largely neglected--Zukofsky, Stein, the Russian Futurists--or to the neglected work of more canonical figures--Williams’s *Kora*, Ashbery’s *The Tennis Court Oath*, Creeley’s *Pieces*. Within the little magazines like *This*, *Tottel’s*, *Roof*, *Hills*, *Miam*,

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and *The Difficulties*, poets such as Ron Silliman, Barret Watten, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Robert Grenier, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer, and Clark Coolidge developed modes of writing that implicitly criticized the norms of persona-centered, “expressive” poetry of the 1960s,³⁵ and explicitly focused attention on the material of language itself, and desired to reintroduce politics into discussions of aesthetics.

The “Language Sampler” appearing in the Winter 1982 *Paris Review* bears the following headnote by Jonathan Galassi:

One of the most frequently mentioned and least understood developments in American poetry in recent years has been the emergence of an ideologically, psychologically and linguistically self-conscious movement, centered largely on the East and West Coasts, which some observers have dubbed Language Poetry. Like most pioneers in new literary directions, the Language Poets, for the most part, deny they belong to a formally constituted group and eschew the name imposed on them by casual critics. Nevertheless, for better or for worse, a shared tendency--or at the least, a common preoccupation with “the resonating of the wordness of language,” as Charles Bernstein puts it--has been recognized by the outside world, and to some extent by many of these poets themselves. (75)

The most recent “group” of American poets to be actually capable of bringing about a major shift of attention in American poetry and poetics is the so-called “Language” school. Language writers, however, have consistently refused to locate themselves as members of a coherent group. Ron Silliman mentions that Language poets’ “work might be said to ‘cluster’ about such magazines as *This*, *Big Deal*, *Totter’s*. . . . Called variously ‘language centered,’ ‘minimal,’ ‘nonreferential formalism,’ ‘diminished referentiality,’ ‘structuralist.’ Not a *group* but a *tendency* in the work of many” (Introduction to “The Dwelling Place: 9 Poets” 104). In the Canadian journal *Open Letter* guest edited by Steve McCaffery, once again Language poetry seemed to argue not for a movement but rather a disposition. Their poetics cannot be understood as derived from a shared theoretical base. By the same token, Language poetry resists all attempts to totalize or to conduct a general survey by the imposition of unifying schemes or rigid structures. It keeps the marginal status and the problematic identity in that it resists self-certainty, the “expository logic and speech-derived

syntax that dominate contemporary writing practice” (Bernstein, *Content’s Dream* 239); it chooses instead the uncertain processes of formal investigation and critique (*Ibid.* 371).

In spite of being an extraordinarily diverse group,³⁶ all Language writers are involved with writing projects which fracture the surface regularities of the written text, and which interrupt conventional reading processes. Jed Rasula comments: “Reading through the mass of theoretical statements and position papers in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, *In the American Tree*, and the book-length issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (Vol. 4), it’s evident that the only issues about which a consensus was reached among Language Writers were a restoration of the reader as a co-producer of the text and an emphasis on the materiality of the signifier. Yet even these have been subject to reconsideration” (von Halberg 319). Also, the dissolution of theory into practice and vice versa might be cast as the defining character of a movement whose founding premise is the intransparency of language. The ongoing process of consideration and reconsideration helps keep Language poetry from assuming a fixed position: what is kept is a commitment to restoring the reader and, to cite Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, “repossessing the word” (*LB* ix). The solidarity among them, I suppose, is that the movement of their poetry works as a mode of resistance to institutional or critical demands for fixed aesthetic value and direction.³⁷

The Language writing movement presents itself as a revival of an earlier mode of avant-gardism, not merely in its establishment of alternative means of distribution but also in its self-conscious taking of aesthetic positions, its frequent production of manifestos and other statements. As an oppositional literary practice, Language writing questions the tendencies of mainstream poetry, and, on the other hand, its own status and forces us to question its question. To cite Bernstein, “The question is always: what is the meaning of this language practice; what values does it propagate; to what degree does it encourage an understanding, a visibility, of its own values or to what degree does it repress that awareness? To what degree is it in dialogue with the reader and to what degree does it command or hypnotize the reader? Is its social function liberating or repressive?” (*Content’s Dream* 224-25).

It is worth recalling Raymond Williams's comments on hegemony, and his concept of the emergent and residual formation to understand the situation of the Language poets. Williams stresses that

a lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. . . . Moreover. . . it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (*ML* 112)

An emergent cultural formation is a cultural practice that is in the process of producing new forms of articulation, new ideas, styles, and conventions that cannot be accounted for as the determinate result of existing social formations. The emergent group cannot fully comprehend itself within the available terms of the pre-existent social order, nor can it be fully comprehended from within that knowledge produced by the dominant order. Williams insists that an emergent cultural formation occupies a zone of incomplete articulation, "where what is not fully articulated. . . comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble" (*PL* 120). This astute analysis points to one of the greatest weaknesses of current theories of language and culture.

The Language poets are part of an emergent cultural formation. But the analysis cannot end there. Sometimes a residual formation can keep alive ideas, ideals and practices whose radical potential remains a viable possibility if relocated or transformed according to the changed historical moment. The Language poets have aligned themselves with such a residual cultural formation, the American left, which has strong roots in the socialist movements of Europe, and in their cultural practices. As a cultural group these poets are located both as an emergent formation that is still in the process of emergence, which Williams calls "a structural formation at the very edge of semantic availability" (*ML* 134), and in a residual cultural formation that the dominant culture has violently expunged from itself. That dual character of the new aesthetics is scattered through their poetry and prose.

Thus, my focus will be that seemingly hermetic language of Language poetry, growing out of a critique of referentiality and “the narrowness and provincialism of mainstream literary norms” (Silliman et al. 262) contributes to the pluralization and decentralization of American poetry, not only in an aesthetic nature but also in a political one. In the broadest sense, Language poetry proposes a way of life, a political praxis, in which the disruption of habitual patterns of linguistic control may result in the liberation of the committed reader from the whole matrix of social mechanisms defining late capitalism.

The journal, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, devoted itself to poetics. As the editors later explained, they hoped to emphasize “a spectrum of writing that places its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning, that takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter. . . and to develop more fully the latticework of those involved in aesthetically related activity.” Further, Bernstein and Andrews attempted to generate “discussion on the relation of writing to politics” to the end of producing an “analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole and of the place that alternative forms of writing and reading might occupy in its transformation” (“Repossessing the Word” ix-x).

Thus a third of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* is taken up by discussions of poetry and politics,³⁸ discussions laced with the names of such Marxist critics as Althusser, Macherey, and Jameson. In a pivotal essay called “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” Ron Silliman gives us the classic Marxist position espoused by many of the Language poets (232).

Silliman takes as his epigraph Marx’s famous statement (1859). Applied to poetic language, this becomes:

(1) the stage of historical development determines the *natural* laws (or if you prefer the terminology, the underlying structures) of poetry; (2) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language; (3) the primary impact on language and language arts, of the rise of capitalism has been in the area of reference and is directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish (*LB* 122).

Whereas early tribal societies preserved the “expressive integrity of the gestural nature of language” (what may look like “nonsense” syllables to us), “what happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of ‘realism,’ the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought” (*LB* 125). Silliman links lingual transparency with the rise of capitalism. Language, under capitalism, is thus “transformed (deformed) into referentiality”: when words and meaning are “surplus,” when they are blindly consumed, they become merely transparent.

Steve McCaffery has extended that notion in some quite radical ways. He argues, like Silliman, that capitalist society and its distinctly classist version of reality are transmitted through language by dematerializing it. Furthermore, he goes on to characterize and condemn reference purely in terms of a capitalist market economy (*LB* 161). Reference, he suggests, being an exchange-oriented commodity, is merely a “surplus-value” (*North of Intention* 13). When he suggests that reference is an example of commodity fetishism in language, he seems to want a language of use-value, not of surplus-value, a language that emphasizes the signifier and so the production, not the consumption, of language (*Ibid.* 14).

Developing this position, Bruce Andrews, Barrett Watten, Charles Bernstein, and others have also discussed “reference” and an easily packaged “meaning” as commodity fetishes of language use within a capitalist system, as linguistic products with their mode of production suppressed. Their point is as Perloff succinctly explains, that “[language] . . . is itself always already politically and ideologically motivated” (*Poetic Licence* 295). As McCaffery declares, “[The] linguistic promise that the signified gives of something beyond language i’ve come to feel as being central to capitalism (the fetish of commodity). . . . To demystify this fetish and reveal the human relationships involved within the labour process

of language will involve the humanization of the linguistic Sign by means of a centering of language within itself" (*LB* 189).³⁹

"The rise of capitalism," writes Silliman, "sets the preconditions for the rise of the novel, the invention of the optical illusion of realism, the final breakdown of gestural poetic forms" (*LB* 126). Still, poets like Silliman and Bernstein are on to something important when they lament the "invisibility" of language in our "literary" culture. "The words," says Silliman sadly, "are never our own. Rather, they are our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization" (*LB* 167). For many of these poets, then, to expose or foreground linguistic "means of production" through techniques of disruption has been, by analogy, to expose the repressed, and repressive, features of capitalist thought. To revive poetry, "to change the language," for them means that one must try to "Write what cannot be written," to produce what cannot be "read"--in short, to "derange the language" from its current conventionalities. A similar notion is elaborated in Kristeva's writing: "Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures" (*Revolution* 16); a critique of bourgeois instrumentalist discourse, in other words, is inherent in the hermetic nature of difficult poetry.

Fredric Jameson's recent challenge to the poetic practice of the Language poets makes urgent the need to formulate the aesthetical-political positions of these poets. Ironically, Jameson and some Language writers all base their critiques of certain literary modes on the notion of reification. But this single notion has led to quite opposing conclusions. Despite his critique of presumed homologies between textual and economic production in *The Political Unconscious* (43-46), one might expect that Jameson's Marxism would align him more closely than many critics with the Language writers' ideological project. His well-known essays on postmodernism, however, show this not to be the case. In these essays, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" and "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of

Late Capitalism,” Jameson finds in Language writing two formal features that he thinks especially characteristic of postmodernism in general: stylistic pastiche, and a quasi-schizophrenic “breakdown of the relationship between signifiers” (“Consumer Society” 119). On the relationship that he sees between capitalism and the postmodern, both as a period and as a style, Jameson is quite explicit: “I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system” (125). Structurally, Jameson echoes the Language writers’ own claims about an analogy between language forms and socioeconomic systems, while revising the terms of the analogy. In direct contrast to the poets themselves, Jameson reads the stylistic disruptions of Language writing as merely symptomatic of, rather than critical of, consumer capitalism.

The attack on the voice epitomizes the main aspects of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ and it certainly seems to accord with the “disappearance of the subject” and the fading of “depth” and history which Jameson discerns in postmodernity (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1-54). Perhaps, though, it is misleading to describe Language poetry, as Jameson does, as having “adopted schizophrenic fragmentation as its fundamental aesthetic” (*Ibid.* 28).⁴⁰ Jameson means to draw attention to the breakdown of the signifying chain in this writing which produces “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers,” a “linguistic malfunction” which prevents us from unifying “the past, present and future of the sentence” and “of our own experience” (*Ibid.* 26-27).

Jameson implicitly attributes Perelman’s schizophrenic aesthetic to the process of reification in late capitalist society. Thus it is interesting to find Perelman and others claiming that their aesthetic is based on a critique of precisely that same fragmenting process. When Silliman carries on the most sustained analysis of the interplay of realiam and reification, and McCaffery writes that “Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. . . has been central to my own considerations of reference” (*LB* 189), we have to examine their

claims rather than to accept Jameson's argument without any question. They intend to reveal the foregrounding the materiality of language, far from being a schizophrenic disorder or an hallucinatory escapism, instead as "a political writing practice that unveils [and] demystifies the creation & sharing of meaning" (*LB* 135).

For Charles Altieri, the politics of Language writing are anything but "plain to see," and he treats skeptically the view of description and referentiality as somehow intrinsically capitalist forms of language use. Seeing the Language writers as themselves reifying language, Altieri further objects that their allegedly radical views of reader participation and freedom "can easily be recast to support or reflect basic capitalist practices. Why is the process of audience freedom not best understood along the lines of neoconservative economics: is not such freedom to recast inherited materials a perfect exemplar of the right to treat language as a commodity to be manipulated in whatever ways I can get away with?" ("Without Consequences" 305)

Marjorie Perloff occupies yet another point on this spectrum of possible stands on the Language poetics-ideology connection. In an early, influential essay-review on Language writing, Perloff, one of our best readers of this work, attends almost exclusively to formal matters, and raises the topic of politics only to give it rather short shrift in a couple of paragraphs. Nevertheless she asks the same question that Altieri and Jameson, in their different ways, ask: "whether the calling into question of 'normal' language rules, or received discourses. . . is a meaningful critique of capitalism" (*The Dance of the Intellect* 233).

Meanwhile, Altieri's charge that the writers themselves reify language in the process of critiquing reification is anticipated by one of Language writing's important precursors, Jackson Mac Low. The argument for "the rights of the signifier" has been questioned by Jackson Mac Low, himself a writer on the Left in the sense that "the larger part of the work of giving or finding meaning devolves upon the perceivers" (*OL* 26). But even then the question remains whether the calling into question of "normal" language rules, or received

discourses that I have been describing is a meaningful critique of capitalism. In an essay called “Language-Centered,” pointing out the homology between reference and reification, Mac Low observes that the “brilliant, seemingly Marxist, attack on reference as a kind of fetishism contributing to alienation. . . is a dangerous argument, easily turned against its proponents. What could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference?” (*OL* 23) What critics whom I have cited do not sufficiently acknowledge is that, in postmodern culture, any ideological struggle gets carried on in highly mediated form; indeed, the Language writers take this very mediation and its mechanisms as a central subject. Politics in poetry is not only “subject- or theme-based” in the more conventional examples but also much from “reader-writer relationships, from material choices of publication and distribution, and from the social relations that inhere in stylistic choices and embodiments” (Lazer 381). Thus, the Language writers’ ideological claims for their project are best measured instrumentally, in terms of direct results in the “real” world.

Language poets, however, do not argue that language can be purely material and “nonreferential,” unless perhaps as music or gesture; it has no verbal incarnation. In fact in his note Silliman says flatly, “Words are not, finally, non-referential. For they originate in interactions with the world” (“The Dwelling Place” 118). Silliman takes Robert Creeley’s well-known statement, “poems are not referential, or at least importantly so” to be close to the mark in that the Language poets seek simply to diminish the importance of reference:

By the creation of non-referring structures . . . , disruption of context . . . , forcing the meanings in upon themselves until they cancel out or melt By effacing one or more elements of referential language . . . , the balance within and between the words shifts, redistributes. (Ibid. 118)

As Jerome McGann points out (640), Silliman makes an important distinction between reference and referentiality. It is referentiality not reference that is the silly corpse Silliman writes of. That words refer is not the problem; the problem is, for Silliman, that capitalism

requires words to do nothing but refer, to reside inertly on the page with a readily discernible meaning waiting to be culled from them by a reader who demands of his/her thinking faculties the least possible effort. Lee Bartlett's characterization of the movement's general response to reference is in accord with Silliman's: "The issue is not, then, reference per se, but a reaction to a prevailing poetics which seems to be unaware of the social implications which over just above its acceptance as a first given of an unquestioning referentiality" (Bartlett 748). Bernstein also notes, "Not 'death' of the referent--rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has" (*OL* 7-22). One way to recharge the use of "referential vectors" is by "making the structures of meaning in language more tangible and in that way allowing for the maximum resonance for the medium" (*OL* 35). It is that Language poetry seeks--a reverberating sort of reference.

Seen in this context, contrary to the implications of Jameson's schizophrenia analogy and other critiques, Language poets seem to suggest that there are alternative ways of structuring our experiences. Such alternatives foreground our social relations, not reify them. Moreover, Language poets, ironically, can be seen to meet Jameson's call for a new political art whose "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" in this confusing postmodern space of late capitalism may achieve "a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing [the world space of multinational capital], in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion" ("Postmodernism" 54). Thus most Language poets remind us of the socially contrived basis of any writing. They do not do so, however, by abandoning modes of writing or reifying language. "Modes cannot be escaped," Bernstein argues, "but they can be taken for granted. They can also be meant" (*LB* 44). It is the exploration of the possibilities for meaning-production, which lies behind most Language poetry.

It is important to note that although the Language poets rigorously deconstruct the notions behind their contemporary poetry, the deconstruction is often followed by an attempt to develop a constructive writing practice. Language poets' questioning of, disruption of, language and linguistic norms cannot be overlooked; it occurs at such a basic level that the reader is required to participate, to question, to probe, to leap from word to syllable to sound, to disorganize and recognize the words presented. Language poetry often leaves the connections between various elements open, thus allowing the reader to produce the connections between those elements. In this sense, in the early essay (1980) about labeling the movement, Mac Low prefers the term "perceiver-centered" rather than "language-centered" or "nonreferential" to describe what came to be called Language poetry.

Language writing proposes and makes necessary new methods of reading which force us to reconsider the political dimensions of literary activity. Importantly, the ambiguity of the structure of Language writing reminds us that any connections drawn are arbitrary. It is the framing process itself, and by extension the process of ideological framing, which is no longer taken for granted. Since the rejection of the "conduit theory of communication" is at the very heart of Language poetry, the concept needs clarification. In an essay called "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," Bernstein writes:

The distortion is to imagine that knowledge has an "object" outside of the language of which it is a part--that words refer to "transcendental signifieds" rather than being part of a language which itself produces meaning in terms of its grammar, its conventions, its "agreements in judgment." Learning a language is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were simply a matter of matching up "signifiers with signifieds," as if signifieds already existed and we were just learning new names for them. . . . Rather, we are initiated by language into a [the] world, and we see and understand the world through the terms and meanings that come into play in this acculturation. . . . In this sense, our conventions (grammar, codes, territorialities, myths, rules, standards, criteria) are our nature. (60)⁴¹

In theory, Language poetry, by actively seeking to be "unreadable," transforms the formerly passive reader into an active meaning maker, with the inevitable concomitant of political awakening. In most Language poetry, "the perceiver [not the writer] becomes the

center--the meaning-finder" (*In the American Tree* 494)--an observation implying that "reader-centered" might be a more accurate term than "language-centered" for the Language writing. Language poetry is not inscribed with a readily discernible meaning. Rather, its meanings are "inseparable from the language in process" (Messerli 3). Lyn Hejinian argues in "The Rejection of Closure" that such "open" writing "is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers" (134-35).⁴² The reader, however, decides to reconfigure a poem and to deal with its scattering of words. The poem helps the reader question the process of reading; it requires a new, exploratory relationship between writer, text, and reader. At this point, Language poetry blends, in differing ways, the roles of reader and writer.

In response to such arguments, on the other hand, Tenney Nathanson wonders "whether what readers confronting [Language writing] in fact experience is the liberating effect of being able to produce rather than consume meaning. It is at any rate far from obvious what it might mean to produce a reading of one's own here" (311). What invites objections such as Nathanson's is that "the reader" in Language theory tends to remain a rather monolithic category. Moreover, there was a heated exchange of opinion on the political and moral, as well as aesthetic, value of Language poetry. Language writing has been criticized for a supposed self-regarding cliquishness and defensiveness in the face of criticism from "outsiders." A typical argument is the attack like Tom Clark's "Stalin as Linguist," which contrasts Language writing with the work of William Carlos Williams: "Williams's historic decision to base his writing on the spoken American language. . . was the great democratic gesture of poetry in this century, expanding its audience to fulfill the grandly inclusive aims of Walt Whitman. The language school has set out to draw back the perimeters of that audience, contracting poetry until it fits around only themselves" (304). In another review article of July 1985, Clark accuses Language poets of a "gang

mentality,” because by working together against the conventionally referential and representational capacities of language, they rob language of its emotive power; he finds them guilty of preaching only to the already converted, discouraging differences of opinion, and hastening a “future in which discourse is terminated and all that’s left of language are the fragmented inarticulate remains, a non-referential solipsistic muzak” (11).⁴³

What is mostly interesting here is the terms of Clark’s attack: the Language writers are antidemocratic, and they talk only to themselves. In Clark’s view, poets address either everybody or only themselves; and the former is what they should do. What is lacking in his argument seems to be the sense of a middle ground. That middle ground is an audience neither grandly inclusive on the one hand nor self-regarding on the other; to be sure the audience with a high tolerance for opacity of language. At this point, what Bernstein says, in his interview with Tom Beckett, is most illuminating: “It’s a mistake, I think, to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing. As many others have pointed out, a poem exists in a matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the formation of an individual text than any personal qualities of the life or voice of an author” (*Content’s Dream* 408).

Bernstein, in the *Paris Review* introduction, also points out that “Distinctions between. . . prose and poetry are often not observed.” Furthermore, “Issues of poetics, when not explicitly determining the genre of the work, often permeate its mode of address--a tendency that can pull the poem out of the realm of purely personal reference and into a consideration of the interaction among the seemingly competing spheres of politics, autobiography, fiction, philosophy, common sense, song, etc. . . . There is a willingness to use, within the space of a text, a multiplicity of such different modes, which counts more on a recognition of the plastic qualities of traditional genres and styles than on their banishment” (“Language Sampler” 76).

The relation of poetry and theory seems to be one of the crucial issues now in understanding how poets' theory has come to confront the expanding crisis of poetry. Bernstein suggests that Language writing offers the best hope for breaking down the impasse between poetry and theory that has led to the marginalization of poetry within the academy. The notion of a theoretical poetry unsettles all of our expectations about poetry, raising troubling questions about the status of the individual poem.

On the other hand, it is precisely this "blurring," "avoidance," perhaps "willful destruction of the distinction between theoretical and practical genres" (Lavender 184) that has been called into question by critics of Language poetry. Common complaints are as follows: "Too bad that their poems aren't as interesting as their theories," and "this work is not poetry, it's prose." Even Tom Beckett, in his interview with Bernstein, remarked: "Charles, one frequent criticism of many of the contributors to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in general and you specifically is that the theoretical essays you write, say, are considered to be more 'alive' than your poems" (*Content's Dream* 402).

However, having developed an awareness and understanding of the materiality of language through an encounter with several texts, both "theoretic" and "poetic," why would one return to read more? One might imagine a meditation on this matter, by a skeptical reader, along the following lines: If a poem is a demonstration of a theory, then once one has read the theory, is there any need to read more than a few exemplary poems to "get" it? Still a question remains: Why continue writing or reading Language poetry?

While this meditation has raised many of the theoretical premises of Language poetry, it remains stuck in the dilemma of how to conceive of a "theoretical poem." Bernstein denies the very distinction between poetry and theory⁴⁴ by rewriting the famous projectivist dictum "Form is never more than an extension of content" as a credo for the Language poets: "Theory is never more than the extension of practice." Bernstein goes on to explain how the poet's approach to language and genre yields actively engaged theories. From the poet's point of view, all writing must be seen to inhabit the field of poetic / social

composition (*In the American Tree* 488). A theoretical poetry has designs on breaking down not just the distinctions between poetry and theory but those between reading and writing, creation and criticism, life and politics. The individual poem, for the Language poets, is a site in which the ongoing activity of theoretical poetry can occur, a site for theoretical recognitions about the language in which we live.

What is the significance of the loose collective enterprise known as Language writing? Language writing promises to provoke and sustain a more enriched text milieu for the reading and writing of poetry. This body of writing--by virtue of its attention to an oppositional school within modernism, Williams, Stein, Zukofsky instead of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and its addition of an original twist to that reading by recourse to European poststructuralism--forces us to rethink our relationship to and appropriation of modernist poetry. It also asks us to develop new methods of reading and criticism to come to terms with a poetry emphasizing the signifier. As an active critique of the canonical poetics of the 1970s and 1980s, Language writers' collective practice posits alternative literary histories, alternative ways of reading, alternative conceptions of poetry. To know this diverse body of Language writing is to enlarge our sense of what poetry is and what poetry can be, as well as our understanding of the present.

How do we read this writing along with Stein's work, that questions our defining notions of poetry, narrative, language, writing, literature, and finally the world? Stein might well ask of her critics some fifty years after her death: "Why don't you read the way I write?" Posing a direct challenge to the assumptions of academic literary criticism in general, the work of Stein and Language poets has not lent itself to the hermeneutic and thematic textual explications that have dominated critical approaches in the twentieth century. Commentary has abounded with marginalizing terms such as "hermetic," "difficult," "experimental," and "inaccessible." The more radically a literary text departs from familiar conventions, the more actively the reader must struggle to determine how to read it. Resolutely refusing to provide the traditional pleasures of narrative verisimilitude,

the text forces its audience to share the author's movement toward knowledge in the process of reading.

It is true that the formal disruptions of Language writing seek to create, in Andrews's words, a condition of "'unreadability'--that which requires new readers, and teaches new readings" (*LB* 31). As Andrews further argues, the poems demand from readers active participation, the relinquishment of passively unself-conscious reading habits (*LB* 36). Or as McCaffrey says, the poetry requires "a productive attitude to text," "a writerly stance on the reader's part" (*LB* 162). It is noteworthy, however, the terms in which Andrews and McCaffery discuss the relation of reader to text derive from Roland Barthes's distinction between "the readerly" and "the writerly," where he also argues that "the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*S/Z* 4). Barthes's text seems to have all the features of Language writing. "The Text is what is situated at the limit of the rules of speech-act (rationality, readability, etc.)," he writes (*RL* 58). It is "without closure," "plural," a "weave of signifiers," "entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes: cultural languages. . . antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony" (*RL* 59-60). The notion that the Text "asks of the reader a practical collaboration" in "play, activity, production, practice" (*Image-Music-Text* 156) associates Stein and Language poets with Barthes; the ideas of the latter can be seen as possible ways of reading the former. Therefore, Barthes is the subject of the next section.

(3) Seductions of Language

To introduce Roland Barthes means to present his ideas; but Barthes is more than a set of ideas; thus to introduce Barthes is to reduce him. Or, in other words: to read Barthes for the ideas is not to read Barthes. Barthes's writing liberates itself from an entropic rhetoric that would engender the critic's sense of omniscience and authority. He

conceptualizes an idealized theory of writing as an activity which refuses all settled doctrines and is consequently open-ended. Instead of establishing the authority of instruction, the Barthesian critical essay becomes a new form of experimental literature that destabilizes accepted meanings and subverts the power inherent in traditional categories.⁴⁵ Barthes's is, then, a theory of persistent fluidity, of an irresolution which would keep the text alive from generation to generation while allowing no one reading to own it.

Helen Vendler, on the other hand, calls "the overvaluing of the hunger for innumerable new objects" a flaw in the Barthesian aesthetic ("The Medley Is the Message" 72). If flaw it is, however, so then is what motivates his valuing the new, namely, his desire to question "received opinions" and to test the limits of thought. His target, in his own words, became, as his work developed, not merely "the petit-bourgeois good conscience, but the symbolic and semantic system of our entire civilization; it is not enough to seek to change contents, we must above all aim at *fissuring* the meaning-system itself: we must emerge from the Occidental enclosure" (*The Semiotic Challenge* 8). For Barthes, that enclosure is most apparent as a desire to constrict language. Through his long rebellion against the intellectual and institutional practices in which he was raised, we can see his shift from the analysis of structures to the analysis of processes of signification. A properly attentive reading of Barthes brings out the extent to which critical concepts are ceaselessly transformed or undone by the activity of self-conscious writing.

Therefore, I will not treat here Barthes's texts as Text but as an interweaving of significations and intertextual citations floating against the oppressiveness of language whose ultimate task is to define knowledge. I will see them as stages of the Barthesian quest to challenge the privilege of a transcendent or systematic model of conceptual thought.⁴⁶ According to Philip Thody, the difference made by Barthes is as a writer "who believes that the only way to change society is to change the language in which people think. . . [and] to write in a highly original manner and to annoy people by so doing" (68). Throughout a wide range of his discourses, we can view, as Vendler remarked, a French

intellectual, made marginal by his own destiny, struggle through the generic life offered his generation, not submitting to a single *prise de conscience*, but instead suffering restlessly all the intellectual currents of his time, finding not a single framework through which to orient himself, but rather locating, over time, a plurality of frameworks, each offering the advantage of a different “fix” on the world, each proffering a new discourse, a new lexicon, a new mentality (“The Medley Is the Message” 73).

The story of Barthes’s “intellectual itinerary” tells the traces of structuralism and poststructuralism. In the early writing of Barthes, among others, the aim was a full-scale science of the text modelled on the linguistics of Saussure and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Barthes insists that structuralism is always an activity, an open-ended practice of reading, rather than a “method” convinced of its own right reason. In his early writings, we can see his concern with how signs signify and how cultures arbitrarily assign meanings to recurring phenomena. His later texts, as Christopher Norris points out, maintain a dialogue not only with structuralism but also with poststructuralist thinkers whose influence Barthes both acknowledges and keeps at a certain protective distance (*Deconstruction* 10). Barthes’s lifelong hostility to representation began to ally itself cursorily with the conclusions reached by Derrida and de Man, yet the reasons for Barthes’s espousal of a language of pure differences could scarcely themselves be more different. With Derrida and de Man the denial of representation takes the form of a thoroughgoing epistemological skepticism which relentlessly questions the basis and validity of imputing any properties of presence or re-presentation to textuality. Barthes’s concerns, however, seem to be far from epistemological; if anything, his objection to representation is moralistic. That is to say, that what he spent a writing life challenging is what we might call the ethics of representation, the ways in which a society transforms culture into nature and thereby stamps its products with the seal of authenticity.

If one were to try to determine which terms recur most frequently through Barthes’s “intellectual adventure,” one would certainly find that the word “language” is one of the

most often used. It is, in fact, a word that characterizes the entire *episteme* of the twentieth century. Language was a model for all sign systems, according to Barthes.⁴⁷ Barthes's attention was always resolutely fixed on language: on the nature of the linguistic sign, on the workings of discourse, on texts--on the most complex, elaborated, and unpredictable uses of language. It is clear that Barthes's career was an exemplary search for understanding how man creates meaning, a lifelong exploration of man's definition as *homo significans*, the maker of meaning in signs. In anthropology, in linguistics, philosophy, and the discourse upon literature, this has been a characteristic preoccupation of our age, and no one addressed himself to it so persistently, so multifariously, so ingeniously, as Barthes.

For centuries, men had believed in their own innocence before an objective world, and in the innocence of language as the means of communicating information about that world. The world, they assumed, existed independently of both language and themselves, prior to both; it was eternal "nature" itself, not a product of human history. Language, it was understood, was the means of gaining access to objective experience of such a world. However, language is contaminated by history. No one owns language or invents it; it comes to each of us from the culture, "already used, corrupted, tired" (Michels 160). Historical contaminations have certainly worsened since Barthes, and at the precise rate at which corporate mass culture has been gaining control of our systems of meaning. Public language--visual as well as verbal--has degenerated within the realms of politics, advertising, and entertainment into commodity fetishism, and there is now a virtually "unlimited technological reproduction and near universal diffusion" of this language (Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" 21). Saturated with the ideology of bourgeois capitalism, it works unceasingly to shape values and beliefs, indeed, our very "structures of feeling." Not only has the dominant culture, with its powerful technological resources, managed to cheapen consciousness, it has managed to constitute a subject within its victims which identifies with its oppressor.

“Language is never innocent” (16), Barthes wrote in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), the book that began his career as the latest in a long line of provocative postwar French critics that included Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Merleau-Ponty. He argues that literary style, from the *style classique* to the “zero-degree” or transparent writing of Camus, is far from innocent: that style is in fact economic, and arises out of an ideological condition. Men now recognized not only that nature takes the shape of their own minds, but also that language is the means by which they shape and perceive nature. In other words, men recognized that their experience of the world is determined largely by their language, and that their ability to express themselves is determined by the culture in which they find their language. Seen in this light, language can no longer be taken for granted; it becomes, in Barthes’s word, “problematic”—it reveals its own complicity in history; it is significative in itself, quite apart from any content with which a writer may wish to fill it. For Barthes, the most important consequence of these views is that the modern writer has come to feel an urgent need to justify himself as a writer—to doubt the very possibility of expression without somehow trying to make language innocent again.

Modern writers have become increasingly skeptical that there are objective meanings in the world, and literature has accordingly become less representational and expressive. It is this effort to remake language in the act of writing that accounts for the characteristic absence of traditional content in much modern literature. When the change in the conception of the relation of literature to “the world” occurred, he tells us in *Writing Degree Zero*, “literature” began to become truly conscious of itself, no longer trying to make its form and linguistic surface as unnoticeable as possible in the interest of a “reality” it was written to reveal, but instead calling attention to that surface, its *writing*, as its entire being. For Barthes, this change implies a new relation between the critic and the literary text. It is no longer appropriate, he has said, to think of a text as “a species of fruit with a kernel (an apricot, for example), the flesh being the form and the pit being the content”; “it would be better to see it as an onion, a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body

contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes--which envelop nothing other than the unity of its own surfaces" ("Style and Its Image" 10).

The writer as "subject," Barthes says, no longer thinks of himself as an "individual plenitude," a fullness that may be evacuated in language, but instead as an "emptiness" around which he "weaves a discourse" that is "infinitely transformed" in such a way that "all writing *which does not lie* designates not the internal attributes of the subject," but the "absence" of subject. "Language is not the predicate of a subject. . . [it] is the subject" (*CT* 85-86). Modern literature, as Gerald Bruns therefore characterizes it, no longer expresses itself through language; "it is rather language which now expresses itself through literature" (99).

The "modern" writer attempts to avoid self-deception by trying to reduce language to pure form, to a truly innocent or neutral state which Barthes calls its "zero-degree of signification." "Modern" poetry, Barthes says, "carries its own nature within itself, and does not need to signal its identity outwardly" (*WDZ* 43). Barthes's point is that "modern" literature aims to be a potentiality, the empty form of a meaning to be filled--but filled by the critic or reader. That is what he is getting at when he says that the critic covers the text with his own language. Thus, there is a "problematics" of language for the critic as well as for the writer; according to Barthes, "the writer and the critic meet in the same difficult situation, facing the same object: language" (*CT* 64).⁴⁸

Writing Degree Zero analyzes the relationship between the writer and the available language. As Julia Kristeva maintains in a 1971 essay on the work of Barthes, his aim is to specify the key role of literature in the system of discourses. He does this by giving center stage to the notion of writing: "'Literature' becomes writing; 'knowledge' or 'science' becomes the objective formulation of the desire to write, and their interrelationship [sets] the stakes where the subject is--within language through his experience of body and history" (*DL* 94). Kristeva suggests that the originality of

Barthes's work lies in the double necessity that literature be regarded from the viewpoints of the sciences of language, the body, and history at the same time and that the scientific approaches to literature be controlled by "the discreet and lucid presence of the subject of this 'possible knowledge' of literature, by the *reading* that he gives of texts today, situated as he is within contemporary history" (DL 94).

The status of "zero degree" writing "refers to the utopia of a lifting of signs, an exemption from meaning, an indivision of language, a transparency of social relations" (*The Grain of the Voice* 195). Such writing, while pregnant with future meaning, is an indicative mood not overlaid by commitments to form and to history. Barthes calls "zero degree" writing ideal writing because it resists "literature" so thoroughly that it enables a pure, undistracted experience of language. In poetry his models are the unspecified heirs of Mallarmé. The hallmark of the zero degree is an avoidance of both "literature" and ordinary communication in a narrowly functional sense. Zero degree writing destroys the functionality of language (WDZ 46). It "leaves standing only its lexical basis," and "this void is necessary for the density of the Word to rise out of a magic vacuum, like sound and a sign devoid of background, like 'fury and mystery'" (WDZ 46-47). It strips out emotional declaration and conceptual meaning, because these are points at which the pressure of 'Literature' might be exerted. It almost evacuates style itself; "a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style," he remarks of Camus, and might have remarked of Beckett (WDZ 77).⁴⁹

From the fall from literary innocence around the turn of the century, as we have already noted, the writer recognized "the morality" of the form of his language; he became aware, in a new way, of his own responsibility as a writer. Barthes began his career, in *Writing Degree Zero*, by radically redefining the Marxist relation to textuality: he introduced language, rather than its objects, as the determining factor in a literary text's engagement with the social and historical conditions of its emergence. His question was no longer "Why write?" but "How to write?" for he had now a conscious choice to make:

either to adopt the “writing” of his past along with all that it stood for, or to reject it and, attempting to return language to its original innocence, devise new modes of free expression. For Barthes, then, there is a history of “writing” (distinct from that history of themes and individual styles known as “literary history”): the history of those “modern” attempts to purge language of its historical meaning--to write without a preconception of Literature. *Writing Degree Zero* was an introduction to such a history.

In her preface to the English translation of *Writing Degree Zero* (1967), Susan Sontag introduced this work by quite rightly placing it in a context of modernist critical theory and political debate. *Writing Degree Zero* is polemic which relentlessly conflates the literary and the political. It defines a modern “problematics of language” in relation to a role for artists and intellectuals. Its portrait of literary culture as increasingly homogenized, and artists and intellectuals as increasingly isolated, is very familiar, as is the argument that traditional forms no longer bond new work to the cultural mainstream. Barthes portrayed the dominant culture as narrow and incorporative, and the formal properties of its literature as incapable of registering the significantly new. Barthes argues that new writing is made from the collapse of accepted languages. In *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes also describes the situation of the writer as a blockage, and suggests that “every man is a prisoner of his language.” Writing is “a blind alley. . . because society itself is a blind alley” (WDZ 87). Barthes’s writer is inevitably solitary (WDZ 4) and disjoined: there is a “tragic disparity between what he does and what he sees” (WDZ 86). Against the background of imprisonment, blindness, alienation, paralysis and blockage, the writer might find a fleeting freedom by resistance to incorporative language. It is the language and form which primarily enact the resistance to an orthodoxy which the argument depressingly seems to sustain.

Thus, it is clear, as one reads Barthes entire, that his devotion to the aesthetic was not only a natural inclination but also a fully ethical commitment. The aesthetic, by having an inherent plurality of language, tone, and viewpoint, defends the mind against its own

premature anxiety for closure. Barthes's greatness as a critic is that he shows, and does not merely proclaim, a steady refusal to separate literature from ethics and politics in the broadest sense--for he sees literature always in connection with responsibility, pleasure, desire--and an equally steady insistence that these connections are via form and language, not via the representation of a content.

From Barthes's point of view, Sartre's insistence upon a literature of commitment to social revolution is a form of linguistic innocence. Sartre's "engaged" writer, by rebelling against established literary conventions, is assumed to have restored language to a "clean" or neutral state, the only medium in which free expression is supposed to be possible to the writer and available to all readers. To Barthes, however, this freedom is an illusion; the very stylelessness of "committed" language becomes another closed "mode of writing," another style--in this case, "the sufficient sign of [a] commitment," functioning "as an economy signal whereby the scriptor [or writer] constantly imposes his conversion without ever revealing how it came about"--if indeed it ever did (WDZ 26-27). "Commitment," then, is only a myth; it is only the convention of commitment.

Barthes is at odds with Sartre on the question of *literature engagée*. In other words he does not think the writer has a duty to arouse in the reader a revolutionary consciousness of some sort, though he does seem to think that "writing" is a subversive activity. On the other hand he carries out an exemplary campaign of criticism against all forms of writing with a message, and particularly of writing with a political message.

For Barthes, as Sontag mentioned, a language and a style are "objects," while a mode of *écriture* is a "function." Neither strictly historical nor irredeemably personal, *écriture* occupies a middle ground; it is "essentially the morality of form." *Ecriture* is the writer's zone of freedom, "form considered as human intention" (WDZ xiii-xiv). To carry out the writer's joy, according to Barthes, the writer must accept his language and accept his style as given: what he has to choose is his writing. Not so much the kind of writing as the act of writing. The point that Barthes wants to make about "writing" is that it is a genuine

matter of choice. The writer's mere *decision to write* is what matters, not his decision to communicate a political message or share a human experience. To be more exact: the "writer" does not try to communicate something to the rest of the world, but only to define correctly the relation between writing and the world. This means that he knows his business is to write first of all, not to teach, to amuse, to inspire, to elevate, to shock, or to transform society. He does something to society not by pushing against its structures--which are none of his business--but by changing the tune of its language and shifting the perspectives which depend on the ways words are arranged. He systematically demythologizes literature. *Gestus* is more than "gesture," more than idiosyncrasy. It is the chosen, living, and responsible mode of presence of the writer in his world.

Barthes concludes, in *Writing Degree Zero*, that "writing is thus essentially the morality of form, the choice of that social area within which the writer elects to situate the Nature of his language" (15). It represents Barthes's will to locate writing--the activity of the writer--in the mobile act of signifying rather than, with Sartre, in immobile content of what is signified. At this point, Barthes is still conceiving of writing as an authorial production; later, he came to link it far more strongly with the reader, as his interest shifted from the author to the text, for him a shimmering force-field of signifying into which the reader enters and by which the reader is "traversed."

Many critics on Barthes agree that his work took a significantly different turn toward the end of the 1960s, and that this is indicative of the division between structuralism and poststructuralism. Poststructuralism developed in part from a critique of structuralism, but continued to insist that the analysis of language is central to any modern intellectual project.

The rise and fall of structuralism is an extremely complex phenomenon; in this study we can deal with it on only the most superficial level. Here we shall merely note that structuralism tended to separate its product (a model structure or system or "language") from the process of its production--a shortcoming that Barthes, at least on the level of theory, attempted to overcome by explaining structuralism as an "activity"--and if the

product is separated from the production, it is also separated from the producer, the “subject.” Since structuralism aims to construct a “language,” and since--according to Saussure--it is the language-making faculty that distinguishes men from animals, then all men are, in a manner of speaking, structuralists. But the language we “make” as we speak or write is produced in an endless “process of difference”; it is not fixed as is the static system produced in structural analysis. In poststructuralism, language is no longer seen as a reliable yardstick for the measurement of other signifying systems. It is now seen as itself an impossible medium.

As far as Barthes is concerned, each of his critical moves has been nothing more than a source of personal pleasure, the transformation of himself as a text. At any rate, that is how he most currently viewed his critical progress, a view that might in turn be regarded as still one more transformation of the Barthesian subject. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), he has given the name “morality” to this latest phase of his work, “morality” being the thinking of the body in a state of “language.”

In the early 1970s Barthes came increasingly to emphasize the values of plurality, intertextuality, productivity of meaning, and the infinity of languages; as a result he came to attach less importance to the sciences of the subject and more importance to the subject’s performance in reading. The plural of the text is indeed Barthes’s insistent subject in *The Pleasure of the Text*. The plural means not simply “ambiguity” or multiple meanings, but the impossibility of hierarchizing the different voices of the text, the need to submit to their interdependence and simultaneity. Reading should never become the search for some ultimate signified, but rather a joyous and animating multiplication of the signifiers, of words and symbols themselves.

Here, what interests him in the meeting of reader and text is specifically the “dialectics of desire” by which animation of the text depends on the reader’s desire, and this on the text’s solicitation of the reader. Barthes observed that reading is “desiring the work,” that is, wanting to be one with the text being read. Also, the text has a desire of its own.

Appropriately, Barthes the reader noted in his *The Pleasure of the Text* that “the text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*” (6). This is a realization of his earlier insight concerning “the death of the author” that a text’s unity was to be found in its destination rather than in its origin. And the Barthesian pleasure of the text is above all the joy of the exercise of creative freedom, as the reader cooperates with the printed text to render it alive once more within a human mind. The performance is likened by Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* to the weaving of a piece of Valenciennes lace; to the act of love, where the creation of meaning is the climax of love, bliss.

Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue--this texture--the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. (PT 64)

The great advantage of Barthes’s method, and an indication that it touches a central principle of postmodern thought, is that it works equally well for specific literary questions as it does for social practice at large. For each, Barthes’s first task is to locate “the very materiality of the signifier” (UT 33) which in literature is the text and in society is the code by which things function. This materiality is a realm of interaction--not the subject, not the language which expresses it, but rather the signifying practice where the two meet. Signification is not produced at the level of abstraction but through the very operation of its practice. This notion of signifying practice restores active energy to language and makes any linguistic or social action as interesting as fiction. The text is a tissue, something woven--one thinks of postmodernist work as a weaving which deliberately unravels in its reading--and the fabric of this texture comes from the interlacing of codes which the semiologist separates into its component parts. Barthes’s textual analysis does not simply note a structure, but produces a mobile structuration of the text which locates its avenues of meaning. “What founds the text is not an internal, closed accountable structure,” which would as such be a kernel of meaning extractable by the critic but rather the study of “the

outlet of the text on to other texts, other codes, other signs; what makes the text is the intertextual" (UT 137), the interwoven strands of which the critic must sort out. It is in the interest of each narrative to delay this unweaving, to prolong its existence in suspense which exists not as a flat, tabular space but as "a volume, a stereophony" (UT 157) which its temporary irresolution fills.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes draws a correlation between two kinds of texts and two ways of writing about them: ancient and modern, *textes de plaisir* and *textes de jouissance*. Although Jonathan Culler would have us believe that *jouissance* meant "ease" for Barthes (*Roland Barthes* 22), it was much more likely that, within what Richard Howard calls "an erotics of reading" by Barthes (*PT* viii), the word pointed toward an intersection of physical and intellectual apogees where "everything is there, but *floating*" (*A Barthes Reader* 403). Richard Miller translates *jouissance* as "bliss," which is no doubt better than "joy" or "enjoyment" or "delight," but we don't really have a word which will convey the sexual thrill Barthes wishes to connect with a certain kind of reading:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (*PT* 14)

The experience of meaning consists in the dissolve of the reading subject into the fault, the seam, the edge between tradition and modernity. The redistribution of language that occurs in the avant-garde text, Barthes says in *The Pleasure of the Text*, is "*always achieved by cutting*. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed" (*PT* 6).

This is precisely the distinction between texts of pleasure, in which language is obedient, and of bliss, in which language has emptied itself of its customary meanings and in which, therefore, the reader cannot find comfortable assumptions about world, self, and language. In the passage just cited above is a cut between traditional and modern texts and the kind of reading they invite. The blissful dissolve is the effect of reading modern texts, or of reading any texts in the modern, writerly way.

The fact of the existence of the avant-garde text makes a demand on readers, and the fact that the demand is met by the development of a new mode of reading teaches a lesson about how meaning is produced. The demand is that readers do something to make sense of the text, for the text, if passively approached with the customary beliefs about the relations between literature and life, and words and world, is nonsense. The custom of the Cartesian is to make truth a supreme value resident in the reference of a representation (signifier) to what is represented (referent), where the reference is mediated by the concept (signified) of the represented object.

What is shaken by the avant-garde text are not simply beliefs about the relation of literature to what is outside it, including the relation of author and characters to reader, but, as Barthes registers in his characterization of the text of bliss, the reader's assumptions about the world, its past, its culture, and its people, his self-consistency, and his relation to language. The challenge of avant-garde literature reaches as far as language reaches: to linguistics, psychoanalysis, history, theories of culture; to the practices of self-identification and self-justification; in short, it moves throughout the system of discourses, with the result that questions intrude themselves.

The reading subject becomes a "living contradiction" (*PT* 21), enacting on the stage of his mind the drama of a culture in the throes of change. The experience of avant-garde literature contradicts the reader's customary way of regarding himself; if he does not regard himself in traditional way, there is nothing for the new text to speak against and it cannot be heard. If, however, the reader cannot entertain the contradiction of his beliefs about

himself, the avant-garde will be nonsense to him. The reader must, that is to say, entertain both the conventional beliefs about what he is and the contradiction of these beliefs. For the subject to appreciate the differential value of the new and the plurality it opens up, he must experience the value. He must, that is, not merely know that thus and so are the traditional beliefs about language, literature, self, and world that are unsettled by the modern text; he must adopt the point of view of one who accepts these beliefs. This is just to say that he cannot read the new text in the old way, where reading in the old way is really gazing at what shines through the lines and the print. When one looks at the avant-garde text through tradition's lens, nothing is in clear enough focus to make out.⁵⁰

The reader lives in the language and it, not an author, speaks to him. The first split in the "subject split twice over" (*PT* 14), is a rupture in the set of his beliefs: he believes there is a world full of speaking selves, including himself, and he believes that worlds and selves are but functions of the infinite play of language. The second split is a fragmentation, a scattering, a pluralizing, that occurs in the course of writerly reading. Any one text is:

entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately. . . at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened: each single text is the very theory (and not the mere example) of this vanishing, of this difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissible. (*S/Z* 12)

The avant-garde text makes us "think against" received theories and invites us to read the old theories as we have learned to read the new texts. Writing is more like performing than it is like thinking. Barthes speaks of the subject's dissolving into the text as it reads and so far as this happens there is no logical distance between subject and text, and the subject's performance of the text is his performance of himself. The customary connections between signifiers and what they signify are wrenched apart, and the subject's commitments to the received doctrines of his culture (the *doxa*) are undone--the subject is wrenched from his "tastes, values, and memories" (*PT* 14). Signifiers, at bottom, sounds and inscriptions, and readers float free.

The accession to modernity signaled by a penchant for reading in the writerly way might seem to be accession to the value of plurality and the consequent devaluing of binary opposition.⁵¹ One reason for this is that the value of plurality lies precisely in its undoing the traditional unity of signifier and what it signifies and the unity of self and a consistent set of attitudes. Another reason is that, as Barthes says: “neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw which becomes so.”

Then, mimesis gives way to semiosis.⁵² *S/Z* began with the observation that the structuralist enterprise of trying to see all the world’s stories within a single structure is undesirable because stories from which a model is extracted lose their difference. The difference is not a sort of uniqueness, but the result of textuality itself. What can be written is what can be interpreted, where interpretation is not finding the text’s meaning but appreciating the plural that constitutes the text. Interpretation is an operation performed on a text that reveals “the more or less each text can mobilize.” “The systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language” (*S/Z* 6).

Barthes renders the very nature of interpretation problematic and establishes a tension between the intelligible and the equivocal. He sets up the major polarity as a tool for evaluating texts: the readerly (*le lisible*), in which meaning is conceived of as the transparently natural representation of reality as it will forever be, and the writerly (*le scriptible*) which functions independently of a priori models of intelligibility and acknowledges the plurality of which a text is composed.

Our evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write. . . . What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the *writerly*. Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the *reader* no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. . . . Opposite the writerly text is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text. (*S/Z* 4)

In short, the readerly text establishes the unequivocal authority of a particular signifying mode whereas the writerly text discredits the so-called “innocence” of an aesthetic object and demands that the reader become a writer capable of liberating energies otherwise repressed. The readerly is defined as a product consumed by the reader; the writerly is a process of production in which the reader becomes a producer: it is “ourselves writing.” The readerly is constrained by considerations of representation: it is irreversible, “natural,” decidable, continuous, totalizable, and unified into a coherent whole based on the signified. The writerly is infinitely plural and open to the free play of signifiers and of difference, unconstrained by representative considerations, and transgressive of any desire for decidable, unified, totalized meaning.

The purposes of the cuts and codes is to pluralize the reader’s intake, to effect a resistance to the reader’s desire to restructure the text into large, ordered masses of meaning: “If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text. . . we must renounce structuring this text in large masses, as was done by classical rhetoric and by secondary-school explication: no *construction* of the text” (*S/Z* 11-12). In leaving the text as heterogeneous and discontinuous as possible, in attempting to avoid the repressiveness of the attempt to dominate the message and force the text into a single ultimate meaning, Barthes thus works a maximum of disintegrative violence and a minimum of integrative violence.⁵³

In a similar vein, Barthes has an important commitment to the articulation of material pleasure. In his late essay, Barthes approvingly cites Nietzsche’s assertion that “we must reduce the universe to crumbs, lose respect for the whole” (*RL* 282), and throughout his work he pursues the metonymic enunciations of discourse. He attempts to discover the meanings of scatterings, to recuperate significance and pleasure in the material multiplicity of language. “*Writing aloud*,” Barthes says, “is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear

the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language" (PT 66-67). What he seeks, then, is a kind of materialism of the sign, yet one in which the signifiatory force of the sign is not lost in its materiality.

Rather than recovering intelligible meaning, he attempts to recover meaningfulness as an active force in human affairs. "A literary work," he writes, "is a very special semantic system, whose goal is to put 'meaning' in the world, but not 'a meaning'; the work, at least the work which ordinarily accedes to critical scrutiny--and this is perhaps a definition of 'good' literature--the work is never entirely nonsignifying (mysterious or 'inspired'), and never entirely clear; it is, one may say, a *suspended* meaning. . . . This disappointment of meaning explains. . . why the literary work has so much power to ask the world questions (undermining the assured meanings which ideologies, beliefs, and common sense seem to possess), yet without ever answering them. . ." (*Critical Essays* 259).

Barthes does not attempt to reconstitute either reader or writer; rather, he attempts to reconstitute reading as an activity (RL 30-31). Such a reconstitution is what he calls the "third meaning" of discursive activity, an obtuse meaning beyond the communicative and symbolic meanings. "By contrast with the first two levels, communication and signification," Barthes writes, "this third level--even if the reading of it is still hazardous--is that of *signifiante*, a word which has the advantage of referring to the field of the signifier and of linking up with, via the path opened by Julia Kristeva who proposed the term, a semiotics of the text" (*Image-Music-Text* 54). In this definition, however, *signifiante*--the activity of signification, of rhetorical "play," the elemental *production* of meaning--remains within the reserve of meaning, of signification; it remains, as Barthes says here, an effective concept. Here Barthes inscribes the materiality of language within discourse, but that material enunciation still maintains itself within the reserved economy of signification.

Furthermore, Barthes opposes "texts" to "work": "The Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work which is The Text's imaginary tail. Or again: *the Text is*

experienced only in an activity, in a production” (RL 58). The text is neither communication nor significance, but a possibility of meaning determined by the “empty” positions, waiting to be filled, that discourse presents. In its rhetorical activity, text, writing, signifiante destroys the intentional meaning, the work, and ultimately the “person” of the author as well; above all, it destroys the clarity of communication.

Still, in this there is a certain obscurity, as Barthes notes, a “discomfort” of meaning; in this there is the material non-sense of pleasure that inhabits discourse, what Barthes calls variously the “grain of the voice” and the “rustle” of language. This brand of obscurity seems to me closely linked with literature and its textual strategies intending to invigorate the inertias of our common life. The articulation and exploration of such “intentional obscurities” of rhetoric have been the object and motor of Barthes’s literary criticism.

Characteristically, Barthes’s difficulty is finally placid, an *aporia* of language and literature; it is embodied in his unanswerable question: Who is speaking? Perhaps it is Barthes’s “pleasure,” what Culler calls his “hedonism” (*Roland Barthes* 91-100), which precludes the ontological, so that he seems to be among those who, as Miller describes them, “seem able to live on from day to day and year to year, even as readers of literature, without seeing religious or metaphysical questions as having any sort of force or substance” (*Rhetoric and Form* 22). For Barthes, language and signification are everywhere, disseminated, ongoing, not to be avoided,⁵⁴ while for deconstructionists, there is, alongside discourse, a glimmer of the horror of meaninglessness and pure non-sense.

We have seen the logic, inscribed in his tactics, of the turn in Barthes’s later work to “pleasure,” in which, as Steven Ungar has noted, “the voice is not at all the condensation via synecdoche of a unified whole, but the movement of various parts of the body toward utterance” (74). For Barthes, the scandal of the speaking body is the scandal of *signifiante*, materiality inscribed within the reserve of language, the textualization of

meaning. For Barthes, *signifiance* is rhetoric, a conception of language as the play of the surface rather than the expression of depths--of meaning, of personality, of clarity itself.

The later work of Barthes--many key texts are posthumously collected in *The Rustle of Language* (1989)--is more and more preoccupied with questions of reading and of listening. Through the text the reader must become like a writer, "someone for whom language constitutes a problem, who is aware of the depth of language, not its instrumentality nor its beauty" (CT 64); the reader produces writing of his own only as a response to a previous experience of a text. This describes the reader who in struggling to make something of the modern text discovers how language works in it and, how language works everywhere, even in the classic text and ordinary discourse, whose meanings seem to be ready made. Critics are perhaps to be defined, Barthes suggests, in the same way as other writers--as "those who read *in order to write*."

Consequently, freed from the author, the text becomes a space of "manifestly relative signification" (Barthes, *On Racine* 170). The text, as Barthes conceives it, is a specific manifestation of *écriture*. It is to be contrasted with a "work"; a work belongs in a genre, its meaning is constrained, it has an author, it is subject to classification. The text, Barthes tells us, is "always *paradoxical*" (RL 58); it "practices the infinite postponement of the signified" (RL 59); "it cannot be caught up in a hierarchy, or even in a simple distribution of genres" (RL 58); and "no vital 'respect' is therefore due to the Text: it can be broken" (RL 61). The idea of a text as an explosion of unconstrained meaning, without origin and without purpose, is likely to be considered as a theoretician's fiction.

At this point, it would be worthwhile to focus on how the author, who proclaimed the "death of the author," portrays himself in his seeming autobiography. Interestingly, Barthes says, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*,⁵⁵ "*I am speaking about myself as though I were more or less dead*" (168). On the last stage of Barthes's career, we can see the Barthesian self-portrait which represents the theoretical principles: the writer projects the image of a protean self whose elusiveness is heightened through fragmentation. The

integrity of a totalized self-portraiture is obliterated by the fusion of multiple selves that precludes the possibility of classification. In order to create a portrait that would be the antithesis of non-desiring immobility, Barthes seeks to effect multiple displacements which generate self-dispersion and a movement toward ontological emptiness. The anxiety emanating from the fear of a totalized self-image forces him to substitute for the “whole” person shifting perspectives that underscore his fragmented posture. Barthes uses fragments of discourse--discrete, self-contained entities--to forestall closure: he conceives of an open-ended discursive praxis, a series of new beginnings manifesting a preference for discontinuity.

It may be true that the unmitigated attempt to undermine the authority inherent in discourse shapes the rhetoric of Barthes's self-fashioning. “The aim of his discourse is not truth. . .” (*RB* 48).⁵⁶ The writer transforms himself into an object incapable of articulating a singular mode of thought; self-depiction at all levels is characterized by a rupture which comes from the impossibility of representing a portrait consubstantial to the man. Barthes therefore becomes entirely absorbed with the preoccupation of presenting himself as Other, and a refuge from being pigeonholed.⁵⁷

Moreover, the will to play prevents Barthes from being locked in the reified structures of personality; it is an assertion of freedom against the agony of solidification. Barthes therefore transforms the self into a text of *jouissance*, a creature of paper who shatters the illusory foundation of being through the gaps in the text's discursive fabric. The breakdown or interruption in self-representation promotes orgasmic delight emanating from the impossibility of recuperating the self's integrity. Entry into the world of play through the activity of self-dissipation is thus dependent on the erasure of a *telos* that would provide the stability which Barthes desperately seeks to escape.

Traditional literary criticism, including what was called in America the “New Criticism,” is primarily exegetical, an analytic restating of the structure and texture of the literary work with the aim of leading the reader to a greater appreciation of its complexity,

nuance, and unity, and an evaluation of its relative place in the “canon” composed of the masterworks of the tradition. The understanding of literature is considered to be the sum of a number of acts of explication. New criticism of the Barthesian variety, however, has tended to disdain exegesis, and to shatter the unity of the individual work in a search to understand the components of “literature” itself, the workings of “textuality,” the adventures of language in the making of sense.

This “newer” literary criticism is protean and varied. Needless to say, it has been shaped by figures other than Barthes: by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Harold Bloom. Still, acknowledged or unacknowledged, Barthes remains the exemplary “newer” critic, marked by a certain restlessness, a desire to move beyond the mere exegesis of works to the question of how meaning itself comes to be made. Criticism in the wake of Barthes is less interested in what texts mean than in how they mean--the processes that constitute “semiosis” (the production of signification), including the radical uncertainties introduced into those processes by the play of signs, the ambiguities that result from the combination of signs, the problems raised by the inescapable presence of figures that name something in terms of something else.

(4) An Enigma of Language: “We can only think in a language”

It has often been said that the twentieth century has moved from reflection on self or subject to the problem of language and “text.” The experience of a pluralistic postmodern world has raised the suspicion that there is no definite or set “way things are.” Reality is, in a measure, malleable and open to wildly different perspectives. Accordingly, Richard Rorty argues that it is simply wrongheaded to assume a mirror image of the relation of mind, language, and ideas to “reality” (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*). There is no

naked reality “out there” independent of what we say and think about it. So ideas, values, and ideals cannot somehow mirror reality.

Intellectually and experientially the realism of traditional mimesis is now contested and protested. Granted that we meet the world in jolts, gaps, and differences, how do we understand our being and acting? How do we understand our participation in a meaningful yet ambiguous world? In particular, “hermeneutics” and “deconstruction”: two terms that name two bodies of thought, two sets of texts, which today bear the signatures “Gadamer” and “Derrida” have reopened the discussion of mimesis and its problems.

Following Heidegger’s lead, both Gadamer and Derrida deny the possibility of a transcendental language-free standpoint for human understanding. And both, like Heidegger, regard our relationship to language as a primary philosophical issue, seeing language as the scene of our finitude, the place where we encounter the limits of our subjectivity. But their developments of Heidegger’s insights into language are not at all alike.

In taking up mimesis, and especially Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida, we encounter a clash of positions. Most simply stated, the conflict is between those, like Gadamer and Ricoeur, who explore and hold to hermeneutical consciousness, and others, like Derrida, who challenge reflexivity in consciousness and deconstruct the relation of self, world, and text. For hermeneutical thinkers, our way of being in the world is that of understanding carried on through the interpretation of texts, symbols, actions, and events that disclose the human condition. Hermeneutics continues the concern for reflexive self-understanding, but it does so with attention to the linguistic and historical character of our existence. Indeed, deconstructionists see hermeneutics as still seeking speculative truth beyond the dance of language, while hermeneutical thinkers, for their part, claim that deconstructionists are either nihilistic or parasitic on real interpretive practice with its roots deep in experience and understanding.

For Gadamer, language is living language--the medium of dialogue. In Gadamer, the development from Heidegger's recognition of the priority of language leads toward a stress on the unity of and in meaning, and a strengthening of tradition. In Derrida, on the other hand, it leads toward underscoring the irreducible equivocation and undecidability of meaning, even apparently toward questioning the concept of meaning itself. Indeed, Gadamer claims that language is being that can be understood and not simply a free play of figuration. In this sense language is the mimesis of being--its dynamic figuration. Here Derrida anticipates a Gadamerian rejoinder that "since the mime imitates nothing, reproduces nothing. . . he must be the very movement of truth. . . truth as the present unveiling of the present" ("The Double Session" 205-6). But the mime, Derrida contends, does not unveil the present. "That is how the Mime operates," Mallarmé wrote, "whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror" (Ibid. 206). Mimetic action is a perpetual allusion, a constant displacement, through the production of doubles. It defers any reference to what lies in, behind, or beyond the action. In Derrida's terms, mimesis is the movement of *différance* leaving endless traces or figures. If truth is an unveiling of being, then mimesis, at least, has no part of it.

On this basis, hermeneutics and deconstruction seem to offer us extremely different views of language. But despite their differences, they also have a common ground that needs to be kept in mind. Both Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Derridean deconstruction present a significant challenge to the metaphysics of modernity, whose assumptions continue to dominate not only a good deal of thinking within philosophy but also within other interpretive disciplines, including literary criticism, theology and the social sciences. And, however far apart their views of language may appear to be, both find a common ground in this challenge itself, in questioning the metaphysical assumption that language is at our disposal. We are not the ones "in charge" of language, Gadamer and Derrida both claim. It is, they insist, the other way around.

Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutics may be described as an enormously suggestive attempt to extend Heidegger's insight into the linguistically mediated nature of human understanding. Clearly language plays a central role to both thinkers--it is the "house of the truth of Being" to Heidegger, and according to a celebrated formulation by Gadamer, Language is [that kind of] being "which can be understood" (*TM* 475). The difference has led commentators to posit that Gadamer is in a sense domesticating Heidegger and as "urbaniz[ing] the Heideggerian province" (Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles* 190). By the way, I do not wish for Heidegger's very difficult interpenetrating ideas to take over this discussion.

Gadamer's most original contribution to the history of hermeneutics is his linguistic turn. In contrast with hermeneutic theories that view understanding as a psychological process mediating the private experiences of separate subjectivities, Gadamer thinks of understanding as a linguistic phenomenon. As different as Nietzsche, Derrida, and Rorty are, they nevertheless share a deep-seated anti-Platonism that denies the existence of universals and essences and insists that words are mere conventions that in no way touch on the intelligible structure of reality itself. It is no surprise that the generation of meaning becomes a central focal point for these writers.

This tendency to deny that there are any fixed, inherently intelligible referents for human thought and consequently to deprecate philosophy's traditional quest for truth is by no means confined to Nietzsche. In this regard, Derrida's notion of "*différance*" and Rorty's notion of "edification" perform generally the same function as Nietzsche's "interpretation." In all three writers such notions lead to an interest in psychological, pragmatic, or semiotic questions surrounding the generation of meaning, and away from a concern with truth. Moreover, in these thinkers there is a predictable shift away from concerns about the universal conditions of truth and toward a focusing on rhetorical and psychological questions about belief formation.

However, there is one thinker in the hermeneutical tradition whose thought does not evince these tendencies--Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁵⁸ Gadamer's best known work, including *Truth and Method* (1975) and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1976), presents his idea of language: Language is a medium within which we move and understand ourselves and the world from various perspectives. His idea of language is firmly linked with that of "understanding," "prejudice" and "history."

Gadamer pursues these crucial ideas in the central sections of *Truth and Method* beginning with "elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience" (TM 265-77) and leading to the final part of *Truth and Method* which discusses language (TM 383). In this book, Gadamer drew on Heideggerian thought to offer a defense of interpretation intended to affirm why truth cannot be limited to method. It is essentially a statement of the unavoidable existence of a "hermeneutic circle" and the notion that prejudice is a condition of consciousness. We are always in a situatedness in a world where knowledge can never be absolute; we always find ourselves situated in an ongoing process where knowledge can never be absolute return or arrival because the object is always expanded by the attempt to know it.

The emphasis on the role of historically informed prejudices in understanding is also essential to Gadamer's critique of "method" in the human sciences. Gadamer's rejection of "method" is not a rejection of the need for rigor, discipline, or painstaking care in our intellectual endeavors. Rather it is a critique of the Enlightenment's definition of "true," "exact," "objective," and scientific knowledge.⁵⁹ The radical critique of the ideology of pure reason, along with the ahistorical self, are certainly not original with twentieth-century critiques of the Enlightenment. What is new today, however, is the belief that the ideals of the Enlightenment are irrelevant to a newer and fuller conception of humanity.

With respect to the human sciences, we are continually tempted to think that the scientific means that have given us our impressive technological comforts and advantages can eventually be used to solve all human problems. This is an illusion, Gadamer thinks,

because science and technology will never give answers, of themselves, to questions of meaning in life and neither will they answer normative questions about the best life for human beings. Broadly speaking, if understanding only occurs by relating the concerns of a text or disputes about an issue to our human concerns, and these concerns can be traced back to historically informed judgments about what is important, needful, plausible and problematic, for a specific historic community, then ultimately, disputes within or between communities will have to be decided by going back to these concerns and deciding which of the competing claims really is more important, needful, plausible and problematic *at the present time*.

Thus the “method” of *Truth and Method* itself is descriptive or, as Gadamer puts it, “phenomenological.” In philosophy, he says, there can be no such thing as an objective “methodological technique”: “One’s own philosophical standpoint always shines through [one’s] description of the basic meaning of phenomenology” (*PH* 143).

The key both to Gadamer’s allegiance to nineteenth-century hermeneutics and to his departure from this tradition can be found in his attempt to challenge certain Enlightenment assumptions about the ahistorical autonomy of rational activity and to suggest instead that all knowledge claims necessarily presuppose a dialectical history. Gadamer sees his work as both a continuation of their work and, at a crucial juncture, a significant departure from it. Both Enlightenment and nineteenth-century hermeneutics failed to grasp the phenomenon of understanding because they failed to understand the necessity of prejudice.

Given the inexhaustible and ever-shifting linguistic backdrop of understanding, Gadamer argues that all understanding presupposes a set of linguistically mediated prejudices and prejudgments that provide a vantage point from which we understand reality. Gadamer is scornful of traditional attempts to elaborate a methodology that would insure “Objective” (that is, prejudice-free) understanding. As against those who see prejudices as a source of misunderstanding, and thus to be eliminated, Gadamer emphasizes their positive role in making understanding possible: “Prejudices in the literal

sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world" (*PH* 9). This is perhaps Gadamer's most controversial thesis.⁶⁰

More than any other element of his thought, Gadamer's notion of prejudice indicates his determination to acknowledge the unsuspendable finitude and historicity of understanding and to exhibit the positive role they actually play in every human transmission of meaning. What Gadamer asks us to see is that the dominant ideal of knowledge and the alienated, self-sufficient consciousness it involves is itself a powerful prejudice that has controlled philosophy since Descartes. By ignoring the intrinsic temporality of human being it also ignores the temporal character of interpretation.

Gadamer's goal in challenging what he calls "the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice" is not to defend irresponsible, idiosyncratic, parochial or otherwise self-willed understanding in the human sciences, but to argue that all human cognition is "finite" and "limited" in the sense that it always involves a "tacit dimension" of implicit judgments, concerns, or commitments which shape definitively our grasp of the subject matter in ways we cannot anticipate or control. Gadamer is suggesting that the human intellect is always, at least in part, conditioned and determined in important ways by historical factors outside its control. Hence a human intellect can never become fully autonomous; it remains forever and always "finite." Prejudices preclude the possibility of either viewing the subject matter as such, from a perspective-free viewpoint, or of so mastering all possible prejudices that one could go freely from one set of prejudices to another until one had exhausted all the possible perspectives from which the subject matter could show itself. The basis for Gadamer's claim is that we never understand anything "as such," that is as a fully discrete, fully determined and intelligible entity in its own right. Gadamer argues that no text or subject matter exists in an historical vacuum or in a pure logical space. Rather every subject matter we can understand exists in a "history of effects" which makes our grasp of

it part of an on-going process of “interpretation” and “dialogue” between our past and present.

All prejudices are rooted in our past, our historicity, which is covered over and occluded by the many events and layers of meaning that have shaped that past. Hence, Gadamer argues that the conditions that give rise to prejudices can never be objectified completely and critically evaluated. If such prejudices always play a role in influencing the outcome of our intellectual deliberations then there is no way that we could ever escape their ever-changing influence and put in their place a truly universal method for settling our disputes. Instead all our attempts to understand are relative to historically situated pre-judgments we bring to our inquiries. Prejudices can be placed on a continuum which ranges from the explicit propositional belief or preference to an inchoate, vague, but effective non-propositional intuition, “bent of mind,” or “intellectual sensibility.” Prejudices are, more often than not, inherently elusive. This is so because prejudices change over time in the course of their interactions with the subject matter of understanding as much as the meanings of these same subject matters change over time in the course of their interactions with prejudices. Therefore, if Gadamer is right, we are never in a position to make them fully explicit and asymptotically approach their objective justification; they are inherently elusive and non-objectifiable in principle.

Gadamer’s point seems to be that something like a process of reflective equilibrium can be seen in all of our experience. We are always moving back and forth between prejudice and explicit reasoning without being exactly sure where we stand at any one time. Of course, as experience grows we become more aware of past prejudices but this does not mean we are approaching a point without prejudice; it implies simply that some of our prejudices have shifted sufficiently to cast light on some of our former prejudices. Gadamer claims that:

One of the fundamental structures of all speaking is that we are guided by preconceptions and anticipations in our talking in such a way that these continually remain hidden and that it takes a disruption in oneself of the intended meaning of what one is saying to become conscious of these prejudices as such. In general the

disruption comes about through some new experience, in which a previous opinion reveals itself to be untenable. But the basic prejudices are not easily dislodged and protect themselves by claiming self-evident certainty for themselves, or even by posing as supposed freedom from all prejudice and thereby securing their acceptance. (*PH* 92)

This dialectic of shifting prejudices, some concealed and some revealed, is potentially infinite, but nevertheless a potentially infinite dialectic between prejudice and critical reflection operates in all understanding. As our historical experience expands we are constantly forming new prejudices and transforming old ones. As “finite” beings we can never grasp the subject matter as such; we lack the capacity to see “from nowhere” or from any perspective outside a specific historic context, and we are never completely aware of everything that goes into this process. As Gadamer stresses, however, historical beings do not stagnate; they are made and remade in the course of time. Hence we are always occupying new points of view and abandoning old ones. “It is the untiring power of *experience*, that in the process of being instructed, man is ceaselessly forming a new pre-understanding” (*PH* 38). This implies that self-knowledge of our prejudices is never complete and it always contains an element of alienation of ourselves from a past way of being and experiencing the world. In other words, that is the “alienated” knowledge of prejudices; a knowing in retrospect after they have been shaped and transcended by the historical process of which they are a part. In this sense, prejudices are not explicit, knowable as such, fixed, and unchanging. Instead the prejudices of Gadamerian consciousness are fluid with respect to each other and the world; they affect the meaning of our world but they are equally affected by it.

This fact that we “suffer” our prejudices, the fact that we passively experience our prejudices as conditions of our lives over which we have limited control leads Gadamer to make the deep claim that our prejudices always constitute, at least in part, who we are. This is a claim about the ontological status of human being. To be human is to find oneself in a historical context. History goes deeper in that it determines the possibilities of our

lives; in short, it influences our ability to experience ourselves and the world in the particular way we do.

Thus Gadamer takes the knower's boundness to his present horizons and the temporal gulf separating him from his object to be the justified, productive and enabling ground of all understanding rather than unfounded, negative and blind factors or impediments to be overcome. Our prejudices do not cut us off from the past, but initially open it up to us. Shaped by the past in an infinity of unexamined ways, the present situation is the "given" in which understanding is rooted, and which reflection can never entirely hold at a critical distance and objectify. This is the meaning of the "hermeneutical situation" as Gadamer employs the term in his work.

His theory of hermeneutics, as I pointed out, is offered as an instrument for sustained criticism of the ideologies of the Enlightenment. According to Gadamer human rationality is always limited and "situated"; it is this context-bound nature of reason that Gadamer wishes to emphasize and explore. Then, Gadamer's skepticism of the Enlightenment culminates in Gadamer's judgment that the Enlightenment fell prey to the "prejudice against all prejudices, it misunderstood the very concept of knowledge and reason in its drastic divorce between reason and prejudice, reason and tradition, reason and authority. . . . And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power." Again: "The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness" (*TM* 276).

Gadamer holds the Enlightenment responsible not only for the bad repute of "prejudice" but more importantly for having distorted the very conception of rationality. He insists that reason cannot be a faculty or a capacity that frees itself from historical contexts and horizons. Every form of understanding necessarily involves some prejudice.

If Gadamer is correct in saying that all forms of knowing involve prejudice, then it is difficult to imagine a more radical critique of what he takes the Enlightenment to be.

By the way, Gadamer distinguishes between legitimate prejudices and those that are not. Legitimate prejudices are those that are constitutive of all human understanding while prejudices due to hasty misjudgment that lead to error are not. It is the role of reason to eliminate the latter. However, according to Gadamer the Enlightenment collapsed all prejudices into one class, producing several dichotomies: reason versus authority, reason versus tradition, and reason versus prejudice.⁶¹

Gadamer is critical of the Enlightenment because their concept of reason is severed from the circle of understanding and interpretation within which, according to him, all claims and appeals to reason must first occur and subsequently be validated. For Gadamer, understanding, meaning is always historically grounded, like the human condition itself. Interpretation of a literary text, accordingly, depends upon the specific situation of the observer, who has a "horizon," a specific historical context from which he can interact with the past, with a history that itself encompasses, as a coherent transformative process of movement and change.

Gadamer focuses on the "fact" that the actual situation in which human understanding takes place is always an understanding through language within a tradition. In the course of his analysis of the linguisticity of understanding Gadamer shows that all understanding involves, first, the participation of the knower in the act of knowing, and, second, the inescapable influence of the knower's "prejudice." This prejudice is defined as the pre-understanding or forestructure, that is a precondition of all human understanding. Understanding as the linguistic happening of tradition thus provides a much more accessible entrance to the problems common to hermeneutics and phenomenology. Although his hermeneutics is still a matter of understanding and interpretation, it is not concerned with the scientific control of understanding and interpretation so that the humanities may also arrive at intellectually respectable conclusions, but rather with what

always actually happens in any genuine understanding at a level beyond our willing and doing, where understanding is not so much a method as a standing within a happening of tradition. His aim is to describe the conditions that make understanding possible, a question that transcends methodological considerations. Here hermeneutics is a theory of the actual experience that thinking is.

Understanding is not reconstruction but mediation. We are conveyors of the past into the present. It is the historical movement of understanding that he adopts as his central clue to the hermeneutic problem. Gadamer's specific emphasis is not on the application of a method by a subject, but on the fundamental continuity of history as a medium encompassing every such subjective act and the objects it apprehends. "Understanding itself is not to be considered so much an action of subjectivity, but rather as entering into an occurrence of transmission in which past and present are constantly being mediated." This means first of all that one must accept as basic the radical finitude and temporality of facticity, behind which one cannot go, which cannot be superseded by any formalized ego or absolute spirit or some similar entity lurking behind the scenes in previous hermeneutic theories. It is not a matter of a rejection but of a cultivation of a tradition that still lives on in us, in such a way that it not only gives us access to the past, but also continually opens up new possibilities of meaning.

The hermeneutical circle is the basis for human understanding in Gadamer's work. To Gadamer, as to Heidegger, understanding is an ontologically based mode of human being and not at all an "'act' of subjectivity." Gadamer is entirely in agreement with Heidegger's analysis of the forestructure of understanding, which he calls the "reading of what is there."⁶² But to Gadamer the circle is primarily or paradigmatically to be understood as the *movement* between interpreter and text, in which the forestructure consists of the expectations or "prejudices" with which the interpreter necessarily begins his reading (Howard 147). In other words there is no pure perception or perfect objectivity that allows us to separate objects of knowledge from acts of interpretation. Gadamer encourages us to

think of interpretation not as the appropriation of the “real” subjective intentions of authors, but, rather, in terms of the dialectical interplay of traditions.

The concept of “horizon” in phenomenology was appropriated from Friedrich Nietzsche. The concept of “horizon” plays an important role in Nietzsche’s thought. It is a limiting concept in that human beings cannot see beyond their historical or cultural horizons. According to this perspective, the term “historicism” means insight into the essential relativity of all horizons. Historicism for Nietzsche is a great but life-destroying truth because it takes away our ability to believe absolutely in anything. However, in Husserl’s investigation, which ultimately concerned the inner experience of time-consciousness, the horizons of one experience flow into those of another so that in the continuum of experiences there is a constant flux of horizons. “Horizon,” then, to Husserl as opposed to Nietzsche, is in no way a static concept.⁶³ From Husserl’s studies Gadamer developed the concept of “horizon” for hermeneutical purposes of his own. In so doing he reexamined Nietzsche’s concept and arrived at what amounts to a fundamental critique of the assumption that knowledge is relative to temporal or historical conditions. On the one hand Gadamer, like Nietzsche, understands “horizon” to denote the finite limitations of any particular perspective at any particular time (*TM* 302). Gadamer’s interpretation of Nietzsche is problematic on this point. Whether or not his critique is on target, however, Gadamer’s positive argument for the dynamic concept of “horizon” remains cogent. No cultural or historical horizon exists in static and total isolation from others. Horizons, most particularly the horizon of the past that we call “tradition,” are always in motion just as human life is always in motion (*TM* 245). The awareness that our horizons are fluid makes it possible to find new truths--to “expand our horizons,” as the saying has it.

Thus the self-awareness of historical consciousness is for Gadamer the key for reaching beyond or behind a given horizon to confront the possibility that there is truth to be learned from the past. Nietzsche’s historicism is true in the sense that time and place set limits: “To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete” (*TM*

302). But it fails to understand temporal distance as a positive aid to discovering truth, which is the way Gadamer understands the interpreter's hermeneutical situation once it is brought to self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is what he terms "consciousness of the history of influence," and to Gadamer the whole point of historical studies is to trace concepts back through the history of their influence to the point of awakening their "real, living, evocative meaning" (*PH* 127). At that point, the interpreter has achieved the before-mentioned "fusion of horizons."

Every essay in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* finally comes to deal with the question of language, for language is the medium in which past and present actually interpenetrate. Understanding as a fusion of horizons is an essentially linguistic process; indeed, these two--language and the understanding of transmitted meaning--are not two processes, but are affirmed by Gadamer as one and the same.

For him it is not simply that our interpretations and understandings are expressed in language; what is expressed is itself said to be language. Indeed, as Gadamer puts it, "the real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it--what is said" (*PH* 65). To acquire a language is to acquire a theory of the world: "language is a mode of interpreting the world that precedes all reflective attitudes" (*PH* 126). In fact, Gadamer's position is more radical. For him, "what is said [in language] constitutes the common world in which we live" (*PH* 65). Gadamer provides little or no supporting argument for these claims, though he is clearly struck by the purported fact that we can only think in a language: "all thinking is confined to language, as a limit as well as a possibility" (*PH* 127). Minimally, what needs to be argued for here is that the medium of thought--language--constrains, or at least prejudices, our thought. What grounds are there for believing that "we are always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world" (*PH* 64). Thus the prejudices Gadamer identifies as more constitutive of our being than our reflective judgments can now be seen as embedded and

passed on in the language we use. Since our horizons are given to us prereflectively in our language, we always possess our world linguistically.

The starting point of Gadamer's extensive analysis of language is his assertion that language is a universal phenomenon:

The phenomenon of understanding, then, shows the universality of human linguisticity as a limitless medium that carries *everything* within it--not only the "culture" that has been handed down to us through language, but absolutely everything--because everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of "understanding" and understandability in which we move. (*PH* 25)

Gadamer's discussion of language solidifies a number of key points made earlier in his discussion of aesthetics and historical consciousness. In his discussion of historical consciousness he argued, first, that understanding can never be free from prejudice and, second, that it involves the unity of observer and observed--the fusing of horizons. Both of these points are now established as universally applicable in the discussion of language. First, language, quite obviously, entails participation. It is impossible to remain aloof from the language through which understanding occurs. Second, the linguisticity of understanding identifies the locus of the "prejudice" so crucial to Gadamer's account. It becomes clear that we cannot escape this prejudice because we cannot escape our language and the pre-understandings embodied in it.

But Gadamer's analysis of language does more than merely clarify previously established points. Rather, it establishes a distinctive theory of interpretation that ascends to a new epistemological plane. Gadamer compares participation in language to participation in a game, and, furthermore, defines the activity of language as a form of life. But for Gadamer it is not the case that we, that is, subjects, play games with language, but, rather, that language plays *us*:

Strictly speaking, it is not a matter of our making use of words when we speak. Though we "use" words, it is not in the sense that we put a given tool to use as we please. Words themselves prescribe the only ways in which we can put them to use. One refers to that as proper "usage"--something which does not depend on us, but rather we on it, since we are not allowed to violate it. (*Hegel's Dialectic* 93)

Two important consequences follow from this position. First, in the process of interpretation the interpreter is always *inside* language. When a text is interpreted the interpreter does not step outside language to an objectivity, but, rather, moves in the horizon defined by the language employed. Second, Gadamer's theory establishes that the phenomenon of understanding that occurs in language does not entail recourse to the consciousness of the individual subject. In other words, when we understand a text what occurs is not the grasping of the author's subjective intentions, but, rather, the interplay of the linguistic traditions of interpreter and interpreted.⁶⁴

Gadamer's main point is a critique of the thesis that language is essentially an instrument or tool we use to express thoughts that are fully developed prior to their articulation in speech. According to the "instrumental" view we use language incidentally to express essentially private thoughts in a public realm, but language is not the very medium of thought itself. Gadamer points out that language really is not like a tool or instrument we can pick up and put down at will. We may choose a word or phrase, but we do not choose either to use or not use language. All thought is linguistic. In short, our consciousness of the world is a linguistic consciousness that we can never leave behind to achieve a wordless condition of so-called pure thought.⁶⁵

Language is not one of the means by which consciousness is mediated with the world. . . . Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. (PH 62)

As David E. Linge points out in his introduction of *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, this passage reflects Gadamer's agreement with Heidegger's assertion that language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human being-in-the-world, not simply optional functions that man engages in or does not engage in at will. Our possession of

language, or better, our possession by language, is the ontological condition for our understanding of the texts that address us. Our very “linguisticity” and “finitude” make it impossible for us to escape the linguistically mediated nature of our contact with reality and the necessarily “perspectival” and limited understanding this engenders. This means that we can never shake ourselves free of language through the development of something like the “perfect” research method or the most rigorous set of a historical criteria for judging disputes in all our disciplines. We live and think *in* language and never just *with* language.

Interestingly enough, however, Gadamer speaks of the “speculative nature” of language, the way in which language can be seen not as a barrier to grasping the intelligibility of reality or as a foreign, obfuscating medium to reality’s comprehensibility, but as the very medium of intelligibility itself. Language does not estrange us from reality but gives us meaningful contact with it. In using the term “speculative” Gadamer is looking to the etymological sense of the term “speculative,” which derives from *speculum* or mirror. Language is speculative in that reality gets “reflected” in it and through it. It is through language that the world is shown to us in all its many-sided dimensions. Language is like a mirror which holds up to us an image of the real, which, qua image, is logically distinct, but which nevertheless belongs inseparably to that which it reflects. In this way, Gadamer wants to suggest that any linguistic account of a phenomenon offers us a finite perspective on some reality which nevertheless is not a mere appearance of the real but a viable reflection of the real. So it is that by understanding the language of some phenomenon we understand the phenomenon itself but without ever exhausting it or precluding the possibility of developing new ways of speaking about it.

Gadamer speaks of mirroring, but not in the sense of a static duplication of a being or of a fixed pregiven order of Being, but more like a “mirror play,” on a lake or a myriad-faceted gem. Each word mirrors the totality of meaning, as “through a glass darkly.” The function of an image is to make the thing apparent of which it is an image. Its function is, in a word, revelatory, in that it is not just a copy of the thing but a disclosure of the thing

itself that shows us the thing in a way it was not available before. Thus, far from being “inimical” or “foreign” to the thing itself, it enhances the thing’s intelligibility and meaning.

Every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out. (*TM* 458)

The ensuing dialectic is an inexhaustible “play on words,” a selfpropelled language game, “the play of language itself, which addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer” (*TM* 490). Just as conversation at its most spontaneous transcends the participants and moves where it will, so the speculative movement of language is not a methodic act of the subject but a doing of the subject matter which thinking undergoes. In the speculative happening, what is unsaid and to be said comes to language, incipiently if you want, whereas procedures designed to make methodically exact statements tend to obscure the meaning horizon of what is really to be said. To truly say what one means is to speak pregnantly, by holding together an infinity of the unsaid with what is said. (*TM* 469)

Art, Gadamer says, “resists pure conceptualization” (“The Relevance of the Beautiful” 37). This is not to deny that it can be understood. There is a “language of art” (*TM* 475), the understanding of which requires a combination of historical or hermeneutical consciousness and openness to the work’s claim to truth as it addresses us directly as if it showed us ourselves. In Gadamer’s formulation the inexhaustibility or ultimate resistance to translation of meaning in the work of art shows an “excess of meaning” that is present in each work of the “language of art” (*PH* 102). Every genuine work of art carries with it an “incomplete history” of simultaneous concealment and unconcealment so that its very finiteness displays the infinite variability or “unfathomable depth” of truth (Pöggeler 63). In every word of language is implied an infinity of meaning at the same time that each word appears at the expense of all others, thereby exemplifying ineluctable finitude. The

assertion is not about the “what is” of each being, but rather about “how it encounters man’s understanding” (*PH* 132).

The finite presentation of reality in language is the key, in my opinion, to understanding Gadamer on truth. Gadamer speaks of truth almost as if it were something extralinguistic and non-propositional. Yet he also does not believe it to be ineffable. In the more contemporary idiom of Gadamer, we can say reality comes to us in language; language gives us the world. I call his position “perspectival” realism. It is because Gadamer rejects in principle all unbridgeable dualisms between the world and our linguistically mediated perspective on it that he feels confident in repeatedly claiming that though knowledge is mediated by language and history, the truth of our knowledge-claims must still be conceived in terms of their adequacy or correspondence to the things themselves. Gadamer stresses both sides of this claim. We do in fact know the things themselves but we know them only as they are given in linguistic/historical perspectives. This linguistic/historical perspective functions as both a condition and a limit on our understanding.

The notion of a pure presence is a myth to be overcome whether it is defended passionately or attacked vehemently as it so often is nowadays. It is only as we are historically shaped and linguistically mediated that reality becomes knowable for us. One might say that for Gadamer our historical involvement makes possible a revealing of an aspect of the thing; we never can see the whole truth but only a partial truth or a perspective, but a truth about the thing itself nevertheless. But history is also a limit to our understanding. Inasmuch as we can only grasp the thing itself from a perspective we never see it from all perspectives; we never have an exhaustive, final account of the thing. Things themselves never become transparent as they are apart from all historical perspectives. We never occupy a place outside all history from which we can masterfully synthesize all historical perspectives. Despite all the insistence on historical perspective and disavowals of a “pure” vision of presence, Gadamer nevertheless insists that we can know

reality itself and are not necessarily condemned to know only what we construct. It is Gadamer's unique contribution to combine a kind of realism with a kind of perspectivism which insists on the relativity of human knowing. According to Gadamer, the reality we can know is rich enough that we can never exhaust our understanding of it; it is multifaceted enough that there is always more to say; and it is involved enough in time and language that we can know it in and through history and human speech rather than dreaming of a place beyond history and language where we can escape our finitude and know reality like God.⁶⁶

For Gadamer, we can only coherently believe that word and thing "belong together,"-- word and subject matter, language and reality are inseparable--namely, that although all access to reality is in terms of language, nevertheless, our linguistically mediated beliefs accurately reflect, for the most part, the way the world is. Language offers us different perspectives on reality, perspectives whose inherent plausibility cannot be denied despite the contradiction which exists between these perspectives, nor can this dilemma be "managed" by a simple decision to opt for one account over another. Interpretation is possible because we all participate in a common reality but interpretation is never exhaustive, i.e., it remains finite because each of us remains an individual whose individuality cannot be wholly negated. But interpretation remains finite for another reason as well. It is language itself which is our most basic "prejudice." Language itself, like another person, transcends our individual control. We are never masters of the meaning of any speech, even our own.

All perspectives on reality are *finite* presentations of the real. Reality too is present without being transparent. The reality we know is not language but somehow in language. Just as we know someone only through their speech and behavior we know the world only through language. It is largely because of this understanding of "immediacy" and depth of being or intelligible richness that Gadamer will say that language gives us a perspective on the real that is never the whole truth but one that contains the whole nevertheless. If

interpretation is to remain a search for truth, a truth about ourselves and our condition, as well as a genuinely self-correcting, critical enterprise, some position like Gadamer's thesis of the finite presentation of the real in language has to be our point of departure.

Gadamer points out that any knowledge-claim can be adequately understood only from within a tradition. No knowledge-claim stands alone, but presupposes a way of speaking about its subject matter that stretches back into the past and toward the future. If this is so, the question that arises is How are we to understand the development of understanding from this dialectical and linguistically mediated process? What conditions make possible the emergence of a new insight from a process that appears self-referential and locked into the past? Gadamer's answer to this question, depends on his notion of language as dialogue or conversation. Gadamer conceives language primarily a living dialogue or conversation and only secondarily as a deposit of grammatical rules and lexicographically secure meanings.

Conversation is a linguistic process, language on the move. In the human sciences, critical self-development occurs only in the linguistic medium of conversation. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer took the phenomenon of conversation to be not simply an exchange of remarks but "a process of coming to an understanding" (TM 385) each other that turns out simultaneously to be a process of the "coming-into-language of the thing itself" (TM 378). For Gadamer, there is no method or set of methods that can replace the need of human beings to find the truth about ourselves from each other. It is by "conversation," that is to say, by an interchange of viewpoints that consciously and critically seeks for common ground, that truth is found in the human sciences. There is no truly secure path that is beyond all possible deception and manipulation. But speech or conversation is the only means at our disposal.

Gadamer points out that our agreements always outstrip our disagreements, despite the presence of prejudices. However, conflicts arise repeatedly because we are always confronted with a variety of contradictory linguistic accounts of our situation which contain

a myriad of practical possibilities. It also seems that dialogue between people with fundamentally different prejudices will often reach an impenetrable impasse. Thus, living in the society where a consensus is lacking, we might raise questions. Whose standards are going to be applied in cases of dispute? Where are we going to find universal sources of agreement that will supply standards, which will be sufficient in the minds of all those informed and concerned about an issue to arbitrate our many disagreements? How can we settle our disputes without the use of force? “The long temporal unity of historical consciousness, the very basis of shared tradition and the bond of a community of meaning: are these determinations of established power and the effects of a massive repression?”⁶⁷ Despite Gadamer’s skillful and honest description of our situation he does not show us a clear sense of what it means to be *rational* in the seeming cacophony of voices and tangle of standards which we call the human sciences. Thus, on Habermas’s account, Gadamer is indeed guilty of naiveté. To say that the truth must emerge in the actual doing of the activity of the conversation ignores the fact that the conversation itself could be corrupt, and that the “truth” which emerges might not be truth at all, but covered-up domination. Terry Eagleton also indicates this as Gadamer’s limitation: “Hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between past, present and future, and seeks patiently to remove obstacles to this endless mutual communication. . . . It cannot . . . come to terms with the problem of ideology--with the fact that the unending ‘dialogue’ of human history is as often as not a monologue by the powerful to the powerless, or that if it is indeed a ‘dialogue’ then the partners--men and women, for example--hardly occupy equal positions. It refuses to recognize that discourse is always caught up with a power which may be by no means benign” (*Literary Theory* 73).

Gadamer in no way intends to develop a cultural paradigm that will narrowly circumscribe human potential through a set of parochial and artificially imposed standards of rationality. It seems to me that if our culture is not going to justify force but to keep up an open “dialogue” or “conversation” it must be a conversation which takes the need for

commensurability seriously. Conflicting possibilities of understanding in the human sciences must be and should be settled ultimately on nonscientific, moral grounds. Gadamer seems to suggest that the choice we must make is between pragmatically constrained “conversation” and a wooden, mechanical and rule-like method. It is precisely the search for a way to achieve and sustain an open, on-going conversation in which convergence towards unforced, universal agreement is possible. Such a “method” could never be blindly mechanical and insensitive to the historically mediated perspectives of the individuals in the conversation. But it also involves the ideal of rising up to a set of standards and procedures which are higher than and somehow normative for the historically mediated perspectives of the conversants. Such a “method” could never be discovered by one person, however brilliant, but rather it must represent the accumulated wisdom of a community of inquirers who have never given up the ideal that each individual should see what is true for himself or herself and see, in addition, that our disputes should be settled by an uncontroversial application of standards which each has freely accepted as appropriate for this dispute.

We can make better sense of the role that conversation or dialogue can play in working out new insights by pointing to a number of features about language and history and their relationship to the subject matter of any inquiry. To begin with Gadamer often cites a line from Hans Lipps that any linguistic account or “word” always carries with it a “circle of the unexpressed”; or, as Gadamer phrases it, an “infinity of the unsaid.” This implies that any linguistic account is never entirely clear and univocal but carries within it unspoken meanings and possibilities of understanding and critique to be explored and articulated. It is important to stress that these “ambiguities” are not necessarily deficiencies but sources of possible meaning that can cast a new light on the very subject matter of discourse.

The notion of every linguistic account containing possibilities for questioning and development also points to its relation to history itself. Often historical circumstances themselves have a way of opening up critical insight into a linguistic account or penetrating

into the circle of the unexpressed and advancing understanding. This leads Gadamer to say, on the one hand, that all understanding presupposes both historically and linguistically mediated preunderstanding and, on the other hand, to insist that understanding takes place only when the inquirer doggedly pursues the logic of the subject matter itself.

In this sense Gadamer argues that all interpretation involves a fusion of horizons between the past and present. All interpretation takes place not only in terms of an implicit involvement in a tradition but also with an eye to how that past can be applied to our current theoretical and practical concerns. It can be said that it is precisely this need for application that prevents the past from turning into a sterile deposit of irrelevant facts or an ossified orthodoxy. The need for application, brought about by the ever-changing needs of the present, is what drives traditions forward, sometimes, of course, even to their breaking points.

This emphasis on application suggests that we never understand in a “disinterested” fashion but only in terms of some theoretical / pragmatic framework in terms of which certain understandings, theories, solutions recommend themselves, almost as a matter of course. He emphasizes the claim that reason and judgment cannot function without making a type of value-assessment about the “significance” or “importance” of a knowledge-claim for the present circumstances.

Gadamer points out that the rational criteria of the judgments change as the self-understanding of the historically situated community changes. What this means for Gadamer is that our rational ability to make such judgments does not rest on some deep, permanent structure, transcendental reason or human nature, but rather it depends on our changing self-understanding. As this self-understanding changes it gives rise to a new sense of our needs, priorities, and possibilities. Insofar as such historically shifting “prejudgments” are essential to any understanding, the human community is not, according to Gadamer, asymptotically approaching the same body of universal truths. Instead, we are moving “in fits and starts” toward epistemic goals that shift as our needs and priorities

change. In this manner, Gadamer wishes to point out that the human sciences have never been really guided by the ideal of universal reason or objectivity but instead have always been guided by the “practical” needs of the historical community, which have been their final arbiter in matters of dispute.

Gadamer insists that we cannot escape making practical judgments about our past and the direction in which it is taking us. Because we are finite historical beings who always stand within a tradition, because we cannot walk away from our present, and because we must make choices toward some future, we can no sooner escape *phronesis* than we can escape our own humanity. It is one of Gadamer’s deepest concerns to remind Western humanity that despite the fact that we have achieved a great deal of technical mastery over our environment and are daily tempted to embrace the illusion that all questions of human existence will eventually be resolved through the same scientific means that have given us our technologically based comforts, we should not forget our historical finitude and our own responsibility for the future of our species on this planet. Gadamer stresses that horizons--whose medium is language--are not self-enclosed but essentially open, porous, and fluid. He emphasizes the need to situate our horizon within a larger horizon; to open ourselves to the claim to truth that works of art, texts, and tradition make upon us; to allow them to “speak to us.” Gadamer wishes to promote a dialogue or conversation that would help us reach greater consensus on who we were, who we are, and who we will be, in order to help us realize our need for current application of those traditions to our future. Only by recognizing this as our task and by freely taking it up do we have a chance, in Gadamer’s opinion, to prevent the demise of the humanistic tradition. Gadamer offers us accounts of prejudice, understanding, interpretation and language that are neither naive nor nihilistic.

(5) Critiquing the Sign: Social Versions of Linguistic Value

Contemporary literary theory, with its insistence on language as an active structuring force rather than a transparent medium, has affected every area of theoretical inquiry, from the philosophy of science to the theory of history. Through literary-theoretical debates, then, Marxist theory, which comes prepared to recognize the implicit constitutive force of history and ideology in language, has been able to comment forcefully on many issues at the cutting edge of contemporary intellectual discourse. In the field, perhaps, no work has been more important than that of Fredric Jameson, whose books have demonstrated Marxism's ability to comment sympathetically and productively on virtually all the major contemporary critical theories, and that of Raymond Williams whose writings, from the perspective of the dispossessed and the estranged, have contributed to reform cultural theory and to update Marxism. In consideration of the shared ground between Jameson and Williams, but mostly with emphasis on Williams, this section will be concerned with the social and historical conception of language.

Jameson's tempered appreciation and subsequent rejection of structuralism and poststructuralism are enacted in his superb critical treatment of their roots and development in *The Prison-House of Language*.⁶⁸ Structuralism, as Jameson has put it, is an attempt "to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics" (*PHL* vii). It is a symptom of the fact that language, with its problems, mysteries and implications, has become both paradigm and obsession for twentieth-century intellectual life.

The Prison-House of Language (1972), as a critique as well as exposition of nondialectical models, interrogates the complicated critical languages of contemporary structuralism. Jameson's title and his epigraph from Nietzsche show his awareness of the difficulties to go beyond formalism: "We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit." A formalism based on language is the ultimate high-

security prison, for we cannot imagine life outside, cannot even, in our theoretical discussions, think our way out. That Jameson should persist in trying to break out, and be willing for the moment to present an unfinished argument in the hope that later he will be able to go on, argues a major critical talent. This book is very much the by-product of a working-through of Formalism and Structuralism in order, he declares, “to emerge, on the other side, into some wholly different and theoretically more satisfying philosophical perspective.”

The Prison-House of Language is unified, among other ways, by an insistent charge that Saussure and his structuralist progeny suffer from a failure of historical consciousness that stems from the hierarchizing of synchrony and diachrony. Jameson’s critique of both Saussurean linguistics and Russian Formalism is, basically, that their formulations are incapable of dealing with diachrony in any meaningful way. Their sense of time is, for him, too distant from the time in which people live, in which readers read. Of course, when Jameson says that the entire discussion needs to be thrown onto a “higher dialectical plane,” he means to bring forward the notion of “dialectic” itself.⁶⁹

His dialectical perspective⁷⁰ first tries to reveal the philosophical and political bankruptcy of modern Anglo-American thought.⁷¹ Jameson’s battle against modern Anglo-American thought, curiously enough, is aided by poststructuralism in that deconstruction discloses the philosophical bankruptcy of this bourgeois humanist tradition. Yet, such deconstruction says little about the political bankruptcy of this tradition; further, and more seriously, deconstruction conceals the political impotency of its own projects. In short, Jameson rightly considers poststructuralism an ally against bourgeois humanism yet ultimately an intellectual foe and political enemy.

Derrida places a formal but empty meaning within the sign itself, but Jameson, seeking to go beyond formalism, cannot rest here and attempts to escape through history: “temporality here has become visible in structuralist terms only because it is the temporality latent within the sign itself,” but this is not yet a genuine historicity, “not the temporality of

the object, not that of lived existence on the one hand, or of history on the other" (*PHL* 188). Structuralism and Russian Formalism denature history or temporality by their attempts to deal with it; it becomes simply that which is not intelligibility, the locus of displacement, deferment, and alteration. Such theories "remain gaping with amazement before a succession of forms which history itself understands simply as the life cycle of capitalism, from mercantile to post-industrial stages" (*PHL* 194). Jameson speaks of opening again "the approaches to time and to history itself" and of reconstructing "a truth in process upon the ruins of a never-ending ideological formation." At the end of *The Prison-House of Language* he invokes a genuine hermeneutics which, by disclosing the presence of codes and models and by observing the participation of the linguistic analyst, would "reopen text and analytic process alike to all the winds of history" (*PHL* 216). In brief, Jameson's argument is that French formalistic critics have focused on the fixity of "structure" to the neglect of the processes of "structuring." Jameson appropriated the structuralist ahistorical project for his own historicizing ends. Moving beyond the prison-house of synchrony and paradigm, he hopes to recover the referential dimension of language, to liberate formalism and open it up to "the winds of history." Such an opening up is the object of the next phase of his project.

From *The Political Unconscious* (1981) onwards, Jameson talks, reacting strongly to the anti-hermeneutic posture of some contemporary criticism, of the necessity of "restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of . . . history" (*PU* 20), and suggests that with postmodernism there has emerged a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality. In the face of the postmodernism whose features, as described by Jameson, are "pastiche" and "schizophrenia" (*Postmodernism* 1-54), and against the deconstructive movement which often degenerates into the recommendation of a meaningless critical pluralism or an *a priori* rejection of all hermeneutic activity, he emphasizes his notion of meaning as effect and as process, as an inherently political and ideological process. It would be apparent that Jameson is, in some

ways, a traditional hermeneutical thinker; that is, his basic theoretical strategy is that of recuperation, restoration, and recovery. Furthermore, his fundamental aim is to preserve the Marxist affirmation that history is meaningful (*PU* 19-20). He acknowledges that history is always already mediated by language, texts, and interpretations, yet he insists that history is still, in some fundamental sense, “there.”

Jameson has done more than any other American hermeneutical thinker in achieving intellectual breakthroughs and accenting theoretical challenges of the Marxist tradition in our postmodern times. While he is a Marxist and one expects a certain kind of emphasis and commitment, Jameson is always coming up with the unexpected: a new formulation of the problem, new constellations of phenomena, new suggestions for a way forward. His thought has in recent years steadily grown knottier and more complex, his manner of presenting it more oblique and compressed. Instead of arguing Jameson’s ongoing ideas, then, my discussion will focus on Raymond Williams who shares with Jameson the emphasis upon historical consciousness as the core or center. The purpose of this analysis is to present the seriousness⁷² of Williams’s arguments. He has curiously academic power, the intellectually cautious assertion of the radical. He was always keenly aware of his own personal and social position as an interpreter or reader of texts, as the grandson of an agricultural laborer as a committed socialist.

The work of Raymond Williams is one of the most important bodies of socialist literary-cultural criticism to come out of England. Although there are obvious limitations to his work, it has a range, scope and seriousness that raise it considerably above almost all academic literary criticism. In reading Williams’s work, *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961), *The Country and the City* (1973), *Keywords* (1976), *Marxism and Literature* (1977), *Writing in Society* (1983), and *The Politics of Modernism* (1989), we get a sense that his texts are unusually polyphonous both in their genres and in the flexibility of their subject positions and discursive attitudes--inside and outside Marxism, Leavisism, the Labor party, literary theory, and so on.⁷³ In book after book, he tried to

play meanings off against each other in an attempt to avoid what he might, at one stage in his career, have called reification. He has a remarkable ability to treat himself and his own work dispassionately, from the outside, as it were, without losing his line or his characteristic voice.⁷⁴ He was able simply to go on thinking, to go on developing and changing in response to new intellectual challenges. In fact, not only was his work unclassifiable: it actively resisted incorporation into the specialized vocabularies and institutional rituals of the academic disciplines. His whole idiom of thought not only broke across, but was deliberately designed to call into question, the taken-for-grantedness of traditional categories and boundaries. His cast of mind is *intrinsically* connective. "My own view is that we must keep trying to grasp the process as a whole." He wrote, as he said himself, "against the frame of the forms." He insists on the effort to reach out beyond any specialized intelligentsia to a wider audience and to link intellectual work with a broader social and political purpose. "This . . . is the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life" (K14).

He continually raises large questions--about, for instance, the relation between literature and society and the relation between literary judgment and our social-political values--that often challenge one's basic view of literature and culture. Roughly speaking, there are two main periods to Williams's work.⁷⁵ During each period, his guiding interest was "to say something very much against the grain of two traditions" (PL 352): the dominant literary and the dominant Marxist: "one which has totally spiritualized cultural production, the other which has relegated it to secondary status" (PL 352-53). In the first, his argument against official English culture takes place in isolation from any active Marxist tradition. *Culture and Society* was published in 1958, the first fruit of the attempt to meet the "professional objections" of the establishment. Here the attempt was to confront the Leavisite critics of *Scrutiny* with an alternative view of the notion of culture. The second period work is more complicated, as Williams continues his arguments against the

establishment view of literature, but at the same time begins to place his own work more creatively in the context of a developing Marxist theory, one which he sees at times as dangerously idealist. In *Politics and Letters*, he attributes the occasional opaqueness of *Marxism and Literature* to its double opposition. It is directed both against the older conventional view of literature in the universities, and also as a “thrust against the limits of the newly dominant mode of critical structuralism” (PL 339-40). The struggle in the first period of work was against the isolation of the text in the vacuum of New Criticism--“the pseudo-impersonal attempt to judge works without any sense of the presence of the individual making judgment--its effort to divest itself of circumstances, to rise above history, to talk of literature rather than the individual or group making a critical judgment” (PL 335);⁷⁶--in the second period, the struggle is to remove the text from the void of deconstructive play, and once again assert the necessity for a historical and materialist study of cultural production. Williams calls his current theoretical position “cultural materialism,” which he defines as “the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production” (WS 210).

Williams is an original thinker as well as an industrious and intelligent historian and critic. Williams has not “belonged” to this or that exact political group, literary persuasion or institution. Williams was always haunted by the border he had crossed from the “knowable community” to the life of educated intelligence, and lived in border country the whole of his life. Williams’s background of the Welsh border working-class community gave him a perspective on Cambridge--on the way a culture becomes dominant, a “central system of practices, meanings and values”--and the necessary tension between that and the emergent energies and experiences which stubbornly resist it. The difference of his approach epitomizes Williams’s role as “the marginal man of Cambridge English,” “alien mind,” and “oppositional authority.” His life-long concern for culture and language can be considered as a genuine opposition to the dominant discourse about culture and language in the post-war years.

Even though we cannot totally accept F. R. Leavis's simplistic idea that to be responsive to cultural values is to be responsive to a language (*For Continuity* 15 & 44, and *Culture and Environment* 81) and his use of language as an analogy to define culture, Williams's idea of language is inseparable from that of culture. "The area of a culture," in Williams's words, "is usually proportionate to the area of a language rather than to the area of a class. It is true that a dominant class can to a large extent control the transmission and distribution of the whole common inheritance; such control, where it exists, needs to be noted as a fact about that class" (CS 320). He tries to restore a neglected group to linguistic, social, and literary history. He writes an adversarial history, reading in the authorized versions of the past just so many specious justifications for the brute fact of power. His abiding purpose now is to convert, to enforce our commitment to his own version of linguistic, social, and cultural history. Language was one of his intellectual passions from beginning to end, from *Culture and Society* to his posthumous work *The Politics of Modernism*, but his sense of what it signified ran so deep that one hesitated to call him a linguist. Words for him were condensed social practices, sites of historical struggle, repositories of political wisdom or domination (Eagleton, ed. 8).

Williams's work in the field of cultural studies represents his single most important contribution to postwar intellectual history,⁷⁷ for the tension between his loyalties to his rural, working-class roots and his recognition of the needs of "an unprecedented mobile urban society" has produced a body of work, in Frank Kermode's words, "of quite radical importance" (86). His masterpieces are more than merely illustrative of cultural studies; they are formative of it. No one had a more nuanced understanding of its complexities and perils. Williams, moreover, was fully aware of the conflicting meanings of the term and resolutely refused simply to choose one definition of culture over another. "Culture" was the site of the convergence. The fact is that no single, unproblematic definition of "culture" is to be found here. The concept remains a complex one--a site of convergent interests, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea. This "richness" is an area of

continuing tension and difficulty in the field.⁷⁸ He argues, however, the variation of meanings for the term “culture” should not be seen as a disadvantage, but as a genuine complexity corresponding to real elements in experience.

The “culture and society” debate began, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the recognition that all the versions of culture were deeply interrelated. The term “culture” became a new way of relating the texture of lived experience to a recognition of social change, a language in which both could be discussed simultaneously; it offered a range of insight into the reciprocal mediations between a personal structure of feeling, a social structure of feeling, and a complex of changing social institutions. To understand the continuity of the nineteenth-century debate with contemporary cultural argument involves some grasp of the range of meanings which this new phrase has crystallized, and such an analysis can be best pursued by an examination of three pivotal modern figures: T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams. These figures represent respectively what could be termed “the conservative, liberal, and radical socialist perspectives on culture and society,” a fact which provides a wider framework for the comparison. Williams’s declaration that the cultural consciousnesses of the previous hundred years had yielded the opportunity of establishing a common culture and whole way of life, goes hand-in-hand with himself as an example of that at last being attempted, that common consciousness being unprejudicially sought.

Working at first almost entirely on his own, Williams has sharply and constructively criticized writers of other tendencies, and he has offered his own positive alternatives. His peculiar status among British intellectuals can be clarified by his argument first *against* that of Arnold, Leavis and Eliot, and then *against* Structuralism and deconstruction. Thus, Williams’s examination of “official English culture” and language had from the beginning a negative force: it showed how limited and problematic the prevailing idea of culture and language was. On the academic terrain, Williams sought to counter conservative traditions of thinking about culture represented by Eliot and Leavis by refining crude left reflections

about the relation of culture and democracy, art and socialism. And on the political terrain, Williams sought to reconceive the notion of revolution such that cultural practices were neither overlooked nor viewed in a simplistic manner. The point was not only that culture--including popular culture--was to be viewed as a crucial site of struggle, but also that the very ways in which culture was understood in capitalist societies had to be demystified and transformed.

Williams first attempted to offer a critique of and an alternative to "a long line of thinking about culture to what were by now decisively reactionary positions" (PL 97). Therefore, his main purposes in *Culture and Society* were to set out the main line of thinking on "culture" from Burke and Cobbet to Eliot and Orwell, and to make his own revolutionary contribution to the tradition in an appeal for the necessity of a "common culture." Williams's own interest in the study of words derives from the post-war use of the word "culture" within the university. On his return to Cambridge after World War Two, Williams found that "culture had altered" (PL 61), and "Eliot's *Four Quartets* completely dominated reading and discussion" (PL 67). Although there was a debate in the early 1930s about Leavis's use of the word, "culture," it was Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) which gave the word a new importance. Against the general background of an increased interest in culture and its present state in England, various specific interventions in the debate can be considered.⁷⁹ Williams fashioned a weapon against a whole spectrum of contemporary groups. "I knew perfectly well who I was writing against," he observed in 1977. "Eliot, Leavis and the whole of the cultural conservatism that had formed around them--the people who had pre-empted the culture and literature of this country" (PL 98, 112).⁸⁰ In fact, behind the word "culture," which he initially encountered as a battle cry for a disgruntled elite, Williams uncovers a much deeper seam of social criticism.

Williams's courageous, breathtakingly original attempt, in effect, can be considered in comparison with the ideas and influence of the influential trio for the cultural notion;

Arnold, Eliot and Leavis. They, typically if in very different ways, saw culture as a bastion of what is the best, the intellectually and aesthetically ennobling. For Williams, it is Arnold's definition of culture in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that gives the tradition a single watchword. It is in Arnold both a study and a pursuit, which goes beyond the idea of a literary culture and applies to society itself, not simply to individuals. Williams was not to deny his respect for Arnold as one who had a genuine and practical commitment to the extension of popular education, taking knowledge beyond what he had called "the clique of the cultivated and the learned." Arnold's most famous account, however, runs thus: "The whole scope of this essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best [that] has been thought and said in the world" (6). Arnold's idea was that the timeless, classless culture could be used as a balm to prevent unpleasant things like class conflict.⁸¹ The culture Arnold defended then, says Williams, is not excellence but familiarity: "Not the knowable but only the known values" ("A Hundred Years of Culture and Anarchy" 8). Williams traced Arnold's view of culture as a universal ideal--"the best that is known and thought"--back to the social theory of Edmund Burke and forward to the literary criticism of Leavis in order to show its partiality. Far from being a universal, "culture" began as a rallying-cry against the new industrial society and then became a sort of social institution, an educational standard that invested chosen monuments of the national past with tacit but commanding prestige, and taught ordinary people contempt for their own ways of seeing and shaping the world.

Against the narrow and unspecific Arnoldian concept of culture, Williams first argued that culture cannot be reduced to a set of things: "A culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived" (CS 323). When we look at a culture in the past, we tend to think of it in terms of the particular works that it produced. For all sorts of reasons we cannot recover the full range of activities which went to make up any particular culture. And it is even more of a mistake to judge our own, living, cultural experience by the

methods and standards we have used for past cultures. Thus, Williams argued, if we look at working-class culture simply in terms of the cultural artifacts that it has produced we get a very distorted picture which will tend to flatter the greater productivity of the ruling class.

In order to get out of this unattractive corner Williams proposed a shift of emphasis:

. . . a culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work; it is also and essentially a whole way of life. The basis of a distinction between bourgeois and working-class culture is only secondarily in the field of intellectual and imaginative work, and even here it is complicated. . . by the common elements resting on a common language. The primary distinction is to be sought in the whole way of life, and here, again, we must not confine ourselves to such evidence as housing, dress and modes of leisure. Industrial production tends to produce a uniformity in such matters, but the vital distinction lies at a different level. . . . The crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationships. (CS 325)

This new position has important consequences. Williams provides a powerful argument against that reactionary view: for him class still remains a central issue which has been embodied in different views of the world. With a whole new range of things admitted as culture, it is no longer the case that the ruling class or its intellectual mercenaries are the overwhelming source of culture. Since these activities were, and are, widespread, the study of culture is no longer obsessed with great figures and their products. All of these seem to me to be valuable and progressive positions. Culture is no longer something which flourished in the past, and the present and the future are not deserts barren of human achievement.

Interestingly enough, in his chapter on Marxism, Williams is sharply critical of the repeated failures of Marxist criticism and he sets out his basic objection to Marxist thinking on culture: the model of base and superstructure is a false one, for it is not the economic structure that is determining but the way of life as a whole. He reacts even more strongly against Leavis's minority culture position: Leavis's analysis of mass culture as inferior and threatening to high culture.

If culture is to be understood as a whole way of life, then the very concepts of minority and majority culture become increasingly problematical. By the same token, Williams

could not accept Leavis's emphasis on the characteristics of the self-conscious minority who are the guardians of minority culture in a machine civilization :

... we want to produce a mind that knows what precision and specialist knowledge are. . . has a maturity of outlook. . . and has been trained in . . . a scrupulously sensitive yet enterprising use of intelligence, that is of its nature not specialized but cannot be expected without special training--a mind energetic and resourceful, that will apply itself to the problems of civilization, and eagerly continue to improve its equipment and explore fresh approaches. (*Education and the University* 58-59)

Leavis's position is that art and the common life were related in a past, "organic" society,⁸² but that their present relationship, in the context of a commercialist and philistine culture, can only primarily be one of a mutually defining hostility. Williams remarks that "Leavis ratified the position of the school: the best literature of the past *against* a disordered and destructive present; thus a literary-critical school assuming a necessary minority status but carrying the values of the past and of a possibly emergent present in its role as guardians and witnesses of the significant literature" (WS 187). The definition and transmission of social values will always be the province of, to use an Arnoldian term, the "remnant," the few sensitive and decent individuals who can avoid both the decreative influence of contemporary culture and the callousing of a formulated commitment to change it. Leavis thinks of artists as the master explorers of human experience and of literature as a manifestation of the highest creativity of life; but this creativity only occurs, in literature, with the poetic use of language.⁸³ Although the values are themselves social, concerned with the quality of human relationship and moral vitality, the energy which goes into their definition is individualist: it is preoccupied with exploring the possibilities of personal living rather than with connecting these values to the kinds of socio-political agencies which could ensure their general embodiment in the common life. The alternative, Williams claims, is a democratic culture which rests on two basic rights: "the right to transmit and the right to receive." These rights could only be tampered with by a majority decision which had been arrived at after open and adequate public discussion.

Thus, referring to his relationship with Leavis and apolitical *Scrutiny*,⁸⁴ Williams pointed out that “what was wrong with literature was that it was out of touch with a large majority of the people: it was not written for them, and it was not written by them. . . . Since literature was class-restrictive, it was the job of a Socialist to break through this restriction, by producing another kind of literature” (PL 45). When Leavis argued that only a minority was fully capable of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, and Baudelaire, he seemed to point out only an artistic and intellectual meaning of culture. Thus, Ian Gregor maintained in a review of *Culture and Society*, that Williams is simply confusing or obliterating the distinctions between the two meanings of culture--as artistic and intellectual achievement and as a whole way of life. Gregor separated the two meanings too sharply and Williams was able rightly to insist on the continuity of the two meanings. The tendency of Williams’s thought is to collapse distinction between high culture and culture. He seems to be reluctant to acknowledge that art is a higher and the highest kind of creative achievement. Williams’s point is that the culture of literacy is not a product in any Arnoldian or Leavisite sense of a time-capsule containing the “best” that has been thought and said--for that invites its fetishization or sacralization into a fixed canon--nor in the philological sense of a positive body of facts empirically collected and related through “objective” or quasi-scientific methods of analysis--and certainly not in an outmoded aristocratic sense of what the “best” people have. Rather, it is a continuing and restless process of thinking and being, ultimately unprogrammable and unverifiable because its grounds and principles are themselves always in question.

Culture now became the whole gamut of ways in which people thought, felt and acted. The conception of “culture” is itself democratized and socialized. It no longer consists of the sum of the “best that has been thought and said,” regarded as the summits of an achieved civilization--that ideal of perfection to which, in earlier usage, all aspired. Even “art”--assigned in the earlier framework a privileged position, as touchstone of the highest values of civilization--is now redefined as only one, special, form of a general social

process: the giving and taking of meanings, and the slow development of “common” meanings--a common culture: “culture,” in this special sense, “is ordinary.”

Even if Leavis’s approach that Williams argued against seemed to him “immediately attractive” and had “radical tinge” (“Culture and Revolution” 27) and Leavis’s influence, in fact, nourished his work and gave it an admirable complexity, it was “impossible” for Williams to accept Eliot’s position (*Ibid.* 27).⁸⁵ In his critique of Eliot, Williams points out the conservative bias in Eliot’s idea of culture. The conservative element is located in the concept of hierarchy and of cultural elites for the maintenance of civilized values and the defense of the social order against the incipient mob. Hence the idea of culture is set against equalitarianism. In Eliot, there is a simplification and idealization of society. Eliot’s notion of culture finds realization in society only at the cost of abandoning a confrontation with real societal conditions and retreating into an atavistic agrarian community. To a degree Eliot’s reintegration of culture into society signifies a utopian longing for a stasis removed from the dissonance of a fractured human existence, for the reassociation of sensibility in a unified, non-contradictory social hierarchy (CS 236). In this sense the imaginative order of language projects the desired societal unity:

And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic
The complete consort dancing together). (*CPP* 197)

Inside such an imagined order, each constitutive element achieves fulfillment without contradicting another or without transcending its unique form.

The criticisms generated by the publication of *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, can be categorized in two groups: Some attacked Eliot’s notion that a theological framework was necessary for the actualization of a positive culture; others emphasized that

the rigid, static and hierarchical social stratification was archaic, insensitive and even hostile to genuine cultural development.⁸⁶ Both groups, however, tended to accept implicitly Eliot's definition of culture as a whole way of life.

Despite all his reservations about Eliot's reactionary position, Williams also found some accord with Eliot's idea of "culture as a whole way of life" and the idea of "levels" that he posited. Eliot's emphasis on the unconscious nature of a lived culture is crucial to his argument: a culture, precisely because it is the whole way of life of a people, can never be fully brought to consciousness, and the culture of which we are conscious is never the whole of culture. In the conclusion to his *Culture and Society*, Williams puts a similar stress on the unconsciousness of a lived culture, but links it to a different structure of values (CS 334). For Williams, a culture's unconsciousness is a consequence of its openness to every offered contribution; the culture can never be brought fully to consciousness because it is never fully finished. The making of a common culture is a continual exchange of meanings, actions and descriptions, never totalizable as a whole, but growing towards the advance in consciousness. The crucial distinction between Williams and Eliot is that for Williams a culture is common not only when it is commonly shared but when it is commonly made: when common sharing is mediated by collaborative participation. For Eliot a culture is not a matter of individual or minority response but common when commonly shared, at different, fixed levels of participation and response: the conscious defining and nourishing remains the preserve of the minority.

Williams is right to point out that Eliot's famous definition of "all the characteristic activities and interests of a people" includes only external details of activity--"sport, food and a little art"--ignoring the wider spheres of work experience, attitudes, accepted values (CS 233-40). What is perhaps most striking about Eliot's model of a common culture is its static quality, and this is what Williams criticizes. And the moral and artistic versions of culture refuse to enter into significant relationship with culture in its widest sense. Both writers are concerned to contrast a common with a uniform culture: both stress the

unevenness and variety of any collectively lived experience. But for Eliot the variety springs, ironically, from a quite rigid structure of levels: All will not experience alike because all will not participate alike. Williams, while agreeing that full participation in the whole culture will be impossible, locates the essential variety of experience: the culture, precisely because it demands complex and collaborative participation in the shaping of its structures and meanings, will be infinitely richer, more various, open, supple, free than the supposedly common culture we assume. What we can expect, Williams says, "is not a simple equality of culture (in the sense of identity); but rather a very complex system of specialised developments--the whole of which will form the whole culture, but which will not be available or conscious, as a whole, to any one group or individual living within it" (CS 238).

If Eliot's emphasis on the role of tradition and faith in maintaining moral and cultural standards against the threats of a mass society only leaves us with unresolved contradictions, can we find more positive guidance in the work of influential literary critics? Williams offered the most sustained critical engagement with the central domains of English cultural life. He not so much engaged the map of English culture as re-drew it. *Culture and Society* revealed a new configuration in the architecture of English critical thought, which we had hardly glimpsed before.⁸⁷ *Culture and Society* was "a genuine voyage of intellectual discovery" and "an oppositional enterprise," attempting to redress the appropriation of a long line of thought about culture to reactionary positions. *Culture and Society* is profoundly marked by the imprint of the tradition to which it was counterposed: and nowhere so much as in its *method*. Williams's method is to study the language of individual thinkers rather than to deal with a number of abstracted problems. This is a clearly stated preference: "I feel myself committed to the study of the actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience" (CS 18). This is why *Culture and Society* is in large part a commentary on the writings of a range of people. *Culture and Society*

locates a whole series of thinkers who see culture as a “court of human appeal” against the diminution of human capacities in societies of the post-industrial revolution period. The critical thrust of this study lies in its emphasis on the persistence of an ideological complex or set of ideas over a divergent historical period. “This was not only a *cultural* question: in the English context, it was precisely the manner in which a particular set of political and social values had sedimented into a habitual inflection of language and thought” (Eagleton, ed. 58-59).

In a final section of *Culture and Society*, Williams becomes openly polemical. The function of culture in Williams is invariably linked to the possibility of “community,” to the prospect that a common existence--a shared subject position “we”--can be formed or recovered from the reified social relations of the present; that “culture” can, in other words, make the “communal” body of a people. Williams identifies communal virtues with his own experience of working-class life. Among the Welsh rural working class, he claims, there was a certain amount of local and practical democracy, but more significantly, each man had a sense of self-respect, a belief in his own importance and place in the community. His ideal is a common culture, but “this is not possible until it is realized that a transmission [of ideas] is always an offering, and that this fact must determine its mood: it is not an attempt to dominate, but to communicate, to achieve reception and response. Active reception, and living response, depend in their turn on an effective community of experience, and their quality, as certainly, depends on a recognition of practical equality. The inequalities of many kinds which still divide our community make effective communication difficult or impossible” (CS 316-17). Underlying the nature of a truly democratic society, his fundamental belief is in the possibility of open communication through which all members of society will be able to have a real share in decision-making.

Williams’s argument shows a more subtle understanding of the relations between classes, and the cultural problems they create than any mechanical Marxism.⁸⁸ He is concerned with getting rid of the we-they cultural relationship, what he calls “dominative”

attitudes held by an “elite” towards “the masses.” Williams offers a set of interrelated reflections which hinge on the concepts of “mass,” “communication,” “community” and, of course, “culture.” He makes a direct challenge to the validity of the concept of “mass.” “There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. . . . [A] way of seeing other people. . . has been capitalized for the purpose of political or cultural exploitation. . . . In practice we mass them, and interpret them, according to convenient formula. . . . [It] is the formula, not the mass, which it is our real business to examine. . . .” (CS 289). Here then is the direct statement of Williams’s view on cultural and political exploitation which provided the underlying motivation for the writing of *Culture and Society*. Along with the sense of the many being robbed of their common culture by the few, the language itself is also captured, and yet it is in and through language that resistance must begin.

Williams’s task with the field of language is a historic project of an intensely personal yet strongly impersonal kind. The exposure of clichés and rejection of cant concepts--“consumer,” “masses,” to which I referred above, “modernization” and so on--is one of the most liberating achievements of his earlier work. Historical semantics carried great weight for Williams as an analytical tool, from *Culture and Society* onward; he believed that whole social and historical tendencies could be tracked through the changing meanings of words. His project was to increase our awareness of the hidden conflicts covered over by words like “democracy” or “culture.” Looking back on *Culture and Society* in 1983, Williams reflected that: “The book was organized around the new kinds of problem and question which were articulated not only in the new sense of *culture* but in a whole group of closely associated words. Thus the very language of serious inquiry and argument was in part changed and changing, and my purpose then was to follow this change through in the writing of the very diverse men and women who had contributed to this newly central kind of argument” (CS ix). His own project, thus, embodies a particular kind of commitment and is rooted in a view of human agency. He does not suppose that conflicts over

terminology will be resolved by some independent arbiter or linguistic philosopher who will determine correct usage. Conflicts are built in because they relate to different experiences and readings of experiences.

What makes *Culture and Society* a book rather than a series of essays on English writers is the written practices of keywords, both historical and open-ended. Language, and the keywords in particular, is seen as “witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to embody” (CS xiii) over the period 1780-1950. This was, of course, the fascination of language as the structuring form of culture and writing in the theoretical discourses of the 1970s: language is an ambiguous and open-ended structure. The converging strands of literary criticism and socialist cultural politics produced a central linguistic analysis of the shifting historical effects of five words, industry, class, democracy, art and culture, on post-eighteenth-century British society (K 13).

These five words survive in the new book along with 105 additions. *Keywords* was first published in 1976 and reissued in 1983 with amendments and additions. Williams’s *Keywords* is historical rather than philosophical in its approach. However, he most succinctly expresses the principle that underlies the method of annotation by using the phrase “vocabulary of culture and society” to distinguish his efforts from those involved in the production of dictionaries and glossaries. He wants to introduce the present volume as “the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*” (K 15). In his introduction Williams refers to continual encounters between groups where value conflicts at different levels of explicitness and consciousness are indicated in a struggle over the meaning of words. In the development of a language “certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, qualified, changed” (10). These are sometimes long and slow processes and sometimes, as

in periods of war, quick and conscious. After its characteristically autobiographical introduction, the book consists of just over a hundred short, highly informative but also somewhat terse essays, each devoted to a different word of cultural and social importance in the contemporary world. The words are arranged alphabetically, which is of great significance, for the effect is not of a linear and continuous argument but of a cultural network or map of meanings, spreading out thinly and sideways across a wide conceptual area. The entries can be read in any order. The effect is not quite of stasis. The words are seen to be quietly energized, and to move, if very slowly and gently, through history, not having constant “correct” meanings, but yet not arbitrary either, for they have a logical and understandable continuity which can be traced even with internal surprises. It does show most importantly how no one notion is wholly dominant and how language itself is seen as an active and moving set of relations and inter-connections with which we generate meaning, rather than a set of constants to which we refer.

As Williams indicated, the words included are those relevant to discussions of culture and society; they are also words whose meanings--usually for historical reasons--present problems. *Keywords* is a vocabulary in the sense of recording words in the process of use, meanings as they change over time, and it tries to focus especially on discrepant words and meanings at the moment of their interconnection. This concern with historical change seems to tie his work to a historical dictionary. Yet because of its primarily philological and etymological interests, the emphasis in a historical dictionary is on definition as a mechanism of stabilizing variant meanings of a word in the chronological order of their dominant usage. Williams’s status as a historian of the conventional sort is intentionally shaky, because from time to time he suspends the job of historical description of words and things in order to create a consciousness of the very immediate dangers lurking in current usage, where the reality of problems may in fact be obscured by language.⁸⁹ Thus, Williams’s concern is with definition as a fluid social process that consists equally of the continuous and unified movement of meaning, and the discrete, variant “units” of meaning

that may be attached to a word by any one speaker at any single moment. His concern is with parts as they are inseparable from the whole. When Williams identifies his work with "historical semantics," he directs our attention to an expanded context of historical understanding that goes beyond chronology. Certainly the organizing purpose of *Keywords* is to understand parts and wholes in their dialectical relation. Keywords characteristically are "not the specialized vocabulary of a specialized discipline" (K 14); on the contrary, they are likely to connect areas that we now tend to keep separate. Furthermore, they are words whose continuous verbal identity may mask a radical semantic variation over time (K 17), so that a single complex word comes to refer to a number of discrepant things. Apparent diversity conceals unity; apparent unity conceals diversity. Words are therefore endlessly confusing, irritatingly paradoxical, or contradictory in the logical sense, for these are the ways in which language comes closest to expressing the non-linguistic experience of dialectical historical reality. What is most significant about Williams's keywords is not just their embodiment of apparent antithesis, but that the antithesis is most often understood to be historically generated: not so much a static paradox as a dynamic reversal.⁹⁰

From this point, Williams is close to Empson, a pioneer of verbal analysis, but fundamentally different from him. A likely model for *Keywords*, to which Williams also refers, is William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), and in fact a recurrent characterization of particular keywords within the body of Williams's book is that they seem to be, in the Empsonian sense, "complex."⁹¹ Yet despite the fact that Empson's type of structuralism was far more sensitive to historical context than are most of its contemporary versions, his notion of "complexity" tends to entail a sense of structure that precedes history.⁹² Williams's annotations of the words he lists serve the purpose of demonstrating that what may at first appear a verbal irony is in fact a historical one, and therefore an intelligible process.

If Williams aims to understand the dialectical relation of parts and whole, his premise is the possibility of reconciling Empson with a historical dictionary and synchrony with diachrony. Nor would it be accurate to render synchrony / diachrony by the dichotomy structure/ history, since keywords like “structure” and “history” are key precisely to the extent that they acutely reveal the historical dimensions of structures and the characteristic structures of history. From the perspective of dialectics, synchrony / diachrony is the mistaken product of undiachronic thinking, achieved through the substitution of chronology for history.

Another exploration is maintained through his preoccupation with the relationship between the word and the reality to which it refers. Williams does not invite us to linger on the apparently self-enclosed brilliance of a complex word. Hard words refer to hard realities, and Williams’s point is that we should not ignore the thing altogether, while at the same time, we should not, with eager and complacency, take the word for the thing.

The reflections on keywords are not only ways of making connections, where no connection was explicit before but also ways of drawing attention to different social perspectives--different ways of seeing the world. Concepts, after all, in their relation to other concepts, are ways of seeing the world but they are also ways of not seeing the world. To show what is present and what is absent in our seeing and in our understanding eventually has political implications. Moreover, differing or changing meanings or words can draw attention to struggle between different groups in society. Through careful scrutiny of words and their usage we can get clues both to the locus of power in a society and to the sources of resistance to it.

Then what does Williams wish to accomplish? Williams says “What can really be contributed is not resolution but . . . that extra edge of consciousness. . . . This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical--subject to change as

well as to continuity. . . not a *tradition* to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is 'our language', has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view; a vocabulary to use, to find out our ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history" (K 24-25). *Keywords* thus clearly represents an expansion of this mode of analysis, confirming Williams's growing need to place language at the center of a thoroughgoing cultural materialism. It is necessary to insist on the ineluctable opposition between words and things--but the underlying and unifying premise is that semantics cannot proceed in isolation from the history either of words or of the reality of the things to which they are taken to refer.

The chief significance of *Keywords* is that it is possible at all, and that our cultural integration can be seen as an interrelation, not of books or painting, or economic polities, trades, sports, religious beliefs, or pursuits, or all these together; but of words, and by words the notation, as Williams calls it, of the ways we connect and value these other things, but much more generally. And this linguistic regression, so to call it, to the abstract and general, a tendency throughout his work, seems to come out now as a conclusion to all he has written. This ending on the question of language seems important and revealing namely, in the view that a whole culture's structure of feeling is mainly an active network of language abstractions.

But the historical approach to language itself poses problems: the contributors to the Oxford English Dictionary, Williams points out, were not immune from ideological assumptions: nor is he. The main value of his book is, consequently, negative, skeptical-critical. Williams does not want to be a vulgar Marxist, or even to be a historical materialist. What he seeks instead is a Marxism capable of resisting reification and abstraction into a confidently held and admired "position," and so he unobtrusively locates himself in a position--which is really more an act of positing, perpetually conditional and

always subject to the contrary act of negation. It is by this means that his intellectual activity may engage with his whole career as a product that is indistinguishably a lived and ongoing process. This reflexive quality is well extended in *Keywords*: through a discussion of this book's development from work on *Culture and Society* twenty years earlier; and through the invitation that brings the introduction to a close: "My publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions as developments" (K 26) ". . . towards the revised edition which it is hoped will be necessary" (K(1976) 24). The justification for a procedure such as this is succinct: ". . . a book is only completed when it is read. . ." (K 25). In this way the unity of product and process becomes, finally, one of production and consumption, incorporating within its unifying frame a great richness of constituent parts.

In *Keywords*, with his scrupulous attention to how cultural transformations register as changes in the meanings of words, he again "remapped" some of the main turning points of English culture. In *Marxism and Literature* and elsewhere, the very status of the literary text is finally challenged and displaced by a new kind of attention to language and different kinds of writing, conceived as forms of literary production. "Keywords," in fact, were a key to the "structure of feeling." But in *Marxism and Literature* Williams tried to use them to open the lock of Marxist aesthetics. Fewer than twenty terms indexed in *Keywords* also receive extended historical discussion in *Marxism and Literature*. Virtually every chapter begins with the historical semantics of a particular term of debate. *Marxism and Literature* is his most condensed and persuasive reflection on the strengths and limitations of the classical Marxist tradition, from the perspective of what he came to call "cultural materialism."

What is interesting about *Marxism and Literature*, and indeed this later period of Williams's work more generally, is the place it gives more seriously and intentionally to language. Language turns out to be central both to cultural production and to our

description of that, our on-going consciousness of it. This time language is seen to be involved in a complex way with the concept of culture and the notion of structures of feeling. The surprising book *Keywords* is implicitly a demonstration of this but also an embodiment of it, while *Marxism and Literature* spells out the theory more specifically. We must now consider this later emphasis on language.

The centrality of language is a key feature of *Marxism and Literature*, Williams's most explicit and, one presumes, final statement on the subject. The truth is that language is an active process of shared notation. Language, if not seen as an activity, becomes either a tool to be picked up when needed or "medium," which surprisingly is an error too, for it can never be this in the way that, for example, sound and paint are. Language, the actual words, are always already sediments, associations of meaning and tendency when we come to them, and historically enjoined. Language is itself newly produced by us each time we use it in ordinary social life.

As a way of understanding contemporary problems of meaning and structures of meaning, Williams presents historical materialism against non-historical structuralism, in the introduction of the 1976 *Keywords* (21): "... the area of signification is not confined to the system itself, but in one dimension necessarily extends to the users of language and to the objects and relationships about which language speaks, and that none of these can be limited to the formal system but exist, indeed primarily, in material and historical ways" (*Ibid.* 20). For him, "language is a continuous social production in its most dynamic sense. In other words, not in the sense which is compatible with structuralism--that a central body of meaning is created and propagated, but in the sense that like any other social production it is the arena of all sorts of shifts and interests and relations of dominance. . . . [A] notion of language [is] not merely the creation of arbitrary signs. . . but of signs which take on the changeable and often reversed social relations of a given society, so that what enters into them is the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak the language, including all the variations between signs at any

given time" (PL 176). This argument is fully developed in *Marxism and Literature*. In the chapter called "Language," Williams assesses the position of Marxism in relation to linguistic theory. Two things that interest him are the history of language, and the concept of language as praxis, as a constitutive activity, as a shaping force in social production. This chapter shows the uniqueness of Williams's complexity, and it involves his criticism of Saussurean Structural linguistics and his ambivalent relationship to abstract Marxism analysis. This also presents the major theme of *Marxism and Literature*: the overcoming of the false dichotomies such as base-superstructure, individual-society, material-ideal, by human self-creation. "At the very center of Marxism," writes Williams, "is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation" (ML 206). Although it is at the center of Williams's Marxism, another Marxist current has been in the opposite direction, emphasizing determinism, restricting creativity, expressing tremendous hostility to artistic autonomy. Discussing the problem of determination Williams criticizes the notion that determination is only limitation, and this is effectively the bourgeois idea of society as a system of constraints on a putatively pre-social individual. He insists that determinism is not only limitation but also pressure, and it is always a process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic and cultural formation (ML 87). Throughout the book, then, Williams criticizes the numerous and various instances when Marxists, including Marx himself, fail to overcome the bourgeois dichotomies and perpetuate instead the cultural alienation inaugurated by capitalism.

I move on to the area of language, and in particular to his critique of Saussure. Williams maintains that "a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (ML 21). Interestingly enough, in his essay on Saussure, Barthes also remarks that "quite often nothing is more *directly* ideological than linguistics" (*The Semiotic Challenge* 152).⁹³ This point is why Williams wishes to contest the ideological implications of certain methodological approaches to language. Williams identified major shortcomings in the distinction between *langue*, the system "which is at

once stable and autonomous and founded in normatively identical forms" (ML 28), and *parole*, the individual uses of the particular *langue*. Firstly, Williams treats Saussure as exemplifying a trend termed by Volosinov (to whom Williams is much indebted here) "abstract objectivism." Instead of beginning with "the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world," abstract objectivism treated this simply as exemplifying "a fixed, objective, and in these senses 'given' system, which had theoretical and practical priority over what were described as 'utterances'" (ML 27), and then identified this system as the object of linguistics. Saussure's synchronic isolation of linguistic structures excluded both variant language among individual speakers and the role of historical change from the social nature of language. According to Williams, Saussure's theoretical expression "reified" understanding of language, and eliminates language as a social practice, as a constitutive activity, inaugurating a permanent stasis. Secondly, the *langue / parole* antithesis takes the bourgeois distinction between individual and social for granted: "the categories in which this version of system has been developed are the familiar bourgeois categories in which an abstract separation and distinction between the 'individual' and the 'social' have become so habitual that they are taken as 'natural' starting-points" (ML 28). Williams criticizes modern structuralists for their rejection of the notion of the individual and their collapsing of the "living and reciprocal relationship of the individual and the social" into "an abstract model of determinate social structures and their 'carriers'" (ML 194). Thirdly, the primacy of a closed system over the process of utterance, coupled with the thesis of the arbitrariness and fixity of the sign, banish history and activity from linguistics. The *langue / parole* relation formed the theoretical expression of a political assumption about the individual's lack of agency within his or her own world: "the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world was theoretically reduced to instances and examples of a system which lay beyond them" (ML 27). Thus, Williams's critique of Saussure is at once both intellectual and political: the

idealist determinism of structural linguistics could not account for actual linguistic change, which in political terms amounts to a denial of human agency.

Saussure insisted on the arbitrariness of the sign within the context of the history of linguistics,⁹⁴ and implied that the structures of language do not reflect a metaphysical world-order, or universal human patterns of experience. Williams takes the implications of “arbitrary” as cutting off language from society and history: “[the sign] is not arbitrary but conventional, and . . . the convention is the result of a social process” (*PL* 330). For Williams, the thesis of arbitrariness is an eviction of history. Because it has a history, the sign is not arbitrary: it is “the specific product of the people who have developed the language in question” (*PL* 330). And the systematic character of language, which he does not deny, is the “result, the always changing result, of the activities of real people in social relationships” (*PL* 330). To reduce linguistic activity to performance of a pre-existing system “denies the possibility of a constant process of significant present activity which is capable of altering the system, which observably does alter the system of social language” (*PL* 331).⁹⁵ Against the structuralist emphasis on the specificity and “autonomy” of practices, and their analytic separation of societies into their discrete instances, Williams’s stress is on “constitutive activity” in general, on “sensuous human activity, as practice”; on different practices conceived as a “whole indissoluble practice”; on totality. “Thus, contrary to one development in Marxism, it is not ‘the base’ and ‘the superstructure’ that need to be studied, but specific and indissoluble real processes, within which the decisive relationship, from a Marxist point of view, is that expressed by the complex idea of ‘determination’” (*ML* 82).

Many of the other lines of divergence between structuralism and cultural materialism flow from this point: the conception of “men” as bearers of the structures that speak and place them, rather than as active agents in the making of their own history; the emphasis on a structural rather than a historical “logic”; the preoccupation with the constitution—in

“theory”--of a non-ideological, scientific discourse; and hence the privileging of conceptual work and of Theory as guaranteed; the recasting of history as a march of structures.

Arguing against the reduction of language to instrumentality, the idea of language as expression, and also systematic abstractions of language, what Williams looks for in Volosinov is a notion of language as social practice and as historical institution. Language is a social institution but of a very special kind: it pervades all other social institutions and the social self. Volosinov's concept of language as a social activity is preferable to expressivism or structuralist objectivism, but it introduces another problem, that of consciousness. What is the relationship between language and pre-linguistic, non-linguistic experiences, inchoate feelings, memory, and silence? Williams does not ask the question, much less provide a satisfactory answer. To say we all create language and that all consciousness is social could be a beginning, but only a beginning. Calling language “social” is not entirely useful unless one breaks down “social” into its categories.

However, the important stage of Williams's thinking is clearly represented by *Marxism and Literature*. Here Williams declares himself a Marxist and offers what he insists is a Marxist theory of literature and culture. Increasingly moving back towards the Marxist tradition, however, he was moving against the current, just as many Marxists were beginning, in Lyotard's phrase, to “drift away” from the orthodoxy with which they had striven to coincide. Williams explains that the reason for his new openness to Marxism was an awareness of “the variety of selective and alternative traditions” within Marxism that helped him to get rid of the obstacle of “the model of fixed and known Marxist positions” (*ML* 3). (“You're a Marxist, Aren't You?”). Marxist theory in the western world has become, Williams says “active, developing, unfinished, and persistently contentious” (*ML* 4).

Williams conducts an intense, obscure, internal debate with Marxist views of language, literature, and culture. In his innovative discussion on language, thus, he puts the Marxist idea of language--reflection theory--as reductive, polarizing, mechanistic and

abstract: He admits that "Marxism has contributed very little to thinking about language itself" (*ML* 21), Marxism has demoted language to the role of reflecting a reality prior to it, or Marxism has adopted a linguistics entirely outside of Marxism. At the same time, in contrast to structural Marxism, Williams insists on the impossibility of treating consciousness and material reality as relatively autonomous. The material social process is not a complex structure and its effects, but the continuous process of individual social action, the determined result of purposeful, conscious practice. The emphasis in Williams's work on experience seems to place him as empiricist. But one can distinguish between two kinds of empiricism: vulgar empiricism and radical empiricism. The former takes for granted the existence of a knowing subject with an unmediated access to experience; its idea of language is language as a transparent means of communication. The latter questions the terms of the construction of that knowing subject and interrogates in particular the semantics of natural languages in relation to questions of human sociality. This is the radical empiricism of Williams, whose political arguments are precisely concerned with the problems of ideological reproduction across questions of knowledge. And in contrast to vulgar empiricists, Williams insists on the social existence of the individual cultural units, and the transindividual properties of the constituted social process.

In theory, then, Williams is Marxist but not structuralist, and empirical but not empiricist. Williams questions not only the content of orthodox theories but also the way the theory is created. In contrast to both structural Marxists and empiricists, Williams insists that historical investigations and theoretical analyses cannot be separated. Theory is history. It is necessary to locate the specific individuals and cultural units; to analyze the actual processes, their constituent relations and constituting actions; and to trace the transforming effects of the social process as a whole. In other words, it is necessary to write history. There is no short cut "theoretical practice" which can eliminate this necessary step, as a tendency within structural Marxism would argue. At the same time it is necessary to insist upon the need for theoretical reflection as such. History is theory. To

borrow a phrase from Marx, theoretical classification is an essential "mode of investigation."

The most important material means and conditions are, in the first instance, language itself, which is not only material but also the basis of human sociality; and in the second instance, the whole material process of writing as a social relationship, from its initial composition, through its transmission, to its reception in the active process of reading. An emphasis on the indissoluble unity of consciousness and material reality requires that the effects of the dominant social relationships be brought into an analysis of the stuff of consciousness, the actual language itself, its material notations and socially determined signs. For Williams, it also implies that there is no such thing as an abstracted consciousness independent of specific social situations and relationships which can be analyzed as the effect of some other abstracted social structure or process. Consciousness is already a social relationship.

Williams had an intuitive ability to make his idea of language against what he saw as the inhumanities of "writing"--of theory, abstraction, schematization, the techniques he often identified with structuralism and chilly modernist distance. For the theorists who became prominent, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, culture became a language, an abstract system of oppositions and exclusions. Having made the connection between Cambridge English and "Englishness," Williams then links it to a modernist cosmopolitanism which seems almost the opposite of any guardianship of the national tradition. In modernism, he says, the "estrangement"--a sense of both distance and novelty--which is presented as being true of the "mobile and dislocated" modern world is, in fact, true of the intellectuals themselves, who have broken away from their home cultures and now find shelter in universities. Their characteristic experiences were "estrangement and exposure." Soon, however, modernism's estranged intellectuals were grounded in the academy. Emphasizing these two "faces" of modernism and the paradox of modernist culture as both oppositional cutting edge and professional ground, he

continues, "What began in isolation and exposure ended. . . in an establishment," one part of which was "a new way of life--in the universities--for intellectuals" (WS 222-23). In his writings, he frequently notes "the contradictory character of the history of the avant-garde movements" (*The Sociology of Culture* 85): the rapid transformation of modernism from innovation to new orthodoxy: "a radical difference between the two generations" (PM 45): "What has quite rapidly happened is that Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism" (PM 35), and the modernists "destabilized the fixed forms of an earlier period of bourgeois society" but these new techniques and their innovative attitudes "stabilized as the most reductive versions of human existence in the whole of cultural history" (PM 130). Williams's arguments on modernism end in disappointment at the intellectuals' institutional grounding. His version insists that the original experience of "estrangement and exposure" is solidified, grounded not in the sense of restriction but of foundation. Williams suggests that in its essence modernism already was professionalism. Without commitment to local culture or community, the intellectual remains estranged, free-floating, cosmopolitan. In this view, the universality generated in the universities is less national than estranged, imperial, international; in Williams's phrase, English is "the profession of a stranger" (WS 224),⁹⁶ and those who practice criticism look upon the world "with the eyes of a stranger" (WS 223). Williams forcefully condemns the result of modernism: "I can feel the bracing cold of their inherent distances and impersonalities and yet have to go on to say that they are indeed ice-cold" (WS 223). When Williams takes a critical distance from cold modernist distances, the reader is left to infer that a closer, warmer contact with the home culture is both possible and desirable, and that it is just such a contact that Williams himself has maintained.

Williams's account of modernism, however, is not simply antagonistic. Though Williams is more often associated with the interpretations of the realist novel than with the analysis of modernism, he had a lifelong fascination with modernism. Through his reading

of the historical and political character of European Modernism, he exhibited “how modernism’s radical estrangement of the ordinary was at once a creative political experiment and a disabling deracination” (Eagleton, ed. 4). For instance, the very title of Williams’s book on the English novel “from Dickens to Lawrence” proposes a trajectory from realism to modernism; and *The Country and the City* draws to its conclusions with an unanticipated leap from English realism to contemporary post-colonial fiction, the novels of “the new metropolis.” Williams, however, returns most systematically to the questions of modernism and its aftermath in *The Politics of Modernism*.

Tony Pinkney, in his introduction to *The Politics of Modernism* and in a paper in Terry Eagleton’s collection, demonstrates how the thread of the evaluation of the modernist project runs through the whole of Williams’s work from his immediate post-war writings to his last discussions. The book covers a wide range of issues and topics but the essays making up the first half are of particular importance. The first of these papers, “When was Modernism?” as a historical assessment and critique of the modernist movement, introduces some significant themes which run through Williams’s account. He stresses the importance of the development of a new type of city in the late nineteenth century (*PM* 39), the role of the emigré of exile and in a familiar Williams fashion, “border crossing” (35). Williams situates his discussion of modernism in a social and historical context. This he develops, over the next four essays on “Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism,” “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” “Language and the Avant-Garde” and “Theatre as a Political Forum.”

The fact that English modernism is largely the product of expatriates, of “exiles and emigrés,” has sometimes been offered as evidence of how little it “took” in the culture at large. But, as Williams has reminded us in *The Sociology of Culture*, there is nothing exceptional about this situation, which is neither a “missed moment” nor a freakish “peculiarity of the English” but rather the very condition of possibility of modernism as such. Certain facets of avant-garde culture have, Williams contends, “to be analysed not

only in formal terms but within the sociology of metropolitan encounters and associations between immigrants who share no common language but that of the metropolis and whose other (including visual) received sign-systems have become distanced or irrelevant. This would be a traceable social factor within the often noted innovations in attitudes to language and to the received visual significance of objects" (*The Sociology of Culture* 84).

Williams's attachment to place and people and his sense of the right use of learning fuels his critical work as much as his fiction, and is perhaps as telling in the best essays in *The Politics of Modernism* as it has ever been. He explores the speculations anticipated by *The Country and the City*, on the definition of the "modern" and its historical relationship to the metropolis. Williams understands the transformations that generated modernism, and produced its celebration of mobility, change and dislocation. But he values them differently from its supporters. In his analysis of modernism, Williams focuses on the diversity of the movement, and rejects formalism or broad brush historical characterizations. Williams periodizes the development of the avant-garde, and develops his analysis of its politics. "The emergence of modernism," he asserts, is inextricable from "metropolitan perceptions" (*PM* 37). The importance of the metropolis is stressed in the first of these essays, with the place of avant-garde movements within the city being seen as central. Williams is interested in detail, in relating modernism and the avant-garde, seen as a diverse movement, to a particular set of social changes operating in specific locations at a precise moment. In this way, Williams's argument is directly sociological in focusing on the specific relationships and determinations within a particular context. Williams makes the point that it was not simply a general response to the city that characterized modernism, but "the new and specific location of the artists and intellectuals of this movement within the changing cultural milieu of the metropolis" (44). Williams sees modernism as arising from a markedly new phase in European urban consciousness. This phase draws on earlier reflections of the complexity and modernity of urban experience, but contains a number of new features. There is an emphasis on the metropolitan and cosmopolitan aspects of

leading cities--Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, St Petersburg. New forms of cultural juxtaposition occur, as individuals move in from the periphery of Europe and as the cultural implications of Imperialism surface.

In particular the competition of languages (in the context of uneven development) reveals the non-transparent character of language itself and pushes issues of the form of representation to the fore. Formations of artists and intellectuals begin to define themselves as separate and distinct, whether as anti-bourgeois or as the leading edge of a new phase of the bourgeois dream of radical individualism. Thus, the formative "character of the metropolis," "the key cultural actor of the modernist shift," is more than thematic: "the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices" (*PM* 45). The historical conditions for the emergence of a modernist aesthetic are presented as the break-up of traditional or inherited communities by the profoundly disorienting and disruptive encounter with the city. Modernism takes shape in desire to recover "the only community available to them: a community of the medium." Community is thus not abolished but displaced; and modernism is the name of the attempt to reclaim on the aesthetic level that which is denied socially and politically. However displaced, the desire for community remains, a desire which is, for Williams, inseparable from the activity of culture itself. The perception of language has changed. It was no longer "customary and naturalized," but in many ways "arbitrary" (*PM* 46). Williams historicizes the modernist encounter with a material opacity of language as the consequence of immigrations: for immigrant writers and intellectuals, "language was more evident as a medium" (*PM* 46), a medium which promises the recuperation of community.

As I mentioned above, Williams pointed out the contradiction of the modernist movement, and explored the subsequent fate of the modernist movement. He showed with acuteness how modernism, once a voice of dissent, has become a metropolitan orthodoxy with its own supportive critical industry. At its best, Williams argued, modernism knew

only what it was against. Its innovations and experiments are “more immediately recognized by what they are breaking from than by what they are breaking towards” (*PM* 43). Williams also indicates the inherent contradiction of modernist language: “modernism both challenged and replaced, including . . . new forms of colloquial vigour and popular reference”; at the same time it separated its own processes “from the general social processes of language which were in any case there” (*WS* 224). In the process of enriching the language of modernist literature, even including secular and seemingly non-poetic language in its most innovative experiments, ironically it became the cold, distant, privileged work, that is to say, the possession of a minority. To borrow Williams’s words, modernists rejected “the orthodox social and cultural order” but also pursued “its different kinds or order, its clearer authorities,” and then thought themselves as “lonely proud aristocrats” (*WS* 225). Thus, Williams intends to look beyond the language of modernism and Cambridge English: “beyond that remarkable but characteristic innovation which settled to self-definition in an important privileged institution” (*WS* 225).

It is really in the early twentieth century that criticism assumed for itself an elitist focus of imaginative integrity expressed through the discrimination of “authentic great or major works.” The high art concept of culture was institutionalized by the invention of “criticism,” the activity by which one separated the high from the low. The goal of criticism is to facilitate the “conspicuous humanistic consumption” of a high art tradition and thus to validate the socio-political and economic hegemony of the bourgeoisie. This high tradition oppresses not only as social legitimation, but much more insidiously as the purveyor of standards, conventions and traditions. Williams insists that writing is production, the production of meanings and contexts constituted by the author. Although writing is always social, class-specific, inevitably employing convention, Williams implies that if writers increase their awareness of the social nature of their practices, they will liberate their writing from false presuppositions and enable themselves to constitute a literature in a more creative way. High culture and popular culture are not evaluative

categories, but describe specific social relations and assumptions, specific audience-author relationships, specific points of view. Thus the conflict Williams described, between criticism which attends only to a special and privileged category of literature and criticism which attends to a much broader range of written production, is itself contained within the more general development by which criticism creates and maintains its authority.

What remains unexplored in his discussion of modernism, however, is the possibility that the eruptions of the material sign that characterize the modernist text are not attributable solely to the social fact of immigration. Williams's historicism does not permit him to entertain the possibility that this historical condition of modernism, the engagement with a language which is not one's own, is less an exception than an inevitable feature of our insertion into language. Perhaps, in other words, modernism represents a particular thematization of inherent properties of language. To conceive of language as irreducibly opaque and alien would, of course, render it unstable and unsuitable for culture and the workings of a community. Williams's conceptions of culture and community demand that one understand language as a human instrument. But, there is a prospect that certain aspects of language cannot be reduced to language's communicative functions, that there may be a nonphenomenal, nonhistorical materiality of the linguistic sign, or that there exists a rhetorical element of language always to exceed its role as "medium."

In the polemical conclusion of "When Was Modernism?," we can see Williams's understanding of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism especially in terms of culture and community (35). The desire for community is presented as the desire to free human subjectivity from the "inhuman rewriting of the past" that Williams identifies with the "non-historical fixity" of "post-modernism." Williams maintains that the imagination of a human community can be restored only if this "inhuman rewriting" is effaced by the recovery of an "alternative tradition" of culture. The "inhuman writing" that Williams indicates as a postmodern disposition can be instead what Paul de Man discloses to be an inherent feature of language itself, a "nonhuman aspect of language." As de Man

characterizes it in an exchange with the literary critic M. H. Abrams,⁹⁷ “language does things which are so radically out of our control that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly” (101). For de Man there is an irreducible aspect of language which resists accommodation with the concept of the “human.” What we call the “inhuman,” de Man argues, is “linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language--independently of any intent or any wish or any desire we might have” (96). These claims for the compulsive force of language counter the “humanist” tradition which posits language as a human property. Abrams’s response to de Man in this exchange is exemplary of this humanist position: “Language is the most human of all the things we find in the world, in that language is entirely the product of human beings” (99). Yet de Man’s arguments suggest that such invocations of the “human” represent the ultimately idealist attempt to “humanize” the “prosaic materiality of the letter” as phenomenal or instrumental or historical (Gary Shapiro, ed. 144).

Even though Williams would never accept de Man’s insistence on the “inhuman” linguistic dimension, his historical account of modernism and its aftermath delivers him to a confrontation with an unredeemable materiality of language, “inhuman rewriting.” Williams’ denunciation of postmodernism thus refers to a problem in the assumptions of his own cultural materialism.

Williams’s observation of literary language in the context of its contemporary history culminates in *The Country and the City* (1973). As a very committed, even angry book, it brings together Williams’s various interests: it moves from the very personal opening,⁹⁸ in which Williams sketches his own background, to an analysis of English social, literary and intellectual history. In a new tone, almost a new sensibility, Williams brings to bear, against the well-entrenched, dominant conception of the English “country house” poetic tradition, a sense of historical context, and an understanding of the complex interplay between text and society, so powerful that it is simply not possible, ever again, to read it in

the old way. Characteristically, this is no simple act of literary evaluation; this is an example of critical insight sharpened by personal acerbity. We are made to look at what goes on in poems, and what no doubt went on in reality, and to see the literature of city and country measured against the reality of urban and rural life. This reads in the conventional ceremony and elegance of the English country estate one long history of “fraud, crime and violence penetrated against working people” (Eagleton, ed. 6). The poems and their cultural settings are not downgraded, but re-claimed and re-ordered by the turning on to them of this penetrating critical-historical gaze. They are re-positioned in our imagination and understanding.⁹⁹ Here, Williams argues against attempts, as in Lukács, to define an aesthetic category, and the formalists’ attempt to isolate “poetic language.” Williams refuses to separate the aesthetic situation or poetic language from social and material processes. For Williams, then, to call a portrayal in country-house poems a natural order is “an abuse of language” (CC 33).

Williams’s quarrel with Leavis about the organic community begins with a discussion of poems on the English country house. Referring to the claim that Ben Jonson’s *Penshurst* reflects its social world, Williams, however, argues that Jonson’s poem represents a complete idealization and has no relation to its social world: and he attempts to support his claim by moving from the poems to a discussion of the social history of the period.

Thus, what needs to be focused on is the very different texture of *The Country and the City*, a book which one might say ought to be closest in feeling to the novels. For unlike Williams’s other books it too deals not with conceptions or cultural patterns abstracted, but real, tangible life, work on the land, money-making, factories, country-houses and streets, as they have appeared in history and in literature itself. *The Country and the City* provides a continuous history of exclusion and oppression. The anger that converges from all the directions is aimed chiefly at the incomplete consciousness of English writers, past and present, who failed to see the social realities of the countryside around them. He attacks

canonical poets like Jonson, novelists like Jane Austen, who accept the “illusions” of their kind of writing and who exclude from their visions all except the wealthy classes.

The literary foreshortening comes after a more drastic foreshortening in reality that destroyed the settlements of the many to stock the artificial needs of the few. It is in this way, Williams argues, that poetic conventions come to serve as stage properties for a dominant class, which uses them simultaneously to mask and to justify its social control. From now on, exclusion will provide a recurring motif in the development of the pastoral genre, whether in the Austen, who moves across a landscape reduced to real estate, making “settlements, alone, against all the odds, like some supernatural lawyer” (CC 116) or in George Eliot, who denies to her agricultural laborers the intense moral scrutiny she lavishes on her middle-class protagonists. However, Williams concludes with a more generalized anger at the forces creating the present crisis of cities and countries and with a rather urbane call for revolution.

In *The English Novel*, Williams had argued that the real mistake--“sickness”--in our thinking was our false “separation into classes, into categories, into mutually hostile preoccupations and methods: individual or society; public or private; social or literary studies.” *The Country and the City* is Williams’s most sustained effort to overcome this separation and to present a work that deliberately challenges, or shatters, our current notion of “literary criticism.” *The Country and the City* is the record of a wise, committed, socially-responsible reading of literature to reconsider the status and role of a literary text in society. It deliberately spreads over the fields of “social, literary and intellectual history.” Chapters like a literary anthology are interspersed with chapters of polemical metahistory. The result is an admirable, if often controversial, interrogation of the texts as “representations of history--including. . . misrepresentations” (PL 304).

One might raise a question: Is Williams very convincing in this respect? Are there any obvious drawbacks to such an approach? He takes an extreme position? He is too fast and free with his “evidence” and the picture he draws is too one-sided? *The Country and the*

City is highly personal and seems to be Williams's necessary book. In its wide range and subjective feeling it is absorbing in the extreme, and also somewhat bewildering.¹⁰⁰ Then an ordinary reader may wonder if Williams's anger blinds him to other uses of literary language. In the background is Lionel Trilling's famous attack on the limitations of one kind of literary realism, where ideas count for nothing and where "reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant."

Yet Williams rarely falls into the trap of confusing simple unpleasantness and realism. He is saved from it in part by his own complex responses to literature which cut through ideology, in part by his interest in describing the literature of the city as well as the country. His title suggests the opposition of the two, but his argument urges us to see them as interacting and finally, in one sense, as identical. It is misleading, he claims, to understand the country as settled, peaceful, "natural" and the city as a chaotic furnace for industrialism: both city and country work together as unknowing agents of a larger system, which he calls agrarian capitalism and which exploits its elements equally.

Williams wants to knit his personal narrative of dispossession into a larger pattern of expropriation he sees as reaching down to a present in which "the dominant mode of production and social relationships teaches, impresses, offers to make normal and even rigid, modes of detached, separated, external perception and action: enjoying people and things" (CC 298). The possibility of the interlocking, sharing community, working land, seeing the landscape, living in its small but comfortable and humanly warm houses, and in towns, is seen as negated by the actions of those who narrow their life activity down to that of simply quantitative, economic return at whatever price in human terms. The passionate commitment to the worth of working people comes out in a number of clenchingly angry or deeply sardonic passages, and is deep enough in Williams to make him stubbornly resist any creed or theory, no matter that, if that seems to attack such worth.¹⁰¹

The change from the basic statement of *Culture and Society* to the climactic conviction of *The Country and the City* seems to have enabled this final stage, a newly consolidated

plateau of thought on the nature of culture. Culture is now not a whole way of life *a priori*; rather, it is endlessly created and re-created; moving through history in its forms; of active political importance; yet raising most importantly, it seems, the question of language.

It is the experience that is partial and distorted, as much as the language. Another example of Williams's analysis is his treatment of the effects on literary language of the new kinds of social relationships characteristic of the city. The city requires new ways of acting, it generates new modes of perception and of thought. These new ways--ways of isolation, transitoriness and strangeness--make the city an easy symbol for pessimism, whether the social pessimism of Gissing or the religious pessimism of Eliot. But the social experience of the city can also be responded to more positively, as in Joyce, who creates a new language of subjective perception which can convey both the intensely private and the actively social nature of life in the city. The aspect of *Ulysses* and modernist literature in general prompted Lukács to charge it with an "attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality" (*The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 26). His argument is a selective reading based on the denial of a significant fact about language: (that it is the means of both our isolation, in introspection, and our cooperation, in speech.) As Williams writes, "what must also be said, as we see this new structure, is that the most deeply known human community is language itself. It is a paradox that in *Ulysses*, through its patterns of loss and frustration, there is not only search but discovery: of an ordinary language, heard more clearly than anywhere in the realist novel before it; a positive flow of that wide human speech which had been screened and strained by the prevailing social conventions: conventions of separation and reduction, in the actual history. The greatness of *Ulysses* is this community of speech" (CC 294).

Language, in other words, is more than a medium of consciousness. It is the foundation of social relationships of all kinds, the material means of human cooperation. The language of *Ulysses* recreates, through the interior monologue, the objective life of the city: the isolation and the interiority; the sociality and the common action. What saves

Ulysses from being just the first of the many modernist novels in which isolation appears as permanent alienation is the fact that its inner voice is also audibly and recognizably a living and connecting speech.

English now in Williams's work is seen not as simple assumption and canonization of "English literature" but as critical cultural study, bound up with the analysis of forms of writing in their historical conditions of emergence and effect, of conventions and determinations of reading, of the construction and transmission of culture.

As Eagleton pointed out in his interview with Williams, Williams always "suspected closed, monolithic theories and strategies, and from the outset [his] socialism has stressed difficulty, complexity, variety" ("The Practice of Possibility" 20). Moving beyond sectarianism, Williams took the way of "the most pluralist, unsectarian approach to politics with a socialist commitment so deep and unyielding" (Eagleton, ed. 6). Here indeed, as Eagleton has also argued, is Williams's unique importance in a period of postmodernism.¹⁰² In Williams's work, both ways of thinking--"a commitment to class struggle" on the one hand, and "a celebration of difference and plurality"--seem to have subtly coexisted ("The Practice of Possibility" 20). Williams is principally a cultural theorist who has tried to move beyond modernism and the literary theory which sustains it. His sustained commitment to the long revolution towards a participatory socialism, a commitment that is both reasoned and deeply felt, offers a source of inspiration to everyone interested in radical social change. The theoretical superiority of Williams's cultural and literary theories over those of any other Marxist derives from several factors. First, Williams developed his original ideas and concepts in the 1950s quite independently of the Marxism that existed at that time. He was able to perceive the cultural situation without the distorting blinders of an irrelevant ideology. Second, Williams himself is a novelist, one who actually produces an imaginative literature. One cannot realize how incredibly stupid so much Marxist criticism is until one has actually written fiction or poetry. Interestingly enough, his project is also quite as much as "creative" and "imaginative" writing as

academic work. Third, Williams has refused to soften his view of bourgeois culture as alienated culture; he refuses to forget the transformative process of the industrial revolution which so altered the conditions of culture. Because he has refused to forget, he continues to carry with him an ideal of a culture that is not alienated.

Williams opens the possibilities for renewal and affirmation in the context of modern difficulties. If the system is intolerable because of its exploitative character, the alternative values of common effort and community must be sought to overcome the existing divisions. This, for Williams, is the difference between negative politics and the politics of affirmation. At all periods of his work, Williams has expressed an unshakeable commitment to and belief in the dignity and moral strength of the working class and the labor movement, and a trust in "an ingrained and indestructible yet also changing embodiment of the possibilities of common life" ("The Practice of Possibility" 21). His work is distinguished by "steady, profound humanism," "the confident trust in human capacities," and the belief in a process of "self-generation and regeneration" even through the history of "defeat, invasion, victimization, oppression" ("The Practice of Possibility" 21). By the same token, the idea of community retains its importance in Williams's personally involved work. It is surely, in part, because some of the communities which he knows from experience were the carriers of alternative values of mutuality, neighborliness and sharing, in opposition to capitalist values of profit and exploitation. It is a vision of new times. Working for such new times is, Williams recognized, a complicated business. As we have seen through this section on Williams, he indicates the importance of earnestness for the British cultural critic, an earnestness that displaces the exegetical ingenuity of a Frederic Jameson or a Roland Barthes. The essential difference between Williams and so many other theorists, bourgeois and Marxist, is that he believes in the creation of new forms, new ideas, new experiences, new feeling. "For creativity and social self-creation are both known and unknown events, and it is still from grasping the known that the unknown--the next step, the next work--is conceived" (*ML* 212). Most

important of all, the explosion of critical theory of this century has ensured Williams's pioneering work in "cultural materialism" a central place in any attempt to reformulate the connection between literary and social processes, and to define the social idea of language.

As we pursued it through Chapter 1, the discussion of language which has formed part of the "theory explosion" of last several decades, and which can be seen in large measure as an inheritance of modernism, has probably been influenced more by one text on language than any other: Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1916. This text both marked and participated in the shift from the historically based philological studies of the nineteenth century to the linguistic theory of the twentieth, and in so doing it liberated language from a certain myth of transparency and dependence upon the real. Furthermore, as we surveyed, a critical practice and an awareness have developed in recent years as reaction against the narrowness of the structuralist linguistic model of meaning. On the grounds that literature is language, and language provides a platform for arguments about literary criticism, knowledge and history, the contradictory conceptions of language came to be essential elements of modernism and postmodernism.

I will refer to the situation in which a writer using a particular language feels that he has reached a limit either of that language or of his own sense of it: he feels a crisis in his relations to the language. He has made "a raid on the inarticulate" and returned with nothing to show for his labor. Or perhaps he feels, with inevitable frustration, that what he can do with the language is not enough. The view of literature, especially poetry in my study, while acutely conscious of the underlying laws of language, recognizes in man's semiotic nature not only a cause for frustration but also a unique chance for recovering a more comprehensive experience of life. The poet--in transforming experience into language--is necessarily confronted with the laws of both realms. Not only does he question the nature of human experience but also--consciously or unconsciously--the

power and the limits of the medium for presentation and interpretation. Against the background of current theories of language, my argument will proceed to “aggressively intellectual” writers such as T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill: they are also keenly aware of the problems of language, and have their own “ideas of language,” but they are not really theoreticians. The next chapter is on Eliot who provides us with a new awareness of the activity of our minds and of the workings of poetic language.

Notes

1 See Monroe K. Spears, *Dionysus and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971); Cyril Connolly, *The Modern Movement* (London: Deutsch, 1965); Robert Langbaum, *The Modern Spirit* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970).

2 Changes in relations between men and women; changes in the human relation to space and time in the physical world--Einstein had published his general theory of relativity in 1905, Heisenberg his "uncertainty principle" in the twenties; Freud and Darwin had assaulted traditional psychological and biological views of human beings.

3 "We do not know what is happening to us, and that is precisely the thing that is happening to us--the fact of not knowing what is happening to us" (Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis* 119).

4 See William A. Johnsen, "Toward a Redefinition of Modernism," *Boundary 2* 2 (1974): 539-56; Maurice Beebe, "What Modernism Was," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (1974): 1065-84.

5 "[Modernist literature] is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. Modernism is then the art of modernization" (Bradbury and McFarlane 27).

6 The "medium-consciousness" seemed to occur in several arts simultaneously in the last half of the nineteenth century in Europe. Mallarmé's symbolist poem "Un Coup de dés. . .," Cézanne's "primitive" landscapes comprised of color patches, and Scriabin's first abstract piano compositions all reflect a new consciousness of one form of art creating another from its own compositional materials.

7 It is in Central Europe, particularly in Vienna and Prague between 1900 and 1925, that the "language revolution" took place at the deepest, most consequent level.

8 For example, Coleridge says that "the sound sun, or the figures s, u, n are purely arbitrary modes of recalling the object" (216).

9 According to Saussure "language is a form and not a substance" (122).

10 Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: The Open Court, 1923) 322. In his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which was written in the period of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, Cassirer explains the self-constitutive power of thought, and its relation to external reality by maintaining: "Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic in common with cognition: it does not merely copy but rather embodies an original, formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite 'meaning,' a particular ideational content. This is as true of art as it is of cognition; it is as true of myth as of religion. All live in particular image-worlds, which do not merely reflect the empirically given, but which rather produce it in accordance with an independent principle. Each of these functions creates its own symbolic forms. . . . They are not different modes in which an independent reality manifests itself to the human spirit but roads by which the spirit proceeds towards its objectivization, i.e., its self-revelation." E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953) 78.

11 See David Perkins, "The New Poetry of America," *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976) 293-328.

12 For Modernists' radical critique of representation as reductive and incomplete and their argument for the capacity of abstraction as imaginative and even ethical force, see Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 12-58. For Pound's interest in nonmimetic art and his distinction between the "symptomatic" and the "donative" artist; between the "mimetic" and the "germinal"; between the "receiving" mind and the "conceiving mind," see Pound's *Selected Prose, 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1975) 42 & 376; *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 92-93; *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970) 88-89. In his discussion of drama, Eliot argues that the dramatist should not represent the familiar world but present a "new world" with a "logic" of its own. "Dramatis Personae," *Criterion* 1 (April 1923): 305, "Ben Jonson," *SW* 116-17. Eliot also maintains that "abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of the work of art" (*SE* 111).

13 Joyce's part in all of this is rather interesting; *Ulysses* is used as an exhibit of both modernist hermeticism and the culmination of realism. *Ulysses* seems to be the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed. Yet Joyce said of *Ulysses*, "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book." Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1960) 67-68.

The only way it could be reconstructed would be through some process of distillation whereby the raw materials that Joyce used for the work of art could be extracted.

14 Gerald Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 1. Further quotations will be cited by page numbers in the text.

15 Cf. "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together 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." T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *SE* 19-21.

16 The point is that substitutive contexts reverse, so to speak, the function of ordinary or predicative contexts. Consider that in ordinary speech context imposes limits upon and hence directs interpretation; but in the *Wake* these limits are exceeded by and indeed disappear beneath the superabundance of singifiers. That is to say, predicative contexts are determinate in their function; they provide boundaries which isolate or define the meaning of a word; substitutive contexts, by contrast move toward a condition of indeterminacy, precisely because in such contexts the word does not function simply or even primarily as a unit of signification; it functions rather as a unit of equivalence. Thus, whereas in ordinary uses of language "eventide" could not mean "Eve" but only "evening," in *Finnegans Wake* the difference between "eventide" and "Eve" is not so secure; it is, on the contrary, an indeterminate difference (Bruns 160-61).

17 The loose analogy between physics and poetry implied in the title is not pursued in any detail, but it helps to give credibility to deliberate randomness in the choice of words as a technique in modern and contemporary poetry. What is an indeterminate text? In Marjorie Perloff's book, no reference to Heisenberg appears, and Derrida is consigned to a single footnote (17). Instead, we have Todorov's notion of "undecidability" defined initially on a pragmatic basis: because of the violation of the normal relation between *signifiant* and *signifié* found in Symbolism, there are no controls on the associations that arise with texts of the Other Tradition. Thus, "it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not. This is the 'undecidability' of the text" (17-18).

18 Cf. In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner claims there is a high degree of "undecidability" in *any text* removed from our experience, either through historical accident or cultural remove. It seems that we are in fact accustomed to reading with a surprisingly high tolerance for non-comprehension of one sort or another. We "intuitively grasp" while

letting slip and slide the great deal that we don't understand; or radically misunderstand what we think is perfectly clear. But this doesn't inhibit our enjoyment in the least. It may even enhance it.

19 "Other tradition" of the modern variously displays the effects of a "French connection" with Rimbaud initially and then the avant-garde painters in Paris in this century. The low road of Modernism, the anti-Symbolist, Vorticist, Cubist, "defamiliarizing" boulevard opened for traffic by Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, Gertrude Stein's repetitions, the early William Carlos Williams, Pound's montage of fragments in the *Cantos*, Samuel Beckett passim, John Ashbery's "open fields of narrative possibilities," and the conceptual art performances of John Cage are closely examined for evidences of Rimbaldian influence.

20 This assumption is a complicated one and is intimately related to developments in philosophy of language in this century found in the work of, among others, Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Dewey. The deconstructionists, following Lacan, would take this a step further and say that the divine event is the word itself, which creates its own peculiar tension-filled presence in the absence of the thing.

21 This metaphor of surface and depth obscures the fact that there are more than two levels of correspondence in question: the correspondence of words to concepts, of concepts to states of affairs, and of states of affairs themselves to some implied spiritual state of which they are Eliotic "objective correlatives."

22 Ashbery's "These Lacustrine Cities" occupies one pole, where all reference to meaning behind the words is denied; and *The Waste Land* occupies the other, where there is direct reference to things existing in worlds we know, adding up to symbolic threads of quite ascertainable meaning. A paragraph from Beckett's "Ping" shows him near the Ashbery pole, for the value of his words "is compositional rather than referential, and the focus shifts from signification to the play of signifiers."

"Villes" from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* is well dismembered to show that it will not take a consistent denotative reading: sense of place eludes, as does sense of time, and movement and noise are contradictory. Eliot's "Unreal City" was a real enough London, polysemously replete with other urban echoes; "In 'Villes,' however, the depth of Eliot's cityscape gives way to surface to what Jean-Pierre Richard calls a 'shallow screen,' upon which synecdochic images, the parts of an absent whole, appear side by side without necessary connection" (55). William Carlos Williams attained the Rimbaud standard in *Spring and All*, where poem after poem has the "Cubist mobility and indeterminacy."

23 Perloff insists that some works are simply not open to the kind of interpretive action that critics are so prone to undertake, and then she stops.

24 See Kathleen Staudt, "The Poetics of 'Black on White': Stephane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de des*," *Ineffability*, ed. Peter Hawkins and Anne Schotter (New York: AMS P, 1985) 153.

25 Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 477. Further quotations will be cited by page numbers in the text.

26 Her early hero, William James, had been teaching that "association, so far as the word stands for an effect, is between THINGS THOUGHT OF--it is THINGS, not ideas, which are associated in the mind. We ought to talk of the association of objects, not the association of ideas."

27 In *Tender Buttons*, sentences become shorter, as the emphasis shifts from syntax to diction and association. In a lecture Stein explains that the lines of poetry are shorter than those of prose, because "such a way to express oneself is the natural way when one expresses oneself in loving the name of anything. Think what you do. . . when you love the name of anything really love its name. Inevitably you expresses yourself. . . in the way poetry expresses itself that is in short lines in repeating what you began in order to do it again. Think of how you talk to anything whose name is new to you a lover a baby a dog

or a new land. . . . do you not inevitably repeat what you call out and is that calling out not of necessity in short lines" (Stein, *Lectures in America* 234).

28 For the analogy between Stein's writing and cubist painting, see Brinnin 134. It is interesting that synthetic cubism, though more arbitrary and less realistic than analytic cubism, is in some ways more easily legible once one understands the conventions involved. In both synthetic cubism and Stein's style in *Tender Buttons*, specific signifieds are evoked by a more specific concrete vocabulary, and what is left obscure and ambiguous are the relationships (spatial, syntactic) among those signifieds. That people find the result easier to read in painting than writing may be due to differences between the two media. It may also indicate more resistance to learning a new set of verbal conventions than visual conventions.

29 Stein discovered, during her experiment with what she called "the recreation of the word," that it is impossible to make language unintelligible. See *A Primer* 18.

30 "Her practice was to concentrate upon an object as it existed in her mind. . . . Gertrude Stein perceived that the object was immersed in a continuum of sound, color and association, which it was her business to reconstitute in writing" (Bridgman 124).

31 Cf. A psychological approach to Stein is Allegra Stewart's *Gertrude Stein and the Present*, which uses Jungian psychology to explicate Stein's *Tender Buttons* and *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*. Michel Hoffman's book *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writing of Gertrude Stein* is one of the key works that compare Stein and the cubists. B. F. Skinner in "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?" tried to explain her obscurity by suggesting that she practiced automatic writing.

32 Laura Riding also pointed out Stein's deliberate exclusion of cultural apparatus: "None of the words Miss Stein uses have ever had any experience. They are no older than her use of them. . . . None of these words. . . has ever had any history. . . . They contain no references, no meanings, no jokes, no despair." *Contemporaries and Snobs* (Garden City: Doubleday Doran, 1928) 189 & 194.

33 The December 1978 issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* began with a special feature on readings of Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914). See Michael Davidson, "On Reading Stein" (*LB* 197-98), Larry Eigner, "A Carafe. . . Glazed Glitter Roastbeef" (*LB* 198-99), Steve McCaffery, "Translational Response to a Stein Single," (*LB* 200-1), Jackson Mac Low, "Reading a Selection from *Tender Buttons*," (*LB* 202-4), and Robert Grenier, "Tender Buttons" (*LB* 204-7). For Silliman's praise for the Stein of *Tender Buttons* and *How to Write* as a forebear of the new sentence in English, see *The New Sentence* 84-87. The idea of the poem as "process" overcoming the exigencies of reference gives one key to Stein's importance for the Language poets. See also Bernstein, *Content's Dream* 362. For Grenier's reservation to assimilate Stein's work to contemporary "language-oriented writing," see *LB* 205-6; and for the comparison between Stein's "A Carafe" and McCaffery's "translation," see Easthope, ed. 122.

34 Wisely, Messerli both in his selections for the anthology and in his introduction, undermines the presumption that there is or might be "a single definition or a unified complex of ideas which applies to 'Language' poetry" (1). *In the American Tree* derives from the name of a weekly radio program of live poetry readings and interviews produced by Kit Robinson and Lyn Hejinian, two of the anthology's poets, in Berkeley; it is also the title of a Robinson poem. More importantly however, it recalls William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*, and indeed the Williams of *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* is one touchstone for many Language poets. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* is the first anthology from a major trade press to contain a substantial number of Language poets.

35 They arise from a literary-historical context even more thoroughly dominated then than now by the autobiographical free verse lyric and the presumed centrality of the authorial subject. See Ron Silliman et al., "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry," *Social Text* 19-20 (1988): 261-62.

36 Language writing has never been a homogeneous entity, and the "movement" itself has always contained dissenting voices on matters of politics and poetics. Many women writers associated with Language writing, for instance, have taken gender as a more central category in their thinking on poetics than capitalism. See Drucker 64 and Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* 11-12. As George Hartley reminds us, Barrett Watten rejects what we can call the "realism-as-reification" argument; Robert Grenier and Clark Coolidge disavow any connection with Marxist thought.

37 Some Language poets' ideological stance calls to mind the work of Julia Kristeva, the most influential recent theorist to connect experimental language use with subversive politics in the manner of the historical avant-garde. In fact, she has been important to the thinking of many of the Language writers on poetics. Language poetry seems a paradigm case of Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, even if her attention is directed almost entirely to earlier French modernists and symbolists. That her construction of theory begins with a dismissive critique of existing foundational concepts of language, seems especially promising for such a trial of this formalist approach. For the discussion of the overlap and difference between Kristeva and Language writing, specifically Susan Howe, see Middleton 81-95. For a useful overview and critique of Kristeva's thinking on the language-and-politics issue, see Moi 150-73.

38 Linkages between poetry and politics were always the source of dispute. For some, language writing was too programmatically political to be poetry; for others, it was too poststructuralist to be political. However, the notion that reference is culturally determined is widely accepted by almost all of the Language poets; their position grows out of readings of theorists like Sapir, who promotes the highly controversial theory that people live "at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society" (qtd. in Silliman, *The New Sentence* 7). "I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within" (LB 39) is, strictly speaking, impossible, for the "exact words that come from within" are already coded by the historical and social context in which they function.

39 See also Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention* (New York: Roof Books, 1986) 13.

40 For an extended critique of Jameson's reading of Perelman's poem, see George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 42-52.

41 *Boundary 2* 1.2 (1981); rpt. in excerpted form under the title "The Objects of Meaning," LB 60.

42 See Andrew's poem in *Wobbling* (qtd. Hartley 40), for instance. Strange as it may first seem, the poem is a strong argument against culturally imposed constraints on reading, and for seeking out new ways of reading and constructing meaning. Reading as one would normally attempt to—line by line, top to bottom, left to right—little "sense" can be made. Thus the reader [the performer] would take on much of the burden of reorganization.

43 See Silliman et al., "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 261-75, for a group manifesto, which might annoy critics like Tom Clark, at the same time, however, can be a powerful counterargument against criticism like "Stalin as Linguist."

44 Another problem of Language writings regarding the relationship between theory and poetry, is "the paradox" or the separation that "intransparency, nonreferentiality, and hence the impossibility of a poetry of pure practice, are themselves grounded in theories that are specific, clearly articulated, and deployed in the transparent and unambiguous form of the essay." For further discussion on this topic, see Lavender 181-202.

45 Barthes's complexity was something Gérard Genette observed in 1964 essay on Barthes, "The Obverse of Signs" (included in his volume of essays called *Figures of Literary Discourse*). Genette remarked that in the ten years after the publication of his first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes passed from a Sartrean blend of existentialism and

Marxism, through the "substantial psychoanalysis" on to a feisty, sarcastic Marxist "critique of everyday life" in *Mythologies* (qtd. in White 137).

46 "It is my hope that semiology will replace no other inquiry here, but will, on the contrary help all the rest, that its chair will be a kind of wheelchair, the wild card of contemporary knowledge, as the sign itself is the wild card of all discourse." "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 474.

47 Saussure was the first to relate language to semiology. He pointed out that linguistics was a subset of the larger study of signs, which he called semiology. Semiology is the study of signs independent of their particular meanings, in contrast to semantics, which operates on the level of meaning itself. Barthes inverted the relationship by making semiology a subdiscipline of linguistics. Because of his association with the word semiology and his Chair in Literary Semiology at the Collège de France, Barthes is often considered to be the founder of semiology. In fact, Barthes is one of the leading representatives of this science, not so much as its initiator but as one of its most effective advocates. Although there are some who insist that semiotics and semiology refer to the same study of signs, it was clear that Barthes gave priority to language as the basis for semiology, a term he used throughout his writing career. Barthes focused on the sign as a crucial component of the ideological relationship among writer, writing, and reader. In a brilliant analysis of Barthes, Steven Ungar has reminded us that "ultimately, there is no escape from the dominance of signs because meaning is projected out of a need to assume mastery and appropriate difference" (54).

48 I made a slight change of Keuneman's translation from Barthes's passage: "the writer and the critic come together, working on the same difficult tasks and faced with the same object: language." Anyhow, in this sense, Barthes's views seem to be prophetic rather than synchronized with the writing practice of time. The mainstream of the modern poetry, the prestructural poetic word, is far from being a kind of writing that it is a place where writing reaches "a zero degree." For modern writing, the writing that must choose its forms, is a construct out of language and style. But, the modern poetry that Barthes refers to, seems to be a refusal of language. At the same time, however, Barthes's seemingly prophetic idea can provide a new way of reading both the modernist work in "the other tradition" and the postmodernist work, which we have seen in the previous section.

49 He also defines the difference between the modern and the classic text in terms of undecidability, where "Undecidability is not a weakness, but a structural condition of narration: there is no univocal determination of the utterance: in a statement, several codes, several voices *are there*, without preeminence" (*The Semiotic Challenge* 293).

50 See also Marjorie Perloff's poetics that I discussed in the section one, as an example of a different way of reading "the avant-garde text."

51 For a similar argument, see also de Man's essay, "Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism," *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990): 177-92. He pointed out "the inherent tension" of "the traditional polarities" throughout the ages; and "the implicit valorization" that "has always privileged the first terms and considered the second as an auxiliary." Furthermore, "language itself," he argued, "as the sign of a presumably nonlinguistic 'content' or 'reality,' is therefore devalORIZED as the vehicle or carrier of a meaning to which it refers and that lies outside." Then, "literature" is considered "to 'represent' or 'express' or at most, 'transform' an extralinguistic entity or event which it is the interpreter's (or critic's) task to reach as a specific unit of meaning." At this point, getting along with Barthes, de Man presents the possibility of the "liberation of the signifier from the constraints of referential meaning." This suggests that the "metaphorical language of polarized hierarchies and power structures fails to do justice to the delicate complexity" of the relationships between signifier and signified (180-81).

52 To discover how the semiosis works, one must become like the writer, "someone for whom language constitutes a problem, who is aware of the depth of language, not its

instrumentality or its beauty" (CT 64). This describes the reader who in struggling to make something of the modern text discovers how language works in it and, how language works even in the classic text and ordinary discourse, whose meanings seem to be ready-made.

53 "To reduce the text to the unity of meaning, by a deceptively univocal reading, is to cut the braid, to sketch the castrating gesture" (S/Z 160).

54 For Barthes, "language is everywhere, and not simply close by" (RL 160).

55 "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas--for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (PT 17), an idea that is perpetuated in various ways in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. One of Barthes's commentators, Roland Champagne, suggests that the insistence upon the body is an attempt to reverse the traditional privileging of consciousness over unconscious determinations in literature, as indeed we might expect it to be (79-101). However, Barthes, of all contemporary theorists, is peculiarly uninterested in the unconscious, his concerns being rather with the surface play of signification rather than the depths from which it may have emerged. Furthermore, the body in his works dictates conscious scenarios, the fantasy rather than the dream. Champagne, though, also says that "Barthes came to realise that writing is an attempt by the writer to make his body perpetual in time" (97), and this is, I think, far more persuasive, particularly since *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is the epic fulfillment of Sade Fourier Loyola's desire: "were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to 'biographemes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion" (9).

56 "Barthes's books are not expositions of ideas but verbal gestures, action writing; they count intransitively by the very act of their production." Tzvetan Todorov, "The Last Barthes," trans. Richard Howard, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): 451.

57 "In the frontispiece [of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*] we read, 'It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.' This 'novel,' however, begins with a scrapbook of captioned family photographs, a series of childhood images that, as the author tells us, are at once disturbingly familiar and yet seem to portray an unfamiliar other, 'whose units are teeth, hair, a nose, skinniness, long legs in knee-length socks which don't belong to me, though to no one else.' What Barthes calls 'the fissure in the subject' is thus immediately introduced, for who is Roland Barthes?" (Perloff, "Barthes and the Zero Degree of Genre" 511)

58 This is far from coincidental, for Gadamer is well-acquainted with the antimetaphysical, antirealist variety of hermeneutical thought, particularly Nietzsche's variety, and he has consciously struck out on a different path. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss, "Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 5-12.

59 Anyone even slightly acquainted with contemporary philosophy is aware of the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment. From Habermas to Foucault, from Derrida to Lyotard, the Enlightenment's most cherished ideologies and presuppositions have been subjected to devastating deconstruction. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, for example, Habermas--echoing Foucault--rejects the Enlightenment's concept of the centrality of self-awareness and its ideal of transcendent reason. Like Foucault, Habermas argues that reason is a "thing of the world." The ideology of reason must be reformulated "in line with our essential finitude," that is to say, recognizing the historical nature of the knowing subject; it must be "recast according to our received humanistic ideals" (1-22). Similarly, against the Enlightenment's strong conception of the *a priori* character of reason, Derrida stresses the embeddedness of reason in language, in forms of life, and the incommensurability of different language games (*Positions* 74).

60 Cf. For Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the knower's own present situation can have only a negative value. As the source of prejudices and distortions that block valid

understanding, it is precisely what the interpreter must transcend. The methodological alienation of the knower from his own historicity is precisely the focus of Gadamer's criticism.

61 That one may always learn from the past and that the past always makes truth claims on us are insistent claims in *Truth and Method*. Thus, Gadamer must think that the questions--what may we learn from the Enlightenment and what truth claims does the Enlightenment make on us?--are reasonable questions.

62 See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Philosophic Foundations of the Twentieth Century," *PH* 125.

63 Cf. *TM* 245.

64 "When we understand a text we do not put ourselves in the place of the other, and it is not a matter of penetrating the spiritual activities of the author; it is simply a question of grasping the meaning, significance, and aim of what is transmitted to us. In other words, it is a question of grasping the intrinsic worth of the arguments put forward and doing so as completely as possible. . . . The meaning of hermeneutical inquiry is to disclose the miracle of understanding texts or utterances and not the mysterious communication of souls. Understanding is a participation in the common aim." Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 127.

65 Cf. Ellis's argument: "The sweeping positions . . . --all thought is linguistic, or our thinking is completely determined by language--are simply incorrect attribution." John M. Ellis, *Language, Thought and Logic* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993) 61.

66 In order to better understand Gadamer's perspectival realism consider the following quotes. "The verbal world in which we live is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being-in-itself but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened" (*TM* 447). "The multiplicity of these worldviews does not involve any relativization of the 'world.' Rather, what the world is is not different from the views in which it presents itself" (*TM* 447). "Seen phenomenologically, the 'thing-in-itself' is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects shade into one another. . . . In the same way as with perception we can speak of the 'linguistic shadings' that the world undergoes in different language-worlds. But there remains a characteristic difference: every 'shading' of the object of perception is exclusively distinct from every other, and each helps co-constitute the 'thing-in-itself' as the continuum of these nuances--whereas, in the case of the shadings of verbal worldviews, each one potentially contains every other one within it--i.e., each worldview can be extended into every other. It can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the 'view' of the world presented in another language" (*TM* 447-48).

67 Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 154. Lentricchia points out that these questions are for Michel Foucault.

68 For example, he writes in the preface of this text:

My own plan--to offer an introductory survey of these movements which might stand at the same time as a critique of their basic methodology--is no doubt open to attack from both partisans and adversaries alike. . . . The present critique does not, however, aim at judgments of detail, nor at the expression of some opinion, either positive or negative, on the works in question here. It proposes rather to lay bare what Collingwood would have called the "absolute presuppositions" of Formalism and Structuralism taken as intellectual totalities. These absolute presuppositions may then speak, for themselves, and, like all such ultimate premises or models, are too fundamental to be either accepted or rejected. (*PHL* x)

69 According to Jameson, "the originality of Saussure's point of departure returns to limit his results: for that initial repudiation of history, which at the very outset resulted in an inability to absorb change into the system as anything but a meaningless and contingent datum, is now reproduced, at the very heart of the system itself, as an inability to deal with syntax as such" (*PHL* 39).

70 See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 307-8.

71 See the preface to *Ibid.* x.

72 "If you look at the implied relationships of nearly all the books I have written, I have been arguing with what I take to be official English culture" (PL 316).

73 For Williams's indeterminate doubleness, see Terry Eagleton, ed., *Raymond Williams* (Boston: Northeastern UP) 175.

74 *Politics and Letters* is a good example to show Williams's self-reflexivity.

75 Cf. Some other critics think that Williams's work can best be described as falling into three main periods. Brian Longhurst, "Raymond Williams: The Sociological Legacy," *Sociology* 24 (1990): 520. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976) 39-40. This is a periodization which still has uses as a way of ordering the complex and wide-ranging nature of Raymond Williams's work. However, it will need to come under close scrutiny as more critical appraisals of Williams appear.

76 See Raymond Williams, "Literature in Society," *Contemporary Approaches to English Studies*, ed. Hilda Schiff (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1977) 24-37.

77 Williams remarks that "the difficulty about the idea of culture is that we are continually forced to extend it, until it becomes almost identical with our whole common life" (CS 256).

78 For further review of Williams's cultural studies, see Maurice Cranston, "Rev. of *Culture and Society*," *London Magazine* May 1959: 60-62, E. P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution," *New Left Review* 9(1961): 24-33, and Asa Briggs, "Creative Definitions," *New Statesman* 10 Mar. 1961: 386+.

79 F. R. Leavis's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), and T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939); Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Williams is also concerned with the development of a "common culture" and with getting rid of the we-they cultural relationship, what he calls "dominative" attitudes held by an "elite" towards "the masses."

80 He admits that "the tradition it records is a major contribution to our common understanding," as well as "a major incentive to its necessary extensions" (CS 338).

81 Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* was written in the context of the crisis of the 1860s--public demonstrations for an extension of the franchise--and the official response which called for public order.

82 What Leavis's analysis rests upon, is a view of an organic pre-industrial, rural society with "right" relationships in a natural environment, contrasted with modern urban society--its meaningless work and commercialized, degraded values. Those involved in the contemporary minority culture are struggling against the tide and are continually having to formulate defensive positions. Yet, as Williams points out, this analysis rests upon a myth of the past. Such dogmatic judgements and neglect of history do not pay attention to real social experience. For all Leavis's energy and indeed his dislike of capitalism and its establishments, he lapses into a mixture of mythology, conjecture and dogmatism. Trying to do justice to the life and experience of the country without idealization is then part of Williams's project, specially through *The Country and the City*.

83 For Leavis's extended definition of the role of the poet, see Chapter 1 of *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1950), especially 16-17.

84 Cf. There is the paradoxical nature of the influence of what Williams quite rightly calls Leavis's "cultural radicalism." Williams cites in explanation Leavis's attack on the metropolitan literary and commercial cultural scene, the excitement of the discovery of practical criticism and the *Scrutiny* emphasis on education. He was influenced by Leavis, but he was able to break with that literary tradition while continuing to draw strength from its critique of society and its social vision. It provided him with intellectual roots, but he rejected its hierarchical conception of society.

85 For Williams, Eliot's idea of culture moves "away from something," and "arrive[s] at nothing positive at all." His fundamentally conservative conception of culture "idealizes and simplifies his actual society" (CS 230).

86 An instance of the former would be R. P. Blackmur, "T. S. E. on Culture," *Nation* 23 April 1949: 475-76; of the latter, Harold Laski, *The Dilemma of Our Times* (London: George Allen, 1952) 117-36; or R. Hinton Thomas, "Culture and T. S. Eliot," *Modern Quarterly* 6 (1945): 147-62.

87 Cf. For the criticism of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, see E. P. Thompson's famous and strategic response--"way of struggle"--to Williams's notion culture--"way of life" in his review of *The Long Revolution* in *New Left Review* 9-10: 24-33, 34-39; Williams's self-reflection in *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1979) 106; the indication of the lack of important issues and references in John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge, *Raymond Williams* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 69-71.

88 There has been considerable interest in Williams's relation to Marxism: see, for instance, Terry Eagleton, "Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams," *New Left Review* 95 (1976): 3-23; Anthony Barnett, "Raymond Williams and Marxism: A Rejoinder to Terry Eagleton," *New Left Review* 99 (1976): 47-64.

89 See, for example, Williams's discussion of "positivist," "status," and "criticism."

90 The relevance of historical change to the contradictory quality of some of the words is obvious and well-known; for example, the medieval-to-modern reversal of realism, subjective, and objective. Other reversals are not so total but equally interesting: creativity as a divine rather than a human quality; eighteenth-century improvement as a positive material force with negative spiritual consequences; the linear and progressive sort of revolution with which we are familiar comes from the circular and repetitive "revolution" of pre-seventeenth-century usage.

91 However, Empson argues against Williams's *Keywords* in his hostile review. "Compacted Doctrines," *The New York Review of Books* 27 Oct. 1977: 21-22.

92 See, for instance, Chap. 12 "Sense and Sensibility" (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) especially 252-53, 269.

93 Towards Barthes, Williams shows apparent indifference, at least in the published work. *Writing Degree Zero* and *Mythologies* feature in the bibliography of *Marxism and Literature*. Williams mentions Timpanaro's critique of Barthes and others with apparent approval in *PMC* 119. Yet despite this one can find out significant elements of theoretical convergence between two. Barthes points out a significant absence in Saussure's *langue / parole* model, of any mediating agency between the will and intelligence of the individual and the social product that is a language.

94 Cf. De Mauro argues that Saussure eschews "conventional" deliberately, but for methodological not ideological reasons. Only the insistence on arbitrariness allows Saussure to affirm the mutually constitutive relationship of signified and signifier, and the fundamentally differential character of language-systems, seen as functioning in virtue of the relationships between terms within the system rather than between individual terms and things or processes in the world.

95 Williams's final major criticism of Saussurean linguistics focuses on the concepts of sign and system with which it operates. He holds that "relation within the sign between the formal element and the meaning which this element carries is. . . , crucially, . . . not fixed" (*ML* 37). The reality of the sign is as a "dynamic fusion of 'formal element' and 'meaning'. . . rather than as fixed 'already-given' internal significance" (*ML* 39). Here his references to formalist linguistics (*ML* 38-39) are far from clear.

96 In an entire volume dedicated to interviews with Williams, the editors of *New Left Review* throw into question the very notion of a national literary tradition (*PL* 169). Cf. Coining the phrase "Left Leavisism," Eagleton has charged Williams with never having separated himself definitively from Leavis and his nostalgic celebration of a past or passing England. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976) 22-27.

97 For the same kind of debate, see two articles: M. H. Abrams's "Construing and Deconstruction" and J. Hillis Miller's "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism." Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, eds., *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 127-82 and 96-126.

These two essays make us raise a question of why two brilliant scholars brought up in somewhat the same tradition and both with presumably some competence as readers and critics, nevertheless, so differently read even a short poem, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." The answer to the puzzling question lies in the lowlands of basic and instinctive orientation toward language rather than in the high altitudes of pure literary theory.

98 The book begins not with a statement of aim but with a near-mystical evocation of atmosphere, in which Williams, autobiographical as ever, gives us his very personal reaction, not only to his childhood village in Wales or to the cities he has visited, but to the very spot outside his house near Cambridge where he is writing these words now.

99 "I am very powerfully moved by the early churches, by the great cathedrals, and yet if I don't see the enormous weight of them on man, I don't altogether know how to be a socialist in the area where I work. . . if we acknowledge them as a contribution, we must also acknowledge them as an obstacle. . . . The cathedrals are not just monuments to faith, the country houses are not just buildings of elegance. They are constantly presented to us as 'our heritage', inducing a particular way of seeing and relating to the world, which must be critically registered along with our acknowledgement of their value. I always see them as profoundly ambivalent" (*PL* 309).

100 For these reasons it is difficult to summarize, and one can only say that the book is historical, attempting to trace the idea and use of the countryside, landscape and productive land, in literature, in other record and in real life. This begins at the time of Sidney and goes on to the present, where the huge industrial conurbation has changed the scene and conditions of life entirely; entirely, but with some deeper patterns surviving, as Williams suggests in his last chapter.

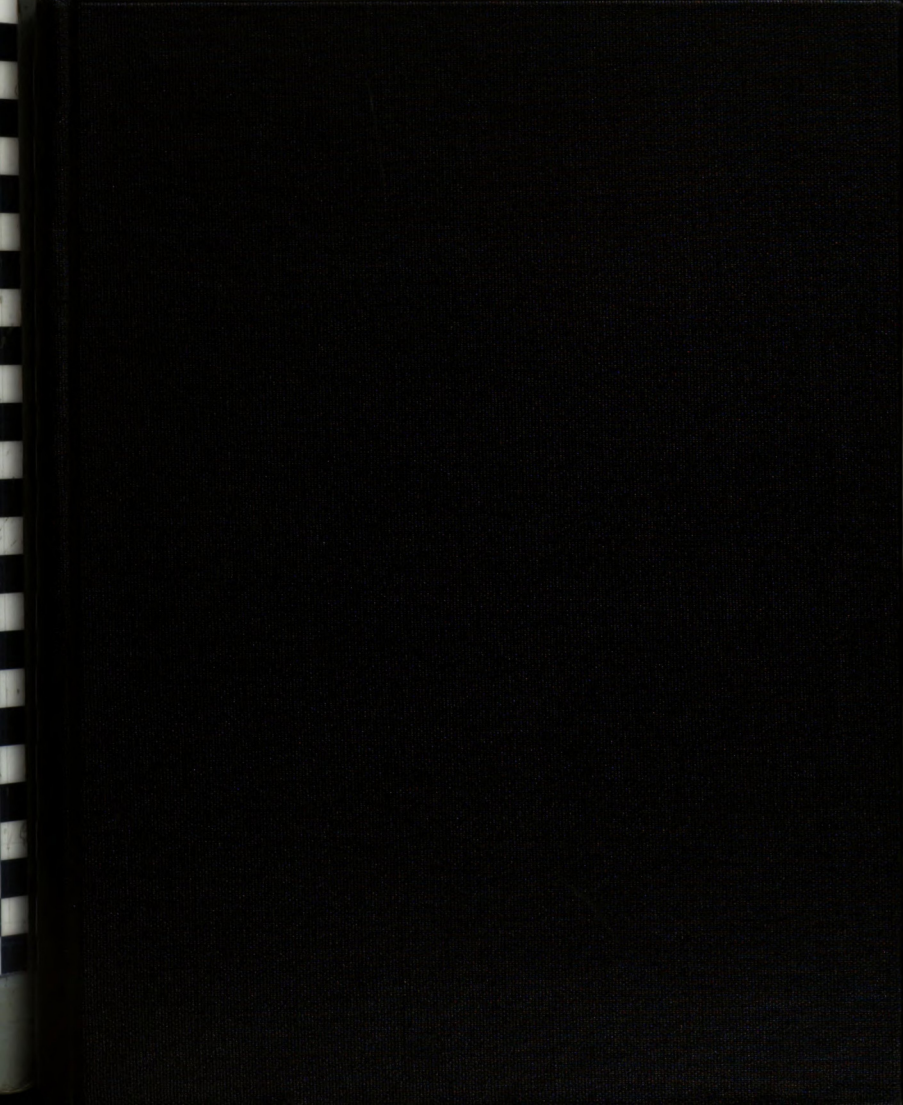
101 The intensity of this commitment seems also to be tied to his own rural origins; and Williams's anger at the implication by orthodox Marxism, of "rural idiocy," as if only the urban proletariat were capable of moving history forward, has been another source of difference. (Compare Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1989) 13 and *PL* 319.) Yet that is a personal feeling, not an intellectual argument as such. Its intellectual parallel is the firm and idealistic belief, in Williams, in man's absolute priority as a creative being; literally creative, in the sense of bringing himself and his mode of life into existence at all points and in every facet of life. This basic attitude prevents any allegiance of Williams to Marxism, even though *The Country and the City* is to be taken with Williams's growing rapprochement with Marxism.

102 The variety of terms in which Williams is hailed, for instances, "a socialist delegate from the future," "a Welsh intellectual and a contributor to Marxist theory," "principally a cultural theorist," is simply testimony to his extraordinary range of interests and ambition.

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**“OUR WORD IS OUR BOND”:
T. S. ELIOT, GEOFFREY HILL, AND
THE (POST)MODERNIST PROBLEMATIC OF LANGUAGE**

VOLUME II

By

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Chapter 2

T. S. ELIOT'S IDEA OF LANGUAGE

To pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet. (TCC 133)

As I indicated in the section of "Modern Poetry and the Ideas of Language," the modernists' original intellectual perception of the language is firmly related to their understanding of the modern age as "fragmentary" and "apocalyptic." They could generate a medium of communication only by fragmenting conventional standards of representation, and integrating the fragmentation into their new language. In other words, the modernist preoccupation with the formation of a new language should be seen in the context of the crisis of modernism that is "dispensationalism."¹ The herculean effort to cope with the loss of a shared reference point, involving ingenious attempts to retrieve or discover or create substitutes, characterizes modernism in all of the arts.

The modernists generally believed that Europe had a mind and that the crisis of their time was equivalent of a mental collapse. Oswald Spengler argued in *The Decline of the West* (1918) that civilizations are organisms that go through stages of youth, maturity, and decay, and that then, like other organisms, they die. Spengler believed that Western civilization was in an advanced stage of decay and would soon go the way of Babylon, Athens, and Rome. In April 1919, in a revealing passage in the *Athenaeum*, Valéry described the spiritual crisis of war-ravaged Europe as a "mental disorder." According to Valéry, the war revealed Western civilization to be as fragile as those civilizations "now sunk to the inexorable bottom of the centuries" ("Letters from France" 182). In his view, cultivated Europe was exhibiting "all the familiar effects of anxiety, the disordered enterprises of the brain which runs from the real to the nightmare, and from the nightmare to the real, like a frenzied rat caught in a trap" (Ibid. 182-83).

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, modernists felt that they were living at the end of or between periods. Ortega y Gasset discusses the early twentieth century as a period of such disorientation, in which the epistemological skeleton of the culture collapsed, a time with no broadly shared or shareable religion, no common philosophy, no framework for thought. This preoccupation with "dispensationalism" is omnipresent in the work of Mallarmé, Yeats, Pound, Joyce, and Eliot. Yeats, whose cycles were organized around lunar models, agreed that apocalypse was near for Western civilization, a vision preserved in chilling clarity in his powerful poem "The Second Coming." In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," Pound describes Western civilization as an "old bitch gone in the teeth"; and in "Gerontion," Eliot imagines it as an old man gone not only in the teeth, but in the eyes, in the groin and in the brain. Pound's interest in history moved from experiments in retrieving classical and medieval models to an obsession that not only shaped the *Cantos* but also determined most other aspects of his personal destiny. Joyce, with greater detachment, left it to Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses* to declare that "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (28).

The most influential contemporary dispensationalist is Derrida. In *Writing and Difference*, he divides Western intellectual history into two giant eras, each characterized by an assumption about Being or presence. His first dispensation includes the entire history of Western thought before the twentieth century, which he claims was erected on an acceptance of "Being as presence in all senses of this word" and must be thought of as "a series of substitutions of center for center." In the late nineteenth century, he continues, a "rupture" occurred in the history of thought. Derrida associates the rupture with the "Nietzschean critique of metaphysics," the "Freudian critique of self-presence," and the "Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics." After these destructive discourses, "it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center" (*Writing and Difference* 278-80).

Major writers responded in different ways to the collapse or disappearance of what Derrida calls the center. Yeats in *A Vision* made up a mythology to serve as a reference

point for his poetry, and Joyce in *Ulysses* retrieved a Homeric reference point. Eliot typically analyzes the modernist crisis in terms of a mythic absence in contemporary life. In "The Modern Mind," he comments that "the present situation is radically different from any in which poetry has been produced in the past: namely, that now there is nothing in which to believe, that Belief itself is dead; and that therefore my poem [*The Waste Land*] is the first to respond properly to the modern situation and not call upon Make-Believe" (UPUC 130). Most of his poems from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" through *Four Quartets* are conscious experiments for coping with brokenness, and trying to achieve form apart from dependence on a fixed center. His solution is different in each case, although his achievements in each poem become platforms for beginning again.

T. S. Eliot is inseparably linked with the development of modernism. His powerful role for so many poets in this century can be suggested by Donald Davie's tribute: "Mr. Eliot has been a presence in my life more insistently influential than any other writer whatever" (221). Reading Eliot and reading about Eliot were equally formative experiences for his following generation (Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue" 292). His influence was probably at its greatest between 1930 and 1950, and it was the influence of his poetry and criticism combined. Marjorie Perloff has demonstrated how two groups of critics have carried on an argument as to whether the modernist period is the "Pound era" or the "Stevens era" ("Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?" 485-510). Perloff concludes by hinting that we can perhaps tell quite a different tale by calling "the first half of the century the Eliot Era" (506).² At the same time, in recent criticism we find the definition of modernism remade in somewhat different languages--for example in Hugh Kenner's claims for Pound over Eliot³ on the grounds that where Eliot has only the symbolist mind in endless pursuit of itself, Pound binds poetry to the facts of nature and history, and, as we have seen, in Perloff's contrast between a poetics of symbolist lyric closure and a pursuit of Rimbaud's indeterminate and overflowing transformative energies.

It is time to re-examine the inherited notions of modernism, and to consider how it was constructed and how Eliot became a key to its canon. As Raymond Williams has emphasized, what now constitutes "Modernism" is a highly selective construct (*PM* 33). The basis for that selection was, in part, another temporal contingency: the coincidence of "Modernism" with the emergence and development of "English" as a respectable academic subject. What such "difficult" writing as that of Eliot, Joyce, and Pound potentially offered was justification for claiming the status of a "discipline" for "English" in the first place. The function of difficult texts with allusions in this context was twofold: to validate the notion that genuine learning was required and to reinforce a claim for necessary training in close and practiced attention. However, the merits of modernism were not immediately endorsed by the academic community.

Even during the time of Eliot's most complete ascendancy there was a determined backlash against his ideas: against the "classical" theory of the "objective correlative" there was a romantic counterthrust; against "autotelic" art, an emphasis on subjectivism, an insistence on the primacy of individual response, the unique perspective, the life. Importantly, however, there were F. R. Leavis's considerable achievement and a similar process in the United States, the so-called New Criticism to enlarge and systematize Eliot's version of modern poetry and place it in an educational context. Leavis's earliest and pioneering work on Eliot--*New Bearings in English Poetry* and *Revaluation*--attempts "to re-write the history of English poetry from a twentieth-century point of view" (Wellek 177-78), in other words, essentially to reshape the canon according to Eliotic criteria.⁴ As Eliot is alluded to in the very title of Leavis's book: "He has made a new start, and established new bearings" (*New Bearings* 28). "He was more aware of the general plight than his contemporaries, and more articulate: he made himself. . . the consciousness of his age, and he did this the more effectively in that he was a critic as well as a poet" (*Ibid.* 158). According to Leavis, it is Eliot who is responsible for the modern critical revolution centered on poetry, and Eliot deserves to be recognized as the most important critic of

poetry—certainly that dealing with the past—in our time (“T. S. Eliot as Critic” 177-78). It was Eliot who was to be the truly significant figure, the one who was to produce the new voice for the altered sensibility. Even Eliot’s earliest poems represent a break with the nineteenth-century tradition, requiring us to modify our traditional idea of the distinction between seriousness and levity in poetry, and to revise our idea of the canons of the poetical. The first poems themselves express a modern sensibility, “the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age” (*New Bearings* 76).

What in the 1920s were revolutionary and startling ideas about poetry became familiar by the 1940s. That age and its taste have passed—Leavis and the American New Critics who made Eliot’s literary canons prevail are invoked now only to explain, or to explain away, the phenomenon of Eliot’s success. In the second half of this century, another generation of critics emerges in the increasingly professionalized and institutionalized field of English literature. Especially in the United States a generation of well-trained elucidators produced an impressive body of scholarly commentary, with ever-more specialized studies of every aspect of the modernists. Eliot’s extraordinary influence as poet-critic is worn, in the postmodern age, when the issues and the frames of reference that influence literary criticism have shifted so radically. Eliot became a source of growing discontent to a new generation of critics eager to escape from his shadow. Eliot’s work was imputed with a discredit: as the alienation from the rest of humanity and the creativity of life. He was clearly identified as “a threat to contemporary sensibility,” and as ur-draughtsman of the critical orthodoxy to be deconstructed and as the archetypal white male elitist conservative literary icon.⁵ Thus he became “the easiest target” as “the enemy of the life force” (Glück 19).

After the elucidatory work upon modernism and the redefinition of the canon, the problem we face now is how to tackle the same terrain as before but with a different critical emphasis and how to say something new about the overwhelming bibliographical construct that is a modernist like “T. S. Eliot” or “Joyce.” One initially successful strategy seems to

find new theoretical ways of revalidating the already established valuations. Now, therefore, may be a time to expect some fresh historical revaluations and reassessments, and to see Eliot's work against a widening and deepening retrospect on modernism through contemporary perspectives. Recent critical theory, however, has contrived not to notice seriously the inaugurators of modern criticism. In one sense this is surprising, because what they inaugurated was that probing attentiveness to language that is still at the center of Eliot's poetry and criticism. Michael Grant in his introduction to *T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage* has noted the lack of a certain type of criticism on Eliot which this work aims to satisfy. He observes "the most important criticism seems likely to come from a study of Eliot's understanding of language in terms of his most crucial beliefs, through an illumination of his poetic language by an understanding of his tradition" (63). In my view, we still have not altogether escaped the influence of Eliot's achievements in spite of recent critical skepticism. One reason for reexamining Eliot's much examined work is to provide a greatly needed study of its relation to postmodern thinkers. There is too much life in his work for the accepted ideas to contain it; and a new generation of readers, coming to it in the frame of mind of this end of the century, are finding that there is much in it which answers to current preoccupations. A new direction of Eliot studies, enriched by an increased appreciation of the relevance of theoretical concerns with language, can be established. But to be of any positive use, the account must try to place Eliot in his time and in the critical tradition especially since it will set him in a strong relation to his own recurrent terms--tradition and the individual. This is no longer the age of Eliot, but Eliot is none the less a poet for our time.

The word presents the metaphysical problem today. When the beginnings of the twentieth century are seen in perspective, it will be found that the disintegration of words and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes constitute some of the most important theoretical reconstructions of our age. The traditional meaning of words is being subverted, language itself questioned, and a panic seizes the upholders of the norm as they

contemplate the process of destruction that opens up undreamed-of possibilities of expression. And at no time have we been more painfully self-conscious about just the trustworthiness of the language than in these days, which should make it plausible to reread Eliot's work, in particular, *The Waste Land*, as an experiment devoted to determining how far any mode of discourse may be trusted, and revealing a profound concern with, even suspicion of, itself as a vehicle of communication. A poet struggling with language--a poet surrendering to the realm of ineffability--such paradoxes are of the essence of the Eliot who emerges in this chapter. I will consider *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* as counterparts that define the shape of Eliot's career and a version of modernist's self-understanding. Making extensive use of Eliot's poetry and prose, I will be concerned with the complexity of Eliot's idea of language, and take issue with the character of modernism as embodied in his writings, and his relation to contemporary letters, including Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Eliot gave us a new, critical awareness of language. I will discuss Eliot especially as a poet and from the point of view especially, of what other poets of his time have got from him. He has, I am suggesting, for all of us, refreshed the language of poetry. He has restored the intellectual dignity of English poetry; at a time when few people would take it seriously, he formed a means of expression in poetry for the surface and the depths of a representative modern mind, intensely aware of his surroundings, their place in history, and his intimate reaction to them. And with his sensitive, multi-lingual scholarship he has contributed more than any other modern writer to the framework of ideas within which English poetry, past as well as present, is read and interpreted.

(1) T. S. Eliot as the most articulate spokesperson of modernism, and prefigure of postmodern insights

T. S. Eliot's stance as an innovator and renovator can be explained in his relationship with Romanticism and Victorianism. In the beginning and most significant phase of his career, Eliot's goal is to free the English language and its literature from what he saw as the

constraints of Victorian forms and sensibilities, and of uncreative mediocrity. His criticism suggests that his poetry makes a radical break with the poetry of the nineteenth century. In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," he identifies his own poetic ideal with the "direct sensuous apprehension of thought," the unified sensibility that he finds in Donne and Herbert, while he criticizes the subsequent poetic tradition for its dissociation of thought and feeling. The poets of the seventeenth century, before a dissociation of sensibility set in, "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience" (*SE* 287). This is what modernity must seek to restore. His poetry restores a vital immediacy that modernists felt the language had lost as society and technology had advanced into the twentieth century.

The anti-Victorianism of the chief Modernist poets is well known, in large part because it was incorporated into the New Critical vision of poetic history. Cleanth Brooks is one of the key figures who institutionalized New Criticism to a greater or lesser extent in the curricula of university English departments. In his first book of criticism, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), Brooks attempted to "revise" the history of English poetry, along lines similar to Eliot's less explicit attempt and Leavis's *Revaluation*. He is a good example of a critic obsessed with the idea of internal consistency and text-in-itself ideology. He argues in his paper "The Uses of Literature" that there are three main types of criticism: reader-oriented, writer-oriented, and writing-oriented. His, like that of many critics, is writing-oriented. It is concerned with a text "as a structure of meanings, as a piece of artistic craft, as a verbal context" (*A Shaping Joy* xiii). A poem for Brooks is a linguistic object, a closed system, and poetic language is emotive, concrete, inclusive, and paradoxical. In the "Notes for a Revised History of English Poetry," which ends *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Brooks uses the concept of dissociated sensibility to discredit the achievements of romantic poetry. The Victorians provide him with the most extreme example of the poetic failures he describes.

Victorian poetry hardly calls for extended comment here. The points to be made against it on the basis already set forth are perfectly obvious, and have been made often. . . . The motive here is not to add anything to the indictment, but merely to relate the poetry of the Victorians to the foregoing pattern.

Victorian poetry does offer occasion for a convenient summary; for, if poetry since the Restoration has been characterized by a confusion between imaginative and scientific organization, the Victorian period will furnish and illustration of this confusion in its final and most extreme form. Poetry is left impaled on one of the two horns of the dilemma: poetry with a message, the "philosophy" of Tennyson and Browning--the attempt to substitute poetry for religion; or, on the other hand, pure poetry, art for art's sake. (239)

In 1965 he wrote "A Retrospective Introduction" for a new printing of the book in which he comments on his earlier views. He asserts that were he rewriting the book today, he would want to lay more stress "on the extent to which Eliot, Yeats, and the other modern poets built upon the Romantic tradition and incorporated structural devices that are a part of the general Romantic inheritance" (xiv). He does not mention the Victorians in his retrospective revaluation.

The New Critical reading of Eliot has already been subject to revision. Recent scholarship in literary history has largely followed the pattern which Brooks's retrospections suggest. Thanks to ground-breaking efforts by Kermode, Langbaum, Frye, and Bloom among others,⁶ we now seem pretty much agreed that modernism is not so anti-romantic as some writers and critics once wanted it to be. The first problem in discussing romantic-modern relations is to isolate some fruitful element of continuity. Critics have shown that many elements of the modernist creed, such as the superiority of the concrete image over the discursive intellect, have their origins in the nineteenth century. Kermode had pursued the "image," Langbaum the concept of a "poetry of experience." Bornstein shifts focus toward what seems to him a still more profitable subject: the pattern of mental action that creates image and shapes experience. What he brings to the discussion is a synthesizing impulse; a capacity for refining received opinion, as in proposing a structure of "description-vision-evaluation" for the greater romantic lyric; and an acute perception of romanticism in three stages: high, debased, and renewed.

By uncovering this previously hidden side of modernism and New Criticism, "the revisionists" were able to dissolve the sharp opposition between nineteenth-and-twentieth-

century poetics. Both the traditional and the revisionist views of modernism have their merits, and neither should be accepted or rejected without qualification. The problem is to analyze with greater care and precision the intricate hows and whys of romantic-modern relations. Bornstein tackles this problem in his book, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens*. His key concept is "transformations," announced in his title. Bornstein focuses upon what moderns do to the romantics: instead of merely rejecting or reproducing romantic patterns, modern poets alter them. Bornstein's aim is to delineate "the radical continuity of nineteenth-and twentieth-century poetry" (xi), presenting his case by exploring "the obsessive relation to British romanticism of three major poets of our century--Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens" (xi). To show this continuity he concentrates not so much on the content of the poets' statements as on the "mental action" of a given poem--"the poem of the act of the mind" as Stevens put it. That is, while he notices "echoes, sources, and parallels," his main emphasis is on "the dynamic nature of each poet's relation to his literary heritage" (xii). This approach enables him to demonstrate how the modern poets, facing problems similar to those encountered by the romantic poets, employed like strategies, engaged in like acts of the mind, though modifications were necessary to meet the demands of the modern era.

Bornstein's research is an elaborate and subtle revaluation of the complex relationship between romantic and modern poetry. Yeats and Eliot made opposite public uses of romanticism to define their own poetic stances. While Yeats projected himself as the last romantic, Eliot posed as an anti-romantic modern; and whereas Yeats strove to rescue romanticism from its own defects, Eliot worked to purge literature as a whole of the contamination of romanticism.

According to Bornstein's argument, even if Eliot first became a romantic, and his learning to write was from deeper imitation of Shelley, Byron, and Keats, he repudiated his models to achieve his own poetic identity. For Eliot, romantic poetry showed the flaws of his own early poems--musical jingling, banality, superficial cynicism, ignorance of Latin

tradition, confused thought, and imprecise feeling. He identified romanticism with a permanent adolescence of the spirit and its products as an immature phase of poetic development. Then he attacks romanticism:

“ . . . Romanticism is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality. . . .” (SW 31)

“Emotion recollected in tranquillity” is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected,” and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. (SW 58)

The romantics failed to attain “unity of temper” in sympathy with society or art and “unity of expression” in an individual.⁷ To Eliot their careers were parables of the need for control and discipline of the violent forces of poetic composition and affect. Similarly, they showed the necessity of ordered morality in both art and life.⁸ Then, he wants to make his poetry express freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age, and, at the same time, make it a self-contained literary universe. His work in an “ideal order” (SE 15) of monuments can be seen as modernist discourse to reflect the language revolution.

Eliot wrote to a literary patron that he wanted his book of criticism [*The Sacred Wood*] to be “a single distinct blow.” The blow was directed against the contemporary lack of standards of good writing for both verse and critical prose represented by that “huge journalistic organism the ‘critical’ or Review press” (*Letters* 355). He views contemporary literature that is unlike his own brand of modernism as unadventurous and stagnant, indicating an intellectual failure. He writes in 1922:

There is certainly in the atmosphere of literary London, something which may provisionally be called a moral cowardice. It is not simply cowardice, but a caution, a sort of worldly prudence which believes implicitly that English literature is so good as it is that adventure and experiment involve only unjustified risk; lack of ambition, laziness, and refusal to recognize foreign competition; a tolerance which is no better than torpid indifference; not cowardice merely, but still a composition of inertias which is usually to be found in general cowardice. (“London Letter” 510)

Of the two new poetry anthologies--Methuen and Company's *Anthology of Modern Verse* & Untermeyer's *Modern American Poetry*--he is considering, Eliot writes, "Both appear to me to insult the English language. . . . Both appear to me conventional and timid" (Ibid. 511). Eliot attacks what he sees as the root of this literary mediocrity, its insipid language: "The English language is of course badly written in both [England and America]. In England it is not ungrammatical, but common; it is not in bad taste, but rather tasteless" (Ibid. 512). He knows, from his own early poetry and his involvement with avant-garde magazines and movements, the potential power of language; he is thus frustrated by writers' failure to draw on this power. English, he explains, "demands greater and more constant variation" from its writers; "every word must be charged afresh with energy every time it is used" (512).

Again, in "The Three Provincialities" (1922), Eliot decries

the complete collapse of literary effort in England. One may even say that the present situation here has now become a scandal impossible to conceal from foreign nations; that literature is chiefly in the hands of persons who may be interested in almost anything else; that literature presents the appearance of a garden unmulched, untrimmed, unweeded, and choked by vegetation sprung only from the chance germination of the seed of last year's plants. (11-12)

Eliot's metaphorical description of the mulching, trimming, and weeding essential to vital contemporary literature points to the attention he places on cultivating, not just incontinently churning out, a modern voice. The writers' tool for this cultivation must be their language. Eliot identifies great literature as only that which reflects a writer's "complete knowledge" of the language, and exhibits literary art via "its expression of the genius of its own language."

Eliot energizes the language, salvaging what fragments are usable from the past and transforming them into something that fits the new demands of the present. He knew, as he wrote in "Burnt Norton," that

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (CPP 175)

In his poetry, he fights to stem this decay, and to preserve, by counteracting the fluctuations and imprecisions of language, his vision of the immortality of literature.

Language is, for Eliot, the essential link between himself and the world--past and present--around him. "The traditions of the language, to the traditions of the nation or the race, are what first concern the writer" ("The Three Provincialities" 12). In his poetry he sought a language in which the tradition could be sustained and extended, and at the same time serve the demands of contemporary immediacy embodying the "objective correlative." This language had to be a medium in which all the obvious incongruities that plagued the modern artist were avoided or dismissed, and what remained would make sense--would be of the present, would sustain the volatile mixture of memory and desire. In the schema Eliot uses in *The Waste Land*, this means that the quest is to find a language landscape which represents the accumulated heights and ruins of the past.

As we have seen, Eliot is a key figure in twentieth-century English poetry especially in terms of revitalizing poetic language. Furthermore, what once seemed "enormous differences between Eliot's outlook and our postmodernist perspective" has been steadily diminished, to the point that we may now understand Eliot's literary theories as comfortably in line with post-structuralist concerns. Postmodern readers who know the work of Derrida and Gadamer will be able to see that Eliot in his early philosophical work arrived at theories that have much in common with contemporary insights. Eliot may most profitably be compared to Gadamer, many of whose central ideas Eliot clearly prefigures.

In order to pursue the Gadamerian element in Eliot's idea of language, we need to revisit his early study on F. H. Bradley with particular attention to the theoretical pronouncements that anticipate the direction of postmodern thought. Eliot's personal awareness of the contemporary epistemological crisis was intensified by his absorption in Bradley's thought. In the two years that he spent reading Bradley, he found an immediate

acknowledgment of the disturbing gap that separates hints of absolute truth from everyday experience. He also encountered a formal and elegant defense of the positions that undergird modernism in the arts and sciences. In 1916 Eliot completed a doctoral dissertation entitled "Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley," which was belatedly published in 1964. This dissertation, "the work of an expert," according to Josiah Royce (qtd. in *KE* 10), represents the culmination of Eliot's investigation into possible answers to the epistemological crisis precipitated around the turn of the century. His study of Bradley suggested ways of coping with the rubble of his personal life and methods of structuring the ruins of history into art.

From the beginning of his career, Bradley was a radical skeptic who insisted that true objectivity is a chimera. Like all idealists, he believed that everything is connected to everything else in a systematic way and that everything is part of a single comprehensive whole. He believed, consequently, that all relations are internal relations and that every perspective is partial and incomplete and thus is unreal, an appearance. Roughly speaking, he divides experience into three categories: "immediate experience," "relational experience," and "transcendent experience." He believed that experience (knowledge) begins in unity, falls into fragments, and he also believed in the possibility of a recovery of unity, in the possibility of forming new wholes. In all of these areas and others as well, he provided Eliot with a philosophic statement of positions that were enormously useful for a poet living in a time of epistemological confusion.⁹

Since Eliot's critical career closely follows his intense study of Bradley and since he himself recognized the influence of Bradley in his own work (*KE* 10-11 & *TCC* 20), many have insisted that Bradley's philosophy is the key to understanding Eliot's poetry and criticism. Ann Bolgan, for instance, confidently declares of Eliot that Bradley's mind "lies . . . behind every major theoretical concept appearing in his literary criticism" (252). Lewis Freed similarly maintains that "the philosophy in his critical prose, late and early, is the version of Bradley sketched in *Knowledge and Experience*" (xii).

It is true that different readers have discovered in Eliot's dissertation different Eliots.¹⁰ The pioneer work on Eliot's philosophy and its pervasive presence in his poetry was done by Hugh Kenner in *The Invisible Poet*. Kenner, in 1959, found Eliot's dissertation to be a statement of enlightened disillusionment with the intellect's pretension to competence as a mode of understanding and "evidence for [Eliot's] unqualified ingestion of certain perspectives of Bradley's which one does not discover him ever to have repudiated" (*The Invisible Poet* 39). In 1965, J. Hillis Miller read it as an acknowledgment of "the inevitability of dualism," an expression of the conviction that this state "is an alienation from reality," and an announcement of the theme of Eliot's early poetry: "The pathos of the human condition is man's inescapable exclusion from absolute experience" (*Poets of Reality* 135-36). Lyndall Gordon, in 1977, took the dissertation to have been written by "a haunted young man, torn between the truth of his visions and his rational distrust of them" (53), "strain[ing] towards a final truth contained in heightened moments of 'lived' experience" (52). And in 1981, Walter Benn Michaels found the same young man to be so far opposed to notions such as that of "a final truth" as to be considered a pragmatist and even something of a grammarologist.

Every critic wants whatever is there to be a party to the case, and the temptation when discussing Eliot's dissertation is to give it an explanatory power over his literary writings; the danger is that in order to do so, the dissertation will be endowed with a prescriptive character which it seems determined not to possess. Bradley's philosophy influenced Eliot's writing, I think, as a coloring, not as a body of doctrine.¹¹ The metaphor here is Kenner's: "it is precisely as a stain, imparting color to all else that passes through that Bradley is most discernible in Eliot's poetic sensibility" (*The Invisible Poet* 45). Furthermore, I will argue that what affected Eliot profoundly is Bradley's "personality as manifested in his words" (*TCC* 20); that is not speculative bravery but the graceful intellectual poise with which he accepted human failure to know final truth: "We justify the natural wonder which delights to stray beyond our daylight world, and to follow paths that

lead to half-known half-unknowable regions. Our conclusion . . . has confirmed the irresistible impression that all is beyond us" (Bradley 486).

Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893) mirrors the very cast of Eliot's mind, poised between mystical intuitions of a totality, and the solvent energies of critical reason. According to Richard Wollheim, the ideal of immediate experience is crucial to Bradley's world view because it constitutes the foundation upon which all higher forms of knowledge or consciousness are grounded. Here the primary datum in the Bradley-Eliot system is immediate experience. Immediate experience preexists all divisions, all temporal and spatial realities. The central import of immediate experience is revealed in a quotation Eliot takes from Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality*: "'At every moment my state, whatever else it is, is a whole of which I am immediately aware. It is an experienced non-relational unity of many in one.' This is what we mean when we say that feeling is self-transcendent" (KE 21). Ideal experience is immediately felt because it is a state of utterly concrete union with other persons, objects, and those inner cores of our own beings. Such unity is made possible by either the non-existence or transcendence of abstract relations and thought categories which establish the generalized distinctions that prevent the terms or members of a relationship from entering into a felt whole.

Bradley's main idea is that we live in a world of appearances, and our knowledge is relative. Human consciousness divides and classifies, and consequently we know the world through a particular "finite centre" (199-200). But there is also a "general condition before distinctions and relations have been developed, and where as yet neither any subject nor object exists" (*Ibid.* 406). This non-relational, original condition of immediate experience is lost as we locate ourselves in space and time, experiencing the world of objects and other people. Thus emerges our individual point of view, or "finite centre," and with it the world of appearance, which is always private and relative. What we call true and real in ordinary experience is, in the end, a convention agreed upon by those whose points of view coincide. And yet our knowledge keeps tending towards the state of

original unity from which it fell into time and space. This original and enduring wholeness, without subject and object, division and fragmentation, Bradley calls the Absolute. Without it, there would be no meaning at all, even though our limited and partial meanings do not encompass it.

In discussing immediate experience Eliot makes a very subtle and most important adaptation of Bradley's system. In his writings Bradley seems to waver on the question whether our experience is ever merely immediate. Bradley admits the "mereness" of this stage, but yet, he seems to believe that a totally immediate experience is possible. Eliot is quite emphatic on this point. Immediate experience, Eliot says, represents "a timeless unity which is not as such present either *anywhere* or to *anyone*" (KE 31). "There is indeed no such state." "No actual experience could be merely immediate, for if it were, we should certainly know nothing about it. . . . There is no absolute point of view from which real and ideal can be finally separated and labelled. . . . We allow ourselves to hold both that a lower stage of mere feeling is irrelevant and that knowledge is based upon and developed out of feeling" (KE 16 & 18). The co-presence of thought or consciousness and the immediately felt experience is the fundamental aspect of Eliot's innovations in Bradley's philosophy. "We cannot create experience out of entities which are independent of experience. Nor could we be conscious at all unless these ideal connections somehow entered into the experience, breaking up its immediate unity. Yet the original unity. . . though transcended, remains, and is never analyzed away." Out of these series of paradoxes emerges the conclusion: "the only independent reality is immediate experience or feeling" (KE 30). As soon as we conceptualize immediate experience, it becomes a term, an object of knowledge, and so enters into relations with other objects as one term among many. Immediate experience, "a timeless unity" preceding distinctions and relations breaks down into various constituents, appearances, the major divisions of which are subject and object.

At this point, Eliot's thought, the absence of "mere feeling" in the world of experience which is the important adaptation of Bradley's system, is linked to Gadamerian ideas. The movement from the immediate experience of the first level to the intellectual experience of the second is accompanied by the intrusion of language, by the rise of objects, and by the fragmentation of reality. Through language, the conventions of signification available to us deny or distort the immediacy of experience. The movement from the second to the third level involves a transcendence of brokenness and a return on a higher level to the unity of the first level. Both in his dissertation and in his literary criticism, Eliot often refers to the first level as feeling, the second as thought, and the third as a unification of the first two. These levels of knowing are also levels of being. In the first, there is actually no such thing as knowledge, as knower and known. In the second, there is specific but limited knowledge, with special distortion caused by the fact that the knower is imprisoned in his own perspective and receives only a few bits and pieces of experience, all of which are filtered through language. In the third, there is a special ideal knowledge which comes from passing beyond diffusion to a higher many-in-one unity.

Eliot's reflections on lost unity, on entrapment in language and in intellect, and on the promise of transcendence are of central importance in all of his poetry and criticism, including *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. His clearest discussion of these matters is to be found in the first chapter of his dissertation "On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience," in large part an exposition of a chapter by the same name in Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality*.¹² Eliot argues that "we are forced, in building up our theory of knowledge, to postulate something given upon which knowledge is founded" (*KE* 17).

Another important point must be made in regard to Eliot's comments on cognition and the nature and function of language in the second chapter entitled "On the Distinction of 'Real' and 'Ideal'." The function of language hinges in large part on the difference between idea and reality. In "The Hollow Men," we are told that "Between the idea / And the reality / . . . Falls the Shadow" (*CPP* 85). In Eliot's own words, ". . . the apparently

fundamental separation between the real and the ideal is but tentative and provisional, a moment in a process" (*KE* 32). An idea is an abstraction of reality; and while the idea depicts reality, at the same time, it evades it. The idea both approaches and swerves from the object under consideration. Its relation to the real is dynamically ambiguous. The relationship between word, idea, and concept, is the basis of Eliot's understanding of the inadequacy of language to reveal reality directly (*KE* 46). "We know the concept only through ideas--through its appearances" (*KE* 46). A conceptual framework can never encompass the totality of reality, and the word as concept is an inadequate manifestation of the complexities of experience: "The goal of language is in this sense unattainable, for it is simply that of a complete vocabulary of concepts each independent of the rest" (*KE* 46). He repeatedly warns of what we might call the "language trap." The problem is that language and conscious cognition can occur only in the relational phase, and consequently language inevitably carries dualistic assumptions which distort any description of either immediate or transcendent experience. Language cannot occur before the fall from unity and cannot survive the transcendence of dualism.

Bradley said that our ideas of objects are separate from objects themselves and thus function only as their signs. Eliot's work on the dissertation influenced his criticism by developing in him a habit of skeptical inquiry into ideas and by teaching him Bradley's "scrupulous respect for words" (*SE* 455). Words such as "sensation," "sensibility," "feeling," and "emotion,"¹³ which are essential to Eliot's analysis of how we perceive reality, are scrupulously and subtly employed in the dissertation. Eliot rejects the naive realism that says the world is simply there before us, insisting that our ideas and feelings condition even our most direct sensations of the world. Similarly, a "fact" is not something that is simply there before our consciousness. Eliot argued that each fact had a pre-arranged place in a system which gives it its status as a fact (*KE* 60). In "The Dry Salvages," Eliot wrote that "We had the experience but missed the meaning" (*CPP* 186). This famous line expresses Eliot's sense that no experience is "real" nor any "fact" valid

unless it fits into a pattern or system of relations that gives it meaning—even though this meaning can never be final since the pattern is always changing and the system always developing.

In asserting that “we have no objects without language,” Eliot grants privilege to language in a way Bradley does not. For Eliot words are not simply representatives of a separate object from which they derive their significance; rather, they are “woven into our reality” as essential components of its makeup. Thus Bradley’s distinction between word and object is one that for Eliot makes no sense, since, just as there is no feeling without thought, there are also no objects without words. We use words to construct our reality, the organized systems that are our own private worlds. Eliot’s emphasis upon language’s productive power denies the existence of a common, solid, external world of shared objects. This idea suggests that our worlds, our “finite centres” or “points of view,” do interfere with and make a difference to each other—we can “partially put ourselves. . . at each other’s point of view”—and it is through these interferences that what we take to be an object world is built up. Thus Eliot reverses Bradley’s theory of language; in his view, we begin with words and, in a somewhat unconscious and public way, construct the reality that Bradley understands words to represent simply.

Postmodern elements in Eliot’s dissertation can be found especially in the fact that, for a postmodern theorist, signs produce and refer to other signs, and, for Eliot, words function the same way. Readable in the dissertation, however, is Eliot’s will to believe in something beyond words, and the conflict between this will and his skepticism concerning such a nonverbal transcendence. Postmodern ideas can also be seen in the dissertation’s conclusions about truth and interpretation. For Eliot truths are always “partial and fragmentary” interpretations, and thus “every interpretation, along perhaps with some utterly contradictory interpretation, has to be taken up and reinterpreted by every thinking mind and by every civilization” (*KE* 164). This passage points to the dynamic sense of tradition Eliot wrote of several years later in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919).

It also suggests the open-ended hermeneutics prevalent in Eliot's work but often suppressed by his early emphasis on classicism and objective standards and his later, highly Christianized rhetoric. In Eliot's criticism there is a tension between idealism and skepticism, a centripetal will to believe in an impersonal, uninterpreted truth--an undivided Word--countered by the centrifugal pull of endless interpretation and proliferating words. *Knowledge and Experience* is an early trace of that tension.

In his most famous and influential essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues for the importance to poetry of a literary "tradition" that transcends the limited personalities of individual poets. What exactly Eliot means by "tradition" has been the subject of much critical debate, but in this essay he explicitly rejects the genealogical understanding of tradition as a passive handing down or "timid adherence" of one generation of writers to the successes of an earlier one. Rather, tradition suggests a dynamic process by which a writer does not inherit a body of texts but obtains, "by great labour," the "historical sense," the "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (SE 14). According to Eliot, "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [a poet's] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (SE 14). The poet perceives this order as a timelessness transcending his temporality. And yet this ideal textual order is not simply static and fixed, for it is "modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work": when the new text supervenes upon the old, "the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" (SE 15). Thus tradition is not simply the influence of the past upon the present but also, in a very dynamic sense, the influence of the present upon the past, the way in which each text reinterprets and reshapes its own literary ancestors. Although "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has been most widely read for its affirmations of the authority of an ordered literary tradition, Eliot's dialectic of literary history both asserts such ideal order and questions its apparent stability.

Let us consider the underlying ideas motivating Eliot's historicist view of literary understanding and note their striking affinity to the more recent hermeneutic philosophy of criticism expressed most systematically in the work of Gadamer. Eliot, already acknowledged as a leader of modernist criticism, may then be seen also as a precursor of certain positions in postmodernist theory.

Like Eliot's view of tradition, Gadamer's concept is globally comprehensive rather than aesthetically restricted. Moreover, it is socially real and changing rather than transcendently ideal and timeless. For Gadamer, as for Eliot, tradition--being inextricably linked with language--constitutes the preconditioned and preconditioning matrix and medium of our thought. It is not a separate object we survey from an external standpoint. "Rather, we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process--i.e., we do not conceive of . . . tradition. . . as something other, something alien. It is always part of us" (*TM* 282). And we are part of it: "We belong to elements in tradition that reach us" from the past as a still living structuring force in the present, a force which is at the same time modified and "motivated in a special way by the present and its interests" (*TM* 284). Therefore, Gadamer maintains, "Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves" (*TM* 293), weaving "the great tapestry of tradition that supports us" (*TM* 338). As founded on communication, as the product of a dialogue between past and present, tradition is conceived by Gadamer as essentially "linguistic in nature" and inextricably identified with language; "tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is language" (*TM* 358). And language, perhaps more obviously than tradition, is "the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world" (*PH* 29). If language embodies, transmits, and "is the reservoir of tradition," so conversely tradition, broadly conceived by Gadamer as "that which is societally transmitted," must in turn include and transmit language (*PH* 29). The

strikingly deep affinities between Eliot's and Gadamer's theories will be demonstrated in the remainder of this section.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Gadamer stresses that the past is not separate and done with, but conditions the present in the way it bequeaths to it the variously-called fore-meanings, presuppositions and prejudices which influence understanding in a particular present. In Gadamer's words, "history is not only not at its end, but we its interpreters are situated within it, as a conditioned and finite link in a continuing chain" (*TM* 200),--"[Time] is not a yawning abyss, but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us" (*TM* 297). Understanding takes place not in a vacuum, but in a framework of already given, largely unconscious ways of seeing called by Heidegger the "fore-structure of understanding."

Situatedness expresses the idea that one is always and irremediably located in some part of the spatio-temporal, socio-historical world, and that one's perception and thinking are structured or conditioned by one's particular situation. The ways we see, judge, and describe things are largely determined by the concepts and language in which we think and speak. Heidegger captures the idea of situatedness in his central notion of "being-there" in the midst of the world and within a concrete historical situation; and it is similarly central to the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer. For Gadamer all human understanding can exist "only in concrete historical terms--i.e., it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates" (*TM* 276). Eliot makes precisely the same point. "We are all limited, by circumstances if not by capacities"; "limited by the limitations of particular men in particular places and at particular times" (*TCC* 104, *UPUC* 142).

Finitude is a consequence of situatedness, and its meaning for historicist hermeneutics goes beyond the simple matter of mortality. Our perspectives are always those of "limited and transient human beings existing in space and time" (*UPUC* 109), limited by the horizons that our situation imposes; and there is no way for philosophical thinking to put

itself outside time, space, and historical situation so as to achieve ultimate objectivity. From the principle of situated finitude Gadamer rejects the assumption of a transcendental, absolutely objective historical understanding (*TM* 218-42).¹⁴ Indeed, as Eliot points out, our mortality makes it impossible for us to overcome the finitude of perspective by trying out all possible points of view, because our time for experiment is very limited and the world is anyway always changing; it is not as if “we were always the same generation upon earth” (*Essays Ancient and Modern* 106). Finite and situated, “our vision is always partial and our judgement always prejudiced” (“Experiment in Criticism” 198).

However, the idea of understanding’s finite situatedness is not simply a negative reminder of cognitive limitation and fallibility. As Gadamer and Eliot insist, prejudice and point of view provide not only the limits but the necessary direction and structure for understanding to take hold of what it grasps and appreciates. Gadamer’s famous “rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice” (*TM* 277) is thus following Eliot in insisting that “all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice” (*TM* 270) that the prejudices we bring with us help constitute the situation and horizon of a particular present, not only representing the present limits of our understanding but constituting “the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience” (*PH* 9). Importantly, Eliot remarks that “if it be objected that this is a prejudice. . . I can only reply that one must criticize from some point of view” (*SE* 114). Gadamer similarly follows Eliot in drawing the conclusion that since there is no hope to escape all prejudice and point of view, the main thing is to be aware of our own and its limits and to be flexibly open to entertain different views which challenge our prejudices and may enlarge our scope of understanding. “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (*TM* 269).

Like Gadamer, who recognized that situations and horizons inevitably change as we move through life and that understanding requires “the fusion of these horizons,” Eliot was concerned with the problem of the change and multiplicity of different horizons and the

threat it posed to meaning and understanding which demand a certain unity or coherence of experienced points of view (*KE* 140-42). Since throughout our life “we vary by passing from one point of view to another,” we face “the painful task of unifying . . . jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them” (*KE* 147-48). In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot illustrates how our understanding of poetry and criticism has undergone significant changes through history as a result of more general social changes so that “our criticism from age to age will reflect the things that the age demands” (141). Gadamer later makes the same point when he argues that “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself.” “The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience,” but “it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history” (*TM* 296).

As Eliot incisively puts it, “the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show” (*SE* 16). Since understanding is always situation-dependent, and since the changing world is continuously imposing new situations and circumstances, we cannot rigidly hold to our past interpretations, assessments, and beliefs. Time’s challenge to established dogma is one reason why Eliot insists that tradition itself must be constantly reinterpreted and revised to be preserved, that “tradition cannot mean standing still,” since time and history never stand still (*After Strange Gods* 25). More generally, as we hear in the poetry of “East Coker,” the shock of temporal change highlights the limits of all man’s empirical knowledge:

. . . There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.

The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. (*CPP* 179)

Indeed the world of individual experience, haunted by illusion, fragmentary and tenuous, was for Eliot a disturbing prospect. He admired Bradley partly for the “perfection of destruction” by which skeptical reason could provide a degree of rigorous order in a world perpetually threatened by the peculiar chaos of our private illusions.

From this perspective, Eliot tries to explore the redeeming power of language, even though he is also aware of the limitation of language. He seeks to distinguish completely between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (*SE* 18) and to see poetry not as the expression of a personality but rather of a “particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (*SE* 20). The poem is thus a “new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself,” and the poetic process is a “continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (*SE* 17). His theory makes the “medium” itself the active agent in the production of poetry, again seeming to subordinate the accidents of personality to an order--in this case, language itself--that transcends them. But he admits that “this is not quite the whole story,” since “there is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate” (*SE* 21), thereby suggesting the skepticism with which he must finally treat this idealistic theory. Thus although both “tradition” and “impersonality” find their way from Eliot’s essay into New Criticism as the names for a certain ideality, Eliot’s own use of the terms does not ignore their provisional and uncertain nature.

For Eliot the chief problem with theory was a problem with its language. The focus of his critique in his dissertation was on the vocabulary of explanation, definition and theory, and on the mentality implied by its use. Every explanation can be shown to be correct from some point of view, but there is available no absolute point of view from which to establish

truth or error. Eliot asserted that “it cannot be wholly true that any explanation is wholly wrong,” because “in a relative world nothing can be completely illusory. . . all values are if you like illusory, and all real” (qtd. in Perl 67).

According to Eliot, the language of explanation is inadequate to treat “a relative world,” a world whose definition is thought to depend upon the observers’ points of view. Eliot’s misgivings about explanation were a consequence of his doubts about epistemology. In a chapter of his dissertation, “The Epistemologist’s Theory of Knowledge,” he argued that the epistemologist’s major error is the assumption “that there is one consistent real world. . . and that it is our business to find it” (136). But “the real world” is infinitely complex, a process of construction that can never be more than “vague, unprecise, swarming with what are, from a metaphysical point of view, insoluble contradictions” (*KE* 136).

Eliot thinks that “It is a mistake . . . to treat the word as something which barely points to the object. . . . The word ‘chimera’ . . . is the beginning of the reality chimera and is absolutely continuous with it, and the ‘present King of France’ is already partially real” (*KE* 129). Following this passage, he gives a warning against philosophical “language forcing untenable theories upon us” (*KE* 130). The theorist’s innocence is secured by a group of assumptions: that “truth” or “reality” exists; that it is the ultimate object of knowledge; that knowledge has objects. Our “real world” is a fabric of implicit theories that we have tacitly agreed to call “facts.” There is ultimately no distinction between a fully successful theory and reality, or between metaphysics and the practical world. That distinction has been central to philosophy because theorists are “deceived by [their] own metaphors” (*SE* 453). Philosophers tend to treat verbal abstractions and figures of speech as though they referred to objective phenomena. Eliot believed that this misstep, this misuse of language, had led metaphysics away from its original and proper role.

The conventional theorist over- and underestimates the power of language to define reality, because he makes a distinction between words and the ideas or things that they are called upon to name and define. “A word is that which it denotes,” Eliot said in his

dissertation: “Without words, no objects” (143). Thus language is not “simply a development of our ideas; it is a development of reality as well” (KE 132 & See also 104). The theorist overrates the strength of language when he insists that the definitions and distinctions of philosophy possess precise and immutable meanings. Precision is impossible because there is nothing, once subjected to analysis, that is not self-contradictory. Moreover, the theorist ignores the temporal dimension of language. Definitions and explanations possess contextual validity: a validity, as the poet says, “only for one time / And only for one place” (CPP 89). Human language is a poor medium in which to work the precisions of philosophy. The theorist’s project is “largely one of simplification,” and it entails a reduction of the knots, echoes and vagaries that constitute a language. “An idea is not a thing,” Eliot wrote in his dissertation, “and our difficulties arise from trying to treat it as a thing” (KE 129).

In this respect, contemporary philosophy seemed a dreary failure. Eliot wrote, in a letter of 1929, that he looked forward to “the creation of a new type of intellectual” (qtd. in Perl 77). Eliot’s admiration for Bradley, as his 1927 review of the *Ethical Studies* makes clear (SE 444-55), was based not on doctrine but on attitude. What he saw in Bradley was humility raised to a methodology: an “attitude of extreme diffidence” (SE 444). Eliot’s Bradley is a “uncynical” skeptic, a relativist, and a contextualist. According to Eliot, the salient features of Bradley’s approach were likely to re-emerge, and he was right about “the new power destined to supersede” the analysts (SE 449). Furthermore, he may well have met with the postmodern sense that reality is a convention defined by a common language; and with the “grave doubt upon the classical notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, all of which could be exposed as reality on a naively representational theory of language” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 143). As perspectivists in the postmodern context, we may be tempted to remark that Eliot was “ahead of his time.”

In the preface of *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, Eliot said that he could no longer “pretend to understand” the terminology of his dissertation.

Completing his critique of theoretical language, method and presuppositions, he turned decisively toward those of poetry and literary criticism. What the philosopher does for a language's abstract thought, the poet seems to do for its capacity to communicate complex and subtle feelings with a particular language. Eliot posed a radical choice between "the language of philosophy" and "the language of poetry" (qtd. in Perl 79). The language of poetry seems to be more complex than the language of philosophy in the obvious sense that it has a greater range of linguistic features, even if this is not to claim an automatic superiority.

(2) "It is impossible to say just what I mean!": "Prufrock," "Gerontion," and *The Waste Land* as the breakdown of "our bond" of language

It is important to notice the connection between the theoretical obsessions of our day and the "problematic" of Eliot's poetry, especially, *The Waste Land*. Eliot can now be read as raising, in the concrete, some of the same questions which have been preoccupying recent critics in the abstract. We need to pursue such a connection, certainly, by way of language--in which case one could propose that the problematics of language has all along been one of the real subject matters of *The Waste Land*. To interpret *The Waste Land* is to show that relevance. For whatever our situation, it is bound to include some doubt as to the trustworthiness of the language employed. Contemporary poetry has become accustomed to answering this question for itself in the affirmative, somewhat too easily. Contemporary criticism, "a babel of warring jargons," seemed equally busy denying that any such thing as credible language could possibly exist at all. *The Waste Land* recovers the issue as a set of specifics, and therefore tentatively, that is to say, neither in hopeful innocence nor dogmatic refusal.

However, the problematics of language is enacted in Eliot's work from the outset through his later poetry. Prufrock's frustrated exclamation that "It is impossible to say just

what I mean!" (*CPP* 16), Sweeney's lament that "I gotta use words when I talk to you" (*CPP* 125), the arcane reference to the "Word" as "*to en*" in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" all display Eliot's concern with linguistic issues, and specifically his sense of linguistic limitation. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Sweeney Agonistes," language seems to be a kind of concession to others, a barrier that must be negotiated. Though Sweeney says "I've gotta use words when I talk to you," and though Sweeney cannot command words sufficient to express his terror and loathing, still he knows the hopeless frightfulness of his condition. Thus the fragments of "Sweeney Agonistes" end with brutish subverbal syllables: "Hoo ha ha / Hoo ha ha / Hoo / Hoo / Hoo / KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK / KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK / KNOCK / KNOCK / KNOCK" (*CPP* 126). "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" projects, if only through its parodistic failure, a longing for a Word beyond mere words. *Ash-Wednesday* displays this longing, now positively expressed with less irony. Finally, in the *Four Quartets*, the Eliotic figure of language takes shape with greatest clarity and urgency. There the trope of language becomes the center of meditation, and urgently so in each quartet's culminating section. It is also in the *Four Quartets* that an ambivalence toward language is most pronounced. Language appears as a necessary instrument, but one that is flawed and limited. It is this appeal to so faulty an instrument that emerges in Eliot as profoundly self-compromising, with implications not only for Eliot's own progress but for the Christian tradition as it becomes the final articulation and framework of Eliot's concerns.

There is a tendency in Eliot to erect a whole theory of language from the defamiliarizing experience of how words can fail to work for one. It is congenial to believe that there are moments at which language stands baffled, saying of whatever it has just said that that is not what it meant at all. In this sense, as Balachandra Rajan argues in *The Overwhelming Question*, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" must take its place not only as a beginning of Eliot's first book of poetry, but as a beginning which looks forward to an end, and which defines the terms of the unending inquiry (7).

The reading of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) coincides with the interests Eliot manifested in his dissertation, including the credibility of language. Both are concerned with an epistemological approach to reality through language. Both the dissertation and the first book of poems revolve around the question of the word and sign as **expression** of knowledge and around the relation of knowledge to experience. Eliot tried to **make** these philosophical concerns more accessible in his poetry when he attempted “to **recover** the accents of direct speech” and “to concentrate. . . attention upon trivial or **accidental** or commonplace objects” (“Reflections on Contemporary Poetry” 118).

Therefore, when we read “Prufrock” with an awareness that Eliot was a philosophy student when he wrote it, we cannot easily ignore the presence of arguments, questions, **descriptions** and other modes of verbal activity which occasion and give form to Prufrock’s **fear**: “And in short, I was afraid” (*CPP* 15). At this point, we may raise some questions: **What** is the cause of Prufrock’s misery? What is the reason that Prufrock’s love song is **never** sung as it has been often remarked? Is it that he is self-consciously unattractive and **inactive**: “his hair is growing thin!” and “his arms and legs are thin” (*CPP* 14); his image is **quite** opposite to the powerful and muscular works of Michelangelo, which “In the room **the women come and go**” (*CPP* 13 & 14) and talk about; his mental state is like that of “a **patient** etherised upon a table” (*CPP* 13) and the evening fog which moves like a sleepy cat? Or we can answer that Prufrock’s inability to sing a love song is not simply ironic, but **part** of the specifications of failure. To sing is to achieve a definition and Prufrock’s fate is to **fall** short of definition, to bring momentous news only to thresholds. Then it represents the **necessity** of existing through the medium of speech. On a fundamental level “Prufrock” is a dramatization of the impossibility of asking questions--both in the realm of contemplation and the realm of action. On a more generalized level it presents a vivid rendering of the fear that all language evokes in those who, like Prufrock, sense that it is no longer a valid medium of self-assertion and self-disclosure. Importantly enough, being unable to say just what one means, or facing a roomful of people telling one that that was

not what they meant at all, were real social experiences for Eliot during those early years in England. His letter of June 17, 1919 to Eleanor Hinkley (*Letters* 304-5) is an interestingly painful account of the social complications of meaning and report possible in the politely vindictive world of literary London.¹⁵ By the same token, the poem suggests, illustrates, and evades such language modes as love song, confession, argument, explanation, and description. In the process the poem calls into serious question the truth of all assumptions about the formal coherence of speech, speaker, and subject of speech.

As the title indicates, "Prufrock" is exploring love and song, the articulation of language and desire, and the digressions that divert them both from satisfaction. Hugh Kenner's remark, "J. Alfred Prufrock is a name plus a voice," can be a useful formula, for it treats Prufrock as an artifact of language (*The Invisible Poet* 35).¹⁶ If we are to have a chance of understanding Prufrock, we must understand the exact nature of his inability to find words and a syntax adequate to his message. We must note that language is the substance of Prufrock's inner self and thus the necessary means of acting out, maintaining, disclosing and even having more than an inchoate inner self. Our notion of Eliot's poetic techniques can also influence one understanding of Prufrock's character and his monologue. For example, critics often quote approvingly Eliot's statement, made several years after he wrote "Prufrock," that a modern poet must become more and more "allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (*SE* 289). In order to express the complexity of contemporary society, to give form and order, Eliot asserts, poetry must dwell on the connotative meanings of words, on their capacity to relate on more than one level. Thus Eliot attempts to suppress the denotative power of words in order to release language's ability to "digest and express new objects," that is to emphasize the associative power of words. Even though this is not the only way poetry can be written, obliqueness in poetry, as the context of Eliot's statement makes quite clear, is the result of cultural contingency. In Pound's words, "The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace" (*Selected Poems* 61-62). As Kenner demonstrates, the language of

“Prufrock” is often obscure in that its effect is to create an atmosphere rather than a conventionally cohesive narration.¹⁷ In “Prufrock,” a highly innovative poem, the complex, disjointed structure and indirect mode of expression are undercut by a deeper, persistent belief that it is the condition of the world itself that has banished from it both natural feelings and a natural kind of poetic expression. It is impossible to make sense in this world unless one joins hands with it. This is the contingency the poet faces and he adjusts his expression accordingly. The form of the poem is a living, spatial symbol of that reality.

When we feel Prufrock’s sense of a dissonant relation between himself and his verbal renditions of himself, we must also feel with him that language is an inevitable covering up of reality, not a disclosing from which “delight necessarily follows.” Speech is a set of falsifications like clothing, grooming, perfume, fantasizing, and elegant phrasemaking, not a sequence of enactments of one’s true being emerging at the center of an on-going drama which is the essential self. The streets, we learn, are retreats which “mutter”; they speak, after a fashion, but say nothing we can understand. Remembering becomes dismembering, as all his memories and fantasies disintegrate into “the butt-ends” of impossible totalities. The series of contrasts leads him first into self-mocking trivializations of questions--“Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” and then into the poem’s final locations, the beach and “chambers of the sea.” Realizing that he is blocked from both the language of contemplation and the language of social action, he withdraws from the world altogether and moves into the realm of myth. The mermaids, whose song might suggest some possibility of hope and release, sing only “each to each,” and real communication, real confrontation, is more than the subjective self can admit: when “human voices wake us,” we “drown.” It is also plain that he still fears language, for the intrusion of human voices, rather than foam of the sea, will wake and drown him.

As an important intersection of Eliot’s early poetry and philosophy, we can not ignore the dissertation’s chapter on the problem of solipsism, a problem raised by the fact that in

any human experience of the world, the world is always experienced from an individual perspective or, in Bradley's term, "finite centre." An individual's mental life consists in a changing series of such finite centers, and there is no guarantee that his centers will harmonize with others or even with themselves. The privacy of the self also bespeaks the privacy of language. There is thus no guarantee that one's experience or self will be understood by others. Communication of the inner life is always a courageous act of faith across a gulf of privacy and difference. We see here the terrifying problem of personal communication poetically expressed in early works like "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," and "the painful task of unifying. . . jarring and incompatible [perspectives]" (KE 147) clearly points forward to the fragmentation and synthesizing efforts of *The Waste Land*.

Most readers of Eliot are familiar with Bradley only through the note Eliot appended to line 412 of *The Waste Land*: "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison." (CPP 74); "Also F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 306. 'My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. . . . In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul'" (qtd. in CPP 80).

The above excerpt is usually taken as the keynote to Bradley in Eliot. To a certain extent this is accurate, for Prufrock is an excellent example of a person enclosed within a private opaque sphere and thus unable to communicate with anyone but himself. The "overwhelming question" can never be put forward in this cosmos;¹⁸ there is little possibility for communion among the opaque spheres who inhabit it if they persist in remaining inside their own private experience and do not attempt to achieve the felt unity of experience.

Whereas Bradley used “finite centre” to designate the individual as an incommunicable opaque sphere who intends his own world, and cannot concretely relate his object-world to those of others, Eliot employs the term “point of view” which does not totally exclude the necessary possibility of many points of view which can be connected. Eliot seems to suggest that one must go beyond the confinement of the finite sphere to the natural inclusion of many points of view to escape the confinement of a totally subjective cosmos.¹⁹

In order to fully appreciate Eliot’s idea of language in his early poetry and philosophy prior to his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, we need to know more about his concept of the real world as it exists. Eliot repeatedly warns against epistemology’s false assumption that a single, complete, and consistent world of external reality exists. Eliot dismissed that assumption as “not only ungrounded but in some sense certainly false. Reality contains irreducible contradictions and irreconcilable points of view” (*KE* 112). According to Eliot, “Everything, from one point of view, is subjective; and everything, from another point of view, is objective; and there is no *absolute* point of view from which a decision may be pronounced” (*KE* 21-22). Not a single, objective reality to which we can expect to conform but rather a reality that relies upon our perspective within it: the “relative perspective” is the metaphysically unsatisfactory but practically real procedure. Having ruled out Bradley’s Absolute, and at the same time not taking a deconstructive position, Eliot explores the middle ground where placing things into relation and articulating distinctions, similarities, and differences organize the world.

In his dissertation, he insisted “The real world . . . consists in the common meaning and ‘identical reference’ of various finite centres” (140). This identical reference is an assumed or accepted one real world agreed upon by the many various points of view who, in their ideal constructions, strive for a felt organic whole. Eliot is faced with a duality of Bradley’s finite centers and his own emphasis on the extension of one’s own limited experience into a relational whole of experience which unifies the various points of view

within the individual and among all individuals. If a merely immediate experience were possible it would be for Eliot “annihilation and utter night” (*KE* 31), because in it there is no contact with other finite centers or points of view. But when a finite center comes in contact with objects or other persons, “half objects,” the harmony is broken because of the clash between the different objects and the divergent points of view. Each can go on constructing its own ideal world, but what then of the goal of harmony? How can we escape the imprisonment of finite centers? “But beyond the objective worlds of a number of finite centres, each having its own objects, there is no objective world. . . . How do we yoke our divers worlds to draw together?” (*KE* 141). Eliot answers his rhetoric by carefully adapting Bradley’s concept of the unity of the immediate experience: “The external world is a construction by the selection and combination of various presentations to various viewpoints: and that the selection which makes reality is in turn made possible by the belief in reality” (*KE* 142). The lines of a poem, as with the characters of a novel, can be considered as “*meanings*, as a criticism of reality from the author’s point of view” (*KE* 123).

In fact, “Prufrock” offers a reading of the dissertation and the dissertation a reading of the poem. In *The Matrix of Modernism*, Sanford Schwartz suggests that the self-conscious personae of Eliot’s early poems “constantly agonize over their encounters with other persons.” He explains the significance of the personae’s confrontations with others in terms derived from Eliot’s dissertation: “They are suspended between their external apprehension of others as active centers of consciousness. These personae also experience a subject / object split within themselves. They are at once detached observers and conventional agents, spectators of their own participation in the social world” (184). “Prufrock,” Schwartz suggests, follows this pattern very closely. He warns, however, that “We should avoid the misconception that Eliot first formulated the ‘half-object’ [the Prufrockian object observed from both an internal and an external point of view] and then dramatized it in his poetry.” “Long before he wrote his dissertation,” Schwartz notes,

“Eliot had composed ‘Prufrock,’ ‘Portrait of a Lady,’ and several other poems that exhibit the [dissertation’s] internal-external point of view of the half-object” (187f).

But as Schwartz himself implies, that “Prufrock” (written Feb. 1910-July/Aug. 1911, published June 1915) preceded *Knowledge and Experience* (written 1913-16) does not mean that there is no connection between the poem and the dissertation. “Prufrock” is a poem that Eliot comes to see in a Bradleyan light. In fact Eliot’s recourse in his dissertation to certain Prufrockian metaphors suggests that he himself was aware of the connection. If in the usual chronology of cause and effect it would seem that Bradley did not influence the composition of “Prufrock,” the poem certainly influenced Eliot’s articulation of his philosophical point of view in *Knowledge and Experience*. Bradley’s philosophic exploration of the relation between self and other selves articulated dialectically what Prufrock had articulated dramatically--that is, that self depends upon other selves, subject upon object, and “I” upon you.

As we have seen, Eliot argued that nothing is describable except within the terms of an engagement of the perceiving consciousness with what is allegedly described. Eliot cannot finally subscribe to a view of art which is naively representational, which argues that there is a visual description available for every object in the external world and therefore a linguistic description, since classical thought has assured us that poetry is a speaking picture.

Language itself is enmeshed in subjectivity and words take on a strangely disembodied character,²⁰ informing in “Prufrock,” “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent,” and there, “hands / That lift and drop a question on your plate” (*CPP* 13, 14). Little wonder that Prufrock finds it impossible to say just what he means. He embodies Eliot’s assertion that there is a “circle described about each point of view” (*KE* 14). As we have noticed, the poem highlights lack of communication between individuals, and that Prufrock’s main guilt is his refusal or inability to sing his “love song.” However, throughout the poem it is Prufrock who worries most about the impossibility of such

communication. Prufrock's most urgent wish is to convey his feelings. Unlike the pathetic and gregarious lady of "Portrait of a Lady," he is acutely conscious of the insensitivity and callousness of his society and can see the futility of expressing his true feelings. All human potential and the world itself are locked within the confines of the word, and language reveals the agonizingly private nature of each experience and, hence, each individual. When seen from the perspective I have offered, Prufrock is something more than the pathetic and ridiculous figure usually discussed. He has good reason to fear the language patterns available in the world. Those patterns are threats to his life and to ours. Thus he creates a new kind of reality.

Eliot's preoccupation with the problem of language, which is central to his extended critique of Bradley, is double-edged in the sense that he confesses the difficulty of saying what one really means, and asserts the necessity of finding a view of reality which would permit saying anything at all. Language is not just a means of communication but the principal means of finding or constituting the shared ground of our humanity. Language is irretrievably social and the dialect of the tribe, purified of tribal encrustations of privilege, is a primary statement of the human family. If the external world can be known only in so far as it is internalized, then what we know is not necessarily the object but rather our perception of the object. We can correlate our perception to that of others; but the correlation can only be made via language statements which in their turn have to be laid open to the indeterminacies of internalization. The possibilities for a breakdown are considerable. "That was not what I meant at all" might well be the normative rejoinder if intense vigilance is not insistently applied to the effort at articulation. Then here is an important question: what medium permits a disparate set of finite centers cooperatively to intend an identical world at once subjectively credible and objectively sufficient? Eliot awards the organizing, reality-conferring power to language. Not coincidentally, in so doing he marks off a privileged territory for poets, the masters and guardians of language. To authorize an epistemologically real world, we may through language cooperate with the

points of view “of other civilized adults with whom we come in contact, but quite possibly extending to all finite centres with which we can establish an identical reference” (*KE* 91, See also 36-37, 44).

If the unity, much like Bradleyan immediate experience, fails, language compensates the loss. Unity of reference creates unity of intention, or at least a unity of an intended world; words with shared meaning hold us, and our world, together. Here appears a link between Eliot the poet and Eliot the social critic, tirelessly comparing the state of the language to that of society, at times seeming even to advocate social reorganization as a means of producing better literature. Word and world march, in this conception, more or less in step. Eliot’s use of the word to resolve metaphysical confusion invites us to notice how it parallels his aesthetic--uniting fragments into a poem; his psychology--uniting the disparities of the self; and his sociology--trying to discover a principle of unity in society.

“Yet the Word exists.” It is this fact which gives meaning to both “Gerontion” and *The Waste Land*. In the “unstilled world” of “Gerontion” and *The Waste Land* communication has so degenerated that the word is no longer an adequate vehicle for the expression of the Word. The two poems point to the fact that language, whether that spoken by Gerontion or that which speaks as myth and tradition in *The Waste Land*, is no longer effective as a means of revealing truth to man.

The poem “Gerontion” might very well be spoken by a Prufrockian character at the end of his life. As many critics have observed, Gerontion’s mood and problem, such as “the question of failure” and his lack of action or commitment, resemble Prufrock’s. Like Prufrock’s, Gerontion’s life has been “no great matter” (*CPP* 15). And also like Prufrock’s, Gerontion’s world is one of details in relation amounting not as an answer to some “overwhelming question,” but rather to the seemingly ceaseless production of yet more “spawned” details such as blistering, goat, and gutter. Moreover, the “zone of

consciousness” in “Gerontion” like in “Prufrock” leads only to the futility of thinking, and to the inadequacy of interpretation and of sign.

As Lyndall Gordon and A. D. Moody pointed out, however, the major innovation of “Gerontion” is “the historical perspective,” which starts from the gradual expanding of the ego, incorporating larger entities, and leads to a climax in *The Waste Land* (*Eliot's Early Years* 102, *Thomas Stearns Eliot* 66-67). Still maintaining a firm grasp on particulars, Gerontion is portrayed as an expression of the historical sense, with a point of view within time. Many of the details, Grover Smith argues, function in an allusive capacity, referring not only to the present circumstances of the speaker of the poem, but also to past events (57). Gerontion incorporates echoes of past tradition to such an extent that the persona can himself be considered tradition in a state of decay. When he says thus “My house is a decayed house” (*CPP* 37), he is analyzing not only himself as “a little old man,” in an exhausted reverie, incapable of engaging with the external world, but also the Western culture with its chaos and sins. At the same time, he offers a metaphor not only for the shape of his consciousness but also for the structure of the poem which delivers that consciousness to us. The speaker’s mind is a place in which words, ideas, images, observations rattle about, the “Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (*CPP* 39). In this sense, unlike Prufrock, Gerontion seems to get out of “the solipsistic and self-defeating context.” But his historical perspective only reminds him of the heroic deeds of the past. It does not function like Eliot’s idea of tradition: its essential aspect is the presentness of the past in a dynamic way. Gerontion can not become a partaker of tradition, participant in the heroic exploits of his ancestors; he remains in passivity and isolation. It is fitting that in “Gerontion” which is concerned with the possibilities of language, Eliot used, as a point of departure, the loss of perception and identity which is concomitant with the loss of tradition, a theme present throughout most of *Poems, 1920*.

Significantly, Eliot placed Gerontion outside community, among other drifters and petty individualists, “in a rented house” in a dingy city after the Great War (Gordon 102). In a space which is not his own and in a posture which is decayed and disinherited, Gerontion is incapable of offering any representation of the social world. Importantly, “Gerontion,” with slight alterations, could cover the symbolist retreat to language, the style enamored of obscure intensities of speech. In fact, as Bernard Bergonzi and other critics remarked, “Gerontion” is Eliot’s most obscure poem, where “the language itself forms a barrier or smoke screen between the reader and the essential experience of the poem” (55). “Gerontion,” as Kenner also demonstrates clearly, exploits the ambiguity of “dissolving key-words” (*The Invisible Poet* 110-11) in doing so it aligns itself with the symbolist doctrine as it is exemplified in a passage of Mallarmé’s translated by Arthur Symons: “Words, therefore, must be employed with an extreme care, in their choice and adjustment, in setting them to reflect and chime upon one another” (*The Symbolist Movement in Literature* 70). It is because of these reflections and chimes that Eliot is able to set up resonances through the juxtaposition of words and to provide a “network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires” (SE155). “Gerontion” seems to aim at a maximum exploitation of the connotative resources of the language, allowing implications and suggestions to proliferate almost without limit. According to Bergonzi, however, taken as a whole it fails because of “the slipperiness of its language”: the desire to preserve a maximum openness to verbal suggestiveness makes “Gerontion” an echo chamber where there is much interesting noise but nothing can be clearly distinguished (55-56). More negatively, some critics view “Gerontion” as a failed attempt to extend the method used in “Prufrock”; for while “Prufrock” exhibits loose psychological coherence, “Gerontion” is “radically incoherent.” The seven stanzas are heterogeneous in length and content, and contiguous semantic integers are not continuous logic.

The ambiguity of its language and structure enacts, I suppose, its thematic concern. This poem, while maintaining symbolist concerns and techniques, is primarily concerned

with the fact that language in its different forms is constantly wearing out: “what is kept must be adulterated” (*CPP* 38). Thus what matters here is something more than just an obsessive preoccupation with ambiguous, or imperfectly referential, meanings. It may be true what it is “about” must not be other than dimly apprehended; this being the condition of its existing at all.

Of what value then is sign and language as the activity and expression of thought to experience? The philosophical assertion, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” gains a concreteness in Gerontion’s confession. His experience, however, is still negatively defined through language.

I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought. (*CPP* 37)

The boy is presumably reading a book about the past of the Western civilization, and the above lines are more than an old man confronting his memories. Those are all negatives, a listing of what he is not. Like Prufrock’s--“I am no prophet,” “I am not Prince Hamlet” (*CPP* 15, 16)--Gerontion’s “identity” rests on crucial absences. It is no wonder that Gerontion refers to himself in terms of the vacuous, “A dull head among windy spaces” (*CPP* 37).

The insistent imperatives of the poem:

Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors . . .
Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted . . .
Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. . .
Think at last
We have not reached conclusion (*CPP* 38),

invites the reader to share the search for meaning and ensnare him in the radical skepticism it offers towards language and sign, as debased. Prufrock’s “argument of insidious intent” here leads through “the cunning passages” and the “contrived corridors” of history to the

questioning of signs. Certainly Gerontion's description of history as a series of deceptions violates the conventional view of history as a linearity pointed toward truth. Furthermore, the lines quoted above seem to represent the ongoing desire for fulfillment and its ironic function to drive the endless production of differences.²¹ Then we can raise a question: if the poem holds such a negative view of sign why does it exist at all. Gerontion answers "Think at last / I have not made this show purposelessly" (*CPP* 38). Denying the validity of sign and language, denying the possibility of truth, he would still, astonishingly, claim, "I would meet you upon this honestly" (*CPP* 38).

It is often remarked that Eliot's interest in language extends to an investigation of rhetoric in much of his later work and particularly in *Four Quartets*. However, this is evidenced as early as "Gerontion" where the traditional links between language and the Logos, and between the precision of language and the spiritual health of society are already in play. The health of society is dependent on the precision of its language. The vague and disturbing phrases of Gerontion would seem to serve as an objective correlative for the religious and social sickness which characterizes him. "Technique is discovery."

Closely linked to *The Waste Land*, "Gerontion" is itself an illustration of the relation of words to the Word and of the fact that the degeneration of the one is involved with the loss of the other. In both poems, language has become ambiguous, dividing, instead of uniting man. The multiplicity of tongues in *The Waste Land*, ironically present even in the "Notes," testifies to the fact that with the Tower of Babel, language, designed to communicate, now raises barriers. The words in "Gerontion" are also "rhetorically charged" but "vacant." Like the "vacant shuttles," they weave only the wind and their suggestive power whirls constantly away from the objects they would represent. As Ronald Bush remarkably points out, there is a major component to the winds in "Gerontion," and that is the movement of "empty talk"--a speech that has become unmoored from its emotional springs and has degenerated into rhetoric. Gerontion's talk does not correspond to his inner reality, nor does it let him grasp the reality outside him. It

serves only to postpone silence, and keeps him from acknowledging the truth of his condition. His speech, if we wish to dignify his mutterings with that word, is a series of shifting postures shoring up a self that he himself constantly questions (34).

For a further discussion on the relationship between language and society in the study of "Gerontion," Eliot's essay on Lancelot Andrewes (1926) is important. Not only does he quote passages which appear in the poem, but his remarks on the degeneration of language are directly pertinent to an understanding of the poem. The phrase "the Word within a word, unable to speak a word" is, interestingly enough, cited by Eliot in his essay as an example of that style, deliberate and memorable, whose phrases "do not desert us" (*SE* 349-50) and in which "emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotions wholly contained in and explained by its object" (*SE* 351). The words of Gerontion give only the illusion of an object behind his rhetoric. The Word cannot resound in his "ruined house" his experience brings him "knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; / Knowledge of speech, but not of silence; / Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word" ("Choruses from 'The Rock'" I, *CPP* 147). Being caught in sensory experience only, words do not allow him, as do those of Andrewes, to penetrate more and more deeply into the realm of the spiritual until, as Eliot writes, quoting Plotinus, "he is finally 'alone with the Alone'" (*SE* 351).

The sickness of Gerontion is also reflected in the meaninglessness of history: she "Gives too late / What's not believed in, or if still believed, / In memory only, reconsidered passion" (*CPP* 38). Life offers only "fragmentary rubbish"; thought points to its transcendence in death; for Gerontion, those decayed senses do not allow contact with the Word, death offers no hope of eternal life. Memory is incapable of retrieving it since history's "many cunning passages" have no meaning without the Incarnation.

In "Gerontion" then, the degeneration of language goes hand in hand with the sickness of society and the meaninglessness of history. Ritual too, which embodies the Word, has

been perverted. “Christ the tiger” comes “In depraved May” and the host is only “To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk / Among whispers” (*CPP* 37). However redemptive such rites may once have been, they are now only memories ironically juxtaposed to Mr. Silvero, Madame de Tornquist, Hakagawa, and Fräulein von Kulp. Thus the proliferation of meaning in the one leads to the proliferation of religious rites—all suggest the loss of doctrine which was of such importance to Bishop Andrewes. These personae not only represent a loss of unified culture, since they are all cut off from their traditional roots, but a loss of contact with the Logos as well. The turmoil of language in the central sections of the poem gives place therefore to the same exhausted rhythms with which the poem opened: Gerontion, a prey to the winds which blow through the poem, simply abandons his frantic attempts to make sense out of life and out of his memories.

After having described the decayed state of the old man and the mind of Europe, the reason for the depraved nature of individual and society is given.

Signs are taken for wonders, ‘We would see a sign!’
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. (*CPP* 37)

These lines imply that modern civilization is “a decayed house” at least partly because of the deterioration of Christian faith. But furthermore, the lines seem to comment upon a failure of linguistic meaning in Gerontion’s world. They suggest that the relationship between signifier and signified is obscured. Signs may be taken for wonders because words, disconnected from their meanings, may still assume a kind of miraculous life of their own. Within language, the theoretical transcendental signifier lies dormant, “swaddled with darkness,” unable to speak a self-presence that might root the language of time in a primary structure. Gerontion, who conflates and distorts several excerpts from Andrewes, perverts the proper paradox, “Word without a word,” into a mere puzzle, “word within a word.” Interestingly enough, words are commonly found within words: “silvér” is within “Silvero.” That much is idle play, as in a speculation over the peculiar divergence of

concrete “within” and abstract “without” so that they are no longer opposites in quite the same sense as “in” and “out” are opposites. But the play disappears with Gerontion’s “unable to speak a word.” The speechless child’s being *infans* resembles his own inarticulate state, and both figures--the little old man and the little newborn baby--are “swaddled with darkness.” The impoverishment syncopates “juvenescence” to “juvescence,” a word missing a syllable, an eccentric corruption of youth forced to chime with the “Jew” before and the “Judas” to follow. So Gerontion, who has lost his name, loses speech. And those who demand “signs” of proof find only “a wilderness of mirrors” (*CPP* 38), and “weave the wind.”

In the line “I have lost my passion” is the crux of Gerontion’s tragedy. “Inability to *feel*” is his chief difficulty. The plight of Gerontion is not simply that he has lost his faith, but that he has lost the ability to feel any moral or spiritual emotion; because, as Eliot argued, “A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless” (*OPP* 25). With the drying up of the fountains of feeling, Gerontion is unable to respond emotionally to the needs of man or to the call of the divine. For him, there is no possibility of essential connection, no means for a “closer contact.” Like Prufrock he is incapable of communication.

These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn.
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner. (*CPP* 38-39)

In speaking for himself, Gerontion speaks for man who is inevitably imprisoned within the relational maze of “a thousand small deliberations.” As Gerontion makes clear by poem’s end, his life ends in a fracturing rather than a closure upon the transcendental signifier, the Word. In the “thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season,” we have all history from the Fall to the present. The entire world from Thermopylae to Belle Isle and the Horn and even the sphere of the Bear is enclosed in the old man’s “dull head among windy spaces.” The most he can do, in his seeming ramblings, is to reveal the meaninglessness of revelation when “signs are taken for wonders.” The quest for salvation, reconciliation yields yet more fracturing. The poem degenerates to death and silence. Connections are eliminated, verb forms are fractured and are, finally, dropped. There remain only fragmented images of a Cartesian reduction: “Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (CPP 39).

The image of the ending does not in itself constitute a structural key. This image becomes a key only when it is in the mind of a reader who is re-reading the poem; the image comes to exist only as part of a more inclusive whole. Thus the reader who has the final image--thoughts in a brain as tenants in a house--will perceive the verbal echo: houses within houses within houses, that is to say, the figments of Gerontion’s reverie *within* his dull brain *within* himself, his withered body *within* his brittle rented-house *within* a ruined and dying civilization.

This draughty dwelling also represents the words which house the speaker, and the text which drives the reader down the same blind discursive corridors. Like the speaker, the reader raids this house for meaning, for both “would see a sign,” and to reinvest Gerontion’s words with history is to take signs for wonders.²² Movements from one part of the poem to another, from fragment to context, requires that the reader be constantly shifting his vantage point--backwards, forwards, sideways--in dimensions sometimes temporal or spatial, sometimes logical, sometimes both. Not only is the reader required to assume a different vantage point in moving from one part of “Gerontion” to another, he

must continually make perspectival adjustments even within a single stanza; often he must dance upon a word if he is to collaborate with Eliot in the poem's multi-contextual technique.

As in the case of "Prufrock," Eliot's use of language in "Gerontion" does compel our assent that the word in time may float free of empirical linkage, that there exists no necessary one to one correspondence between word and exteriority, but rather that the object / reference, any bundle of sensations, may be focused by language as language's own phantasmagoric creation. As Kenner observes, "the uniquely specifying rhythms, the richly explicit verbs, the syntactic muscularity of a sequence of declarative sentences, all these specificities of gesture expend themselves in weaving the wind, their intimate narrative energy handling only ambiguities, phantoms, footless metaphors. We are not in a world where statements handle facts" (*The Invisible Poet* 109). Where meaning is obscured, words may assume a richness of potential meaning through their very indefiniteness; indeed, the play of signifier may present itself as a wonder--and perhaps as a substitute for meaning. On the one hand, indeterminacy of meaning communicates to the reader a failure of meaning in Gerontion's life. But on the other hand, such indeterminacy or ambiguity can obviously "multiply variety"; it is a "pungent sauce" to the mind's appetite for stimulation. In terms of the idea of language, while Gerontion fails, "Gerontion" succeeds.

Prufrock's dilemma results from the disparity between possibility and fact, but as we have already noted, that dilemma is figured forth in terms of the persona's failure to communicate. *The Waste Land* also treats man in his dilemma between possibility and fact but the context of the poem is expanded to include the whole of a people, with London standing for a race at a particular juncture in time and place. "Gerontion" also works as a possible prelude to *The Waste Land*. This persona of 1919, the successor of Prufrock, is nearly related to Tiresias, his successor (Moody 53). Gerontion and Tiresias share many

common traits. Both are old and blind, and both show the inadequacy of human culture in history to effect authentic significance. Both are trapped in a naturalistic perspective. The poems also share many common traits in the establishment of ambiguity as the limits of language. There are the self-denial of voice, the fragmentation of text, unstable grammatical structures, and a recourse to polyphonic allusion which cannot be contained in a single coherent intellectual system.

The Waste Land had its enormous influence also partly because it expressed so perfectly the disquiet and bitterness of a whole generation, and more specifically the sense of sterility and hysteria in sexual relationships which is a recurring theme in novels as well as poems of the 1920s; and partly because of the range of technical invention in it; the use of abrupt cinematic cutting from one scene to another, the shifts of tone, the sharp and glaring contrasts, the juxtapositions of sordid and colloquial phrases from modern urban life with allusions to, or parodies of, the splendor and formality embodied in the poetry of the past. A number of shifts and juxtapositions occur throughout the entire poem: they constitute the texture of the poem. Ornate vocabulary gives way to colloquial dialogue, lyrical moments are interrupted by sordid intrusions, the comic and the macabre coexist with the solemn words of religious instruction, one language is supplanted by another.

What is the significance of the modern "Waste Land"? The answer may be read in what appears as the rich disorganization of the poem. The seeming disjointedness is intimately related to the erudition that has annoyed so many readers and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions. These characteristics reflect the present state of civilization. Traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary, and the referential quality of language is not stable; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a break-down of forms and the irrevocable loss of the sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture.

Since its first appearance in the *Criterion* in October 1922 and its publication the following month in the *Dial* and in December in a volume with "Notes," *The Waste Land*

has been the subject of virtually every critical approach twentieth-century literary studies have devised. No other twentieth-century poem has generated such diverse responses or provided a better index to the fluctuations of literary criticism up to our time. From the initial uproar--“the confusion, ambivalence, and annoyance”²³--and the New Critical analysis, which is as much fostered by the poem in question as it was promulgated in theory by its poet, through the recent interpretations, which apply the philosophical and critical theories engendered by Heidegger and Derrida, *The Waste Land* continues to refuse steadfastly to yield up a generally accepted and acceptable meaning. Then John Xiros Cooper’s point is right: “*The Waste Land* is a poem we have learned to handle, but not a poem we have tamed. It has, of course, always been difficult” (1). The poem remained a challenge, a mystery, a debate, and a continuing source of fascination.

Frank Kermode argued, in his article “A Babylonish Dialect” (1967), *The Waste Land* is an act of “decreation.” Against attempts to find order and coherence in the poem, Kermode stated that “Eliot ridiculed the critics who found in *The Waste Land* an image of the age’s despair, but he might equally have rejected the more recent Christian interpretations. The poem resists an imposed order” (239). Marianne Thormählen takes Kermode’s argument a step further: “Not only does *The Waste Land* resist an imposed order--it resists a limitation to any one interpretation” (206). She argues that it is in the nature of *The Waste Land* to need its reader and each act of reading to complete itself.

The Waste Land has many different meanings in the sense that it is an invitation to interpretation. By now we can see that the New Criticism’s most original contribution was its attention to structure rather than content, and that that idea of structure transcended old formalist prejudices. Thus it involved the reader closely with verbal play²⁴ in ways that previously only the poet had been involved. Yet we, as postmodern readers, remain skeptical about the New Criticism’s view that eventually the poem is “neatly self-contained” in terms of theme, form and content. Significantly, the New Criticism’s structure-oriented view of poetic language seems to be close to the more recent view of language, which is

one side of Gerald Bruns's dichotomy: "hermetic," for the hermetic idea of language also considers a poem as "a self-contained linguistic object" rather than verbal signification. In the same vein, Margaret Dickie Uroff says, "In *The Waste Land*, the self-referential poet, the self-pointing narrators, the tautological language, all turn attention not to a meaning beyond but inward toward concentric circles of words where the activity and confusion and difficulty of experience and language are united. There, words do not stand for something else; they are reality. . . . The poem derives its authority from its holistic structure" (165). When Eliot asks us to consult other texts in order to understand his own, according to Uroff, to question what the poem means forces us to read the poem in a new way and directs our attention to the self-referential quality not only of the dedication and footnotes but also of other statements and devices in *The Waste Land*. They point to the poem's own activity and reveal at the center of this most allusive poem a profound concern with, even suspicion of, itself as a vehicle of allusion and communication (148).

Furthermore, in Bruns's perceptive analysis, we can link Eliot's idea of language with Mallarmé's sense of "the hermetic nature of language," its separateness from ordinary speech, and his concept of creative process. In particular, the Mallarméan theory of poetry we have seen in the first section of Chapter 1, in which he allows the structure of words independent existence after purging the artist's interior feelings, annihilating himself "as an experiencing subject," reminds us of Eliot's argument of impersonality in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Words, in such a view, will become "poetic substance" with physical properties rather than signs as function. In fact, over the course of his career Eliot wrote a number of essays about the French Symbolist poets. For instance, in "A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry" (1924), Eliot wrote that Valéry achieved "an individual and *new* organisation of many poetic elements" (11). Language for Valéry already contains "elements" which are intrinsically "poetic"; words are used not to express emotions and feeling, but for the emotions and feelings they already possess. This is language at as advanced stage of development, highly conscious of itself. Many years

later, however, in his retrospective lecture on the Symbolist tradition, “From Poe to Valéry” (1948), Eliot said: “This process of increasing self-consciousness—or, as we may say, of increasing consciousness of language—has as its theoretical goal what we may call *la poésie pure*. I believe it to be a goal that can never be reached, because I think that poetry is only poetry so long as it preserves some ‘impurity’ in this sense : that is to say, so long as the subject matter is valued for its own sake” (TCC 39). For Eliot, “*la poésie pure*” can never be achieved because a poem can never entirely dispense with subject matter without ceasing to be poetry. In other words, a discourse that aims to purify words from emotional and historical associations could be said to deprive language of human content, and this attempt, Eliot believed, “would be suicide.” Moreover, he speculated about a future that had already begun. The Symbolist aesthetic, he said, had “gone as far as it can go” (TCC 41), and he expressed concern that what succeeded it, in attempting to go beyond it, might take the arts from “a highly civilized attitude to a barbarous one” (TCC 41). A rebellion against modernist sophistication appeared to him more than possible. It is true that *The Waste Land* is a highly self-conscious text; “a major subject” of the poem “is the contingency of language,” as Brooker and Bentley claim. But if Symbolist poetry is based on a solipsistic aesthetic: “what it says is always only itself,” in Davie’s words (204), *The Waste Land*’s solipsism is not merely a matter of aesthetics, and this is a poem concerned with more than hermetic language, “the contingency of language.”

For a structural analysis of *The Waste Land*, Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts can also be invited. As we have seen in the third section of Chapter 1, Barthes made some distinctions, particularly in *The Pleasure of the Text*, between different approaches to “writing” and between different levels of language performance. He located these distinctions along a dual readerly / writerly or pleasure / bliss axis. Barthes associates the first level with the simple repeatable “pleasure of the text,” with its unfolding of a predictable and established world-view or order. Its language is transitive, its syntax predicative, its voice totalizing, transmitting at once the inheritance and the assurance of an

institutionalized culture. On the other hand, Barthes locates the “writerly” at the site of the collision or clash between the “antipathetic codes” of each level. Anticipating later formulations, *Writing Degree Zero* characterized this polysemous modernist poetic writing as “full of gaps and full of lights, filled with absences and overnourishing signs, without foresight or stability of intention” (48). Thus it undermines conventional linguistic relationships and purposes; it dislocates both spatio-temporal and causal alignments, rendering the referent ambiguous; it splits the autonomous subject of the first level into schismatic personae, the reader like the subjects themselves becoming unstable; it opens the text to its own predecessors, to that play of intertextuality which combats fixed context or meaning.

In Barthesian terms *The Waste Land* is an exemplary modernist text, inviting improvised deceptions on the part of the reader, compelling him to reproduce his own “processes of deconstruction by a plurality of free interpretative choices” (Eco 40). More specifically it enacts the subversion of traditional poetic discourse systematically. Thus, Gerald Doherty, in his analysis of *The Waste Land*, adopted a Barthesian critical methodology. Doherty argues that each part of *The Waste Land* opens with a stylistically traditional poetic discourse in which “a syntactic cohesiveness, a sustained, uninterrupted movement towards closure reduce dislocations of meaning to a minimum” (247). According to him, what follows are “paratactic formations, a text full of gaps” which “open the text to its unconscious component, and dissociate the speaking subjects from the realities to which they refer” (247). Referents become unclear or ambiguous; representations are disrupted by discontinuous formations. Finally and at “extreme” points in the text, the relationship between signifier and signified is fractured; “the sign’s form is repeated but never is signified.” However, I suggest that even the opening of “The Burial of the Dead,” which Doherty thinks seems to be “reasonably homogeneous, coherent and thus, ‘readable’ text” (247), makes us engagingly disorientated. Christopher Ricks has described well, in *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, how the “force” of the opening words depends

upon the combination of “unmistakable directness” (“Manifestly the first five words are a disagreement with. . . something which it is believed that you sentimentally believe”) and the “lurking possibilities of mistaking its direction,” depending on whether you stress “April,” “is,” or “cruellest”: “since the words are the very opening, we lack that sufficiency of established context which will often secure us” (175-76). The opening paragraph enacts in microcosm the effect of the whole poem: the familiar-sounding displaced and made strange.

I shall briefly allude to the final Stetson segment of “The Burial of the Dead” which is exemplary in its fracture of semantic coherence. The stability-effect is achieved by a referential punctiliousness which records the precise location (London Bridge, King William Street), the particular church (Saint Mary Woolnoth), the exact time of the discourse (nine o’clock), by repetitions and parallelisms, and by syntagmatic anticipations of closure. With the appearance of Stetson this consistently indicative discourse is transformed into a declarative, imperative and theatrically interrogative one:

‘Stetson!
 ‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
 ‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
 ‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
 ‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
 ‘O keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,
 ‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!
 ‘You! hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable,--mon frère!’ (CPP 62-63)

In this confrontation the stability-effect is dissolved as the text oscillates wildly between its literal and figural levels, between precise and obscure fields of reference. Meanings are obfuscated with the shift from at least seemingly authoritative, reliable observer to hysterical participator and interrogator of Stetson. The final line “You! hypocrite lecture!--mon semblable,--mon frère!” at once implicates the reader in the bizarre conjunctions just staged, at the same time staging its own act of conjunction as it breaks its contextual boundaries to unite with its intertextual referent. He implicates reader and poet in a conspiracy of self-conscious literariness that both confines and liberates.

The opening scene of “The Fire Sermon” is established through referential effects which at once posit a specific scenario and the presence of an ironic speaker who observes and substantiates it. It is at this point of maximum distance both from the represented speaker of the opening lines and from the representations through which he was constituted that the “babel” of pure sounds erupts:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu (*CPP* 67-68).

On the surface, these words (Twit/ Jug) retain at most a residual onomatopoeic and mimetic component. They seem to function primarily as empty signifiers beyond the specific determinations of context or meaning. In fact, however, even the purest sounding of utterance is sullied by allusive depth--Tereus, Philomela, Procne.

The initial shift is from the anthropomorphized landscape to a dehumanized one, empty of culture and history (ll. 331-45). Space is temporalized, the landscape is a correlate of the sequential perceptions of the group who traverse it. Signifieds slide under signifiers, at once mobilizing and obscuring the scene represented:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think (*CPP* 72).

Concomitantly the speaking “I” of the opening section dissolves into the “one” of collective narration, to be finally absorbed into the pure performance of language itself, into word-sounds which momentarily generate images and then dissolve back into word-sounds again:

If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water (*CPP* 72-73).

This evocation of absence as presence is theatricalized in the spectacular staging of “appearance-as-disappearance” which follows, in the representation of the third hooded figure visible to the speaker as hallucinatory form in the distance but absent from view when his actual presence is registered. This presence / absence dialectic climaxes with a “fission” effect in which the text denominates its own sites at precisely that moment when their figurative “ruin” is accomplished:

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (*CPP* 73).

Another possible way of interpreting *The Waste Land* is applying Gadamerian hermeneutics that we have seen in the section four of Chapter 1. Specifically, the notion of the interaction between past and present, and the perception of the past as having simultaneous existence with the present moment of experience are outlined in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and poetically enacted in *The Waste Land*. In his *Egoist* article, “Reflections on Contemporary Poetry” (1919), Eliot found fault with modern poetry for its deficiency in tradition, “No dead voices speak through the living voice; no reincarnation, no re-creation” (39). On the other hand, long famous for its use of allusion to past writers and its juxtapositions of different time sequences, *The Waste Land* is an example of how “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (*SE* 15). The logic for this is found again in *Knowledge and Experience* wherein Eliot argues that we never remember a past object as it was, but rather the experience or meaning we drew from our contact with that past object.

The past as lived and the present as remembered are in fact one and the same in intention. . . . You either live the past, and then it is present, or you remember it, and then it is not the same past as you once lived: the difference is not between two objects, but between two points of view. . . .

The idea, if the foregoing remarks have any cogency, is not a glass through which we descry a past reality, but the idea of a past reality is itself the object, an object which is not past in the sense of a past object of experience, and which is not present in the sense of a present object. . . . [T]he object of memory is the memory itself. . . . [T]he present is an ideal construction, and an ideal construction in which the ideal constructions of the past and future are integrated. (KE 51 & 52 & 54)

Eliot, like Gadamer, does not mourn the fact that all our thinking is socio-historically conditioned and that it thus proceeds from basic cognitive prejudices. He instead recognizes how such limitations provide the necessary directedness to the world and social context in which we must cope. For Eliot and Gadamer, the factoring out of the fruitful from prejudices is the function of tradition and the tradition-informed but open-minded practical intelligence which must appropriate and interpret tradition in changing circumstances. *The Waste Land* is a poem where all distinctions--between past and present, romantic and classic, ancient and modern, sense and nonsense--seem to blur in a confusing symbolic landscape. Its confusions are artificial and intentional, because they are the work of the poet, who has carefully contrived a quasi-literary landscape, one now cluttered, now barren, now ancient, now modern, that nevertheless, in its very lack of any apparently reasonable constraints, strives to connect chaos with order.

The activity of tradition, as in the previous section, we have seen in terms of Eliot-Gadamer "affinity," is what makes Eliot's view most compelling, tradition not as an inert mass but as an ongoing process, something that "cannot be inherited" but that must be obtained through "great labour." In "The Function of Criticism," Eliot put an emphasis on the "critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing." "This frightful toil is as much critical as creative" (SE 30). But this critical act is not simply a telling feature of the poem's genesis. It is a striking aspect of its form. *The Waste Land* generates a wealth of cultural allusions, but it places them in no permanent order; the poem works and reworks its sense of the past. The poem is itself an inventive act of literary history; the poem becomes a drama among contexts. Part of the drama of the

poem is the attempt to bring diverse cultural contexts into satisfactory relationship, the effort to obtain a tradition.

Raymond Williams's view, no simple unified language, and his awareness of the clamorous diversity of socially stratified languages can offer a useful perspective on *The Waste Land*, which is filled with a wide variety of voices from the literature of the past and from the cultural traditions. If we accept that Williams was a kind of "Bakhtinian" social linguist, we can also read *The Waste Land* from a Bakhtinian perspective--"the actively literary linguistic consciousness at all times and everywhere . . . comes upon 'languages,' and not 'language'" (295), because in the poem we can witness the clash of languages--the jarring encounter of different social languages.

To support this argument, "A Game of Chess" is the best example. The opening paragraph of Part II is full of the blatant literariness: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, Thomas Middleton's play, *Women beware Women*, and *Paradise Lost*.²⁵ The presence of "parodic stylization," the creation of a socially typical image of a language, is clear from the first line on. With its lofty diction ("burnished," "wrought," "fruited") and equally lofty objects ("marble," "candelabra," "laquearia"), this is the language of epic ceremoniousness. Interestingly enough, however, the paragraph turns into something other, mocking its parodic formula. It rises above its literary occasion with lines that are "fattened" with what sounds like the exaggeratedly "poetical." Claustrophobic syntax and diction conjure up "the room enclosed." The more the visual detail accumulates, the less we can be sure of what we are seeing. Our "senses" become "troubled, confused / And drowned" (*CPP* 64), in keeping with the poetry's confusions of linguistic and grammatical "sense." Words describing the scenic props equally well describe the style, which comes over as "synthetic," "burnished" and highly "wrought," "glittering" with "antique," rare and artificial words such as "fruited," "Cupidon," "unguent," "coffered," "carvèd," "sylvan." Moreover, the glut of words ending in "-ed" is one cause of the confusion:

In vials of ivory and coloured glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
Unguent, powdered, or liquid--troubled, confused
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
That freshened from the window. (CPP 64)

There is little sense of articulate movement. The excess of verbs and adjectival participles does not freshen or stir. In contrast to a surplus of grandeur, a claustrophobic excess of nobility where the language is both genuinely impressive and stiflingly oppressive, some lines later the pub scene comes across as vocal performance.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said--
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. (CPP 65-66)

A language capable of "withering" the grand style of the opening of Part II now assumes the accents of working-class female vulgarity, of the unstoppable energies of lower-class gossip. Importantly, this, one of the most mimetically "realistic" episodes in *The Waste Land*, is also one of the most self-conscious. The episode is symptomatic of a poem that is "in different voices," whose essential quality is its vocalness: the word "said" occurs, in gossipy fashion, fifteen times. "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" wittily becomes the voice to end all voices. The barman's words break into the narrative, their capitalization typographically indicating their sonorous and possibly portentous register. They contribute meanings to the narrative unintended by its narrator, a procedure assisted by the lack of quotation marks around the reported speech.

Furthermore, the impossibility of identifying the speaker or speakers in the discourses, which are socially typical and "contested, contestable and contesting" (Bakhtin 332), becomes another issue of *The Waste Land*. It is often remarked that there is neither a narrative nor a speaker which runs throughout the poem. Instead there is a series of speakers who are seemingly unrelated to one another, and who often interrupt one another.

In spite of Eliot's claim that Tiresias is "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest" (*CPP* 78), and B. C. Southam's argument that the claim "draws our attention to the fluidity of the point of view in *The Waste Land*" (172), Tiresias remains less a seer than a helpless voyeur without a truly empowering prophetic voice.²⁶ Particularly, in "The Fire Sermon," Tiresias's grandly prophetic discourse--"I Tiresias have foresuffered all" (*CPP* 69)--strives to make contemptible the modern love-making of the typist and her "young man carbuncular" (*CPP* 68). Yet the discourse of modernity, with its distinctive tones and objects, is sufficiently present in this passage to reify Tiresias's lofty authority into mere class snobbery, as when he describes the house agent's clerk as "one of the low on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire" (*CPP* 68), or even into the shabby sexual voyeurism of a fetishist--"Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays" (*CPP* 68). Even if Tiresias is expected to "father" the text as the unifying consciousness in so far as he anticipates, generates and concludes its enactments, the seemingly closed and enclosing order is in turn dissolved by a sequence of topological "driftings." Representations of a journey through central London (ll. 257-65) and of two journeys down river (ll. 266-91) effectively open the text to that extreme fragmentation of subjects, sites and citations with which the section concludes:

To Carthage then I came
 Burning burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest
 burning (*CPP* 70).

In this polyphonic text extravagant repetition, broken syntax, and dissonant speech registers block the consistent identification of the speaking subject with the scene represented. There is no direct, unmediated authorial discourse, no "voice of the poet."

Michael Foucault repeats the question--"What matter who's speaking?"--from Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* in order to define one of the fundamental principles of

contemporary writing. Such writing, Foucault says, is “primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (*Language* 116). Contemporary or “postmodern” writing, in other words, tends to efface or conceal its origin in a writing or speaking subject, and also to deconstruct the notion of the subject as transcendental value, just as it deconstructs the transcendental values of origin, presence, and an object of signification existing outside the play of difference in language. In this respect, *The Waste Land* seems to fit into a category of postmodern poetry, continually opening into a space where its speaking subject is both destroyed and restructured anew at every turn. To borrow a phrase from Julia Kristeva, the poem enacts the drama of the *sujet en procès*--the subject both “in process” and “on trial” (“The Speaking Subject” 215). The poem is elegiac in tone, yet it repeatedly dismantles the convention of the speaking subject on which the elegy traditionally depends, by calling into question the conventional unity and identity of that subject. *The Waste Land* may thus be read as a mourning for the loss or disappearance of the subject.

The poem reinforces the strategy of discontinuity in the line quoted from Baudelaire, “hypocrite lecteur!--mon semblable,--mon frère!” (*CPP* 63), which accuses the reader of complicity in constructing a subject for the poem. The hypocrisy of poet and reader lies in this shared fiction of a speaking subject whose unity transcends the obviously problematic and decentered nature of the discourse. Here the poet reminds us that we are readers and not participants in the scene he has just created; but he also reminds us that we are one with him. At the same time, by using Baudelaire’s lines, Eliot avoids a personal assertion of intimacy with his reader. And he admits by allusion that he has not been able to achieve such intimacy. The poem from which Eliot borrows is itself engaged in a methodical abnegation of subjective identity. In Baudelaire’s “Au lecteur,” the human soul is nothing but a “banal canvas” on which pitiful destinies are sketched out by sexual violence and destruction. In his radical reduction of the spirit to the body, to brain and lung and worm-eaten flesh, Baudelaire constructs a discourse of abjection that prepares the way for *The*

Waste Land, a poem equally relentless in dismembering its own spirit, voice, and body by language itself, with its systems of representation that depend on the stable recognition of difference. We recognize not only the specific imagery in *The Waste Land* of rape, abortion, scattered bones, broken fingernails, toothless mouths, and severed tongues--“a heap of broken images”--but also the body of the text itself, dismembered, turned inside out.

It is true, then, *The Waste Land* is far more modern than we have yet dared to imagine; far more itself the inherited experience of poetry than the act of poetry writing. Confronting such a poem now in a critical landscape itself colored by current theories, whose foundations in philosophy question the very legitimacy of writing, namely, language itself as anything more than an interference between mind and meaning, we might feel that we are at last ready to confront even *The Waste Land* as a poem of that older and new school. While in the older school, meaning is expected and apparently given, here in this new world is a postmodernist liberation from the tyranny of the Word. However, Eliot's poetry is often its own best commentary for in assembling *The Waste Land*, Eliot was also assembling his thoughts on poetry. What I attempt to establish throughout this section is that *The Waste Land* is always that, for the poem is, like all revolutionary works, “both a text and a metatext, a poem and a commentary on poetry” (Uroff 149). Certainly, it is poetry as well, and it is very likely that *The Waste Land*'s necessary eruditions and intellectual subtleties may forever cloud our ability to experience the poem as an act of art, pure and simple and mimetic. Thus it is this very chameleon quality of the poetry that appears to have an enduring capacity to take on the shape of whatever species of discourse the interpreter sets out to prove it exemplifies.

At this point, Pound's description that *The Waste Land*, though only 433 lines long, was “the longest poem in the English langwidge” (*Letters* 169), is not as hyperbolic as it may seem; the word's very compression, its dense shorthand of allusion which collapses into the text world history and literary history, gives the poem some of epic range. And the

poem is not exactly written in any “language,” but in a “langwidge.” By “langwidge,” Pound means “language” that has been reconstituted afresh, without the stale conventional connotations of its tradition. “Langwidge” starts with “language,” but the modern aesthetic goes beyond the constraints of convention at its inception. The remnants of “language” linger in the background, but the future of modernism is written in each author’s perception of “langwidge.” Eliot is writing, according to Pound, in a new language, appropriate to the new age. It is a language that must systematically explain itself within itself. The new language must communicate to and through a world of alienation, confusion, distortion, acceleration--a world turned upside down.

We must wonder what a real work might be. What could words do? What could the poet make them do? These are questions that the finished text kept open. I would suggest that it is poetry’s capacity to show us how meaning is arrived at, whatever the meaning might be, through sign and symbol, rather than to express a particular meaning excluding any other. What I suggest is that the “meaning” of *The Waste Land* is to comment structurally upon the modern crisis of a search for meaning by intentionally undermining through travesty and parody the literary sensibilities that oriented us toward that search for meaning in the first place. In this view, *The Waste Land* is meaningful as a commentary on the severe limitations upon our ability to arrive at meaning, and it achieves that “meaning” by disassociating itself from the techniques of conventionally meaningful literature. Eliot’s poetry constructed the theme in modern terms and therefore deserved attention as an imaginative engagement with the essential chord of human suffering: that we crave meaning and yet have never found it to remain in any satisfactory form either of experience or art. *The Waste Land*, in other words, relies upon us readers sharing with the poet his sense of a crisis in our understanding not only of each other but also of our words, especially when those words are supposed to have a meaning that transcends cultures, ages, and languages. It was only by composing a poem that structurally recognizes the

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severe limits on, and of, poetic discourse that Eliot was able to rediscover the nature of our need for meaning at any rate.

It is a masterful stroke, the deconstruction of literature for the sake of reconstructing it in the image of the Modern Age, and so the literary fragments form a large part of the heart of this strategy, in how they make us pay more attention to what the poet says. Everything we “know,” the poet of *The Waste Land* reminds us very early on, we know only in bits and pieces. “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images” (CPP 61). Thus Hart Crane is right when he read in Eliot’s poetry the words of an intelligence without heart and, worse, without soul. That intelligence without heart and soul, however, was not Eliot’s but the culture’s, what Western culture had evolved into; Eliot had set out to expose the fact.

Ultimately, however, *The Waste Land* does more, for by encouraging us to be particularly distrustful of language as a conveyor of usable meaning, the poetic act deconstructs itself in the very process of restructuring a psychologically more hospitable reality. *The Waste Land* as a language act, in form and content, exposes the formless nature of the world-as-experience and leads its reader into this perspective where reality is held to be beyond human grasp or expression. Its language acts ambiguously to restrain and to effect transcendence; the poem shows the failure of sign to transcend itself and ends with the hint of the use of language as ritual since truth then becomes a matter of belief rather than of knowledge. The limits of the knowledge of the world is to show both its inability to indicate reality and the human inability to abandon knowledge and sign. The only power of the word is to show its powerlessness. Broken, it fragments reality.

The Waste Land subverts any foundation in the transparency of discourse by foregrounding its own textuality. Fissured with isolated quotations, broken phrases, citations, interjections, truncated dialogue, uncompleted scenes, with disruptions of all kinds, the text releases its writing from any determinate context, surrounds it with space on

the page, and leaves it to attract a large number of suggestions, overtones, connotations, **resonances**. *The Waste Land* admits its own derivation from a structuring of the signifier. **Yet** we must also note the presence of a distinct counter-impulse in the poem, an attempt to **find** some ultimate discourse of authority that would unify or transcend many fragments of **which** the text is composed. It may be defined as modernist, as distinct from **postmodernist**, in that even on this basis *The Waste Land* nevertheless continues to be an **expressive** text, seeking to recuperate its own textuality.

The original title of *The Waste Land*, “He Do The Police in Different Voices,” gives a **clear** indication of the persistent concern with the problematic relation between language **and** experience. If the police can be seen as the upholders of social convention, **maintaining** the structures of established traditions, then the original title suggests that the **poem** examines critically the use of language as a social convention which determines **reality**, and it provides an indication of the battle that Eliot was to fight throughout his **career** to “purify the dialect of the tribe.” The different voices of the poem indicate the **inability** of contemporary social mores to establish a unified and viable reality. Instead **what** they produce is “a heap of broken images”—a waste land.

One function of the epigraph, dedication,²⁷ subtitles, and endnotes is to create a multi-**layered** discourse with the reader. In the poem itself, as Wayne Booth has noted, the titles **and** subtitles convey the poet’s direct appeal to his reader to approach the work in light of **other** works of art or ritual (100-1). Here Eliot operates them as explicators of his own **text**. He also seems to be showing us how it is impossible to know another person’s words firsthand; and yet in literary experiences we firstly derive some species of meaning from the words before we ever consider their source or context. His endnotes do reveal Eliot’s high valuation of art, as well as a certain self-mocking tendency evident also in the poem itself. Eliot’s explanations seem to arise from an uncertainty about what poems could do as well as from a confidence in that they do and he himself has done something unusual and significant. Then Eliot’s method serves both as a stepping stone and a barrier for the

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reader who is being helped toward understanding and shut out from it since it is made to **r**eside in another text.

Mostly, the individual titles of the separate parts address the concern with sign systems **as** conventional. The titles refer to sign systems: myths, stories, rituals, fables, sermons, **a**ll the systems of language by which experience is ordered. But what they seek to order **h**as eluded order. Instead they participate in the chaos of the waste land, and thus **c**ontribute to the subversion of the intellect by promising what is not fulfilled in the texts of **e**ach part. Within each part the principle of fragmentation operates. It acts to create a sense **o**f loss so that each rhetorical act is given an equal linguistic significance.

In *The Waste Land* language itself is seen as having fallen, even from the first **i**ntelligible sound that broke the silence: that primitive imitation or quotation of the **t**hunder's "Da" is already a deeply ambiguous and enigmatic syllable. Language is to fall **a**gain as a mysterious dissociation of sensibility allegedly "set in," like a nervous **b**reakdown in the culture: "Falling Towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / **U**nreal" (CPP 73). Lines 373-76 of *The Waste Land* capsule the chronological **d**isintegration of Western societies with the refrain from Baudelaire--"unreal"--extending **b**ackwards to encompass them all. However, at the center of this metaphor of falling **t**owers and ruined civilizations is the Biblical correlative of Babel. The collective "wisdom" of the Western world--represented by generous allusion to the classical literature of Greece, Rome, Italy, Germany, and France--suggests not only that sense of "memory" which forces us to see our sterile present juxtaposed against a more vibrant past, but also to see the death of language as part of a continuing process.

Placed in the social context of *The Waste Land*, language's inability to render meaningful the relationship of one consciousness to another also signals the emptiness of religion and of history. Words are no longer sufficient to reveal absolutes. Words must be released from their subjective participation in the life of the ego before any potentially religious language can become the vehicle of faith. Language conceived in the categories of

an idealist epistemology cannot be made to serve the demands of a faith grounded in the revelation of Absolute Being. Finally, the language of the poem reveals Eliot's ultimate wariness of language itself. This poem is a sort of thesis on the question of language as well as a construct of language.

In *The Waste Land* Eliot reveals mostly the failure of language. The voices of the poem perform the rituals of speech, but for them language--indeed all communication--is stillborn. Words are spoken, newly formed or invoked from the past, but they fail as sign and as signification. The signs no longer appear clear, as the voices shift in and out of the consciousness of the quester; their words hover as simple statements of misery, without any hint of underlying meaning to indicate what might be signified by the prevalence of that suffering throughout mythical and recorded history. The speakers search for answers in their material world: through clairvoyances, through words, or glitter; but they learn the futility of seeking answers as everywhere they turn they find desolation and they find themselves cut off from one another. The quester also investigates the words which have in the past carried the signification of redemption but finds them, like the ruined "chapel," "empty" and filled only with "wind."

To be sure, the breakdown of communication is one of *The Waste Land's* major themes. Although there are many voices who speak in the poem, they are discontinuous, ephemeral, estranged from authoritative textual or cultural origins; they speak to themselves or to other eccentric interlocutors in rhythms "quite close to the madness of hearing inner voices" (Hartman 55). The reader is inscribed voyeuristically in the text as an intruder into communications and as a decoder of their semantic obliquities. He comes to recognize that there is no interchange among the unsettling voices. Few even appear as anything but disembodied voices; their words evoke little or no response. Language fails to communicate anything but the failure of communication. Eliot's message is clear throughout his poetry: when one must depend on stable social interaction as a basis for language, conversation, or communication, the result will be fragmented--destabilized--

beyond coherence. This condition seems to preclude any form of language that is predicated upon the cooperation and shared values of a community. The boundaries of social fragmentation are exactly the boundaries of the finite center. The fragments of language that survive are combative, competitive, unassimilable into any greater whole; they threaten to overcome or destroy each other. The one sequence which implies a response is Madame Sosostris's reading of the Tarot cards. Her words are clear and coherent, but her information is incomplete since she sees neither the Hanged Man nor the "something" that the merchant carries. Part II of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess," is the section of that poem most affected by social fragmentation. Conversation and communication are made helpless amid the neurosis of failed relationships. The only "conversation" recorded is that of the Lady in "A Game of Chess" and the speaker of the poem. Her words are whining and panicky, and his answers are vicious and apparently spoken only in his mind as the Lady begs him to "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak" (CPP 65). Their speaking creates no mutual sharing, no contact that might unite the characters so that they might find meaning at least in the sharing of their suffering. Instead the voices demonstrate the pervasiveness of essential absence, so much so that they seem to lose their personal individuality, becoming in Spender's words, merely "symptoms of attitudes, reflexes, neuroses, which are the results of the state of civilization to which the deeper voices, voices of the Biblical and Greek world, bear witness" (77).

The failure to communicate that marks many situations would further expose the undependability of the language used. Eliot's command of the non-denotative effects of language is apparent in these disembodied voices; they range in tone and diction from the Old Testament prophetic sonority and repetition of forms as in the words of the prophet in the opening section of "The Burial of the Dead":

for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

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O O O that Shakespeherian Rag--
It's so elegant
So intelligent. (CPP 61 & 65)

Neither the words of the rituals nor the most casual conversation overheard in a pub can break through the barrier; language in *The Waste Land* has no form in which it can allow or create communication on any level; certainly not on the level of unified myth. Language is hampered by the inability of the voices to extend outside their own experience.

The collage technique is another artistic device Eliot uses to present the fragmented language in the modern world. According to Jacob Korg, although “the technique of *collage* was originally devised as a way of closing the gap between art and reality,” it was later more generally perceived as emphasizing that gap (Korg 63). “Far from merging two different kinds of reality, then,” Korg writes, “*collage* testified instead to the disjointedness and incongruity of experience” (63). By the way, Eliot’s version of the collage technique forces the reader to see both affinities and irreconcilabilities between one part of the poem and another. The famous collage effect is due not just to the plurality of materials assembled but to the different kinds of language deployed. As Eliot’s use of quoted and allusive texts becomes more idiosyncratic and more strikingly disconnected from the poem’s main narrative tone, the motif begins to reenact the effect of socially fragmented language: just as people can no longer communicate clearly with each other in a language of shared meaning, so cultures do not have a language that represents a shared bundle of tradition. Just as people turn on each other when their language devolves amid social decay, so cultures become destructive.

How then does *The Waste Land* express a permanent human impulse--the search for meaning? During all his creative life, Eliot respected the tenuous relationship between word, meaning and reference, for he perceived that as the most difficult task facing the writer. To achieve “unadulterated meaning,” a meaning that is not easily formulated in intellectual terms, a meaning derived from reality rather than a fictive construct via words, then, is perhaps the supreme challenge for a poet, for he must create a thing that is the very

opposite of the energies of language which drive us back and forth continuously between the purely real and the wholly artificial. In these terms, unadulterated meaning is as elusive of analysis by human sensibilities as immediate experience, and yet is the only meaning worth pursuing.

In *The Waste Land*, one is in a state of constant suspension between memory and desire, life and death, language and silence. If desire is the center of the web of language, memory is the many echoes in the poem of desire's failure to create anything more than itself. Desire is sterile, then, and that is why the waste land appertains as the poem's prevailing symbol; for there is nothing more barren than a longing that seeks only its own perpetuation. What Eliot suggests, however, is the most startling part of this strategy: that our worst longing is our longing for an expressible meaning. That does not make the poem nihilistic, although it might very well make it an excellent formulation of existentialist thinking.

The constant suspension between desire for meaning and desire's failure is enacted through Eliot's allusive substructure. The lines of other poems Eliot incorporates within *The Waste Land* establish an allusive framework that sometimes "supports" and at other times "threatens" to undermine the poem's structure. A significant group of these poems is composed of songs and more specifically of songs about singing. Eliot does fortify his own construction by quoting singers or poets of all ages who share his concern with the nature of singing, but his quotations and allusions also create a certain instability in the poem as the context is constantly shifted and redefined. Drawn from a variety of sources (popular tunes, poems, operas), they burst forth from the congested constructions of the surrounding text with a direct energy that not only frees the line but also breaks the conditional atmosphere. Their metrical and contextual functions, quite apart from their referential value, are crucial in a poem where human speech is often frustrated, reduced to a stutter. Finally, *The Waste Land's* language reveals Eliot's ultimate wariness of language itself.

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For instance, Part III, “The Fire Sermon,” has moved through Spenser, Shakespeare, Marvell, a popular song, Verlaine, Wagner, and miscellaneous lyrics about birds to a moment when words are made to stand alone as mere sounds that call attention to their status as both meaningless and conveyers of unlimited significance. The songs in *The Waste Land* express the multiple activities of the mind beneath the rational and deliberate. When they come in clusters, they establish a chain of associations that may lead the deliberating mind away from its daily concerns. As the songs are dissolved into broken syllables, the text exerts its repressive control over them. Paradoxically, however, by reasserting its broken rhythms, the text heightens the music of its borrowed songs and thus demonstrates their charm. *The Waste Land* is a revolutionary art form that nonetheless, in the finest conservative tradition, pays homage to traditional rhythms and structures. In this respect too, the poem displays Eliot’s ambivalence about literary innovation and convention.

The complicated situation of audience and poet is indicated in the vivid references to the myth of Philomel in the second part of the poem, for which the reference to the thrush in Part V is a partial parallel:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.
 And other withered stumps of time
 Were told upon the walls; staring forms
 Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed. (CPP 64)

This passage is a portion of the lengthy description of the ornate room which is apparently the setting for the half-spoken, half-thought truncated dialogue that follows. The panels hung on the walls as decoration portraying scenes from myth and literature represent one possible attitude of audience to esthetic object. Then, cutting through all the hypnotic artifice and syntactic confusion come the startlingly clear, syntactically direct words “yet

there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice.” The myth of Philomel as it is mentioned suggests certain aspects of the nature of esthetic creation. In the version alluded to here, Philomel is ravished by her brother-in-law Tereus, who then mutilates her by cutting out her tongue to prevent her from exposing him. When Philomel is pursued by Tereus after she manages to report his crime despite her inability to speak, she escapes by being transformed into a nightingale. Her song, inviolable though she has been violated fills a landscape that is at once sylvan scene and desert.

The “inviolable voice” of Philomel carries further reverberation. Philomel, having had her tongue torn out to prevent her from speaking about her rape, represents most graphically the mutilated state of human expression that the poem both describes and protests. At the same time, the lines define the poem’s status by presenting an image of the poet’s activity and a possible effect of that activity on the reader. Like Philomel, the poet transforms a desert by filling it with voice.²⁸ The desert is a psychologized landscape, the image itself of the plight whose end is the transformation into art. Her story is made to speak out of the past to us now, bringing “the tragic and criminal past into the empty and guilty present” (Lennard 192). The story still cries out with “inviolable voice,” testing our reactions. The violated Philomel, tongue cut off, unable to put her story into words, nevertheless expresses her grief in inviolable song; and the contrast between the inviolable simplicity of these words and the stylistic and syntactic violations, the elaborate profusion and confusion, of the writing up to this point in “A Game of Chess,” is an act of poetic empathy. Not just despite but because of mutilation and pursuit, singing is possible. The presentation of the waste land is both an image of suffering and an esthetic transformation of suffering. What may sound like incoherent babbling is actually a special kind of singing that emerges from the silence imposed on the singer by the shocking brutality of experience. At various points in the poem, the speaker presents voices in the paradoxical role of silent responder and commentator that combines muteness with speech. In the scene with the hyacinth girl alluded to in Part I, he “could not / Speak” (ll. 38-39), and in

the truncated dialogue of Part II he will not speak, but in both passages the poet does speak to the reader who is asked to interpret his poem as other than “Jug Jug.” Like the walls of the room, the poem presents a series of allusive panels. The response of the spectator determines the “withered” quality of the wall decorations in the room and the images in the poem. The reductive perception of the song as merely “Jug Jug” transforms the mythological panels to stumps of a past without meaning for the present. Lacking an audience capable of a dynamic, involved response, the harmony of the poet’s song goes unrecognized, and the room or poem remains circumscribed, “enclosed” like the opaque sphere of subjectivity, “a circle closed on the outside.” However, its audience can create the possibility that the stumps will begin to flourish unexpectedly. The nature of that voice depends on the disposition of the hearer. The interweaving of past and present, the deft move from “cried” to “pursues,” signals how the mythic past “still” lives, unresolved, in the unmythic present, even as we try to resolve the finally unresolvable syntax. For all their muteness they speak to later ages, enabling their stories to be “told,” telling of the untellable, speaking of the unspeakable; and they act as an example to the poet of how to utter the unutterable, how to endure and overcome the sense of “I could not / Speak.” Therefore, the words suggesting the voices of birds who were once human beings locked in a spectacular context of cruelty not only function as allusions to a mythic transcendence and as an oblique prefiguration of the bloodiness of Hieronymo near the end of the poem; they also function as a simultaneous reduction and expansion of language.

Eliot closes each section except “Death by Water,” which is unique in other ways as well, by a swift change to another poet’s voice; but it is in the final section that he uses this technique most elaborately. There, the quotations pile on top of each other in an extended effort to end without concluding.

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon--O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih (CPP 74-75)

It is questionable whether the final verse-paragraph enacts “failure to reach conclusion” or “a resolution not to” (Reeves 95). Gareth Reeves pointed out that “the suspension of the word ‘fishing’ between the start of the line and a caesura sounds like a determined irresolution” (96). Does the Fisher King put the arid plain behind him as if turning his back on the poem’s waste land of “stony rubbish” and “broken images”; or is the arid plain a backdrop to his continued fishing, as it were, for meanings? According to Reeves, the phrase “with the arid plain behind me” shifts grammatically from the retrospective to the prospective, from looking back to the fishing to looking forward to the setting of lands in order, from disenchantment to anticipation (96).

I suppose that the poet who consistently borrows endings reveals *both* a desire to end and a reluctance to formulate a conclusion. The desire for order and the surrender to the chaotic desires of life remain in tension. The speaker sits by the sea, turning his back on the “arid plain” of the desert. Still he asks, “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (CPP 74) indicating the continuation of a quest for order and meaning. But the speaker is answered by a series of allusions which are neither properly “my lands” nor in any discernible order. The lines themselves speak of disintegration and disorder, madness and desire. And the variety of voices here, speaking in different languages and different tones, indicates a world rich with possibility as well as confusion, with salvation as well as loss.

The successive “collapsings” of London Bridge prefigure the successive collapsings of syntax and sense in the lines which immediately follow. Foreign language citations, volatile figurations jostle each other. The text at once designates the modes of its own operation (“These fragments have I shored against my ruins”) at the same time specifying the state of semantic anarchy to which it has briefly succumbed (“Why then Ile fit you.

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Hieronymo's mad againe.''). As a sound-sequence they operate as an effective ceremonial close to the poem, analogues of a terminal silence; as empty forms they stretch the gap between signifier and signified to its limit, underscoring that exhaustion of signifying activity towards which the text has been repeatedly gesturing.

As the poem nears its conclusion, the collage of languages dovetails into images of chaotic destruction and madness. London Bridge falls down; language degenerates into nursery rhyme. The tradition he draws upon in the final fragments is that of the maddened poet so that, in pointing his poem to literature, he points simultaneously to himself as one in a long line of poets whose testimony bears witness to the difficulty, even the treachery, of the poetic act. The plea to be released from suffering into singing, from life into art, embedded in the wish to be as the swallow, is surrounded by evidence from poets who long for transformation. With these figures in the foreground, the falling bridges and decaying towers of the background mirror the disintegration of form itself against which the waste land poet moves to conclude his poem as it threatens to fragment. No more final conclusion could be imagined. All that remain are hysteria and silence, with the Sanskrit refrain of "Shantih shantih shantih," suggesting a "peace" which will be non-verbal and presumably beyond the scope of language. This is an incredible irony for a poetry that uses seven languages--with a pointing toward the ineffable: Shantih shantih shantih. Such an ending is a self-evident mockery of the efficacy of words to do anything more than confuse us out of the very peace we seek to find through them; and that is one reason why the poem is often seen as anti-literary, deconstructing the very system, the Western literary tradition, and then deconstructing the very medium, language. The artifices of Western culture--in their futile attempts to circumscribe the Ineffable--have created a Babel of monstrous proportions. However, Eliot, above all else, was a poet and the breakdown of language had a special meaning for him.

Yet the possibility of renewal, insofar as that possibility obtains, comes not from within Western culture but from without. The peace that passeth understanding descends

upon the maddened poet and his audience when what is said is said. And to bring the poem to completion, Eliot again depends on the East as much to imply that the European tradition could not provide adequate depth of expression. Eliot later revised his explanation of “Shantih,” describing it as “equivalent” to the phrase “The peace which passeth understanding,” but in the original note he was not so confident of European verbal range: “Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. ‘The Peace which passeth understanding’ is a feeble translation of the content of this word.” To read this as an embrace of Hinduism is to simplify, where simplicity is the least appropriate of attitudes. Still, the poem, we must concede, rejects the boundaries of the Western tradition; it resists Eurocentrism, insisting on a wider range of reference. It represents a challenge to the self-sufficiency of the European tradition.

Eliot ends by circling back so that Part V “What the Thunder Said” concludes simply with what the thunder said. The poem ends with the mystical invocation, “Shantih shantih shantih,” which brings the whole work together with the onomatopoeic sound of rain—a sound for which one must rummage through the languages of all corners of the world. Eliot’s integration of foreign languages into his works is simply one more way he revivifies a languid poetic idiom: “the interaction between language and language” is “a condition of vitality in literature.”

Dominic Manganiello hears “DA” as the ultimate in “linguistic alienation”: “Even the final words of salvation are uttered enigmatically as a *fragmented* syllable, ‘Da’ in Sanskrit, another Babylonish dialect to those locked in their own prison-house language” (54, 55). Manganiello acknowledges that his account owes much to Michael Edwards, who argues that “Babel / Babylon is present by implication in the quotation from Psalm 137,” and that *The Waste Land* is partly concerned with a “fall of language.” Edwards also notes that in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* Hieronymo’s play, alluded to at the end of *The Waste Land*, “enacts the fall of Babel” in a “confusion of tongues” (Hieronymo: “Now shall I see the fall of Babylon, / Wrought by the heav’ns in this confusion”). Edwards goes on to

speculate: “It may well have been Kyd who suggested to Eliot the possibility of a polyglot *Waste Land*, with Babel as a constituent myth” (111-12).

We arrive at *The Waste Land*’s most remarkable paradox. Linguistic alienation in *The Waste Land* goes hand in hand with linguistic attraction: we are fascinated by what sounds strange. Michael Edwards understands the paradox when he hears the poem’s last two lines in opposed ways:

The last words are precisely that--words:

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

In their utter foreignness, at once alienating and compelling, lies their significance. Salvation implies another language. . . . And yet the words are not entirely foreign. . . . Sanskrit is thought to be the oldest Indo-European language, and is therefore the root of all the languages in the poem. As DA is the root of the three commands. The languages scatter, to be gathered in the final words. The poem reaches back to a pre-lapsarian condition, before the dispersal of languages; and Sanskrit is its metaphor of a primitive, wise and single speech. (113)

In the final movements of the poem, the images from Western literature are images of disintegration, while the fragments of Sanskrit provide tentative principles of moral structure: Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata, Give, Sympathize, Control. Dante’s visionary European voice joins in this chorus: “Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina.” For those who do not know the *Upanishads*, that is for the majority of Eliot’s readers, “Datta, Dayadhvan, Damyata” is simply what the thunder said. In this sense, the sound sequence enacts that moment in which the constraints of reference, the signifier’s link with the signified is abolished. The contract established between the text and its codes breaks down. Initially these sounds are meaningless ciphers, uncodable noises, that is until the activity of translating the words out of Sanscrit and relocating their context permits some measure of textual domestication. Yet their “exotic and mystical” essence persists, underscored by the extended margins of silence, amplifying the void-context of each of the DA sounds, and by the urgency with which the act of domestication proceeds.

By constantly resurrecting the dead through memory and through the act of speaking the words of the poem, his language revivifies and continues a literary tradition. As we

have seen, because the language comes from a variety of contexts (literary works, songs and operas, descriptions of architecture, realistic conversations, commercial transactions, even Sanskrit words), readers have difficulty establishing the context of the poem. In part, the inclusiveness of *The Waste Land* is a strategy designed to extend the language of poetry, to make art congruent with actuality, and furthermore to broaden the realm of our consciousness. The cumulative effect of the poem's shifting language is to superimpose not only this poet's work on earlier works but to superimpose on one another the activity of readers. The long, difficult, and uncertain process of the poem's composition, carefully documented in the drafts, shows Eliot struggling with words and forms in an attempt to wield a whole out of disparate elements. Despite Eliot's high praise for Joyce's mythical method as a way of giving an "order" to the "futility and anarchy" in contemporary world, the poem's structure, without a narrative order or "mythical organization," depends upon the poet himself to select, arrange, bind his scenes and characters.²⁹ Along with this effort is a continuing concern, frequently explicitly stated, with the nature and function of language.

The Waste Land relies in general on a language which raises precise and powerful feelings but which seems extreme in its imprecision and confusion in all other ways. We can be confused by *The Waste Land*, but we are not left unmoved in our response to it. The diction, syntax, line length, and images of the poem work effectively. If verbs are relatively rare, that serves to emphasize the inactive nature of life as the speaker experiences it, which means that the words of the poem are fully expressive. What the poem communicates with great clarity is the state of the speakers' minds--they are confused and disturbed--and the poem also shows the relationship these speakers have with language. For them language is a frightful puzzle which they awkwardly labor over in order to try to sort things out.

The poet's language creates these speakers and their world for readers, and then it draws readers into experiencing that world. The way the language "invites" us to

experience images and then “prevents” us from fully and comfortably experiencing them creates an almost physical tension in us as we read. By frustrating our attempts to fully connect images to one another, the poet creates in us the sense of frustration his speakers also feel. Thus *The Waste Land* establishes, in its ambivalent distance and strange intimacy, a new relationship between the poet and his readers. Like the poem’s creator in the process of composing, readers are faced with a “heap of broken images” that require assembly. While the broken images of the poet as speaker are his poetic materials and the chaotic world around him, the readers’ heap is the poem itself, a poem that, like the cards Madame Sosostris draws from her pack, cannot be interpreted in any univocal way. What may seem fragmented and trivial in one context takes on meaning and resonance from another. When Madame Sosostris reads the cards she addresses a “you” that is the speaker, the reader, and a fictitious listener. In her “reading,” the most important and mysterious card is blank. Acts of the imagination are required for the reader to inscribe the card that is the poem, as the blank page has been inscribed by the poet and the desert filled by the nightingale’s song, and to account for the various “yous” evoked in the shifting contexts. The process of reading required by *The Waste Land* demands that readers struggle with obscure details of language and become self-conscious about how meaning can be assigned to the apparent jumble of phrases. We as postmodern readers never succumb to any single attempt at reconstruction.

The end, both goal and termination, of the speaking and reading of Eliot’s poem is the fulfillment for readers described in the conclusion of his second essay on Dante. That fulfillment is the completion of “the conscious attempt, as difficult and hard as rebirth, to pass through the looking-glass into a world which is just as reasonable as our own” (*SE* 276) and which becomes our own through reading. As he does in other essays, in “Dante” Eliot asserts that an attitude of belief is not necessary for readers. Instead of becoming believers, readers learn to accept new forms. Reiterating the rebirth accomplished by readers, Eliot suggests the possibility of a “moment of acceptance at which the New Life

begins" (*SE* 277). The rejuvenation is inherent in the author's creative action to "build a world of art" "out of his own personality" (*SE* 217). As Eliot says in his essay on Ben Jonson, "The creation of a work of art. . . consists in the process of transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author" (*SE* 157). This transfusion feeds the shades of the poem's underworld, allowing them to speak to readers and allowing the interior voice of readers to speak. The simultaneous speech of poem, author, tradition, and reader gives "the pattern, or. . . the undertone, of the personal emotion, the personal drama and struggle, which no biography, however full and intimate, could give us; which nothing can give us but our experience" (*SE* 203) of the art itself.

As we have seen, Eliot was burdened with the sense of the inadequacy of language. Words are, in the modern age, exposed as being much more vulnerable than they ever could have been thought before; they are not absolute or impartial or objective. Eliot often points to places where words show their inadequacy: in "Burnt Norton," after thirty years as a poet, Eliot reflects on the tools of his art, and on their limitations the words that strain, crack, break, slip, slide, perish, and so on. Because of all the uncertainties and inadequacies of language that Eliot perceives, his poetry is fraught with difficulty. In spite of the difficulty and obscurity of modernism, its new language exceeds the scope of the old language; it stands empowered by virtue of the fact that it can evoke more: "The poet," Eliot writes in "The Music of Poetry," "is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist" (*OPP* 30).

Eliot's view that language has become stale and unprofitable in modern society, unsuitable for poetry, was shared by other modernists. Each modernist, however, presents a different artistic stance--an idiosyncrasy, a deformation of convention, and a fierce determination on the writers' part to draw upon their own original intellectual perception of the language. Eliot points to a dominant theme of twentieth-century theories--common to thinkers such as Gadamer, Derrida, and Wittgenstein--the fundamentally linguistic character of our experience and understanding of the world, a world which itself is largely

and unavoidably constituted by the structures of language. Like these theorists, Eliot realized that we “live in” a language (*OPP* 65) and that the language we live in greatly determines the direction, limits, and quality of our thought and feeling. “Every language has its own resources and its own limitations” (*OPP* 54); but the particular constraints that this places on our understanding are not irremediable or final. Language seems to be developed by the creative and critical efforts of its users, whose intellectual achievements extend the language’s capacities for thought and feeling. This is one of the functions of philosophers and poets. Much concerned with the problem of the change and multiplicity of different horizons and the threat it posed to meaning and understanding, Eliot could generate a medium of communication by welcoming fragmentation, and integrating it into his new language “appropriate to the new age.”

In terms of revitalizing language, his own explanation about “the good poet” fits himself adequately. In his essay on Philip Massinger Eliot writes: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion” (*SW* 125). He goes so far in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as to propose of the poet that “we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (*SW* 48).

Eliot’s poetry is about how we speak in spite of the limitation of our medium, and his poetry is how he would have the modern age speak. For Eliot, language is all powerful: it is what has enabled Western civilization. Thus, for him to address his poetic mission to the issue of language is not to limit himself in any way; this is Eliot’s strategy for confronting his age and culture. Eliot realized that each individual word must carry a great deal of weight. Each of Eliot’s idiosyncratic words itself shows how Eliot uses the language; but at the same time, the reader should be attuned to the more general issue of how and why

Eliot places so much of his poetic force in a given individual word, forcing this word, virtually on its own, to convey a crucial image or to define a tone. For Eliot, the word is the fundamentally integral fragment of language--the word endures though the language may crumble around it.

Language, especially after Eliot has left his mark on it, may be regarded as the “hero” of the modernist poem. It embodies in itself the capability to rise above the constrictions of the age, and to express itself in spite of overwhelming barriers to communication. Eliot never ignores the sanctity, power, or historical resonance of each individual word. “Whatever word a writer employs,” he writes in “The Three Provincialities,” “he benefits from knowing as much as possible of the history of these words, of the use to which they have already been applied. Such knowledge facilitates his task of giving to the word a new life and to the language a new idiom” (13). The writer, to mesh with the tradition of literature, must get “as much as possible of the whole weight of the history of the language behind his word” (13). The words that arise from the writer who possesses this sensibility Eliot feels, will combine to form the only kind of contemporary literature of which a culture need not be ashamed.

Modernism was to initiate an ongoing aesthetic exploration of the ways in which human reason was in fact confined to limited perspectives or had fallen into complicity with a debased instrumental form whose end is, at best, simply its own enhanced efficiency. *The Waste Land* is a collage of interpenetrating voices which never lead to a transcendental Absolute, but always to another vista in a kaleidoscope of shifting cultural contexts. Most immediately, however, *The Waste Land* conveys a sense of modern urban existence where one’s situation is both literally and metaphorically bound to an acutely shifting and partial perspectivism. This is physically, in fact, the experience of being on a crowded street: an endless processing of random shocks, gestures, movements, fragments which refuse to cohere.

Eliot tends to dwell in linguistically and culturally pessimistic fashion on the experience of modernity, but it is not viewed as entirely beyond redemption. The “memory” is of fragments--after his quest through the waste land, it could hardly be otherwise; and the “desire” is, productively, to shore--to create within the limits imposed upon the artist by his age and culture. For Eliot’s characters, grappling with the frustrations of desire, the paradigmatic plaint of angst is: “What shall I do now? What shall I do?” (*CPP* 65). With “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Eliot answers the question of what he shall do himself. Indeed, what emerges is that concern with discovering relations between depths and surfaces which are characteristic of modern expression. Eliot may have abandoned faith in reason as the instrument of knowledge, but he has not necessarily abandoned faith in the possibility of discovering a universal order which implies some meaningful relation between the contingent surfaces of everyday experience and latent structures of truth. Eliot tries to shore his fragments against his ruin, hoping to make them cohere through the discovery of a deep aesthetic logic expressing universal mind. The faith is not strong, but the desire is everywhere in evidence. As with most modernist writers, the burden of the task is transferred from reason to the aesthetic, but it is unclear whether art can reveal order through its non-conceptual creation or whether it can only construct a coherence which can discover no external correspondence. Famously, he wrote in 1921: “A poet’s mind. . . is constantly amalgamating experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes” (*SE* 287).

It is the “non-conceptual” language of the poet, rather than the “rational” thought of the philosopher, which takes on a burden beyond the capacities of ordinary men. Though tending towards the postmodern is transferring the burden of knowledge from the rational to the aesthetic, Eliot’s assertion is modernist in its conception of the production of High

Art as an experience which has constructive value in comparison with chaotic everyday life. For Eliot, as for most modern writers, and all postmodernists, neither the fact of correspondence with the world nor the means of its achievement seem so clear. If the tools of reason are shown to be pragmatic fictions, is poetry another form of radical fictionality; or in seeking to create new orders, to amalgamate disparate experience, to produce new metaphors of existence, can it thereby in some more authentic way discover existing orders through its own creative fabrications? Michel Foucault's postmodern response to Kant in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" takes up concerns which more and more insistently informed modernism. For Foucault, modernity lies not in the sense of discovery of pre-existing truths, but in the fact that their discovery lies always in their creation. To borrow Wallace Stevens's words, emphasizing process rather than product, the modernist poem is an "act of the mind" "finding / What will suffice" (240, 239).

Like the other major modernists, Eliot saw that if there cannot be clear objectivity about the world, art must turn constructivist. It must promise not truth but completeness by trying to make visible those psychological energies which constantly displace what both descriptive and mimetic versions of the dramatic attempt to stabilize. In his early essay, "The Lesson of Baudelaire" (1922), Eliot said, "All first rate poetry is occupied with morality" (4). According to him, the poet is to achieve moral quality by a total conscious preoccupation with technique. Then he pointed out that "the lack of curiosity in technical matters" of his contemporary poets "is only an indication of their lack of curiosity in moral matters" (4). Dealing with the same argument, C. K. Stead finds Eliot's particular achievement in his "aesthetic concern" which can be elevated "to a higher kind of morals" (133). Thus Eliot's poems can be thought of as a series of linguistic experiments by a scrupulous artist searching for form in a formless age. Major moments in his quest can be measured by the form realized in such works as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Gerontion," "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday*, and *Four Quartets*. His struggle to achieve form in art reached its apogee in *Four Quartets*. I

will approach the poem comparatively, or, to use the poet's own language, I will examine it as a new start, a new attempt to address the old problem of form.

Subsequently, we can raise a question: how does a poet's concern with "technique," "language," and "form" achieve a more profound moral view than a conscious concern with morals? According to Stead, the answer can be found in Eliot's concern with "tradition" (133). In this respect, Eliot's evaluation of Blake and Dante, I suppose, can give us more insight on the topic. He takes Blake as an example of what happens to the poet when he is left too much alone. Blake "was naked and saw man naked, and from the centre of his own crystal" (*SE* 319): "What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet" (*SE* 322). As always, Dante is Eliot's example of a poet who had the great benefit of a coherent culture, and "the concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius" (*SE* 322). A framework is what Eliot himself seeks. His immediate predecessors had aspired to density and compression, to increasingly concentrated units of meaning: the image, the impression, the epiphany. Eliot, however, looks for meaning in "systems," "wholes" and "frameworks," not in bristling instants. In his sketch of English literary history, what he regrets most is the loss of the larger coherences. The task he sets for modernity is not to generate a host of new particulars; there are particulars enough; but to find possible ways to organize the exhausting diversity.³⁰

Biographically, Lyndall Gordon argues, "The multiplicity of Eliot's roles conceals an extraordinary singleness of mind. To follow the course of his development it is necessary to walk a narrow path: not to be dazzled. . . into a bland acceptance of Eliot's studied performances" (*Eliot's New Life* 6). Applying this view to Eliot's language, Randy Malamud argues that Eliot's words, full of a multiplicity of tentative poses, are nevertheless

yoked together in the one linguistic enterprise: to find one enduring modern voice. For Malamud, the entire agglomeration of Eliot's words imposes coherence and precision upon its fragmented units (73). As we have seen in the ending of *The Waste Land*, however, Eliot's language sustains the tension between fragments / coherence, destruction / construction, memory / desire, limitation / possibility, and openness / closure. His language tries to be a delicate balancing act, covering numerous crucial facets of the modern intellect. How may we widen our view and how at the same time may we give order to what we perceive? It is the modern discipline which offers the broadest view and which through its "comparative method" hopes to bring pattern into the heterogeneity of human culture. It thus provides a framework for the modern mind. The poem moves forward only as it moves sideways, toward new analogies, new parallels, new possibilities for comparison. The completion of the quest becomes of less central dramatic emphasis than the recognition of other quest-motifs in other cultural settings. The poem develops not by resolving conflicts but by enlarging contexts, by establishing relations between contexts, by situating motifs within an increasingly elaborate set of cultural parallels--by widening.

"A new poetic," Stead says, "requires of the poet's sensibility" and "it should draw into itself both moral and aesthetic qualities latent in the raw materials of the art, fusing these qualities into a form richer, more alive, more intensely expressive of the full human condition" (192). It is true that Eliot has employed the new poetic. The questions, however, still remain: if he could achieve "a fusion of aesthetic and moral qualities into a new wholeness" (*Ibid.* 192), and if the linguistic form he built is coherent and complete. Nevertheless, his language is vitally sincere. His poem ends up with showing "a threshold" rather than telling about "a path." And through his language, he invites us to our own journey to find "what will suffice." Such a poem can only be written "out of humility" we could also find in F. H. Bradley and Gadamer--the humility of the man before the tradition, and of the poet's conscious mind before his limited condition, limited medium, and limited technical problems.

(3) *Four Quartets*: “To purify the dialect of the tribe”

With “Prufrock,” “Gerontion,” and *The Waste Land*, Eliot moved decisively from exploration of language for aesthetic effect to exploration of language for spiritual effect. Eliot’s poetic aim seemed to be that his readers should mistake the meaning; but their misidentification of the lexical item is only a stage in a complex process of becoming conscious, with the writer’s engagement in “the battle of language.” The way to the true meaning is through the incorrect sense. Rhetoric became a mode of spiritual discovery. Even when he is speaking directly of unity and dissociation of sensibility he cultivates a technical-sounding language. His best-known account refers to a “mechanism of sensibility” possessed by the “metaphysical poets”; a mind “perfectly equipped for its work” and “constantly amalgamating disparate experience” (*SE* 287). “With Shakespeare, far more than with any other poet in English, the combinations of words offer perpetual novelty; they enlarge the meaning of the individual words joined: thus ‘procreant cradle,’ ‘rooky wood.’ In comparison, Milton’s images do not give this sense of particularity, nor are the separate words developed in significance” (*OPP* 140). “Perpetual novelty” in the “combination of words” is equivalent to “words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combination” (*SE* 209). This is one of Eliot’s most distinctively modern assumptions—that complexity will be found in poetic language only where there is some conspicuous dislocation of the individual words. It is usual to make the connection and to do so by holding that the realizing powers bring the reader self-knowledge. “Realization” here has a double reference; it points back to complexity of language and forward to self-awareness.

Since Eliot doesn’t explicitly develop the connection between poetic language and moral effect, it is later easy for him to separate them in his Christian literary essays; he is positively anxious to avoid suggesting that poetry is morally improving; and easy for him to dismiss as trivial his own earlier suggestions that integrated words bear witness to an integrated being. But in the early essays where Eliot’s ideas about poetic language are

crucial there is no doubt that he makes the suggestions seriously. As Vincent Buckley has pointed out, the later criticism of Eliot, “at least” from 1932, “reveals an open moral concern, even a moralistic one; for Eliot is . . . interested. . . to find some means of protecting the modern sensibility against certain unhealthy factors as they receive a literary form in contemporary novels and poems. . .” (129). Nowhere is this more forcibly expressed than in the 1935 essay “Religion and Literature.” Since “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life. . . . Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (*SE* 398, 388). Thus Eliot would later repudiate the reliance on an aesthetic of effects in the tradition from Poe to Valéry, countering such theatrical experiments and skeptical playing with ideas with Dante’s philosophical convictions and faith; he later saw Dante’s linguistic economy as providing “a wholesome corrective to the extravagances of the Elizabethan, Jacobean . . . authors” in whom he had “delighted” in his youth (*TCC* 23).

At this point, Eliot’s remarks on other poets give us some important clues to his own later poetry. That Eliot came to reconcile his variant views regarding meaning and style can be seen from a series of remarks which appear in the criticism from 1926 through 1946. In Eliot’s view, recognition of the relationship between “auditory imagination” and “visionary imagination” is one of the reasons for Dante’s greatness. In his major essay on Dante, in 1929, he introduces a corollary to his notion of the “auditory imagination.” Dante possessed a “visual imagination. . . in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions” (*SE* 243).

Eliot announced that in contrast to Dante, Matthew Arnold chiefly lacked the “auditory imagination,” while Milton is faulted because he lacked “visual imagination.” In the 1933 lecture on Arnold, Eliot defined the auditory imagination as “the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and

bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality" (*UPUC* 118-19). Certainly, this passage is very enigmatic. According to Michael Edwards it also has "a reverberating vagueness that Eliot doesn't usually allow into his prose. As if this were both an idea of great importance to him, and one that he didn't fully grasp" (127). Whether Eliot could fully grasp the idea or not, for him "the auditory imagination" appears to go below consciousness, but also back through the life of the race, to "the most primitive."³¹ Now, Eliot's essay on Milton (1936) is also important because it reveals another tension in his definition of poetry. In Milton's verse the "syntax is determined by the musical significance, by the auditory imagination, rather than by the attempt to follow actual speech or thought. . . . The result with Milton is, in one sense of the word, *rhetoric*. . . . This kind of 'rhetoric' is not necessarily bad in its influence; but it may be considered bad in relation to the historical life of a language as a whole" (*OPP* 142). Eliot's account of Milton shows that his "recantation" was not a recantation; he merely said the same things again, but used another definition of "music." The real trouble with Milton is that he did not help in preserving "the tradition of conversational language in poetry" (*OPP* 142). Thus Eliot concludes his "controversial" essay with this remark: Milton "may still be considered as having done damage to the English language from which it has not wholly recovered" (*OPP* 145). Eliot would see language as something which can share in and reflect a shift in cultural and epistemological orientation and hence as something which can be damaged by wrong handling. This attitude is descriptive and reflects Eliot's gradually emerging sense of social change and cultural decay. Thus, as the passage I quoted as epigraph to this chapter implies, the "development," "refinement," and "precision" of language appear to be key words in Eliot's writings.

A recurring theme in Eliot's writings on language, in particular the English language, can be formulated in the following terms: what a poet does to the common speech, and

what he does for it. In the famous passage of “Little Gidding,” Eliot “fuses” the two activities in the person of the “familiar compound ghost” who is “both one and many,” “myself” and “someone other,” and it is this figure who declares, both to and through Eliot, that “[O]ur concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight” (*CPP* 194). Just as the poet impresses the “mind” or consciousness of his readers with a sense of the history of the language living in his words (“aftersight”) and at the same time opens up new experience through his use of these words (“foresight”), so too the “speech” which impels him is not just the poetic language he writes, it is also the common tongue he speaks.

According to Helen Gardner’s study *The Composition of Four Quartets*, the drafts of “Little Gidding” bring out clearly how the endeavor to forge an individual poetic idiom is also the effort to create a national poetry. In one draft, the speaker says: “These events draw me back to the streets of the speech I learned early in life. I also was engaged in the battle of language. My alien people [a dying]? with an unknown tongue claimed me. I saved them by my efforts--you by my example. . .” (186). This passage articulates that the poet is claimed by his language, and in this sense his “concern” for speech ceases to be a private affair; and though in his own “intolerable wrestle with words and meanings” the poet must aim, “to purify the dialect of the tribe,” he comes thereby to discover his responsibility to spend his life, as another of the prose drafts has it, “in that unending fight / To give a [the] people speech” (*Ibid.* 187).

For Eliot, the poet, entrusted with the task of extending his own consciousness and language so as to extend that of his linguistic community, can only succeed if his individual explorations do not altogether lose touch with the common tradition which gives him a dialect of thought and feeling to create in and refine. The great poet, then, must be “exceptional but not eccentric.” Invested with “the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them,” the poet is also obliged to remember “that the explorer beyond

the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted" (*TCC* 134).

This is why Eliot so often asserts "that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear" (*OPP* 29), and it is how he distinguishes "the eccentric or mad" writer from "the genuine poet." "The former may have feelings which are unique but which cannot be shared, and are therefore useless; the latter discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others. And in expressing them he is developing and enriching the language which he speaks" (*OPP* 20). For Eliot, then, the extension of perception and sensibility and that of language "are not to be thought of as separate or separable. The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meanings of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed" (*TCC* 134).

Eliot addressed considerable thought to the issue of linguistic change and originality and to the poet's particular role as both an innovator and preserver of language. The first point to be noted is that language must involve change and creativity, because of its functions as the structuring medium of our experience and as a tool which both reflects and serves our needs and interests in coping with the world. As our experience, needs, and interests change, so must language. For Eliot, the healthy state of language, tradition, and historical consciousness requires a proper proportion between the old and the new, so that we suffer neither stagnation nor a disruptive and unmanageable flood of hurried change. Since in the late Victorian Age the former danger seemed more acute, and in modernist and postmodernist times the latter danger seems more proximate, there is pragmatic justification for greater emphasis on our innovation in relation to the past, and at the same time, our historical and linguistic continuity with the past. Having seen Eliot's assertion that tradition

must be flexible and open to criticism and change, we should expect his similar insistence that change and creativity are necessary to the vitality of a language and thus ultimately to its preservation and survival.

Subsequently, in the work of linguistic maintenance and refinement, Eliot found the prime social function of the poet, a function of both preserving the past and serving the present and future.

We may say that the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his *language*, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve. . . . Poetry can to some extent preserve, and even restore, the beauty of a language; it can and should also help it to develop, to be just as subtle and precise in the more complicated conditions and for the changing purposes of modern life, as it was in and for a simpler age. . . . [The poet] . . . has the privilege of contributing to the development and maintaining the quality, the capacity of the language to express a wide range, and subtle gradation, of feeling and emotion; his task is both to respond to change and make it conscious, and to battle against degradation below the standards which he has learnt from the past. (*OPP* 20, 22 & 37-38)

To quote “Little Gidding,” poetry must “purify the dialect of the tribe.” Or, as Eliot puts it in his essay, “the social function of poetry in its largest sense. . . [is to] affect the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation” (*OPP* 22). And, if the nation’s speech and sensibility are “deteriorating, [the poet] must make the best of it” (*OPP* 22). Here Eliot suggests some important ways in which the poet can “extend and improve” his language. One possible way, which Eliot consciously practiced in the first half of his career, is to make poetic language more revitalized by making it encompass the realities and speech of modern life and give them more subtle, precise, and satisfying linguistic expression. Another is to give linguistic expression to what people vaguely feel, which allows them to feel it more consciously and thus differently, thereby enlarging the range both of feeling and of language. The loftiest way that the poet can extend the range of language is in his “attempt to extend the confines of the human consciousness and to report of things unknown, to express the inexpressible” (*OPP* 169). In this respect, the consequences are not purely linguistic, but poetry keeps language alert to its possibilities, its responsibility. That is to say, the poet is giving people an acuter apprehension of their own deepest feelings, now, in words, open to an inspection distanced from their personal inadequacies.

Thus to discover a way, through language, of bridging the gap between word and reality, between possibility and fact, is the central concern of all the poetry subsequent to *The Waste Land*. The necessity of the struggle is nowhere more clearly revealed to Eliot than in his efforts to be the public critic, to be able to say something about the role of the poet and the function of his product which can have broad, even universal, significance for a public audience.³²

Eliot's attempt to master his craft is the theme of the first stanza of "East Coker" V. In the passage, Eliot acknowledges the inadequacy of the linguistic "forces" (words) in the face of new, hitherto unexpressed experience and an audience who lack words for their new feelings and so cannot feel them with any distinctness: such is the poet's "raid on the inarticulate." Only "precise" words can order and elucidate "the general mess of imprecision of feeling" (*CPP* 182). He has devoted the interval between the wars to constant experimentation. His struggles as a writer are depicted in military metaphors, each attempt a "raid," with "shabby equipment" his emotions behaving like "undisciplined squads." There is territory "to conquer" and a "fight to recover" it.

Eliot's insistent concern with precision of meaning is shown in his frequent recourse to definition. The epigraph to *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (published 1948, but begun in 1943/4, shortly after he completed "Little Gidding") is this from the OED: DEFINITION: 1. The setting of bounds; limitation (rare)--1483.³³ For Eliot verbal precision and definition are the means to combat the "general mess of imprecision of feeling." Eliot's linking of precision of feeling with a higher, worthier spiritual condition and his accompanying suspicion of expression which mirrors confused feeling are nowhere more in evidence than in his essay on the prose writer whose influence on his thought and style is comparable to that of Dante. The "precision in the use of words" (*SE* 344) that Eliot notes in his 1926 essay on Lancelot Andrewes corresponds to a clarity of mind and an integrity of spirit opposed to that of persons "habituated to feed on the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing" (347). In

Andrewes, style and spirit are at one: “the effort is to find the exact meaning and make that meaning live” (349). Eliot’s phrase in “Little Gidding” III, “the purification of the motive,” holds true for him not only of spiritual order but also of the discipline of poetic art, and the disinterested pursuit of truth Eliot has in mind at the beginning of the Introduction to *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*: “I think our studies. . . want to be pursued with chastity like mathematics” (C&C 85).

Eliot’s most extended effort “to find the exact meaning and make that meaning live” is found in the Introduction and first chapter of the *Notes*. His professed aim in the last two chapters is “to disentangle culture from politics and education” (C&C 88) and he criticizes those who use the word “as a kind of emotional stimulant—or anaesthetic” (C&C 86), observing in a footnote that “The pursuit of politics is incompatible with a strict attention to exact meanings on all occasions” (C&C 87n). But it is plain that “the extreme of [his] ambition,” which is “to rescue this word” (C&C 89), is more than an exercise in lexicographical hygiene, and has far-reaching consequences. Eliot’s verbal critique in this analytical context is of a piece with his endeavor as a poet “to get the better of words” (CPP 182): part of the “battle of language” is resistance to the tendencies that make for linguistic deterioration. Eliot “rescues” the word by defining it.

The deterioration of language is a theme enunciated early in “Burnt Norton”: “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still” (CPP 175). In fact, reflections on language as worn out, fragmented, partial, and therefore finally inadequate to the desired vision of unity, recur throughout the *Quartets*. “Burnt Norton” II complains, “I cannot say” (CPP 173). “East Coker” II considers its “way of putting” things “not very satisfactory,” “leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (CPP 179). “Dry Salvages” II quietly frames the “approach to the meaning” (CPP 186) in “something that is probably quite ineffable” (CPP 187). In “Little Gidding” II, the life of language in time specifically disqualifies language: “For last year’s

words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice" (*CPP* 194). Such is the problem for the poet who, as he says in the lecture on Dante of 1950, should be extending the boundaries of experience, "making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men" (*TCC* 134). In practical terms, the decay of words through imprecision is caused by their imprecise use by other writers and speakers, something which necessitates a continuing activity of criticism as part of a poet's strategy. Eliot, as is well known, carries out that criticism not only in his prose but also within the poetry itself, especially from *Ash-Wednesday* onwards.³⁴

Words fail to reach "the stillness" because of the poet's own inability to "sit still." It is true that Eliot here attributes the failure of his words to gather themselves into the Word, mainly to the "scolding, mocking, or merely chattering" voices "of temptation / The crying shadow in the funeral dance, / The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera" (*CPP* 175): the voices, ostensibly, of those "who trust in their own wisdom." In the act of composition his words are assailed by demonic voices, and also, perhaps, by the voices of the fallen self that he wants to hear in the work. Thus the last line of the passage--"The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera"--seems to show what can happen when the poet submits to temptation. The line, however, also "falls" within itself, in the manner of the early poetry, its intricate sounds patterning in a void. It thereby relates to the deeper significance of the passage as a whole, where words are described as failing not only through the fault of the poet but also through their own intrinsic fault. The passage registers dismay, once again, at the fall of language.

Here and there in the *Quartets*, linguistic defeat is presented as inevitable in some other senses. First, language is itself subject to the incompleteness and change that prevent temporal things from achieving fulfillment in inclusive stillness. Second, language functions as an image for fragmented partiality and incompleteness. That is, in the poem language functions as both medium and trope. In this context, the final movement of each *Quartet* offers a meditation not simply on language, but also on linguistic failure. It points

to an intersection, that between words as words (in time) and words as art (both in and out of time). Eliot again points not to terms or words, but to the cracks between words as the placeless “place” where meaning might be found, as the place to go to get beyond time and place. As we have seen, “East Coker” V emphasizes the faults of language as a medium. Language as “shabby equipment” leaves the poet to try “to learn to use words, and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure / Because one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it” (*CPP* 182).

Time passes away, and words pass away in time: “Words move. . . / Only in time; but that which is only living / Can only die” (*CPP* 175). As a medium, language cannot achieve the stability in which Eliot locates his “ineffable” meaning. This linguistic condition, however, has no solution, as “Dry Salvages” V implies. There the denunciation of language seems directed merely against misguided modes of discourse in their false attempts to penetrate beyond times past and into times future. Words move here not only “in” time, but also like time. Within the mutability of sequence, they “strain, crack, and sometimes break,” and do so “under the burden” not only of expression, but also as images of mutability. Like process itself, they “slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still.” Words not only operate through succession, they represent succession as its trope.

Recognizing the problems of words, Eliot seems to conceive the act of making a poem as a struggle against fallen matter. Words, as well as selves, are in rebellion, and the theological overtones are clear: they “slip, slide, perish,” and they do so “under the burden.” “The intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” isn’t merely an echo of the Flaubertian sense of the labor involved in giving form: it recalls the sweat of Adam tilling a cursed ground. Despite misgivings, however, the speaker believes that there is something to be valued in his words. Thus in the last lines of “Burnt Norton,” employing the epiphanic language of revelation, he reaffirms the still-point in the turning world.

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always--
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after. (CPP 176)

In *Four Quartets* words may “reach into the stillness”--the stillness, it is understood, of “the still point of the turning world.” This can be seen as an extension outward of Eliot’s belief that poetry can make us aware of “unnamed feeling”--which are never “named,” but nonetheless evoked. He is always radically skeptical about our conscious mental powers but believes that poetry can carry us across into moments of reality. How poetic language may “reach into the stillness” is not critically explained but poetically demonstrated, if it is demonstrated. How can language get beyond time, when it depends on time for its existence? Moody tentatively suggests that the “musical” structure of *Four Quartets* has enabled Eliot to succeed (Thomas Stearns Eliot 199).

While, as noted above, Eliot’s remarks on other writers, especially Dante and Milton emphasize the public function and value of poetic language, the other critical landmark in Eliot’s account of English poetic history is Dryden. The emphasis here falls differently. Dryden’s voice is not too “musical” but too public. Eliot is also drawn towards a private, mysterious quality in poetic language, and he finds it completely absent from Dryden. Dryden’s poetic language obviously lacks the mysteriously suggestive quality. His words “are precise, they state immensely, but their suggestiveness is often nothing” (SE 315). On the other hand, Swinburne’s poetry is all suggestion and no denotation. And talking again of Swinburne, Eliot wrote: “Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified. They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment” (SE 327). This passage raised a dispute. This seemed to Leslie Brisman, in his essay “Swinburne’s Semiotics” (1977), to be an assertion informed by a

“rather powerful notion of the representational nature of words”--the notion that “words substitute for presences”--and thus to partake of the dangerously metaphysical view that “it is [the] things behind the words that convey the meaning,” a view apparently responsible for what Brisman calls “the tyrannizing presence of the Eliotic world of objects.” Walter Benn Michaels, in his venture to connect Eliot’s dissertation to Eliot’s criticism, took issue with Brisman’s assessment, and cited in Eliot’s defense this passage in the dissertation: “No symbol, I maintain, is ever a mere symbol, but is continuous with that which it symbolizes. Without words, no objects. The object, purely experienced and not denominated, is not yet an object. . . . [W]e have no objects without language” (*KE* 132-33). Just as a subject divorced from all objects is an unreal abstraction, and just as objects disappear without subjects to intend them, words and things always appear together. “Eliot’s denial that there can be an ‘actual object of perception,’” Michaels concludes, “is a denial of the signified-in-itself, what Derrida calls the ‘transcendental signified,’ what Peirce called the ‘transcendental object,’” and his refusal to separate word from thing or to give priority to either clears him of the charge of being a metaphysician of presence. But we are now faced with the question of what, if language and objects are by ontological necessity always identified, the phrase “in a healthy state” can possibly mean.

Graham Hough, for instance, singles out Eliot’s confession that the poet

is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. . . . [A]nd when the words are finally arranged in the right way--or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find--he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. (*OPP* 98 & qtd. in Hough 61)

Hough argues that “this is language of a kind that Eliot has never used before” (61). For Hough, this passage seeks to penetrate into the intimacies of the creative process in a manner different from Eliot’s earlier criticism (61). What Hough sees as a split, however, can be seen simply as a concern with different and equally necessary parts of the creative-

critical process. Eliot himself, in the passages that Hough quotes, puts his persistent emphasis again when he speaks of “words . . . arranged in the right way.” Thus what is notable is the sense of continuity between the subtle stirring of creativity and the patient search for the best words.

Eliot’s comments on his own poetry confirm this continuity. In “What Dante Means to Me” he refers to the Dante-esque lines in “Little Gidding” and speaks of the “very bare and austere style” and the “simple words and simple phrases” (*TCC* 129). In the poem itself Eliot records the impulse to “purify the dialect of the tribe,” and this is followed by the well-known classical account of poetic language, “where every word is at home. . . The complete consort dancing together” (*CPP* 197). Furthermore, the following statement from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* shows Eliot’s view of poetry as the supreme instrument for the exploration of the real: “[poetry] may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world” (155). This passage also recalls another of Eliot’s preoccupations. “Constant evasion of ourselves” reminds us that “humankind cannot bear very much reality” (*CPP* 172)—because, for Eliot, the deepest human reality is an unreality, a nullity. Here we arrive at a final question in Eliot’s thinking about poetic language: can its “realizing” powers touch something beyond human unreality?

In a way to search for the answer, the music of poetry begins to take on more and more importance, partly because Eliot feels that it can express the inexpressible. Eliot has the idea of an unexplored realm of existence; for him, this realm is unreachable through language but extant in spite of that drawback—it is the task of the modern writer to acknowledge this realm: “the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist. . . ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate” (*OPP* 30-31).

When Eliot writes directly about music, he often does so in an effort to affirm music and rhythm as the privileged expressions of truth and meaning. In "Poetry and Drama," for example, Eliot asserts that "beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives or our conscious life when directed towards action. . . there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus." Words and names--the symbols of language, in other words--can only take us so far toward this significant fringe, which, however, "music can express" (*OPP* 87). Understanding the language is no guarantee that the poem will move us as poetry. Harry Antrim notes that for Eliot, "language may inherently possess structures which in their rhythm and music bear correspondence to the ground of human emotion" (45-46), an observation consistent with Eliot's privileging of music and rhythm, in which he points out that a "particular rhythm" may reflect the origin or ground of a poem, giving "birth to the idea and the image" (*OPP* 38). Where language fails--where it is enclosed by the borders of the "nameable"--music succeeds, transcending those borders and taking us, apparently, back to poetry's origin.

For Eliot, then, music is able to transcend the limitations of words, limitations that forever hold words away from the origin, rendering them incapable of expressing it. Thus as a meaningful gesture, an increased critical attention is given to the role of sound and pattern in establishing meaning in poetry. Eliot's attentiveness to ritual comes along with his growing awareness that language itself may reveal meanings through patterns which approach music, but which are for the most part neither overt nor explicit. Patterns in language may themselves become ritual patterns or designs which work upon the mind in ways which are difficult to define. At any rate, Eliot expressed the major concerns of his later poetry, in particular, the relationship between music and poetry: "I think that a poet may gain much from the study of music. . . . [T]he properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly, are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure. . . . The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music" (*OPP* 38). Here he puts an emphasis

on pattern and design, the analogy from music, the idea that meaning may be achieved through repetition and recurrence of rhythmic and verbal patterns. But the question remains, how do these concerns, essentially a transformed view of language, affect the poetry itself? Eliot's poetry finally tries to reach a level of incantation and contemplation where words take on the aura of sacramental gesture. For instance, *Ash-Wednesday* is an attempt to enact his changed understanding of poetic language, and to redeem language.

The humility which is the subject of *Ash-Wednesday* is also evident in the tone of the poem, in its use of language, and in what we might call a new respect for the potentiality of words. The extended use of repetitive, incantatory language renders the poem lyrical, and also suggests a liturgy, truly a common prayer. As often remarked, the hardness, the sharpness of the former poetry is absent and in its place we find a language almost prosaic at times, frequently abstract, and depending greatly upon simple repetition of phrase and line. The heart of *Ash-Wednesday* is its incantatory credo in part V, invoking the still hidden Word, and artful balance of world-weariness and strenuous affirmation.

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word. (CPP 96)

Despite the erosion of used language and the literary tradition, and despite our failure to receive or repeat properly the given Word that establishes forever the meaning of all derivative life and speech, the Word remains: ineffable ("The Word without a word"), incarnate ("the Word within / The world"), and redemptive ("and for the world"). The simple, total existence of the Word, which Eliot conveys by using "is" as the only verb in the second triplet, contains and perfects the language we have spoken and lost, and gives our muteness a higher reference in its resonant silence. Actually, it seems to demonstrate

the problem of connection between man's word, lost, spent and unspoken, and God's Word, unspoken and unheard. God's Word is the Logos, the ineffable Name, the "Word without a word, the Word within / The world and for the world." "Word within the world" opens a way of transcendence--one that points beyond language and world to the "Word unheard." As an instrument of revelation, language can be freed from its bondage to the subjective mind and can explore new paths. It is therefore the poet's task to fit himself into the patterns of his language and bring to light those designs which are potentially there, contained in the mind of God. It may even be capable of recapturing the lost word which is the revelation of God in history, that is to say, the revelation of Incarnation. The effect of the word "still" at the beginning of the fourth line is striking and suggests much of what the entire passage is about. That is the stillness within which one must wait for the sound of the word which is spoken from without. In order to hear the "Word without a word" all other words have to be silenced. But the "still" has also the other meaning of "yet," of something which continues in spite of the inattention of the world. The double meaning of the word, its crucial placement in the passage, and its referring both to what precedes and what follows it can be seen as a paradigm of at least one of the ways in which Eliot was coming to learn to use language to utter the unutterable. It gains meaning also from its being repeated, in slightly different context, in the "unstilled" and "still whirled" of the next to the last line in the stanza. It points forward to that major image of stasis-in-motion which plays a vital part in the meaning of *Four Quartets*--the still point of the ever turning cosmos, or the center of the turning wheel. In *The Invisible Poet* Hugh Kenner describes Eliot's language after *Ash-Wednesday* as "characteristically open, even tranquil, its aim a ritual translucency," in contrast to his former idiom which "had tended towards opacity" and was menaced by "a certain succinct impenetrability" (225).

Throughout Eliot's second period we find him closely concerned not only with the cultural roots of words but also with the hermetic possibilities of language which loosen words from their referents and place discursive syntax in the service of music. As one way

of pointing out the importance of these two main characteristics, Kenner has written that to unite in *Four Quartets* “a *Symboliste* heritage with an Augustan may have been Eliot’s most original act” (*The Pound Era* 439). In Donald Davie’s words, it “swings to and fro between the sonorous opalescence of Mallarmé and . . . a prosaicism so homespun as to be . . . positively ‘prosey’ or ‘prosing’” (“Anglican Eliot” 194).

For Eliot, Mallarmé’s achievement is that he gave a new language to our experience: new in the sense of being a newly refreshed and newly efficient language.³⁵ More than that, a new language evokes genuinely new experience. Eliot of the *Quartets* and Mallarmé of the letter to Eugène Lefébure, 17 May 1867,³⁶ generate new experience by questioning the ground of the old. They create by eliminating. Justifying his future experiment with incantation and indeterminacy, in 1926 Eliot pointed out that in Mallarmé’s incantatory syntax, every word dislocates the expectations of discourse with a new beginning and liberates the reality behind speech from our conditioned sense of it. Installed in its “puissance primitive,” the word can conduct us from “[le] monde tangible” to a world beyond: “[le] monde des fantômes.” Yet Mallarmé’s gift had a price, which Eliot was now to pay in his turn.

It would be an error, however, to link *Four Quartets* with Mallarmé too hastily. For one thing, Eliot gave his own characteristic coloring to Mallarméan notions like “silence” and “music.” In his 1958 introduction to Paul Valéry’s *Art of Poetry*, Eliot summed up three decades of opposition to the Symbolists’ desire to separate language from speech and from society. “The words set free by Valéry,” Eliot wrote, “may tend to form a separate language. But the farther the idiom, vocabulary, and syntax of poetry depart from those of prose, the more artificial the language of poetry will become. . . the *norm* for a poet’s language is the way his contemporaries talk. In assimilating poetry to music, Valéry has, it seems to me, failed to insist upon its relation to speech” (xvi-xvii).³⁷

Eliot was always wary of the kind of poetry criticism which spoke of the sound of poetry detached from the meaning, which spoke of musical values as being opposed to

those of the intellect or of the visual imagination.³⁸ Although poetry may originate in music, and although music is able to express the “border of. . . feelings” that always lie beyond poetry’s words, music is at the same time poetry’s death: “We can never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry” (*OPP* 87). It is the dangerous origin from which poetry must always swerve: poetry must always detour away from its musical origin in order to be other than its own annihilation. Thus Eliot brings music and meaning together, and recognizes them as a unity: “the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning” (*OPP* 29). He was also wary--and this is particularly germane to his own poetic practice--of any equation of music with mellifluousness or sonority: “There are many other things to be spoken of besides the murmur of innumerable bees or the moan of doves in immemorial elms”;³⁹ “Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place” (*OPP* 32).

In his third Turnbull Lecture, “Laforque and Corbière in our Time” (1933), which is currently published in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1994), Eliot said that the ideal literary critic should “primarily be concerned with the word and the incantation; with the question whether the poet has used the right word in the right place, the rightness depending upon both the explicit intention and an indefinite radiation of sound and sense” (287). By the same token, the “important poets” will be “those who have taught the people speech. . . the function of the poet at every moment is to make the inarticulate folk articulate; and as the inarticulate folk is almost always mumbling the speech, become jargon, of its ancestors or of its newspaper editors, the new language is never learnt without a certain resistance, even resentment. *Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*, Mallarmé said of Poe; and this purification of language is not so much a progress, as it is a perpetual return to the real” (*Ibid.* 289-90).⁴⁰

A similar point was made in the second Turnbull lecture (1933), speaking of Crashaw. Here Eliot asserted the double necessary elements of poetic language--“precision” and “vagueness”: “The poet’s business is to know what effect he intends to produce, and then

to get it by fair means or foul. There is the element of rationality, the element of precision, and there is also the element of vagueness which may be used; and we must remember that one distinction between poetry and prose is this, that in poetry the word, each word by itself, though only being fully itself in context, has absolute value. Poetry is *incantation*, as well as imagery. ‘Thunder and rubies’ cannot be seen, heard or thought together, but their collocation here brings out the connotation of each word” (*Ibid.* 272).

Focused on lines he later absorbed into “Burnt Norton,” (“Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree.”) this is clearly one of those discriminations Eliot made to “prepare the way for his own practice” (*TCC* 33). As in his “Note sur Mallarmé,” he ends by affirming the radical potential of “each word.” Here, however, he is thinking his insight through, and along the way he connects his claim to several subsidiary notions he had been playing with since he finished *The Waste Land*. For the poet to preserve the “absolute value” of each word, for example, Eliot recognizes that he must rely on “context.”

At any rate, I suppose, the most important of all Eliot’s ideas related to the “music of poetry” is that of the vital relation of poetry to common speech. In Eliot a transcendent impulse against worldly attachment, which is also antilinguistic and antirepresentational, harmoniously coexists with a more earthly positive vision, which is based on common language. In his essay “The Music of Poetry” (1942), Eliot wrote: “Whether poetry is accentual or syllabic, rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse” (*OPP* 29). Eliot saw that he and other poets at the beginning of the century had effected the same kind of revolution that had been effected by Donne in his time and by Wordsworth in his: they recalled poetry from straying too far in the direction of artificiality and specialized poetic diction. No word was to be thought intrinsically unpoetical; poetic language was to be made to accommodate the elements of modern life. In the late essay “What Dante Means to Me” (1950), which includes several valuable reflections about Eliot’s early poetic practices, Eliot wrote of how he learned from Baudelaire and Laforgue “that the poet, in fact, was committed by his

profession to turning the unpoetical into poetry" (*TCC* 126). The language of common speech--which would often, according to Eliot, need to be based also on a local language, the language of a particular place--was to sound throughout his poetry, whether in the tones of the poet himself, or those of his characters: the clerkly Prufrock, the effusive lady of the "Portrait," the archly business-like Madame Sosostriis, the neurotic lady and the Cockney women in "A Game of Chess," the sad dull tones of the London girl and the sonorous intonations of Tiresias in "The Fire Sermon" (Schofield 82). It was a capacity for dramatic common speech which, as many have felt, seems paradoxically more alive in Eliot's poems than in his poetic dramas. And it was a quality he learned not only from his own ear for the voices around and within him, but also from many literary sources, among them the excitingly fresh cadences.⁴¹

Between music and meaning in poetry, then, Eliot posits a specular relationship. In order to be itself at all--in order to stand out from its originating, rhythmic maze of sound, in which all is lost and annihilated--poetry must speak with a language other than music, a language of "vision," "idea," and "intellectual meaning" that "supplements the music by another means" (*SW* 146). This supplementary language adds to poetry's music the thread of determinate meaning that lifts the poem out of the annihilatory "condition of music," stealing away its sound toward vision, its rhythm toward idea, in a move that distances and protects the poem from the dangers of its origin.

Within *Four Quartets*, Eliot makes use of commonplace speech, sententious diction, colloquial diction, and in short, the entire gamut of language as it is spoken and written. In *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, Helen Gardner has characterized it as "metrical speech" and the phrase is appropriate. She goes on to say that the "supreme merit of his verse, however, is the liberty it has given him to include every variety of diction, and to use the poetic as boldly as the prosaic, without any restraint. It has enabled him also to express his own vision of life in a form in which that vision can be perfectly embodied" (35).

Eliot's attempt to reach beyond the limits of language which is so much a part of the *Quartets* demands more than metrical flexibility. If words are to be made to reach across the void, to explore the "frontiers of consciousness," then not only must metrical facility be exploited, but also the customary vehicle of poetry, namely, the metaphorical. For however much the poems acknowledge the existence of an actual world existing apart from the perceiving self, that alone is not sufficient to transfix the "still point of the turning world" which is "Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards" (CPP 173). What is required is some manner of giving voice to the experience often called mystical. "For most of us, there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time, / The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight" (CPP 190), and poetry can reveal such moments. "But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint-- / No occupation either, but something given / And taken, in a lifetime's death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender" (CPP 189-90). To achieve that end is to try to make poetry go beyond the realm of poetry, to make language perform the task of rendering mystical insight.

On the other hand, Leavis asserts, Eliot's problem is that he cannot trust his own creativity. In his detailed study of *Four Quartets*, Leavis takes Eliot to task for succumbing to a kind of despair and nullity, for, according to him, Eliot has not properly understood the quality of personal life. Leavis continues his argument: Had Eliot properly acknowledged his participation in an ideal community that has, all the same, "a very present depth" in actual lived time, he might have seen to the bottom of his central convictions: that "there is no such thing as persisting--that is, real--identity," and that, "inescapably confined to a 'sphere of being' where there is no direction and no pattern," ordinary life is "meaningless," change "illusory" (*The Living Principle* 241). In other words, Leavis makes a good deal of adverse comment on Eliot's low view of humanity and sees his belief that poetry can "reach into the stillness" as a desperate attempt to escape from the prison of self. In his distinguished critique of *Four Quartets* Leavis suggests that in registering his

recoil from actual life Eliot denies life's essential creativity. He says also that there is in Eliot a "lack of courage in the face of life" and that "the profoundest and completest sincerity, that which characterises the work of the greatest writers, is. . . impossible for him" (*Ibid.* 189). Stead was also bothered by Eliot's later style, with its abstractions and discursiveness: "however wise and admirable the man it displays, the poem remains. . . imperfectly achieved, with large portions of abstraction untransmuted into the living matter of poetry" (179).

Not only Leavis but also readers like Stead who prefers the early to the later Eliot often find in *Four Quartets* a sign of some evasion or dishonesty in the poet.⁴² The very elegance of the later poem, with its formal, patterned beauty, seems a withdrawal from human suffering, a retreat into mystical contemplation far from "the world where poetry is accustomed to dwell" (Cowley 768). It is not surprising that this apparent move away from the strains and tensions of human experience should be regarded as a perhaps unfortunate move "Beyond Poetry" itself.⁴³ Eliot, after all, helped teach modern readers to value tension and discord in poetry, and in many ways *Four Quartets* seems strangely lacking in those very qualities. Certainly it lacks the kind of dissonance that gave *The Waste Land* its peculiar force.

It is true that there is no counterpart in *Four Quartets* to "the young man carbuncular," to Stetson with a corpse planted in his garden, to the bitterly witty juxtaposition of Spenser's Thames with cigarette butts and sandwich papers. In *The Waste Land*, what Yeats called "those things that feed the soul" (315) appear in one instant and in the next collide violently with the banalities of modern life. In contrast to this dazzlingly discordant style, the style of *Four Quartets* seems smooth, polished, even disconcertingly polite. Words like "reconciliation" and "resolution" appear again and again in discussions of the poem, because the final impression it creates is one of consonance and harmony. I suppose, however, the special harmonies of *Four Quartets* depend on the poem's own special kind of dissonance--a dissonance that provides the formal vehicle for the major

subject of the poem, human suffering.⁴⁴ The thought is elaborated in “The Music of Poetry,” where Eliot advised that the phenomenon of his title was at least as much a matter of tension as of resolution. In the first of the *Quartets*, Eliot’s heaviest weight falls on dissonant words--phrases and images that are, Eliot says, “impossible to imagine or conceive simultaneously,” and which together suggest resurgent energy. For instance, words, images, and motifs “in uneasy tension”--the dust on a bowl of rose leaves, the wave cry and the wind cry, tolling bell etc.--appear and reappear, they carry in them all of the other connotations they have had in the poem and many they have had outside it in literary tradition.⁴⁵ At this point, Eliot’s own famous remark about “dissonance” and “cacophony” in poetry is more than apt for interpreting *Four Quartets*, because dissonance functions as transition. “Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place: just greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole. . .” (*OPP* 32). Dissonance has its place just as long poems must have transitions. Eliot argued that the music of an individual word occurs “at a point of intersection”: that the music of words consists partly in their relationship to their immediate context and partly in their allusion to all the other contexts with which they have ever been associated (*OPP* 32-33). In fact, none of the major forms of dissonance in *Four Quartets* is produced by the shock of dramatic collision characteristic of *The Waste Land*; they do not disrupt the smooth flow of well-wrought line and pattern, although they strain against it. Such dissonance is different from that in *The Waste Land*, yet it is thematically appropriate to *Four Quartets*, in which suffering is presented, not as a series of dramatic conflicts, but as an all-pervasive undercurrent, straining against the deceptively smooth surface of time-bound existence.

Four Quartets is one of the most sustained meditations in our tradition on the problems of language and rhetoricity as they bear on practical and poetic expressions of the negative and positive ways alike. Certainly, it is a poem which discusses its own poetics, for the problem of representation is something the poem both discusses and enacts: how to use the

partial and successive medium of language to render a unitary wholeness that transcends differentiation and succession. Yet the tension between the poem's positive claims to redeeming experience and its commitment to unitary wholeness as the redemptive figure is never resolved. Indeed, the negative representation of language only radicalizes this tension. Just how a partial, temporal language is to conduct to a unitary, atemporal representation that remains disjunct from it is a problem the poem's linguistic meditations dramatize rather than resolve. The inquiry, especially at this level of paradox is best carried out in creative work. From the poem, we will learn that we saw the contradiction as natural, and language as an inevitable medium with the paradox of "its deficiency and its prodigious power." It is, after all, precisely the problem of the word in the desert, that negative word so easily attacked and mimicked by the "loud lament" of every passing "disconsolate chimera." Eliot is well aware of the rhetorical irritations attendant on expressions of the negative way. Part of his way of dealing with them is simply to insist. "You say I am repeating / Something I have said before," he says, and answers with self-reflexive irony: "I shall say it again / Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there, / To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, / You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy" (*CPP* 181).

The primary concern of "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker" is the need of spiritual rather than artistic fulfillment; the fight to formulate experience in language is a symptom of the greater struggle. It is the struggle that is important, which is why "The poetry does not matter." The poet's long struggle to arrive where he is "And know the place for the first time" (*CPP* 197) is a struggle to apprehend rightly the torment of being between--to experience it as merely transitional discord. The sudden arrival in the midst of his own words is itself an Incarnation--a moment when, as at Pentecost, the Word reveals itself in human language. And it is said that the experiences of possible epiphany in *Four Quartets* are merely indicated and even listed, not described: "the moment in the rose-garden, / The moment in the harbour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at

smokefall" (*CPP* 173). At least some part of the poem can be consummate. Yet it is written in a "fallen" language, by a "fallen" man. Thus its vision is limited, and possibly wrong, in any sense of the Word. It's not a speech "tongued with fire," or only fitfully. Even the Incarnation is not a final moment of revelation but a promise--that, in the future tense, "all shall be well."

In *Four Quartets*, intermediacy, being between, is not merely a result of human failure but simply an inevitable condition of mortality.⁴⁶ Significantly enough, the *Quartets* is replete with descriptions of "being between," in the middle, in motion from one point to the next. For example, in "Burnt Norton," desire is associated with "the form of limitation / Between un-being and being" (*CPP* 175). The "place of disaffection" is "neither daylight. . . Nor darkness. . . . Neither plenitude nor vacancy" (*CPP* 173-74). In "East Coker" the "captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters" go into "vacant interstellar spaces" (*CPP* 180). In "Little Gidding" the poet walks the street in that same "uncertain hour before the morning" (*CPP* 193). "Between three districts" and "Between two worlds become much like each other," he and the ghost converse about the plight of a poet caught in a time between past and future (*CPP* 193-94). To live in the intermediacy of linear time is to be constantly in motion like the fishermen of "Dry Salvages" and the dancers of "East Coker." For both, as Elizabeth Drew said, life "does have a rhythm and an aim. . . . But it is time-wrecked too, a part of the endless flux" (180).

It is skeptical that permanent and perfect union can exist in this world; the most one can hope for seems to be a moment of revelation "When the short day is brightest" (*CPP* 191). It is true that as the last poem, "Little Gidding" presents special difficulties in a sequence largely dependent on the power of repetition. By the time he came to "Little Gidding," Eliot seemed to master his structural principle and his theme, but, as Helen Gardner's work on the composition of the poems makes clear, he had far more trouble with this poem than with the other three. The challenge was to complete what was in essence "always in progress," to close what was "always open." He points beyond the garden by pointing

back to it; he takes us beyond our first world by enabling us to know it for the first time; he completes his line by taking us in a circle. The circle is at once a movement and a completion of movement, a return and a new start. The return, however, does not take us back to the exactly same place from which we started but to a beginning which moves toward an end, which becomes a new beginning. Thus in "Little Gidding" the pilgrimage is described as only "a shell, a husk of meaning" because we, the pilgrims, have chosen our object and the choice is in accordance with our own mere "sense and notion." We come to face one of the persistent problems of the *Quartets*--the idea that the poem has to work out the implications of "What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation" (*CPP* 171)--hence, in the poem, the note of speculation, the feeling of words issuing from a merely speculative universe of discourse.

What remains for Eliot at the end of *Four Quartets* is only the "husk," the outer "shell," of the meaning he came into the poem searching for. The "purpose" of his poem, he has discovered, is "beyond" the purpose he had "figured," and has become "altered in fulfilment." This end, of course, is the poet's beginning: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from" (*CPP* 197). The poem ends not with a declaration of discovery but with a declaration that the poet must continue the "exploration" begun in his poem: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started" (*CPP* 197).

To summarize, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot remains interested in the problem of form he had struggled with in his early work. However, the poetry he writes in response to that challenge changes, for as he indicates in "East Coker" V, "one has only learnt to get the better of words" (*CPP* 182). Getting the better of words--"to purify the dialect of the tribe"--is of the essence in the *Quartets*. The sub-text implies that the poem's language itself should be passed through the refining fire. Then its major design is to use words so

as to make them mean what is beyond words; or, to put the same idea another way, to transform the understanding of the world. The theme of words that must strive and fail to reveal the Word is stated throughout the *Quartets*, especially “Burnt Norton” V and “East Coker” II, V we have discussed in part--then apparently left aside to be finally developed in “Little Gidding.” Moreover, he was forced in the *Quartets* to make a new start “with shabby equipment always deteriorating” (CPP 182). At this point, it is noticeable that his attitude towards reference points has changed, a change that makes all the difference in his art. We may say that an essential part of Eliot’s approach to form in the *Quartets* is the problematization of all imaginable reference points. Traditionally, the reference point was given in art. In the early twentieth century, the reference point was brought or constructed. In *Four Quartets*, the reference point is both there and not there. “Where is the summer, the unimaginable / Zero summer?” he asks in “Little Gidding” (CPP 191). In the face of “the ineffable” opened by human experience, he cultivates his own poetics involving an acceptance of absence, “silence,” and gaps as openings to transcendence in life and in art.

“Burnt Norton,” shading the word “silence” would put it this way:

Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.
 Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
 Not that only, but the co-existence,
 Or say that the end the co-existence,
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
 And the end and the beginning were always there. (CPP 175)

Here Eliot seems to connect his idea of poetic language with the neo-symbolist statement of *musical* characteristics of poetry. In part, the statement corresponds to what Eliot later said in his 1958 essay on Valéry: that the essence of music as the symbolists understood it was striving “towards an unattainable timelessness. . . [a] yearning for the stillness of painting or sculpture” (xiv). As Eliot asserts in the lines from “Burnt Norton,” the language that we use and make into art leads towards the absolute still point of the Word, but represents at

best an analogy of that unimaginable truth. What words neither convey nor represent, except negatively, is what remains beyond succession in unity--the "stillness" or "co-existence" where "all is always now." This wholeness of time, this concord of moment, is represented not by language, but by its antithesis: the "after speech" that reaches "into the silence." Not language, but silence, is the ultimate sign for a transcendence that finally repudiates language as essentially other from its concord. In this sense, Eliot's desire "to purify the dialect of the tribe" resonates well beyond a strictly aesthetic project. The poem is a purgative process that also discloses the contradictions of Eliot's positions. The poem claims to represent "a lifetime burning in every moment," both "still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion." However, it inevitably does so only "through the dark cold and the empty desolation" (*CPP* 183). Those "united in the strife which divided them" are reconciled only when all "accept the constitution of silence." Only by way of such constantly repeated descents, rejections, calls to detachment and renunciation, does the poem assert a "fullness," which, however, can only be represented as emptiness. This ascetic commitment find its ultimate sign in silence. Both as representing and as subject to temporal division, language is to be surpassed, which is to say, denied. As the mystical descent of "Burnt Norton" III points away from "this twittering world"; as "words, after speech, reach into the silence" in "Burnt Norton" V; so the soul is enjoined to "be still," and consummate experience is "quite ineffable." It is only in this self-negating sense that there "is a voice descanting (though not to the ear, / The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language)" (*CPP* 188). In this, Eliot is not, then, confronting what Hillis Miller calls "the difficulty of putting named things in such a pattern that they will reach beyond time and space" (161). Nor is he offering language, in Hugh Kenner's terms, "itself as a transience on which sufficient form may confer endurance" (*The Invisible Poet* 257). He is instead presenting language as transient, and ultimately as discontinuous with what endures beyond language. Only silence, linguistic negation, seems to act as figure for such transcendent unity. At this point, for Eliot, the music of

poetry goes beyond stillness, and these lines represent only one mood of “Burnt Norton.” To be sure, the importance of repetition as structure and theme in the *Quartets* is inseparable from the musical analogy. It must be noted that musical form reveals structure through repetition at the same time that it resists reduction to specific meaning, and struggles to present the transcendent. Lévi-Strauss claims that music “is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable” (18). For Eliot, the music of the *Quartets* is not simply a formal property; it is the emanation of a spiritual fountain. As Eliot explains it in his Edinburgh lectures, after *Hamlet*, “there appears dimly another plane of emotion, apprehensible through the *music* of the play--coming from the depths of Shakespeare himself” (qtd. in Bush 168).

For Eliot to affirm poetry’s fundamental inadequacy was also to affirm its open-endedness. On the one hand, this points toward a deplorable condition close to Eliot’s life-long sense of inadequacy. It means that every attempt to use words “[i]s a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure” (*CPP* 182). However, it also means something more positive, something that had been asserted by Eliot’s earlier struggle against convention. It implies that the self stands in no less provisional a relationship between man and God than speech does between words and an ideal language. As man is forced constantly to revise his speech, so he is forced constantly to revise himself. He is permanently in question, but he can, in the play of “a world of speculation,” at any moment renew himself. For a moment, it seemed possible to attempt a kind of writing in which “we are lifted for a moment beyond character” (*OPP* 77)--to aim, as Eliot wrote in 1933, “to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*” (qtd. in Matthiessen 90).

If the poem, like the self, can never reach wholeness of stillness, if it exists in a state of continuous becoming, if “the word by itself,” like each successive act of choice, “has absolute value,” then literature is always in play, and closure is always self-conscious and arbitrary. Eliot’s mode of operation in the *Quartets*, then, leads readers to an absence or a gap or a puzzle and then leaves them there for reflection on what can only be guessed, glimpsed, imagined, half-heard to an *aporia* as a fertile impasse.

Now we are tempted to link Eliot’s exploration of “silence” in *Four Quartets* with Derridean deconstruction, especially his essay, “How to Avoid Speaking.” This attempt may seem an indulgence in one of those metaphysical conceits by which, as Samuel Johnson put it with some distaste, “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” The Derrida / Eliot parallel has, however, been suggested, though not fully explored, by several critics,⁴⁷ and it takes on plausibility when we consider both parallels and in some cases interactions. The real question, however, is not whether Derrida and Eliot thought alike or experienced the same problems. Rather, it is to what extent the texts of one can illuminate those of the other. In the case of *Four Quartets* and “How to Avoid Speaking,” Cleo McNelly Kearns says, “the potential for this illumination is great.” Kearns also maintains that we can understand better the curious, oblique discourse of *Four Quartets* “with the Derridean analysis of negative theology in mind” (145-46). Moreover, the interactions between them make us more aware of that rhetoricity or literariness threatens both to fulfill and to defeat its purposes, and at the same time it will violate neither the status of the text as poetry nor its function as spiritual training.

First of all, Eliot and Derrida share a common distrust of language in general and of propositional language in particular (“How to Avoid Speaking” 4). There are good reasons for this distrust, for any decision to express the “way down” in propositional or conceptual language, the language of definition has, almost inescapably, a positive or affirmative dimension, an implicit “way up.” Because to speak implies in its very way of working a certain degree of affirmation, whether that speech emanates from the divine origin, “the

Word,” or simply a prior text, “the word.” Furthermore, speech always carries within itself some trace or mark of that call and responsibility. As Derrida insists in the essay, “The most negative discourse, even beyond all nihilisms and negative dialectics, preserves a trace of the other. A trace of an event older than it or of a ‘taking-place’ to come” (28).⁴⁸

Secondly, Eliot’s exploration of the void, either as a stasis or as a “way,” in *Four Quartets* seems to be close to Derrida’s assertion. Eliot’s “still point” is likewise an approach to the idea of “*différance*.” According to Michael Beehler in his *T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and the Discourses of Difference*, “The ‘drift of stars’ in ‘Burnt Norton II’ is similarly reflected by a drift of words in ‘Burnt Norton V,’ which, recalling the figure of the dance itself, interrupts the entropic influence that their patterning into a grammar, poem, or book always exerts. Although ‘words move,’ a stillness is invoked by ‘the form, the pattern,’ a cessation of motion that is nevertheless only a pretense of stillness, since even a ‘Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness.’ . . . and thus it is only in the long view—in the fabricated hallucination of ‘Burnt Norton I’ . . . that stillness appears” (132). The stillness, which stands at the unmoving center of experience and around which experience whirls, seems to be constituted by “*différance*.” Eliot expresses the “essence” of the still point in a series of images that negates each other:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (CPP 173)

“There is only the dance.” No fixity, the still point seems to represent metaphoric space where signs come into relation as signs.⁴⁹ With the “*différance*” at the core of experience, we are left “In the middle, not only in the middle of the way / But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble, / . . . where there is no secure foothold” (CPP 179).

Derrida, in his critique of Saussure, remarks that “the age of the sign is essentially theological” (*Of Grammatology* 14). It is moreover, fundamentally dualistic, as Derrida underscores. The very notion of a “signified,” thought and expression through “signifiers” reflects and relies on “the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and non-ideality, universal and non-universal, transcendental and empirical, etc.” (*Ibid.* 8). These distinctions assume a “signified able to ‘take place’ in its intelligibility, before its ‘fall,’ before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below” (*Ibid.* 13). In this sign-scheme, a pure intelligibility stands above the exterior, sensible world, which remains, in comparison, a fallen one. Eliot’s purgative writing strives, as he puts it in “Little Gidding” I, to offer “a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all.” In the ancient exegetical image, the signifier is a shell or husk that falls away once its purpose to convey the signified is achieved. As we have seen, however, Eliot is also aware of the difficulty of reaching the ultimate signified through signifiers. René Roques argues that the relation between signified and signifier is almost paradoxical: “What makes possible a certain revelation is also what covers it with veils; and what dares to disturb these veils in order to strip bare the Truth, can also destroy it” (345-46, 356). Without the signifying veils, the truth remains inaccessible. Seen through the veils, however, the truth is ever obscured.

“Language has started without us, in us and before us,” Derrida argues; “this is what theology calls God” (“How to Avoid Speaking” 29). According to negative theology, the term “God,” if speakable at all, is speakable only in the differential, deconstructive sense. In this respect, negative theology shares with deconstruction the desire to destabilize the logocentric, theologizing usage and return to that other usage of the signifier “God” which is more closely associated with trace, call, promise and recognition of otherness. After all, negative theology too relies on language which is not only material and historically situated but also often heterodox to its intentions. It is not simply as *Four Quartets* puts it, that “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break” under their burdens, but that this breakdown

is essential to their ability to function as language at all. There is no way for either positive or negative ways to claim immunity from this rhetorical danger, for the danger is *in* the very medium of expression of them both. As Derrida puts it succinctly, “the risk is inscribed in the structure of the mark” (Ibid. 5).

For Eliot, the words too are problematic, and are good only when they direct the listener to the silent meaning. One name for this, however, is humility. Imprisoned within the indeterminate world, Eliot turns away from the interpretation of despair, and says, in “East Coker” II, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (CPP 179). Thus we can locate his turn toward the value of “humility” as an important difference between Eliot and Derrida—if not a difference in the results of analysis, at least a disparity of their respective responses to those results. Significantly, *Four Quartets* began with two fragments from Heraclitus (CPP 171). The first admonishes us to give up our private wisdoms, which are almost certainly merely egotistical delusions, the “fancies” of “Burnt Norton” III, and to seek the Word which is true precisely because it is not our invention. So a proper humility is launched. That is to say, Eliot’s abandonment of the strenuously-created closure and completion was accompanied by the move towards a position rooted in humility. How better to convey the Christian’s humble awareness of his inability to apprehend or characterize the logos--what *The Rock* was to call the “Light invisible. . . / Too bright for mortal vision” (CPP 166)--than through a poetry yearning toward “silence” yet conscious that failure is inevitable?

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled. (CPP 190)

Eliot sends us again away from the work, into our own life, following us with hints only. He brings to the poem experiences that may be the reader’s: intuitions at the edge of the natural, visitations of strange awareness, as “the wild thyme unseen.” For us, “[t]here is

only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again” (*CPP* 182). And “there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (*CPP* 182). Along with the skepticism about the possibility of language and knowledge, however, what is more interesting is the way in which humility--the acceptance of limitations--enables one to go beyond limitation: knowledge is limited, but humility is endless. In theological terms, the recognition of our powerlessness enables us to accept grace and transcend our limitations; we cannot free ourselves by “thinking of the key,” but we can be free in Divine Love, when we acknowledge a higher power.⁵⁰

We encounter a problem as difficult to articulate as it is to avoid: the struggle of language to speak about dimensions of reality which are ineffable, that is, which lie “outside” the powers of speech. The problem is one which is confronted throughout our normal experience, as we daily discover our inability to express a thought or a feeling. This confrontation of the limits of language, however, has also been the subject of the most sophisticated reflection. There remains an irrepressible “obligation to express”--an obligation foreordained to failure, and yet one which even in defeat presses hard against what cannot be said, perhaps even to the point of enlarging our understanding of what the ineffable is.

Furthermore, if the juxtaposition of two types of figure as distant from one another as Dante and Mallarmé or Beckett indicates the abiding nature of the problem of language and ineffability, it also demonstrates its persistence in the face of vastly different assumptions about reality. If the ineffable is that about which nothing truly can be said, perhaps to borrow a line from Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” we can differentiate between the “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (10)--between what we may call a “negative” ineffable and a “positive” one. Although it has many secular manifestations, the latter is most fundamentally a religious notion, one which acknowledges the great gulf fixed between the divine and what human beings can think or say about divinity. As Eliot

remarks in a footnote to his essay of 1928, "Second Thoughts about Humanism," "to the Greek there was something inexplicable about [logos] so that it was a participation of man in the divine" (*SE* 485n).

From the theological point of view, not only did the unspeakable Word of God break the divine silence by speaking both creation and Scripture into being, but, more radically still, God spoke Himself into the body of our speech and into our mortal syntax: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John i.1). Therefore any Christian notion of language and the ineffable take into account not only the transcendence of God, but also the avenue of communication between our words and the divine Word which was opened up by the Incarnation--a route to be travelled by all practioners of what Marcia L. Colish has called "redeemed rhetoric." In contrast to what we may speak of as the positive ineffable there is the negative, the "nothing that is not"--just a silence which is the absence of being. "Negation" can even deny the possibility of representation altogether. Out of this void, on the other hand, our words call up everything that can be known, creating time and space and the only world any of us can ever experience. Rather than an all-expressive (and therefore inexpressible) Word--a Word which language can only fall short of. There may be, as Beckett said, "nothing to express," and yet the sheer fact of one's existence carries with it the "obligation to express." This is so because to fall silent is to disappear into the void from which we first spoke ourselves into existence "in the beginning." For this reason Stevens dreams of his Supreme Fiction and Derrida proposes an infinitude of "writing." Thus the contemporary preoccupation with language, and with the self-referentiality of texts, can be seen in part as a concern for human survival. To speak at all is to carry on an assault against the unutterable; to express anything is to create something out of nothing.

Between the extremes of Dante and Beckett we can arrange a whole spectrum of authors and a variety of critical approaches. There are diverse conceptions of the ineffable and the literary tactics developed by them to carry on, in Eliot's phrase, their "raid on the

inarticulate.” In the poetry of Eliot, the ineffable remains a mystery of absolute being which both precedes and fulfills human speech. Intuited in terms of the cosmic perspective of *Four Quartets*, it is at once the “primitive terror” described in “The Dry Salvage”—the primal element behind all memory, all recorded history--and the Word beyond language that embodies ultimate meaning.

. . . I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations--not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror. (CPP 186-87)

Even if, as in the passage cited above, he still associates the ineffable partly with inchoate origins, by then Eliot has learned to link beginning to ends, and to accustom himself, as he says in his essay on Dante, “to find meaning in *final causes* rather than in origins” (SE 274). These final causes, to be sure, involve something equally ineffable but they depend on a different perspective of life. As William Harmon views it, there is a progress from the silence of Eliot’s earlier poems which displays futility, frustration, and humiliation, to a new kind of silence that points toward the ideal condition of stillness (450-59). What seems at first too sordid and dangerous to contemplate as an aspect of Prufrock’s “overwhelming question” becomes, in Eliot’s later, more religious view, an intimation of Grace: a revelation of Truth; the beginning and the end; the source of Incarnation and the mode towards which all created forms evolve. “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” Prufrock exclaims, introducing a particularly subjective version of “ineffability.” Initially, in an early poem such as “Prufrock,” the failure of adequate speech may seem mainly a matter of individual character and aesthetics, of a weak man in an ugly world. In “Gerontion,” it may seem a matter of constricted experience. By the opening section of *The Waste Land*, however, where we see that essential responses to life are disengaged or frozen, the inability to speak and the depletion of common language become manifest limits

of the human condition. Eliot's starting point in the *Four Quartets* is "the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (CP 179), or again, learning "to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say" (CP 182); his material is a complex weave of polarities--past and present, memory and experience, time and stillness, word and silence etc.--all of which are in some way or other elements of our consciousness: not world, but the very stuff out of which the presence of the world to us is formed. Throughout his career, Eliot struggles at length with both the content and the form of the ineffable, making a gradual transition from a subjective to a visionary point of view. His focus shifts from a moral horror at the nastiness and futility of human desire to an awesome sense of a transcendent convergence of temporal and eternal reality--a crucial movement "from the unspeakable to the inexpressible."

Eliot's major early poems proceed from a comparable judgment taken from a "backward half-look / . . . towards the primitive terror" while the terror still seems palpably close, chaotic, and private--not yet incorporated into the larger scheme of shared experience that he affirms in *Four Quartets*. The nameless retrospective horror that he first presents, suggests the reaction of a man who assumes that he has already seen or suspected too much--a man of disappointed expectations, coming of age as his culture breaks down. The early figures such as Prufrock, Gerontion, and Tiresias carry the sense of the unspeakable dark depths welling up to the verge of expression. In a letter to Paul Elmer More⁵¹ dated "Shrove Tuesday, 1928," shortly after his formal conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, Eliot gives a particularly striking image of the abysmal depths that seem to undermine his attempts to reach out beyond the self, pointing to "the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive toward asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting" (qtd. in Simpson 161). This void, it would appear, is a personal rendering of the general primitive terror--where center ("the void. . . in the middle") corresponds to original source--and is

equally ineffable. The question of meaning becomes all the more pressing on this chaotic plane. Here again the inner Word is hidden, while ostensible language is scattered into different voices, dialects, and codes. It requires the action of the word to fill it, to make it substantial. At this stage in Eliot's career, the void seems to remain a fixed center of existence, ominously compelling and in that sense empowering.

The ineffable makes its presence felt throughout *The Waste Land* both in terms of what is left unsaid and in terms of what remains inexplicable. Silent figures, such as Phlebas the Phoenician, and speechless figures, such as the man in the hyacinth garden and the beleaguered husband in "A Game of Chess" ("Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak."), haunt the poem with a passivity that suggests a primary failure of vitality and will.⁵² Like Prufrock and Gerontion, these figures stay self-absorbed instead of looking for more compelling answers to their lives in the surrounding world. Their failure to act manifests itself as a failure to speak where speech has been valid and transforming. As we have seen in the previous section on *The Waste Land*, a variant of saying nothing that makes the poem an especially painful expression of modern society is saying nothing worthwhile, not communicating, using a "cryptic or casual" language that reflects the degradation of speech. Despite the widespread dislocation of language in *The Waste Land*, which represents "the breakdown of our bond of language," the potential for meaning inheres in the words themselves and in what they allusively symbolize. Like the physical world and the people that Eliot depicts, words seem dormant rather than dead, implicative, ambiguous yet opaque. The essentials of life and myth remain even in this extremity of insular solipsism, waiting, available for whatever renewed sense of purpose and vision we might have:

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home. (CPP 73)

Words can give us a lease on a higher dimension of ineffability suggested in the lines above by “singing” and “the wind’s home,” examples of the act and source of ultimate inspiration. Hidden yet implicit, the silent word suggests another dimension of ineffability that redeems and contains the primitive terrors we struggle to conceal. In effect, the generative Word replaces the degenerative void at the center of all expressive life, providing a new and fully integral focus of meaning. Language in this context is no longer merely expressive or descriptive: it is an inspired sign, the embodiment of mystery.

Throughout his career, the sense of the void never really leaves Eliot, whether he tries to fill it, deny it, instruct it, incorporate it, or relinquish it to the power of Grace. The poem’s own linguistic claims finally question its fundamental premises: whether the vision of unity and eternity indeed bestows positive value on the realm of time and multiplicity it is meant to redeem; whether silence, in surpassing language, indeed fulfills it; or only by negation can they indicate what remains forever beyond, and indeed opposed to, the conditions of representation. Thus he will continue to say in various ways what he states so fully in “The Dry Salvages”: “We had the experience but missed the meaning”; and he will continue to search for the meaning. For much of the time movement is one of his greatest concerns--the spiritual vicissitudes of finding and keeping a viable way; the instability of the expressive language that mediates between inchoate sound and devotional incantation.

Discussing the status and treatment of language in Eliot’s work, we have seen that for him, language serves both as a subject and as a medium of representation. But its place in his work is highly ambivalent, at once asserted and negated. This ambivalence is not Eliot’s alone. Eliot makes more evident the equivocal and even self-contradictory place of language within that tradition of ambivalence. Incompletion and fulfillment, multiplicity and unity, signifier and signified: instead of being reconciled, these remain in Eliot’s system ultimately discontinuous, and indeed at odds. Eliot’s quest for truth and language was complicated, as complicated as his mind and his personality. He did not try one

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scheme at a time, neatly and in sequence. Both in substance and in sequence, his schemes overlapped. "For last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice" (*CPP* 194). In the end Eliot was still--and more truly--the "perpetual beginner" he had sought throughout his mature youth and youthful maturity to be in his roles as poet-critic. Eliot's language is "foreign" in every conceivable manner: foreign after, as the world awaits the new voice. Literally doubling back upon himself, "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from" (*CPP* 197). The way up and down, the way forward and back, are one. If Eliot is right in what he believes, he will be aiding that voice right along, for his words, freed of the human imperfection of pattern and now become "Too strange to each other for misunderstanding," will be part of "what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living" (*CPP* 192).

Reality, words, and art are all flawed for the modern artist. Mostly, they herald failures, waste lands, hollow men, though there endure isolated moments of fulfilled success--the voice of the thunder, for example. Both the failures and the successes contribute to Eliot's language, though neither term in itself is possible without the other--just as in "Portrait of a Lady," neither the lady's speech nor the caller's interior dialogue is itself sufficient as means of communication for the modern age. It is, again, the combination of success and failure that generates the condition of language in which it can be most usefully presented. Eliot does not pretend to have a panacea for the failures of language, the failures of reality. Both success and failure must be combined in the poem in the only way they can be--as fragments, lacking the link that would pedagogically turn failure into success, or moralistically show the audience how to choose success over failure. For Eliot, poetry must suggest the vital, redemptive value of language. At the beginning of his career as poet, Eliot doubted that language could even accomplish the traditional task of recording one's perception of the external, phenomenal world. Through

the continued struggle of trying “to learn to use words,” the constant “raid on the inarticulate” (*CP* 128), and by careful arrangement and conscious patterning, Eliot tried to make language communicate the objects of the contemplative mind. In the final analysis, however, it is clear that language cannot reach the realm of the ineffable, for the poet’s vocation is to treat contingent human circumstances.

My intention here was to ground the discussion of language as being double-edged, for language is limited and fallen, while at the same time always working against its own limitations. Language, after all, is and remains both inherently theological and inherently material and it bears the trace or mark or cross of both. This double dimension of linguisticity, to affirm or negate either aspect of which generates the twin illusions of logocentrism on the one hand or logophobia on the other, creates the space, the occasion, the intersection at which negative and positive ways may meet and cross. It also provides the medium for understanding the identity in difference of both. The resulting tension is so-called “duplicity.” In this respect, one of the paradoxes of the poem is itself. Language that is fallen remains nevertheless an object of wonder. Contradictory responses to it work against each other, in a fierce tension. The poem, like language and life, is at one and the same time great and wretched. Eliot’s awareness of the “difficulty” and at the same time “necessity” of finding a language that would relate us to the past while giving us a precise sense of our distance from it, is an essential part of his poetic genius. To discover a self is not just to receive impressions, but also to find a language that will relate to past and future. It is to “urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.” His positing an ideal which no contemporary poet could achieve is a further sign of his miraculous sense of the possible and impossible. This great poet showed throughout his career a “peculiar honesty” in his poetry that is indeed disturbing, and is the outcome of a supreme integrity. What is certain is that Eliot is a pivotal figure in the history of modernism. In his early work he renewed the critical tradition and gave it its distinctively modern direction; with his last great poem he may have shown it the way ahead. To be sure, we can say of Eliot what he himself said

of Yeats: “he was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them” (*OPP* 262).

Notes

1 This term originally came from the indication of "a particular religious system, especially considered as controlling human affairs during a period." Here I use the term in a more common way, and at the same time for a theoretical--deconstructionist--undertone.

2 However, Perloff argues that Eliot's poetry does not as fully pose the problem that came to obsess modernism.

3 Wyndham Lewis told his correspondent that Eliot owed his best poetry to Pound--he was convinced that there would eventually be a vogue in favor of Pound which would take the form of a reaction against Eliot. See Ackroyd 290.

4 In fact, Leavis's changing approach to Eliot was less clear-cut but more interesting, involving "a zigzag progress" through many different states, of enthusiastic regard, regard tinged with doubt and unease, of renewed expressions of admiration, followed by exasperated swings into abusive dismissal. For detailed discussions, see Singh 226-54, and Bergonzi, "Leavis and Eliot," 21-43.

5 One of the most heated attacks on Eliot came from prominent feminist scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the linguistic and stylistic experiments of many male modernists, including Eliot, reflect "the historical intensity of the linguistic issue that has haunted male writers since the nineteenth century" (253). They criticize Eliot's language as a desperate and insecure reflection of a sense of belatedness, rather than a confident embrace of the past. According to them, Eliot and others created "linguistic fantasies" that their language can transcend a perceived confinement; they respond to the sense of belatedness and confinement "by seeking to reconstitute a vanished father-speech" (256). In their perspective, Eliot's attempt to reconcile past and present resembles an attempt to escape into a domain of unchallenged and unthreatened male authority.

6 Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* (1957) which argued that "the essential idea of romanticism is the doctrine that the imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematical. The poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can thus be seen in connection as a poetry of experience." M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971) set out to show that "romantic thought and literature represented a decisive turn in Western culture. . . . This fact has been obvious to most of the important writers from the mid nineteenth-century to the present time, and many of these writers have defined their own literary enterprise by either a positive or negative reference to the forms and inherent ethos of the romantic achievement." Northrop Frye's *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968); Frye argued a similar case in archetypal terms. He showed how romanticism involved a major change in nothing less than the mythological structure of Western culture. Early nineteenth-century romanticism was "the first major phase in an imaginative revolution which has carried on until our own day. . . . This means that everything that has followed Romanticism, including the anti-Romantic movements in France and England of fifty to sixty years ago, is best understood as post-Romantic."

7 Eliot was preoccupied with the opposition between "romantic" and "classical" at least as early as 1916, when he served as Oxford University extension lecturer on the subject of modern French literature. The synopsis for the course survives and makes plain Eliot's interest in the contemporary French reaction against romanticism.

8 Cf. Eliot recognizes imagination as a violence from within but not as a rage for order. He therefore relies on external authority to contain the irrationality of composition: first literary tradition and later religious orthodoxy.

9 Any affinities can be found or connections made between Bradley, Eliot's Bradleyan thesis, and Eliot's critical theory. Moreover, Eliot did not accept Bradley's ideas uncritically. His dissertation is no mere summary but a critique. Clearly, he agreed with

Bradley's general position, but at the same time he disagreed with a number of Bradley's ideas and was explicit about points of disagreement. For instance, see *KE* 153.

10 The studies of Kristian Smidt and Hugh Kenner led to a number of books and articles on this subject [Bradley's influence upon Eliot] in the early sixties. Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961); Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1965). For a bibliography of books and articles up to 1971, see Anne C. Bolgan, appendix 2, in *What the Thunder Really Said* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's UP, 1973) 169-84.

11 In Lyndall Gordon's words, "Bradley's attraction for Eliot was not . . . speculative bravery, but the graceful intellectual poise with which he accepted human failure to know final truth" (*Eliot's Early Years* 50): "We justify the natural wonder which delights to stray beyond our daylight world, and to follow paths that lead to half-known half-unknowable regions. Our conclusion. . . has confirmed the irresistible impression that all is beyond us" (qtd. in *Ibid.* 50).

12 F. H. Bradley, "On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience," *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1914) 159-91.

13 For the subtle distinctions among these words, see Blackmur 170-75.

14 From the same standpoint, Eliot rejects the possibility of an absolutely pure and incorrigible appreciation of art. "'Pure' artistic appreciation is to my thinking only an ideal, when not merely a figment, and must be, so long as the appreciation of art is an affair of limited and transient human beings existing in space and time. Both artist and audience are limited. . . . Hence each new master of criticism performs a useful service merely by the fact that his errors are of a different kind from the last; and the longer the sequence of critics we have, the greater amount of correction is possible" (*UPUC* 109).

15 Eliot's friend, Conrad Aiken also reads "Prufrock" as "autobiographic." Furthermore, he assesses this poem as "psychological realism" in "highly subjective or introspective vein" (12).

16 But Kenner's point fails to register the tension between the name and the voices of the text. There is a sharp disjunction between the poem and its title; between the love song we expect, and the monologue we hear; between the speaker and his name. Like a letter without an address, Prufrock's love song returns to sender.

17 Traces of a prolonged incubation, these incongruities have disconcerted many readers: Pound urged Eliot to cut the Hamlet passage; C. K. Stead could have wished he had removed the fog (153). But the meaning of the text depends upon the fissures of its discourse, for they dramatize the speaker's dislocation from himself, misfitted in the language which bespeaks him.

18 Cf. J. Peter Dyson, "Word Heard: Prufrock Asks His Question." *Yeats Eliot Review* 5.2 (1978): 33-35. In contrast with Elizabeth Drew, George Williamson, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, who posit Prufrock's inability to identify the question, Dyson has a differing view about Prufrock's formulation of the question. "Prufrock does, in effect, formulate his question--the question of the ages. . . but he can do it only indirectly, by allusion."

19 In this sense, Eliot can be a forerunner of Gadamerian hermeneutics, which understands "horizon" to denote the finite limitations of any particular perspective at any particular time, and furthermore, asserts the possibility to "expand our horizons." See the section (4) of Chapter 1: An Enigma of language.

20 Prufrock is himself a moving fragmentation, and the reader is obliged to conjure him out a bald spot, a morning coat, a simple pin, some arms and legs, all casually thrown together. The city, too, consists of broken tortuosities: its hotels are reduced to oyster-shells, and even the fog descends like the muzzle and the tongue of some lost cat. Meanwhile, the female body is disorganized into an inventory of its parts: hands, faces, voices, eyes, arms, teacups, and the skirts that trail across the floor.

For an early clear glimpse of the disintegration of Eliot's rhetoric, see an anonymous review for *Times Literary Supplement* 21 June 1917, 299.

21 At this point, we are tempted to relate "Gerontion" to the process of deconstruction. In the words of Grover Smith, "The futility of a world where men blunder down the blind corridors of history, guided by vanity and gulled by success, asserting no power of choice between good and evil but forced into alternatives they cannot predict--this is the futility of a labyrinth without an end" (61).

22 Derrida argues that the notion of the line, whether straight or circular, has exercised a secret tyranny on Western thought, shaping all conceptions of language and temporality. But "Gerontion" stands in what he calls "the suspense between two ages of writing": between the myth of linearity and another order, imaginable only as the fission of the old.

23 The anonymous review for the *Time* on 3 March 1923 began his cutting, single-column piece, "There is a new kind of literature abroad in the land, whose only obvious fault is that no one can understand it," and added, "It is rumored that *The Waste Land* was written as a hoax" (12). This same tone of annoyance can be heard in J. C. Squire's review, which said flatly that the "printing of the book is scarcely worthy of the Hogarth Press" (qtd. in Grant, ed. 191-92). Others, like Louis Untermeyer, found Eliot's "pompous parade of erudition" and "the absence of an integrated design" to be formidable barriers to appreciation. Eliot's inability "to give form to formlessness," according to Untermeyer, was an unforgivable weakness in a poet (453). So also was Eliot's use of allusions, which, for F. R. Lucas, resulted in cheap parodies and inferior imitations of the originals (116-18).

24 To see poetry in terms of complexity of meaning was alien to the conventional critical outlook of the time as it was congenial to some of the most vigorous minds in the newly formed Cambridge School of English: notably Richards, Leavis and, a little later, Empson. Even if they evolved various terms for complexity, but they all meant the manifold interconnectedness of words used poetically.

25 For a further detailed explanation for this point, see Southam 156-60.

26 Anyhow, he can "see" though blind, speaks in literary forms not yet invented in his own time, understands with surprising accuracy the social implications of an industrial society. If an old man with wrinkled female breasts, he is in some sense a dirty old man, twentieth-century voyeur. Eliot has made Tiresias into a character who will suit his poetic needs. In this way, he subverts his allusion. A common strategy in *The Waste Land*, this subversion reveals his ambivalence about the poem as a vehicle of allusion. Thus the use of Tiresias is an important demonstration of Eliot's way with allusion.

27 At the very opening, calling Ezra Pound the better craftsman, Eliot reminds us of his own craftsmanship and of poetry as a craft. In elevating the content of the poem, Eliot calls into question its craftsmanship or his own ability to embody that content. Such fastidiousness about the status of the literary structure is peculiar.

28 A similar interpretation is put forth by A. D. Moody, "'To fill all the desert with inviolable voice,'" *The Waste Land in Different Voices*, ed. A. D. Moody (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1974) 47-66.

29 For Eliot's comment on Joyce's mythical method, see *Selected Prose* 177. Helen Gardner demonstrates that *The Waste Land* does not have the mythical organization of *Ulysses* in *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949) 84-89.

30 However, William F. Lynch suggested provocatively that Eliot had an orthodox mind and heretical imagination (172). His suggestion, I suppose, is more suitable for Eliot's complex position in terms of ordering poetic materials.

31 In a footnote to the final chapter of *UPUC*, Eliot refers, seemingly with approval, to a French article suggesting that "the pre-logical mentality persists in civilised man, but becomes available only to or through the poet" (148n).

32 The desire to be the public poet and critic is directly related the importance of poetic drama in Eliot's later career, which my dissertation shall not explore. The theater is a place, in Eliot's view, where the commonplace is absorbed into pattern and where language maintains its social function and yet points toward a silent "meaning which reveals itself gradually" (*UPUC* 153).

33 *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*'s dual purpose is to define the word "culture" and to set a bound or limit to the idea--to specify what is and is not culture.

34 Poetry, for such reasons as its concentration and memorability, has more chance than prose of making words "stay still." But prose is better equipped for the task of enabling words to "stay in place" and remain serviceable for the expression of new experience and emotions.

35 Eliot wrote in "Note sur Mallarmé et Poe" (1926), "constitue une brillante critique de Poe: donner un sens pur aux mots de la tribu." *La Nouvelle Revue Française* XIV, 158 (1 Nov 1926): 524-26.

36 "I have created my work by mere elimination, and any truth I have acquired was born only of the loss of an impression that, after flashing, had been consumed and allowed me--thanks to the darkness supplanting it--to penetrate more deeply into the sensation of Absolute Darkness. Destruction was my Beatrice. . . . Every birth is a destruction, and the life of a moment is the agony in which something lost is resuscitated so that it can be seen, being unknown beforehand. . . . I think that in order to be really a man, nature as thinking, one must think with his entire body, the result being thought full and in unison, like those violin strings vibrating immediately with its hollow sound box. . . . I am truly decomposed: imagine all this being necessary in order to have a very single view of the Universe! Otherwise, one can't feel any other unity than that of one's life" (qtd. in Strauss 86 & 90).

37 Eliot's counter-statement should be contrasted with Valéry's assertions in "The Poet's Rights Over Language" and "Remarks on Poetry," both reprinted in the same volume.

There is no need to recapitulate here Eliot's detailed analysis of Poe's "irresponsibility towards the meaning of words," what we might call the claim of the people's speech, to demonstrate that "in the sense in which we speak of 'purity of language' Poe's poetry is very far from pure" (TCC 40). For Eliot's detailed attack on Poe's carelessness and unscrupulousness in the use of words, see TCC 27-42.

38 See for example his essay "Swinburne as Poet," SE 324.

39 The phrases are lines from Tennyson.

40 Here again we can see Eliot's clear movement away from Mallarméan esotericism towards the notion of social role for the poet, even though Eliot's tribute to Dante does not imply a total rejection of Mallarmé and all he stands for.

41 For St. John Perse's observation of Eliot's use of words, see his conversation with Kathleen Raine: "Eliot's interest in words was literary and etymological: he learned about words by reading the Oxford dictionary" (Raine 257). For Eliot's confirmation about this, see his unpublished address on the "Poetical and Prosaic Use of Words," in the Eliot Collection, Kings College, Cambridge (qtd. in Bush 160).

42 Frequently, *Four Quartets* has been criticized on the ground that Eliot has abstracted what was in *The Waste Land* a lively critical and creative process. However, it is a good time to read again *Four Quartets*. As Denis Donoghue pointed out, in many respects *Four Quartets* seems to be Eliot's most challenging work; a dogmatic poem in an age hostile to dogma; a Christian poem written in a time which we are admonished to call "post-Christian"; a poem which sponsors the silence of understanding and belief (303). Furthermore, the recent tendency to see Eliot's career as a continuing development has caused critics to downgrade *The Waste Land* in favor of the achievement of *Four Quartets*.

43 The title of Cowley's 1943 review of *Four Quartets*, in which he said, "Eliot's preoccupation with the contemplative life seems to be carrying him into an abstract sphere beyond the limits of poetry" (768). Graham Hough, "Vision and Doctrine in *Four Quartets*," *CritQ* 15 (1973): 107-27, provides a subtle analysis of the relation between poetry and belief in *Four Quartets* and the problem that relation presents for the modern reader. Eliot came to see getting "*beyond poetry*," as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*," as one of his goals (unpublished lecture, "English Letter Writers," New Haven, 1933, qtd. in Matthiessen 90).

44 For several sources of dissonance in *Four Quartets*, see DeLamotte 343-61. Also, Moody's *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* provides an insightful reading of *Four Quartets* that is deeply informed by a sense of its dissonances. Furthermore, in his most recent book on Eliot, *Tracing T. S. Eliot's Spirit* (1996), Moody said "The further we go into the poem [the *Quartets*] the more we find that its music does not resolve its contradictions but rather becomes the music of a profound and irreducible contradiction" (161-62).

45 For further discussion of this, see DeLamotte 351-54.

46 Eliot's fascination with relation-in-itself can also be found in the earlier poems, for instance, "The Hollow Men." See *CPP* 85-86.

47 See the work of notably Davidson, Perl and Brooker and Bentley.

48 Some words and phrases--like "as if" or "without" or "let me put it this way."--help to postpone affirmation and to destabilize the propositional nature of language, while at the same time they point ahead or behind to the possibility of these fulfillments.

49 This discussion also addresses Eliot's early philosophical statements, even though the question of continuity from *Knowledge and Experience* to *Four Quartets* is a highly complex one. He said that although objects and words are "different," they depend on their relations to one another for their individual cogency, for their difference (*KE* 134).

50 The darkness of the tube train in "Burnt Norton" III, with its evocation of human limitations, physical and mental, is not dark enough; we must "Descend lower" to find the "internal darkness." This pattern is repeated precisely in "East Coker" as the darkness of the deep lane gives way, via Dante's "dark wood" and Milton's "dark dark dark," to the darker paradoxes of St. John. In each case, the same image is used to show how human limitations can become the means of their own transcendence: if time can only be conquered through time, other forms of limitation can only be conquered through limitation. In this sense, we can read the "enclosed" and "dark" places in the *Quartets* as places of purgation which will lead to enlightenment.

51 As his poems deepened in spiritual authority, Eliot found other writers who had made the same journey he had made, particularly Paul Elmer More, the Princeton professor. For further relationship between two in terms of religion and void, see another quoted letter of Eliot to More, dated 2 June 1930, in Margolis 144.

52 In the case of the "hyacinth girl," the feeling moving through the passage is troubled, ambiguous. The "silence" in this scene, Michael Edwards points out, implies its double nature: This moment "seems to escape the toils of language, by looking to a possibility beyond speech. . . . 'Silence' at the end of its line rhymes semantically with the negatives at the end of the three previous lines. And 'I knew nothing' is not the same as 'I did not know anything': like silence, 'nothing' is positive, as in Mallarmé" (108).

Chapter 3

GEOFFREY HILL'S IDEA OF LANGUAGE

The poet's true commitment must always be first to the vertical richness of language. The poet's gift is to make history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language. ("Under Judgment" 214)

Up to the present, post-Second World War British poetry has been perceived by most American and some British critics as "less original," more inhibited and ultimately less important than pre-war British poetry or contemporary American poetry. The first highly influential negative criticism of post-war British poetry appeared in the Introduction to *The New Poetry* (1962), an anthology of contemporary American and British verse. In its now famous introduction, the critic A. Alvarez attacked the Movement and the British poets in general for their timid provincialism and narrow-minded insularity, for their reluctance to write really serious poetry which dealt with the great, often tragic issues of our age. As models of high, dramatically serious poetry he held up two Americans, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, who were able to cope "openly with the quick of their experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown" (24-25). In the revised edition of the anthology (1966) the names of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were added as further examples of the "new seriousness" that English poetry, according to Alvarez, sorely needs. Alvarez's general sentiments were repeated by American critics not long afterward. In a 1965 essay Chad Walsh warned that "if it [Movement] continues too long, English poetry will become a backwater and an eddy" (105). In several books and essays of the late 1960s M. L. Rosenthal complained of contemporary British poets' lack of daring and urged them to attend to their more extreme American counterparts as models. In *The New Poets* (1967), for instance, Rosenthal commented that American readers are likely to react unfavorably to contemporary British poetry which "looks a morass of petty cleverness--effetely knowledgeable, spongy and talkative, and often derivative--that seems

quite dead at the center. The poetic act, on many occasions socially rather than aesthetically oriented, seems taken for granted, and a tolerance for facile mediocrity at times pervades every level of poetic activity" (197). This negative opinion persisted into the 1970s and 1980s at least on the American side. In his book, *Love-Hate Relations* (1975), Stephen Spender asserted that "American writers today don't at all conceal the fact that they consider English literature finished" (311). In an article on Philip Larkin (1983), Christopher Miller said "Britain in the twentieth century has not proved a fertile context for the creation of great poetry. This fact has been adequately demonstrated by the poverty of British poetry since Yeats and Eliot" (69). This negative attitude culminated in a 1977 special issue of *Contemporary Literature*, entitled "The Two Poetries: The Postwar Lyric in Britain and America." Marjorie Perloff's Introduction asserts that "since the early sixties" British and American poetry "have increasingly gone their separate ways, today it would be fair to say that American poetry has less in common with its British counterpart than with the poetry of France, of Eastern Europe, or of Latin America" (264). The essay focuses on characteristics of contemporary British poetry perceived as obstacles to originality, spontaneity and effective technique. The essays in the special issue argue that the dominant British poets of the 1960s and 1970s share specific, endemic weaknesses. They go on to argue that those weaknesses make contemporary British poetry manifestly inferior to its American counterpart. Michael Wood, for instance, asserts that contemporary British poetry is stifled by a culture "solidified into banality." Responding to this fact has caused the distinctive sentiment of that poetry to be "a sense of crowding; of litter, both material and moral; of cheapness and indifference to cheapness; and above all, of the oppressive, inescapable, thoroughly internalized presence of others" (305).

While the articles gathered by Perloff suggest it is American poets and critics who have been reacting against the perceived timid, urbane, overly rational and controlled nature of British poetry, in fact British poets themselves have been rejecting the poetics governing "Movement" anthologies, furthermore testing radically innovative techniques and exploring

new, often emotionally charged or highly politicized subject matter, in the 1970s. Ted Hughes, in his interview with Egbert Faas (1970), charged the Movement writers with having confined themselves to “the cosiest arrangement of society” and having avoided the horrors that were rifts in man’s broadest experiences of the world (10-11). Through the early 1950s, the heyday of the Movement, Geoffrey Hill, as a resistant figure, progressed toward a “dense and complex” idiom, which is in contrast to “purified” or “chaste” diction, grammatically proper syntax, and conventional urbanity. Since Hughes and Hill broke into print, they have established the strongest English counter to the prevailing Movement mentality. It is thus surprising that Lawrence Kramer argues for a basic similarity between Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin--two strikingly different poets standing “at the poles of sensibility and language” (320). In his essay, “The Woodwatches the Water Clock,” Kramer points out that the two poets’ “stylistic evenness, a decorum almost, the hard motion of a uniform verbal will.” He opposes this style of near “modesty” and “decorum” to the dominant style of American poems, which show “a transcendental discontinuity: a free, self-determined movement of language from idiom to idiom, standpoint to standpoint, time to time, and place to place” (325). Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, however, indicated the “pluralistic” and “positive diversity” of British poetry in the seventies. In their introduction of *British Poetry since 1970*, we come to encounter a series of names as interesting poets: Charles Tomlinson, Donald Davie, W. S. Graham, Michael Hamburger, Roy Fisher, J. H. Prynne, Elaine Feinstein, Christopher Middleton, John Heath-Stubbs and David Gascoyne. Furthermore, as an important part of the dynamic picture of contemporary British poetry, Jones and Schmidt pointed out “the overdue recognition of Geoffrey Hill’s uncompromising work, and emergence of C. H. Sisson,” and “the rediscovery of Edgell Rickwood” (ix-x). The map of post-war British poetry is today very much denser and more various than it appeared two or three decades ago, when the so-called “Movement” poets seemed to dominate the 1950s and the “Mersey Beats” the 1960s. Thus the insistence on the inferiority of contemporary British poetry is to ignore the real

achievement of a new generation, who have transformed the nature of British poetry, politicizing it and energizing it.¹ Among those who remarkably write in the post-war era, Ted Hughes,² Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison need to be read more seriously and amusingly.³

Among those contemporary poets, Geoffrey Hill's position seems to be "unique" and furthermore "solitary."⁴ He exhibits a kind of literary and comprehensive imagination his contemporaries tend to lack. He is in command of a profound moral sophistication and maturity rare among poets writing in the language anywhere. While to some critics Hill is "the most ambitious and successful," "the most gifted," then, "indisputably the best living poet in English,"⁵ to others, particularly to American readers, a body of his work may seem difficult, "foreign," and "slightly anachronistic." Indicating "the tardiness of American response" to Hill's poetry, Donald Hall said, Hill has been "the subject of a small cult" in America ("Poet of Stones and Fields" 601). Moreover, it is true that in America, outside of a few now fairly standard anthology pieces, Hill's work has been little read. To be sure, Hill's concerns and voices are unlike anything found in American poetry today, and his poetic stance is more closely descended from modernism than anything written here. Hill's poems are complex in syntax and lexicon, dense with allusion to literature of the past, to English history, to European history and religious thought. Providing a perspective on history, the poems provide a striking contrast to many contemporary American poets' past which seems to go only as far back as their own childhood. The poems are not about the world we already know but about some of what we should know if we are to gain imaginative perspective on our contemporary situation. In this sense, his poetry is "intellectually deep" and "emotionally vigorous" (Werner 97). The poetry comes out of a sense of communal relationship--of the past and the present, of one human being and another, of a person and his God--and it is deeply ethical. Accordingly, the contrast between Hill and American practice make Hill appear all but "unreadable"--"pretentious, affected, impenetrable, reactionary."⁶

As Harold Bloom points out, not only Hill's style but also his subject is "difficulty": "the difficulty of apprehending and accepting moral guilt, and the difficulty of being a poet when the burden of history, including poetic history, makes any prophetic stance inauthentic" (*Figures* 235). Hill compels each of us to test his own strength as a reader, and so to test and clarify also our own relation to tradition (235). He has long had difficulties with readers in general, and not merely because his poetry is difficult. Considerations of what should be expected of the relation between poet and audience run through his essays in *The Lords of Limit*. He has tried to put into practice what he calls a "formal engagement" requiring "one's audience to become one's fellow-laborer," like Coleridge's "clerisy,"⁷ so that reading the poem becomes just as much an act of discovery for the reader as the writing is for the writer. The point is that Hill's "remorseless concentration," his power, and his learning tend to leave one awe-struck. Our obligation as readers, however, is to attempt to assess Hill's own extraordinarily "fastidious," his absolutely "scrupulous" assessment of his own subjects and of himself as poet in relationship to these subjects and the ambiguous act of writing about them. This must be done at the level of image, idea, diction, metric, and so on.

The discernment of a writer's moral liability for the literary artifacts he applies himself to, and a reticent and ironic engagement of such responsibility in his poetry, are characteristic features of Hill's demanding oeuvre. Under the burden of what he variously calls the poet's "empirical guilt," "the tongue's atrocities," "the indecencies of the language" and "its great potential for violence," which subsist as "irredeemable error in the very substance and texture of his craft and pride," the writer discovers his vocation, that of bearing his "peculiar . . . shame in a world growing ever more shameless." A search for command from within and through a position of defeat and loss is fundamental to what is special about Hill's skeptical art. This has everything to do with his unique conception of language which involves a definition of the place and function of poetry and of the poet

within his poetic tradition and his own time. He is an outsider and a writer of “strong poetry.”

Chapter 3 will pursue Geoffrey Hill’s unique stand in the relationship with modernists, especially, T. S. Eliot and with postmodern theorists. Hill is considered as a most Eliotic contemporary poet in this post-Eliot age, then, as a late-comer. Hill accepts the burden of modern poetry and attempts to work his way beyond it. I will make extensive use of Hill’s prose (*The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas*, *The Enemy’s Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language*,⁸ and his interviews etc.) as well as his poetry, and show how his “plural” idea of language is in and out of modernists’ influence, and examine how it can develop a postmodern consciousness against “the flood of postmodernist theoretical argument.” Indicating the difference between theory and his poetry, Hill also said that “I don’t feel that anything I do is understandable in terms of a general theory. The writing of every poem presents its unique problems, of finding the right articulation for the particular moment” (“Literature Comes to Life” 25).

I assume, however, the connection between Hill’s own statements about his poetry and his poetic practice provides a good basic understanding of Hill as a poet and thinker (poetic philosopher). Thus, before undertaking specific and detailed discussions of his poems, the next section will examine his idea of language through his prose, which paves the way for the very illuminating reading of his poetry.

(1) *The Lords of Limit* and *The Enemy’s Country*

In the fourth stanza of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Geoffrey Hill asks, “Must men stand by what they write / as by their camp-beds or their weaponry / or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?” (CP 183). Hill ponders this question throughout *The Lords of Limit* (1984) always aware of the conflict and compromise between the poet’s joint commitment to “aesthetics” and “ethics.” Through a collection of

essays produced between 1960 and 1983, he offers interpretations of English literature from the sixteenth to the present century.⁹ But a constant theme is the question of language. At times, Hill seems balked in the attempt to formulate a relation between language, moral responsibility, and the power of poetic invention. Often he argues against a narrow definition of poetry that would assign it to a special domain of aesthetic beauty, or against an equally narrow definition that would confine its significance to that of any other persuasive assertion. What he wants instead, he says, is “an atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgment” (10). His interpretations, thus, are unified by his ethical insistence upon the responsibility writers must accept for their words, and by his meticulous analyses of occasions when writers either manage or fail to effect “atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgment.” In commenting on Wordsworth’s “The Female Vagrant,” Hill said, “Language. . . is not ‘the outward sign’ of a moral action; it is the moral action” (LL 117). It is just such an idea of language that Hill’s poems do enact. Thus it may be true that a criticism of Hill’s prose is suggested by his poetry. Bloom makes great play on this idea of language in his introduction of *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom*, and he argues that Hill brings to his poems “his power, his despair, and . . . his Word, not in the sense of Logos but in the Hebraic sense of *davhar*, a word that is also an act, a bringing-forward of something previously held back in the self” (xix).

In particular, three of the essays, “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’” “Redeeming the Time,” and “Our Word Is Our Bond,” deal with the poet’s attempt to effect an “at-one-ment” between his personal desire for vivid self-expression and his respect for the impersonal dictates of style. First of all, Hill’s opening essay of *The Lords of Limit*, “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’” reveals his deep engagements with the nature of language and literature, and the wrestlings as a poet fatally enwrapped with the Word. Hill’s oxymoronic statements and his heavily allusive style stress the plight of the modern poet obsessed by his need to resurrect an ethical idiom from a fallen language.

Language, the element in which a poet works, is also the medium through which judgments upon his work are made. That commonplace image, founded upon the unfinished statues of Michelangelo, 'mighty figures straining to free themselves from the imprisoning marble', has never struck me as being an ideal image for sculpture itself; it seems more to words. The arts which use language are the most impure of arts, though I do not deny that those who speak of 'pure poetry' are attempting, however inadequately, to record the impact of a real effect. The poet will occasionally, in the act of writing a poem, experience a sense of pure fulfilment which might too easily and too subjectively be misconstrued as the attainment of objective perfection. It seems less fanciful to maintain that, however much a poem is shaped and finished, it remains to some extent within the 'imprisoning marble' of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection. At the same time I would claim the utmost significance for matters of technique and I take no cynical view of those rare moments in which the inertia of language, which is also the coercive force of language, seems to have been overcome. (LL 2)

In this passage a good number of things may be argued. It is obvious from this passage that Hill is a poet immensely self-conscious about language itself, and a poet whose moral and political preoccupations deepen everywhere into preoccupations which may properly be called religious. The essential nature of poetry whose medium is a language is impurity. In an interview with John Haffenden, Hill suggests that he, as a poet, inherits a "fallen" language: "The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice" (88). For him, language is of a density equal to the world's (LL 151), and within it lurks a "menace." Thus facing the menace of fall in words, words that are of this world, the poet should be particularly aware that every act of writing is in danger of being a "specific crime." To overcome the "inertia" and the "coercion" in the act of composition is to achieve a momentary sense of fulfillment and concord. Furthermore, Hill conceives of the acts of composition as a resistance to sin and shame. Hill finds that moment of fulfillment phrased by two poets more than usually sensitive to the transcendent potential of language: Yeats for whom "a poem comes right with a click like a closing box" and Eliot in his "moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation" (qtd. in LL 2). Those two definitions are severely different, as Christopher Ricks has noted (*The Force of Poetry* 320-21), but that does not prevent Hill from imposing on them the silence of reconciliation. At the same time, he seems to start off with a problematic theme common to twentieth-century poetry and philosophy: language's incompatibility with the objects it intends to signify. As Eliot

firmly positioned modern art against the disarray of modern society, Hill also provides his own poetry with the capacity for “atonement.” They shared the burden to supply through their art what the modern world lacks: coherence, form, control, order. Eliot and Hill have employed different ways, but in each case the principal effort has been to avoid the isolation of “aesthetic” and “ethical” qualities in poetry, to achieve a fusion of these into a new wholeness. With an Eliotic sensibility that should draw into itself both moral and aesthetic qualities latent in the raw materials of the art, fusing these qualities into a form richer, more alive, more intensely expressive of the full human condition, Hill seems to have another burden, that is to say, to overcome Eliot’s influence.

Hill has described the poetic process, “the technical perfecting of a poem,” as “an act of atonement,” amplifying that word as “a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony” (LL 2). Hill both sees the poet “in the act of ‘making’” as “necessarily delivered up to judgement”—a judgment moral as well as aesthetic and explicitly identifies the “creative intelligence” as “redemptive,” his “utterance” an “act,” his “sacrifice” an “at-one-ment of the ‘sense of language’” with a feeling for the ways of life. Hill affirms a serious function for poetry by supplementing “the high claims of poetry” as a “menace” with the acceptance of poetry as “an utterance of the self. . . demanding love in the form of recognition and ‘absolution’” (LL 17).

At this point, it is worth noting that in terms of style, Hill’s prose is as difficult, “riddling,” and deliberately ambiguous as much of the poetry. The texture of the mingled lectures and essays in *The Lords of Limit* sharply recalls that of his poems. As Peter Levi remarks, “the same preoccupation with moral criticism, with detailed and oblique analysis” is the nourishing force of all Hill’s writing. Both in the obstinate lyrical density of his poems and in the relentless concentration of his essays, Hill uses “resistance” as an impulsion towards definition. He believes, as he has written in an essay on C. H. Sisson, that “poets advance by reacting against that which impedes them” (12). Among the impediments in both his prose and poetry are the tradition of English literature itself; to put

it more specifically, the defaults of language and literary tradition when they are brought to bear upon human experience; the moral ambiguities, betrayals and suffering of the past and present; the nature of power and justice. Moreover, there would be distinctively a “modern” situation that is a kind of impediment--“a social awkwardness” in the conditions under which serious literature like Hill’s is received. As Eric Griffiths points out, Hill suggests, through the evidence amassed in *The Lords of Limit*, that the problem is constantly acute, though protean in the forms it may take; that it arises from a permanent friction between the writer’s attempt to speak representatively for the community and a recognition of his own fractional position within that community, or from even deeper rifts of attitude to the writer’s operation in language (60). As Hill implied in his interview with Haffenden, all these are involved in the impediment of form, because form “is not only a technical containment, but is possibly also an emotional and ethical containment. In the act of refining technique one is not only refining emotion, one is also constantly defining and redefining one’s ethical and moral sensibility” (87).

In the essays, as in his own poems, Hill constantly seeks points where resistance¹⁰ to the various kinds of “impediments” and “immoral pressures of the world” provokes the creative solution of “form,” or what the first essay in *The Lords of Limit* calls “atonement.” As I noted earlier, Hill interprets this word radically as “at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony” (LL 2). Hill regards style, “form” as, above all, a moral struggle. At the same time, for Hill, the “question ‘how the moral intelligence gets into poetry’” (LL 115) becomes one of the most important questions. Interestingly, that was also a modernist main concern: exactly how “moral exactitude” and “technical precision” might coalesce. Furthermore, Hill’s notion of the poem as speech act (LL 11) and his insistence that we should take “with a proper seriousness the idea that ‘rhetoric’ is a part of the ontology of moral action” (LL 158) led him to endorse Wittgenstein’s dictum that “Ethics and aesthetics are one.” Subsequently,

this view produces the intense self-consciousness about meaning, which inevitably makes his own style something of a struggle even for the reader.

The other eight essays treat of instances where “at-one-ment” occurs under different circumstances of “menace,” or where impediments are evaded, not recognized, or inadequately assumed. The question at the heart of his arguments, is whether the poet can respond to his time without compromising with it or being compromised by it. Moreover, the title of his relatively recent book, *The Enemy's Country* (1991), also indicates the world in which he struggles for unworldliness against the corruption of popular taste and, one might say, popular morals.¹¹ Hill has set out, in *The Enemy's Country*, to explore what force of circumstance may do to language when a writer's “enemy of judgment” is not strong enough to counter the pressure. Hill is concerned throughout to detect, in writers' engagements with words, the traces of their engagement with what he terms “the world's business,” from the vicissitudes of Dryden's relations with patrons and publishers to Pound's battles against the faults of modern culture as he saw them. More specifically, Pound's distaste for what “the age demanded” is echoed strongly in Hill's poetry and prose. Adopting the language of Hobbes, Hill refuses an easy “‘compleasance’ that is to say ‘*That every man strive to accommodate himselfe to the rest*’” (EC 1). Enacting his idea of language, Hill's poetry is significantly set and established “against the casual and the haphazard.” Accordingly, his poetry often seems, in Hugh Haughton's words, “obstinately archaic” (129) and, as I remarked earlier, it makes daunting demands of its readers. Like Pound, Hill delights in presenting work that is “out of key with the time” and which refuses the fatuousness resulting from a “readiness to oblige” (EC 16). This is not simply a solipsistic retreat from the world's din. However, Hill sees the poet's prime duty as one of resistance: “a poet's words and rhythms are not his utterance so much as his resistance. His ‘choice of *Words*, and Harmony of Numbers’ as Dryden would say, his ‘technic’ as Yeats and Pound called it, must resist the pressure of circumstances or be inundated by the tide of ‘compleasance’” (EC 5). At this point, Hill's *virtù* involves

“resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive” (*LL* 1), offering “some resistance to the reductionist tendency of modern scientism” (qtd. in *LL* 6) and, above all, resisting the “inertial drag of speech” (*LL* 87). In Hill’s poetry, we see the work of the “intelligence at bay; of intelligence fighting against an alignment of odds” (qtd. in *EC* 95).

To be sure, Hill owes much to modernists like Eliot and Pound. Pound’s advocacy of economy in the use of poetic language and modernist techniques may be not only the devices to “make it new,” but also a mode of resistance in the modern world. Hill, thus, is an heir not only to Pound’s variety of modernism, but also to his insistence that modernist techniques offer a strategy of negotiation for the “resistant intelligence”:

One of the discoveries of ‘modernist’ poetry has been the technique of transposing the hopeless ‘irritation of the jostled’, ‘the gross silence of hired concealers’, into the kind of rapid juxtapositions and violent lacunae that one finds in the third and fourth poems of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*--phrase callously jostling with phrase, implication merging into implication (‘pli selon pli’), sententiae curtly abandoned. These become key instruments of the ‘intelligence at bay’. (*EC* 94-95)

This “resistant intelligence” places the modern world against a much older one, not for reasons of nostalgia but with the insistence of the scholar-poet who believes that there should be a continuum between the language and experience of the past and that of the present. Consequently, Hill’s poetry is profoundly historical and intellectually ambitious.

In this resistant project, Hill reveals a somewhat Foucauldian sense of words as receivers and transmitters of power, and of language as the site of a remorseless ideological struggle, arguing that “the writer’s judgement of word-values both affects and is affected by his understanding of, or his failure to comprehend, the current reckonings of value in the society of his day,” so that “a poet’s words and rhythms are not his utterance so much as his resistance” (*EC* 5). Hill’s conception of the relationship between power and language, as it emerges from these complex and oblique studies, is a dual one. On the one hand, there can be no ideologically or morally pure use of language, whether in poetry, criticism or public life, since words entangle the user in negotiations with the ways in

which they have previously been used and misused, so that we are constrained and controlled by language even as we attempt to constrain and control it. As a result, our writings and utterances are always liable to rebound on us, revealing our complicity with oppression, or complacency. On the other hand, Hill also believes that a certain morality can be exercised in language when an utterance or text shows its awareness of such dangers, acknowledges their inescapability, but resists with an exemplary scrupulousness.

Thus, throughout Hill's two books of criticism, we can not ignore the problematic and intriguing relationship between writers' situations, literary context and the justification of poetry's (literature's) essential purpose under those circumstances. Subsequently, in our discussion, we need to raise a question about the twentieth-century circumstances which include cognizance of poetry's assumed marginal value. Division between the public world and the modern poetry's world presents to Hill a double focus that offers opportunities for making evaluative distinctions between the two, or for reconciling, unifying them. Hill returns to how a situation becomes a "context," and how in turn contexts in writers' lives relate to contexts within their work. Hill's descriptions of his authors' virtues rooted in their predicaments stand upon those "floating words," situation and context.

Along with "resist," "redeem," with its derivatives, is another key-word in *The Lords of Limit*. "Jonson redeems what he can" (54). Like T. H. Green, Hill himself is "creative in his distress" (120), and he too, in poetry and in prose, "redeems what he can." If the concept of redemption exists for Hill, it exists in and through language. Then, his idea of "redeeming" is firmly related to his resistance to careless writing and careless speech. In a similar vein, Hill's fear is surrendering to the laxities of the time, to "the very inertia of general taste." In "Redeeming the Time," as a significant gesture, he turns to Hopkins, the figure of resistance to the nineteenth-century rhythmical life, and offers the achievement of Hopkins's sprung rhythm, his ability to step "out of stride" and make "abrupted experiences once more commune with each other" as evidence of perfect "at-one-ment" between language and action (97, 102). Such a task is clearly fraught with difficulty. In

“Our Word Is Our Bond” Hill reiterates the poet’s struggle between the “ethical” and the “esthetic.” He again praises Hopkins’s poetry for uniting ethical and aesthetic by a “right-keeping of will,” a “pitch of attention” which forces the poet to stand by his words. By the same token, Hill condemns Pound for retracting his words, for not standing by his deeds and thereby opposing ethical to aesthetic.

At this point, it is worth noting that Hill’s characterization of Pound’s work is not evidently one-sided; a kind of homage “to the triumph of his ‘defeat’” (*CP* 207). According to Hill, Pound is “the old combattant” (*EC* 85) whose failures of judgment are as illuminating as his moments of triumph. Clearly Pound’s work has been an enduring profound influence on the poetry and prose of Hill. “The truth of much that he has to say” is for Hill embedded in Pound’s deep concern with the artist’s role and the relationship between society, literature, commerce and morality. Pound’s insistence that “The *mot juste* is of public utility. . . . We are governed by words, the laws are graven in words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate” (*Literary Essays* 409) is a precept that has marked indelibly Hill’s essays and poems. According to Hill, Pound was “In theory and principle. . . always entirely clear about the necessary counter-measures” (*EC* 88). In practice, however, Pound’s fate was to “become the helpless and hopeless victim of those circumstances which he . . . [so] acutely diagnosed and assayed” (*EC* 86). It is this disjuncture in Pound’s work between theory and practice that focuses Hill’s evaluation of Pound’s work. Pound’s “flaws” must be, according to the logic of his own arguments concerning language and morality, intrinsic to the language in which his vision is expressed.

In his essay “Envoi (1919),” the last essay of *The Enemy’s Country*, Hill argues for a comparability between Dryden and Pound in their awareness of the crucial connection between a writer’s handling of words and his understanding of the economic and political situation of the time. Not directly addressing the view that Pound was very wrong indeed about certain “political and economic realities of circumstance,” Hill offers here a finely-

judged reading of Pound's poem, "Envoi." Hill addresses the question of that poem's archaic language as this bears upon its place in the "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" sequence and on Pound's contention with the literary and cultural ethos of his time. He indicates the failure of Pound's "Envoi" is that it does not engage sufficiently with the "contexture, and other circumstances of Language" (EC 25) from which it springs. Unable substantially to recreate an ideal of lost lyric beauty, Pound "comes perilously close to being thought to endorse the 'blitheness,' etc." that is associated with "the cavalier lyric" (EC 92). To put Hill's evaluation of "Envoi" more succinctly, "Integrity is in the mood. . . otiosity is in the mode" (EC 102). In the very act of trying to resist the pressure of circumstances, Pound's "Envoi" thus finds itself drifting with "compleasance" and linguistic coercion. The poem reveals its lack of struggle with "the world's density" at the same time that it reveals its laborious struggle to transcend it: "That which is 'laboured' may at the same time be 'otiose' for the 'laboured' may not, in fact, have been worked on enough" (EC 8).

Not only because Pound evaded the world's complexity, which is embodied in his use of language, according to Hill, but also because he broke "the poet's bond to and with the responsibilities of the spoken and written word," Hill criticizes Pound unrelentingly in "Our Word Is Our Bond" (Steiner, "The Poet's Bond" 42). In this essay, Hill explores the nature of poetic language and its distance from contingent reality. As his starting point, he takes the culpability of Ezra Pound for his broadcasts over Rome Radio during World War II. Its aim is to place the aesthetic view of poetry in a tense opposition with the conception of language as performative utterance. To test how far the opposition may be sustained or made to collapse under pressure, Hill examined the record of Pound's wartime broadcasts for Mussolini and his subsequent court hearing on charges of treason. Hill is not, however, concerned with the details of the case. Rather he finds Pound guilty of a subtler *trahison* against language, so that there appears an ironic justice in his fate after all. For Hill, Pound's own idiom "implicates itself in 'the conduct of meetings and business'" (LL 154) and is indicative of a failure to resist "the inertial drag of speech." Pound's language

becomes fatuous because of its “readiness to oblige”; its linguistic slackness indicates a loss of resistance which equals moral failure. Through his rigorous scrutiny of Pound’s life and work, Hill gives us a revised definition of the traits and strategies of the “intelligence at bay”: its work is to resist “the pressures of contingency” (*EC* 31) and, having found a “strategic position” (*EC* 84), to stand fast and negotiate the difficult business of keeping language “living and accurate” in a world dominated by notions of “compleasance.” According to George Steiner’s review of *The Lords of Limit*, “Hill cares deeply: about the muddle and suffering which ideology, particularly when it is made naked by secular pride, inflicts on history; about the very danger inherent in great art, its power to beautify, to distance us from, the prosaic facts of the inhuman; about the declining circumstance of English culture and of its language” (42). Hill’s poems and essays seek to elicit a redemptive stress and truth of caring.

In contrast, the writers Hill most admires in *The Lords of Limit* have enacted “this sense of identity between saying and doing” which, in “Our Word Is Our Bond”—an essay predominantly exercised by this possibility—he suggests “modern poetry. . . yearns for” (*LL* 153). Hill argues for the independent and active involvement of art in its sources, in “situations.” However, it presents him with a further difficulty. Confronting a predicament and rendering it into a literary context, a work of art may indeed convert an irrefutably given “fix” into a volitional stance: “as a moral artist” Swift “can transfigure his patterns” (*LL* 67); Southwell’s is “an art of ‘transfiguration’”. The term connotes both ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘elevation’” (*LL* 30). The purpose of transfiguration is to foreshadow redemption. Thus by analogy the poet’s “‘redeeming work’ in the face of ‘the world’s absurdity’” is achieved through the transfiguration of situations which are human dilemmas enacted in art.

Thus, in this chapter, I will focus on the relentless paradox at the center of Hill’s work, which is the sense of a linguistic responsibility to a reality which evades language. Language or speech may be impotent and bereft of meaning, but it is the only weapon that

the poet-as-bewildered-survivor can rely on. And so he is left with the irony of his own helplessness. It is a task which Hill faces squarely, questioning his own enterprise but mustering great strength, and never compromising with the “helpless,” slippery situation. For the discussion of the paradox and complexity in Hill’s idea of language, Merle Brown’s contention in *Double Lyric* (1980) is helpful. His main argument in his posthumous book is that the best poetry in recent years is characterized by “doubleness,” by the poet’s attempt to express his divided self within the confines of the lyric. More importantly, this divisiveness makes the poems more open and humane. In this regard, Brown sees Hill as masochistic in his desire to explore the ugly side of history: “Hill’s joy comes from exposing the unexamined terror in the examining experience, in the poetic act of resuscitating the past.” Exhuming the corrupt past entails a careful examination of words and syntax. If the word was once creator and redeemer, it is now also deceiver. His battle with a suspicious language is considered as the main problem and ultimate victory of his poetry.

In terms of the duplicity of language, “Our Word Is Our Bond” which we have discussed briefly, is the most subtle and ambitious essay in *The Lords of Limit*, and the most interesting for what it says about Hill’s own sense of vocation. In dealing with the idea of language, Hill also understands the moral ambiguities of history and society. The title of the essay came from a phrase used by J. L. Austin to mean that language must--as Austin claims the language of poetry does not--indicate some kind of contract with empirical fact (or in Hill’s paraphrase, “reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol”); for Hill, “our word is our bond” equally suggests “shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility” (LL 151). Here, Hill seems to struggle with J. L. Austin’s definition of performative language as it affects the powers and responsibilities of the writer. If Hill sees the dichotomy of language available as on the one hand the hoped-for “transparency” of empiricism, and on the other a “struggle with dark and disputed matter,” his predilection

for density leads him to cherish language that is unparaphrazable, and so apparently unverifiable--indeed, at times, "impenetrable."

Hill is explicit about his poetics in "Our Word Is Our Bond," having suggested that language is perhaps less "innocent, than we have any right to expect" (142). Also, in the second essay of *The Enemy's Country*, "The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses," Hill is concerned with the equivocal nature of language, quoting Hobbes ('there is scarce any word that is not made *equivocal* by divers contextures of speech') and Bacon ('wordes, as a *Tartars* Bowe, doe shoote backe vppon the vnderstanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle, and peruert the Iudgement'.) (22, 23). Bacon's simile is itself tangled: clearly he is describing a seventeenth-century version of shooting oneself in the foot, but equally clearly the Tartars are not to be imagined as shooting themselves, but as shooting their enemies while appearing to flee, whereas in the case of language it is those who use it who are hit. Hill's argument is that, since "even the most unequivocal utterance is affected by the circumstantial and contingent matter implicated in our discourse" (25), the response of the poet should be a creative and resistant form of equivocation, a technique which he traces back to Chaucer.¹²

As we have seen, *The Lords of Limit* presents itself as an interrogation of the moral life of literature. For Hill, language and moral life are involved with each other. Language, to a sensitive observer, may always be a revealing index of moral life. To quote Pound's words, "The poet's job is to *define* and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice" (LL 3). The evidence that they judge comes from the use of language--what others would simply call, but Hill does not consent to call simply, style. In different ways they analyze betrayals (treason) of the moral intelligence, which leave their mark in the betrayals (disclosures) of language. Although Hill does not discuss the connection, the notion of justice returns one to the theological meaning of atonement. The notion is crucial because it prevents Hill from slipping into a linguistic play for play's sake which would make poetry and language irredeemably fallen. For Hill, all words, including

those of poetry and those of other usage we loosely call “creative,” must stand the test of the most literally applied responsibility. He believes that saying is doing, that words are acts, that “the language a writer uses and the writer who uses the language are inextricably involved and implicated” (LL 153). To be “involved” is to be responsible. To be “implicated” is to be guilty. For Hill’s concern is with the ethical, rather than the narrowly aesthetic consequence of misusing and abusing words.

At this point, Hill’s work seems to defend what D. M. MacKinnon, a contemporary moral philosopher calls “ethical language.” Language is “not confined to praise and blame, exhortation and prohibition. We find this language in use not simply when we are trying to dissuade or to encourage, but all the time that we are trying to come to terms with what we are” (MacKinnon 137). In other words, ethical language is the language of the self. It cannot be both the language of the self and also the language of self-deception. For the poet, it intricates and implicates his own failures and guilt with the performance of poetry. For the reader, the poetry of ethical language becomes the definition of limits and limitations, not their willful or wishful eradication. The effect of Hill’s insistencies about definition and redefinition, about impediment as the source of resistant creation, about words as act, about saying as doing, about “atonement,” reciprocal meanings, referential complexity, about “ethical language” is not to reserve poetry from life, but to make poetry’s assumptions and effects answerable to MacKinnon’s “what we are.”

Hill is the poet of exemplary conscience. However, even as the poetry of “ethical language,” Hill’s own work can not be taken as reductively didactic. As Steiner, reviewing *The Lords of Limit*, has described, Hill’s texts are “sometimes altogether opaque” (42). Indeed “obliquity” is also the mark of Hill’s poetry. At times it accompanies the shifts in attitude, the ambivalencies, from scorn to sympathy, recalcitrance to bewilderment. It has long been clear from Hill’s poetry that he is as acutely aware of the world’s “devious compromises” as he is of its open brutalities. His own world, which is not hermetically sealed, is one where the poet, more generally the truth-telling artist, is often seen as a kind

of priest-martyr. His crucial rejection of commitment as ordinarily understood has not led him to art for art's sake. Faced with an always complex and often appalling reality, aware that he himself is caught up in it, not outside or above it, he does what great artists have always done: he "paints" it. Thus I suppose, as Merle Brown says it is for Leavis, "a genuine poem. . . cannot but be troubling, resistant, probing the reader as he probes it" (211). To be sure, Hill's writing is composed of genuine poems.

With Hill's idea of language in his prose as a backdrop, the following sections will focus on another issue: then, how to read his poetry; how far and deeply his idea of language is enacted in his own poems. Certainly, there are some exemplary readings of Hill's poetry. Firstly, Harold Bloom has identified Hill as one of the very few "strong poets" of our time. It is true that Hill stands apart from his contemporaries, at least partly by the brilliant verbal craftsmanship of his poetry and for the intellectual rigor of his poetic ideas and procedures. At a time when his contemporaries have rejected modernist devices and religious sensibility, Hill's mode appears to be modernist and traditionalist. At the same time, however, he is deeply suspicious of totalitarian order, tradition, and the forms of Christian orthodoxy. Hill's poetry struggles between a distrust of language and poetry itself, and an allegiance to poetic tradition. Needless to say, Hill is an unusually difficult poet who both demands and rewards "close and subtle critical reading." Next, in terms of a close reading of Hill's poems, it is hard to find a better work than Vincent Sherry's. In his book, *The Uncommon Tongue* (1987), Sherry rightly characterizes Hill as a poet who reveals his moral purpose as a technician of language "multiplying the significance of words, and so redeeming language from the bondage of fixed reference" (81): from the materials of common speech the poet creates an uncommon tongue. He offers an extended discussion of Hill's means to this end, in particular his exploitation of cliché and etymology in an effort to resist the "coercive force" of common habitual speech. Moreover, he describes Hill's subversion of the single, fixed references of the common tongue without once mentioning deconstruction. Such attention could only result in a richer appreciation of

Hill's ambiguous relation to postmodernism. As its title implies, his book, a traditionally formalist reading, is concerned with how the brilliant verbal surfaces of Hill's words constantly betray their speakers. Sherry's chief argument, through a series of skillful close readings of individual poems and sequences, is that Hill's language always sets itself against what Sherry calls the "common tongue" of habitual discourse or civil speech. Sherry's statements are mostly accurate enough¹³ but Hill's best and most English words are painful, tortured pieces which demand a more urgent mental and physical response than can be handled in the often seamless categories which Sherry relies on.

Significantly, there are some other critical attempts to see Hill's poetic language from larger perspective. They properly suggest a number of broader contexts in which Hill's work remains to be examined. As R. K. Meiners aptly put, Geoffrey Hill's idea of language is "the act of a poet thinking in, through, and around his poetry" ("The Fourth Voice" 38). The modern poet has inherited a guilty language, and Hill is too conscious of that guilt. This historical guilt severs Hill from the later Eliot and prevents him from asserting any sacramental presence in his poems. In Seamus Heaney's and Merle Brown's arguments, we can find an important dimension of Hill's work which Sherry tends to overlook. In an essay entitled "Englands of the Mind," Heaney takes the work of three contemporary English poets--Larkin, Hughes and Hill--and suggests that each is concerned with presenting a vision of the England he inhabits. In each case, this "England of the mind" is a quite distinct historical, geographical and social landscape, with its own peculiar landmarks and character and its own distinctive language:

Hughes relies on the northern deposits, the pagan Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements, and he draws energy also from a related constellation of primitive myths and world views. The life of his language is a persistence of the stark outline and vitality of Anglo-Saxon that became the Middle English alliterative tradition and then went underground to sustain the folk poetry, the ballads, and the ebullience of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. Hill is also sustained by the Anglo-Saxon base, but his proper guarantor is that language as modified and amplified by the vocabularies and values of the Mediterranean, by the early medieval Latin influence; his is to a certain extent a scholastic imagination founded on an England that we might describe as Anglo-Romanesque, touched by the polysyllabic light of Christianity but possessed by darker energies which might be acknowledged as barbaric. Larkin then completes the picture, because his proper hinterland is the English language Frenchified and turned humanist by the Norman conquest and the

Renaissance, made nimble, melodious and plangent by Chaucer and Spenser, and besomed clear of its inkhornisms and its irrational magics by the eighteenth century. (*Preoccupations* 151)

Despite these differences, however, Heaney sees each of the three as, in a sense, engaged in the same project:

All three are hoarders and shorers of what they take to be the real England. . . . A desire to preserve indigenous traditions, to keep open the imagination's supply lines to the past. . . to perceive. . . a continuity of communal ways, and a confirmation of an identity which is threatened--all this is signified by their language. . . . I think that sense of an ending has driven all three of these writers into a kind of piety towards their local origins. . . . The loss of imperial power, the failure of economic nerve, the diminished influence of Britain inside Europe, all this has led to a new sense of the shires, a new valuing of the native English experience. (*Ibid.* 150-51, 169)

Heaney's emphasis on the profound awareness of the socio-linguistic past that is embodied in and brought to life by the poetry he discusses is extraordinarily suggestive. Because its very medium is a living language that carries within itself a whole accumulated complex of differing and often conflicting socio-historical meanings and resonances, a poetry that genuinely engages with the medium may be one of the finest means we have for actually thinking about our situation as "highly elaborated and self-interpreted cultural creatures," shaped by and implicated within history. Moreover, we try to gain some kind of perspective on it. Such poetry would be in many ways a finer and a more radical mode of thought than rational analysis. As Edward Thompson puts it, "our sense of political reality, in any generous historical sense, has become lost within faded rhetoric and threatening abstractions, and . . . poetry, most of all, is what we now need. And . . . this must be a poetry more ambitious, more confident of its historical rights among other intellectual disciplines, than any that is commonly presented to us today" ("Comment" 54).

I suppose that we have such a poetry in Britain today: a poetry that embodies a far more searchingly intelligent sense of political and social realities, indeed a far more rigorous intellectual discipline, than is suggested by Heaney when he speaks of these three poets he admires as "driven. . . into a kind of piety towards their local origins" (169). And just because of its difficult engagement with the language, this poetry raises crucial

questions about the particular social and historical and cultural landscapes that we all inevitably inhabit--questions that Heaney touches upon in "Englands of the Mind." His central view of these poets, however, remains somewhat limited when he speaks of them as each inhabiting and realizing one particular "England of the mind," as exhibiting "a kind of piety towards their local origins," a "valuing of the native English experience" (169).

In this essay, however, Heaney's comment on Hill's use of language is of great significance: "I imagine Hill as indulging in a morose linguistic delectation, dwelling on the potential of each word with much the same relish as Leopold Bloom dwells on the thought of his kidney" (160). The feeling is of a deeply serious play not excluding humor--Hill's command of different registers of the language includes a good deal of humor, that does not expound meaning through, but discovers it in, the ambiguities and multivocalities of the language itself. To quote Hill himself:

I don't think I've ever conceived a poetic argument as a thing in itself which merely required words to embody it. I can only discover my argument in discovering the words for it. There's a phrase of William Blake's from *Jerusalem*, 'the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots', and in moments of either elation or depression I feel that the phrase could stand as an epigraph to my whole writing life. One can take 'incoherent roots' either literally or figuratively, and I suppose the particular excitement of *Mercian Hymns* was to find that I was meditating on my roots in a double sense. (Haffenden 82-83)

If the most habitually unquestioned and intimate national inheritance is language--the language which native speakers often assume they simply share--it is also, as Heaney implicitly suggests and Hill acutely acknowledges, the most "problematic." A part of the reason is that language is freighted with values and meanings from areas of social and historical experience so different as to constitute virtually different worlds. Accordingly, this transitive sense of the poetic activity, of the poet as both worked upon by and working in and with the language, results in a poetry the reverse of transparent--emphatically not a poetry "where language has a deft, satisfactory, empirical function, inoffensively conveying the gist of an interesting experience" ("Under Judgment" 214). Precisely because of its commitment to "the vertical richness of the language," Hill's poetry demands of its readers what Hill, writing of T. H. Green, has called ". . . the pitch of attention at

which the true (as opposed to the spectral) Coleridgean 'clerisy' might be expected to work" (LL 119), which we noted before. For the same reason, it is not a poetry that presents a single "England of the mind." Different voices, different idioms, different parts of the social-linguistic heritage, bring different senses of what "England" is and means into dynamic inter-play.

Rigorously, Hill's poems attempt to dissolve the self into history, legend, and myth, and to find a meeting point between personal and communal meaning.¹⁴ This attempt is clear especially in his poem sequences "Of Commerce and Society," "Funeral Music," *Mercian Hymns*, "An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England," and *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. In these poems, in very different ways, Hill's essential "commerce" is with what he calls "the speechless dead," re-imagining the occasions of their suffering, and finding in it paradigms for the ways in which we all, necessarily, live and die. Moreover, he longs for moral coherence. He would like to close the gap between what he knows himself to be and what others see in him. So also the orders of family, society, and government show him a dispiriting view of possible goods corrupted by indeterminate evils. Although he wishes to find his own integrity, Hill dismisses the way of transcendence and the way of withdrawal from the world: he will not blame the devil for our villainy or look to the realm of pure spirit for salvation. Integrity is meaningless for him apart from experience, and experience must involve him in the corruption he loathes.

When we consider the poems especially in *For the Unfallen* and *King Log* in the following sections, we shall find not only a preoccupation with a limited number of themes, but also a consistency of attitude in the way that Hill treats and develops these themes. The chief theme might be broadly expressed as Hill's attitude towards history, poetry and language. More specifically, Thomas Getz has described Hill's poetic as one of struggle:

At the core of Geoffrey Hill's poetry is the conviction that to be fully human is to imagine oneself in relation to individuals and to broader historical tendencies which are antagonistic to oneself and which often threaten to destroy one's integrity. Hill's own integrity is not based on a principle of closure--the self wrapping around itself for protection. It is the absence of protectedness in Hill which is most impressive. Almost every poem he writes demonstrates his need to come to grips with a condition of fragmentation, isolation, or corruption. Hill's impulse is to express a feeling of continuity with history, human relatedness and the possibility of religious faith. However, while the poems are full of metaphors of poetic acts as "salutations" or "incarnations"--attempts to unify--Hill fully doubts the efficacy language used in this way. He realizes that faced with the extreme difficulty of recapturing the past, poetic salutation may be as superficial as a handshake when it is an habitual form or mannerism--mere gesture. The attempt to "incarnate" may change if not destroy the material sought after. The acts of incarnation and salutation may be trivially solipsistic. These are poems full of self-sarcasm. (4)

It is Hill's sense of doubt: self-consciousness, doubt about the efficacy and true function of language and poetry, doubt about his ability to wrest honest meaning from devalued language that shapes his own poetry. At any rate, as he says of Green's lectures, the poems in *For the Unfallen* and *King Log* may be, in their completely different way, "an act of atonement, in the arena of communication, between the 'unconscious social insolence' of the listener and what Coleridge termed the seeming 'assumption of superiority' on the part of the speaker" (LL 114). Reading Hill's text also seems to be the act of atonement that recapitulates the act of composition.

(2) *For the Unfallen*: Reality is "witness-proof"

For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958 (1959), Geoffrey Hill's first volume of poetry,¹⁵ shows a marked sense of disillusionment with the state of poetry in its own time and its function, role and place in the world. Also unique is how this discomfort expresses itself as an intensive and comprehensive quarrel with poetic tradition. In 1954, as a young poet about to leave Oxford for a lecturing post at Leeds, Hill defined his poetic program in *The London Magazine*: "There does seem to be quite general agreement that each artist, young or old, must cut his own path; and that only those with the most strength and courage are likely to get through to the end" (73). In his interview with John Haffenden, putting an emphasis upon the difference between young poets of the fifties and himself, he also

pointed out that “The poetry written by most of the ‘promising’ poets of the fifties seemed to me to stem from a basic misconception about the nature of poetry and language, and I must say my views have changed very little since then. It seemed to me that young poets of the time were writing poetry of two kinds, neither of which was my kind. They were either Empsonian in the most arid sense, writing cerebral conundrums, a travesty of Empson’s real gifts; or they were narrating amorous adventures and travel anecdotes in language that was the equivalent of painting by numbers” (78). Pertinently, even after twenty years Hill speaks about his own art and position via negation, a way of speaking which seems to be uncannily coincident with what is intrinsic to the unobliging quality of Hill’s art. It seems Hill’s intuition about the kind of poetry he did not want to write was stronger than his knowledge about the kind he did want to write.

From the start, Hill took a stand against spontaneous confessionalism in favor of stately, impersonal formality. He wanted to build durable poems out of ephemeral experiences rather than to “applaud each broken or complacent confession” as it came. At this point, Hill’s discomfort with confessional poetry follows in Eliot’s footsteps. He sets his personal conflicts against the larger backdrop of political and social history. Against the Confessionals’ hypochondria, Hill was also against the Movement’s antiseptic evasion of suffering. Hill is a poet driven by “traditional furies,” who sacrifices social ease in order to communicate the difficult lessons of history. For Hill, man is emphatically a historical and linguistic animal who continually veils the pain of his heritage. Hill intends to create, or at least resurrect, the conscience of his race by holding up the past in all its bewildering complexity. To be sure, he is not in the least like any of his contemporaries--Amis, Wain, Alvarez, Thom Gunn, Martin Seymour-Smith, Philip Larkin. In his review of Hill’s *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom*, Christopher Ricks succinctly pointed out that Hill was “uncomfortable about the sheer comfortableness of most British poetry” (6). He “does poetry” not in the current relaxed manner but with a chillingly distinguished formality. Indeed, few first volumes reveal this combination of qualification and tough assertiveness.

The dead are the common subject of Hill's early verse, and *For the Unfallen* is itself a dark sounding of the teary inversions and solemnities of Laurence Binyon's anthology piece, "For the Fallen" ("They went with songs to the battle, they were young, / Straight of limb, true of eye"). Indeed Hill's "oblique" poetry is often concerned not with the fallen but with the unfallen, that is to say, not with the direct, open tragedy of victims of history, but with the moral responsibilities, the existential compromising of the survivors. Obviously the title, "for the unfallen," is an ironic invention of Hill's. The "unfallen" are those unslain in battle, in the extermination camps; those not yet dead, in other words, survivors for whom even now we ought to be composing epitaphs; those who though dead, still have a presence, such as martyrs; and those not yet fallen from grace. The phrase is taken from the last poem in the collection, "To the (Supposed) Patron," and there refers to those who have not yet experienced nature's inherent cruelty and "the blood's pain": "For the unfallen--the firstborn, or wise / Councillor--prepared vistas extend / As far as harvest; and idyllic death / Where fish at dawn ignite the powdery lake" (CP 57). The title also parallels that of one of Larkin's: *The Less Deceived*. For Larkin one can hope for nothing more than to be less deceived, less of a fool than others. Both attitudes cohere within the ironist academy. Under Hill's hard scrutiny, poems for the dead are always for the living. The complex guilts of Hill's poetry are keenly judicial, and the judgments in language are also the judgments of history and religion, of the gas chamber and the cross. Thus the sense of his poems is elegy--elegy, in a broad sense, for Europe. The feeling is a tug between a sense of the monumental grandeur of the European heritage and a violent nausea at its roots in bloodiness and greed. The intention is not to unloose this knot but to pull it as painfully tight as possible in intricate patterns of words. That poetry might be construed as a search for adequate authority, a search deviled by a skeptical mistrust of the common palliations of government, of religious practice, of language.

The poems in *For the Unfallen* are often perceived as "impenetrable and uncommunicative." The meaning is reckoned as "too esoteric in expression." However, it

is fair to say that Hill's first volume, a master rhetorician's work, is strenuously disciplined in form and charged with meaning for readers who are prepared to dig out subtleties and brood on them. Both poet and readers are forced into making individual moral decisions, for Hill's poems are an arena for self-examination and mental toil. Painful uncertainties in the face of love and death, faith and suffering, are tortured into verse of matching exactingness.

"Genesis," aptly titled as a first poem in a first volume, was written when he was nineteen and originally published in a pamphlet in Donald Hall's *Fantasy Poets* series when he was twenty. It is clear that Hill mastered the traditional forms very early and by 1952 was making them dance to his own ideas and voice.¹⁶ "Genesis," which took shape "over a period of weeks in a series of long one-day walks in Worcestershire," sketches Hill's "genesis" as a young man and points toward the major preoccupations of his work ("Under Judgment" 213). This five-part sequence contains aspects of the poetic journey, meditation, and elegy, but casts them in a new and powerful way. The poem's most obvious model is the Book of Genesis, but Hill versifies the Bible in his own way, just as Christopher Smart versified the Book of Psalms in his own way in "Song to David."¹⁷ The biblical story about creation is not only the story about Hill's awakening into poetry but also functions as a metaphor for the role and function of poetry. Here Sherry's reading of this poem is helpful. Sherry views "Genesis" as "a story about the origins and developments" of Hill's own "language" (40). He argued that the sense of linkage between word and thing in an Adamic language dissolves through the fall from trust to skepticism, which has also implications for language. He pointed out, for example, the first part of the poem is mainly composed of "concretely referential, the monosyllabic words" which stand like "the exact integers" they signify. As the poem progresses, however, "I" who used to project his words to meet the corresponding objects in nature, withdraws and becomes a perceptual and cognitive presence (41). Accordingly, the precise equivalence of word and referent turns out to be "a disparity between word and fact" (41). But Sherry thinks that Hill also

conveys a sense of redemption by his vehicle, the body of language. Thus, for Sherry, Hill's poetry serves as a redemptive ordeal for language; the poet tries to regain the consubstantiality of word and thing, which was portrayed from the first part of "Genesis." In his book on Geoffrey Hill, Henry Hart argues, "Genesis" is Hill's song of innocence and experience, an imitation of Blake in the sense that for the two poets, "contraries are creative" (3). It is this early work which leads Bloom to assert in the introduction that "Hill has been the most Blakean of modern poets." This would be accurate had he written nothing but "Genesis," but almost immediately, as we shall see, he became another kind of poet entirely.

At any rate, it is a haunting poem; the rewriting of the creation, where six days of God's work led to the conclusion that "by blood we live, the hot, the cold, / To ravage and redeem the world / There is no bloodless myth will hold" (CP 16). And the last few lines present the kind of charged ambiguity, the grim paradox sensually posed, that Hill so much delights in. He is "a fallen stoic" whose only redemption is found *perhaps* in language:

And by Christ's blood are men made free
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
Under the rough pelt of the sea;

Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight
The bones that cannot bear the light. (CP 16)

Although Christ's blood promises salvation, even to the dead, Hill does not allow himself the reassurance of accepting the salvation. Where the poem ends on a characteristically doubtful note, with the image of scattered bones rather than with the promise of redemption, we come to sense a profound doubt. Certainly it is hard to comprehend "pure" genesis, as Jeremy Hooker remarked in his essay on *For the Unfallen*, for we cannot know the creation without our language, myths, systems, artifacts; nor can we "create purely, without mixed motives as the imposition of pattern on experience" (25).

The poet-maker's struggle to create the world meets with opposition: the world has already been created, and it is the poet's task to find some way of dealing with that creation

in all its bloody and violent manifestation. A motif that begins to emerge more and more clearly in the later poems of *For the Unfallen* is a sharp-edged ambiguity about art, including the art of words. This could best be described as suspicion, with at once reverence and contempt. It appears in the carefully selected phrase “artistic men” which appears twice, first describing the Magi in “Picture of a Nativity” (CP 37) and later in “Of Commerce and Society.”

“Picture of a Nativity,” composed in 1956, is a relatively weak poem, but provides a central example of Hill’s transforming “biblical doctrine into fables of the imagination” (Hart 55). Although Christ’s nativity is at the center of his tale, it is a “disturbing picture” with multiple implications; the newborn Christ is depicted as “a dumb child-king,” “discharged” out of the debris on the sea coast to “his rightful place”--“rest[ing], / Undisturbed, among slack serpents; beast / With claws flesh-battered” (CP 37). According to Sherry, the speaker here speaks not the Word of God but the words of the vatic poet, whose protean, creative usage comes to replace that ideal of referentiality, the Word made flesh (58). Then this poem may be a metaphor of writing itself. The artists approach the new poem as if they were magi approaching a new incarnation. Due to the creative duplicity in the word “appear,” the line “the artistic men appear to worship” can be read as either they “only seem” to worship, or they, like the magi, “arrive” to worship in fact. Simulation is characteristic of the magician-poet. They “fall down” in obeisance before something that is ultimately mysterious, and make a picture or myth.¹⁸ To borrow the words of “In Memory of Jane Fraser,” its effect is to “chain / Creation to a stunned repose” (CP 22); the poet not only pictures his god but also gives birth to him, with a self-centered vision and art that divides him from Creation.

Moreover, *For the Unfallen* embodies a keen awareness of the “fallen” nature of its words and devices, indeed of poetry. An important step towards understanding the book is a recognition of the way in which Hill perceives words to be fallen and art corrupting. In particular, Hill’s poems written during the 1954-56 period seem to enact his growing

awareness of the problem that “language may deceive as it transforms.” In other words, he questions the possibility of accurate remembering and, in doing so, the aims of his own art. He is aware of the problematic that is the complacent aesthetic reductions out of atrocious actualities. Here, through close readings of “Two Formal Elegies” (1955-56), and “Of Commerce and Society,” I will reveal the themes of Hill’s history poems and Hill’s concerns with the limitations and powers of poetry, of language.

Hill’s war poems are characteristically about the survivors and those who did not fight, rather than about the actual combatants. They express uncertainty and difficulty in speaking about and for the victims. Hill’s language is weighed down by history, layered by the contradictory and tangential meanings, the volatile rhythms in words, in the same way as human experience is burdened by history; the “‘density’ of language” in the poem being a mimesis of “the specific gravity of human nature” (*LL* 81). Or, as Hill has said of Yeats “who where words are concerned has almost perfect pitch,” in this poem, Hill is becoming increasingly

[a] poet who possesses such near-perfect pitch. . . able to sound out his own conceptual discursive intelligence. . . . The poet is hearing words in depth and is therefore hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth. (“The Conscious Mind’s Intelligible Structure” 21)

In an interview with Blake Morrison, he also stressed the importance of historical consciousness: “I think that it is a tragedy for a nation or a people to lose the sense of history, not because I think that the people is thereby necessarily losing some mystical private possession, but because. . . it is losing some vital dimension of intelligence. I’m entirely in sympathy with those who would argue that in order to control the present one needs to be steeped in the past. I think my sense of history is in itself anything but nostalgic, but I accept nostalgia as part of the *psychological* experience of a society and of an ancient and troubled nation” (213). At this point, we can compare Hill with Eliot. Both poets share historical awareness and perspective, and the poetic practice of bringing past and present into fruitful juxtaposition. In “Little Gidding,” Eliot affirmed that “history is

now and England” and sought to witness all times, past and future, in a pattern of timeless moments. Although Hill distrusts “timeless moments” and envisions history as a repetitive struggle, “red in tooth and claw,” like Eliot, he resurrects the dead for contemporary edification. From this respect, what is special about “Two Formal Elegies” is how the past and the present are related one another. As Vincent Sherry mentions, the full title, “Two Formal Elegies, For the Jews in Europe,” itself “contrasts the formal order of art with the ragged facts of history” (61). This poem enacts the distance between “the dead, and how some are disposed,” and versions of “their long death / Documented and safe” (*CP* 30, 31). The first alternately rhymed sonnet starts with an “arrogant” claim to knowing the dead:

Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:
Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,
In clenched cinders not yielding their abused
Bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance saves
Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.
Arrogant acceptance from which song derives
Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish young
Roots in ashes. . . . (*CP* 30)

Hill asks how a poem about their horrible suffering can not “yield” to the callousness in words, since the very callousness of those abuses is embedded in just those words which are, ironically, the only medium we have in order to “grasp,” remember their suffering. The question is how to write a poem which shows our insufficiency but does not accept our insufficiency as a sufficient response. This is a recurrent theme in Hill’s poetry and prose: “conflict between aestheticism and morality.” To borrow Jeremy Hooker’s expression, the conflict makes Hill’s poetry “perhaps the least ‘innocent’ of our time—innocent, that is, of unconscious corruption” (28). He is keenly aware of the disjunction of words and reality. Hill asserts that, as a poet, he inherits a language “fallen” from an original ideal state: “In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice” (Haffenden 88).

Hill's way of making an elegy can be compared to that of commentators on the Holocaust, such as Adorno and George Steiner, who suggested that its unbelievable horrors transcend linguistic description.¹⁹ "Two Formal Elegies," as a history poem, questions the reasonableness of shocking the living with memories of atrocities. Hill's poetic martyrs, Hart argues, sacrifice all forms of comfort in the attempt to bear witness to historical sins and sufferings (41). Here, it is important to note that martyr from the Greek *martus* originally meant "witness." However, "Reality is 'witness-proof': it resists any objective testament in language, as indicated by the very duplicity in *proof*: testament, in the nominative sense, but resisting that testament, in the idiomatic sense of the compound of noun and adjective here. The vatic poet, on the other hand, seeks to recreate reality under the form of words, and Hill, in a subtle and self-conscious way, samples the deceptions to which his vaticism is prone" (Sherry 62). As Hill quickly goes on to say, our kind of witnessing is a fallible, insufficient kind of knowing, closed off against any real awareness of that other world by the armor of the brackets and the weighty monotony (itself a kind of shielding) of the repetitively stressed alliterative consonant in "we," "witness," "world," and "witness-proof": "we have enough / Witnesses (our world being witness-proof)" (CP 31). Thus the last bracketed question which, remembering his wondering about art's capability of accurately witnessing "sacrifice," makes this clear with its several meanings of "sacrifice," "stand," and "start": "Sufficient men confer, carry their weight. / (At whose door does the sacrifice stand or start?)" (CP 31). We must begin by questioning ourselves and show where we stand by acknowledging our responsibility. But, this is only a beginning (a "start"), in the way Hill's art in registering its limitations while striving towards precision acknowledges that his endeavors amount to a shamefully limited act of sacrifice for our guilt. There is the fear or self-consciousness that even when trying most conscientiously, art evades and subverts, because of its very nature. In fact he becomes so unbearably conscious of the limits and falsifications of poetry and language in the actual world that he feels guilty for his own gift to make art of others' agony.

“Two Formal Elegies,” which reveals “the perfidious power of art” to “make acceptable, through words, what is unacceptable” (Sherry 61), is thematically connected with the fourth poem of “Of Commerce and Society.”

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,
Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:
Some of us have heard the dead speak:
The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away. In summer
Thunder may strike, or, as a tremor
Of remote adjustment, pass on the far side
From us: however deified and defied

By those it does strike. Many have died. Auschwitz,
Its furnace chambers and lime pits
Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable
Unbelievable in fatted marble.

There is, at times, some need to demonstrate
Jehovah's touchy methods that create
The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man.
At times it seems not common to explain. (*CP* 49)

Significantly enough, this poem follows “Death of Shelley” where hopes for a new order evoke the figure of the artist-savior. On one level, “Death of Shelley” is an elegy for that poet's drowning and for the death of Romanticism, but, more importantly, it is an elegy for the demise of his vision--“an epitaph for the millennialism that led Shelley, in youth, to envision a gradual refinement of man's natural condition” (Sherry 66). Furthermore, by implication, it is also a lament for our loss, because we live in a demythologized commercialized culture. In speaking ironically in his own person, the poet apologizes lamely for the Jewish Holocaust; he attributes it to “Jehovah's touchy methods,” and pleads “At times it seems not common to explain.”

The poem quoted above poses particular problems for the poet in terms of raising questions on the status of art. Here Hill speaks of communal guilt and how the mind deals with it, how it projects guilt into symbolic figures, represses, and sublimates it. There is the context-affected “adjustment,” “fatted marble”--valuable art that has drawn on and

profited from “fable,” and the “connoisseur of blood” who is involved with gain in one way or another. These are considered in the context of the unimaginable horrors inflicted through a political movement that is part of the immediate inheritance of the twentieth-century Europe. There is a further chilling meaning in that “marble” itself results from the recrystallization of a limestone, so might be seen as an inevitable progression from the “lime pits.” Thus the dead would have provided the material for art in a horrifyingly material form. Everything begins to seem part of a terrifying pattern as an empirical demonstration of the natural cycles emerges from “The Death of Shelley.” The poem’s opening line--“Statesmen have known visions”--is open to question whether these visions have religious significance and, if they do, whether they can ever be free from taints of “gain” and power. Ambiguity here allows the suggestion that they have known of but not seen, “visions,” or that those visions they do have are merely “known” ones--already experienced and therefore predictable, so lacking any real sense of “vision.” Hill comments obliquely on the status of poets and other artists in relation to the Holocaust in his word “artistic,” repeating the phrase he used in “Picture of a Nativity.” By the very duplicity, the word “artistic” suggests not only “magically restoring and transforming power” but also self-delusion and inaccuracy. Its suggestion of Romantic idealism, such as Shelley’s, that claims to “transcend or transfigure reality, resolve contradictions, and reconcile opposites” (Hooker 22), must be viewed in the light of Auschwitz, just as the two poems here are placed side by side. In the same context, we also need to reconsider Shelley’s famous notion that poets should be the world’s unacknowledged legislators.

“No poetry after Auschwitz” was Adorno’s famous cry (qtd. in Steiner, *Language and Silence* 53). Steiner wondered if silent witnessing was best. Like Adorno and Steiner, Hill is conscious of how the political inhumanity of the past and present has demeaned and brutalized language beyond any precedent; but in Hill’s case the consciousness is more painfully sharp than in any other contemporary poet’s work. Confronting words used to justify the savagery of political falsehoods, massive distortions of history, the bestialities of

totalitarian states, and words as they seem to have become the special mark of (“our world being witness-proof”), Hill cultivates “a contrary voice.” In contrast to our fearful numbness, our paralyzed speech, and his contemporary poets’ plain discourse, “a manner of address,” Hill’s poetry stands for an articulate unconventional “demonstration” (as Hart mentions, whose Latin root means both a showing and a warning) so that the brutal facts and the myths which engendered them are engraved deep in public memory. Distinctively, then, Hill’s counterpart lacks that “character / In civil intercourse” (*CP* 32), and so cannot attain the “eloquence” that is merely “the perfection of the common tongue.”

The language of history, politics, commerce, science, agriculture, mythology, art as it specifically defines the breakdown of Western civilization in the first half of our century now makes that ambiguous legacy our own. “The language of poetry,” rather than an “idea,” as Hill has said, “is the situation”:

Language *contains* everything you want--history, sociology, economics: it is a kind of human destiny. One thinks how it has been used and exploited in the past, politically and theologically. Its forthrightness and treachery are the drama of the honesty of man himself. Language reveals life. (“Literature Comes to Life” 24-25)

Facing directly and urgently the complex pressures of the world and history as they affect the language of poetry, Hill shows that this is his subject, “the language of which he is capable”--“Etymology is history.” Although in our own age, words have lost their face value for ever, he cannot rest with the suggestion that “Beyond a doubt, silence is best” (qtd. in *LL* 84). Instead, the poems mark out the ground concerning all the subtly different tendencies towards moral evasiveness in the human imagination--mere acceptance, compliance with or the giving of a free reign to the sympathetic imagination--when faced with the inexorable. Hill’s elegies define our modern predicament as one of survival within the inexplicable and as it affects the condition and position of poetry, the poet and the reader in our own age: we must “suffer” “to remain / At such near distance” (*CP* 38).

There are other ideas in the first collection which I want to mention quickly, and they are related to the central theme. “Of Commerce and Society,” the six-part sequence in process from 1956 to 1958 dwells on “the complacency and spiritual obtuseness of Europe” recovering after the Second World War. This is an exemplary poem to show Hill’s probing and disturbing rejection of the civil aesthetic. Throughout “Of Commerce and Society,” Hill condemns the facile perfections of civil eloquence, and warns how language itself can function in complicity with the commercial instinct. In brief, modern “society” is viewed as an outgrowth of “commerce.” The fact that *For the Unfallen* was itself originally to be titled *Of Commerce and Society* further underlines the strength of Hill’s concern (Hart 58). The volume’s longest sequence draws its title and epigraph from Allen Tate’s “More Sonnets at Christmas.” It may be true that of all its predecessors, Hill’s poetry recalls most acutely the somber music of Tate, who was aware early of the new trends but whose late work, even, is strictly of the older tradition (Squires 213). And the epigraph seems to cover the whole sequence in a cold irony:

Then hang this picture for a calendar,
As sheep for goat, and pray most fixedly
For the cold martial progress of your star,
With thoughts of commerce and society,
Well-milked Chinese, Negroes who cannot sing,
The Huns gelded and feeding in a ring. (CP 46)

Hill’s preoccupation with the limitations and possibilities of language is now focused on the world especially in Tate’s way. Specifically, the sequence considers the tensions belonging to the “chaos of self-interest” marking European and American politics, commerce, and society. Because of the sequential nature of the arrangement, the meaning of one poem seems to be colored by its reaction against others. By the same token, Hill uses titles, subtitles, and sometimes even dedications and epigraphs to qualify various parts of a poem, and that poem may be said to comment upon these elements.

The first piece, “The Apostles: Versailles, 1919” depicts the situation at Versailles of politicians as one of extreme failure:

They sat. They stood about.
They were estranged. The air,
As water curdles from clear,
Fleshed the silence. They sat.

They were appalled. The bells
In hollowed Europe spilt
To the gods of coin and salt.
The sea creaked with worked vessels. (*CP* 46)

At Hill's Versailles, the politicians are described as apostles of "the old faith, materialism," and more importantly of the wrong word. As in many other poems, Hill exposes "the invidious connection between the abuse of language and political destruction" (Hart 70). The annunciation at Versailles revealing "greed, arrogance and vengeance" formulated the destiny of twentieth-century Europe: the inability to design a treaty which would properly conclude the Great War, and the totalitarian aspirations endemic to that war, also caused the Second World War. It is worth noting that the opening sentence ("They sat") is repeated in the concluding sentence of the first quatrain, and functions as a kind of parentheses. It literally "contains" and thereby enacts the "ineffectuality" of those politicians and of their "estrangement" from one another and from the matter at hand. In the second quatrain, the parenthetical quality of the first quatrain resonates the ineffectual silence and inability of those politicians. At this point, the comparison between the Apostles at the Last Supper and the politicians at the treaty table would be illuminating. The Apostles were "appalled" at news of the impending martyrdom of Christ. Interestingly enough, however, there is a sense of duplicity in that word here. The politicians are apparently "appalled" at past events over which they actually have had some control, but there is a sense of evading their responsibilities. Christian faith has been replaced by a faith in commerce. It is a metaphor for the consciences of "hollow" men "spilt" by the self-interest of their allegiances to commercial ideals. Moreover, as Hart argued, "in deflated, almost simplistic sentences," in a kind of stasis that was prefigured in the epigraph, "Hill imitates the deflation of values, and the concomitant deflation of Germany that set the

country, and the rest of Europe,” on the track towards extreme atrocity that is Holocaust (70-71). Hart further remarked that because of this debased annunciation, in which words and emotions “curdled” into a stagnant mass, Europe was turned from a potentially hallowed land to a “hollowed” land. “Like Eliot, Hill composes an elegy for ‘the mind of Europe,’ whose established culture after the Great War is a heap of broken images” (71).

The horrors undergone have been “scoured” from memory. The next poem, “The Lowlands of Holland,” turns to the European “terrain” “much-scarred,” “much-scoured” by “commerce and society”; to Holland’s “half innocent, half undone” (*CP* 47) position during World War I. In this poem, with the backdrop of the symbolic capital of European bourgeois culture, Hill goes on to discredit materialism as a standard for public art. He depicts a dulling, futile art, given to the complacency of the middle class: commercial Holland is “stuffed with artistry”; its “replete” cities are “ample monuments” to traditions now “lost” and ineffective.

Europe, the much-scarred, much-scoured terrain,
Its attested liberties, home-produce,
Labelled and looking up, invites use,
Stuffed with artistry and substantial gain:

Shrunk, magnified (nest, holocaust)
Not half innocent and not half undone;
Profiting from custom: its replete strewn
Cities such ample monuments to lost

Nations and generations: (*CP* 47)

Characteristically, Hill could not have written “Stuffed with artistry” without thinking of his own craft. A line such as “Not half innocent and not half undone” brings us face to face with our tendencies to err through slovenly interpretation--in Hill’s own words “the brute actuality” of English misapprehension (“Common weal, common woe” 414). The play around positives and negatives is both the line’s own refusal of definition and demonstration of a contemporary laxity. Hill’s demonstration of uncertainty here seems to be deliberate and scrupulous in its attempt to demonstrate the complexity of language and

our propensity to engage with it. Furthermore the poem's "dislocated syntax"--colons, semi-colons, brackets-- demonstrates how Hill displays a web of evidence, leading always to many other areas, that must be untangled in order to view a subject with clarity. For example, the use of colons leads the reader to expect explanations, but each pause signals a shift in the poem's focus.

. . . its cultural
Or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone:
Flaws in the best, revised science marks down:
Witness many devices; the few natural

Corruptions, graftings; witness classic falls
(The dead subtracted; the greatest resigned);
Witness earth fertilized, decently drained,
The sea decent again behind walls. (*CP* 47)

There is no developing idea between the first and the second section of the poem: the first two sections split by colons. The next ("Flaws in the best, revised science marks down") seems to be cryptic, giving little insight. And final section frustrates our expectations of a solid argument with its invitations merely to "Witness. . . witness . . . Witness. . . ." Indeed, all this witnessing raises questions in regard to "moral action" on the part of the poet and to the possibility of "at-one-ment." It is an attempt at absolutely accurate representation in artistic terms of matter that has been subjected to mental scrutiny and emotional involvement. This "setting at one" involves the desire and ability to see things as they really are--to "witness." The ability to be sincerely committed to the subject matter and to demonstrate this technically is the crux of "moral action." However, what the poet has begun to suspect is that art, no matter how well executed, begins to betray what it would uphold. The prime example of this for him, both here and in the later poems, is language's and a culture's, inability to prevent, even comprehend, the atrocities of human history such as Nazi Germany.

The concluding piece considers the status of art and artists. As the title ("The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian"), subtitle ("Homage to Henry James") and the biblical epigraph ("But then face to face") suggest the pains and price paid by the committed artist

“Engrossed in the cold blood of sacrifice,” from Henry James, self-exiled and dying in Europe in 1916, back to the martyr. In the poem, Hill compares the state of America with that of Europe:

. . . Well-stocked with foods,
Enlarged and deep-oiled, America
Detects music, apprehends the day-star

Where, sensitive and half-under a cloud,
Europe muddles her dreaming, is loud
And critical beneath the varied domes
Resonant with tribute and with commerce. (CP 51)

Here the ambiguity resides in the culture. The tone seems at first positive, with a sense of openness: America is portrayed in terms of the consumption of “foods” that are well-prepared--“deep-oiled,” of the appreciation of “music,” and of the understanding of beauty --“the day-star”--all “Enlarged” for clear “apprehen[sion].” Yet the enlargement could be an overblown image or have a pathological connotation such as symptomatic of disease. On the other hand, what of Europe, materially depleted after two world wars--“sensitive” or over-“sensitive,” “dreaming” the wonders of art or avoiding reality? Like an impractical intellectual, a continent suffers as much from self-absorption as the other suffers from the ills of material good. In this analysis, the culture of America and Europe is wholly misguided.

This is Hill’s angry condemnation of the world of commerce, and at the same time, is also a powerful defense of art and of the committed artist, martyred by the commercial world for his sufferings. The martyrdom of the saint, a frequent subject of Renaissance paintings, is travestied in the first two lines, “Naked, as if for swimming” and “Catches his death,” the common idiom for getting a cold. It represents the poet as an exhausted aesthete, a victim who in his vulnerability to the world of commerce, “catches his death in a little flutter / Of plain arrows,” where the cliché matches the tongue. Explaining history, however, may be only an ideological exercise, and as such more devious than ignoring it.

And his salvation, which is his formidable power as a maker, throws him always back into the tragedy of the actual world, which language must amplify.

“In Piam Memoriam,” the volume’s penultimate poem, celebrates the glass saint “Exposing his gifted quite empty hands,” “Of worldly purity the stained archetype” (*CP* 56). The image of the saint appears to embody the concept of perfect art; he, as one of utter poise, seems as flawless morally as well as aesthetically. However, the vision is problematic because the saint’s perfection lies “purely”--innocently or merely--within the artistic medium: “Created purely from glass the saint stands.” A smart pun repeats the point: the saint’s “worldly purity” lies in “the stained archetype” of the window glass. This image of stained purity is vulnerable to the play of filtered winter sunlight. At the same time it has endured: “A feature for our regard”:

In the sun lily-and-gold-coloured,
Filtering the cruder light, he has endured,
A feature for our regard; and will keep;
Of worldly purity the stained archetype. (*CP* 56)

Thus it turns out to be a complex poem about the nature of medium, the place of art, of artifice within the world of ordinary, common existence; about the reader-poet relationship; about the endurance next to the ephemerality of art.

The last stanza, however, envisions a perfection outside art; on the other side of the glass, “a new earth” as “revealed.” Here the poet stands outside the church and cunningly allows his own brilliant but brittle imagery (“Created purely from [colored] glass”) to be broken down into the raw material from which it comes: its “common, puddled existence”:

The scummed pond twitches. The great holly-tree,
Emptied and shut, blows clear of wasting snow,
The common, puddled substance: beneath,
Like a revealed mineral, a new earth. (*CP* 56)

Significantly enough, however, this transformation also belongs to the process of art, not history or nature. We are viewing the scene outside *through* the mediating window of art,

for “In Piam Memoriam” is a poem “about” as well as “like” a stained glass window. In this regard, Sherry meticulously points out that the symmetrical three-part structure of the poem matches that of the transfiguring glass--the triptych pattern prevalent in church fenestration (27). At the end, the poem turns, foreshadowing the majestic music of *Mercian Hymns*, to the decaying and generative world of nature, there as inexplicably as the renewals language enacts and elicits.

While being keenly aware of the difficulty describing reality as it really is, his stepping away from the poem and placing it in all its brittleness within the greater perspective of common life indicates where Hill stands, and shows his ideas of language, of poetry and of his own craft: “Poetry--excites us to artificial feelings--makes us callous to real ones.” Poetry is not life but a “criticism of life.” Because Hill’s own art, skillfully affecting a “stained [kind] of purity,” shows us through the glassiness of its artificiality as it appeals to our “callous” feelings, how mixed our feelings really are. The verbal play noted in *For the Unfallen* signals the poet’s extreme self-consciousness of his medium, while confirming that “reality is witness-proof,” for the image and concept on the world are made of words. “Language, then, is the medium and range of the poet’s perfection” (Sherry 27). Now we come to recognize the duplicity of language: “Our word is our bond.”

Soon after publication of *For the Unfallen*, when interviewed in a Leeds University magazine, Hill quoted two statements as “summing up a good deal” of what he felt. The first was from Yeats; “I took pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I found something hard and cold, some articulation of the image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life.” The second was Pound’s: “The poet’s job is to define and yet again define. If the poet doesn’t make certain horrors appear horrible who will? All the values come from our judicial sentences” (qtd. in an anonymous review of *King Log*, *TLS* 31 Oct. 1968, 1220). This belief in literature as “begetter and conserver of values,” coupled with the desire for a tough, cold excellence of expression, was unfashionable, and there was an embattled feeling, a bristling defensiveness about the book. “Hill’s artistic self-

consciousness, political wariness, and uncompromising demand for perfection” which were revealed in even his early work, are rare qualities but “welcome antidotes” to our troubled world (Hart 80).

(3) *King Log*: Tongue’s atrocities

With his first volume, *For the Unfallen*, Geoffrey Hill established a reputation for powerfully disquieting, intensely enigmatic writing on huge themes. In the volume, we have seen a general avoidance of direct statements, and a tendency to use oblique, ambiguous language; a great compression and economy of diction. Obliqueness, allusiveness, density, impersonality: all features make Hill’s poetry very near to Eliot’s verse. These features are pervasive also in the second volume, *King Log* (1968). In his review of *King Log*, Gavin Ewart pointed out the feature: Hill is “somber, concentrated and obscurer at times of meaning” (92). Ewart also maintained that contemporary life hardly exists in most of Hill’s poems, except by implication (93). The seemingly archaic poems, however, permeate into our own age with its own history of losses, defeats, failures, and suffering. Then in our mind, the painful past is juxtaposed with the present not exempt from atrocities. In an essay “War and the Pity,” Jon Silkin has also noted that Hill’s poems on battles and victims in the past are in different ways poems of present history. According to Silkin, through Hill’s poems, the past could not be relegated to the past; history is not in that way done with (117). In this section, I shall discuss the book’s dominant themes, “violence and suffering,” so-called historical “atrocities,” and show Hill’s unaccommodating scrutiny of the “historical problems of power.” Significantly, however, it is difficult to discuss his main themes without coming first into necessary contact with his language, for his compressed language is intimately bound up with what it is conveying. As Silkin noticed, this is true of many poets, but true to an unusual degree with Hill in *King Log* (Ibid. 120). As we have seen, even in Hill’s early work, the

language itself is unlike most other current writing, and there is unusual self-consciousness of the poet's part to the language. To borrow Silkin's observation again, this is not because Hill wishes to draw attention to it for its own sake, but because for him the language is itself an instance of his moral concerns (Ibid. 120). Dealing with violence, loss and suffering caused by the mismanagement of power in the name of virtue, Hill's poems enact "tongue's atrocities," and explore the relation between his own poetry and historical domains.

The poems from *King Log* are not only most infuriatingly obscure but also some of Hill's finest and strongest. Just as dauntingly difficult as *For the Unfallen*, the poems in *King Log* grip and haunt the imagination with a kind of agonized forcefulness and ceremony. Thus the second volume is often perceived as Hill's "perfect book of lyrics." He had spent the year 1959-1960 in America, lecturing at the University of Michigan. It may have been while here that he came particularly under the influence of Tate's poetry, because whereas the interest was there before, as in the epigraph to "Of Commerce and Society," the new poems show a dominant likeness in both music and ideas. Contrary to Bloom's statement in the introduction to *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom*, what we find in *King Log* could be called unromantic and certainly unBlakean. Not only has Hill taken over the tortured, overloaded line from Tate, he has been deeply stirred by his ideals and strictures. Perhaps the word is not influence but a recognition of kinship. I suspect that Hill used Tate's ideas at an important time to clarify his own, and what he made of that agonizingly conscientious line and allegiance to form, the guilt of history, the sad failure of American progressivism, and his love of the "Mediterranean," the lucid, and controlled, is something very much his own, and unique in modern poetry. After his return to England, Hill came to know Jon Silkin, who had arrived at Leeds on the Gregory Fellowship in Poetry in 1958, and stayed there until 1965. In 1964 Silkin asked Hill to publish a small collection in the Northern House Poets, the series of pamphlets he had initiated earlier. Eight of the poems²⁰ in *King Log* first appeared in Hill's Northern House Poets pamphlet,

Preghiere which is the Italian word for “prayers.” The pamphlet’s title encapsulates not only the tones and moral vision of the poems included there but also that of the others Hill was to collect later for *King Log*, most of which were first published periodically in Jon Silkin’s magazine, *Stand*. The *TLS* reviewer of *Preghiere* (25 August 1966) wrote that Hill had “a disappointingly ingrown talent” and that his poems were “mandarin and rarefied” offering “a contrast to the earthy particularity of the others.” It is hard to see anything “mandarin and rarefied” in such lines as “I watch a slug / Scale the glinting pit-side / Of its own slime” (“Men Are a Mockery of Angels” CP 78); “maggots churning spleen / to milk” (“Domaine Public” CP 80), or in the phrase “blood-embroiled souls” of the third stanza of “History as Poetry,”²¹ their effectiveness centering in their very “earthy particularity.” Jon Silkin in an introductory essay to Robert Shaw’s anthology of modern poetry, *Flashpoint* (1964) writes that “the way in which Geoffrey Hill’s moral concern works is through his sensuousness, a sensuousness that is harsh, abrasive, translucent” (20). One can expand upon Silkin’s insight and say that Hill’s meticulous ordering of words, phrases and punctuation enacts a syntactical force comparable to that physical force it both conveys and attempts to transcend; the syntax serving as the physical means of embodying a powerful spiritual and intellectual integrity.

The “life of decision” in the volume is usually of a political nature, as is indicated by the quotation from Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* which serves as the book’s epigraph: “From moral virtue let us pass onto matter of power and commandment . . .” (9). Indeed, the purpose of Hill’s volume is the exploration of this question. It may be true that words are in his power, rhythm and phrase are under his command. Few poets, I suppose, have the courage to tackle such a major theme. In the *King Log* poems, where the writing of poetry is defined as a “matter of moral imperative” and the poet as “one [who] writes under judgment,” Hill confronts more directly his own predicament as a contemplative contemporary British poet. It is not just his concerns with the poem as “artifact” not becoming an “aesthetic” object or a “theoretical” construct which Hill scrutinizes here; but

how, when one has to respond to suffering, these very concerns might be indecent and the ultimate in callousness. The poems, then define Hill's unease with the inevitability of being a poet of "belated witness": he fears that his need to bear witness to pain and loss, and his "belatedness" necessarily makes his responses insufficient because his position is not just theoretically but actually a vicarious one.

Not only the volume's epigraph but also its title from Aesop is a brilliant choice for Hill at this point because it expresses his skepticism of social and religious progress, and idealistic reformation in general. Aesop's fable of King Log and King Stork contrasts two kings of opposite qualities: the supine, indolent, "do-nothing" King Log and the worldly, rapacious, "care-nothing" King Stork. The frogs of a pond, dissatisfied with the unworldly and ineffectual ruler, ask for a change and, ironically, receive something much worse, who terrorized and devoured all he could. Moreover, the prose postscript, "King Stork," aptly records the force of political violence in a coldly objective prose style.²² Most of the poems in the volume chronicle the reign of King Stork, raising a question: "How does one govern with force?" Historically, the subject ranges from the medieval to the modern worlds, and the political and spiritual ruthlessness of the earlier age sets the mood. Furthermore, the title points towards an intermittent theme of ironic and bitter contemplation of the respective dignities of ruler and ruled. The dead of Towton and the surrounding established slaughter on the block and elsewhere; the dead of Shiloh; the victims of the Third Reich; the four poets Campanella, Hernandez, Desnos and Mandelshtam dying in prison for political and religious reasons in different historical periods, all these are the "matter of power and commandment." All are public victims, and as such inhabited, as we inhabit, a world with the choice of responsibility. Accordingly, history is the correlative of guilt, and reformers at best fail to comprehend its burden, at worst aggravate and fuel its cruelty. Yet, in such a world, no bystander is innocent, and "innocence" is a liability, even at times a threat. In these poems Hill is a master of clear and two-edged irony. In style and form, the poems repeat this experience of power. They can

be authoritative to the point of arrogance, demanding exceptionally careful reading, furthermore, submission on the part of the reader. At the same time, however, several poems, like those on Campanella and Hernandez in “Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets,” associate poetry with formal virtue. Thus the experience of reading enacts a dialectic between ascetic virtue and worldly power, and some poems take up this tension as their chief concern.

In the first poem of *King Log*, “Ovid in the Third Reich,” we encounter deceptively simple syntax, colloquial sentences, and loosely rhymed two quatrains:

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon.

I have learned one thing: not to look down
So much upon the damned. They, in their sphere,
Harmonize strangely with the divine
Love. I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir. (CP 61)

At the same time, as Silkin notes, we confront Hill’s “obsessive concern with innocence, and its mutilation, or impossibility, within the context of human barbarism” (“The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill” 113): “Too near the ancient troughs of blood / Innocence is no earthly weapon.” Despite the apparent lucidness, the poem is problematic; it also seems more intentionally ambiguous. In this respect, it is worth noting the poem’s epigraph, which is a passage from Ovid’s *Amores* claiming that innocence is wholly contingent upon the denial of guilt, and guilt upon confession. According to Hart, while Ovid’s *Amores* sings about “a man’s illusioned and disillusioned love for a woman,” Hill, working on a larger scale, speaks of “a man’s perplexed love for humanity, which includes indifference and repugnance” (103). Indeed, the power of the human mind to rationalize barbarity lies at the heart of the resonant horror produced by the poem’s chilling compactness. Because here we see not only the indifference to political realities in a totalitarian state, but also the even more terrifying ability to absorb the Reich’s cruelties into a personal theology and ethic.

“Ovid in the Third Reich” seems to problematize “helplessness” to alleviate or even understand evil, “poetic quietude” of a “disengaged artist” under Hitler, and our “inability” or “reluctance” to associate with guilt. Hill *plays* on the use of irony, taking readers to questions about not only passive silence but also responsibility, self-incrimination in that social context. In the poem “Annunciations,” when the Word returns from abroad “with a tanned look” (*CP* 62) we know that any “announcing” can be taken ironically, and that the “announcer” will plead seriousness or jest, depending on the accusation, and beyond that will plead the times, and the world which tends to corrupt what it hears. Professing an aesthetic-ethic dualism, the poet-speaker of “Ovid in the Third Reich” mixes clichés with literary diction, colloquial uncertainty with stylized finality. Hill’s creative use of idiom and cliché was appreciated particularly by Christopher Ricks in a substantial critical essay on Hill’s poetry, “Cliché as ‘Responsible Speech’: Geoffrey Hill.” For Ricks, Hill is a unique contemporary poet in the sense that he persistently “tackles the problem of what to do about dead language, clichés,” (96) and uses clichés deliberately and responsibly. Ricks’s scrutinies act out the two stages in our reading: “from clinical identification to enlivening awareness of creative opportunity.” Interestingly enough, Hill’s remarks on literary cliché in other poets suggest some of the strategies taken in his own poetry, especially in “Ovid in the Third Reich.” “In Marvell, as in Jonson,” he observes, “the perspective requires the utterance of deliberate cliché, but cliché rinsed and restored to function as responsible speech” (*LL* 45). Thus Jonson allows the normally unquestioned connotations of the phrase to be “disturbingly scrutinized” through his literary art; Hill refers to the one altered word that “blasts the cliché into a new perspective” (*LL* 46). For example, “Innocence is no earthly weapon” is a great and typical line by Hill, which, if we can solve it, will show us how carefully we need to read this economical language. The notion of innocence as a defense against earthly corruption has an ancient lineage; but in this poem it is linked with the more combative “weapon,” suggesting a very literal sense. At the same time, the line leads us towards an equation with “no earthly use or good”; but it

could also mean “Innocence is a heavenly weapon.” The use of language has been described as “reinvigorated cliché,” making us think again what the often-repeated expression “no earthly use” really means. Thus the drag of old habit can lead to the lift of new insight, usual meanings give way to new meanings; in Sherry’s expression, “for out of the common tongue the uncommon tongue is shaped” (15). We become conscious of the cliché as such and of a new, invented meaning. Then it is true that Hill achieves truthfulness by not eschewing cliché; moreover, by rising above cliché, he achieves dignity.

In the second stanza, the poet-speaker’s reaction is significantly ambiguous when he tries “not to look down” with smug detachment on the tortures of the damned. As Ricks points out in his detailed elucidation of this poem, the phrase “look down” has the uncertainty of “despise” or “see from Heaven”—with “a further uncertainty unfolding”: “contemplating” their suffering (101). Here, I suppose, the ambiguity implies solicitude, humility, and restraint. The poem began with the simple assertions like a Creator gazing over his creation, or like any father talking about his work and children, but it ends with an innocent bystander’s observation.²³ Justly or unjustly punished, the damned harmonize “with the divine / Love.” He seems to celebrate the “love choir” who express unqualified love for life’s victims. He applauds the concord between “the divine love” and “the damned,” as if it were the harmony of the spheres, but he remains in his own earthly sphere at a safe remove from the “troughs of blood.” It signals how a poet, because not “near” enough to “the ancient troughs of blood,” might go “too far” from them. This is precisely because he does not “see through” the callousness of his reasoning in the name of his vocation. Indeed, while a poet may maintain privileged diffidence or “decency” in his own art, that very diffidence or “decency” may imply a moral evasiveness in worldly terms. Hill never ignores his burden of doubt, anxiety, and vacillation. He acknowledges them in the ambiguities of his poem. Thus, the poem’s development into complexity and

ambiguity is entirely characteristic of Hill, and significantly it is also characterized as complexity and dubieties of our own time.

As Ricks has remarked, Hill here considers the predicament of those Germans who remained silent. However, this interpretation is not enough. More importantly, it does not account for “Ovid in the Third Reich” being a “poet’s poem” and as this contributes to its difficult central meaning--the conflicting tensions between clarity and ambiguity. Moreover, the tensions are aroused by the uncanny perspective enhanced by its title²⁴ and its division into two stanzas. At this point, it is important to note that Hill has said of Jonson’s use of dramatic rhetoric, that he employs “ambiguity--of word, phrase or situation--to give what is ultimately a quite unambivalent expression to moral preference or decision” (LL 47). Similarly, Hill employs ambiguity not only of word, phrase and situation but also in his title and in that Latin epigraph. From this perspective, it becomes more clear why Hill should place this poem first in *King Log*, which is seriously concerned with questions about the role of poets and their words. In the poem’s setting, the following questions become complicated--questions about right moral conduct in worldly terms, and questions which make Hill’s Latin epigraph even more self-ironic than may at first be apparent (“He who denies that he sins commits the unpardonable sin.”). Through this poem’s shifts in perspective--by placing a historically real poet in a historically real setting to which he does not belong--in a bitterly ironic way, Hill seems to consider his own predicament as a poet of belated witness. Thus he expresses his fear of how he might function with his morally earnest convictions on the autonomy of poetry, if he were to be living in the world of King Stork. At the same time, he acknowledges the moral evasiveness of entertaining such a fear in artistic (fictional) form. In comparison with others’ suffering in the world of brutal facts, his living by that fear allows the poet to remain comfortably secure in his own poetic convictions, however apparently “modest,” and self-conscious.

To be sure, there is much more to Hill than can be accommodated within Ricks's terrain of play on ambiguity and cliché. As we have seen, even a short poem of eight lines was encapsulated in a complex statement of enormous scope about the serious human condition regarding art and reality. It is true that in Hill's poetry, there is no trivial mannerism or flourish. Instead, it reveals what is innate to his imaginative grasp of life. Thus, we may say that Sherry's comment on Hill's rhetoric, especially on cliché was properly made: "Hill takes us. . . from cliché to *crisis*: a critical point of awareness, a challenge to moral initiative, a constant opportunity to recognize and overcome the inertia that idiom threatens to induce"(17). For Hill, as for Herbert or Marvell, ambiguity and paradox are not tricks of rhetoric, but necessary means of comprehending truths of life as the complex thing it is, so requiring correspondingly subtle use of language. Hill's difficulty is demonstrably concomitant to unusual ambitiousness of both theme and method.

Hill's sincere effort to achieve responsible speech can be found in other poems of *King Log*. "September Song," "Funeral Music," and "Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets" are good exemplary poems to discuss Hill's poetic language in dealing with painful history. Among them, "September Song," as Merle Brown called, is a "miniature masterpiece" (26). As another poem depicting the terrors of the Third Reich, it uses elegy form to remember those victims who were reduced into things. Here Hill returns to his preoccupation with the German concentration camps, this time for someone born a day later than himself and gassed in September of 1942.

"September Song" aptly illustrates the ambiguity of Hill's poetry. Everywhere in it are cryptic allusions, double meanings, puns, mixed registers which lead the reader in false directions. The ambiguity of content and language is, as the author intends, a mere reflection of the ambiguity of history. As Sherry succinctly points out, the poem "reveals the terrible moral complications of aesthetic distance." Moreover, "Hill is twisting the idea of aesthetic detachment . . . toward his central theme: the poet's complicity in history"

(103-4). Here, to write a poem is to be a “living witness,” where the poet’s use of the “living word,” if it constitutes a defense of poetry, is first and foremost a defense of the dignity of the human individual. At the same time, however, Hill never neglects the problematics of his only medium, “living words” to compose his work.

“Things happen” out of a whirling untenable space, a void. A similar impersonality appears to overhang the fate of the Jewish child of “September Song,” *born 19.6.32--deported 24.9.42*. In his sensitive study, “Geoffrey Hill 1: ‘The Tongue’s Atrocities,’” Ricks points out the anonymity and inhumanity revealed in the expressions like “deported” and “9” in comparison with “died” and “September” (302). Normal gravestone inscriptions have as initial and final dates two natural events: birth and death. Here, on the other hand, the second event is deportation. With its grim irony, it points to the absurdity of those times when natural death had been displaced by organized state murder; it also underlines the supplementary horror of the loss of personal identity which took place in extermination camps (even the date of one’s death was drowned in anonymity).

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries. (CP 67)

“Undesirable” refers both to racism and to sexual desire. A similar double meaning is found in the term “touch” (“to touch” is both “to caress” and “to beat”). Normally a person who is not sexually “desired” is not “touched” either. By the way, the victim was not “desired” but was “touched.” The effect is one of sinister irony.²⁵ Here, to borrow Sherry’s words, the victim’s physical presence is effectively erased by “the plethora of negatives” (103). “Things marched,” but all is calculated, organized precisely. Things are rationalized so that this time the Jews are not passed over.

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough. (*CP* 67)

These lines give way to the deep personal feelings of the speaker, who contrasts his own relative security--permitting him to observe "The smoke / of harmless fires" on a September day--with the destruction of the young victim and the smoke that it released. Here, Hart's reading is somewhat radical: Even September reminds the speaker of "victims 'fattened' for the fire, as if all nature were ripening toward some great unholy harvest" (111). At any rate, I suppose, one of the best marks of Hill's greatness as a poet is his attention to the conscience of and for history. His confessions are not confessional poetry in any personal sense only, but speak for the race and species.

The last line, separated from the main text, reads so double it functions as a refrain. Indeed the whole poem is "binary," including its own echo, or inverted reflection. It mirrors the ambiguous duality of the fallen world, in which the concentration camp can be seen as a place from which we the nonvictims have been expelled and sentenced to live out our exile in guilt. What seems to alarm him most is looking into the fallen world and seeing people pretend not to know they are fallen, even though he grants they may be helpless to act on that knowledge. In juxtaposing the child's condition with his own autumnal comfort, and "rich harvest imagery"--"This is plenty. This is more than enough."--Hill is also pointing towards a corruption of language where such words as "sufficient," "plenty," "enough" can be used indeterminately to disguise what they are quantitative of. The poem itself can be a luxury, part of the plenty. Its only justification lies in its irreducible integrity with particular words. However, good intentions alone are inadequate, and the whole business of expression is fraught with the perils of glibness, the Word made fashionable as in "Annunciations" (*CP* 62-63). At this point, Hill's awareness of the vulnerability and "limitation" of his own language is poignant. However much he may "believe in words," and his skillful use of their richly resonant meanings testifies to

this faith, Hill bitterly concludes that words are never quite enough. Instead of saying too much, here, Hill remains somber, stoical, sardonic, taciturn, since “a garrulous fattening of language” would indicate complicity with the fallen world he describes (Hart 111). He is aware of the indulgence that the articulation of his regarding the dead child can become:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true) (CP 67).

The contemplation of another’s suffering, however contained and constrained, cannot help but reflect one’s own selfishness. The lament is for the survivors like himself as well as for the dead, even if the speaker is worried by that easy paradox. As we have seen, the play in the subtitle, “*born 19.6.32--deported 24.9.42,*” and one day difference from Hill’s own birthday (18.6.32) contribute to the duplicities of this elegy: the identification with the victim’s fate and the distance between the victim and the poet. However whole and smoothly lyrical this line may be, the syntax is cracked by how the words are placed on the page. From this point of view, it is hard to find a better reading on these three lines (one smooth line) than Silkin’s critical meditation. According to Silkin, “the slightly awkward break after ‘it’” implies two things that the elegy was made for the speaker, himself (at least, in part); but the speaker also made an elegy “on a ‘true’ event” (“The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill” 111). As Ricks believes, moreover, Hill manages the language for atrocities while indicating that it is impossible to speak the words. This reticence employs as its special device parentheses. Brackets (parentheses), Ricks observes, “lower the words within them down into silent depths” and “intimate an irreducible recalcitrance, of the kind which any true poem on such atrocities ought to intimate” (*The Force of Poetry* 300). By placing the lines in brackets, Hill speaks “tentatively,” and distances himself from the atrocities he has described. In demonstrating the poet’s power to transmute fact into an artistic event, Hill acknowledges the difficulty of the poet, who wishes to approach the atrocities of history with his tongues’ atrocities, but “has compunction about doing so.”

Moreover, Hill's way of "avoiding in words the indecency in words" reveals a delicate energy and a fine irony. With his use of brackets then, together with the ironic combination of the smooth lyrical line and its "broken" syntax, Hill simultaneously reveals the unutterable nature of the "atrocities," the insufficiency of his "tongue," and his own "commitment" that he must somehow speak.

As particularized in "September Song," Hill's bracketed distress about the possibilities of an imaginative openness to the suffering of the world invokes return upon return. For Hill all expression seems akin to indulgence, the over-articulate serpent offering the apple of garrulity. Yet silence is impossible: "Words clawed my mind as though they had smelt / "Revelation's flesh" ("Soliloquies" CP 85). At times, as we have seen, Hill exploits clichés to make the words enact the poet's ideal: poems, as a field of limitation and possibility, *may* put on "Revelation's flesh," a redeemed language.

In this regard, a key entry in *King Log* is a short lyric "History as Poetry."²⁶ No poem by Hill exploits more dogmatically the clichés, abstractions, in modern colloquial speech with the intention of exposing the compromises indulged in by new contemporary poetry. As the seemingly unambiguous title says, the poem is about how history is the domain of any poetry; it is so called Hill's "poetic manifesto" of the relationship of history and poetry.²⁷ And it declares that the history of language and the history of society follow similar patterns. "History" does not just stand for the past, but quite literally means the past, the dead of the past, since poetry uses language shaped through the past ("etymology is history"). Thus the "ashen feast" of clichés, for that is what the poem offers us, enacting how poetry "unearths" (resurrects) "the speechless dead" (the past, history) to make them speak:

Poetry as salutation; taste
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead

Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam. Fortunate

Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung:

'A resurgence' as they say. The old
Laurels wagging with the new: Selah!
Thus laudable the trodden bone thus
Unanswerable the knack of tongues. (CP 84)

Through his own skillful working and reworking of the "speechless," "unanswerable"--literally "raising up" out of the "provided loam"--Hill wants to bring the past to a rebirth, to deny the pastness of the past. In other words, Hill intends to pressurize the lightness and predictability of the clichés towards the heavier, unpredictable, more specific matter of life in words--which reveals that writing poetry is more than having a "knack" with words.

Henry Hart sums up "History as Poetry" as follows: "History is a record of creations, falls, and redemptions. Poetry is the same" (116). It is true that history, religion, and poetry are inescapably interrelated. I suppose, however, poetry is neither autonomous from nor synonymous with history but problematically parallel to it. After the broad, self-confident pronouncement of the title, in terms of the relationship between history and poetry, the poem degenerates into severe skepticism. Importantly enough, the whole poem is clotted with dense combinations: history / poetry; poetry / salutation; taste of bluish ash / blue wounds; blue wounds / the tongue's atrocities--wounds. The relationship between each pair turns out to be ambiguous. Hart, furthermore, points out that "Hill witnesses the collusion between poetry and history, in which 'poetic' rhetoric incites atrocities and atrocious dictators silence poets" (116). The characteristic clash between different dictions, the "tongue's atrocities," the lily's "gouged face," "golden dung" create an effect of deliberate uncertainty. Each line, even each word, seems to contradict the preceding one to suggest a jarred consciousness; the voice which addresses us is "unanswerable" not only because it is disembodied, but also because it comes to no easy conclusion. The "knack of tongues," the act of poetic resurrection, is "unanswerable" because the dead remain dead no matter how passionate or skillful the act of poetry. It is as if Hill has succeeded in

encompassing every doubt, every contradiction in his poetry, even the doubts and contradictions which concern poetry itself.

At this point, "History as Poetry" implicates the act of its own making in a way which includes the poet's skepticism about what poetry can accomplish. We have already noticed Hill's awareness of the problem--how the imagination through "the knack of tongues" will always salute and celebrate, perhaps can only praise and celebrate in spite of what the case, the suffering and waste are. As the world of experience is pathetically undeserving of praise and salutation, so the human spirit may be unfit for the "resurgence" out of the carnage of history. Here poetry with its love of the violent paradox, may be the true image of history, and "the tongue's atrocities." To be sure, Hill is baffled by the practice of his own art. Even when attempting the opposite, trying to present truth, indictment, not praise, the craft subverts the intentions. Poetry can only embody unresolvable tensions and cast doubt on its own means. These tensions are implicit in the poet's medium and materials; he either exposes them or attempts to conceal them. At any rate, Hill returns in his poetry with an unmannerly insistence to those atrocities of history that "might better be forgotten" since they cannot be understood. Unlike Eliot, he does not compare the present unfavorably with the past; neither is given an advantage. More than any modern poet in English, I suppose, Hill feels a deep responsibility to address the reality of history. Where most of his contemporaries stay with their personal experience for subject matter, or play with fantastic and vague textures, Hill works with the biography of state and race, language, the neuroses of empire, the actuality of wars. Hill intently refuses to escape; he confronts openly the painfulness of historical awareness. He has achieved a kind of art which is an action of engagement, a way of imagining history which is experiential, evokes multiplicity, is fully felt--is very close to the qualities of historical living itself. While constantly returning to history, however, he recognizes the division between event and verbal representation as absolute. But within the linguistic sphere to which he is confined, the poet can--and should--accept his artistic heritage, insure its preservation, and enlarge it

insofar as he can. To preserve poetry, it is necessary to preserve language from complacency, mendacity, and indifference. By exposing the contradictions that lie just below the conventional surface of linguistic usage, the poet protects meaning and the possibility of creation.

Thus, it is the active assertiveness of the poet reaching out to affect the world in touching it. But the poetic act is rendered scrupulously by the poet's self-doubt, which saves him from "the two forms of poetic death he imagines most fully: death by absorption into the pastness of history, which often takes the figurative form of death by drowning; or the opposite, death by evaporation, removing himself so far from a subject that he can no longer touch it and be touched by it" (Getz 13). At this point, I argue that Sherry's reading of "History as Poetry" is somewhat limited. Sherry sees "History as Poetry" as a poem where poetry itself has the capacity through the "tongue's atrocities" to redeem history: "while this poetic regimen embodies the stiff resistance of history to poetry, it also effects a violence in language akin to history's. . . . The poem imitates that friction and, by achieving its metrical shape, overcomes the opposition. And so it may claim a kind of transcendence, like the divine logos of the annunciation (the angel's 'salutation' to Mary) or 'Pentecost's' inspiration, but only by letting its words wear the smudge and bear the smell of human history" (111). The disjunctive syntax here leaves broad gaps for interpretation. But it also offers clear discontinuities which allow us to see the Janus-faced nature of humanity; not so much a question of redemptive poetry versus destructive history, but rather the redemptive power in the capacity of speech involved in the act of killing. The "tongue's atrocities" are commands to execute and to give battle as much as they struggle towards "at-one-ment."

Hill, risking "the tongue's atrocities," will write the dead's "funeral music"--"a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks" (*CP* 199), he says of his terrifying sequence of unrhymed sonnets on "the period popularly but inexactly known as the Wars of the Roses" (*CP* 200). To be sure, in "Funeral Music" there are melodic places in the sequence and

resounding clashes of vowel and consonant: “Fire / Flares in the pit, ghosting upon stone. . .” (*CP* 70); or “we are dying / To satisfy fat Caritas, those / Wiped jaws of stone” (*CP* 71). However, it seems rather “grunts and shrieks” of the syntax, motifs and images, related to a theme, which Hill’s comment invites us to notice. In delivering the theme of poetry as history, Hill uses dissenting voices instead of “a single linear movement” gathering a coercive impetus over the span of the sequence. It is worth focusing on the sequence’s polycentric character, which effects shifts in perspective, that is to say, contrary and alternative views. Then it is true that Hill’s rhetoric is not quiet or smoothly-flowing. Accordingly, his tone also varies among sarcasm, disbelief, repugnance, and despair, when he confronts history’s battlefield of corpses and mud. Various narrative, dramatic, and meditative, the perspectives shift freely from soldiers’ accounts of the Battle of Towton in 1461 to ceremonial views of executions.²⁸ In fact, there is little coherent narrative in “Funeral Music,” *Mercian Hymns*, or the other poems on historical subjects, except by way of minimal statements of fact or allusions supported by a footnote or an ironic headnote. Instead, there is the music, “heartless,” florid or austere, a “key” for which is provided in a narrative of real human suffering which we must infer. “It is . . . worth remarking,” Hill writes in the essay on Green, “that ‘music’ is a term which can be exploited both ideally and empirically. It is the ‘still, sad music of humanity’ and it is the precise detail of articulation, the ‘difficult music’ of communication” (*LL* 111). In terms of music, Hill marches with “a staccato tread” while Eliot discourses on “timeless moments” and historical (and musical) patterns with dampened humility (Hart 128).

According to Hill’s own essay commenting on and illuminating some aspects of the background, the sequence “avoids shaping . . . characters and events into any overt narrative or dramatic structure. The whole inference, though, has value if it gives a key to the ornate and heartless music punctuated by mutterings, blasphemies and cries for help” (*CP* 200). Although this appended short essay makes the poem no easier for the reader, it does indicate Hill’s discursive intention of juxtaposing the images of the “fragmentary

chaos” against the “‘formal pledge’ of art” (“Suppose all reconciled / By silent music; imagine the future / Flashed back at us, like steel against the sun, / Ultimate recompense.”) (CP 71) from sonnet two, for example, whereby reality and idealism fuse within a tense collocation of imagistic and narrative material which Hill has borrowed eclectically from his reading of the characters and events of the Wars of the Roses. At this point, “Funeral Music,” can be regarded as a creative parallel to Hill’s reading of Tate, and its crystallization in the essay of 1963, since in the sequence the characteristic tension between “the ‘formal pledge’ of art” and “the presence of ‘aimless power’” is most evident. The entire sequence maintains a tension between formal vessel and bloody content. By juxtaposing the two instead of having the latter fill the former, Hill undercuts reader’s anticipated responses. Even his choice of the sonnet form sets up expectations of sequence and fulfillment, and deliberately undercuts those expectations.

“Funeral Music,” a group of eight poems, stands at the center of *King Log*.²⁹ The sequence as “a work of broad historical imagination,” moves freely through the political and intellectual circumstances surrounding the English Wars of the Roses. As I mentioned earlier, the eight sonnets are a series of “meditations,” “dramatic monologues,” interwoven with battle scenes, and the “rhythms” of a mind vacillating between the world of violence and contemplation. In this way, more effectively than before, Hill can question the practices of power and authority that is a consistent theme throughout *King Log*.

The main theme, the conception of this world as “restless / Habitation, no man’s dwelling-place” (CP 70) and life as a lingering pain, is set in the first sonnet:

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.
The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
With an equable contempt for this world,
‘In honorem Trinitatis’. Crash. The head
Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood. (CP 70)

As a note informs, the voice and what it says belong to Tiptoft, who commanded “that he should be decapitated in three strokes ‘in honor of the ‘Trinity’” (CP 200). The fate of his

head, unmitigated by his piety, contributes to the theme running throughout--the grievous lot of humankind on this earth, the "stark ground of this pain." Hill's symbolic procession, however, represents not just one funeral but all ceremonies of remembrance. The processions, the moving figures that make the shadows on the stone wall in the fable, are by extension the historical figures that process through the sequence, "Creatures of such rampant state" as they are later portrayed (*CP* 70). Another theme in "Funeral Music" is the responsibility of the poet in relation to the demands of the dead to be reported in the world aright.

There is a kind of "palimpsest of perspectives." There is a Platonic conception of events, the scene of the fifteenth-century martyrdom, and a twentieth-century consideration of both. Dealing with the massacre of the estimated "twenty-six thousand" dead (*CP* 201), Hill finds a correlative for the present. Characteristically, this is Plato's cave in which the real world has been reduced to shadows and ghostly sounds. The image of the "cave" with which the sequence opens may imply all human situations: living within the cave yet being unable to escape. At this point, despite the apparent substantiality of these ritualized funerals, the poem is in part a visual image of a kind of Platonic form in which the martyrs "dispose themselves" as in a pattern or paradigm of martyrdom--as though they are creating their own art-work, in part an image of the cave, and in part sheer void--a "vacuous ceremony." Despite a concrete treatment of atrocities, for example, "The head / Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood," what Hill intends here is not simply making us feel sudden shock and compassion, but shaking our very modes of thinking. "Tiptoft" the "Butcher of England" with his requested "In honorem trinitatis" is an ambiguous subject and as such has become material for an open-ended meditation in which we are invited to allow our minds to range over the causes of pain and its positioning in philosophical systems. This sequence considers, among other things, the ways in which we structure our knowledge and experience of others' pain. Michael Schmidt spoke of Hill's "ruminations from within an experience" (405). These poems are aware of the way in

which they use pain and form it into an artwork--the weaving on "articulate looms"--an economy of pain from which the poet profits. In this sense, not only the martyrs are shown as victims of the cave situation, but also we must doubt the evidence of our own senses.

In the second sonnet of “Funeral Music” one of the three beheaded aristocrats, asks:

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain--
For none but the ritual king? We meditate
A rueful mystery; (*CP* 71)

The justification of pain, of the fallen world, is open to rejection. The “mystery” has connotations not just of “problem,” but of a secret religious doctrine, possibly that which is beyond human knowledge to explain, but probably the further meaning of “anything artfully made difficult.” As consolation, acceptance of God’s fallen world is inadequate. Such careful planning cannot be made consistent with the proven arbitrariness of human suffering:

some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Struck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind's
Flurrying, darkness over the human mire. (CP 71)

Certainly in view of the questioning on matters of articulation that has gone before, they invite an approach that observes the tension they contain between sound and silence.

A field

After battle utters its own sound
Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.
Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly
Among carnage the most delicate souls
Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping 'Jesus'. (CP 72)

And from the fourth sonnet:

Averroes, old heathen,
If only you had been right, if Intellect
Itself were absolute law, sufficient grace,

Our lives could be a myth of captivity
Which we might enter: an unpeopled region
Of ever new-fallen snow, a palace blazing
With perpetual silence as with torches. (CP 73)

According to an interview with Haffenden, when he was writing “Funeral Music,” he was interested in “Averroism.” He defined it as “the doctrine of monopsychism,” that there’s only one single Intellect, or “intellective” soul for the whole of humanity. That would put an end to conflict by collapsing all diversity into a single identity, the Intellect, as “absolute law,” “sufficient grace.” Then he has pointed out how at first sight, a most comforting doctrine can later become the archetype of the totalitarian state (98). In the sonnet, thus, he shows how he approaches the same idea again and again from a different angle and thereby enacts what happens to an idea when it has been impinged upon by experience. Worrying about the expediency of faith and instinct, as ways of avoiding the reality of pain, suffering and violence, the speaker cannot accept either the “void rule” (the unworldliness of a King Log) or the “waste history” of Averroistic “pure Intellect” (the totalitarianism of worldly reason). Here Hill argues “against any sort of Eliotic fusion of soul with intellect and against structuralist reductions of individual men to anonymous Language” (Brown 45). At the same time, he “insists on his own identity, on the inviolability of his soul, and with his single voice he is arguing for us all” (*Ibid.* 45).³⁰ In contrast to the Eliotic or structuralistic approach, by submitting himself completely to the imperatives of tradition, Hill has been able to reveal its incoherence. Having done so, he tentatively explores the possibility of subverting his accomplishment by attributing it to a partial consciousness. In “Funeral Music,” existence is tested in relation to imagined alternatives (“Suppose all reconciled / By silent music”); the endeavor to represent the past impersonally is seen as subject to personal compulsions (“What I dare not is a waste history / Or void rule”); the seeming inevitability of historical patterns does not encompass being in the present (“Not as we are but as we must appear. . . not as we / Desire life but as they would have us live?”).

In the fifth sonnet, Hill demonstrates the complexity of our involvement with language.

Those righteously-accused those vengeful
Racked on articulate looms indulge us
With lingering shows of pain, a flagrant
Tenderness of the damned for their own flesh: (*CP* 74)

It shows how, for example, although context and grammar may clearly indicate which meaning of a word we are to infer, our minds are often unable wholly to rule out other meanings, so that these may hover and affect our perceptions. The lack of a comma or conjunction in the line “Those righteously-accused those vengeful” poses considerable problems. As it stands, the line is grammatically unclear; the reader is not given any guide to the link between the two terms, and so becomes empirically “Racked on [the] articulate loom. . .” or the poem itself--becomes subject.

Silkin, in “The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill,” writes of Hill’s “tact”³¹ as a quality of “evasive caution” by which “self-questioning exposes further recessions of self-doubts and questions” (112). Hill himself, however, has provided us with a better definition of it in his essay on the poetry of Jonathan Swift, the poetry of “reaction” where he describes Swift’s preoccupation with verbal values in terms of this “creative tact” which is succinctly described as the ability of Swift’s dramatic poetry “to test various techniques against varying situations and successfully reduce a dangerous immediacy to a more remote hypothesis” (*LL* 73). In Swift’s satire, Hill argues, the moral “reaction” to the injustices of man and nature is couched in artistic terms which simultaneously assimilate the insensitive clichés of the language of a particular society and Swift’s own sensitive awareness of that insensitivity. Hill argues that it is this power of Swift’s “to move with fluent rapidity from private to public utterance and from the formal to the intimate in the space of a few lines” which enables him to challenge satirically “a sense of tradition and community. . . by a strong feeling for the anarchic and the predatory” (*LL* 68). In *King Log* tradition and community are tested thematically by the subject of war and persecution and syntactically

by the intrusion of reality upon the “remote hypothesis” or idealistic artifice of the poetry. In the seventh sonnet, particularly, it is the contrast between the parenthesis of the speaking voice with its abstracted statements, and the intractable silence of the earth’s concrete imagery which creates the tension between man’s mortality and the earth’s eternity.

Hill ends the seventh sonnet with a soldier gazing at the field after battle strewn with anonymous dead preyed upon by carrion crows:

So they flashed and vanished
And all that survived them was the stark ground
Of this pain. I made no sound, but once
I stiffened as though a remote cry
Had heralded my name. It was nothing. . .'
Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
Strutted upon the armour of the dead. (*CP* 76)

To be sure, however, the fifteenth-century soldier is the twentieth-century poet himself, using the nameless voices of imagined others, facing the devastation of history, “the stark ground / Of this pain.” Atrocities continue: like the Second World War’s Holocaust, the rack of the Wars of the Roses stands apart in time but moves together in the poet’s consciousness. And as it impinges upon him, it makes him question his own preoccupation with suffering--how he might bear witness to it “unself-indulgently” and how he must let history speak through him for itself.

The question is also raised in the final sonnet. It is an elegy not only for the sequence’s imaginary characters but also for the poet and his readers, survivors of history’s pain, wondering how we might bear witness to it in our belatedness without indulging in self-pity. The sonnet stands “apart in timeless colloquy; / So it is required.” The colloquy is far from its traditional meditational form. In this meditation, the “contractual ghosts of pity” speak because it is required--by meditational form, by the forms of history and poetry; they “bear witness, / Despite” themselves. Fashioned by forces beyond their wills, the speakers are once more shapes without an authenticating reality. “Not as we are but as we must appear” (*CP* 77).

Like Eliot's coda at the end of the *Four Quartets*, which draws poetic and historic fragments into "the crowned knot of fire," Hill's end envisions a "sphere of harmony," that seems imbued with a calm acceptance: "Each distant sphere of harmony forever / Poised, unanswerable" (CP 77). Nevertheless it promises little consolation, and contains all the seeds of doubt which cause the speaker to cry out at the end. Moreover, in contrast to Eliot's momentary "union" of "spheres of existence" in "The Dry Salvages," here there is both ignorance and separation. The final sonnet deals, not quite with error, but with humanity's ultimate inability to discover, despite its desire, a structure that fits all the variables. All that can be found is the structure of the poem itself; and the degree of comfort or distress to be gained from this will necessarily fluctuate according to the predilections and perceptions of a reader. Thus, Brown's observation of "Funeral Music" as "so dense, so multi-layered, so polyphonic" is thematically and technically right (38). We know from "Ovid in the Third Reich" and from "Annunciations" that the work of poets may be suspect, and that we should be wary of the whole industry of literary production.

The blurring of boundaries between octave and sestet throughout the sequence is empirical demonstration of complex thought-processes and of ideas that will not fit within prescribed limits. The octave of the final poem, for example, ends in mid line, then the sestet also starts in the middle of the line. When Hill yearns to commune with both living and dead, as it is, he finds himself in "no man's dwelling-place," the ghostly cave between the two. The second half of the poem, with its "echoes" suggesting we are in Plato's cave, separated and bracketed off from the world with only the echoes of our own voices, does not break out of this constrictive circle without answers. And it is a bitter self-interrogation and confirmation of what has gone before: "If . . . if. . . then. . .":

If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us--or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end 'I have not finished'. (CP 77)

The sonnet seems to have a final turn, moving to a personal colloquy signaled by the first person singular, the address to “love” uncapitalized and human in this twentieth-century meditation. The final apostrophe to love, however, contains characteristic obliqueness, especially because of the phrase “this worldly place” underlining the distance of a material sphere from a metaphysical plane. It may be the awareness of the very ambiguities in human nature--yearning for love at the same time as inflicting pain. At this point, a poetic medium is particularly relevant to situations that the mind finds difficult to fathom. As the last four lines say, this poet is condemned to relive the past as though it did matter even if it does not get him anywhere; to bear witness to it with elegies in which there is no resolution. Hill offers us more than a self-reflexive echo from the cave. His sense of absolute defeat and loss which acknowledges that this is the unavoidable drama for him as a poet, and at the same time his angry protest against surrender to it, could not be expressed more clearly and passionately: “I have not finished.” Accordingly, Hill’s elegies are not consolatory. In this regard, Hart aptly points out that “Hill finishes his poem with a cry for finality that never comes. His denial of transcendental resolutions and perfect completions, paradoxically, is not an affirmation of the imperfect, unfinished world either” (140). Characteristically, his cry in the end is “a call for human contact, for renewed love between estranged parties,” and for an end to history’s atrocities, which he knows will never end. In poetry as in history, endings are at best tentative resolutions. “Funeral Music” articulates a continuous music, a dialectic of dissonance and consonance, of “atrocious crimes and penitential redemptions,” and “it painfully affirms an anguished persistence” (*Ibid.* 140).

In the reading of “Funeral Music” as in *Four Quartets*, at first glance, we are likely to be tempted by the analogy between poetic practice and music. This analogy, as Gabriel Pearson points out, is “infinitely fertile, infinitely seductive,” because it appears to dissolve “the most resistant linearities of the discursive mode, making them answerable to the logic of metaphor and myth” (34). Furthermore, in it, “the tough contradictions of history are

reconciled.” Pearson called it “a musical Hegelianism,” the antinomies of experience resolved and transcended in the higher term, which is the very form of their expression (34). As we have seen, however, in “Funeral Music” there is a discrete and regretful repudiation of Eliot’s aesthetic sacramentalism, that consoling dissolution of historical contraries into a figuration on the ground of the redemptive scheme. Here Hill conducts a quiet, loving divorce from Eliot: behind the phrase “silent music” lurks an almost silent process of disengagement (*CP* 71). Markedly, Hill’s work consists in units of meaning which form chains of elements, where each element resists the tyranny of the syntactical energy. Hill’s personae struggle from utterance to utterance, phrase to phrase, the chain of appositions charting, in its twisting, the trajectory of their unreconciled human nature. As Brown maintains, “[Hill] shares the need of Eliot to align himself as poet-historian with a superior position like that of the martyr-saint, but, unlike Eliot, at the very time he gives vent to that need, Hill exposes it to the withering light of truth. Against Eliot’s tendency, even in *Four Quartets*, to withdraw into ‘a world of speculation,’ Hill binds the meditateness of his poetry fiercely to ethical action in a worldly sense” (50-51).

Immediately after “Funeral Music” come “Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets,” commemorating the four poets (Tommaso Campanella, Miguel Hernandez, Robert Desnos, and Osip Mandelshtam³²), who are victims of totalitarian regimes--the Counter-Reformation, Franco, the Nazis, and Stalinism respectively. Silkin argues that this sequence is “an indication of the complexion of Hill’s attitudes”; and each poem acts as “an index to a substantial portion” of Hill’s verse, particularly in the 1960s (“War and the Pity” 125). Importantly enough, all four were poets who were ranged “in contained opposition to their oppressors.” This implies that the poet, “in the nature of his or her production, is of the essence of a potential and . . . actual resistance to oppression” (Ibid. 125). It is true mainly because of the acts of language that Hill’s poets opt for instead of silence.³³

The first, “Men Are a Mockery of Angels,” is spoken in the voice of the sixteenth-century poet, priest, and philosopher, Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639). Arrested for

his writing, tortured, and then thrown into prison, he spent more than a quarter of a century cultivating thoughts of man's renovation in a "city of the sun." Campanella's dream of a utopian "city of the sun" may have inspired Hill's next poem, "A Prayer to the Sun," for it imagines the sun's ascent over the prisoner's shadowy confinement, as if it were the radiant mind itself. It is connected with the preceding poem, moreover, by the imagery of light and shadow, by the interplay of light and dark vowels. It is dedicated, however, to Miguel Hernandez (1910-1942), the Spanish Catholic Communist poet who fought against Franco in the Civil War and died in prison while awaiting his execution. This poem, describing a day in the life of Hernandez, is full of ruin and darkness, a predatory world victimized by the sun. As an exceptional example of "concrete poetry" in Hill's work, it is composed of three numbered stanzas of five lines of unequal length shaped like crosses. Each dark cross, standing respectively for morning, midday, and night, gives birth to a light which generates new darkness. Those three crucifixes placed on the blank page convey the visual impression of a sun-ravaged landscape crisscrossed by crosses and stand for Hernandez's life, crucified for his political and religious convictions:

i
 Darkness
 above all things
 the Sun
 makes
 rise

ii
 Vultures
 salute their meat
 at noon
 (Hell is
 silent)

iii
 Blind Sun
 o u r r a v a g e r
 bless us
 so that
 we sleep. (CP 79)

Hernandez's sunlit city is an embattled one, over which "Vultures salute their meat" (*CP* 79), and a predatory sun circles. At dusk, the sun greets darkness, death putting an end to his life. Thus the last stanza is resonant with the acute bitterness, because it ends with not only the end of just any day, but also the entire last day of his life. At the same time, however, this stanza can be read as a brief prayer, shaped as crucifix which attests to a dialectic between light and dark, predator and prey.

The third poem, "Domaine Public," is spoken by the French poet Robert Desnos (1900-1945) in the Nazi camp at Terezin, "where bodies starved and dying mock the concept of artistic discipline." On one level the poem reminds us of an enraged debate with visionary ideas about morality and a question--how one might ideally transcend suffering when one is faced with extreme hunger, fear, death: "For reading I can recommend / the Fathers. How they / cultivate the corrupting flesh: / toothsome contemplation: cleanly / maggots churning spleen / to milk" (*CP* 80). Words, standing for how one may control suffering, are mere "mouthings"--"toothsome" exercises. As Sherry argues, at this point, taking his title from a posthumous collection of Desnos's verse, Hill explores the relation between his own poetry and an historical domain that includes atrocities like the mass deaths at Terezin (108). Accordingly, the poem asks "what is a 'bedside' knowledge of suffering,--"For bedside reading I recommend / the Fathers" (*Preghiere* 4)--of how we might transcend human decay, next to the inflicted suffering and the degradation experienced in those camps?" Thus the atrocities in the "Domaine Public" are hardly a "toothsome" reality.

The sequence finishes with "Tristia: 1891-1938, A Valediction to Osip Mandelstam," the Russian poet who spoke out against Stalin and suffered exile in a number of detention camps, where he eventually died. The title not only celebrates the Russian poet's collection of poems, *Tristia* (1922), but also laments for his life and the immense sacrifices and horrors he endured as the dates of his birth and death suggest.

Tragedy has all under regard.
It will not touch us but it is there--
Flawless, insatiate--hard summer sky
Feasting on this, reaching its own end. (*CP* 81)

In these last lines Hill comes back to his own questions about “the vanity and the necessity of remembering” which also haunted Mandelshtam. Here Hill seems to raise questions: Can we express all this dark tragedy which rises out of the soil of Mandelshtam’s Russia? What can we say about that poet who became broken by his suffering, in “witnessing” the immense suffering of others exposed around him? Why will it not touch us while it overshadowed and overwhelmed Mandelshtam and others, and continues to do so perpetually, so mercilessly, everywhere?

These are painful and difficult questions for the poet and for us, because it means we must realize the differences between our lives left mercifully untouched and the life full of extreme suffering touched of this. In this sense, although the poem begins with Hill’s identifying with Mandelshtam and addressing him as the “difficult friend,” it ends with expressing the difficulty to fully testify others’ indescribably painful experience. At any rate, we must “regard” those questions, in spite of being much “too late,” for “Tragedy has all under regard. . . . it is there” (*CP* 81). Thus Hill attempts to face his sense of guilt as a “connoisseur of blood, [a] smitten man” (*CP* 49). Hill bears witness to what should be witnessed and not forgotten: their steadfastness in suffering and their persistence in giving as both poets and individuals. Testifying to the “endurance of poets,” they are moving testaments to the power of words as Harold Bloom has said: “a word that is also an act, a bringing-forward of something previously held back in the self” (*Figures* 240).

To be caught up in Hill’s poetry is to feel trapped: unable to dismiss a poem as absurd or pretentious, yet equally unable to feel secure in it without giving considerably more attention to the text. As we have seen, this penchant toward difficulty certainly develops out of Hill’s earliest writing. For instance, the “Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings” (*CP* 29) opens with an elaborately complex sentence fragment growing out of the title, and

moves through an equally elaborate sentence, with an almost-hidden grammatical subject, before giving way to more orderly syntax in its completion. Here syntactical obscurity reinforces the tension and destructiveness Hill would describe, as it does in the first of the “Two Formal Elegies,” a sonnet celebrating the toughness of Jewish survival. There Hill establishes syntactical uncertainty by delaying the subject of the first sentence for more than four lines, and continues that uncertainty through the grammatically complex sentences that follow.

This same difficulty has continued to mark his writing even as he has disclaimed many of those first poems. Indeed, in the “Three Baroque Meditations,” written sometime in the mid-1960s, he explicitly turns the parallel between the reader’s difficulties and the writer’s into an emblem of life’s difficulty. According to Hart, these “meditations” are the clearest examples of “Hill’s self-excoriation” (98). In criticizing poetry fiercely, Hill also deals with the poet’s bitterness about “the incompatibility between art and life.” He begins by noting how, despite the majesty afforded by language and philosophy, as a poet he feels hounded by the jungle law of nature--“shadowed” by the “lithe / Paradigm Sleep-and-Kill” (*CP* 89). In the second meditation, beginning with a characteristically packed and powerful line, “Anguish bloated by the replete scream,” Hill develops his ongoing realization as poet: the intimation that producing true poetry only compounds the agony of reality by revealing further agonies. Rather than release or escape, the finished poem--“perfect / In its impalpable bitterness” (*CP* 90)--gives the poet only a “Scent of a further country where worse / Furies promenade and bask their claws” (*CP* 90). Through the art of poetry, however, the conscious objectivity of the syntax tries to convey the force of an inner vision which matches the unredeemed brutality of external reality:

Flesh of abnegation: the poem
Moves grudgingly to its extreme form,

Vulnerable, to the lamp’s fierce head
Of well-trimmed light. In darkness outside,
Foxes and rain-sleeked stones and the dead--
Aliens of such a theme-- (*CP* 90)

According to an original version of "Three Baroque Meditations," there is no comma after "outside," and the line "Aliens of such a theme" used to be "Aliens of my own blood" (*Preghiere* 7). The revision illustrates how crucial the least detail of syntax can be in a reading of Hill's poetry. The comma after "outside" makes one pause long enough to consider the tension of the poet's mind as he contemplates the juxtaposition of the bleak silence of reality and inner "voices" of his own thoughts. Writing of Yeats in his essay "The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure" Hill says, "It is as though the very recalcitrance of language--and we know that Yeats found the process of composition arduous--stood for the primary objective world in one of its forms of cruelty and indifference; but also for the cultivation of that other objectivity, won through toil" (21). In terms of Hill's own poetry, the objectivity of "the lamp's fierce head / Of well-trimmed light" is set against the inviolability of "Foxes and rain-sleeked stones and the dead" (*CP* 90). In other words, the rational poetic intelligence is pitted against the unredeemed anarchy and arbitrariness of nature. Furthermore, in the third meditation, "The Dead Bride," the poet attempts to find a tactful balance between heart and mind, passion and control, ideas and things. Unlike the first two meditations on writing poems, the poem is perceived as "a soliloquy and reminiscence delivered by the poet's wife, which condemns him for manipulating her like a poem" (Hart 100). The poet-husband is "the poet of a people's love" (*CP* 91). In his real life, however, there is the conflict between the poet and his wife. Following the disciplines of an exacting craft, "By day he professed languages-- / Disciplines of languages," and his "sacramental mouth" transfigures everyday speech into poetry (*CP* 91). On the other hand, his overheated imaginations cause suffering to his loved one. Even his "sacramental mouth" is also a tool of corporeal lust and power. With the "vixen's tongue," she defames: "His sacramental mouth / That justified my flesh / And moved well among women / In nuances and imperatives" (*CP* 91). Thus we may read this poem as "a wife's vindictive complaint" against her poet-husband's self-absorption with poetry at her expense. Moreover, it is a portrayal of a poet's struggles with his troubles,

love, hatred, despairs, and especially with his concerns that “through the exercise of [his] art of such passionate finesse [he] might in the end be serving callousness” (“Under Judgment” 214).

It is this balanced tension between art and reality which informs all the poems in *King Log* and enables Hill to say “For I am circumspect, / Lifting the spicy lid of my tact / To sniff at the myrrh” (CP 90). By “tact” Hill means the testing of his powers of moral and aesthetic discrimination through the selection and deployment of his poetic diction, without being insincere to the truth of his own imagination or the objective world which resides all around him. His self-tortuous balance is caught in the juxtaposition between the unanswered question: “Do words make up the majesty / Of man, and his justice / Between the stones and the void?” and the ineluctable fact of “An owl plunges to its tryst / With a field-mouse in the sharp night. / My fire squeals and lies still” where the innocent atrocities of nature coexist with the crimes of fallen man (re-enacted in the “fire” of the poet’s imagination) (CP 89). Its unanswerable nature is implied by the possible emptiness of words, the paradoxical meanings of “make up”--compose, create, form as a whole, compensate (for), put cosmetics on, invent in order to deceive. For Hill, every poet has to forge his art out of intractable reality and, although he may evade the brutal facts of contemporary and historical reality (which Hill does not, certainly) he still has to incorporate concrete images of that externality he is attempting to surmount into his poetry if he is to remain intelligible. The problem, of course, is not unique: in the late nineteenth century Mallarmé and the Symbolists had attempted to capture the essence of “le néant” in terms of abstraction in order to negate the demands of reality. Since that time poets have had great difficulty in finding a proper balance between the demands of the imagination and those of the world. In the case of Hill’s poetry the poet believes that total abstraction is an ineffectual response because it neglects in its generalization the unique aspects of the world, whereas absolute concern with concreteness negates the unifying power of the imagination: he prefers to adopt a “tactful” balance between the two.

“The Dead Bride,” depicting marriage problems, is followed by a love-sequence concluding *King Log*. In some sense, the former anticipates the latter. The passion and pain throughout “The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz” come from the writer’s estrangement from his wife, who has left him because he obsessively writes. In the group poems, a fictitious Spanish poet relates the loss of his lover to the practice of his craft. The sequence represents “the work of an apocryphal Spanish poet,” following a specific tradition of Spanish poetry, because, as Hill comments, “Various *Cancioneros* (*Songbooks*) are referred to in bibliographies of Spanish poetry” (*King Log* 70). The poet’s first name cries out for the arrows of martyrdom which are then supplied by his second name. According to some reviewers of *King Log*, the name “Sebastian Arrurruz” is meant to suggest first the martyrdom of St. Sebastian and then the arrows that kill him, as well as arrowroot, which is an herb for drawing out poison from wounds made, for instance, by venomous arrows. In the group of eleven poems the martyred lover who is their speaker and subject meditates on his loss of a mistress to someone else a few years before. As the title implies he is still receiving and trying to heal his wounds.

The subtitle says--“Sebastian Arrurruz: 1868-1922”--these poems represent a poetry which falls between two poetic eras, between the idealism of the nineteenth century and the disillusionment and despair of the twentieth. In an interview with Haffenden, Hill comments: “I gave Arrurruz the chronology 1868-1922, which enabled him to celebrate the centenary of his birth on the date of publication of my second book, which was advantageous to both of us. . . and also enabled him to die on the very threshold of modernity, without having had the advantage of reading *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*” (95). Hill’s persona was too late to be a Romantic and too early to be a modernist; he stands as an unknown, eccentric figure on the periphery of literary modernism.

Arrurruz’s predicament is one of exile, loss, defeat, not only because it constitutes his private circumstances but also because it means quite literally and figuratively that the poet is thrown back upon his own resources:

What other men do with other women
Is for me neither orgy nor sacrament
Nor a language of foreign candour

But is mere occasion or chance distance
Out of which you might move and speak my name
As I speak yours. . . . (CP 94)

The lines above show the verbal discipline and the determinate control of the “scholarly poet.” The persona accordingly claims his “stoic superiority” to “what other men do with other women.” In fact he is well aware of the language of love, especially its impurities--“its innuendoes, hyperboles, clichés, and obvious lies” (Hart 146). In contrast to the sensuality, his writerly imagination, his intuitions out of a lived knowledge of what is required of him, will enable him to survive as an individual of integrity with his own predicament. Although he regards the loss of sexual life as a gain for his poetry, the value of artistic virtuosity is assessed more gloomily: “The exact words / Are fed into my blank hunger for you” (CP 96). For Arruñaz, after all, sensation is a “blank” until filled by his lover. Language, even “exact words,” provides no substitute for her real presence. At this point, the dialectic of the imaginative and the real social life defines and exacerbates the relationship between the poet and his lover. Though he intends to unify those oppositions, finally he fails to.

Thus the last poem in *King Log*, the final poem of “The Songbook of Sebastian Arruñaz,” appears from its statement to be a retreat towards silence:

Scarcely speaking: it becomes as a
Coolness between neighbours. Often
There is this orgy of sleep. I wake
To caress propriety with odd words
And enjoy abstinence in a vocation
Of now-almost-meaningless despair. (CP 102)

In context, this is the dying fall in a movement of poems concerning the loss of love and the writing of poems. The phrase “now-almost-meaningless” is hyphenated to point up its accession into cliché, though here a cliché restored to hint at the real despair of the poet--the

possibility of no longer, through the contraction of valid speech, being able to say anything meaningful. Here Hart asserts, however, “by retaining a sense of ironic propriety,” the speaker “still enjoys his daily rhythm of waking, working, and sleeping, which connects him to the larger rhythm of society and cosmos” (152). Hart goes on to argue that out of his failures and fears, Arrurruz pieces together a faceted poem of romantic hopes and tragic disillusionments (152). For Hart, the poet’s desolation of the sequence makes new creations possible. It is still questionable, however, to identify the persona’s thought about writing poetry with Hill’s. Although characteristically Hill seeks to include in the sequence each modulation of thought and feeling present in his contemplation of his subject, Hill’s Arrurruz never exactly mirrors its author. In an interview with Haffenden, Hill stresses its sense of humor, which I suppose indicates (self-)ironic elements of this work (95). Moreover, Hill intends to resist any suggestion that he is being confessional as he clarifies in the notes that “The Arrurruz poems contain no allusion to any actual person living or dead” (*King Log* 70).

Several of Sebastian Arrurruz’s poems in fact find him speaking of turning his sorrow into art, word-art. In another poem, as we have seen, Hill writes: “Do words make up the majesty / Of man . . . ?” and in yet another the speaker recalls how as a child “Words clawed my mind as though they had smelt / Revelation’s flesh” (*CP* 89 & 85). *King Log* is a book dedicated above all to trying to give words that degree of power. It is the sheer prodigious expressiveness of high art. “The exact words” are Hill’s total concern as a poet. Whether the poetic imagination can know and accurately represent anonymous victims of concentration camps, little-known martyrs, politicians and soldiers butchered during the Wars of the Roses, and artists who die under dictatorial regimes is “a question for epistemology, linguistics, historiography, and poetics.” The question is open to conflicting arguments, some of which we discussed in Chapter 1: The Problematics of Language. Moreover, words in our time are on trial as never before. In his essay on Hill, Henry Gifford took historical examples regarding this problem: “The brutal manipulation

of words in order to seduce the masses in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, and the sheer difficulty of finding any terms to express the impersonal horrors of the Second World War, made speech, the cardinal human achievement, no longer secure" (150). Even since the First World War, the language of politicians, in particular, was seen by men at the front as derisively out of touch with horrifying experience.³⁴ The Second World War also raised the questions of language, which are being struggled with in Hill's poetry. In this regard, it is worth noting the final piece of *King Log*, which is "Postscript: King Stork," composed of an essay on "Funeral Music," and "Notes." Importantly enough, its discursiveness "places" the recorded historical facts in a realm of reality, while the characteristically meditative syntax of the poems in the preceding part, "King Log," is thus retrospectively seen to be of a fictional nature possessing reality only in the poet's imagination. The realism of the essay and the admission that he has had problems with that particular poem seem to lead us into a realm of reality beyond the fictional world of the poems in *King Log*. By the time we close the book, however, it is uncertain to what extent "the 'formal pledge' of art" has redeemed the "fragmentary cosmos." To be sure, Hill's poems exist in an intransitive relation to the "aimless power" of the world. Thus remains the question whether the "remote hypothesis" of a poet's "creative tact" fully transcends the "dangerous immediacy" of contemporary and historical reality, or it never will. At any rate, Hill's determination is to strive to make his words as adequate as possible to the events he witnesses. *King Log* is the fruit of that witness and that determination. For its enhancement of our witness, and of our sense and feeling for the language we use, it commands admiration.

For a conclusion of this section on *King Log*, I quote what Donald Hall has said in his introduction of Hart's book: "If in the end Hill has contradicted everything he has said, including his own contradictions, he has created and articulated the structure of a mind unable to find rest, defeated and beautiful in stillness, resolved in a perfection of irresolution. These poems of course include the idea, its antithesis, and the emotions

engendered by oscillation to and fro; but they do not, because they are great poems, include ideas as a suitcase includes clothes: they embody or enact a wholeness. This resolved manyness, this complexity reaching stasis, this diversity and multiplicity may rest only in the form of poetry: *Hill's poems reveal again what poetry is for*" (xii).

(4) *Mercian Hymns*: Redeeming the time

In the previous section, we pursued Hill's moving phrase "the tongue's atrocities," whose implications, as John Bayley notes, are "poetry should be part of the uniform consciousness of the moral universe" ("The Tongues' Satisfactions" 9). In the post-Holocaust world, Hill took it as an index of poetry's ability to respond to all the atrocities of human history. "In the face of the inhuman," to borrow the view of Adorno and Steiner, silence seems to have more authority than the speech of poetry or speech itself. Hill's distinction and individuality as a poet, however, has consisted in exploring the question through "the speech of poetry": "seeking to reconcile, as it were, the atrocity with the tongue, and the fact with what a poem can say about it" (Ibid. 9). Hill regards "the writing of a poem as a delicate moral problem, in which the overriding concern for the poet must be the demonstration of his own delicate and doubting awareness" (Ibid. 13).

The next book, *Mercian Hymns* (1971) "came relatively quickly." The sequence of thirty short prose-poems, Hill said in an interview with Black Morrison, "took me almost three years to the day" to complete (212). Although Hill stressed "the likenesses, the continuities" between his first two volumes of poetry and *Mercian Hymns* (qtd. in Milne 45), in the new volume, we encounter a new style achieved by a profound poet as a new kind of rigor and a new kind of language.³⁵ In the first place, *Mercian Hymns*, according to Hill, is "a sequence about England--English history, English culture, the English people" and "it's very much the nature of England itself which concerns [him]" (Ibid. 213). To speak about England is to speak about what has made it and what it is. An entire collection

is devoted to the resonances between eighth-century Mercia under King Offa and the modern England in which Hill has grown up. It is true that such historical allusion and cultural cross-reference are pervasive in these and most of Hill's other poems. In *Mercian Hymns*, however, the way Hill juxtaposes past and present seems to be different from the way he dealt with atrocious history in the previous volumes. The main difference, I argue, is that history, here, is both public and personal; it belongs as much to the world of facts as to the world of the imagination, because the poet gives us his own specific experience of the past as it has shaped him and still affects him while writing in the present. As he revealed his attitude to the realm of the *Hymns* in an interview with Haffenden, his feeling for Offa and Mercia "can scarcely be disentangled" from his mixed feelings for his own home country of Worcestershire. At the same time, the "image of a tyrannical creator of order and beauty" and "the murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal" seem again "an objective correlative for the ambiguities of English history in general" (94). Through the personalization, he dramatizes the history of England and the character of state. More importantly, history, as the imaginative context of the child's games, opens as the richest dimension of the poet's verbal play. As Sherry argues, Hill explores the layers of a word's past, revealing the meanings deposited there over the course of its etymological history (135).

None of the *Hymns* was published separately. In a review on the sequence, Ricks aptly points out that the reason for this was Hill's "just sense of their graceful, moody interdependence: similar considerations, sensing the rhythm within a poem, make them particularly hard to quote from" (274). This close interrelationship within and between the *Hymns* is based upon the use of "parallelism," as Silkin notes in his essay on Hill. Although Silkin acknowledges that he is using it in the sense defined in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, he does not explain this term further.³⁶ At any rate, it seems to be clear that Hill adopts a "parallelism of thought" for the whole structure of the *Hymns*, because Hill himself acknowledges this source in his notes to *Mercian Hymns* (*CP*

201-2). Furthermore, the quickening “excitement of *Mercian Hymns*,” Hill said, “was to find that I was meditating on my roots in a double sense” (Haffenden 83). I suggest that “a double sense” is a central axis of interpreting *Mercian Hymns* in the sense that the energies of the *Hymns* flow not only along the axis between past and present, the vital link between public and private worlds, but also along a deep texture of language. The distances of history melt inside the powerful field of Hill’s linguistic energy. Moreover, it gives the *Hymns* characteristic verbal compression or tension. Since there is no traditional narrative basis to the *Hymns*, Hill seems to resolve the problem of structure by bonding his juxtaposition or paralleling of disparate events and images. Then *Mercian Hymns* seems to represent a venture into a form of prose poem which incorporates different but simultaneous historical perspectives. It is questionable, however, at the end of the sequence whether *Mercian Hymns* “redeemed the time,” or it still remains unresolved mainly because of the duplicity of language itself: “our word is our bond.” Thus in this section, I shall examine how “a double sense” works through *Mercian Hymns* structurally and thematically, and explore the relevant points between the *Hymns* and “Redeeming the Time,” “Our Word Is Our Bond.”

To begin with, the volume’s epigraph from C. H. Sisson explains Hill’s own concern with the interrelationships of the personal and the historical, and implies his intention throughout the sequence. The epigraph begins, “The conduct of government rests upon the same foundations and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons.” Interestingly enough, as Sisson himself commented on *Mercian Hymns*, Hill “holds in a steady gaze not only a series of complicated perspectives between past and present, but between public and private life” (27). There is an essentially human reality on one plane and a social reality on another. For the sequence is built around “the historical King Offa” (757-796), and blends history and autobiography, combining legends of Mercian King Offa with imagined episodes from Hill’s childhood in his own native Mercia. In other words, the chronologies and personalities of the poet and King Offa interchange and

merge, so that Offa's "dominion" endures "from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond)" (CP 201). Essentially a single poetic technique--the unearthing and examining of fragments of memory--creates both the private and the public portraits in Hill's sequence. While Offa is a historical figure forging a national identity among the early English,³⁷ the relics of his rule are meager--a few coins, the remnants of his dyke against the Welsh, and some fragmentary contemporary references. Indeed, only three events in the *Hymns* can be precisely dated: the crowning of Offa in 757, the presentation of Charlemagne's sword in 796, and the death of Offa in 797. As a subject, Offa therefore does not lock Hill into a great number of constraining facts and dates. Besides allowing Hill special entrance into the history and cultural life of the West Midlands, Offa is an enigmatic figure. Thus I suggest that he is a fit subject for Hill's poetic sensibility, which has consistently found expression in a language of paradox, irony, and modernist complexity.

Moreover, Hill discovers in the history and topography of his native West Midlands "a particular rhythm of life" which he succeeds in conveying in the poem by an informing mythology and an analogous prose rhythm. At this point, "Redeeming the Time" is helpful, for in the essay, Hill generalized upon the subject of rhythm, which is relevant to his poetic method in *Mercian Hymns*:

The responses are to be understood both as recurring within the limited time-span of a particular Anglican evensong, following the established pattern of the rubric, and as recurring over an implied and indefinite number of years, Sunday by Sunday, season by season. It is by such means that 'channels' are created; by the joint working of abrasion and continuity. 'Responses' is the correct term for the established form of congregational participation in the liturgy. At the same time, over and below this literal meaning, the word connotes the continuity of human response in general to an ancient process of parochial and national life. The collects of the Anglican Church are composed of liturgical prose; they could properly be said to possess rhythm, though not metre. Here again, however, 'familiar rhythm' is both liturgical and extra-liturgical, telling of a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties and obligations from which an individual severs himself or herself at great cost and peril, but implying also the natural sequences of stresses and slacks in the thoughts and acts of a representative human being. (LL 88-89)

Mercian Hymns, a loosely strung but individually very tightly written series of prose-poems, is a "response" to Hill's felt sense of "traditional life." Traditional life is also

caught by his use of rooted Mercian idioms of speech. Significantly, the method is by means of a prose style which possesses “rhythm, though not metre,” that is bedded in the impersonal “speech of the landscape” of Mercia and Hill’s personal “affectionate joy” in his native landscape and language (qtd. in *LL* 89). The “rhythm of parochial and national life” in his poems of place takes his own past, constantly treating one in terms of the other. For instance, his own acts of cruelty in his childhood relate to the wider history of the bombing of England by the Germans in the Second World War, especially in Hymns III, VII and XXI. The recollection and re-enactment of these acts by the mature poet imply “the natural sequences of stresses and slacks in the thoughts and acts of a representative human being” in the present and the past (*LL* 89). Caught up in the rhythm, the whole legacy seems to be in both its constructive and destructive aspects of the Mercian past. Neither is a complete myth; in a way the core of the poems is like a fragmentary mythology. Since they are autobiographical this is as if they were a poetry of fragmentary identity, yet the sense of self-identity in them is extremely strong; it is implicit even in the spring and life of the language.

The sequence of “versets”³⁸ ritualizes its beginning and end: it opens with an invocation of its subject, the medieval King Offa of Mercia in a cadenced heroic catalogue; it concludes with a protracted ceremony of the figure’s death. But there is no chronological progression. The sequence shifts imperceptibly between Hill and Offa, Hill as Offa, past and present, past as presence. The variety of voices³⁹ is sometimes not distinguishable or consistent. Although Offa is a figure for a certain constituted cultural legacy, he does not simply lead Hill on a tour of his Anglo-Saxon inheritance, because for the poet, self-definition is a matter of negotiating a delicate balance between self-construction and self-parody. As noted above, each hymn is deposited as a fragment, often with an autonomous weight of meaning. The hymns tantalizingly offer themselves as glimpses of biography. The first two poems are pertinent examples. Thus the opening poem announces its subject.

At this point, it is worth noting that “Our Word Is Our Bond” is applicable to the reading of the opening hymns. Furthermore, it also forms an important introduction to *Mercian Hymns*, even though it was published some years later than the sequence. The *Hymns* can be seen as an extended play on the possible puns on the word “bond.” Language becomes performative by the dialectical process defined in “Our Word Is Our Bond.” That affects the powers and responsibilities of the writer. Bonds are first shackles or impediments, alienating and constricting. Like language itself, which can both join and separate, these bonds stand between people, alternately obscuring and advancing their community. The means of alienation can become a covenant, a bond in the positive sense, only when this inherent obliquity is questioned and explored.

The interplay of some of these terms can be seen in the first of the hymns, one devoted to a catalogue of Offa’s attributes. A voice appears to sing for King Offa a list of incongruous and anachronistic titles, many of which derive from West Midlands topography. As a builder, Offa presides over two quite different kinds of constructions. He is “overlord of the M5,” a road, and builder of “the his- / toric rampart and ditch,” a barrier. He is architect of citadels and hermitages, but also guardian of two famous bridges (“the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge”). In other words, Offa presides over connections and separations, movement and blockade. The axes of space and time are crossed in the very first line of the *Hymns*: “King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand- / stone” (CP 105). The perennial or the continuous in time is contrasted to the “riven” or separated in space. But Offa is the intersection of other transactions as well. He is “money-changer” and “saltmaster,” ruler over two different mediums of economic exchange. “Contractor to the desirable new estates” could mean that Offa builds these estates or merely supplies them. At the same time, however, the word within “contractor,” “contract” implies the bond of agreement, and interestingly, “the desirable new estates” is a common phrase in newspaper ads of the present. Thus Offa is the center of temporal, economic, and political exchange in the sequence. To be sure, the whole sequence thrills with a knowledge of the

physical, linguistic, cultural hearth. Moreover, Hill's use of colons--the placement of objects separated by colons--through the first hymn reveals its propensity for duplicity, each seemingly laudatory phrase appearing to grow from the one before, and evoking an open-ended rumination in the reader's mind on the subject of Offa's authority and morality of its operation. In this regard, the last line of the first hymn ('I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.') signals embarrassment, perhaps, over epic inheritance. More importantly, I suppose, it indicates conscious deferral to generic inheritance and generic transmutation. Certainly, Hill is singing it again--the convention, himself, Offa, his cultural contexts. Very early in the sequence, then, Hill signals the relationship between historical excavation and literary creation: "I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots / and endings. Child's-play. I abode there, bided my time" (*CP* 108). In excavating history and creating poetry, Hill exhibits his own idea of the word as a medium of protean significance, and his characteristic verbal play with multiple meanings from a word's etymological history.

The second poem plays on the name "Offa." In a compressed style with frequent full stops, Hill makes tonal change from phrase to phrase. The wit which takes us through the complexities of the name--as a pun, as letters, as sound, as significance on a private and social level--reveals the multiple nature of the name and person of Offa. Hill uses Offa as a "residing genius of the West Midlands"--a person of legend and history with a traditional presence through a span of centuries. This justifies the anachronisms which are carefully handled:

A pet-name, a common name. Best-selling brand, curt
graffito. A laugh; a cough. A syndicate. A specious
gift. Scoffed-at horned phonograph.

The starting-cry of a race. A name to conjure with. (*CP* 106)

Offa's name is ancient, as "the starting-cry of a race," and also current, as a best-selling brand. The fact that the hymn turns so completely on puns makes this historical doubleness part of the essential doubleness of language. The name itself never appears in

this hymn, as if it were only an absent source. But there are many suggestions and echoes of Offa's name in these lines. Sherry perceptively connects the poet's technique here with the quasi-acrostic conventions of Anglo-Saxon riddles. He suggests that the connections of the sound of the name with *laughing*, *coughing*, the initials of an organization and a race start "all echo *O, F, F, A*" (130). At this point, the poem becomes riddle-like too in its radical brevity and the rapid accumulation of its suggestions. The "curt graffito" could be "piss off." "A laugh; a cough" reduce Offa to a level below language, but contain an essential vowel sound. At the same time, laughing and coughing are characteristically human actions; perhaps Offa's greed and cruelty are themselves characteristically human traits. A syndicate could be the O.F.C. (Overseas Food Corporation) or Overseas Federal Fund Association, and a "specious gift" could bring us back to "offer." To be sure, the "starting-cry of a race" is "They're off!" At the same time, it can be the "starting-cry" or ancient language of the whole race, and also the word that sets the race going. It is a "specious gift," a spurious ordinary performative language. But it is also "a name to conjure with." Hill's epithet, "specious" expresses not only moral righteousness but also a certain cynicism: the use of the word "specious" reenacts the cynical use of language that subverted the original meaning of the word and thereby subverts Hill's authority. The clash between archaic and contemporary meanings may even link Hill with Offa as a figure who exercises a violent authority over his realm--Offa, the realm of Mercia; Hill, the realm of language. It is a conjuring that has put Hill in the very forefront of contemporary English poetry.

With the ambiguity of tone that Hill adopts toward aphorism, trite expressions, we are uncertain at the end of the poem. The context may redeem the literal meaning of the used phrase. Made new, however, it can still retain its trite overtone and the element of ironic deflation. If we keep this play on words in mind, the entire sequence reveals itself as a language-game. It becomes apparent that the poet's words are not the straight-forward

tribute the king thinks them to be; rather, they are teeming with irony that subverts the king's authority.

Hill's naming is in the fallen world, where words mean not only what the individual intends them to mean, but also what history intends them to mean. In this context, the segment from *Sisson* needs to be focused on: "Words are not ours but the words of a myriad. . . . We speak as historical persons. . . we do not speak as ourselves. If we are selves, it is by virtue of other selves that we are so. And our speaking is that of a race, of a tribe, of a time. There is no speech which is not of a here and now and it is nothing except in terms of other times and elsewhere" ("Sevenoaks Essay" 204). Like *Sisson*, Hill is keenly aware that we speak as historical persons: our words existed before we did and have acquired (and continue to acquire) connotations over which we do not have control: "ash" is not the same word it was before Auschwitz and Hiroshima. At the same time, however, the poet engages in the paradoxical enterprise of mastering the very words whose historical or public connotations he, as an individual speaker, is powerless to control. Here again, that is the duplicity or "bond" of language: limitations and possibilities, "shackle" and "reciprocity." He takes this effort to master language even further through an exploration of what we might call the totality of denotation, weighting the individual word with multiple and often contradictory meanings. And in the eternal (and perhaps unredeemable) present of the *Hymns*, "here and now" and "other times and elsewhere" are one; meanings rendered obsolete through the passage of time may rise up to do battle with their successors. As Bloom points out in a different context, "Nothing can be anachronistic when there is no present" (*Figures* 244). Thus, "specious gift" (*CP* 106), a name assigned to Offa, has, like his coins, two sides; like his sword, it is "two-edged" (*CP* 120). On the one hand, "specious" originally meant "beautiful," "lovely," with no suggestion of a contradiction between appearance and reality. On the other hand, it expresses its speaker's distrust of what Offa offers--the figure of the king is devoid of any positive value.⁴⁰

There is a fascinating parallel here between Offa and, to borrow Bloom's term, "the belated poet"; each is the "staggeringly-gifted child" of his forefathers (*CP* 133), enormously talented in his own right yet also staggering under the weight of his inheritance.⁴¹ Offa's power is different in effect from the poet's, but it seeks justification by the same ethical principles. Chosen by circumstance for a cultural and therefore social responsibility, he must interpret, order, act and speak from a positive relationship with a wide social and historical context. Moreover, linking the figures of the medieval king and the modern child, Hill approaches the theme of power and violence from a very unusual angle. He reveals the perception that the child's fantasies of power, his gratuitous cruelty and egoistic whims underlie the adult king's structures of command. By using a naturally inquisitive child's perspective, Hill presents the smallness and littleness of his environment with remarkable immediacy and precision, and leads us to wider horizons. Here again the epigraph from Sisson, which soberly compares the character of private lives with the conduct of government, is developed ironically by Hill. The boy's possessiveness and violent retributions anticipate the kingly machinations of power, just as his toy prefigures his kingdom

Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools
that lay unstirring. Eel-swarms. Coagulations of
frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he
battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the
stillness and silence.

Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after
the day of the lost fighter: a biplane, already
obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy
snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a hole
in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the
rat-droppings and coins.

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering
with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed
him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours,
calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry
named *Albion*. (*CP* 111)

The various dimensions connect here. First we get a glimpse of the child's callousness in the act of slaughtering frogs; then of how he "flayed" his friend as punishment for losing a toy plane; finally of how he leaves to journey--"calm and alone," with no apparent remorse. Interestingly, in fact, the persona appears as an unidentified "he." As the poem progresses, the reader discovers that this "he" is a very complex figure. The fact that the children play with a biplane initially places the persona in the twentieth century, but the bi-plane drops into an archeological stratum of "rat-droppings and coins." The "biplane" "already obsolete and irreplaceable" itself catches the time shifts because it is one of those treasured toys no longer in production due to the war. It is as historical and obsolete a toy as the original aircraft it represents; while the military-destructive meanings of "the lost fighter" carry on the murderous spirit of Offa. "Ceolred" is the historical name of a Mercian king who ruled between 709 and 716. This historical Ceolred, surely the original of Hill's, was a "a dissolute youth, who oppressed monasteries, and according to St. Boniface died insane. . . . His death in 716 ends the first phase of Mercian history" (qtd. in Hart 171). The "quarries" and the red sandstone are also part of the notation of the natural environment of Offa's reign: "he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud" are the last words of the *Hymns* (CP 134). Ending with the "he" traveling in "his private, derelict sandlorry named *Albion*," which is not only a real name of trucks but also the legendary / mythic name for England, Hymn VII invites us to read it as acrid commentary on power and violence fantasy through English history.⁴²

Certainly, it is difficult to tell the difference between Hill's reminiscences of childhood and his poetic investment and re-creation of Offa's kingdom. In the mysterious relation between adult and child in the persona, sometimes we see the king's childishness, sometimes the child's regality. The child's meticulous concern with minutiae is the adult's fastidiousness in the negligible and the child's preoccupation with mastering his environment is the adult's thirst for power and control. As we have seen, Hymn VII affirmed "continuities between the unconscious fallibility of childhood and the vocalized

guilt of maturity” (Hart 170). Although there is the similarity of the poet to the king, and *Mercian Hymns* weaves in material from Hill’s personal experience, the self does not exist in isolation in the sequence. Apparently, Hill does not write autobiographical or confessional poetry. He attempts to find for his personal acts correlatives in history and legends. In this work, myth interweaves with fact. The following examples are paradigmatic:

Exile or pilgrim set me once more upon that ground:
my rich and desolate childhood. Dreamy smug-faced,
sick on outings--I who was taken to be a king of
some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one. (CP 109)

It may be true that Hill had a sickly childhood. More importantly, the childhood loneliness is at once ripe and wretched (“my rich and desolate childhood”), a shadow over the loneliness of the throne, which reveals some of the complex sources of Hill’s poetic language. Second:

The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
to their freedom, I dug and hoarded. Orchards
fruited above clefts. I drank from honeycombs of
chill sandstone.

‘A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.’
But I, who had none, fostered a strangeness; gave
myself to unattainable toys. (CP 110)

Third, the penultimate hymn (XXIX):

‘Not strangeness, but strange likeness. Obstinate,
outclassed forefathers, I too concede, I am your
staggeringly-gifted child.’

So, murmurous, he withdrew from them. Gran lit the
gas, his dice whirled in the ludo-cup, he entered
into the last dream of Offa the King. (CP 133)

In the tenth hymn, we discover the complexity of the emergent adult personality, with all its legacies from childhood: his special “adored” possessions. The poem collapses the

figure of Offa into that of the poetic subject in terms of history and in ways of timeless process of school-learning. The first stanza displays the fetishistic symbol of the desk and the personal appropriation of this through the sunken graffito of the individual name:

He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony,
assorted prize pens, the seals of gold and base
metal into which he had sunk his name. (CP 114)

The desk is an extension of the ego in its process of educational self-extension. Offa's delight in the accessories he uses for drawing up laws of consequence is what a child derives from being proud of having "prize pens" and from carving his name for posterity into the top of his school desk. Thus the child sits at the "desk," arrays the "pens," and mentally enacts a fantasy of his coming adult years using his surroundings as he has perceived them. The poem switches back and forth between the official acts of Offa to the private acts of the boy doing his homework, between the law-giver's concern with being a servant and master of his people and a child's experience of mastering and not being able to master his Latin. At the same time, deep within all this, there are some other dimensions. His tyranny has been the cause of his rival's death, and the manner of this killing has been tortuous. But seeing the event as merely a disturbance, he has finally committed bigotry: he "forgave the death-howls of his rival" (CP 114). The concluding section of the poem constitutes an extraordinary vignette of boyhood in just thirty-two words:

He swayed in sunlight, in mild dreams. He tested the
little pears. He smeared catmint on his palm for
his cat Smut to lick. He wept, attempting to mas-
ter *ancilla* and *servus*. (CP 114)

The external and inner realms of experience are expressed through a contrast between sunlight and dream. Then pears and the pet cat summon up the sensuous immediacy of early youth before "shades of the prison house" descend in terms of the subtleties of Latin--not the "mother-tongue" but the language of identification, classification, understanding and control.

At any rate, a question of a spiritual nature--“What should a man make of remorse, that it might profit his soul?”--remains unanswered (*CP* 114). The speaker does not differentiate between moral improvement and the financial gain implied in “make” and “profit.” At this point, the poem invites us to reflect on the question--how one deals with remorse. “Social locutions. . .” writes Hill in “Redeeming the Time,” can “impose. . . a force as shiftless as that of nature itself” (*LL* 87). It might be any one of us, for we have seen how “mild” he is in daily life, and how inevitable for one raised to rule in a culture of kings and wars to be like this. Finally, he cannot tell if he is progeny or progenitor as he struggles to learn the names pertaining to his world: “He wept, attempting to mas- / ter *ancilla* and *servus*.” Here is the personality, caught in the legal structuring of the societal web.

If *Mercian Hymns* marks the progression of a profoundly ironized self, that is because its integrity relies on an immersion in historical and cultural contexts that Hill does not seek to separate from any notion of an “essential” personhood. Thus the kingly child exceeds a lyric function and works to thematic purposes as well. The reader might first probe each piece for its subject, examine it like a crusted coin, experience the mystery of the past.

Hymn III fuses the archaic crowning ritual with a modern coronation of King George VI in 1937, which Hill remembers from his childhood. While the scene is contemporary, the ritualistic nature of the “bonfire” and “brisk largesse” point back to Anglo-Saxon coronation:

On the morning of the crowning we chorused our re-
mission from school. It was like Easter: hankies
and gift-mugs approved by his foreign gaze, the
village-lintels curled with paper flags.

We gaped at the car-park of ‘The Stag’s Head’ where a
bonfire of beer-crates and holly-boughs whistled
above the tar. And the chef stood there, a king in
his new-risen hat, sealing his brisk largesse with
any mustard?’ (*CP* 107)

In extending the crowning to the chef at a pub in the second stanza, Hill deflates that ancient ritual by placing it in a modern environment where crowds sentimentally wave their hankies, merchants peddle tacky gift-mugs, and lintels are “curlered.” For the children, recess from school for the occasion is a “remission” as from an illness, and they are much more fascinated by the chef who looks like a king “in his new-risen hat” than by the real king, who is physically removed from them. The chef’s “largesse” (an old French word meaning “a king’s generosity”) of mustard on a sandwich is more relevant to their lives than any largesse offered by the real king. Interestingly enough, the chef in his silly “new-risen hat” parallels the chief, or “ring-giver,” of the Anglo-Saxon mead hall: both distribute “largesse” to their people amid drinking and eating. At this point, the chef reminds us that any man might be king, if the domain is small enough, even though his kingly largesse may be reduced to sausages. While the poet at first seems to be using echoes of archaic rituals to compare a glorious past with a degraded present, we should notice that the poem’s setting is the car-park of “The Stag’s Head” pub. Those pubs are still centers of social, communal life in England, especially for the working class. In a sense, here the poet portrays an actual, viable community ceremony. Thus it may be true that the interaction of past and present in this hymn highlights a cultural continuity that Hill describes throughout *Mercian Hymns*.

Culture is always in part ironic because cultural inheritance is in a sense a matter of commodification: the crowning of George VI, complete with memorabilia is for the child occasion for a barbecue, and for the adult poet occasion to explode a ritual. For Hill the self must be, in part at least, always ironic, because it constructs itself against traditions that themselves are always subversive. *Mercian Hymns* relies on a fusion of contrary expectations: public accessibility and congregational context, on the one hand, and internalized meditation, on the other. Public and cultural strivings take place every day in the “familiar rhythm” of the self’s struggles with identity, which is the rhythm of us all. What matters to Hill and to us, is the posture of our approach to the past, which is parallel

to the posture and rhythm of our approach to the texts of the past and, most important, to the self. In its subversive aspects, *Mercian Hymns* asks us to question our readings of it.

To be sure, *Mercian Hymns* resembles *The Waste Land* in its use of a wide variety of materials and references, its seeming impersonality, and its inclusion of notes to the central text itself, which appear almost a parody of Eliot. The difference, however, is Hill's attitude to the past: for him the past is not necessarily more glorious than the present.⁴³ Hill characterizes Offa's reign as materially and politically impressive, yet as morally problematic. Throughout his longest sequence, he repeatedly demonstrates how institutionalized privilege and power relate to brutality and violence. Brutality permeates the *Hymns*, from childhood fantasies to systematic torture on the orders of the king. According to Hill, it has been continuous and self-perpetuating through the history not only of England, but also of Western civilization itself. Characteristically, however, presenting the king as all aspects of man, Hill confirms his common human nature, eliciting from the reader a psychological understanding rather than a moral judgment. Concerned with power and violence, Hill is interested in the underlying subtle private impulses which energize them. Accordingly, history in *Mercian Hymns* is a realm of exploration and discovery rather than a medium for moral lessons.

At this point, we need to focus on the sequence's peculiar mixture of idioms⁴⁴ through which Hill explores the interaction between the public world of historical events and the private world of individual relationships in contemporary time. Hill's peculiar idioms allow a public voice to take on the intensity and immediacy of a private consciousness, and a private voice to gain the breadth, resonance, and authority of a public persona. Through most of the *Hymns* Hill speaks in a language which pulls into itself the style of both medieval and contemporary England. The sequence is Hill's most complete development of poetic language as archaeology. "Digging" into archaeological strata occurs throughout the poems as a metaphor for this exploration, beginning with the poet's childhood: "invested in mother-earth," he would tunnel like the mole into "the Roman flues, the long-

unlooked-for mansions of our tribe” (*CP* 108). The unearthed coins of Offa’s realm are his solids of discovery, his “ransacked epiphanies” (*CP* 116). With unknown images and ancient inscriptions, these coins emerge from the “rune-stone’s province,” and to Hill the past speaks this magic language of runes (*CP* 117).

Hill attempts to present a language capable of evoking English history and drawing that history into present moments of vision and articulation. For Hill, the past is always a site to excavate. Moreover, language, like history, is a medium capable of evolving, changing, growing and surviving by taking along what has gone before. Thus digging up words is not an act of duplicating English in its older forms. Instead, the poet’s urgent engagement with language as it has been shaped by history implies a confrontation with the problematic past.

Hymn XII opens with the physical metaphor which dramatizes the notion that naming is an unearthing; words have etymological levels as the earth has strata. The real interlocking between ancient and modern in the poem lies in the direction of archaic materials by a distinctively contemporary intelligence.

 Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant
 soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked
 epiphanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of
 wild bees’ larvae. They struck the fire-dragon’s
 faceted-skin.

 The men were paid to caulk water-pipes. They brewed
 and pissed amid splendour; their latrine seethed
 its estuary through nettles. They are scattered
 to your collations, moldywarp.

 It is autumn. Chestnut-boughs clash their inflamed
 leaves. The garden festers for attention: telluric
 cultures, enriched with shards, corms, nodules, the
 sunk solids of gravity. I have raked up a golden
 and stinking blaze. (*CP* 116)

The poet collates into “moldywarp,”⁴⁵ the texts through which a self is to be voiced. Hill may well “have raked up a golden and stinking blaze” of historical encrustations, but all blazes are still the signs of struggle. *Mercian Hymns* provides a series of historical

excavations; the digger, as Henry Hart points out, “is a paradigm for all the artists” (173). The poet endeavors to rescue language and myth just as the mole, spade, farmer’s plow, and boar’s snout dig up fallen objects from the ground. He wants to dig out a sense of continuity for himself, but it is the nature of the past to enforce its distance from the present. Here again, the poet comes to face the duplicity of language. To borrow Hart’s words, the word is “spade and sword”: “a digger of etymological and cultural roots and a warrior that severs those roots” (157). In this respect, Hill demonstrates language’s capacity to record past upheavals in the abruptness of rhythms through the *Hymns*. At the same time, the *Hymns* indicts language for causing such upheavals. Even the protective soil is “variably resistant.” So the digging must be vigorous, even violent. The violence arises from the poet’s self-awareness and language as well as from the subject of his attention. The poet thinks of himself as drawn to his act of unearthing (“the garden festers for attention”) in the way that maggots or vultures are drawn to carrion. It is in his way of looking that the chestnut-boughs “clash their inflamed leaves.” One knows what one makes, and what one makes is at least in part a projection of oneself. Thus Hill includes his own propensity for violence in his imaginative presentation of Offa’s violence, here presented through the imagery of mining and excavation: “I have accrued a golden / and stinking blaze.” The “golden and stinking blaze” is Offa’s hoard of money--the result of ransacking the earth; but it is also Hill’s hoard of language and the riches of “shards, corms, nodules, the / sunk solids of gravity” which his verbal archaeology unearths from “telluric” (earthy) cultures. Apparently, Hill’s “strong land” (*CP* 25) is of course the rich mine of life as it lies buried in the ruins of past civilizations, for Hill the source and matter of poetry. The archaeological metaphor stands for what he envisages are poetry’s methods--a form of excavation where poetry’s discoveries and possibilities of disclosing meaning depend on the means used. This in turn is what the poem enacts.

It is possible at places in *Mercian Hymns* to distinguish clearly the language of medieval West Mercia from the language of the modern West Midlands. As Hill speaks it, eighth century alliterative verse sounds like this:

Fortified in their front parlours, at Yuletide men
are the more murderous. Drunk, they defy battle-
axes, bellow of whale-bone and dung. (CP 130)

The basis of this is the Old English four-stress line, given emphasis by alliteration. Here the alliteration crosses the enjambment: “men / are the more murderous”; and at times two patterns of alliteration cross each other: “Drunk, they defy battle- / axes, bellow of whale-bone and dung.” To be sure, here, the Old English pattern dominates the conversational voice of the contemporary poet. At times purely contemporary rhythms of conversation are also heard:

Tell everything to
Mother, darling, and God bless. (CP 114)

‘God’s honour--our bikes touched; he skidded and came
off.’ ‘Liar.’ (CP 121)

But usually a new idiom is formed. Hill utilizes a pattern of ordinary contemporary speech, but invests it with an unusual clarity and sensitivity and also a heavy physicality:

After that shadowy, thrashing midsummer hail-storm,
Earth lay for a while, the ghost-bride of livid
Thor, butcher of strawberries, and the shire-tree
dripped red in the arena of its uprooting. (CP 131)

The conversational rhythm of lines 1 and 2 shifts subtly to a four-stress line in lines 3 and 4. Taken as a whole--we do not consciously analyze the modulation in actual reading--the sentence creates a language capable of evoking a thousand years of England’s history.

Since the hymns are individual acts of perception and reflection expressed in the image and rhythm of a particular language, they are most interesting when we attend to the quality of individualization and the quality of language. That is also an almost physical act of

archaeology, the creation of an idiom that digs out an imagery of the past and articulates it as contemporary. Here the poet's highly developed awareness of history and language is evidenced in his strong attraction to the graspability of things and to the verbal image. The physicality of the language of *Mercian Hymns* forms a connection between Hill's subject and his attitude toward the subject, and is one of the unique achievements of the sequence.⁴⁶ For example, when Hill simply names things and places, one has a sense that the poet, as Hill said of Yeats, "is hearing words in depth and is therefore hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth." Hill continues, "It is as though the very recalcitrance of language. . . stood for the primary objective world in one of its forms of cruelty and indifference; but also for the cultivation of that other objectivity, won through toil" ("The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure" 21).

Heathland, new-made watermeadow. Charlock, marsh-marigold. Crepitant oak forest where the boar furrowed black mould, his snout intimate with worms and leaves. (CP 115)

As the above example, the language of *Mercian Hymns* is characterized by its association with things. "Tracks"; "ironworks"; "Hearthstones"; "A solitary axe-blow"; meanings accrete round these concrete particulars and almost dissolve them (CP 132). Things lose their substantiality in the ambiguous medium of language, but language seeks the sensuous clarity of the things it describes. This is a poetry of the mysterious exchange between language and the world it describes or invents. The volume is full of sensuous apprehensions of the world: "Candles of gnarled resin, apple-branches, the tacky / mistletoe" (CP 110), "He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony" (CP 114), "He tested the / little pears. He smeared catmint on his palm for his cat Smut to lick" (CP 114), "Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and weight" (CP 115).

At this point, we come to notice how, in *Mercian Hymns*, sentences also have a strange solidity, which comes from the way words adhere to one another, brought together by rhythmic and phonetic affinity, as though they sought the unity and richness of the thing

described. “Christ’s mass: in the thick of a snowy forest the flickering evergreen fissured with light” (*CP* 120). The complementary terms “thick” and “light” are held together in the sound of “flickering” “Forest” and “fissured,” and want similarly to merge. The language of everyday exchange is at once a debasement and a reminiscence of this ideal language, which is well known in Symbolist theory; the language of *Mercian Hymns* is distinguished by its clinging close to actual experience, to things, while rejecting the thin and abstract language of day-to-day living. It is an exercise in translation from the language of everyday to the language of poetry. These poems embody our experience of the world and reflect on the distortion of that experience in words and perception. The prime fact is the world’s existing. Christ’s mass is the thick mass of the forest, fissured, transfigured and changed by “light.”

The three hymns entitled “Opus Anglicanum”⁴⁷ are the finest examples in which “history as poetry” brings history to life. They are exemplary for revealing that strong lyrical poetry is poetry of witness, capable of registering and of engendering morally imaginative forms of living. Art as inessential ornament, fanciful thinking not of this world and art as craftsmanship, “record” of laboring, living in the world--this opposition also forms the backdrop to “Opus Anglicanum.” Hill’s treatment of exploited artists in the two hymns of “Opus Anglicanum” (XXIII, XXIV) leads to his concern, in Hymn XXV, with exploitation of the English working class, a parallel phenomenon to the exploitation of artists. In a moving passage in Hymn XXV, Hill remembers his grandmother’s toiling in a Midlands nailshop and finds there an image of the forging of language too. At this point, Hill’s quotation from Wimsatt can act as a gloss: “the fullness of [the poet’s] responsibility as public performer in a complex and treacherous medium” (qtd. in *LL* 8). As Hart notes, the writer works on similarly treacherous looms, weaving texts with the care once devoted to textiles (185). Hill ponders Ruskin’s letter (“the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*”) on the injustice of the master-servant relationship, on the exploitation of labor and on the demanding work in a nail forge:

Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
nailer's darg.

The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.
It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred
its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
floated a damson-bloom of dust--

not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one
thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another
to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
nailer's darg. (CP 129)

Not many critics have noticed how strongly Hill's sense of English history is shaped by his sympathy for the oppressed class who made its triumphs possible. Hill's imagined participation as the grandson actualizes the plight of the grandmother--the servant of "cottage capitalism." The mood of the Hymn XXV about the "nailer's darg" is a terse indignation, which informs the rhythm and tone of the description.⁴⁸ Yet there is an oscillation between different registers of the language: from informal meditation ("Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*") to liturgical formality ("I speak this in memory. . ."); from stark physicality ("It reeked stale mineral sweat") to Tennysonian beauty ("In dawn light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom of dust");⁴⁹ and a troubling tension between the dignified confidence of "I speak this in memory. . ." and the characterization of the voice that speaks as mere "posthumous clamour," which cannot alter an irrevocable past. Here Hill seems to set the world of language and the world of deed against each other. Furthermore, the precise language and great understatement of lines ("it is one thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another / to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire") do not reveal the speaker's outrage directly. Instead, there is both celebration of that indomitable labor, and compassion for what was suffered and "spent" in it, and both are held together in those two present tense verbs, "celebrate" and "cradle." At

this point the lines intensify the reader's sense of the outrage. In a similar way the repetition of the first stanza as the final stanza provides a personal, subjective context for the two stanzas in the middle, describing and commenting on "public" working conditions. The very presence of repetition as a short hymn's refrain seems to reinforce our understanding of the speaker's emotional urgency.⁵⁰ Therefore, besides being a personal tribute to the life and sufferings of the poet's grandmother, the poem undertakes a more general, far-reaching cultural criticism on the nineteenth-century capitalist celebration of the "quick forge," which allowed for profitable exploitation of the underprivileged class. It may be true, then, the poem is spoken with full moral conviction. Here we are made explicitly aware of the consequences of the power of capital and the use of human beings for the modern world. Hill's love of England is only equaled by his resentment against it.⁵¹ Guilt and anxiety constantly undercut Hill's desire to celebrate the past, which makes any nostalgia he feels for it uncomfortably ambivalent. As Hill delicately demonstrates, even in the shape of wrought objects they speak not only of suffering but also of real human aspirations and energies. Thus Hill's whole poetic method explores one of the most crucial of the "spoils" that is the very language through which we seek to understand our world. In his extraordinarily creative engagement with language, he demonstrates the dynamics of the process of division and conflict, exploitation, suffering, dreaming, creation, and achievement, which is history. Therefore, I think, he is in a finer and more intimate way, enacting the critical awareness of contemporary theories. At this point it is appropriate to recall R. K. Meiners's argument: Hill "has already engaged the questions of the dissemination of languages in social and poetic orders at such a level that any overt move into an engagement with recent theory would be, from the perspective of his poetry, regressive" ("Upon the Slippery Place" 227).

While standing as a warning of the tendency of authoritarianism to destroy the spirit of people through economic manipulation and torture, the hymns are also a demonstration and celebration of the rich resources of language and imagination. The work of language does

not need to be completely useless; it can at least lead us to a renewed consideration of the world that lies outside it. If used with individual integrity, poetry can shape a creative future out of the rich soil of the past. *Mercian Hymns* itself, imaginatively recreating aspects of the world of the past as they reverberate in the present, laments and celebrates the physical realities and the delusions of Offa: "he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of / red mud" (XXX). Here the poet is keenly aware that something historical is always both invulnerable and fragile, almost trivial. For Hill, the past and memory, however diffused and fragmentary, are his raw materials. Thus as they layer and form the strata of language, they are his medium--the traces of red mud--out of which he draws his material to shape "coins," poems of lasting testimony to what has been, as a legacy for us.

In this respect *Mercian Hymns* constitutes a powerful defense of poetry as legacy. More specifically then, we come to raise a question: what is Hill's poetic legacy to us as readers of this sequence brooding on the relevance of history in our lives today? One of the most common complaints about Hill's poetry is that it is less relevant to us because it is so immersed in history. However, his poetry is a token of its concern with the present; the primary concern of the *Hymns* is the necessity of understanding the past if we are to understand ourselves in the present. It is the continuity between old and new life that Hill's poetry explores. This involves the cultivation of a "vital dimension of intelligence" and here lies the special challenge and power of poetry in particular. "A poem containing history" can be another intersection between modernists and Hill. As Eliot put it in "What is a Classic?," "The maturity of a literature is the reflection of that of the society in which it is produced" (*OPP* 55), and that depends on "a consciousness of history." There is thus a mutually buttressing relationship between belonging to a mature and continuous history and having the historical consciousness which makes one a mature writer. The poet plays with the history of the past, but in doing so he truly makes the history to come. And when that new history is established, it will see the past as real which the poet made in play. Hill situates this many levelled complex exploration in terms of different perspectives, each

having its own specific sense of time, place, character and register. *Mercian Hymns* is an attempt in Seamus Heaney's phrase, to "make contemporary landscape and experience live in the rich shadows of a tradition" (*Preoccupations* 160). For Hill the language of poetry is charged with history. His need to lance a prevalent nostalgia by examining the words he has inherited is first of all personal, but it also implies versions of our literary and political history, too.

As we have seen, moreover, history in *Mercian Hymns* is not chronological; instead, the present moment is enriched by all the past simultaneously. From the first hymn, the events of Mercia over the last twelve centuries are never treated as a linear development: there are no pure "moments" of history. Hill shifts freely between historical periods as well as between public and private experience.⁵² The sudden, baffled displacements of this history betray the narrow respect for force and influence mere chronology has. History is no neat laying down of sediments: we fail to understand the deep or abiding authority of Offa if we do not see where the past still afflicts the present, nor least in the perennial holly-groves. By using the ancient king and the poet himself in childhood or present manhood as the commanding and unifying figure throughout the sequence, the remote past, the recent past and the present are obliquely presented, often within the space of a single section. Thus, it is true that the historical past, far from simply a reconstruction to be offered to the present, is consciously interspersed *with* the present. It tells us about our particular moment, it reminds us also of our mode of narrativizing the past whose constructions we are not yet through with. In short, the sequence of hymns should help us to a more nuanced reading of the cultural inheritance and contemporary construal of the past. According to Charles Tomlinson, the continuing Celtic and Anglo-Saxon revival through Hill's sense of cultural over-lap gives us a larger England, a spiritually denser England, that it helps to rectify a loss of cultural memory (18-19).

At this point, it is necessary to explain Hill's concept of "redeeming" time because this is important in terms of refuting accusations concerning a reactionary nostalgia. In his fine

essay "Redeeming the Time," Hill says of the redemptive style: "Its structure is a recognition and a resistance; it is parenthetical, antiphonal, it turns upon itself" (LL 94). This describes very well his own procedure. The concept of redeeming time, however, tends to be considered as displaying a wish to return to the past, rather than being, as Hill explains it, an attempt by a poet to purge a usually contemporary era of a particular ill. In brief, it is an active concept where ethics combine with what he terms "rhythmic disjuncture" to result in a breaking-into accepted rhythms in such a way that perceptions are jolted (LL 97). Although William Logan is one who notes the ethical and rhythmic components of the concept, he argues that Hill has taken on the desire to "redeem" time as a "vocation." He remarks, "No time can be redeemed through the ethical intuitions or rhythmical grumblings of its poets" (337). A vital element of Hill's procedure of "redeeming" is that it is localized--confined to specific instances of rhythm-change rather than applying to broad sweeps of poetry. Logan displays the common tendency to assume that Hill aims for extensive redemption of historical periods rather than minute and specific verbal atonements. Hill does not see the device of "redeeming time" as a panacea, and in Hymn XXV, he seems to "brood on" the very inability of language to redeem--the "dust" is "not to be shaken by posthumous clamour." In this respect, the idea of "redeeming time" again leads to the duplicity of language--"our word is our bond."

It must be recalled that Hill's poem-sequence proceeds by a rhythmic method of connection and transformation between the individual parts. By this method, moreover, "the strands of personal and national destiny are interwoven." The conflict within and across the prose-poems between complementaries, converses and opposites of theme, image, meaning and rhythm results in a poem of high tension, if by tension one means Hill's acute awareness of contemporary psychological anxieties and social, linguistic frictions. Importantly enough, in his essay on *Cymbeline* Hill describes poetic tension as "a dualistic acceptance of things as they are. Such dualisms seem to avoid the chain of

cause and effect” (27). It may be true then that his compressed poems work ironically, partly in terms of their different manifestations of tension between linguistic ambiguities.

Private memories, public history and contemporary reality merge into the question “What is Mercia?”.⁵³ The language of the sequence strives for the continual interaction of all three levels, and it is the very interaction that in turn generates many of the difficulties critics have had with the form, differing voices, and historical context. *Mercian Hymns* shows the mutual implication of past and present, the rootedness of both in the soil that nurtures them, the violence and uncertainty of all human culture and the fragility, as well as the pervasiveness, of power. The ruler, the philosopher / poet, the craftsman, the soldier on the one hand and power, knowledge, truths which obtain only in a world of the imagination unrestricted by physical realities on the other, intersect in Hill’s view of Mercia.

In the *Hymns* Hill postmodernizes the realm of Offa by constructing a prose “dream-time” which represents the self’s voyage through the shards of history to attempted encounter with a remembered “present.” It constitutes a chastening vision of “Englishness” whose unresolved problematic concerns precisely “the Presence of the Past”—the title given to the “postmodernist” Venice Biennale of 1983. “Mercia” is a zone where the traces of history and the strains of personal maturation are indissolubly linked: “On the morning of the crowning we chorused our re- / mission from school” (CP 107). The focused time-in-point is remembered from a postmodern moment where “telephones,” “car-dealers” and “confetti” have become widely shared social indices. Where history is collapsed, and the tone keeps shifting,⁵⁴ “Mercia” is summoned up “in tapestries, in dreams” (CP 127). It leads, however, to one end, where aeroplanes, archaeology and incipient ecological environmentalism (“snout intimate with worms and leaves”) mingle in insistent conjunction (CP 115). In brief, “Mercia” is a palimpsest; it is layered in etymological depth where history continuously writes and overwrites itself—in whatever language.

Mercian Hymns is postmodern in that it inscribes the “processes of generation; deeds of settlement” (CP 132) as a relativistic process. For Hill’s sequence, as we have seen, represents history as a kind of flux, uncertainly permeated by the waywardness of its actors rather than as any progress or evolution. The “Presence of the Past” can only be apprehended through such evocative signs and the poems themselves operate only as “coins” and “traces” of both an English past and a now-lost boyhood and maturation. At this point, the question Hill posits in Hymn XXIV (“Where best to stand?”) is characteristically postmodern. The poet seeks some perspective on the past, but he finds the present modifies the past as the past can dominate the present.

Although it would be misleading to term Hill’s poetry “postmodernist” as the word is fashionably used, it is distinctively postmodern in some sense. As its example, it uses the major writings of such modernists as Eliot, Pound and the later Yeats and it views the period of late modernity from a scanning position informed by Auschwitz, Hiroshima, ecological ravagement and the consumer society. It constitutes “historiographic metafiction,” in the sense that Linda Hutcheon has used the phrase to denominate recent fiction, but it was achieved before most such fiction was written. But it is not just a “product” of our times--it rather provides a picture of our times as reflection of past passions and problems. In content, it insists on the present pressure of past existence, on the ultimate ambiguity of both and on the radical dependence of both on a grounding in seasonal, ecological wholeness. It offers a prosaic formulation which can open up the expression of postmodernity to poets of a newer generation. Thus, in *Mercian Hymns* history recedes into legend and legend into myth; the actual history is at all points--past and present--extremely obscure: few of us will know much about Offa and fewer of us much about Hill’s childhood; and when history is glimpsed in the poem, it is shown in the process of its narrativizing, that is to say, “the loss of the historical quality of things.”

As I have already mentioned, *Mercian Hymns* begins with an invocation of Offa and ends with a valedictory fragment and there is a suggestion of maturation--being born,

childhood, education, ruling. As we also noted, *Mercian Hymns* is a record of the growth of a poet's mind and of the development of a culture. The book of hymns explores the analogy between the "objects and justifications" of the "conduct of government" and "the conduct of private persons." Although government and individual differ in technical and methodological aspects, beneath the differences, as we have noticed, there is an area of similarity. Thus it is not merely a self-portrait but also a portrait of a potent British myth: Offa, the king who stands at the beginnings of English nationhood. To borrow Silkin's succinct expression, the King himself "threads 'his' way in and out of his past and our present" ("The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill" 122). According to Ricks, these poems consciously weave new legends. There come together some ancient dignities and indignities together with modern dignities and indignities ("Overlord of the M5" 274). I suppose, however, narrative here is shrunken down to "*petites histories*" and vignettes and plotting are virtually non-existent. Finally, due to Hill's verbal play, we recognize that Hill has in the *Hymns* of Offa an "offal" subject matter: a heap of fragments, relics, and remnants, coins and "traces of / red mud." Thus, in the end, Offa still remains as an enigmatic figure. *Mercian Hymns* seems to be full of the ambiguities Hill exploits. Although some critics like David Gervais see the *Hymns* as "Hill's most accessible book" (95), I consider the sequence as the subtlest and most oblique of Hill's works. In this respect, I agree with Meiners's observation: *Mercian Hymns*, he points out, is a most dubious book, and he goes on to say "In the *Mercian Hymns* this whole matter of the voice in Hill's poems is much complicated by the fact that there is clearly a doubling in the persona that presides over the voicing in the poem as well as the usual doubling and re-doubling of Hill's own poetic voice" ("The Fourth Voice" 49). As Ricks wrote in *The Listener*, the hymns "speak of crypts and are cryptic" (274). In a similar vein, Martin Dodsworth in *Stand* noted how the ironworks of Hymn XXVIII can be "nineteenth century mine-buildings in decay, or eighth-century sword-blades rusting in the thicket" (62). It is

with such verbal play and ambiguity that Hill gets a lightness and economy along with a depth and solidity.

Since language is the most intimate and inescapable of our cultural inheritances, it seems only too easy for habitual usage to assume it is the expression and repository of unproblematically shared experience. Hill, probably more aware than any other living poet of the terrible power of cliché, views it as the most powerful and unexamined register of our “unacknowledged complicities in ancient and recent guilt.” Interestingly, his struggle for verbal mastery begins as early as the Latin lessons of the child in Hymn X. The words for “*ancilla*” (female slave) and “*servus*” (male slave) resist the control of the child-poet, just as their referents do for the king. Language poses the same threat as an unruly subject class; and if we pursue the analogy, the attempts to subdue it to the formal order of poetry may only increase the resistance. Nevertheless, language is also the poet’s necessary medium, the vessel of energies that are not only mystifying, distorting and deceptive but also creative and enabling. As Hill, speaking of this ambiguous and pressing heritage, has said, the poet’s task is to draw upon and activate “the vertical richness of language”: “[T]he poem may. . . belong with certain kinds of constructive scepticism as one of the instruments of resistance to the drift of the age” (Haffenden 88). What this means has best been seen in the poetry of Hill himself, especially in *Mercian Hymns*.

(5) *Tenebrae*: From tempting music back to ambiguous language

In the previous section, we have seen *Mercian Hymns* as a complete redrawing, a new idiom, a new map and a new picture. Hill took over an area commemorated by the countless topographical past and made it new. In his subsequent volume, *Tenebrae* (1978) we encounter a totally different picture from that of *Mercian Hymns*. In the *Hymns*, through the sheer liveliness and sufficient strength of each poem, the language became at once impressive and difficult to penetrate. Thus the poems neither invite nor require

translation or reduction. As Peter Levi points out in his review of the *Hymns*, there is no way of articulating the gaps between sentences or stanzas; it is filled with a kind of reverberant humming (100). Moreover, at the end of the *Hymns*, Offa seems to be “murmurous.” Like any ancient legend rather than history, he, as a cluster of voices remains resonant but incompletely defined and complex. Leaving only hints of his existence, Offa finally eludes explanation as does time. By reading *Mercian Hymns*, then, we have found “postmodern” elements, and perceived them as good counterevidence to a critical tendency on Hill: Hill’s direction is backward; in an age in which poetry moves toward openness, Hill’s is closed. In *Mercian Hymns*, history always eludes us even if glimmers, sounds and images remain to fascinate and baffle with power and brutality. The words plumb moral depths but do not furnish us with a frame of judgment. Hill is keenly aware of the problematics of language, of the linguistic changes around us, of our inability to scrutinize with any exactitude the history we find ourselves involved in, and of the mystery of human personality that he creates in such a literary structure as Offa.

At first glance, however, *Tenebrae* seems to be Hill’s most “purely beautiful writing” in a return to traditional, rhymed forms, especially the sonnet. For that very reason, some critics including Calvin Bedient and William Bedford see *Tenebrae* as “disappointing” and “Hill’s least successful volume.” It reacts against the strengths of *Mercian Hymns*, and regresses from the open style of the *Hymns* into the “frigid” formulas of sixteenth-century religious poetry. According to Bedient, the writing is all ceremony and poorly lit (22-23). In Sherry’s words, the new volume is most commanding, most masterfully crafted, but regrettably the least engaging (157). To elaborate Sherry’s views, he has found *Mercian Hymns* the most successful of Hill’s works, mainly because of its rough and often riddling style, its multifaceted linguistic surface, and its exploitation of both the antireferential and the “civil” potentials of language. On the other hand, applying the same standard of evaluation, he is critical of *Tenebrae* for its abandonment of the roughened edges of the poet’s other work and especially for its apparent acceptance, however provisional, of a

high modernist belief in the possibility of achieving some kind of redemption or “atonement” through the perfection of verbal artifice. Where the earlier poetry exploits “crises” of meaning and syntax to expose the duplicities of language, Sherry finds the poems of *Tenebrae* too burnished, too finished, too relaxed in their form. He argues that in this volume, Hill concedes too much to the “antidemocratic edge” of his poetics of the uncommon tongue. Its traditional, elegantly crafted forms are too much like “the features that align Yeats’s poetry most consistently with the political will of an ancient state” (157). At this point, I argue that the spare and seemingly transparent language of *Tenebrae* may lead to misreadings. For example, Hayden Carruth mistakes the intensity of religious feeling for impassioned belief, and sees *Tenebrae* as “the best book of devotional poetry in the modern high style since Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*” (81). Others perceive the ambiguity in Hill’s religious views but object to it: “A unifying statement is presumably not the poet’s aim,” Frederick Grubb complained sharply. But several critics, notably Michael Schmidt, Peter Davison and Donald Hall value the ambivalence as a strength and acclaim *Tenebrae* highly. In his review of this volume, Hall says “If in the end he has contradicted everything that he has written, including his own contradictions, he has made an articulated structure, or representation, of the modern mind unable to find rest or resolution, defeated and beautiful in stillness” (104).

To sum up, the negative responses to *Tenebrae* stress such qualities as formality, artifice, obliquity and, above all, a sense of “distance.” We can add one more quality to those, *Tenebrae*’s musical and ritual element. The ritualistic qualities of the first two sequences, “The Pentecost Castle” and “Lachrimae or Seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans,” seemed to place these poems at a certain cultural and emotional remove. At this point, it is worth pointing out Hill’s own argument against Eliot’s gesture toward the sphere of pure music. In his critical writing, Hill demonstrates the most important differences between Eliot and himself, and he permits himself a much more censorious account of the Eliotic surrender to the ineffability of music:

I would further suggest that Eliot's asceticism in the three post-war verse-plays is too often a kind of resignation, or what W. W. Robson, in an acute criticism of the later essays, calls 'abstention'. He is left with a language that is at once aloof and ingratiating, unambiguous yet ambivalent. In the essay 'Poetry and Drama' Eliot speaks of 'a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus. . . . At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express'. As Eliot well knew, however, a poet must also turn back, with whatever weariness, disgust, love barely distinguishable from hate, to confront 'the indefinite extent' of language itself and seek his 'focus' there. In certain contexts the expansive, outward gesture towards the condition of music is a helpless gesture of surrender, oddly analogous to that stylish aesthetic of despair, that desire for the ultimate integrity of silence, to which so much eloquence has been so frequently and indefatigably devoted. (LL 9)

According to the above passage, Hill is profoundly suspicious of the symbolist gesture toward music. Refusing the gesture, he intends to "turn back" to the impure business of language. At the same time, however, he is tempted by music, and his inspiration often comes from music.⁵⁵ That is well demonstrated through the titles of such poems as "Funeral Music," "The Songbook of Sebastian Arruruz," *Mercian Hymns*, "Two Chorale-Preludes," "Lachrimae"--subtitled "Seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans." Furthermore, in an interview with Haffenden, Hill speaks of his deep and passionate love of music, and his envy of the composer. Hill notes that the composer has several advantages over the poet: he unites solitary meditation with direct, sensuous communication to a degree greater than the poet (91). In a general sense, Hill seems to resort to the traditional idea that music is the most perfect expression of a fusion between the intellect and the senses. In a specific sense, the poet's disciplined search for the most perfect form, in which the intellect and the senses are fused into what may be seen as a higher reality, is compared to the search for transcendence which constitutes the aims of the disciplines involved in the art of meditation. Music is central in *Tenebrae* in both a general sense and a specific sense. At this point, it seems to be hard to determine how both his passion for music and his suspicion of it in verbal art work together. Thus, in the section on *Tenebrae*, I shall pursue Hill's seemingly contradictory attitudes towards music, and discuss his idea of language related to them.

Tenebrae, Hill said in an interview with Morrison, "is a ritual, and like all rituals it obviously helps one to deal with and express states which in that particular season of the

church's year are appropriate--suffering and gloom. *Tenebrae* does at one level mean darkness or shadows; but at another important level it clearly indicates a *ritualistic*, formal treatment of suffering, anxiety and pain" (213). The title of this volume implies the gradual extinguishing darkness of the last days of the Holy Week ritual, symbolizing Christ's suffering and death. A mood of meditation thus prevails in the collection. His poetry is suffused with religion, but it is not a poetry of belief; it is a poetry of struggle and pain. There seems to be a kind of liturgical propriety in *Tenebrae*, matched by a literary decorum unseen since *King Log*. *Tenebrae* is like an intricate mechanism, beautifully made and with many interlocking parts, some of them familiar in other contexts. However, this does not make the poetry easier to understand, since the function of the whole mechanism is extremely hard to ascertain. There is a basic uncertainty as to how far the dominant religious imagery is itself metaphorical for something else, and as to what is Hill's real intention in using the traditional sonnet form, and extensively echoing and paraphrasing earlier literature. Throughout *Tenebrae*, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgments, translations, imitations altogether work as a collage of references, borrowings and re-workings. Several poems find models in Spanish ballads and sonnets by Lope de Vega and Argensola. Others still find impetus in the devotional verse and prose of John Donne, Crashaw, and particularly Robert Southwell. Significantly, the overall effect is original.

Hill himself observed that "many of the poems in *Tenebrae* are concerned with the strange likeness and ultimate unlikeness of sacred and profane love" ("Autumn 1978, *Tenebrae*" 64). As Ricks points out, Hill's peculiar use of punctuation, particularly the hyphen, may articulate strange likeness and unlikeness, conjoining for instance the word atonement and at-one-ment, the latter itself a declared conjunction of its elements (*The Force of Poetry* 326). Likeness and unlikeness meet: "The Jesus-faced man walking crowned with flies" (*CP* 147). According to Jeffrey Wainwright, "Jesus-faced" is "uncomfortably and deliberately close to 'Janus-faced'" (33). Significantly, the hyphenated

form is itself two-faced, which leads to Janus-viewpoints. In Hill's work the change of language and style implies more than just technical matter.

The opening sequence of *Tenebrae* enacts the interfusion of the two opposite points: the divine and the secular. "The realm of love," in its different but overlapping provinces, is the subject of the sequence, "The Pentecost Castle." A suite of fifteen lyrics mainly in accentual short meters denotes with "castle," architecture and quest, and with "Pentecost," Hill's canonical visitation of divine power. The poems deal with the ancient entwining of religious or divine love with sexual love. Then each poem is an exclamation of love-longing or loss for a lover, or for Christ who is seen as a lover. A complex turmoil can be articulated through that continuing device of lovers, paradox: "This love will see me dead / he has the place in mind / where I am free to die / be true at last true love / . . . dealing his five wounds / so cunning and so true / of love to rouse this death / I die to sleep in love" (CP 141). We may trace patterns of meaning through a maze of paradox, but can not synthesize them.

"The Pentecost Castle" is also a good starting point to discuss Hill's controversially new style. On the surface, "The Pentecost Castle" is the volume's least somber and most fluidly musical sequence. Complexity has been melted. The tensed inflection has noticeably diminished. Instead, a conscious transparent simplicity of language is found, though the overall effect is anything but simple.

They slew by night
upon the road
Medina's pride
Olmedo's flower

shadows warned him
not to go
not to go
along that road

weep for your lord
Medina's pride
Olmedo's flower
there in the road (CP 137)

Here sensuousness and passion glow unimpeded through tiny unpunctuated stanzas of lucid structure and direct utterance. To be sure, Hill has been praised for his intricate and expressive punctuation in most of his work. But he writes here in a quite opposite way. Thus it is important to note that "The Pentecost Castle" has "un-punctuation" or "non-punctuation" rather than just no punctuation. In this respect, Ricks's argument in his essay "*Tenebrae* and at-one-ment" is useful. Discussing "The Pentecost Castle," he refers to Eliot's idea that verse itself is a system of punctuation, and that the absence of expected marks of punctuation may serve to emphasize this (76-77). Interestingly, Ricks sees the punctuation of the sequence in both ways: "non-punctuated" and "punctuated." The sequence is non-punctuated because it does not have any conventional marks of punctuation, and moreover as Eliot noted, the absence of punctuation appears where we would have expected punctuation marks. At the same time, Ricks regards the sequence's lineations with its stanzas itself as a system of punctuation.

The form taken by this phantom punctuation in the sequence of fifteen lyrics is musical; the absence of marks concentrates the ear and eye upon the "harmonic" structure formed by syntactical relations and the movement of propositional sense. At this point, it must be recalled that Hill's own description of the genesis of the sequence emphasizes a process of creation through the work of other artists, an envy of music, and the presence of hidden connections. The primary mediating presence in "The Pentecost Castle" is the Spanish Counter-Reformation sensibility which Hill found in the work of the composer Antonio de Cabezón and of the poet and playwright Lope de Vega (Haffenden 91-92). Through a process of moving from the music and poetry of others towards his own poem, he intends to get a final result where words and music have fused. Although the manner of composition must be discussed with the whole structure of the completed text, this process is manifest in this poem itself, especially in its enigmatic air of alluding to a concealed or effaced narrative. The musical structure of "The Pentecost Castle" is visible as well as audible. For instance, the repetition of "not to go" in the above lyric provides a

symmetrical center about which the poem turns.⁵⁶ The effect approaches that of pattern poetry; the visual appearance on the page of "The Pentecost Castle" contributes to the sense of its sparseness and lucidity. Yet there is also a sense of allusive resonance. In the context of Lope's play, *El Caballero de Olmedo*, the allusions to Medina and Olmedo are clear, since Alonso comes from Olmedo and has triumphed in Medina. In the Hill's sequence, however, they become enigmatic and atmospheric. Thus even in the setting of a dramatic scene of loss and the sense of such a journey, the poem presents rather the fluctuations of a mind in a vacuum than a narrative drama. Here is no opaque ambiguity that we have seen in Hill's previous volumes. But the sense is still ambiguous, the construct itself of great beauty.

The second lyric of the sequence continues the highly patterned effect of the first lyric by using identical first and last stanzas.

Down in the orchard
I met my death
under the briar rose
I lie slain

I was going
to gather flowers
my love waited
among the trees

down in the orchard
I met my death
under the briar rose
I lie slain (*CP* 138)

This poem, and the sequence as a whole, can be seen as developing from the first poem in the manner of musical variations. Facing the absence of an overt narrative or story, readers tend to seek structural principles in such elements. It is apparent, however, that an analysis of "The Pentecost Castle" in terms of musical variations cannot be based on a direct equivalence of words to notes. Although the repetition of words, embellished or modified, in different lyrics, does play a part, such repetition is not the main structuring principle of the sequence. Moreover, such a procedure in words would be unlikely to be

very productive. To be sure, the comparison with the form of musical variations clearly has its limits; like all such comparisons it founders, if pushed too far, on the radical differences between music and words. Although the purity of music is arguably a myth,⁵⁷ music represents an ideal for many symbolist and post-symbolist writers. Thus they see the imitation of musical form as a potent representation of that ideal. In this respect, it appears to be meaningful to read "The Pentecost Castle" in a web of literary and musical connections .

It may be true, in a certain aspect, the poems are linked by syntactical structures and verbal echoes. Susanne Langer argues that such patterning provides a parallel between poetry and music:

The tension which music achieves through dissonance, and the reorientation in each new resolution to harmony, find their equivalents in the suspensions and periodic decisions of propositional sense in poetry. Literal sense, not euphony, is the "harmonic structure" of poetry; word-melody in literature is more akin to tone-colour in music. (220)

In this sense, the second poem may be seen to vary the "suspensions and periodic decisions" of the first poem showing a combination of verbal, semantic and syntactical correspondences between the two poems. We can trace a series of correspondences: "upon the road" and "under the briar rose"; "along that road" and "among the trees"; "there in the road" and "Down in the orchard / down in the orchard"; "They slew by night" and "I met my death," "I lie slain"; "not to go" and "I was going"; "Olmedo's flower" and "to gather flowers."

Accordingly, the strong links between the first poem and the second encourage the reader to seek structural patterning: the use of three quatrains remains constant throughout, as do the short lines of two or three stresses, with between four and seven syllables. While the first poem acts as the model on which the subsequent variations are built, the remaining poems of the sequence reveal sufficient continuities to sustain a parallel with the variation form. Verbal echoes and clusters of imagery run through the sequence.⁵⁸ Within the sequence, such structuring patterns build up a sense of theme, atmosphere and mood.

Thus when we read “The Pentecost Castle,” we attend to meaning, but importantly to the shape and rhythm of meaning rather than to paraphrasable content.

The song-like poems are spare, impersonally personal, and contain a near explosive passion, both secular and divine, which vibrates off the page. These at-first-sight transparent lyrics have been distilled over and over to achieve an intensity.

If the night is dark
and the way short
why do you hold back
dearest heart

though I may never
see you again
touch me I will shiver
at the unseen

the night is so dark
the way so short
why do you not break
o my heart (*CP* 142)

Hill’s rhythm substitutes the frequent pausing of dimeter lines for the pauses and pitch-changes required by comma and bracket; he retains control. Here is the final lyric of “The Pentecost Castle.” The speaker at the end finds a dark well not a “castle” with answers.

I shall go down
o the lovers’ well
and wash this wound
that will not heal

beloved soul
what shall you see
nothing at all
yet eye to eye

depths of non-being
perhaps too clear
my desire dying
as I desire (*CP* 144)

The lines move down the page erasing themselves; if we go “down,” yet it is to a well; we may wash a wound, but it is a wound which will not heal; if the soul is addressed as

beloved, it is told that it will see nothing in the water; if it will see nothing, it will see it eye to eye--which on reflection suggests that the beloved soul is also nothing; depths but of non-being. Here Donald Hall points out the magnificent, inclusive ambiguity of “as”: My desire dies as I wish it to, or it dies in my act of desiring. Hall goes on to say “only motive or circumstance is ambiguous: in both readings desire dies” (106). Furthermore, in the concluding quatrain of the sequence, the lack of punctuation and non-punctuation is like non-being and it has its depths. “By abandoning those aspects of language which are designed to break down reality into component parts,” Hill intends to represent “a condition beyond knowing” (Milne 29). Thus the ending of “The Pentecost Castle” is resonant with “a question” and “an assurance of future quests”⁵⁹ rather than an affirmation of resolutions in sanctity (Hart 206).

In the next sequence in *Tenebrae*, we are again tempted to find a musical device, since the title “Lachrimae, or Seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans” itself comes from John Dowland’s composition for viols and lute, dated 1604 and dedicated to Queen Anne. “Lachrimae” means tears. Moreover, the titles of individual poems allude to different kinds of tears. In a strong mixture of the “tears,” we are invited to contemplate the divine--tears of grief, of love, of separation, tears real and tears forced, tears old and tears new. Hardly any conventional devotion is expressed, and the tone is generally bitter, questioning, or baffled. In the beautiful and painful sequence, the religious and the secular become inextricably mixed, ritualizing the suffering of the split-consciousness of modern man. Several voices in a single mind express an immensely deep religious sensibility, but his strong attractions to the religious faith along with equally strong attachment to the secular world. Written, Hill has told us, “out of a passionate love for the music of John Dowland as out of [his] interest and admiration for the life of St. Robert Southwell,” “Lachrimae” achieves instances of what Leavis termed “the contemplating, relating and reappraising mind” (*The Living Principle* 86-87). A part of the title, “pavan” indicates a slow, stately, grave dance, the dancers elaborately dressed, providing the contradiction between “the

splendour of life" (*CP* 146) and a sense of its tragic movement, its slowness aspiring to the motionlessness that men ultimately achieve, "the moveless dance, / the decreation to which all must move" (*CP* 149). It may be true then "Lachrimae, or Seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans" suggests the motifs of the tears and dances which are in fact more than motifs. The tears are the embodiments of physical expressions of grief, with the even patterning, the "slow" pace of an harmonious "stately dance," and of grief ritualized.

Yet to claim a piece of Renaissance dance music as a "source" raises more questions than it answers. Although Hill takes over some of Dowland's titles for individual pavans, he makes important departures from Dowland's pavans. Dowland ends his sequence with "Lachrimae Verae." Hill places his "Lachrimae Verae" first (Hart 217), and redefines Dowland's concluding "tear." The reader at this point must consider in what sense these tears are "true," as distinguished from those which are "coactae" (forced) or "amantis" (loving). The opening sentence of "Lachrimae Verae" is a paradox: "Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross / and never move." Seen through tears, Christ appears to move, but lamentation creates only the illusion of motion: he remains fixed. More significantly, it implies that the contemplation of Christ fails to move him to a firm faith, or a transformation of his life. A pun on the word "moves" continues in the second and third lines: "Sometimes in dreams of hell / the body moves but moves to no avail / and is at one with that eternal loss" (*CP* 145). Dreams of a hellish state may bring the speaker closest to Christ, in terms of imagining his suffering on the cross. At the same time, the dream experience parallels the failure of the penitent, who is, in emotional terms, "moved" by Christ but unable to change his condition. In the following lines, the speaker addresses Christ in his relation to man: "You are the castaway of drowned remorse, / you are the world's atonement on the hill." The image suggests that Christ and remorse for sin are mutually dependent. His damnation results from our false remorse, "drowned in tears"; if it is drowned then our remorse is already dead. The last two lines of the octave seem to deepen the irony by parodying Christ's words: "This is your body twisted by our skill /

into a patience proper for redress" (*CP* 145). This is Hill's typically ambiguous syntax, each clause unfolding a different meaning for the whole sentence. "This is your body" suggests a response to the Eucharist, but the implications are complex. The body on Calvary appears twisted through the tears of the contemplator, but it has also been literally twisted by sinful man, who caused Christ's suffering. This is not simple suffering, but a "patience proper for redress." To "redress" is to "dress again" or to "re-clothe" as a pun; but it is also to "set straight" what we have "twisted." And "twisted" is "distorted" as in the image of swimming, and certainly as in a distortion of meaning, and perhaps most of all as in "tortured." The inadequacy of that "redress" is further confronted in "*Lachrimae Antiquae Novae*": "Crucified Lord, so naked to the world, / you live unseen within that nakedness" (*CP* 150). The irony of "twisting" is compounded in the following lines: "I cannot turn aside from what I do; / you cannot turn away from what I am. / You do not dwell in me nor I in you" (*CP* 145).⁶⁰ The opening statement of the sonnet seems to be expanded here: Christ and man cannot escape their mutual relation. The "true tears" are shed not out of repentance but for the above truth. Interestingly enough, the truth-telling of "true tears" is made by powerfully affirmed negatives as noted in the above three lines. Thus the quiet and stately rhythms display the "twist" of a modern poem about loss of faith; about twisting away and becoming fragmented rather than "turning" and becoming whole.

The fifth poem, "*Pavana Dolorosa*" is also weighted with Christian paradox. Here Hill begins by inverting the first phrase of his epigraph, from "passions I allow and loves I approve" to "loves I allow and passions I approve" so slightly satirizing Robert Southwell's work.⁶¹ For Southwell, sexual passion is a derivation and diminution of "real love"; for the poet, Christianity reflects a "passion amorous of love." Although the title of Hill's sonnet does not come from Dowland, the "wincing lute" recalls the principal instrument in Dowland's *Lachrimae*, which simulates sympathetic pain for Christ's suffering. Such art is real--but it is necessarily pretense.

Loves I allow and passions I approve:
Ash-Wednesday feasts, ascetic opulence,
the wincing lute, so real in its pretence,
itself a passion amorous of love.

Self-wounding martyrdom, what joys you have,
true-torn among this fictive consonance,
music's creation of the moveless dance,
the decreation to which all must move.

Self-seeking hunter of forms, there is no end
to such pursuits. None can revoke your cry.
Your silence is an ecstasy of sound

and your nocturnals blaze upon the day.
I founder in desire for things unfound.
I stay amid the things that will not stay. (*CP* 149)

The poem celebrates the “joys” of martyrdom, cleverly using the comparison with music. Here Hill juxtaposes ugliness and beauty, lightness and darkness, through the volatility and substance of sound in music and the stillness and the movement of the poised dance. As Henry Gifford points out, the poem works through negative forms (“moveless,” “decreation,” “things unfound”); through contradictory statements (“Ash-Wednesday feast, ascetic opulence”; “self-wounding martyrdom”; “joys. . . true-torn”; “Your silence is an ecstasy of sound”) (157-58). It also works through a discreet play upon words: “revoke your cry,”⁶² implying recall and retraction; “stay amid the things that will not stay”--the second “stay” can mean to sustain.⁶³ Thus his words and rhythms--for more examples, the interplay of the meanings of “decreation” and “dance” and “founder” and “unfound”--make us aware of how many obdurate things are already condensed in these words. Those sound orders, forms which recognize the flux of disorder can never be given a final fixed shape, but are something of a spiritual exercise. In this respect, the poem is the most elaborate in the sequence. As Gifford also notes, however, these devices occur throughout the sequence (158).

Christianity provides one object for our “wild and objectless longings” (*CP* 150). The irony here is complex: the martyr is responsible for his own pain, but he also derives satisfaction from denying himself pleasure. His “ascetic opulence” may take the form of

literal self-mutilation, but he is free from the pains of mundane and sensual experience. The "moveless dance" recalls both the static movement of the first sonnet's "turnings" and "the still point of the turning wheel"; more literally, the phrase suggests the music of the pavan, originally a dance form which is now primarily instrumental. Artistic creation attempts to capture the experience of Christ and to outwit an ultimate moment of "decreation." The martyr or religious artist is "self-seeking" in the idiomatic sense, but he is also seeking alone and for what is "innermost." If he cannot capture Christ's cries, he also cannot silence them. Christ ultimately eludes all attempts to fix him in our "forms": what lies beyond the music transforms the meaning of music: "None can revoke your cry. / Your silence is an ecstasy of sound." The paradox of the real Christian music is contrasted to the limiting paradox of the speaker's own state. Despite his knowledge of the limitations of Christianity, his own position is unfounded and uncertain.

Written in a controlled and metaphysical mode, "Lachrimae" presents exceptional difficulties and obliqueness, even if none of Hill's poetry might be called simple. The barriers to understanding which continually confront the reader correspond to barriers continually encountered and examined by the speaker, who is exploring the darker regions of religious doubt.⁶⁴ Christianity in "Lachrimae," as we have seen, is associated with the crucifixion and acts of martyrdom. Possibly because the martyr attempts to renounce life on earth as a means of attaining oneness with God, Hill, trying on the persona of martyr, is encouraged to do the same.⁶⁵ Significantly the experience of religious doubt in this sequence seems to be parallel to the act of writing the poems. At this point, the sense of renunciation expands into the poetry itself. For Hill, faith can only engage the language as that which is longed for but not fully assented to. Whatever the language approaches "vanishes in the chaos of the dark" (*CP* 146). The language of verbal incarnation falters and is replaced by a more formal language which establishes a sort of autonomy for the poet. The danger is that, with the finely shaped form of the sonnet and an imagery of balanced paradox, the poet will turn the problematical quality of his Christian faith into

seven emblems of the difficulty of full belief--into seven "tears," into syntactical figures of the poet's estrangement--whereas the ideal for the martyr would seem to be human formlessness, dissolution of the personality, oneness with God. Jeffrey Wainwright has noted the relationship between self-concern and martyrdom. He points out that even as the martyr aspires to an indifference to earthly life, he "is making, *composing* his life, there is the ambush of contrivance of some sort, of design, which therefore partakes of earthly existence and its sophisticated ironies" (32). The dilemma is that in writing the poems, Hill may be indulging in the very act of composition that will articulate his doubt but further enclose him in his own ego.

As we have seen, however, these poems in their formal eloquence and musical analogy, firmly caught in an individual experience, do not give us any specific answers. Instead, they offer us a drift of order caught in flux, which is also the nature of human behavior. This is why the order and the singing should be as beautiful as possible. Hill needs to trust in the poised beauty of his rhythms, in their cadence as part of a dance, presented not as a way of mastering but as a way of coping with the flux of behavior that incorporates, defines, and refines human behavior. Yet in their concern with form and discipline, the poems demonstrate Hill's love of music and distance from it. With the mixture of sensuous quality and religious meditation, and the use of paradox, irony, and subtle use of language, the sequence seems to reflect, define and refine the nature of truth, or our knowledge of the truth. Characteristically, the sequence elicits us to think about how we live with truths--half-truths--in the world. Thus Hart remarks "Hill's poems are self-reflexive, even to the point of reflecting on their self-reflexiveness" (226). It is clear that Hill extraordinarily scrutinizes his poetic motives with self-consciousness and then writes poems that "criticize poetry as a gross act of self-wounding and self-seeking" (*Ibid.* 226). His ongoing striving to perfect and enliven language, to borrow Hart's expression again, "to cut away the dead wood to let the new shoots grow," is his self-appointed task.

“His stately music of inevitable failures and partial successes is accompanied by dolorous and joyful weeping” (*Ibid.* 227).

Whereas the language of “*Lachrimae*” is metaphysical, and its manner is “timeless,” the next sequence is time-bound, dense with the particulars of specific historical moments. Hart sees the difference as Hill’s focus shifts from “personal dilemmas” to “tenebrous aspects of political and social life” (227). Under the title “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England,” the historical orientation continues throughout the thirteen sonnets. Moreover, here he shows a profound reaction to place, and evocatively explores the reverberations sent out from places. In this sense, the sequence is comparable to *Mercian Hymns*. It may be true, however, despite the similarity between “An Apology” and *Mercian Hymns* in terms of rhetoric, the sonnets in “An Apology” are comparatively relaxed and lyrical. As Hart notes, “An Apology” abounds with ringing bells, bird songs, clear whispers, chiming clocks, carols, resonant calls, and cries (228). In short, the sonnets demonstrate a manner to combine historically problematic landscape with musical consonance, “a civil tone.”

Here the title has been borrowed from the first serious justification of the Gothic Revival in English church architecture, which was written by the remarkable Catholic architect A. W. Pugin, and published in 1843. Pugin’s message was clear: the revival of an aesthetic style was to herald the revival of a religious belief and a lost era. The title points to its central concern with “the English heritage,” framed by images of iconoclasm; and in one way iconoclasm is a very exact image for that suspicion of “cultural monuments.” So the “Apology” is very much a revival of architecture, concerned with physical remains--ruins, artifacts, the shape of the landscape, the forms of ritual and custom, inferred shadows of material loss: “Touched by the cry of the iconoclast, / how the rose-window blossoms with the sun!”--so the sequence ends (*CP* 164).

The theme of Hill’s “Apology” is, in a phrase of Coleridge’s offered as an epigraph, “the spiritual, Platonic old England.” The other epigraph is from Benjamin Disraeli’s novel

Coningsby. Hill's choice reintroduces the persistent theme in his poetry of the role the writer can play in an unavoidably political world. As Steven Meyer points out, not only was *Coningsby* the first political novel in English, but also Disraeli was one of the major political figures of the age, who used his novels to present his political ideas of the "two nations" and an alliance of the working poor and the conservative aristocracy (235). What the juxtaposition of the two epigraphs signals is an insight explored throughout the sequence: that those imaginative landscapes which most seductively attract and compel us, and which are embodied in all sorts of ways in what we call "our heritage," are not merely received by us, but are more insidiously operative than that. At this point, it is worth noting that Hill has been much criticized for what is seen as the pervasive nostalgia of "An Apology." In an interview with Haffenden, replying to this question, he touches on his reason for the tone of elegy that pervades so much of his work: "There are . . . good political and sociological reasons for the floating of nostalgia: there's been an elegiac tinge to the air of this country ever since the end of the Great War" (93). When he wrote this sequence, he perceived a nostalgia in England that he related to "the spiritual, Platonic old England," and he felt that any ideas relating to a progression towards a "New World" seemed, even in this century, merely "fancy" (CP 152). The sequence draws on this sense of a national perception of England, and on the viewpoints of individuals. Thus there is a backdrop of the movement of great civilizations against which to assess the fortunes of England. It is important to note that the word "apology" suggests contrition as well as defense. The suggestion that the term "nostalgia" adequately characterizes the breadth and depth of meaning in this sequence reveals a lack of awareness of the acuteness of Hill's perceptions and of their many layers. The sharp image that embodies Hill's interest in the complexities of perception is displayed in the eleventh sonnet "Idylls of the King": "the half-built ruins of the new estate," in which the houses could appear to be in process either of construction or of decay (CP 162). Thus exponents of the nostalgia theory ignore the bitter condemnation made in a line that lies at the center of the sequence: "Platonic England

grasps its tenantry" (*CP* 158). An essential England, whose "tenantry" in one poem are the dead, is deduced and imaginatively reconstructed from the physical survivals of the past that surround us--from architectural relics, from enduring features of the landscape, from the marriage of nature and artifice, and from the textures of our speech. The sequence mixes nostalgia for a faded ideal and assessment of its human price. Hill has perhaps learned from Robert Southwell that "the best course to let [men] see the error of their workes, is to weave a new webbe in their own loome. . ." (1).

At this point, the epigraph from Coleridge becomes extremely interesting. Coleridge sees his "England of the mind" as a conscious choice: a "spiritual Platonic old England," an essential England, whose values he affirms against those of the "commercial great Britain" he deplores. But Hill's invocation of Coleridge, and the sequence that follows, point toward a very different vision. For what he suggests throughout the sequence is that there can be no such simple choice and separation. The crimes as well as the beauties of British imperialism are paraded in this sequence. Set on the fine country estates of England and in colonial India, the "Apology" is as much a defense of the victims of British imperialism, both at home and abroad--"the phantoms of untold mistakes" (*CP* 158)--as it is an apology for its worst manifestations. Here Hill views the "sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth-century country house" in terms of the social system. At the same time Hill requests us to look at "Apology" with "sufficient closeness" to its texture. According to him, in that reading process, we shall find not only "the celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape" but also "an equal sense of the oppression" and "sufferings" of English laborers and Indian peasants (Haffenden 93).

In this respect, Hill's poem entitled "The Laurel Axe" can be seen to be charged with the tensions and ambiguities characteristic of the "Apology" sequence. Importantly, this sonnet accords with the overall mood and tenor of *Tenebrae*. With both the tree ("laurel") and that which cuts it down ("ax"), it simultaneously affirms and threatens the "laurels" traditionally accorded to political and poetic power. Its ironic combination of a seemingly

brittle and yet solid imagery suggests that a world's desperate attempt to grasp stability is an autumnal ineffectual affair:

Autumn resumes the land, ruffles the woods
with smoky wings, entangles them. Trees shine
out from their leaves, rocks mildew to moss-green;
the avenues are spread with brittle floods.

Platonic England, house of solitudes,
rests in its laurels and its injured stone,
replete with complex fortunes that are gone,
beset by dynasties of moods and clouds.

It stands, as though at ease with its own world,
the mannerly extortions, languid praise,
all that devotion long since bought and sold (*CP* 160).

Although at first sight it seems to evoke the beauty of the country house, we gradually see that "Platonic England" and "commercial great Britain" are one and the same. There can be no "spiritual" realm separated from that of getting and spending. Hill is here re-animating what in our contemplation of "monuments" is usually suppressed and reified into landscape--the human relations of getting and spending, of service commanded and given, that have produced this world. The presence of this monument is not serene or untroubling, and certainly not of the enlarging, inspiring kind that Coleridge sought in the idea of a "spiritual, Platonic old England." No one would expect simple-minded nostalgia from Hill. For Hill history is too decisive to offer any such comfort. But it is more actively disturbing than that, partly because its existence--evoked in the never quite focused image of the great house--seems provisional, threatened and uncertain. "Injured stone" at once suggests the despoliation of the natural which has created such monuments, and hints at the iconoclasm which at various points in the English past has defaced them. Other phrases--"as though at ease with its own world," "beset by dynasties of moods and clouds"--also suggest a continuing and again suggestively unfocused unease. But what is also disturbing is that the sense of what this "England" means is disquietingly equivocal.

The broad historical scope of the sequence includes three sonnets, "A Short History of British India," where oppressed Indian peasants stand as counterparts to a battered English tenantry.⁶⁶ As Hart remarks, if historians see the nineteenth century for its humanitarian achievements, and its stability in foreign affairs, Hill tends to see the century in a larger context of renaissance, decadence, and the expansion of empire (227). The "Short History" was common in Victorian times, and it now suggests a self-confidence that is unavailable to twentieth-century poets. The voice opens the first of these three sonnets: "Make miniatures of the once-monstrous theme" (*CP* 155). Then it continues: "With indifferent aim / unleash the rutting cannon at the walls of forts and palaces; pollute the wells" (*CP* 155). The lines describe the effects of British aggression and attempt to "pollute" the "well" (spring) of Indian culture. This is the voice of violence, hidden, perhaps, within the country-house milieu, but ready to break out upon any future victims, and "fantasi[sing]" a period of "unleash[ed]" pillage--behavior of the type that originally accrued estate. While three of the sonnets deal very engagingly with "A Short History of British India," the other sonnets, as we suggested above, look back into England itself--its weather, its landscapes, its rituals, its ruins, its folk-memories.

At this point, it is necessary to recall Raymond Williams's argument on "country-house" poems. From the start, Williams questions the tradition of country-house poetry: the method of praising a benefactor by praising the style of a house, the management of an estate, and the generosity of owner's house-keeping, continued by Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, and Alexander Pope. In discussing Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," Williams points out that "all these are seen," not as real objects but "in a figure: the conscious look at a passing scene: the explicit detached view of landscape" like "a canvas for painter" (*CC* 56). Next the villagers are allowed to let in their cows to glean. They appear to the poet like "th'universal heard" in a "painted World." Furthermore, he argues that poetic conventions come to serve as stage properties for a dominant class, which uses them simultaneously to mask and to justify its social control.

In his very committed book, Williams provides a continuous history of exclusion and oppression, and vehemently attacks literary landscape seen “from above, from the new elevated sites; the large windows, the terraces, the lawns; the cleared lines of vision; the expression of control and of command” (*CC* 125). As we have noted in the Williams section of Chapter 1, he attempts to restore a neglected group to social and literary history, and writes an adversarial history. Significantly enough, Hill’s “Apology” seems to display a landscape that Williams intends to recover through his cultural views. Here he attempts to define his sense of poetry as a witness to his roots as an English poet. For Hill, complicity and implication are central to how we live with the past in the present and so define ourselves.

Hill’s view in “Apology,” however, is more complex than Williams’s for Hill is not merely exposing the exploitation of human and natural life that has underpinned “Platonic England.” If he were, to be sure, this poem would be much simpler to read. Its very form and language participate in that ordered beauty, that inherited aesthetic richness, whose ambiguous implications it is exploring. In the very act of reading, the reader is pulled one way by the sensuous yet formal satisfactions of the verse, and in another by the disquieting recognitions it seems to animate. The result is a poetry of finally irreducible and richly meaningful images--a poetry that does not merely demystify or admit complicity in an exploitative past, but also acknowledges and celebrates the deep imaginative attractions that determine a sense of a “heritage” and of what it means.⁶⁷ At this point, the opening line of the sequence turns out to be very illuminating. The sequence has begun, “And, after all, it is to them we return. / Their triumph is to rise and be our hosts” (*CP* 152). The opening words “And, after all” take us into a discussion that seems to be already in progress. The phrase “after all” seems to imply that it is not necessarily going to be a logical discussion, but is possibly rooted in prejudices. Thus these imaginative landscapes are seen to be abstractions from a far more complex and divided actuality.

It is clear that compared to Hill's previous poetry, *Tenebrae* demonstrates his strong attraction to music, and his use of musical elements. As we have seen, however, in dramatizing religious experience, and creating musical variations in his sequences, he always remains passionately ambivalent, and comments on the religious and historical experience without ever affirming belief. Hill seems to acknowledge that the symbolist gesture toward music and its attempt to make poetry a substitute religion are also flawed. More clearly, the last short poems of *Tenebrae* show a movement back to the realm of recurrent unresolved ambiguity and paradox--that is the problematics of language. Moreover, Hill gives voice to the possibilities and limitations of his and our own language and culture while interpreting the works of others and seeking different forms of expression.

For example, "A Pre-Raphaelite Notebook" aims at being openly a species of art criticism, showing how art, especially if it is imitation, must offer its own criticism of life. Interestingly, this poem was first published in 1962 with the words "Adapted from Pascal." Thus it is "a poem of atonement," reminiscent of the *King Log* poems such as "Annunciations" and "History as Poetry."

The God-ejected Word
resorts to flesh, procures carrion, satisfies
its white hunger. Salvation's travesty

a deathless metaphor: the stale head
sauced in original blood; the little feast
foaming with cries of rapture and despair. (CP 167)

The title of the poem appears to suggest studies for a painting of spiritual experience, particularly the legend of Incarnation. Undercutting our expectation, Sherry points out, Hill depicts "the demise of the myth of the carnal Logos" (186). No annunciation from Gabriel to Mary, the greeting passes from "seraph" to "worm." Significantly, the image of the "God -ejected Word" develops into the picture of white maggots generated by carrion, not saving but consuming the flesh: "Salvation's travesty" (Sherry 188). Thus Hill's

creative project is not “on a sphere beyond language” but “on attitudes that are verbally determined.” Furthermore, he works on the linguistic duplicities in a redemptive way, rather than glooming over the lost ideal of language.

Similarly, “*Terribilis Est Locus Iste*, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School” revisions another artist’s work: Gauguin’s religious painting entitled “The Vision after the Sermon” or “Jacob’s Struggle with the Angel” (1888). As Sherry explains, the Latin phrase in the title of the poem comes from the Vulgate: Jacob exclaims, in response to his vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder, “How dreadful is this place” (180). Gauguin’s painting depicts in the foreground a group of Breton women returning from Sunday Mass, in the center background two men struggling, one of whom has wings, and on the edge, at the right, part of a priest’s face. It is appropriate here to mention that the detail of Gauguin’s Jacob struggling with the angel is reproduced on the dust jacket of Hill’s *Collected Poems*. Foreshortening Gauguin, as R. K. Meiners notes in his most current essay on Hill, “the dust jacket itself keeps only the wrestlers, struggling in the blood-red field, staggering under the unseen gaze” (232). Meiners further remarks that on the jacket of Hill’s *Collected Poems*, Gauguin’s own gazers, who outline and constitute the field of vision and its contestants, are shorn away; his problematic representation is problematically represented (232). Thus “this little text forms an exemplary allegory that is central to the enterprise of his writing” (Ibid. 232). At this point, Hill’s poem is something like a study of that process which Fredric Jameson has called “the eclipse of the referent,” or “that ontological marginalization which structuralism and poststructuralism have described as a ‘decentering’ where the ego becomes little more than an ‘effect of structure’” (qtd. in Ibid. 232). Drawing his poem out of the abstracted figures of the painting, and even with the “renounced self-portrait,” Hill accentuates the poem’s aesthetic moment as a vivid and significant instant: “marginal angels lightning-sketches in red / chalk on the month’s accounts or marigolds / in paint runnily embossed, or the renounced / self-portrait with a seraph and a storm” (CP 168). While the poem stresses the margins of the painting,

it invokes the central but marginal position of the artist's own person, and suggests that the artist must rearrange and invent meaning through language.

The "quiet" penultimate lyric, "Christmas Trees" is an elegy for German minister and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), who was arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed for his complicity in the 1942 plot to murder Hitler. To be sure, Hill celebrates Bonhoeffer's moral integrity and religious vision. Furthermore, a letter written by Bonhoeffer to his parents on 14 June 1943 sheds light on Hill's choice of Bonhoeffer as an exemplary figure who illumines the darkness of *Tenebrae*. In it he discusses the significance of Pentecost:

I have also been considering again the strange story of the gift of tongues. That the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, as a result of which people can no longer understand each other, because everyone speaks a different language, should at last be brought to an end and overcome by the language of God, which everyone understands and through which alone people can understand each other again, and that the church should be the place where that happens--these are great momentous thoughts. Leibniz grappled all his life with the idea of a universal script consisting, not of words, but of self-evident signs representing every possible idea. It was an expression of his wish to heal the world, which was then so torn to pieces, a philosophical reflection on the Pentecost story. (53)

For a writer such as Hill, who sees poetry as "the knack of tongues" and for whom language has always a moral dimension, Bonhoeffer's words carry profound implications. At this point, we can apply Silkin's comments on Hill's poem "Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets" to this lyric. "The poet, in the nature of his or her production, is of the essence of a potential and . . . actual resistance to oppression. . . . A further and final point is that it is death, not the régime, which silences [the martyr]. And so, it is for the acts of language that Hill's poets opt, and not for silence" ("War and the Pity" 125). Thematically, the word "citadel" of this poem, as Meiners and Haughton notice, is implicit and "multi-edged": "the nature of the prison where Bonhoeffer was kept, the confines of his cell and the strength of his thought therein, the peculiar force of his theology" ("Lyric after Auschwitz" 578). By conferring the title of "citadel" upon his cell, Hill restores or recognizes Bonhoeffer's commanding autonomy in a situation of apparent defeat and subjection at the hands of an authoritarian state. Thus Hill's use of it metaphorically gives

a commanding moral authority to the imprisoned pastor and to his “quiet but not too quiet” words. “Bonhoeffer . . . restores the broken themes of praise, / encourages out borrowed days, / by logic of his sacrifice” (*CP* 171).

Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late. (*CP* 171)

The title-sequence of eight short poems, “Tenebrae” comes at the end of the volume, just as the ritual of Tenebrae concludes the day. Although it is supposed to relate to the Holy Week ritual, the relationship is far from specific or clear, and the individual poems seem to strain rather disjointedly against one another. In the sixth poem of the sequence, Hill tries to say more directly how contradictory it is--the human and the inhuman in love, in art and in ritual:

This is the ash-pit of the lily-fire,
this is the questioning at the long tables,
this is true marriage of the self-in-self,
this is a raging solitude of desire,
this is the chorus of obscene consent,
this is a single voice of purest praise. (*CP* 174)

This appears to be a late-Eliot piece with its sustained lines about perfect and imperfect forms of shared and private expressions of faith. The main problem of these pieces is that there is not only a straining towards simplicity and clarity but also an underlying cryptic heaviness. Accordingly, it makes the poems sound and look smooth but largely unintelligible.

As Hart aptly points out, Hill finishes “Tenebrae” with his favorite analogy between the perfect work of art and the harmonious music of the spheres but asserts that harmonies are fictions which disintegrate as soon as humans “accost” and examine them (253):

Music survives, composing her own sphere,
Angel of Tones, Medusa, Queen of the Air,
and when we would accost her with real cries
silver on silver thrills itself to ice. (*CP* 174)

Hill denies such atonement that presupposes a timeless, transcendental zone where anxieties evaporate. Rather than a resurrection or transfiguration, which would traditionally end the *Tenebrae* ritual, Hill envisions a new descent on the earth: the world of “real cries” brings them crashing to the earth. When ritual or art fails to move our feelings and thoughts, and as the epigraph of “*Tenebrae*” implies (“He was so tired that he was scarcely able to hear a note of the songs”), the music of the poetry also fails, this movement back to the earth, back to ambiguous language is inevitable. Thus poetry, unlike music, must grasp the human particular which is precisely the heaviness of words. It acknowledges those limits which anchor human experience, reminding us of all that can and cannot be grasped and said. For Hill language continually betrays its own indeterminacy.

It becomes clear that *Tenebrae* is for Hill the gloomy and tenebrous landscape of our own modern age, where an attachment to the shared belief and the bond of ritual, art and poetry which reflect significant forms of living is seen as out of touch. Throughout *Tenebrae*, we follow Hill as he changes his pace while trying to recover the fresh traces of lost origin. In *Tenebrae*, Hill seemed to vacillate about the longing for the purity of music, and about the symbolist hopes for atonement through art. Sherry sees this vacillation coming from Hill’s intention as a critic (197). On the other hand, as a poet, with the characteristic hubris of his own verse, Hill may be unwilling to settle into a harmony that is purely formal, aesthetic and secular. Indeed, he is turning back to confront the “indefinite extent” of language, the “seeking of focus” in language and its history. The poems of *Tenebrae*, from “The Pentecost Castle” to the “*Tenebrae*” sequence, chart the history of humanity’s struggle to overcome the darkness of Christ’s absence with the possibilities of language. Hill’s poems are new in the right way--poems of witness, and encouragement, where an attachment to the past is an attachment to the present.

(6) *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*: Crisis of reference;
Truth is mystery

The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (1983) shows an enormous advance, an extension of range and an increase of suppleness, over the style of his early poetry. In his essay on Hill (1985), Peter Levi regards Hill's development in *The Mystery* as a genuine growth of thought and of feeling (14). At the same time, *The Mystery* continues the main concerns in Hill's earlier work, especially the interests in history, in language and its use and development, and in the individual's interaction with his society in relation to constraints pertaining to all these. Jeffrey Wainwright, in his excellent essay on *The Mystery*, says of the poem's main subject: it is about "the potencies of words, their direct issue, their distant weights and attractions, their formation of memories, images and ideologies, their sounds and resonances--about what kinds of things can be done with words" (101). At this point, we can infer an important argument from Hill's essay "Our Word Is Our Bond." History itself is not to be known through theory, fact or positivist assertions, but through accident and contingency. History is not merely known through language, history is language. Although that is evident enough through Hill's previous volumes, particularly in *King Log* and *Mercian Hymns*, this new volume is more openly concerned with history, and at the same time "the poem's complex meditation" strikingly reveals the obliqueness and density of history. *The Mystery* is a scrutiny of how history is commonly read or rather misread, since history is always represented by problematic language. Thus this extended lyrical meditation is again about the relationship between the facts of history, truth and language.

Before discussing *The Mystery of Charity of Charles Péguy*, it is necessary to note something of Péguy himself, because the historical events that supply the pretext for *The Mystery* may be unfamiliar to English readers. Although Péguy's reputation is continually growing, he remains unfashionable and not immediately likable or readable. What after all

does Péguy mean to Hill? Noticeably, Hill's title itself is modeled on Péguy's verse drama *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne D'Arc*.⁶⁸ As Hart remarks, however, if Jeanne d'Arc provides Péguy with a paradigm of self-sacrifice and charity, Péguy provides Hill with a model that remains deliberately elusive (256). Charles Péguy (1873-1914) was a French poet and polemical writer of socialist and nationalist tendencies, admired by Hill for, among other things, his "exact and exacting probity" (CP 206). The background of *The Mystery* is Péguy's action in the world of 1900-1914, "L'Affaire Dreyfus," and Péguy's relations with Jaurès. Péguy began his literary career as a socialist for the Dreyfusard Party, and his earlier years brought him into touch with Jaurès. Péguy conceived of a socialism which was "in no way anti-French, in no way anti-patriotic, in no way *anti-national*. It was, he said, "essentially and rigorously, precisely *international*" and "far from enfeebling, or attenuating, far from effacing the nation, on the contrary it exalted, it purified it" (qtd. in Sisson, "Geoffrey Hill's Péguy" 12). Later he underwent an extreme but not unnatural conversion from socialism to the France of "the old republic," and died as a patriotic soldier in the war he had urged his country to fight. He died an "infantry lieutenant of the Reserve, on the first day of the first Battle of the Marne in September 1914" (CP 205). When Alfred Dreyfus was falsely convicted of passing government secrets to the Germans, and sent in 1894 to Devil's Island, Péguy published articles in his *Cahiers* to vindicate Dreyfus. For five years, Péguy devoted himself "to right the wrong which Dreyfus had suffered and to restore the good name of French justice" (qtd. in Villiers 60). "The anti-dreyfusards and we the dreyfusards," Péguy said, "used to speak the same language We had the same premises. . . . The subject of the debate was, precisely, whether they or we were the better patriots. . . . The anti-dreyfusards said: Military treason is a crime and Dreyfus has not betrayed. He is innocent of this crime" (qtd. in Sisson, "Geoffrey Hill's Péguy" 12). In this regard, Hill speaks shortly of an "extraordinary collision of two kinds of patriotism, the one cynical, reactionary, the other

regenerative and sacrificial” (*CP* 206). In the section 6, mockingly assuming the lawyer’s voice, Hill describes the trial of the stiff “prig”:

To dispense, with justice; or, to dispense
with justice. Thus the catholic god of France,
with honours all even, honours all, even
the damned in the brazen Invalides of Heaven.

Here there should be a section without words
for military band alone. . . .
white gloves and monocles and polished swords

and Dreyfus with his buttons off, chalk-faced
but standing to attention, the school prig
caught in some act and properly disgraced. (*CP* 190)

One of his colleagues in the Dreyfusard struggle was the great socialist deputy Jean Jaurès. Just before the First World War, Péguy attacked his old friend Jaurès for holding pacifist views. Believing in the solidarity of all nations, Jaurès opposed France’s entry into the war, and to Péguy this represented a final betrayal. Here is Péguy’s “rhetoric of denunciation”: “I am a good republican, I am an old revolutionary. In war time, there is only one policy, and that is the policy of the National Convention. But we must realize that the policy of the National Convention means Jaurès in a tumbril and that great voice drowned in the beating of drums” (qtd. in Halévy 137). Soon after these words were published, Jaurès was assassinated by a young madman who, as Hill remarks in a prose afterward, “may or may not have been over-susceptible to metaphor” (*CP* 206). Two months after this assassination, Péguy himself died in the war. Hill alludes to this across the fourth and fifth sections:

Jaurès was killed blindly, yet with reason:
‘let us have drums to beat down his great voice.’
So you spoke to the blood. So, you have risen
above all that and fallen flat on your face
5

among the beetroots. . . . (*CP* 187)

The death of Péguy on the battlefield of the Marne in the autumn of 1914 is presented as a symbolic gesture of radical expiation for what were feared to be the fateful consequences of a published article. In brief, Péguy's hypothetical involvement with the assassination of the anti-war politician, Jaurès--shot by a fanatic who may have been encouraged by Péguy's writings--and his own subsequent death in the early days of the First World War are at the heart of the poem, which develops from a richly textured evocation of these actualities to a consideration of man's ambiguous relationship to history. In an end-note Hill claims that "Péguy, stubborn rancours and mishaps and all, is one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century" (CP 207), and putting it that way suggests that he admires Péguy because Péguy behaved towards his time as the poet should behave towards language. His stubborn rancours imply a distinctively postmodern attitude to the world and in particular to history: confident only of its density, perplexity, of its having escaped from the net of theory.

At this point, Péguy is especially interesting to Hill because of the range of his alliances. Besides being a thinker and poet, he was an adherent of the Catholic church, a socialist, a patriot, and a soldier. According to a Péguy's biographer, "One of the sources of his great power is no doubt to be found in the way these different modes of being met and tightly knotted in him" (Halévy 23). Péguy appears to be the perfect figure for Hill's display of ambiguities. Indeed, how problematical, and how far from being transparent, these terms--"patriotism," "truth," and "history"--really are, is one of the poem's main recognitions. In this respect, especially dealing with the term "patriotism," Jeffrey Wainwright, in his letter to *PN Review*, clarified that far from being a celebration of patriotism, the poem presents a painstaking study of the web of emotive ties, delusions, nostalgias, and manipulations, as well as the proper loyalties and affections that go to make up a notion so contradictory as "country" or "nation" (6). According to Wainwright, "patriotism" is too abstract, and potent a concept to be drummed and trumpeted without a context. For postmodern readers, not only that term but also the conceptions of truth and

history are full of unresolved questions. At this point, what the poem provides is also the full ambiguity and ambivalence of that context. *The Mystery* may encourage the reader to think of Péguy as remote. As the title itself implies, there are things its obliquity cannot say. As I indicated before, Hill admires Péguy as “one of the great prophetic intelligences of our century.” Indeed, the poem presents Péguy as worthy of intellectual respect; but it does not, perhaps cannot, give the incursion of “prophetic” into “intelligence” which suggests that Péguy saw something true. From Péguy’s fate, from providing misunderstood calls to action, Hill’s diction defends itself by its exploratory obliquities. Péguy was a controversial figure who brought his abstract reasoning and beliefs into the concrete, material world. In considering Péguy’s alignment of the abstract and metaphysical with the concrete, we confront “the moral complexity of translating abstract principles into the dubieties of social practice” (A. Robinson 837). At this point, it is appropriate to recall the above lines straddling the two sections--four and five--describing Péguy’s death. In this way, Hill represents Péguy’s “entanglement in the whole rhetoric of Jaurès’s assassination.” Furthermore, as Wainwright remarks in his essay on *The Mystery*, this unusual technique mimes the way in which the different responses to Péguy and his attitudes and circumstances persistently overlap and flow into one another (105). The poem is mainly concerned with the ways in which we apprehend history, the acquisition of language and ideas in terms of social environment and landscape, responsibilities pertaining the use of language, and the problems of judgment and justice. This section on *The Mystery* will demonstrate Hill’s acute awareness of the varied factors that lie behind any perception of truth and reality, and his interest in consequent “mystery” relating to the deployment of truth and reality. Thus similarly, the main concerns in *The Mystery* circle around the phenomenological and hermeneutical questions of perception and interpretation we have pursued in Chapter 1 especially in the Gadamer section: how truth, reality, is conditioned by our perception of it and how perception is, in turn, conditioned

by interpretation and by language, whatever its medium, that cannot accurately represent experience.

In *The Mystery*, historical events themselves are presented in an ambiguous manner. The poem begins, literally and figuratively, with a bang: “Crack of a starting-pistol”--the sound of the shot that killed Jaurès.

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
through the café-window crêped in power-smoke?
The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*. (CP 183)

This is a self-consciously theatrical way to begin the poem. The opening scene is presented as if it were the climactic scene of a “mystery” in the form of a “new farce,” *Sleepers Awake*, and as if that “café-window,” where the play-bill hangs, were the stage-set for the play’s murder scene. As Hart notes, the “starting-pistol” is a brilliant choice by Hill, not only because it starts the poem with a bang, but also because it suggests many of the paradoxical attributes of “the word” and its “annunciation” (259). By associating a real murder with a starting-pistol, Hill begins with an image of distorted truth in the sense that it reduces both the truth of an historical fact and the truth-telling capacity of art to the level of a joke (a “crack”). Here the stage seems to be set for contesting the truth-telling capacity of Hill’s poem versus the facts of history to breaking-point--to the point of cracking. This is encapsulated in the title of the farce reversing the significance of the original title from the Advent Hymn.⁶⁹ By inviting the reader to see through the “window” framed (“crêped”) in “smoke,” the poem displays itself as a frame-up within a frame within a frame within a frame. At this point, the first section gives us numerous reasons to doubt our own perceptions. The bang fired by the “starting-pistol” presages a false start, and fact dissolves into fiction. Primary sources become less primary than they appear.

Although history appears to give us a true interpretation of the facts, for Hill it is often a species of fiction--a farcical and tragic parody of justice. In the first section of *The Mystery*, he casts “History” as a character in images of theatrical burlesque:

History commands the stage wielding a toy gun,
rehearsing another scene. It has raged so before,
countless times; and will do, countless times more,
in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian. (CP 183)

Here is an apparent note of travesty, achieved by means of a metaphor which seems to belittle the circumstances it describes. The lines suggest cyclical movements in history.⁷⁰ History's repetitions are rehearsals, full of mistakes for a final performance that never comes. It is clear that a central theme in the poem is language's dubious ability: to compel a great number of people to commit atrocities as well as to bear witness to them. As we have noted, his starting-pistol "cleverly embraces both the innocent and invidious powers of the word"; it only fires blanks (symbols or signs), but Hill acknowledges that these have a "murderous innocence." At the same time, as Hart points out, Hill personifies history as a murderous clown, arousing laughter and horror as he frolics on the stage (260).

Noticeably, the poem more than once wreathes the incidents of history in the manner of stage or screen, etching or engraving. Much of the material of the poem is refracted through secondary media: the old film footage, "slashed with rain / and St Elmo's fire," that shows the armies of France "reeling towards Verdun," and the "weird storm-light" of those wood-engravings that depict the humiliation of Dreyfus are brilliantly evoked (CP 183, 190). Moreover, it provides certain cruelties of judgment in the sense that any pain may be travestied as art, any blood rendered into ink. For example, the Caesar we know is Shakespeare's Caesar, and his death is a stage death: "In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank / ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink / painlessly spouting" (CP 183). That is all history offers, an existence ever more tenuous, a ghost made into a ghost. The adequacy of words is overtly questioned in such lines as "Here there should be a section without words / for military band alone" (CP 190). At this point, words perform, and their performance is a part of history's theater. This leads us to think of our own secondary status as witnesses of such great moments. As Wainwright puts it, then, "Everything is representation" ("The Mystery" 102).

The Mystery sustains its meditation with continuous intensity. Its motive may be described as an attempt to hold poetry and history in a simultaneously compacted thought. What makes the poem more intense is Hill's extraordinary effort to direct our attention to the complexity, recalcitrance, and other possibilities for language. Even if he is keenly aware of the fictitious elements of history and truth, and of the limitations of our perception and language, he consistently explores possibilities of language. In other words, Hill's chosen "helplessness" before language is what makes it possible for him to function as a poet. As Hollander remarks, *The Mystery* also starts out "with a moral question which most writers would have had to struggle, in the course of a work, to derive" (138).

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry? (CP 183)

Apparently there are two answers to these questions. On the one hand, words are not binding on their author, they are germs of thoughts that he cannot know. On the other hand, they are not only bonds but also shackles, which connect his name forever with the things he has described. In short, the implications of words may be utterly distinct from the conscious motives that produced them; but once they have issued in action, words may rightly be charged with having the force of such motives. To be sure, Hill intends to explain Péguy's fate as that of all who use language powerfully. As a poet and soldier, Péguy stands for the contest from which eloquence arises. Again Hill strikes overtones of the pitch of loaded words. Especially "stand by," reverberates with its multiple associations. To quote Wainwright's explanations, "stand by" your words means: be responsible for; support, stick up for; guard; await inspection; be ready to shoot. As Wainwright further points out, the verb can cover the comic military cliché "stand by your beds!," and the support in desperate circumstances for "shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry" (*The Mystery* 101). Most importantly, the pun in "stand by" indicates a physical situation beside, or an act of honoring or being faithful to, or on the contrary a

failure to get involved. At this point, the entire passage, bearing on the preposition in “stand by,” becomes itself a prepositioning of the question of a writer’s responsibilities and the directions in the poem that it will take. However, it is not easy to comprehend, plainly, what is being asked: “Must men stand by what they write?.”

Each section deepens our awareness of the problems under consideration, and the poem returns again and again to the themes opened up in this first section. Hill’s focus on verbal crimes here, the power of the word to divide and kill is not new. We may recall “Of Commerce and Society,” “Annunciations,” and “History as Poetry.” Similarly, each annunciation in *The Mystery* invokes a denunciation, or, rather, a series of paradoxes whereby words are shown to invert or misrepresent the real nature of events and human experience. Once again, Hill represents Jaurès’s assassination as “an episode of farce.”

So much for Jaurès murdered in cold pique
by some vexed shadow of the belle époque,
some guignol strutting at the window-frame.
But what of you, Péguy, who came to ‘exult’,
to be called ‘wolfish’ by your friends? The guilt
belongs to time; and you must leave on time. (CP 187)

This is about the complicity of words with their foreseen and unforeseen consequences, in the world of action that exists for the writer like a fate. The last line above, Sherry points out, plays “a grave idea of moral philosophy, ‘the guilt belongs to time,’ off against snappy idiom for punctuality, ‘leave on time’” (218). “This world,” Hill says, to borrow a phrase from Auden’s “The Watchers,” “is different, belongs to them--/ the lords of limit and of contumely” (CP 186). Though limiting, they have their proper claim, for “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.”

The second section explains more of the reasons for Hill’s involvement with Péguy: feelings of “rage” for what history has delivered, “regret” that things could not have been different, and consequently a “tireless” resolve to attempt to put the record straight as far as he can--if only to compose an elegy.

Rage and regret are tireless to explain
stratagems of the out-manoeuvred man,
the charge and counter-charge. You know the drill,
raw veteran, poet with the head of a bull. (CP 184)

Significantly, there is identification: “you know the drill. . . poet with the head of a bull.” In other words, both Hill and Péguy know what it’s like to have this dual nature--creative gifts and brute determinations. They are also aware of the “charge and counter-charge,” and the “stratagems” that are as necessary in the use of words as in military “maneuvers.” Hill himself is a “Footslogger of genius,” “skirmisher with grace”--especially that “sentinel of the sacrifice,” and “mortal-proud” (CP 184). With this level of identification, he attempts to discover more of Péguy--“To have discovered and disclosed.” However, this section displays merely the conventional approach to a historical figure, and demonstrates the difficulties involved in apprehending any knowledge of the subject that approaches the truth. “Memory” and “Imagination” that may be expected to assist the endeavor, seem impotent, becoming merely “epitaphs.” The “substance” of attempts to understand the dead seem dissipated, leaving only “grass upon the graves” (CP 184). It appears to be impossible to apprehend the essence of the man. “Memory” and “Imagination” will perhaps lead nowhere and turn out to be merely, to borrow Hobbes’s words, “the decaying sense” (qtd. in Hart 264). While Hill purports to demonstrate his inability to reach back into the past, he is apparently confronted by the very voice of Péguy himself, defending the earthbound nature of words. Here altering Péguy’s line “Ah, les mots, mon vieux, les mots!” to “Du calme, mon vieux, du calms” (CP 184), he elevates the metamorphosis from raw material into new sustenance, and furthermore ironizes the devotions of the past. Historical remains and effects are merely “sugars of decay”; statues become “ghosts, far-gazing in mid-stride.” (CP 184). At the same time, the voice seems to live within the poem, “mock[ing]” our statues and our preservation of the effects of the dead.

The hundred quatrains of *The Mystery* are an artful patterning and lamentation of Péguy’s death, and a profound meditation on the artist’s responsibility. The danger Hill

consciously runs in the poem is that it may fall into a sententious, solemn, and moralizing tone. Although the quatrain is handled with great subtlety and variety, there is a further danger for the poet who uses it with the hindsight of history. The form lends itself to the kind of epigrammatic definition that is only possible after the event: how real Péguy he evokes, how real his time and place. It is true, however, that the poem reverberates beyond its very precise historical setting and becomes much more than an elegy for a historical person. In the third section, Hill describes Péguy as “Joseph the Provider”:

You are Joseph the Provider;

and in the fable this is your proper home;
three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum
in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt
and paddle, and sunlight pierces the heart-

shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon,
shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors.
Here life is labour and pastime and orison
like something from a simple book of hours (*CP* 185).

Before recognizing how virtually real Péguy is, we do not have a clear answer even about which Joseph Hill refers to in this context. He may be Joseph of Arimathea who provided a tomb for Christ after the Crucifixion. Or he may be Joseph, son of Jacob, the provider and the dreamer and interpreter of dreams; on return from “exile,” he “provided his father’s family with food,” after becoming rich by interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams. The ironies flicker. Péguy’s value is open to question. The break of both line and stanza with the split of “heart- / shaped” is a good example of irony. The tone of “sunlight pierces the heart” is poignant, but the poignancy is subjected to deflation as the reading progresses. The “heart” is first reduced to something that is “heart- / shaped” and then to a mere insubstantial “pattern.” This evokes a sense of distancing and loss. In addition, flutterings of the heart itself are felt in the sound-similarity between “shutter” and the consequently-suggested flutter, and in the series of rapid light stresses heard in “shutter pattern.” Moreover, the ideas the observer draws out of the imagery in the scene turn out to be insubstantial--the

“sunlight” makes only “shadows.” Thus the picture has more to do with the perceptions of the observer than facts concerning the observed. Each image seems at first lead us closer to Péguy, but leaves us frustrated of a final validity.

It is neither historical facts nor the abstract slogans of politics that authenticate Péguy’s vision of France from “the land of exile” but a quiet clustering of vivid sensuous perceptions:

Yours is their dream of France, militant-pastoral:
musky red gillyvors, the wicker bark
of clematis braided across old brick
and the slow chain that cranks into the well

morning and evening. It is Domrémy
restored; the mystic strategy of Foch
and Bergson with its time-scent, dour panache
deserving of martyrdom. (CP 186)

During his life, as Hart notes, Péguy was haunted by a vision of lost paradise. He declared that “in my Paradise, there won’t only be souls, there will be things too” (qtd. in Hart 266). His “dream of France,”⁷¹ medieval but rooted in his own time was misinterpreted, since it was militant yet precise, pastoral yet rooted in the concrete, and unclassifiable. It is noteworthy that here Hill is coloring “a version of the ‘matter’ or France in a similar way to the lustrous images of his portrait of ‘Platonic old England’ in ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ (Wainwright, “*The Mystery*” 103). By referring to Domrémy, Hill evokes a complex of notions in which Joan of Arc’s native ground blends with the “militant-pastoral” army of 1914. Moreover, alluding to Bergson’s definition of duration,⁷² he gives “a metaphysical dimension to what is brutally physical” (Hart 273). The above lines perform the process of memory Bergson describes; a persistence of the past in the present, and at the same time erect many images to catch the process and flux.

In the fifth section of *The Mystery*, the poem turns away to “contemplate the working / of the radical soul” (CP 188), and to make another attempt at looking deeper into the person

of Péguy. As Wainwright points out, the phrase, “the working / of the radical soul,” is remarkable and characteristic clustering of meaning (105). The noun-participle (“working”) denotes straightforward, regular activity and labor. The adjective and noun (“radical” and “soul”) goes in apparently different directions--the one downwards to the root; the other upwards toward the heavenly.⁷³ Interestingly, “radical” anchors “soul,” “soul” irradiates “radical” (Ibid. 105). The inward looking section demonstrates a relationship between “soul--instinct, intelligence, / memory, call it what you will” (CP 188) and the prevailing myths. The crux of meaning here is the poem’s exploration of how the “landscape” of the mind--“instinct, intelligence, / memory”--functions in relation to the external environment. This environment is treated mainly in terms of natural surroundings, but it also incorporates the prevailing religious ethos and social fabric. Here again Hill is working on the roots of perception in environment. In this section, as much as in *Mercian Hymns*, Hill is merging himself with his hero. This may also imply that we view history through our own preoccupations; perhaps it goes further to suggest that we can only understand the meaning of other people’s myths by our own interpretations.

Landscape is like revelation; it is both
singular crystal and the remotest things.
Cloud-shadows of seasons revisit the earth,
odourless myrrh borne by the wandering kings.

Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,
die for the ‘terre charnelle’, marry her blood
to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down
into the darkness of resurrection,

into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,
almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook
rising and running through small wilds of oak,
past the elder-tump that is the child’s castle. (CP 188)

It is appropriate to point out the similarity between this section and *Mercian Hymns*. In both poems, there is the whole “working” between place and history through “instinct, intelligence, / memory,” especially the vivid persistence of the child’s memory. The particular details of the country, Wainwright argues, are known as they are in child’s-play;

and it is into this old intimate familiarity that the dead, “in strange Christian hope, go down.” However, it is hard to find here the cadence, toughness, and the intimacy of Hill’s own invocations of the child-king’s landscape we have seen in *Mercian Hymns*. In addition, Hill’s imagery does not recall Péguy’s resonance, even if he attempts to reenact the lyricism and precision of Péguy’s work. At this point, we can only guess that is probably because paradoxically Hill is writing about himself being drawn into Péguy’s mystic realism.

At the end of the section five, Hill imagines Péguy prepared

for early mass from which you stood aside
to find salvation, your novena cleaving
brusquely against the grain of its own myth,
its truth and justice, to a kind of truth,
a justice hard to justify. (CP 189)

Péguy holds together truth and justice in a myth of his own making. We cannot know what “truth” Péguy finally found, unless it is that of following his own “authentic experience.” Péguy remains crucially alienated from this myth-world and its religion, and looks from “its truth and justice, to a kind of truth, / a justice hard to justify.” We may raise a question: Is it what he faced in death--“a kind of truth, / a justice hard to justify?” Can there be a “justice” that is “hard to justify”--unjustifiable? At this point, we have trouble with our terms of reference.

In the sixth section, beginning with Dreyfus’s trial, Hill takes up the word, “justice” immediately. Moreover, he demonstrates how a specific instance calling for the proper practice of justice is almost always clouded by our ideas about what is just, and more often than not in terms of our past experience of defeated justice. In the second half of section six, Hill turns to “us,” and invokes the acts of cowardliness and courage involving violence. Meditating on the observers of such violence, Hill seems to indict those who fail to connect word and deed:

We are the occasional just men who sit
In gaunt self-judgment on their self-defeat,
the élite hermits, secret orators
of an old faith devoted to new wars.

We are 'embusqués', having no wounds to show
save from the thorns, ecstatic at such pain.
Once more the truth advances; and again
the metaphors of blood begin to flow. (*CP* 191)

The poem, however, immediately notes the ambiguity of the pronoun "we." As Sherry aptly points out, the structural device, the repetition of the phrase ("we are") serves to emphasize the essentially problematic nature of moral judgment and action (235). Although "we" are "occasional[ly]" just, we may be fallen. "We" are writers lacking the courage to confront an audience ("élite hermits, secret orators"); we are "embusqués" (soldiers) who avoid front-line combat. If so, how much credibility can be placed on what "we" perceive and write? Moreover, the poem contains self-indictment of the voyeuristic temperament that is "ecstatic at such pain," and also an acknowledgment of the infinite variety of situations in which "we" may find ourselves and that will necessarily influence our "judgment." To make it more complex, Hill's "embusqués" are not merely complacent cowards; they persist in their personal struggles rather than rush to the battle field. Having no war wounds, unbloodied, they satisfy their enthusiasms for war through "metaphors of blood." Hill's attitudes also vacillate. He indicts them, but at the same time salutes their militant spirituality: "Salute us all, Christus with your iron / garlands of poppies and ripe carrion" (*CP* 191). At this point, we cannot ascribe an absolute value to a deed when it is performed: as historical agents we are "heroes or knaves" only "as Clio shall decide" (*CP* 191), while the perspective of the historical muse, as Sherry notes, is relative to the particular time and place from which it is taken (235). This is the poet's apology for sitting in "judgment" on Péguy, the man who was not afraid to be active in politics or to go to war for his beliefs. Hill sees in the figure of Péguy an extreme pathos that stems largely from the integrity throughout his ventures, and he is as much aware of Péguy's "falling" as of anyone else's. In this way, Hill puts both his (our) cowardliness and Péguy's fanaticism

into a question as well as the “unanswerability” of the questions he has placed at the heart of his poem.

In his note, Hill described Péguy’s spiritual position as “self-excommunicate but adoring” (*CP* 207), a position not too dissimilar from Hill’s own--a position he has elsewhere called “a common cultural predicament” (“The Conscious Mind’s Intelligible Structure” 17). In this respect, *The Mystery* is a well-contrived amalgam of religious, political, and literary connotations enacted on more than one plane, trying to make lyrical poetry out of a “cultural predicament.” Indeed, the sense is not able to grasp true religious experience:

push on, push on!--through struggle, exhaustion,
indignities of all kinds, the impious Christian
oratory, ‘vos morituri’, through berserk fear,
laughing, howling, ‘servitude et grandeur’

in other words, in nameless gobbets thrown
up by the blast, names issuing from mouths
of the dying, with their dying breaths

En avant, Péguy!
The irony of advancement. Say ‘we
possess nothing; try to hold on to that.’ (*CP* 193)

We are further confronted with the problem of the ultimate unknowableness of all things, but particularly the incomprehensibility of death and suffering. In section eight, dealing with that problem, the poem returns to humanity and its language. The “lords of life” are transposed from the “lords of limit and of contumely.” These are the common soldiers, battling in front-line combat. Significantly, the injunction to “push on, push on!” links their struggle back to language and to Hill’s comments on Pound’s problems: “the mundane struggle, the ‘being bound’ to push on with the matter in hand, no matter what, where the matter is the ‘heavy bodies’, the ‘solid entities’, the ‘compacted doctrines’” (*LL* 155). The terms used in relation to language seem interestingly applicable to the situation of extreme anguish: “struggle, exhaustion, / indignities of all kinds. . . .” The “compacted doctrines” are also close to the misused rhetoric of “impious Christian

oratory.” Above all, that phrase, “the irony of advancement,” forms the crux of both Péguy’s and Hill’s method of advancing and then turning against, taking distance from an idea, and “returning upon itself” again and again, even on its own skepticism. From this view point, Hill’s poem itself does not “advance” or “advance anything” at all. It keeps coming back again and again to the significance or insignificance of human endeavor, however ethical, within the void rule of history; and to the insoluble paradox that to assert anything is never wholly free of the Gadamerian sense of “prejudice.” As we have noted in the Gadamer section in Chapter 1, he argues that we cannot stand outside all traditions and evaluate them from no committed point of view; the desire for such an inhuman and detached perspective is misleading. But Gadamer thinks that prejudice is harmful only when it is frozen, and furthermore he suggests an expansion of our horizons through the living language. This seems to be the way Hill is dealing with his own limitation in spite of his awareness that perception may be troubled by either his own errors or refusal to face facts, or by ambiguities in the things themselves.⁷⁴

The final section moves to the place of Péguy’s death, a beetroot field in one of the first battles of the First World War.⁷⁵ It is here, in the milieu of greatest suffering, that Hill sites the most pertinent moments of his quest for knowledge of the “real” Péguy and for “truth.”

At Villeroy the copybook lines of men
rise up and are erased. Péguy’s cropped skull
dribbles its ichor, its poor thimbleful,
a simple lesion of the complex brain.

Woefully battered but not too bloody,
smeared by fraternal root-crops and at one
with the fritillary and the veined stone,
having composed his great work, his small body,

for the last rites of truth, whatever they are,
or the Last Judgment which is much the same,
or Mercy, even, with her tears and fire,
he commends us to nothing, leaves a name (*CP* 195).

Reading these lines, Wainwright raises a question ("What is the human substance?"), and presents the multiple possible meanings of "ichor" (111). He goes on to argue that here the contradictory matter of the self soaks into the earth, and what it truly is, what Péguy finally gives, "having composed his great work, his small body," is a "mystery" (111). Moreover, Hill's studied indifference of tone ("whatever they are. . . much the same") suggests that we can no longer judge him, except to assert his value as an individual human being. At the same time, however, if truth has been given the "last rites," a serious poet may claim that the recovery of truth, in the face of whatever odds, is the poet's essential concern. There is something question-begging about Hill's closing line: "in memory of those things these words were born" (CP 196).

This brings us back to how Hill began his poem, and presented it as a tragicomic intrigue or a modern mystery drama. A phantasmagoria is adopted in Hill's reconstructions of history. On both thematic and structural levels, it generates a tension between social practice and its idealized representation. As we have seen, thus, section one oscillates between theatrical illusion and genuine suffering. The juxtaposition suggests a causal link between representation and reality: the imitation violence of rhetorical gesture may be responsible for the actual death of Jaurès, or is this death for real? Encountering the ambivalences of section ten, we are again disoriented: "Low tragedy, high farce, fight for command" (CP 196). Throughout the poem, there are vacillation of "éloge and elegy / . . . moving on the scene" (CP 196), and the plight of the poet caught between art and action. The basic assumption behind the poem seems to be that historical narrative imposes a *hypothetical* coherence on kaleidoscopic evidence, which from another perspective can appear challengingly different. At this point, Hill's dilemma is that writing about the past involves potential exploitation and distortion in order to serve the ideological needs of the present. In *The Mystery* this preoccupation is both thematic and rhetorical while Hill forces the reader to acknowledge the artifice of historiography.

Hill places the historical and biographical poem within the larger context of how the harsh reality of events has always been and still is mythologized and deformed beyond recognition.

Truth's pedagogue, braving an entrenched class
of fools and scoundrels, children of the world,
his eyes caged and hostile behind glass--
still Péguy said that Hope is a little child.

Violent contrariety of men and days; calm
juddery bombardment of a silent film
showing such things: its canvas slashed with rain
and St Elmo's fire. Victory of the machine! (CP 183)

In conclusion, *The Mystery* demonstrates a "crisis of reference": "a break in the alleged covenant between word and world." That defines not only modernity but also the crisis of modern culture that affects the capacity of art and artist for saying anything worth listening to. To borrow Wainwright's expression, the poem shows "the complexity, ambiguity contradiction of *things*, and of the *words* that would do things properly" (111). At this point, Hill remains skeptical about the possibilities of art, including his own art. As we have seen, however, Hill always confronts "the indefinite extent" of language. Surprisingly, Hill's enigmas are triumphs of articulate speech. In this regard, *The Mystery* is also an exercise in social and cultural landscaping through words--his meticulousness with presentation: "landscape is typography."

At any rate, we have no clear answers to the questions posed at the beginning of *The Mystery*. Although we have a much fuller awareness of Péguy's situation, we become open to judgment. Péguy remains elusive, rendering his "mystery" epistemological as well as religious. Péguy's truth remains a "mystery," not because he, or his "charity," is particularly mysterious, but because truth or reality is never clearly revealed. Indeed, the poem, a meditation on the betrayals of truth in the world and the self-betrayals of truth in an ethical individual such as Péguy, undermines the possibilities of ever reading truth aright whether in works of art or in "factual" documents.

Hill's "standing by" what he has written can exist only as a function of his having turned away from Péguy's more radical sacrifice. Hill's intention seems to stun rather than to reveal, and then, *The Mystery* is dazzling rather than luminous. The poem is a sensational adventure to search for the truth, and the meaning of Péguy's charity, which appears to lead nowhere. Our vision is constantly deflected away from the "heroic" figure. Instead, by the confusing shifts of person, place, and perspective, the disorienting selection of another country's patriot, and the pervasive irony, we are pointed in the direction of a more subtle and far more important essence. By starting the poem with a bang ("Crack of a starting-pistol"), and evoking the words of *Sleepers Awake*, Hill calls for our vigilance and wakefulness out of complacency to be on guard against any easy version of truth. In the end, but for all the "vistas of richness and reward" one hundred quatrains represent, one of the major characteristics of Hill's work remains: deflection and resistance to resolution. Hill leaves us on the field of tension--undeclared and ambiguous.

As we have seen, Hill's idea of language is plural. As a poet who is constantly encountering the debasement of language, he has arrived at the paradox of "limit-language." Language either imprisons one or opens one up to reality. Sometimes, language is the tool with which the poet may transfigure a fractured world and, make it new. Sometimes, language is an enemy, refusing to open itself to the poet, refusing reality. Hill feels the bond of language--burden and solidarity, and the violence and sin of language in history. He oscillates between double meanings of "bond": "shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility" and "reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol" (LL 151). For him, however, a great poet cannot exist without being in some way humanly great. This quality of moral intelligence is what grows in his poetry and our rereading of it; this quality is a complicated density of moral, intellectual and physical passion. We are speaking of what is expressed and implicit not quite as music, but as language.

As an artist in poetry and in prose, Hill's commitment is to the complex truth, or perhaps more exactly to an insistence that the truth is complex. In our age, reality or truth is perceived as unknowable, impenetrable, and disobedient to human orders. Language can neither describe nor fix "reality" because reality itself is beyond both definition and knowledge, "a universe," as Marshall Berman puts it, "in which all that is solid melts into air" (15). It is significant to reemphasize that although Hill is always aware of language's duplicity, slipperiness, impurity, and opacity, he confronts openly its helplessness, far from sinking into "negative skepticism." As Peter Levi puts it in his review of *Mercian Hymns*, "Geoffrey Hill is probably the most important, exciting and instructive [contemporary] English poet. Above all he is instructive to other poets; he is a poets' poet" (99). Due to his extraordinary intellectual complexity and deep sense of morality, he can also be called "poets' critics' poet."

Notes

1 In this respect, the position of most current book (of collected essays) on contemporary British poetry published in the United States--*Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1996)--is very unique, and its revaluation of post-war British poets deserves attention.

2 Ted Hughes, however, seems not to have sustained the level of his early work that was extraordinary.

3 In their methods and outlooks these poets display the diversity and vitality of poetry in the last thirty years ranging from experimental modernism to traditional forms renewed by the shifts of attitude in the 1960s.

4 Vincent Sherry regards Hill as "a solitary perfectionist." In his recent essay on Hill, R. K. Meiners also points out "Hill's uniqueness among contemporary poets" (228).

5 See Harry Thomas 94, Robert Morgan 31, Peter Levi 46 and Ricks's review of *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom* 6. For more examples, Hill is described by Michael Longley as "a profound genius," by Ricks as "a poet at once urgent and timeless." And even Martin Dodsworth speaks of "great poetry . . . certainly entitled to all the glory that is ours to give" (qtd. in Fowler 363).

6 Paradoxically, however, early influences on Hill were Americans: Allen Tate, the young Robert Lowell and Richard Eberhart. For the detailed discussion of the relationship between Hill and the American poets, see Sherry 2, 6, 28, 55, 71-72, 101, 238. In terms of the influence on Hill, however, the following observation is fair: A poet nurtured on Eliot and Tate hammered into resistant shape through the 1950s. Hill wanted to write poems somewhere between the traditional syntax of Yeats and the dislocated syntax of Pound, the purified diction of Wordsworth and the linguistic density of Joyce.

7 Not that Hill hasn't got an audience in mind, whether in England or America, when he writes: it is Coleridge's "clerisy." In an essay on T. H. Green written in a prose nearly as dense as his verse--delivered initially as a lecture at Leeds--Hill writes that "the original subscribers to Coleridge's *The Friend* numbered just under four hundred. He was satisfied, we are told 'to direct his remarks to the "learned class" he was later to call the "clerisy"'. He required 'the attention of my reader to become my fellow-labourer' but from the surviving comments of several self-assured readers. . . it is evident that some of them considered that he asked too much. His readers, with few exceptions, rebuffed his attempts, finding him 'abstruse and laboured' as others, later, found Green 'cruelly inarticulate'" (LL 119).

8 The subtitle, "Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language," sounds like contemporary literary jargon, but it fact is out of Hobbes, his elaborate seventeenth-century philosophical tropes. Text, context and contexture are "etymologically impacted," the common root being Latin *texere*, "to weave." Hill's weaving together of the seventeenth-century texts offers a compelling model of how the pressure of context and circumstance may be felt within the very contexture or fabric of literary style.

9 The main writers considered in *The Lords of Limit* are the Jesuit poet and martyr, Robert Southwell; Ben Jonson; Shakespeare; Swift; Hopkins; the nineteenth-century English moral philosopher, T. H. Green; John Crowe Ransom; and a tense pair who stand equally condemned by each other's statements and their own conflicting usages or words, J. L. Austin and Ezra Pound. After an introductory essay, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement,'" the remaining eight essays are arranged in a chronological order set by their subjects' lives.

10 One of the important themes of *The Lords of Limit* may be summed up in the word "resist" and its derivatives. To quote a few instances: ". . . an essential quality of Swift's creative intelligence: the capacity to be at once resistant and reciprocal" (67). "It could be suggested. . . that the Ode ["Intimations of Immortality"] is indeed broken but that the break, far from being an injury sustained, is a resistance proclaimed" (87). "Behind the

façade of challenge is the real challenge: that of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive" (1). "Against all this Hopkins's poetry established a dogged resistance. Both ethically and rhythmically, his vocation was to redeem the time" (103).

11 Like *The Lords of Limit*, *The Enemy's Country* is concerned with the guilts and guiles of language and the moral recognitions of the word. In the present volume, however, there is a further change from the earlier volume, suggesting that Hill may have responded to comments made by, among others, Eric Griffiths. In an essay included in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, Griffiths expressed reservations about Hill's "unsteady reliance on religious metaphors" in his critical writings (183). In Hill's essay "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" in particular, the idea that poetic language may escape from contingency through technical perfection was tentatively figured through the metaphor of Christian atonement, and the constraining force of language was equated with original sin. Such metaphors have been all but abandoned in *The Enemy's Country*. In the earlier essay Hill writes: "Karl Barth remarked that Sin is the 'specific gravity of human nature as such'. I am suggesting that it is at the heart of this 'heaviness' that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the 'density' of language and the 'specific gravity of human nature'" (LL 15). In "Unhappy Circumstances," the first essay of *The Enemy's Country*, he is still concerned with the writer's obligation to recognize and resist a "gravitational field," but this field is identified with the *negotium* or business of practical life, not with original sin.

12 Regarding seemingly most unequivocal statement, that is quotation, Hill says:

when we quote, we are necessarily engrafting, together with scrupulously accurate formulations, much loose, slang, or imprecise matter and many 'compacted doctrines' [And] when Austin states that 'philosophers often seem to think that they can just "assign" any meaning whatever to any word', his own use of quotation marks indicates the limitations of the basically utilitarian approach to 'the innumerable and unforeseeable demands of the world upon language' and concedes that a touch of miming may be a proper part of the process of assessment. (LL 142)

Anxiety about quotation is yet another manifestation of an anxiety about the minute particulars of language that Hill has attributed to a sense that language, in its complications, inevitably expresses some manner of guilt or complicity. Quotation is first among equals because of the way it literalizes the nature of the relation between language and the world. The quotation marks, by setting the quotation off from its context, literally repeat the doubled relation of language to itself and to the objective world. Language, quoted or not, does not redeem the world; rather, it redeems pieces of language the world has already made "innumerable and unforeseen demands" upon. Thus, according to Hill, "when we read how the First World War soldier, in his disillusionment, 'turned and picked up some of the fine phrases which had stirred his heart' so that "'Remember Belgium!'" was heard with ironic and bitter intonations in the muddy waters of the Salient' we encounter the same phenomenon" of the demands of the world upon language being registered in the language. "As Coleridge said," Hill continues, "'our chains rattle, even while we are complaining of them'" (142).

13 Sherry's astute observations on how Hill differs from his contemporaries provide one of the most rewarding parts of his study. In the chapter on *For the Unfallen*, his reading demonstrates persuasively how the poems in Hill's first volume move increasingly toward a resistance to the civil poetry of social convention promoted by the Movement poets who were Hill's contemporaries. Sherry, furthermore, traces the increasing complexity of Hill's developing poetic style. For more detailed discussions, see Sherry 7-80.

14 Hill finds no contradiction between witty writing and authentic emotion; and he desires richness of style. Like Yeats and Lowell, he seizes on intimate, private experience and tries to endow it with public meanings. Like Swift he possesses a deep sense of

tradition and community which is (as Hill has wisely observed of Swift) "challenged by a strong feeling for the anarchic and the predatory" (LL 68).

15 When Hill was twenty, a pamphlet of his five poems was published in the Fantasy Poets Series, No. 11 (1952). And *For the Unfallen* contained three poems from the pamphlet.

16 In his interview with Michael Dempsey, Hill said, "I did not have an adolescent love affair with poetry, I have been a poet for as long as I can remember" (24).

17 "Genesis" was originally subtitled "A Ballad of Christopher Smart."

18 For a discussion of another important pun, "slack serpents," see Sherry 58.

19 For this subject, see Meiners's rich and complex essay, "Mourning for Our Selves and for Poetry: The Lyric after Auschwitz," *Centennial Review* 35 (1991): 545-90.

20 The eight poems are as follows: "Men Are a Mockery of Angels," "Domaine Public," "A Prayer to the Sun," "Three Baroque Meditations," "The Assisi Fragments," "Ovid in the Third Reich," "History as Poetry," and "The Imaginative Life."

21 The third stanza of "History as Poetry" in *Preghiere* was later omitted from *King Log*: "Glittering instruments; sober priests / Who now beyond danger memorise / The names in error and justice drawn / From oblivion, blood-embroiled souls. . ."

22 See *King Log* 67-70, in particular, "Funeral Music: an essay." For example, "Suffolk. . . was in fact butchered across the gunwale of a skiff" (67).

23 For a rich reading of this poem, and especially for a discussion of its lyrical voice(s), see R. K. Meiners, "Lyric after Auschwitz" 580-82. In his subtle essay, Meiner argues, we do not have to read this poem in "the customary way," that is "to read it as a narrative told from one perspective; the lyrical 'voice' of the first stanza is the same as the 'voice' in the second stanza, and both are to be attributed to a monster disclaiming responsibility and rationalizing participation" (581). He goes on to say that "If the second stanza is read as a response to and commentary on the first, by another voice, that of the somewhat-removed poet commenting on his own guilty inclusion within his art. . . the poem yields a different, still more complex (and characteristic) experience" (581).

24 Ovid is not just a German but the elegiac love poet, transferred from one kind of totalitarian state to another.

25 For a sustained discussion of "September Song," in particular for a comment on the irony of conjuncted meanings between "undesirable" and "untouchable," see Silkin, "The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill" 110-12.

26 Begun in 1961 and collected in the pamphlet *Preghiere* (1964) but then, "History as Poetry" was substantially revised between 1967 and 1968. For a detailed discussion of the revision, see Sherry 111-12.

27 Interestingly, Hill's title, "History as Poetry" reverses the well known equation of the Marxists and phenomenologists, that all relevant literature participates in and clarifies history. The poem says something entirely different, bringing collective events sharply into the foreground of his text.

28 In particular the sequence commemorates the deaths of three prominent aristocrats, to whom it bears an "oblique dedication": William de la Pole (Duke of Suffolk), John Tiptoft (Earl of Worcester), and Anthony Woodville (Earl Rivers), all of whom were executed during the course of the wars.

29 Regarding the structural importance of "Funeral Music" as the "central piece" in *King Log*, there are some comments. See Sherry 86. By the way, Merle Brown refers to Hill's "indirection and meditateness," but fails to recognize a specific meditational structure or the purposeful direction such a structure gives to the poetry (35-36). Similarly, Jon Silkin slides over the continuity and directed movement Hill's structure offers when he regrets the absence of narrative structure ("The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill" 116).

30 His frequent use of the pronoun "we" serves not only as a dramatic device but also as a symbol, signaling the necessary identification of the private poet with the public, historical realm, whose physical contingencies, woes, and maimings are inescapable. (Sherry 92-93)

31 See "Three Baroque Meditations." "lifting the spicy lid of my tact / To sniff at the myrrh" (CP 90).

32 In his *Collected Poems*, Hill writes "Mandelstam."

33 Foucault is most helpful here. Throughout his life Foucault has been interested in that which reason excludes: madness, chance, discontinuity. He believes that the literary text allows "otherness" to speak. In philosophy and law this otherness is silent. Foucault values the literature of transgression--it attempts to subvert the constraints of all other forms of discourse by its difference.

34 For a further discussion of "the terrible disparity between civilian and military experience" in the First World War, see chapter 7 of Michael Hamburger's *The Truth of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1982) 148-79. Also George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" is relevant.

35 *Mercian Hymns* is considered as the most dense and initially baffling of all Hill's work. Bloom notes that "difficult as Hill was earlier, *Mercian Hymns*, despite the limpidity of its individual sections, is the subtlest and most oblique of his works" (*Forces* 243). For similar response to the *Hymns*, see Webb 121 and Richman 27. The difficulty in discussing the *Hymns* is mainly due to Hill's innovative techniques involving form, voice and historical context.

36 According to the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, early Church hymns "had neither metre nor rhyme; but each verse was divided into two parts linked to each other by parallelism of thought. The second half of each verse emphasised or amplified the thought expressed in the first half or repeated it in different words, or answered a question contained in it" (liv).

37 King Offa is known as the king who unified England, established lasting economic structures, developed trading relations with Europe, patronized monasteries, and wrote significant laws and charters.

38 The stanzas of the *Hymns* are often called "versets": short verses (the term originally derived from those of the Bible, and etymologically referring to short lines), for they generate, some critics argue, much more complex and patterned rhythms than those usually associated with "prose."

39 The voices include a narrator outside of chronological time; an adult who seems closely identified with Hill looking back on his childhood in England during World War II; King Offa; and Hill's adult persona when not reflecting on his childhood. In this section, however, I will focus on mostly Offa and the poet in order to explore one of the main points, a "parallelism of thought."

40 At first glance, a part of the sequence's title, "Hymns" seems to imply that in some sense they are songs of praise. A hymn is usually seen as praise of a figure, a nation, or God. Even in the first two hymns, however, Hill undercuts the assumption.

41 For Hill's own comments on his experience impersonated in Offa, see Haffenden 94-95.

42 Power and violence portrayed as childhood fantasies reflect the actual political life of eighth-century Mercia. Offa himself succeeded to the throne through violence after the previous king, Aethelbald was murdered by his own guard in 757. In the resulting civil war, Offa battled against another contender, Beornred, driving him into exile before the end of the year. More importantly, in Hymn XVIII, Hill describes "Offa's Journey to Rome" to bear secular witness to the imprisonment and torture of Boethius by Theodoric in 524. According to Hill, Boethius as an exemplary martyr dies under imperial rule. Hill demonstrates Offa's imagination of Boethius's execution in graphic detail, and ends the hymn with a grim parody of collecting souvenirs: "He wiped his lips and hands. he strolled back to the / car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and / philosophy. . . ." (CP 122).

43 Hill's another difference from modernists is that *Mercian Hymns* contains a tone of acceptance of the modern landscape which is not to be found in the poetry of Eliot, and the possibility of a poetic tradition whereby industrial and rural life can interrelate.

44 Sherry finds *Mercian Hymns* the most successful of Hill's works, even though its style and form set it apart from the lyrics of *For the Unfallen*, *King Log*, and *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. In this sequence, Sherry argues, Hill exercises his skill as "a verbal alchemist," manipulating the "protean" qualities of words in order to expose, challenge, and even ridicule "the proprieties of tone and single reference essential to a civil art" (130). Disappointingly, however, Sherry's discussions on the *Hymns* mostly focus on the acoustic scheme of the sequence, and the transformation of sound into aesthetic form. Thus his formalistic reading overlooks more complex and deeper levels of interpreting the *Hymns* which with the mixture of idioms between two different periods, demonstrates the problematics of history and language.

45 For the etymologically rich meaning of "moldywarps," and a discussion on its complex word play, see Edwards, "Hill's Imitations" 168.

46 For detailed discussions on the physical substance of language in the *Hymns*, and then Hill's playing with language as plastic stuff, see Sherry 140-42 and 152.

For further discussions on the physicality of the words, it is worth noting that artists throughout the *Hymns* are not only poets but also builders, architects, stonemasons, moneyers, nail-makers, weavers, story-makers--in other words, artisans or craftsmen and laborers who correct one another in the presumption that they are fashioning perfected works of art. Significantly, the activities of Mercia--coining, hammering, carving--are, first of all, the qualities of Hill's own poetic technique.

47 For Hill's explanation of the term "Opus Anglicanum", see CP 203.

48 Hill gets the word "darg" for a day's work from Ruskin.

49 For an illumination comparison between the lines ("In dawn-light the troughed water / floated a damson-bloom of dust") and the passage from Eliot's "Burnt Norton," see Brown 65.

50 In reading Hymn XXV and indicating Wordsworthian elements in it, David Gervais also makes a similar point. He argues that the repeated rhythm enables the hymn to contain the fund of anger and compassion that Hill is drawing on. According to Gervais, this procedure rests on rhythm itself because of the weight of emotion (99).

51 Hill's ambivalence towards England's past and present stems from his "hostile reverence for life" and his realization that "exultation leaps from a defiance of the odds. . . . Therefore the challenging of possibilities is both affirmation and defiance; and the poetry that utters the praise and the challenge is a ceremonial, even a sacramental, act" ("The Poetry of Jon Silkin" 7). Hill also writes of Silkin's poems as "hymns of love and hate" (8) and within the context of this phrase the words "a ceremonial, even a sacramental, act" can be regarded as a possible definition of a "hymn" if by this word one means a song of praise (the noun) or to celebrate in song or to worship by hymns (the verb). In Hill's poetry praise of the world is not won easily. Its power issues from a bleak background of corruption, death, suffering and cruelty.

52 For more exemplary poems of Hill's use of this strategy, see Hymn III, Hymn XI, and Hymn XXV in the sequence.

53 As Bloom points out, it is hard to hold together *Mercian Hymns*. Critics vary in their estimation of exactly what Hill's sequence accomplishes and "what it is 'about'?" (*Figures* 243). In this respect, I present "What is Mercia?" as one of the most intriguing subjects in the sequence. This zone is what holds the individual sections in place and gives the "hymns" an overall subject. It is a realm of both rootedness and fantasy, where nature and culture no longer operate as binary oppositions but implode into each other as part of one visionary manifestation.

54 For an excellent example of these elements--collapsing history and shifting tone--see "The Death of Offa" (XXVII). Car-dealers attend the funeral of the King of Mercia. The hymn opens with ceremonial tone, then becomes colloquial, then epigrammatic, and ends in appalled vision (CP 131).

55 For the origin and process of "The Pentecost Castle" and "Lachrimae," in terms of music, see his interview with Haffenden 91-92.

56 For further patterned effect of repetitions, see the poems 2, 10, 11, 12 (*CP* 138, 142, 143).

57 Recent theoretical work on music has stressed that it is created, performed and listened to in social contexts which in part define its meaning. If we accept this view, music becomes as much socially conditioned as literary work.

58 For example, the main chains of key words or phrases are as follows. "among the trees" / "in the orchard," "grove," "Jesse tree," and "aspen tree"; "slew," "slain," "blood," "pierced by the blade," "five wounds," "wounded" and "wound"; "shadows," "among the trees," "I sleep in the shade," "his darkness," "the night is dark," "lost in the dreams' grasp," and "splendidly-shining darkness"; "upon the road," "the road she has gone," and "the way short."

59 It needs to be noted that in "The Pentecost Castle," Hill is reversing the usual associations of Pentecost with a single universal meaning conveyed through various tongues. He cultivates the variousness of meaning within his own words; he builds his tower of poetic form around the semantic babble, encasing but not rectifying it. Hill's skill in completing a poem thus provides a symbol of his imagination's ability to form an inclusive structure. The high ground of traditional symbolism thus shifts decisively: from the supernal Logos, the single Thought embodied in the word, to the writer's own creative mind. For the comparison between Hill and Eliot facing similar problems with the old linguistic order, see Sherry 178-79.

60 On the surface, at least, the lines ring like those of *Ash-Wednesday*: "Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn" (*CPP* 89). The echo introduces another important source, found among Eliot's own: Lancelot Andrewes's *Ash-Wednesday* sermon (1609), with its attention to the single word "turn." "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil" (qtd. in Southam 221).

61 Robert Southwell, Catholic martyr and poet from whose work Hill takes his epigraph for "Lachrimae," wrote in his posthumous work *St. Peter's Complaint* (1595) of what he saw as his contemporaries' abuse of their poetic talents: "a poet, a lover and a liar are by many reckoned but three things with one signification." The impatience with their worldliness is consistent with the indifference to earthly life to Southwell. Southwell longed not only for death but also for the utmost suffering to attain his martyr's crown. Living in a world of suffering and misery he sought the apotheosis of that suffering.

62 When the poem first appeared in *Agenda*, the phrase was "None can outwit your cry." Then Hill changed the word "outwit" to "revoke," since he thought "there's a much greater play between 'revoke' and 'cry'" (Haffenden 85).

63 The ending of "Pavana Dolorosa" recalls the following lines of Eliot's "Burnt Norton":

Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness. (*CPP* 175)

There is also a strange sense of wonder in "Pavana Dolorosa." However, not able to remain facing the abyss of the preceding poem-- "If I grasp nothing"--the poet becomes the very "hunter of forms" which he names. At the same time, he acknowledges that his hunting after form is "self-seeking" just as martyrdom is "self-wounding."

64 In terms of religious faith and doubt, the final sonnet "Lachrimae Amantis" seems to be most hopeful, and here the poet becomes "religiously secure" even though there is no pure culmination and resolution. But as expected, here are together "promise" and "remorse" (*CP* 151).

65 For further discussions on the correlation of the martyr's life with that of the poet, see Milne, "Decreation" 66-70.

66 Originating from the notes Hill scribbled during his trip to India, these poems are full of religious icons and cultural rituals, reshaped slowly as he brooded over his observations. One source of creative energy for these poems may have been the profound emotional experience he underwent in the East India Company graveyard in Calcutta, where the tombstones, like icons, seemed to call up the complex history of the British colonial presence.

67 On the other hand, Sherry reads "An Apology" in a different way. According to him, the flaws of the sequence can be taken as paradigmatic of those in *Tenebrae* as a whole. He argues that the poems of *Tenebrae*, unlike many in Hill's earlier volumes, do not attempt to enclose the primary violence of history as a visceral presence in verse. Abrupt rhythms and scraping textures have given way to the more graceful and euphonious periods of "An Apology." He goes on to say that here poetry seems to enter an order of ritual, like the ceremonies of musical exchange in Jonson's poem, a pattern of timeless recurrence and reenactment that transcends the dialectic of history; to have accepted a wish that was put at a distance and fenced off within the parentheses of "Funeral Music": "(Suppose all reconciled / By silent music. . .)" (CP 71) (Sherry 169). In his account of *Tenebrae*, particularly "Apology," Sherry ignores Hill's self-conscious gesture: to problematize a nostalgic view of English history, using musical and nostalgic form. In this sense, as I quoted earlier, Hill is very close to Southwell; "the best course to let [men] see the error of their workes, is to weave a new webbe in their own loome. . ." (1).

68 In *Mystery*, paradox has not been abandoned, but it has enlarged. Rather than confined within the phrase or sentence, it now governs the subject of the poem, the functioning of extended similes. The ambiguity of Péguy and of Hill's attitude to him is displayed first of all in the poem's title: adapted from that of Péguy's long poem *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*, it implicitly puts Péguy in the role of Joan of Arc. There is surely a deliberate touch of farce about this.

69 "Sleepers Awake" comes from the Advent Hymn which praises the annunciation of Christ and his eventual spiritual marriage in a new heaven and a new earth:

Sleepers, wake! The watch-cry peaeth
While slumber deep each eyelid seaeth:
Awake, Jerusalem, awake. (qtd. in Hart 260).

For more allusions about "Sleepers Awake," see Sherry 255n.

70 The concept of circularity is reinforced in the first section by the possibility of replaying the film and by the similarity of the lines of soldiers: "over and over the jolly cartoon / armies of France go reeling towards Verdun" (CP 183).

71 For detailed discussion on Péguy's vision, "*cité harmonieuse*," see Hart 266 and Wainwright, "*The Mystery*" 103.

72 Bergson said of duration that "it cannot be represented by images. . . . there is only one unique duration, which carries everything with it--a bottomless river, which flows without assignable force in a direction which could not be defined" (qtd. in Hart 273).

73 For a similar etymological interpretation of the phrase "radical soul," see Sherry 232.

74 Although Hill realizes that there is no description of the world that can free itself from reference to experience, he also tries to invoke the "free" beauty of nature that is free of human concepts within the artifice of art's conceptually "dependent" beauty:

There is an ancient landscape of green branches--
true tempérament de droite, you have your wish--
crosshatching twigs and light, goldfinches

among the peppery lilac, the small fish

pencilled into the stream. . . . (*CP* 194)

75 Cf. "So, you have risen / above all that and fallen flat on your face / among the beetroots" (*CP* 187), Hill writes, apostrophizing Péguy on the subject of his death in the field. This is a daringly paradoxical way of offering homage but it succeeds. Hill has chosen as his means the kind of poetry that constantly troubles and subverts itself.

CONCLUSION

Geoffrey Hill quotes Eliot's letter of April 1919 to J. H. Woods in his review of the recent edition of Eliot's Clark and Turnbull Lectures, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993):

There are only two ways in which a writer can become important--to write a great deal, and have his writings appear everywhere, or to write very little. It is a question of temperament. I write very little and I should not become more powerful by increasing my output. My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event. (12-13).

According to Hill, this letter "places a remarkably heavy stress on the particulars of career-making" ("Dividing Legacies" 13). Interestingly enough, this passage describes Hill's way of writing--"to write very little" but trying to make his poems "perfect in their kind." What Hill has in common with Eliot, Allan Wall notes, is "a refusal to repeat the same formula" and the strong sense "of never having done anything unnecessary." "These are unaccommodating poets, both allergic to the chatter of the age, both pushing hard against the current" (46-47). Because of his own fastidiousness and perfectionism, we have only six slim volumes of Hill's poetry except the versions of his collected poems. *Canaan*, Hill's first volume since *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), was published in 1996. Its U.S. edition was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1997. At first glance, *Canaan*--particularly the first six or seven poems--seems to demonstrate the possibilities of more fragmented forms. Here he uses absence of punctuation marks, punctuation effected by variable lineation, and a deliberate fragmentation of lines on the page, which evoke peculiarly visual effect. At this point, the discussion of Hill's idea of language throughout his literary career remains open. Although he does not write quickly, he will shape his oeuvre at his own pace, and his reputation will accrue like his own poems.

One of the most common negative views on Hill's work is that Hill's direction is backwards in an age in which poetry moves toward openness. Hill's poetry is often seen as "closed." A. K. Weatherhead says "much contemporary poetry calls for the creative contribution of the reader; Hill's is demanding enough, but the reader is controlled in his complementary exercise" (104). According to critics like Weatherhead, Hill knows how he means to be read. They also point out that much contemporary poetry deliberately avoids depth; on the contrary back of even a single word in Hill's poem, there may be a whole landscape. From the same viewpoint, Hill's word is packed with meaning, not replete with primal energy. The harshest criticism on Hill's work seems to be William Logan's "The Absolute Unreasonableness of Geoffrey Hill." For him, Hill is "not a great poet" (34); Hill "stands by his words by standing apart from everything else, proud of an authority no one wishes to dispute because no one cares to be lord of such limited wasteground" (47). To be sure, Hill is not like "such an overtly epistemological poet as John Ashbery" neither like such consciously postmodern writers as American Language poets Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe (Meiners, "Upon the Slippery Place" 228). As we have seen, however, Hill's poetry is not as closed and limited as Weatherhead and Logan perceive. Moreover, as I suggested above, because of his ongoing literary career, we need to look at his work from a continuously enlarging perspective. At this point, to defend Hill's solitary position, we need to recall Hill's admiration about Sisson as a poet and as "an administrator of public practical affairs." From the same reason for Sisson's greatness that Hill points out, we can find the importance of Hill's work rather than "absolute unreasonableness." Firstly Sisson has said: "It is too readily supposed that there is a 'personal experience' which can be conveyed in words. In fact, the consciousness we have is a product of history." Next, Hill comments, "Our personal experience is not pure experience; it is acted upon by various contingents, of some of which we may be ignorant. Among the least acknowledged of these contingent powers are those of language, and of history effective through the language that we know, the language of which we are capable" ("C. H. Sisson" 11-12).

Hill's work wrestles with the ethical, historical, and linguistic problems raised by modernism without settling, in postmodernist fashion, "for a critique predicated on the suspicion of ontology and epistemology, which itself endlessly replicates modernist suspicion" (Meiners, "Upon Slippery Place" 222).

In 1996, there was an important addition to the Eliot canon. Christopher Ricks, a remarkably brilliant and ingenious close reader, edited Eliot's famously "lost" Notebook, containing his unpublished verse from 1909-17. For the Notebook, Ricks has restored Eliot's original, but later canceled title: *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996). The publication of the Notebook enables us to turn back to the origins of Eliot's work. Its very publication, however, is recognized as controversial, since at no time did Eliot envisage, or desire, to lay these poems before his readers. As he wrote to John Quinn, who purchased the notebook directly from the poet in 1922, "You will find a great many sets of verse which have never been printed and which I am sure you will agree never ought to be printed, and in putting them into your hands, I beg you fervently to keep them to yourself and see that they never are printed" (qtd. in *Inventions* xii). As Ricks dutifully notes in his preface, this was a view that Eliot held to as late as 1964, the year before he died (xii). In a different sense from Hill's work, the rereading of Eliot's work also remains open; once his unpublished or sealed letters are published (now only one volume of his letters from 1898 to 1922 is available), those will shed more light on our understanding of Eliot and his work; later there may be more provocative and interesting research on Eliot like Anthony Julius's undoubtedly shocking anatomy of the poet's prejudice in *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995).

Although my study has ruled out the most currently available work of Eliot and Hill (*Inventions of the March Hare, Canaan*), it has attempted to use extensively the poetry and prose of both writers, and to explore the place of language within a poetic and critical rethinking in modernism and postmodernism. And the first chapter has focused on how some theorists radically revise the empiricist notions of language in their theoretical and

critical writings. The traditional attitude toward language as at best a concession to necessity, at worst a betrayal of truth, inscribes a profound retreat from the conditions that define our experience--conditions that finally frame any attempt to make our experience concretely and ethically meaningful. The sign as "reflection," "expression" or "representation" cannot explain temporal human conditions in the collapse of an intelligible order. As Steiner puts it, in an age of the instantaneous, the possibility of transcendental values has been irrevocably lost; in such an age, even the "bracing acceptance of ephemerality and self-dissolution" embody "the underlying nihilistic findings of . . . incomprehension" (*Real Presences* 132). At this point, the traditional view of sign is not only inadequate for our age, but also denies the productive character of language. It requires a revision in which language-theory plays a crucial role. Thus along with "linguistic revolution" and "theory explosion," there were leaders of an intellectual movement which has come to dominate twentieth-century thought. In their very different ways, they are instrumental in bringing about a radical reassessment of the role played by language in human affairs. Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world in which we live, but as central to it.

Based upon the assumption that the problematic of language becomes the concern of theorist and poet alike, this dissertation has implications for ongoing theoretical debates in our time regarding the character of poetry after modernism. One of the impressive things about poets like Eliot and Hill is that, unlike disciples of theorists, they do not opt for fashionable pessimism or self-indulgent references to the "abysses" and "aporias" of interpretation. Their stance is critical, exploratory, and productive; they do not rely upon the babel of jargons of current theory to do their thinking for their poetry. In their idea of language, a positive valuation of language would join with a negative sense of the limits of language, of what our language cannot express, which would still have a vital and necessary place. Unlike a traditional humility based in submission to a fixed, overarching rule, their "positive skepticism" takes shape as the acceptance of a negative boundary that

leaves open and respects the world beyond ourselves as one we never fully possess. The negative boundaries of language then remind us of our own limitations, while its positive embrace calls us toward full responsibility within the realms of our action and of our utterance. At one point Eliot and Hill enact, in line with Barthes and others, the concept that "language speaks us," and display an infinite range of meanings. Faced with the limitations of language, their poetic language attempts to defamiliarize the reader's habitual world, and to circumvent an established process of generating meaning in order to create the possibilities of exploration, of renovation, or freedom. For them, being "caught" within the linguistic system does not necessarily mean that we are its "victims," but instead enables us to capitalize on the tools that language provides.¹ According to them, once again "our word is our bond."

Although my discussion has centered on Eliot and Hill, I do not want to imply that the idea of language--the consciousness of the problematic nature of language--is unique to them. Crisis thinking is hardly new, nor is the confusion about where to locate the crisis. The greatest literature has always called the whole world in question and has a certain obscurity--a disparity between our intuitive apprehensions and the categories of our language--that is the necessary condition of all poetry and the very element in which it works. It is for literature to try to make sense of this condition by revealing possibilities within us which transcend the existing order. However, since a heightened linguistic awareness is a part of our modern sensibility, it will not be surprising if a great deal of modern literature seems to be more concerned with its own medium than previous literature; more concerned with the nature of experiencing than experience itself. The approach here has suggested the poetic text as an act of transformation from experience into linguistic form. It does not consider the text as a finished product (a fixed system of structural relations) whose meaning waits to be discovered in full, but rather as a dynamic process, a heuristic act, which is itself in search of meaning while grappling with the laws and limitations of the medium. Moreover, the postmodern self-conscious awareness of the

finitude of language (the material), the elusiveness of reality (the truth), and the plasticity of the imagination (now producer of fictions rather than mediator of absolute vision), is often expressed in the poetry after modernism. Postmodernism again appears to be an intensification of aspects of modern Western thought rather than a radical break with them.²

As Barthes implies in his very last text, "One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves,"³ it may be true that we will always fail to speak directly of what we love, that we need to work within the impersonal order of symbols that is language to recreate that experience of love--not in order to master it for ourselves but to create the possibility for others, of reading it. As Barthes puts it, "language is *everywhere*, and not simply *close by*" (RL 160). Certainly, language is unreliable, and meaning is problematic. The issue of language, however, is philosophically vital: a language-act is inexhaustible to interpretation precisely because its context is the world. At the same time, (post)modern language must continually refine itself and keep itself potent. Thus Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*: "That was a way of putting it--not very satisfactory" and "last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice" (CPP 179, 194).

Notes

1 At this point, we need to turn to Eliot's 1927 essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" to find forthright confirmation of Eliot's view that while there is a distinction between poetry and thought, poetry can nevertheless convey "the emotional equivalent of thought." Lest we imagine that that is something less than thought, Eliot explains that a poet of Shakespeare's calibre is "not necessarily interested in thought itself." Rather, he is "occupied with turning human actions into poetry." To borrow Eliot's words again, "in one's prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality" (*After Strange Gods* 30). That is, poetry incarnates--manifests--only what of the ideal, of the ultimate real, can be found in actual feelings and emotions. He knows that poetry saves nobody, but shows rather the actual world from which to be saved or not, and shows also what has been made actual, what has been actually felt, of aspiration. A living language, for Eliot, has to do with a living religion. All this is in a remark which ought still to have the widest circulation: "Poetry is a superior amusement" (SW viii).

2 The relationship between modernism and postmodernism is not so remote as Ihab Hassan argues, describing their relationship in terms of a number of oppositions--form and anti-form, purpose and play, design and chance, hierarchy and anarchy, presence and absence--and argues for a postmodernism which embodies a generalized poetics of indeterminacy as opposed to the grounding of modernism within essential, "metaphysical" beliefs.

3 *The Rustle of Language* includes "One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves," which was left in Barthes's typewriter the day he was struck down by a passing vehicle on a Paris street. It is a meditation on Stendhal, a writer whom Barthes rarely discussed but with whom he clearly felt a close affinity. In this brief and luminous essay, Barthes notes Stendhal's self-conscious failure, in his journals and travel writings, to express the beauty he finds in Italy, specifically his failure to name the sources of his pleasure in everything Italian. And Barthes goes on to show how this failure would be redeemed later on, in the glorious opening pages of *The Charterhouse of Parma*, where Stendhal finds access to communication of his joy in the recreation of the Italian landscape and soul, and sweeps up his reader with him.

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